

Notes on human cover for raptors and their potential prey

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One November, about 1990, I observed a Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* fledgling, begging for food in the back yard of my Wingen, NSW property 31°53'50"S 150°52'41"E. I then heard what I identified as a goshawk species calling from trees along the nearby creek, and went to investigate. There is a laneway that contributes to about 50 metres of open ground between our yard and the creek, and, when I reached the fence line on the opposite side of the laneway, I was joined by an adult Willie Wagtail carrying a bill full of food. As I moved along the fence, it followed me, calling constantly with its 'twitchy twitchy' call. Being unable to locate the goshawk, I headed back across the laneway, accompanied by the Willie Wagtail, which flew along beside me at about waist height. When we reached our yard, my new friend gave me a parting 'twitchy twitchy', and promptly flew off across the yard to its hungry dependent. I concluded that the Willie Wagtail, aware of the goshawk's presence, had been employing me as cover to cross the open ground where it might otherwise have presented an easy target. The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) does not mention such tactics for the Willie Wagtail (Higgins *et al.* 2006: 235) under the heading of 'Parental anti-predator strategies', though it does record that the species 'associates with large mammals and sometimes people' (p. 230), but this is usually attributed to the disturbance of insects providing advantageous feeding conditions. For instance flocks of over 20 Willie Wagtails were observed feeding fearlessly at the feet of moving cattle at Bureen in June 2010 (M. Newman, A. Lindsey, pers.comm.). In the present instance it is suggested that humans, perhaps known humans in particular, are trusted and used to provide protection in an open space where a Willie Wagtail would be particularly vulnerable to predation by an *Accipiter* species. Indeed Willie Wagtails are regularly emboldened by human presence when dealing with threats to them, and will step up their attempts to dislodge perched raptors when humans appear (H. Tarrant, pers.comm.).

In about March of 1992, I was driving through Parkville 31°58'54"S 150°51'55"E when an Australian Hobby *Falco longipennis* appeared from a side street on my left, and flew beside my car for about 200 metres. It then peeled off and attacked a small flock of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* that were dust bathing on the side of the highway, plucking one off the ground. I then deduced that the Hobby was using my car as cover to ambush the sparrows. Raptors are known to use other movement to distract potential prey and buy them valuable seconds when hunting. Olsen (1995: 98) offers as examples first the well-known case of Hobbies working in the vicinity of butcherbird species (in our region usually the Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis*), and that of Hobbies or Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* operating by trains.

However, Olsen adds that the use of trains as cover 'might be an example of the next category', namely the use of moving things that flush prey, while HANZAB (Marchant & Higgins 1993: 270-271) reports that Hobbies 'catch prey flushed by stock, farm machinery, trains, and cars'. However, in this case the prey had not actually flushed, and there is no reason to suppose that Hobbies, and indeed most falcon species, would not be able to flush dust-bathing sparrows and other unconcealed birds on the ground unassisted. It is thus more probable that the Hobby had joined the car for the purpose of concealing its presence until it was close enough to attack. Even in cases where a vehicle is followed in the expectation that it will flush prey, the element of concealment is likely to be a factor, since a flushed bird will give its attention to the flushing agent rather than to any opportunist predator that may be following it.

Finally, on 4 July 2010, as I was driving home from work, and just leaving Scone 32°01'45"S 150°51'48"E, a Peregrine Falcon did a similar thing. It suddenly appeared from the left, flew just above, and in front of the windscreen for about 300 metres, then peeled off to the left. I did not know

what was the subject of its attack, or whether it had caught its prey. I was travelling at about 75km/h, and it would have been unwise to accelerate in order to stay with a bird capable of around twice that speed. Clearly the Peregrine had not waited for my car to flush anything, and any advantage that it gained from keeping close to my car would have been an additional element of surprise.

REFERENCES

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Marchant, S. and P.J. Higgins (Eds) (1993). 'Handbook of Australian New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Volume 2: Raptors to Lapwings'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)

Olsen, P. (1995). 'Australian Birds of Prey'. (University of New South Wales Press: Sydney.)

Note: Another story of a raptor using a vehicle either for cover or as a flushing device came to the Editors' attention after the acceptance of this note. An Australian Hobby was reported to have followed along with a stock lorry 10km north of Singleton (T. Jurd, pers.comm.). A further example of this behaviour involved an Australian Hobby flying alongside a tour bus travelling at about 50km/h along a scrub-lined track on the Newhaven property northwest of Alice Springs in July 2011. The Australian Hobby eventually accelerated ahead of the bus into the scrub, presumably in pursuit of prey (M. Newman, pers.comm.).