

The proliferation of records of Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* in Seychelles since 1995

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Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* is a long-distance migrant, breeding in north-east Asia. It has perhaps “The most striking migration pattern of all among the insect eaters” (Alerstam, 1990). Birds migrate south-westward for approximately 11,000 kilometres to winter in sub-Saharan Africa. They leave the breeding grounds in late August to early September often in large flocks numbering in the hundreds or even thousands. Proceeding on a broad front at high altitude, the majority pass south of the Himalayas between Nepal and Burma during October to November, cross the Indian subcontinent and apparently cross the Indian Ocean to reach East Africa, continuing south through Kenya to winter mainly in an area from Malawi south to Transvaal or eastern Cape Province and west to northern Botswana (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). The return migration is believed to follow a similar route across the Indian Ocean to south-east Asia. Sightings from the Arabian Peninsula suggest at least some may avoid “cutting the corner” to cross open ocean.

Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC), formed in 1992, collects and assesses reports of all birds considered to be vagrants to Seychelles (defined as those species currently recorded less than annually). All known historical sources have been assessed including the accounts of the many excellent ornithologists who have worked in or visited the islands, particularly since the 1960s (Skerrett *et al.* 2007). The first known report of an Amur Falcon in Seychelles was one reported second hand in a published source (Feare & Watson 1984) but no details survive for verification. Until 1995, Seychelles Bird Records Committee had

received no verifiable reports of sightings of Amur Falcon in Seychelles. Since 1995, it has become the most frequently reported of all the 145 species currently accepted by SBRC as vagrants.

As at March 2008, twenty-seven records have been accepted by SBRC, with one further well documented record in current circulation. Amur Falcon records by month are shown in Fig 1, each record representing a single sighting regardless of the number of individual birds. Where a single record spans more than one month it is counted during all months present. The first recorded sighting was of one first-winter and one adult female at Desroches Island, present for at least 3 days in March 1995. This was followed by records of first-winter birds on Cousine Island and Frégate Island from the first week of December 1995 for two months and one month respectively. There were no records received in 1997 or 1999, but since 2000 there have been records accepted each year with up to eleven birds recorded at one time from the same locality.

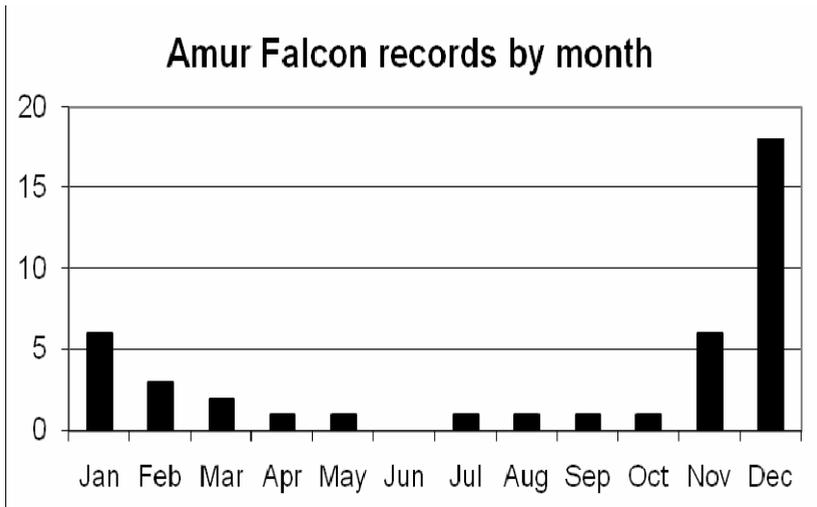


Fig 1. Amur falcon records by month

Twenty-four records (86 percent) have a date during the period late-November to January as the first recorded date of sighting, with the

earliest date being 20 November at Bird Island, on the northern edge of the Seychelles Bank. Despite the fact that the first ever sighting was in March, there is no evidence of a return spring migration in the islands, but rather a peak in sightings in December followed by a steady decline for the rest of the non-breeding season. However, there is one record of a bird over-summering in Seychelles and sighted in each month from July to December.

The islands of Seychelles are scattered over an area from 4°S to 10°S and 46°E to 56°E. All records of Amur Falcon have been from the inner islands of Seychelles or the Amirantes, which lie in the north-eastern sector of the archipelago, an area from approximately 4°S to 7°S and from 52°E to 56°E. This area lies almost 1,500 km east of Africa. There have been no sightings in the more southerly and westerly islands of Seychelles. This may be due to the small number of observers in this area although it is highly likely that at least some birds reaching Aldabra in the south-western corner of the archipelago would be reported due to the presence of a Research Station run by Seychelles Islands Foundation. If it proves to be correct that the Amur Falcons arriving in Seychelles never reach the western half of the archipelago then it seems likely that they never complete their migration to Africa. Amur falcons are known to have died in Seychelles and it is possible that few if any ever return to the breeding grounds.

More than half of all records have included one or more first-winter birds. Young birds have a higher propensity to be recorded off course compared to adults for many species reaching Seychelles. All but two records have involved first-winter or adult female birds (sometimes SBRC has not been able to distinguish the two from the documentation available) but males have also been present on six occasions including three of eleven birds on one occasion. The number of records may not seem very large but there are few observers in Seychelles reporting sightings. Some reports are not accepted by SBRC due to poor documentation. The number of accepted records probably represents only a small percentage of actual occurrences. Nevertheless the marked

contrast between the absence of verifiable reports pre 1995 and the relatively high number since then is significant and it is not something that is seen for any other Seychelles vagrant species to anything approaching the same extent.

Reasons for the change are unclear. It is possible it might be linked to climate change and the movement in the inter-tropical convergence zone. The changes might not be reflected in other species due to the unique migration pattern of this species, often at high altitude. However, this is purely speculative. It highlights the interest in collecting information on migratory birds as possible indicators of climate change but it is beyond the brief of a records' committee such as SBRC.

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