Predation of a brood of European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* chicks by a Honey-buzzard *Pernis aviporus*

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On 21 May 2009 a migrant Honey-buzzard *Pernis aviporus* appeared in the Sumburgh area of Shetland, and the following morning PME watched what was assumed to have been this same individual launch itself from the Mainland cliff of Sumburgh Head to the stack of Little Tind, where it scared an adult European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* (hereafter 'Shag') off its nest. The nest contained at least two recently hatched young, which the Honey-buzzard proceeded to eat over a period of 45 minutes. During this time, the dislodged parent Shag flew repeatedly at the nest site in presumed attempts to scare the Honey-buzzard away, while another adult Shag, probably its mate, stood on a ledge below the nest site uttering the 'Ark-call' (Cramp & Simmons 1977). A small crowd of people gathered to watch this bizarre sight but, despite using an array of telescopes, the exact number of Shag chicks in the brood could not be determined. The Honey-buzzard eventually flew off, either because it had finished its meal or because of the persistent harassment by the parent Shags, and although it remained in the area until 24 May it was not observed eating anything.

Most Shag nests at Sumburgh Head are monitored for breeding success by RMM and MH, and this particular nest was recorded as 'attended but empty' on 4 April, and 'apparently incubating' on 10 April and on nine subsequent checks up to and including 20 May. Given an incubation period of 30–31 days (Cramp & Simmons 1977), and that the brood had been concealed beneath a parent the previous day, the unfortunate chicks were probably c. 7–10 days old. The empty nest was attended by one or two adults on 25 May, 31 May and 5 June, and again recorded as apparently incubating on 10 June, two chicks eventually fledging from the relay clutch by 13 September.

While Honey-buzzards mainly feed on insects, especially Hymenoptera, they have been recorded predating a variety of terrestrial bird species (mainly nestlings and recently-fledged young) up to the size of Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* and domestic chicken *Gallus* (Cramp & Simmons 1980; Roberts & Coleman 2001). Most Honey-buzzards probably fast during migration, although some are believed to feed while following their normal migration routes (Panuccio *et al*. 2006). This observation suggests that disorientated migrants, stranded outside their normal range and habitat, may be forced to be rather opportunistic in their diet to survive.

References

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