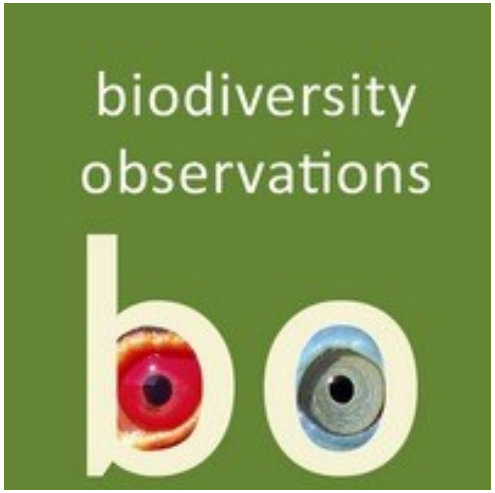
Do Upland Buzzards *Buteo hemilasius* fear Pallas's Cats *Otocolobus manul*?

Tiziano Londei



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Abstract

The Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* and Pallas's Cat *Otocolobus manul* largely coexist in central Asia, with similar ecological niches, including similar prey. However, prior to this observation, no interactions between these two species had been recorded. A fight between adults of the two species would likely be dangerous for both. The observation from Mongolia reported here is of a juvenile Upland Buzzard reacting with alarm at the approach of an adult Pallas's Cat. It suggests that, even outside the breeding season, Upland Buzzards may be automatically responsive to Pallas's Cat behaviours potentially aimed at their juveniles.

Introduction

In most parts of its breeding range, Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius* coexists with Pallas's Cat *Otocolobus manul*; both prefer the cold steppes of central Asia which is rich in small rodents and pikas, the main food for both. It seems that they rarely prey on other predators, e.g., the Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica* (Cui et al. 2008), or the Least Weasel *Mustela nivalis* (Kirilyuk 1999). However, it is interesting for the present question that remnants of a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Kirilyuk 1999) and of an "unidentified Falconiformes species" (Ross 2010) were found as prey of Pallas's Cats. Considering that Upland Buzzards and Pallas's Cats share most of the habitats and mostly prey on the same diurnal animals, so that also their foraging times coincide in a large part, it may seem odd that literature has ignored their likely interactions. I found one piece of evidence in a recent photograph for sale on the Internet (Kennerknecht 2023), showing a Pallas's Cat kitten making a juvenile Upland Buzzard fly away. It is likely that most interactions pass unnoticed because of the extremely elusive nature of Pallas's Cat. I directly appreciated how this felid is a master of camouflage, and once detected, it will search for a hidden position to safely monitor the observer, avoiding interactions as much as possible.

Observation

From 24–27 September 2024, I observed Pallas's Cats at three sites on an open steppe of eastern Mongolia (approximately 46°26'N, 112° 52'E, 1000 m a.s.l.). On each day, shortly after sunrise and shortly before sunset both Pallas's Cats and Upland Buzzards were active. The numerous birds frequently plunged in the grass to catch the superabundant Brandt's Voles *Lasiopodomys brandtii* and I saw the same prey species both in the mouth of a Pallas's Cat and I saw two voles, one still alive, as a provision for kittens near a Pallas's Cat den among outcropping rocks. Most of my observations concerned a mother Pallas's Cat with a well-grown kitten. They had a rocky den and apparently never paid any attention to the Upland Buzzards occasionally perched on the same row of outcrops, as in the photograph of Figure 1, obtained on 25 September 18h39 (local time). These birds seemed equally unconcerned about the two cats. Something different occurred on 25 September. Coming from the steppe, at 07h15 the mother went to a different row of outcrops, on which a juvenile Upland Buzzard was perched (Figure 2). She was probably only trying a quiet escape from human attention. However, the bird monitored her approach with signs of increasing attention and flew away as soon as the cat took cover among the rocks (Figure 2).

Figure 1: An adult Upland buzzard paused a foraging flight at distance of c. 12 m from a mother Pallas's Cat (arrow) on the watch near her den. Both animals were unconcerned about each other's presence.

Figure 2: Trying a quiet escape from human attention, the same Pallas's Cat (arrow) of Figure 1 goes near a juvenile Upland Buzzard; this time, the bird (a and b) monitors the cat's approach with increased attention and then (c) is ready to fly away.

Discussion

With the general lack of information about the interactions of Upland Buzzards and Pallas's Cats, even a single observation is valuable and worthy of consideration. The Upland Buzzard is one of the largest species in the genus *Buteo*, having a wingspan of about 1.5 m with females weighing 1.6 kg on average (Dunning 2008). The weight range of Pallas's Cat is 2.5 kg to 4.5 kg, with a head and body length of c. 0.5 m (Sunquist & Sunquist 2009). Given these parameters, a fight between adults of the two species would likely be dangerous for both. However, both the buzzard and the cat might prey on juveniles of the other species. The kittens of the Pallas's Cat have the protection of a den, whereas the nestlings of the Upland Buzzard are in a open nest on a ledge or even on the ground (Gombobataar et al. 2010, Chen et al. 2015), where they are potentially exposed to predation. Consequently, while Pallas's Cats might usually ignore the proximity of the coexisting Upland Buzzards, the birds would be responsive to cat behaviours. A "presumed" stealthy approach by a Pallas's Cat, as in the present case, might automatically lead a juvenile Upland Buzzard to fly away, but a breeding adult would most likely stay in place and defend its nest. Given the secretive nature of the Pallas's Cat, I suggest that the best strategy to ascertain whether predation on Upland Buzzards by Pallas's Cat actually occurs would be to place camera traps near active buzzard nests.

Acknowledgement

The image sequence of Figure 2 is from a video made by my sister Raffaella.

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