

Ageing and differentiating between a New Zealand falcon and a Swamp harrier.

Nests

Falcon



Harrier



Falcons make a simple scrape to lay their eggs into: this is usually on the ground under a log, bush or rock stack, but may also be on a small bluff or in an epiphytic plant located high within an emergent tree. Harriers in contrast construct a large platform-like stick nest, which they almost always locate on the ground.

Chicks less than 10 days old

Falcon



Harrier



When they first hatch and up to ten days old falcon & harrier chicks are white with pink legs. Very small harrier chicks differ by having a distinctive black bill and a yellowish eye ring and cere. In contrast falcon chicks have a completely pink bill and a subtle grey/blue eye ring.

Chicks 10+ days old

Falcon



Harrier



At approximately 10 days old falcon chicks turn a downy grey colour. As they get older and their pin feathers begin to unfurl they become blacker but retain patches of grey fluffy down all over. Falcon chicks have distinctive blue/grey legs, feet, cere and eye ring. In contrast to falcons, after losing the white down that they are born with harrier chicks turn a more yellowish/cream colour and their cere, eye ring, legs and feet are a light yellow colour.

Recent fledglings

Falcon



Harrier



Downy tufts remain on both falcons and harriers for several weeks after fledging. Falcons are more black/brown than harriers which are more of a russet/dark chocolate brown colour. Fleshy parts on falcons are blue/grey at this age whereas harriers have yellow feet, legs and cere.

Juveniles

Falcon



Harrier



At fledging, falcon chicks are almost uniformly dark brown/black all over with cream under the chin, a washed brown breast with darker blotching and have a distinctive vertical 'malar' stripe running downwards from the back of the bill. The grey/blue coloured cere, eye ring, legs and feet that they had as chicks is retained until they become breeding adults. Recent fledglings retain small tufts of down on their back and on the top of their heads. Once the remaining down is lost falcons have the overall appearance of looking very 'smart and clean' when compared to adults. Fledgling harriers in contrast are a dark chocolate brown, having only a small whitish patch of feathers on the back of their neck. They have yellow fleshy parts and their eye is dark brown in colour.

Adults

Falcon



Harrier



Adult falcons have a dark brown back with a cream streaked breast and russet trousers. The back and tail is thinly barred with buff. The eye ring, cere, legs and feet are a striking deep yellow in the breeding season. This becomes a more pale yellow colour outside of the breeding season. When perched they have a long tail and squat neck making them an upside-down tear drop shape in silhouette. Like fledgling falcons, they retain the cream throat patch and distinctive malar strip. Harriers in contrast are highly variable in colouration, generally being a lighter tawny brown on the back and far more pale cream/white colour on the breast (although they are also streaked on the front like a falcon). Adult harriers are far more bulky, standing on very long prominent legs, have distinctive facial disks around the eyes and in contrast to juveniles have light yellowish eyes.

In flight

Falcon



Harrier



Falcons in flight have long pointed wings and a long rectangular tail. When soaring these open out into a more rounded shape. Falcons are most often seen flying with rapid wing beats in direct, intent hunting flight, or contour flying low to the ground trying to surprise prey. Harriers in contrast are generally seen with their large wings held open in a shallow V-shape, lazily quartering the ground in search of food or prey. Harriers also have an obvious cream/pale rump which the falcon does not have. Falcons have an intensely checkered under wing, whereas when viewed from below harriers are more broadly banded.