## Aerial Feeding on a Large Prey Item by a Brahminy Kite Haliastur indus

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**Summary.** We report an aerial feeding technique by a Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* on large prey. Although aerial feeding on small prey is known for the Brahminy Kite and some other raptors, the size of the prey (a fish 25–30 cm long and possibly up to ~400 g) is unusual.

The Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* is a milvine kite of the Indo-Australian region (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001), but its biology is poorly known (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Lutter *et al.* 2006). It uses several hunting techniques, in accordance with habitat structure, prey type and morphological adaptations. Typically, it searches for prey from gliding flight or from a perch, and takes the prey to a perch or the ground to eat (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Thiollay 1994; Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). It takes dead or stranded fish as well as live ones, and snatches them from just below the surface of the water, without submerging, unlike the Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus* (Thiollay 1994). It also kleptoparasitises other birds, notably aquatic species, from which it steals fish (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001; G. Clancy pers. comm.).

The Brahminy Kite is known to eat small prey, such as insects and mice, in flight (Bell 1985; Marchant & Higgins 1993), but there are no published reports of this species aerially consuming large prey of a size that one might expect to be eaten at a perch or on the ground. The largest food items (>400 g), mostly carrion, are eaten on the ground, and the largest observed live prey item was a fish of ~418 g (Smith 1992). Smith (1992) noted that small items (<20 g) were often consumed in flight, and that larger items (of an unspecified size or weight) may also be eaten in flight, though usually on the ground or at a perch.

In July 2008 we surveyed the Dinding River, which is located on the Banyuasin Peninsula, Sembilang National Park, South Sumatra Province, Indonesia (02°09'S, 104°58'E). On 13 July at 0939 h, an adult Brahminy Kite was seen flying in circles around us, searching for prey. The Kite was soaring and high quartering over an estuary where fisherman had set a fish-trap (a long line of net along the coast). When the tide receded, many fish were stranded in the shallow water. After a few minutes, the Kite saw a stranded fish near the surface of the water, swooped to seize it, and continued flying. We could not observe the fish sufficiently well to identify it, but it may have been a tonguefish (Cynoglossidae) or a catfish (Ariidae/ Plotosidae).

Unlike other Brahminy Kites and some other raptors that we have observed, this bird did not take the prey to a perch or the ground, but instead kept flying and



Brahminy Kite eating fish in the air

Photo: Muhammad Iqbal

consumed the entire fish in the air (Plate 9). While doing so, the Kite maintained an estimated height of 10–15 m, as judged by the height of nearby mangroves. The fish, which was slender in shape, was estimated to be 20–30 cm in length, and therefore possibly up to 400 g or more in weight (from Clancy 2005). After it finished eating, the Kite continued to search for prev while still in flight.

The Brahminy Kite is the most commonly observed bird of prey, and the most successfully adapted to the proximity of humans, throughout the Indonesian Archipelago (van Balen *et al.* 1993). Thiollay (1994) and Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2001) summarised the foraging and feeding techniques of the Brahminy Kite, but did not mention aerial feeding by this species. Although aerial feeding on small prey is known for the Brahminy Kite and some other raptors (e.g. Bell 1985; Marchant & Higgins 1993), the size of the prey relative to the raptor appears to be unusual in this case. The Brahminy Kite is sometimes locally very common, but its feeding techniques are little documented.

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Plate 9

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