**Hobbys and hobbies**

Book of St Albans (1486):

“Ther is an Hoby. And that hauke is for a yong man”

Shakespeare, *Richard III*:

“More pity that the eagle should be mew’d

While kites and buzzards prey at liberty”

Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*:

“A pair of honey-buzzards ... built them a large shallow nest ... The egg was smaller and not so round as those of the common buzzard ... When on the wing this species may be easily distinguished from the common buzzard by its hawk-like appearance.

About the tenth of July in the same summer a pair of sparrow-hawks bred in an old crow’s nest ... “

John Gould on the ‘Brown Hawk’, *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*:

“In its disposition it is neither so bold nor so daring as the typical Falcons, but resembles in many of its habits and actions the Kestrels.”

Frank Gill, *Ornithology*:

“In the Order Gruiformes, the buttonquails, roatelos, and some rails are polyandrous; in the Order Charadriiformes, the jacanas, painted-snipes, the ploverlike Eurasian Dotterel, the buttonquail-like Plains-Wanderer of Australia, a plover, and a few sandpipers are polyandrous.”

Schodde & Mason, *Directory of Australian Birds*:

“As in most corvoids, the 10th primary is moderately developed and secondaries vary from 9 in fantails to 9 plus a remicle in monarchs and drongos and even 10 in the Magpie-lark (*Grallina*).”

1. hobby or Hobby

Why should ‘galah’ be printed with an upper-case ‘g’? My *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* uses lower-case (although it uses ‘G’ for ‘Galahad’ and ‘Galilean’). It is the same in the *Macquarie Dictionary* 4th ed, which is very sparing with upper-case initials, generally only allowing them when the entry begins with a personal or geographic name. It gives ‘emu’, but ‘King Island emu’, for those species.

Some authors treat the names of all bird species as ordinary nouns, using lower-case initials unless there is a personal or place name incorporated, for example –

* Gilbert White (above) (published 1789),
* Richard Meinertzhagen in his accounts of predatory behaviour *Pirates and Predators* (1959),
* Robin Hill in the series of pieces published as *Bush Quest* (1968),
* the CSIRO in its compilation of Australian bird names (1969), and
* JD Macdonald in *An Illustrated Dictionary of Australian Birds by Common Name* (1987).

The short quotes from Gill and Schodde & Mason (above) show the current fashion with scientific writing (unless it is so scientific that scientific names are used exclusively). English bird names are ordinary lower-case nouns except when a particular species is referred to, in which event the ‘standard’ vernacular name, with upper-case initials, is used almost invariably. In the standard name, usually from a list of names compiled by a national authority, all full words are to have an upper-case initial. The upper-case is required to avoid the confusion between eg ‘Brown Thornbill’ and brown thornbill, and ‘Little Eagle’ and little eagle.

Where does that leave ‘emu’ and ‘galah’? These were ordinary nouns well before they were adopted as ‘standard names’ and remain so for most people. *Australian Words and their Origins* (1989) gives mainly lower-case citations.

In general, ‘emu’ and ‘galah’ will be correct, although when the context – or editorial policy – requires standard names it will be ‘Emu’ and ‘Galah’.

Then there are the ‘other names’ used for a species. These might be names in local or colloquial use or superseded ‘standard’ names or rival ‘standard’ names from another jurisdiction. HANZAB lists some of these in its species entries. Those for the Regent Parrot include ‘Marlock’, Rock Pebbler’ and ‘Smoker’. Those for the Grey-crowned Babbler include ‘Happy Family’, ‘Hopping Dick’ and ‘Twelve Apostles’.

Curiously, these are all given with upper-case initials, although whether they were originally or usually written like that (if they ever were written, except in lists compiled by persons who never used them) is another matter. Surely capitals are justified to avoid the confusion caused by ‘Happy families may be found throughout western New South Wales’.

More curiously, HANZAB’s lists of aboriginal names for bird species are also given with upper-case initials. Where taken into written Australian English, these are given in the dictionaries, as they are normally used, with lower-case initials: ‘currawong’, ‘gang-gang’, ‘kookaburra’. As it is not a standard name, ‘Kookaburra’ would only be correct when it is the adopted name of a boat, publication, sporting team or some such, or personified in a story or song (‘Laugh, Kookaburra, laugh!’).

With respect to raptors, usage by expert writers is confusing. One cause of this may be that in England the relevant standard name was formerly often a single unqualified noun. Thus, there was a

‘Buzzard’ (now Common Buzzard)

‘Sparrowhawk’ (now Eurasian Sparrowhawk)

‘Goshawk’ (now Northern Goshawk)

‘Kite’ (now Red Kite)

‘Hobby’ (later European Hobby and now Eurasian Hobby)

‘Kestrel’ (now Common Kestrel).

There has been a tendency for some writers to take the superseded ‘Buzzard’, for example, and use it as an occasional abbreviation for ‘Common Buzzard’, rather than to use the perfectly acceptable noun ‘buzzard’, which a Common Buzzard certainly is. There are difficulties with this, one of which is that it perpetuates ‘Buzzard’ as a rival name. ‘Buzzard’, by itself, is not a standard name of the Common Buzzard and it is not a standard name of the (Australian) Black-breasted Buzzard (which is not a buzzard).

Let’s look at examples of how expert writers treat ‘kestrel’ and ‘hobby’. Worldwide there are some 13 species labelled ‘Kestrel’, including in Europe the Common Kestrel and the Lesser Kestrel and in Australia the Nankeen Kestrel. Four species bear the name ‘Hobby’ including the Eurasian Hobby and the Australian Hobby.

*Eagles, Hawks & Falcons of the World*, L Brown & D Amadon , 1968.

Uses ‘kestrels’ as a general term (‘many of the kestrels form a single super-species’, ‘typical kestrels are’); one species spends much of the day in the air ‘like other kestrels’; some species occur in areas where they are the ‘only kestrel’. However, in relation to the Lesser Kestrel, ‘a flock of Kestrels seen together is more likely to be this species than *Falco tinnunculus’* , but on the next page ‘often in company with the Red-footed Falcon as well as the Kestrel’ [a reversion to ‘Kestrel’ for the Common Kestrel?]. In relation to high-flying by the American Kestrel, ‘where the Kestrel is a mere speck’. The Brown Hawk is ‘the commonest Australian raptor after the Kestrel (*F cenchroides*)’.

Uses ‘hobbies’ as a general term (certain falcons seem to be ’primitive or “degenerate” hobbies’, ‘typical hobbies are ...’). Eleanora’s Falcon migrates ‘with Hobbies’, has its plumage compared with ‘the Hobby’, and the juvenile is compared with ‘a juvenile Hobby’. (One guesses that these are all references to the Eurasian Hobby, but one wonders about the New Zealand Falcon which ‘has the habits of a Hobby’.) A passage in relation to the field characters of the Red-footed Falcon is particularly confusing. This is ‘much like a kestrel in general build’. Females are ‘a little like kestrels’, but immatures are ‘a little like young Hobbies’. In flight it resembles ‘a Hobby rather than a Kestrel’, although ‘in its general mode of life it is like a kestrel’. In the entry on the Eurasian Hobby there are many references to ‘Hobby’ and ‘Hobbies’, always with the upper-case and apparently as a synonym. This species, incidentally, is ‘about the size of a Kestrel or a little larger’, and it has been recorded ‘robbing Kestrels of mice’. Only 2 uses of ‘Hobby’ or ‘hobby’occur in the entries for the Oriental Hobby, African Hobby or Australian Hobby (then ‘Little Falcon’). The African Hobby uses the nest of other birds, ‘adopted by the Hobbies when empty’, and the Australian Hobby has ‘many of the habits of other hobbies’.

*A Field Guide to the Raptors of Europe, The Middle East and North Africa*, WS Clark, 1999.

Uses ‘kestrels’ as general term (‘both kestrels can show wedge-shaped tail tips’). Uses ‘Kestrel’ for Common Kestrel (Lesser Kestrel female is ‘similar to adult female Kestrel’; Lesser Kestrels ‘hover and kite frequently, as often as do Kestrels’). Uses ‘Hobby’ for Eurasian Hobby.

*Birds of Prey and Ground Birds of Australia*, P Olsen, F Crome and J Olsen, 1993.

Consistent in using ‘kestrel’ to refer to the then ‘Australian Kestrel’ when the full standard name is not used. Also consistent in using ‘hobby’ (‘The broader, pointed wing of the Peregrine Falcon has a straight trailing edge ... , while that of the hobby is narrower with a concave trailing edge’.) The only inconsistency is in the introductory section on falcons: ‘The Kestrel and Brown Falcon hover, and all except the Hobby soar quite frequently.’)

*HANZAB vol 2,* 1993.

Uses ‘kestrels’ as a general term, ‘Kestrel’ when full standard name not used. Uses ‘hobbies’ as a general term, ‘Hobby’ when full standard name not used.

*Australian Birds of Prey*, P Olsen, 1995

In this long and comprehensive study, with just a few exceptions in odd corners the author consistently uses ‘Kestrel’ and ‘Hobby’ where full standard names are not used. (‘... for Brown Falcon, Kestrel and Hobby insects are an important part of their diet’). This is in marked contrast to the style in *Olsen, Crome and Olsen* (above).

*The Birds of Prey of Australia: a Field Guide*, S Debus, 1998.

Uses ‘kestrel’ as a general term (‘the widespread group of kestrels’). Uses ‘Kestrel’ to refer to the Nankeen Kestrel when the full standard name is not used. Uses ‘hobbies’ as a general term (interestingly, in referring to species groupings, ‘Australasian hobbies’ and ‘Gondwanan hobbies’, that do not include the Eurasian Hobby). Uses ‘Hobby’ to refer to the Australian Hobby when the full standard name is not used.

Conclusion

As a matter of ordinary language, ‘kestrel’ is to be preferred in referring to kestrel species generally: ‘worldwide, kestrels are usually distinguished by a chestnut back and wings’. It seems less likely that one would want to use ‘hobbies’ in a corresponding sense, but the same principle seems to apply.

It is a matter of choice for the writer (or editor) whether ‘Kestrel’ and ‘Hobby’, rather than ‘kestrel’ and ‘hobby’, are used as short forms of the standard names. In either case, care should be taken to avoid ambiguity. One can easily avoid ‘the Kestrel is a typical kestrel’ by saying ‘the Nankeen Kestrel is a typical kestrel’.

As ‘Kestrel’ and ‘Hobby’ are departures from the convention that in English ordinary nouns take the lower case, a writer using them should have a reason and some idea of the limits of the rule. The reason might be ‘I was taught that at school’ or ‘all my colleagues do it’ or ‘my editor made me’ or ‘it helps a reference to a species stand out on the page’. It would beg the question to say ‘all proper nouns take the upper case’. Why are ‘Kestrel’ and ‘Hobby’ proper nouns?

As to limits, does the ‘rule’ extend to ‘Eagle’ and ‘Kite’? Should we have ‘the Whistling Kite and Little Eagle can be confused but the Kite appears to have a smaller head than the Eagle’. *P Olsen 1995* thinks so: see page 39.

Does it extend to ‘Parrot’ and ‘Honeyeater’? If so, we could have: ‘Swift Parrots and Blue-faced Honeyeaters sometimes feed at the same tree, where the Honeyeater is more aggressive than the Parrot’.

II Hobbies or Hobbys

A Google search shows that both have been used, but is not conclusive as to which should be preferred. Another search shows several ‘boobys’ but not all of these relate to birds.

For the ordinary noun ‘hobby’ the dictionaries give ‘hobbies’ as the plural, and there can be no doubt that that should be preferred. However, your singular might be ‘Hobby’ rather than ‘hobby’, which raises a different question(see above).

My Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* 2nd ed states that if the *y* is preceded by a consonant the plural is *–ies (spies, jetties)* -

But proper names do not conform. *There are now two Germanys. / The three Marys at the Crucifixion*. In applying proper names to other purposes we are inconsistent. Private soldiers used to be *tommies*, and *johnnies* are so spelt; but the hats called after du Maurier’s heroine are *trilbys*.

Australian practice is in line. A little more Googling brings to light an audiovisual product entitled ‘The Best of the Derbys’, this including ‘edited highlights of the Eagles’ 16 victories over Fremantle’.

*The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* puts the rule more narrowly, applying it to personal names.

In any event, there is a question what is for this purpose a ‘proper name’ (or ‘proper noun’, both expressions meaning the same thing)? It may be that if a general rule is to be deduced it should relate only to personal and geographic names and names derived therefrom, as ‘Bloody Marys’. After all, trilbys were so called after Trilby, a fictional heroine.

While I would not propound it as a rule, there is a pattern of usage to the following effect: where a capitalised noun is created from an ordinary *-y* noun the plural for both remains *-ies.* Thus the firefly gave its name to an Uffa Fox sailing dinghy and at least two aircraft types and some other things, in each case becoming ‘Firefly’. In practice, the plural form used for a number of the dinghies or aircraft or whatever is ‘Fireflies’.

As evidence of usage, four of the works on raptors mentioned above use ‘Hobbies’. *Olsen, Crome and Olsen* avoids ‘Hobby’ and so does not need to use ‘Hobbies’, but it does use ‘Australian Hobbies’. However the sixth and most recent, *WS Clark 1999*, consistently uses ‘Hobbys’.

**Conclusion**

There is a basis in principle and some usage for ‘Hobbys’ while also using ‘hobbies’. However, current usage in Australia favours ‘Hobbies’. Unless there is anauthoritative ruling on the point this is unlikely to be reversed. Moreover ‘Australian Hobbys’ does not seem to be in wide current use in Australia. Therefore while it might be hoped that ‘Hobby’ would not be used as a single word, the preferred plural is ‘Hobbies’, along with ‘Australian Hobbies’ and ‘hobbies’.