

# LETTER-WINGED KITE (*Elanus scriptus*) - VORAC Submission

## NAME OF OBSERVERS

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## SPECIES

Letter-winged Kite (*Elanus scriptus*)

## DATE OF SIGHTING

25/04/2017

## LOCATION

Meadows Grassland, Terrick Terrick National Park. Located along Davis Road, Terrick Terrick East, Victoria. This site is approximately 100 hectares and contains a Lignum swamp which takes up a fair proportion of the reserve. The remainder consists of grassland.

Approximate GPS coordinates of the location within the reserve where the original sighting was made is; -36.112365, 144.434583

## NOTES

This bird was initially seen from a distance perched on a fencepost on the Southern boundary of the reserve around 10:00am. We stopped to take images and almost immediately it took flight and revealed the diagnostic black underwing bars. It flew right overhead and was slowly moving off towards the Northern end. We ran after it but subsequently lost the bird. After a short while we scanned the sky above the swamp where several *Elanus* Kites were in the air and relocated the bird

in flight. It landed and we were able to re-find it and obtain good views. It again flew towards the North-west corner of the reserve and briefly landed in a small Eucalypt, then flew and perched on the Western fence line. It perched on a post for a short while and then gave us incredible views as it took flight, circled right above us several times, then headed off to the North and out of sight. We returned to the site in the afternoon to meet with a handful of birdwatchers who had driven up to twitch the bird, we all had good views of the Letter-winged Kite both perched and in flight, again hanging around the Southern area of the reserve. At one stage it was observed hunting, dropping to the grass from the fence only to return empty-handed.

There were also 6 Black-shouldered Kites present in the reserve, at one stage the Letter-winged Kite had a brief altercation with one of them as they both flew up from the same bush. There was also extremely high activity of Mice which were active in the grassland areas during the daytime, and appeared to be present in considerable numbers. We suspect this played a major role in attracting the bird to this location.

In the following paragraph dealing with identification, we will only draw comparisons with Black-shouldered Kite, as this is the only species likely to be confused with Letter-winged Kite in Australia. We noted several differences in relation to structure and plumage of this individual in comparison to the Black-shouldered Kites which were also present. First and foremost the bird had solid black underwing bars which ran from the point at which the wings join the body all the way through the underwing coverts to the base of the outermost primaries. By contrast Black-shouldered Kites only display very small black underwing patches which lie beyond the carpal joints. The bird had a neatly defined area of black in front of the eyes but the black didn't extend behind the eyes in any appreciable way, whereas it typically does in Black-shouldered Kites. Its legs and feet were a paler shade of yellow than the bright yellow legs and feet displayed by Black-shouldered Kites. This bird was grey on the crown and nape, which is something not normally associated with adult Black-shouldered Kites, and in combination with its discernible larger size than the nearby Black-shouldered Kites, suggested it was a female Letter-winged Kite. On one occasion a short, clear whistle call was also heard while the bird was in flight. The flight style of this individual appeared distinct, with slow and relatively effortless wingbeats in comparison to Black-shouldered Kite. We found the existing comparisons to Tern flight to ring true. Also of note was the way in which this bird flew in neat circles after taking flight, before moving out of the immediate area.

The bird was present at this location for two days following our initial sighting and was seen and documented by several other observers.