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KAROO THRUSH AND FROGS: POTENTIAL FOOD SOURCE OR OPPORTUNISTIC ATTACK?

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The diet of the Olive Thrush *Turdus olivaceus*, a widespread member Muscicapidae family is well known (Bonnevie 2005; BirdLife International 2014). The data available regarding the diet is also due to studies on the southern African endemic, and close relative of Olive Thrush, the Karoo Thrush *Turdus smithi* a regular visitor to urban green spaces in western South Africa (Bowie *et al.* 2003, Hockey *et al.* 2005). Food items listed among the diet of the Karoo Thrush include a variety of wild and cultivated fruit, seeds, small reptiles, insects, spiders, oligochaetes, molluscs and even small fish (± 4 cm) and bird hatchlings (Bonnevie 2005; Hockey *et al.* 2005)

Frogs is a food type not listed among all the other types listed in literature. I witnessed what I believe to be unusual behaviour and method of feeding by these birds. At the time of observing I had no knowledge of the diet of the species under discussion.

On 21 November 2013 at approximately 16:45 I observed an individual Karoo Thrush walking through short kikuyu grass in a garden in Johannesburg (S26°08.820' E28°01.440'). Only a few seconds later with the aid of binoculars I noticed that it was chasing a Common River Frog *Afrana angloensis*, which are regularly seen and heard at the location. At first, for about two minutes, the frog managed to hop towards a small pond 4 m away and was pursued by the thrush.



Fig 1 – Karoo Thrush foraging on the ground at dusk © ACvdWesthuizen

After about three minutes the bird managed to grasp the frog in its bill and flip the frog into the air. This feeding method correlates with the method described by Hockey *et al.* (2005) (and online videos) where Karoo Thrush are said to flick leaf litter to find food. This continued and the frog corrected itself a number of times. Eventually the bird, after about ten flips, and with the presumably exhausted frog on its back, started pecking at the belly of the prey. The frog died a metre from the edge of the pond.

For nearly two minutes the bird attempted to pierce the belly and without doing so, flew away without consuming any part of the now



deceased frog. Approximately an hour later I went to the site of the kill to find no evidence of the frog, which may have been consumed by any other scavenger. There is thus no evidence that the frog was consumed by the thrush but was certainly killed by it.

This observation could point to frogs, where available, potentially being a source of food for Karoo Thrush. Indeed Bonnevie (2005) suggests birds in suburbia benefit from watered gardens in terms of their diet. The fact that southern African thrush species can consume fish and small birds, suggests that the thrush should be able to consume some part of the frog. This episode may have been an attack based on curiosity, possibly because of the "unrecognisable" movement of the frog – but it could just as well have been an attempt to prey on the frog.

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