



Biodiversity Observations

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Predation

IRREGULAR PREDATION BEHAVIOUR OF THE BROWN HOUSE SNAKE *BOAEDON CAPENSIS*

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In the wild, the Brown House snake is commonly known to be largely nocturnal, feeds mainly on small rodents and lizards and does not burrow below ground. I quite fortuitously witnessed some behaviour of the species that seem to break these behavioural patterns.

Being avid nature lovers, my wife and I tend to make our home environment as conducive to wildlife as possible and ensure a regular supply of water and bird food in our garden at South Ridge, Durban, South Africa. This has resulted in a permanent daily visits by many bird species to our garden in and around the birdbath and feeders from dawn to dusk (Fig 1). The common daily visitors include various seed-eaters - the Bronze and Red-backed Mannikins, four weaver species, two sparrow species, two canary species, Pin-tailed Whydahs, and more recently, African and Red-billed Firefinches, and now suddenly, Village Indigobirds (this is an interesting observation in its own right as the Indigobirds parasitize the firefinches, which must have followed the firefinches to our suburban area!).

As the garden is very busy with so many birds trying to feed, we have sometimes had to rescue and rehabilitate some finches that became injured accidentally, or through fighting.

On 8 November 2015, at about 08h30 in the morning, I noticed a Red-backed Mannikin in distress right next to a seed bowl on the ground. At first I thought that it was suffering a fit, as it was upside down in the lawn and twitching. I approached the bird and proceeded

to lift it by the tail and legs. I was met with resistance and noticed that its head was below ground. On closer inspection, I noticed the unmistakable form of a Brown House Snake's mouth and snout enveloping the head of the bird from a small opening in the ground.



Fig 1. The daily feeding flock

The snake then attempted to pull the bird back into the hole, to no avail, as the opening was not large enough to accommodate the bulk of the bird. I then fetched my camera to capture the moment. The snake continued with its attempt to pull the bird below ground for a few more minutes, but eventually gave up and proceeded to work its way up and out of the hole with bird in its mouth. The bird was by now lifeless, through suffocation, I think (Fig 2).

After the snake improved his grip on the bird (Fig 3), exited the tiny hole and made off with the bird into the cover of nearby shrubs (Fig 4), I inspected the hole, and pondered about what I had just observed. The location of the hole was right next to a seed dish on the ground next to a bird-bath, ideal positioning for ambushing small birds that would be feeding at and around the bowl. It was unclear if the hole was purpose-made by the snake or not, but future events would partly suggest so.



Fig 2. The snake emerges from the 'burrow'

Worried about the safety of the birds in the garden, my wife filled the hole, and rearranged the garden such that the bird-bath base covered that position, much to my annoyance I might add! I was

keen to see if the snake would return again sometime in the future and use the same tactics, or would this be a once-off fortuitous event in the behaviour of the snake?



Fig 3. Getting a better grip on the prey before exiting the hole

About a week later, I noticed another opening had appeared right next to the base of the bird-bath and seed-bowls. My wife promptly filled this hole too. The hole re-appeared a couple of days later, and since then, there has been evidence of the snakes' continued efforts in keeping a hole near the feeding birds. A few weeks later I also saw evidence of parts of what I think was a Grey-headed Sparrow close by. The parts included tufts of feather with some skin and flesh still

attached. This is more likely due to another predator or one of the raptors common and abundant in and around our location, as the house snake generally ingests prey whole; unless perhaps, as birds are not their usual prey, the snake attempted to remove unpalatable feathers before ingesting the bird!



Fig 4. Adult female snake retreating into the shrubbery with prey

What makes this observation very interesting to herpetologists is that *Boaedon capensis* is not previously known to intentionally burrow underground to wait and ambush birds. Also they are generally known to be nocturnal feeders in the wild and birds are not a regular target for food. An important point in this regard, which may explain this behaviour however, is that a mole had run rampant through our garden about three weeks before this observation. Although the mole

was no longer active in the garden, and the disruption to the soil had been repaired, filled and was no longer visible, it is possible that this snake had come across the entrance to one of the tunnels at some point and explored underground. Possibly in pursuit of the mole!



Fig 5 Close up of the opening to the 'burrow'

Acknowledgements

Paul Sebastian Rabiega (ADU VM ReptileMap Panel) advised me that this noteworthy behavioural observation should be shared and published.

See this Virtual Museum ReptileMap record at:
<http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=ReptileMAP-155548>