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INTERSPECIFIC INTERACTIONS INVOLVING THE OVAMBO SPARROWHAWK *ACCIPITER OVAMPENSIS* IN SUBURBAN GAUTENG

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The Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis* is the commonest accipiter in Gauteng with a documented density in the Jukskei River area of 27 pairs in 740 km² (Allan and Hustler 1984). From a SABAP2 atlas perspective I have recorded the species in 9 pentads 162 times at a frequency of 13% of cards submitted. It has been described as the "most falcon-like of accipiters with relatively long wings and short tail; hunting technique is also more falcon-like than other accipiters" (Allan 1997). It typically hunts in open areas which will be well documented in these accounts. The methods recorded as typical "involve stooping after soaring to 100-150 m, or from an exposed perch about 30 m high" (Kemp and Kemp, 1975; Allan and Hustler 1984). Ferguson-Lees and Christie (2001) add "more typically forages on the wing over woodland or adjacent grassland and other open country and chases individual birds or flocks it flushes".

I will document another method involving a stealthy sneak stoop from a low altitude flight hoping to catch potential prey by surprise as well as higher altitude interactions. Chases of 100-200 m with prey taken close to the ground with a success rate of 6 out of 46 attempts have been documented (Kemp and Kemp, 1975; Allan and Hustler 1984). I have recorded largely unsuccessful attempts with much shorter chases close to the ground. Documented prey, exclusively birds,

include doves (n=57), pipits (12), cuckoos (8), flycatchers (6), weavers (6), widows (6), swifts (3), kingfishers (2), and robin-chats (2) (Kemp and Kemp, 1975; Allan and Hustler 1984; Tarboton and Kemp 1984). The following species were taken as well mousebirds, bee-eaters, wood-hoopoes, woodpeckers, swallows, drongos, prinias and escaped Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulates* (Hockey et al 2005). In my accounts below only the Green Wood-hoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* has been previously recorded as a prey item.

Specific interaction accounts

While atlasing in the Gauteng pentads 2605_2755 and 2605_2800 just after sunrise on the morning of 10 July 2011 in a temperature of 3°C at the time, I observed a pale phase juvenile male Ovambo Sparrowhawk hunting at close quarters. The habitat was parkland with some large exotic trees close to the Emmarentia Dam. I first noticed the sparrowhawk flying at tree top level. Initially the accipiter attempted to prey upon a pair of squawking Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri*, resulting in an impressive green colour-burst of noisy evasive action. This involved a low altitude stoop on the perched birds approaching from behind. Distracted perhaps by this cacophony of sound the sparrowhawk turned on some Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* which took off in an explosion of feathers and noise. The hunting method used was diving onto the perched birds from rapid flight almost identical to the first method.

The accipiter then perched prominently in a tree. It took flight soon afterwards and while gently circling to a altitude of about fifty metres, it attracted the attention of one of the resident park bullies a Pied Crow *Corvus albus*. This resulted in an attack by the Crow but this was immediately reversed with some brilliant aerobatics which had the Crow now fleeing for its life with the sparrowhawk in hot pursuit



on the Crow's tail feathers. I have documented several similar interactions with Crows usually as a direct consequence of being mobbed rather than an attempt to seize prey. These have involved accipiters of all ages.

In another witnessed attempt to prey on Common Mynas in similar parkland habitat – this time in Delta Park (pentad 2605_2800) a seized bird was rescued by a gang of very aggressive Mynas which mobbed the Sparrowhawk on the ground, forcing it to release the captured Myna which flew off apparently no worse for wear. This attack took place in the early afternoon and involved a stealthy stoop by an adult male from low altitude where the prospective prey was seized on the ground.

I have also witnessed unsuccessful attempts by the Ovambo Sparrowhawk to prey upon Green Wood-hoopoe. On two separate occasions birds were pursued unsuccessfully on the wing by both an adult and an immature sparrowhawk. The Wood-hoopoe despite its ungainly appearance in flight is remarkably adept in taking evasive action.

Another attempt at taking prey involved the President Ridge mixed breeding colony including roosting Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* (pentad 2605_2755). Here in the early morning a large adult female made several unsuccessful passes from low altitude on the roosting birds.

Besides the Green Wood-hoopoe none of the other birds mentioned in these accounts have previously been documented as prey items. The Egret certainly is larger (54 cm vs 40 cm) than the largest prey I had recorded – which was an African Olive-pigeon *Columba aquatrix* but is lighter (365 g vs 407 g). Typical prey weights are 10-60 g for

males and up to 250 g for females (Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001) – which would make the prey unusually large even for a robust female. The Crow interactions were not obvious attempts to seize prey and were more aggressive interactions to counter mobbing by the Crows.

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