

# Ornithological Observations



An electronic journal published by BirdLife South Africa and the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town



Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

---

## POSSIBLE PREDATION OF A PYGMY FALCON BY A TAWNY EAGLE IN NAMIBIA

**Joshua I Engel**

Recommended citation format:

Engel JI 2011. Possible predation of a Pygmy Falcon by a Tawny Eagle in Namibia, Ornithological Observations, Vol 2:34-35

URL: <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=19>

Published online: 30 May 2011

- ISSN 2219-0341 -



## POSSIBLE PREDATION OF A PYGMY FALCON BY A TAWNY EAGLE IN NAMIBIA

*Joshua I Engel*

Division of Birds, Field Museum of Natural History, 1400 S. Lake Shore Dr.,  
Chicago, IL, USA 60025  
[Jengel2@fieldmuseum.org](mailto:Jengel2@fieldmuseum.org)

On 8 August 2010, approximately 2km east-southeast of Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park, Namibia, my tour group and I observed an adult Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* with a prey item. The prey item was clearly a fairly small, very pale bird that we assumed was a Cape Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia capensis*. We photographed the eagle and its prey item; when we examined the photos later we realized that the prey item was not a Cape Turtle-Dove as expected, but a Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus* Fig 1.

Tawny Eagle is a common and widespread raptor, ranging from south Asia to south and west Africa (Brown 1982). Unlike other brown *Aquila* eagles, however, there is a large resident population in southern Africa. Several studies of its biology in Africa have been published, including detailed lists of prey items—one based on observations at two locations in Kenya (Smeenk 1974) and two based on breeding pairs in Zimbabwe (Steyn 1973, Steyn 1980).

Birds make up a significant portion of Tawny Eagles' diet in Africa: 50% of prey items from Steyn's studies in Zimbabwe (Steyn 1980), 35% from Smeenk's studies in Tsavo East (Smeenk 1974), and 45% at a nesting site in the South African highveld (Tarboton and Allen 1984). Although most of the birds eaten by Tawny Eagle are larger than Pygmy Falcon, they are known to occasionally predate even small passerines, such as Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea* (Steyn 1973, Smeenk 1974, Brown 1982).



**Figure 1:** Tawny Eagle carrying dead Pygmy Falcon in its talons.  
Photo by James E. Brown.

Other birds of prey known to have been eaten by Tawny Eagle include Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus* and four species of owls: Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Marsh Owl *Asio capensis*, Spotted Eagle-Owl *Bubo africanus*, and Pearl-spotted Owlet *Glaucidium perlatum* (Steyn 1973, Smeenk 1974, Tarboton and Allen 1984).



Only one study reporting on food items of Tawny Eagle (Smeenk 1974), conducted in Tsavo East, was within the geographic range of the Pygmy Falcon and this study does not mention Pygmy Falcon as a prey item for any of the raptors studied at that site including Tawny Eagle, Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*, Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus*, and African Hawk-Eagle *Hieraaetus spilogaster*. In McLean's studies of Pygmy Falcon in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (now part of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park), in northwest South Africa, he makes no mention of them as prey (McLean 1970).

We did not observe the eagle capturing the falcon but only saw the falcon in the eagle's talons. Tawny Eagles are known to eat carrion, including roadkill, and are known to exhibit kleptoparasitic behaviour (Brown 1982). Despite the slow speeds at which vehicles are required to travel in Etosha, birds are occasionally killed by vehicles (pers obs), thus it is possible that this falcon was roadkill that was picked up by the eagle. It is also possible that another raptor, for example Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*, killed the Pygmy Falcon and that it was subsequently stolen by the Tawny Eagle. Regardless, this is the first published observation of Pygmy Falcon as the prey of another raptor.

- oo0oo -

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Tropical Birding for giving me the opportunity to guide the tour during which this observation was made and to James E. Brown for allowing the use of his photo. I thank Jason D. Weckstein for making helpful comments that improved the manuscript.

### References

- Brown LH 1982.** Accipitridae, Osprey, cuckoo falcons, honey buzzards, kites, fish eagles, Old World vultures, snake eagles, harriers, hawks, buzzards and eagles. In: Brown LH, Urban EK, Newman K (eds). The Birds of Africa Vol 1, Academic Press, London: 294-436.
- McLean GL 1970.** The Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus*. Koedoe 13: 1-21.
- Smeenk C 1974.** Comparative-ecological studies of some east Africa birds of prey. Ardea 62: 2-97.
- Steyn P 1973.** Observations on the Tawny Eagle. Ostrich 44: 1-22.
- Steyn P 1980.** Further observations on the Tawny Eagle. Ostrich 51: 54-55.
- Tarboton WR and Allen D 1984.** The status and conservation of birds of prey in the Transvaal. Transvaal Museum Monograph No. 3. Transvaal Museum, Pretoria.