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WHEN A HAMERKOP AND YELLOW-BILLED KITES FIGHT FOR A GUTTURAL TOAD

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Most people, while approaching a water hole in a game reserve during the dry season, expect to encounter large numbers of terrestrial species arriving to drink and concentrations of waterbirds around the water's edge. Thus, at 11:00 on 4 October 2009, when I arrived at Kennedy Vlei in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, in the hottest part of the day, I was disappointed that it seemed to be, at first sight, entirely deserted.

The Kennedy Vlei is the northernmost stretch of a 30 km long grassy open corridor heading south through thick miombo, mopane and teak woodlands (Fig 1). From Kennedy Picnic site, the vlei leads to a first waterhole called Kennedy 1, which is kept full of water all year round (Fig 2).

A single Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* was present at the Kennedy 1 waterhole. The bird was holding a prey item in its bill. On closer inspection I recognised the object in the Hamerkop's bill as a Guttural Toad *Bufo gutturalis*. The amphibian was alive and struggling to escape from its predator which had clamped its bill strongly on its prey. The toad did not appear to be an easy item to swallow and the Hamerkop kept walking around for several minutes, the toad hanging from its bill (Fig 3).

Suddenly, two Yellow-billed Kites *Milvus parasitus*, flew over the waterhole and started showing interest in the Hamerkop's prey.



Fig 1 – The Kennedy Vlei with the Kennedy 1 waterhole

The two kites performed an acrobatic flight with sharp turns, low circles and nose-dives, probably to try distract the Hamerkop (Fig 4 and 6). The Hamerkop attempted to retain the toad, flying from one edge of the waterhole to another, with the amphibian hanging from its bill (Fig 5).

After several minutes of being persistently chased by the kites, the Hamerkop dropped the amphibian on the sand. One of the Yellow-billed Kites immediately dived down to the toad, grabbed it in its bill, and both birds flew off out of sight. This behaviour is described by Iyengar (2008) as kleptoparasitism, literally "parasitism by theft".

Maclean (1993) comments that kites are kleptoparasitic – stealing food from other raptors, however no examples of observations or prey items are mentioned. This incident might therefore be the first description of a Yellow-billed Kite kleptoparasitising other species than raptors.



Fig 2 – Aerial view of the Kennedy 1 waterhole

Furthermore Vernon and Dean (2005) do not mention Hamerkop as a species subjected to kleptoparasitism – this note records this form of parasitism as a first. Guttural Toad is not listed as prey of Hamerkop by Vernon and Dean (2005), and this record is a new addition to the list of prey items for the Hamerkop.



Fig 3 – A Guttural Toad caught by a Hamerkop



Fig 4 – A Yellow-billed Kite chasing the Hamerkop



Fig 5 – The Hamerkop trying to escape from the kites

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Fig 6 – A Yellow-billed Kite flying around the Kennedy 1 waterhole

Photos: Elsa Bussi re