

# Ornithological Observations



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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.

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## **GREY HERON *ARDEA CINEREA* "SPEARFISHING" SWIFTS?**

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## GREY HERON *ARDEA CINEREA* "SPEARFISHING" SWIFTS?

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A Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* was observed during the early hours of the morning of 28 September 2012 on the Bloemhof Dam, within its namesake Nature Reserve, feeding on a Little Swift *Apus affinis*. The observation was made from the Hoopstad road bridge which crosses the waters of the dam. The heron was seen flying toward the bridge with a still-alive swift clasped in its bill – the prey was wriggling a great deal. All the while the heron was being followed and mobbed by other swifts with decidedly better fortune. The heron landed on one of the concrete supporting structures of the bridge and resumed feeding on the swift. Each supporting structure along the length of the bridge harboured one adult Grey Heron, and the bridge also supports a breeding colony of its quarry. No confirmation was made on how the swift was captured, but it can be surmised that they are indeed captured in flight as the park manager, Mr Steve Gore, has observed such.

The Grey Heron normally feeds on small fish and aquatic organisms (Hockey, et al. 2005, Regos 2011). While its congener, the Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* is more a terrestrial forager. The latter is known to feed on a wide diversity of bird species, both in size and form, eg. mousebirds (Ballenden 1988; Rijdsdijk and Greenwood 2012), woodhoopoes (Ballenden 1988), moorhens (Tyler

and Tyler 2001), quails (Uys and Underhill 1995), and doves (Kahindi 1996). Grey Herons have been observed hunting rails (Pistorius 2008), consuming ducklings (Rijdsdijk and Greenwood 2012) and are known to occasionally take birds on the wing (Hockey et al. 2005). The grebe species are seemingly too large as they either choke on them (McCanch 2003), or probably abandon them, as is the case with the ecologically and taxonomically similar Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* (Rivers and Kuehn 2006). The largest bird prey species documented is the Aldabra White-throated Rail (*Dryolimnas cuvieri aldabranus*) (Pistorius 2008).

Generally prey sizes are less than 12 cm (Regos 2011), and the Little Swift's length of 13 cm (Hockey et al. 2005) places it on the cusp of the larger prey sizes for this species. In a review of available literature there is no mention of them preying upon swifts. Notwithstanding the size of prey, the most interesting facet of this behaviour points to its adaptability in its foraging prowess to utilise aerial vertebrate prey. Presumably they are dislodged while airborne and plucked off the water, or perhaps speared in the air, as they do with fish (Cook 1978). Preying upon swifts as such would have implications on prey handling time, and with an abundance of them, and perfected techniques, they could serve an important food resource. Herons appear to be very adaptable foragers and this has impressed upon observers, myself included, to document hitherto newly discovered feeding methods and prey species (eg. McCanch 2003; Tyler and Tyler 2001; Pistorius 2008; Rijdsdijk and Greenwood 2012).

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