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OVAMBO SPARROWHAWK ATTEMPTING TO PREY ON WATERBIRDS

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In Gauteng Province in South Africa the Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis* is the most abundant accipiter. Density of this bird of prey is documented at 27 pairs in 740 km² in the general area of the Jukskei River (Allan *et al.*, 1984).

The Ovambo Sparrowhawk is described as "most falcon-like of accipiters with relatively long wings and short tail" and its hunting technique is also more falcon-like than that of other accipiters (Allan, 1997). Characteristically it hunts in open areas and typical recorded hunting methods involve "stooping after soaring to 100-150 m, or swooping from an exposed perch about 30 m high" (Kemp *et al.*, 1975; Allan *et al.*, 1984). Ferguson-Lees and Christie (2001) add the following to describe the hunting technique of these birds: "[it] more typically forages on the wing over woodland or adjacent grassland and other open country and chases individual birds or flocks it flushes". The predator will chase its prey for distances of 100-200 m and then take the prey close to the ground. A success rate of 6 out of 46 (13%) attempts has been documented (Kemp *et al.*, 1975; Allan *et al.*, 1984). Branfield (2013) has described shorter chases close to the ground – these attempts, however, were largely unsuccessful.

Ovambo Sparrowhawks exclusively take birds as quarry (Kemp *et al.*, 1975; Allan *et al.*, 1984; Tarboton *et al.*, 1984) and the list of prey



Fig 1 – An Ovambo Sparrowhawk overlooking its territory from a hunting perch in an *Acacia* tree. © Niall Perrins

items include doves (n=57), pipits(12), cuckoos(8), flycatchers(6), weavers(6), widows(6), swifts(3), kingfishers(2), and robin-chats(2). The following species have already been recorded as well:



mousebirds, bee-eaters, wood-hoopoes, woodpeckers, swallows, drongos, prinias and escaped Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* (1 each) (Allan, 2005). In a previous account by Branfield (2013) only the Green Wood-hoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* was recorded previously and the following species were added to the existing list of prey items: Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* and Western Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis*. All of these attempts were unsuccessful. The largest documented prey item taken successfully was an African Olive Pigeon *Columba aquatrix* – it was surprised and killed while feeding on the ground (Branfield, 2013).

In this article, I will describe unsuccessful attempts to prey on a Giant Kingfisher *Megaceryle maximus*, an African Black Duck *Anas sparsa* and a Reed Cormorant *Phalacrocorax africanus* by a pale phase juvenile female Ovambo Sparrowhawk. I will also describe a further two hunting techniques in which the predator tried forcing water birds into the water with extended legs from low altitude and hunting from a low perch over open water.

While atlasing in Golden Harvest Park (pentad 2600_2755) around 08:30 on 13.01.2013 I heard the distress calls of a bird in serious trouble. I was in the shade of exotic Blue Gums and Black Wattle trees on the banks of a small dam in the north eastern corner of the park. I observed a pale phase juvenile female Ovambo Sparrowhawk hunting at close quarters. The sparrowhawk was flying at low level with extended legs attacking an adult Giant Kingfisher from above. It forced the kingfisher to utter its distress call and take evasive action by flying in a jinking fashion low over the surface of the water. On a number of occasions, the sparrowhawk struck the kingfisher with its talons forcing the bird into the water where it was released immediately. After surfacing and becoming airborne again, the

kingfisher was immediately attacked. At no stage did the sparrowhawk enter the water. Eventually the kingfisher found a temporary respite in the branches of an exotic tree on the bank of the dam. The sparrowhawk sat in a similar position in a neighbouring tree watching the dam intently.

From this low vantage point (about 2 m high) the sparrowhawk launched a low-level attack on the head of a Reed Cormorant that had just surfaced. The cormorant had to dive very rapidly after being struck by accipiter with its extended legs.

The sparrowhawk returned to its perch but within a few minutes it resumed its attack on the perched and clearly shaken kingfisher. It continued to pursue the screaming kingfisher over the water. The sparrowhawk employed the same method as before resulting in many more dunking into the water episodes for the unfortunate kingfisher. Despite numerous attempts, a thoroughly wet and very unhappy kingfisher made it back to a perch in a tree where it remained alone to protest indignantly.

After this episode the sparrowhawk landed on a low branch where it perched openly for about ten minutes. Thereafter it launched a similar attack on the pair of African Black ducks sitting on the water striking one on the back with extended talons. The ducks took to the air and flew off rapidly quacking indignantly.

The sparrowhawk returned to a low perch close to the kingfisher, which started its alarm call again. However, after a few minutes, the sparrowhawk took off flying low between the trees and disappeared from view. The kingfisher remained perched while the cormorant was out of the water perching over the water on a dead branch.



Kingfishers had previously been documented as prey items, although a particular species was not recorded (Allan, 2005). Both Reed Cormorant (55 cm; 550 g) and African Black Ducks (55 cm; 1000 g) are previously undocumented prey items. Both are considerably larger and heavier than the previously largest recorded prey – African Olive Pigeon *Columba aquatrix* (40 cm; 407 g). Typical prey weights are 10-60 g for males and up to 250 g in females (Ferguson-Lees *et al.*, 2001). This makes all potential prey described unusually large even for a robust female. The Giant Kingfisher (44 cm; 364 g) is very similar in size to the African Olive Pigeon, but would still be unusually heavy for the sparrowhawk. This pigeon was captured and eaten on the ground. Other than kingfishers, no other water birds had previously been documented (Allan, 2005). In a previous article, I documented an attack by an adult Ovambo Sparrowhawk on Cattle Egrets at a colony on the banks of a dam where the attempted predation occurred over water (Branfield, 2013).

The Ovambo Sparrowhawk specialises in capturing birds in flight, using a falcon-like hunting technique. It either perches high up on the edge of woodland, preferring to chase birds over open areas rather than through vegetation, or it stoops at prey from a high soaring flight (Oberprieler, 2012). The technique described here involves catching its quarry in flight while hunting from a low perch over open water and attempting to force the intended prey into the water with extended legs. The list of potential prey items continues to grow. Even birds bigger and heavier than itself constitute fair game for the Ovambo Sparrowhawk although the attempts described here had been largely unsuccessful but serious enough nevertheless.

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