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LANNER FALCON HUNTING LARGE FOREST HORNBILL IN THE EAST USAMBARA MOUNTAINS, TANZANIA

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Although many hornbills are increasingly endangered by deforestation (Kemp and Woodcock 1995), large forest hornbills such as the Trumpeter *Bycanistes bucinator* and Silvery-cheeked Hornbills *B. brevis* strike the observer as particularly prehistoric and successful over the aeons at evading predators and coping with climate and land use change.

It was therefore with some interest that I watched a large immature (probably female) Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* ambush-hunting these two hornbill species over the Amani Nature Reserve rainforest, East Usambara Mountains, Tanzania (S04°45'-05°20', E38°26'-38°48'). Falcons are known to take small woodland hornbills now and then, but it seems rare for much larger-bodied hornbills to be killed by these raptors.

This Lanner Falcon was sighted at close range (< 20 m) at 18:20 on on 23 August 2014, shortly after local sunset, leaving a perch near the clifftop at Mbomole Hill, a well-known lookout point over the Emau Valley forests of Amani Nature Reserve. I judged it to be an immature female on account of its large size, grey-brown rather than



Fig 1 – An immature Lanner Falcon photographed in Botswana

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slate-blue back and lack of rufous crown. The falcon made three passes at pairs and trios of flying Silvery-cheeked Hornbills headed to roost in rainforest canopy of the Emau Valley, dominated by *Sorondeia madagascariensis* and a tall invasive canopy tree, *Meisopsis eminii*. Small groups of Trumpeter Hornbills were also present in slightly larger numbers, settling into roosts. The falcon flew over these birds, one of which took evasive action, but it made no strikes or passes.



Fig 2 – A Trumpeter Hornbill photographed in Zimbabwe.

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Fig 3 – A Silvery-cheeked Hornbill photographed in Malawi.

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Suddenly I heard a loud peeling squawk, and turned to see a puff of feathers floating out from a point just unseen below the Mbomole Hill clifftop. Four Silvery-cheeked Hornbills fanned out from near this point, one squawking loudly, and dipped into nearby trees within about 20 seconds. The Lanner Falcon then appeared, flying away from the cliff in heavy, laboured flight, carrying a large black bundle with drooping wing and lolling head, briefly showing a glimpse of pinkish-cream casque before the bird dipped out of sight again. The cliff is sheer and the clifftop edge unstable, and as it was fast getting

dark I started the 25 minute forest walk down to Amani camp. It appeared that the hornbill caught was probably a female, based on its smaller casque, but I could not be certain.

This falcon, or an extremely similarly-plumaged immature Lanner Falcon, was in the same spot the next evening at the same time, but both hornbill species were conspicuously fewer in number. The falcon made at least two passes over the same area before late dusk. Female Lanner Falcons are roughly 46 cm in length and



Silvery-cheeked Hornbills 74 cm (Stephenson and Fanshawe 2002), but falcons are well known to take larger-bodied prey partly through the element of surprise and the method of stoop-attacking (Cade 1974).

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