

Black Sparrowhawks in the Southwestern Cape: Benefits of Cooperative Conservation

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ABSTRACT

A joint project undertaken between the Cape Falconry Club and the University of Stellenbosch to study the ecology of the Black Sparrowhawk *Accipiter melanoleucus* in the Boland and Peninsula regions of the south-western Cape led to the discovery that the species is widespread in alien woodlands, although not as common as either the African Goshawk *A. tachiro* or the Redbreasted Sparrowhawk *A. rufiventris*. The Black Sparrowhawk does not appear to be threatened by human impacts, and it adapts well to human activity. The food preference comprised of a wide range of bird species (N=11).

This study is a good example of mutual benefit that can be derived from cooperation between all interested parties. Cape Nature Conservation obtained quantitative data to assist in the formulation of management strategies for this species' conservation. The Cape Falconry Club is consequently able to harvest a limited number of birds annually for their purposes. The Cape Bird Club has been shown some of the nests and birds, and this input by the falconry club has resulted in a greater awareness and interest by the members, and a consequent great increase in the reported sightings of the species.

INTRODUCTION

Black Sparrowhawks have long been thought to be absent from the Boland region of the south-western Cape, in spite of historical records for the region (Boshoff *et al.* 1983). Hockey *et al.* (1989) report that it is an uncommon resident occurring in forestry plantations further eastwards. In other parts of South Africa, however, the species is widespread, except in the drier western regions (Tarboton & Allan 1984; Maclean 1995; Steyn 1982). The Black Sparrowhawk is a desirable falconry bird, but because of its local rarity, Cape Nature Conservation was unwilling to allow a harvest of birds for these purposes. The falconry club members along with the University of Stellenbosch thus decided to study the species in the Boland and Peninsula regions of the south-western Cape.

Interest in the species was initiated by a report from a Cape Town resident who had shot a female which had been catching his chickens near its nest in a gum tree in the suburb of Brackenfell in 1979. The pair had been breeding there for some years. This incident occurred 10 years prior to the

publication of Hockey *et al.* (1989) indicating that they were not known from this region. Local residents and farmers were questioned, and there were numerous reports of large raptors regularly taking chickens, which is typical Black Sparrowhawk behaviour. The terrain, along with the numerous exotic plantations, led to the suspicion that the species should be present, and so a search was conducted during September 1989. Many nests were found, but none could be confirmed as being Black Sparrowhawk nests. The search was then brought forward to July in subsequent years, and these nests proved to be active Black Sparrowhawk nests. Most chicks had left the nests by the end of August, which explained why the September searches were unsuccessful. (Oettlé, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study area extended south-west from 33° 30' South and 19° 30' East. The climate is Mediterranean, characterized by cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Black Sparrowhawk nests were searched for in exotic woodlots and plantations consisting of a variety of *Pinus* and *Eucalyptus* spp. that appeared to be suitable breeding habitats. When nests were found, they were visited as often as possible throughout the breeding season. Nests were described according to plantation type and size, position of nest tree within the plantation, height of nest within the tree, type and height of tree, breeding details, and any other observations.

RESULTS

The species was discovered to be widespread in alien woodlands in the study area, although it was not as common as either the African Goshawk or the Redbreasted Sparrowhawk. While the latter two species were not quantified, extrapolation from intensively studied small areas within the study area led to the estimation that these species occurred at least at double the frequency of the Black Sparrowhawks. A total of twenty-two Black Sparrowhawk nests were found, and many more suitable sites were identified where nests are likely, but have not yet been investigated. The nests were found to be typical for the species. The trees used were either mature gum *Eucalyptus* spp. or pine *Pinus* spp. trees, usually close to the edge of the forest, or commanding a view from a high point within the forest. Nests were between 5 and 26 m high, usually at about two thirds the height of the tree. Earliest breeding was recorded in mid-May although most breeding started in June. Most nests were unoccupied by the end of August. As the last chick to have left the nest was at the end of October, this was from a suspected relaying after failure of the first. Food remains were likewise typical for the species elsewhere. Prey species identified were Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*, Redeyed Dove *Streptopelia semitorquata*, Cape Turtle Dove *S. capicola*, Domestic Poultry, Laughing Dove *S. senegalensis*, Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*, Cape Francolin *Francolinus capensis*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Red Knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*, Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, and Yellow Billed Duck *Anas undulata*. One pair was unusual in that the birds fed predominantly on Cattle Egrets from a nearby colony.

DISCUSSION

Brown (1976), who studied Black Sparrowhawks at a nest near his home, stated that he had only seen these birds about 5 times away from the nest forest in 16 years of observation; furthermore, almost all he knew about the species had been learned there in about one hectare. He stated that the species is not shy, just elusive. It is thus no surprise that the species had been overlooked in the south-western Cape; having a Mediterranean climate, few bird watchers are about during the wettest months when the birds are breeding and most vocal. Also, exotic plantations are not desirable birding habitats at the best of times.

This study is a good example of mutual benefit that can be derived from cooperation between all interested parties. Cape Nature Conservation obtained quantitative data to assist in the formulation of management strategies for this species' conservation. The Cape Falconry Club is consequently able to harvest a limited number of birds annually for their purposes. Members of the Cape Bird

Club, which is predominantly comprised of amateur bird watchers, have been shown some of the nests and birds by falconry club members. This has resulted in a greater awareness and interest by the bird club members, and consequently has led to a great increase in the sightings of the species.

However, examples of lack of cooperation in Southern Africa are all too common. In Namibia, there is open antagonism by the Nature Conservation officials towards falconry. This has advanced to such a degree that it would appear that the scientists in that department have allowed emotions to blur their analysis of sound scientific data, bringing in personal bias to affect their decisions. One of the main reasons given by these scientists for rejecting a permit application to import African Peregrines *F. peregrinus minor* from captive bred Zimbabwean stock was that these birds posed a threat to the genetic integrity of the Namibian peregrines should they escape. This is in spite of the well recognized fact that Namibian and Zimbabwean peregrines both belong to the same subspecies. On another occasion, a pair of legally owned peregrines *F. p. peregrinus* were confiscated on the grounds that the housing, built as specified by The Peregrine Fund, (Weaver & Cade 1985) was inadequate and that the birds had been moved within Namibia without the required transport permit. These birds were then housed by Nature Conservation in a larger cage surrounded only by old shade cloth, which tore when the female flew into it, thus escaping. No attempt was made by Nature Conservation to recover the bird, and no compensation was forthcoming. This type of ignorance, obduracy and bias is an anathema to sound science, and has resulted in the crippling of much of the past cooperative efforts of these individuals. One aspiring Namibian falconer who used to spend a large amount of time ringing birds, took to flying racing pigeons instead (an exotic species!), and another resorted to wingshooting since falconry is illegal. The irony of the situation is obvious.

South Africa too has had its share of mistakes, some quite recently. Falconry was illegal in the Cape till seven years ago, and prior to this the wealth of knowledge built up by the falconers was unavailable to the conservators, for fear of falconers attracting unwanted attention. Since the easing of the regulations, and the legalization of falconry, over 20 articles have been published by Cape falconers, and a large amount of nest record and prey data has been given to Cape Nature Conservation. These data would all have been lost to the scientific community if falconry were still illegal. Other examples of antagonism may be found within the RCG itself; as recently as 1996 the RCG formally stated that it does not approve the removal of raptor chicks or the capture of free flying raptors for falconry (Verdoorn 1996). This is in direct conflict with the principles of sustainable use of resources, which is considered the cornerstone of modern conservation. In another article, the chairman of the RCG actively slates human interference with eagle nests, specifically, increasing production by removing the second egg or chick, or double clutching (Verdoorn 1994). By doing so, he influences the gullible public who are funding the RCG into believing that falconers are bad because they take birds or chicks from the wild. Had the chairman evaluated the data in an unbiased way, then it would have been evident that human interference in that particular case in point might have resulted in four chicks being reared from that pair that year, instead of only one. This type of protectionist attitude makes a mockery of the widely acclaimed efforts by The Peregrine Fund to recover the Peregrine, the Californian Condor *Gymnogyps californianus*, and more recently the Harpy *Harpia harpyja* and other eagles, to mention but a few. Furthermore, in 1997, the chairman stated that the RCG "enters into unpleasant battles with the conservation authorities", and "for the RCG, it is a continuous battle to keep unscrupulous characters away from birds of prey" (Verdoorn 1997). This is a good example of poor diplomacy and emotive and inaccurate journalism, resulting in alienation and not cooperation. Falconers are listed in the same article along with collectors, zoos and illegal operators, and yet in the past decade we do not know of any prosecuted illegal activity by falconers in South Africa, nor indeed of any of the other illegal activities mentioned. Such articles in glossy magazines do far more harm to conservation efforts than good.

History repeats itself because people don't listen the first time. Conservation resources are limited, now more than ever. There is no place for ivory towers and sensitive egos; all those involved, even peripherally, with conservation should work together and pool their resources, since the rewards are great. The alternative has failed dismally in the past; it is our duty as conservators to evaluate these facts, and apply the conclusions, even when they disagree with our preconceived opinions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are extended to Guy Palmer, of Cape Nature Conservation, without whose support this study would not have been possible. Thanks are also extended to the other members of the Cape Falconry Club who assisted with the field work.

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