

# 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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## NEST SITE OF BLACK SAW-WING AT BETTYS BAY, WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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## NEST SITE OF BLACK SAW-WING AT BETTYS BAY, WESTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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The Black Saw-wing *Psalidoprocne holomeleana* is endemic to southern Africa (Earlé 1997b). It seems however to be a relatively poorly-known species, with 27 of the 29 references in Vernon and Dean (2005) being to multispecies accounts (fieldguides, atlases, reviews, etc) and the two remaining references, though devoted to the species, are one-page short notes. The Black Saw-wing appears not have a single full-length paper devoted to it.

Tarboton (2001, 2011) described the usual nest site of the Black Saw-wing as a self-excavated tunnel in earth-banks which are 0.5–1.0 m high. "Tunnels are usually close to the top of the bank, the entrance sometimes concealed by overhanging vegetation."

In the First Southern African Bird Atlas Project, there were a total of 9 398 sight records of Black Saw-wing, but only 44 "breeding" records (0.5%) (Earlé 1997b), where breeding included all evidence of breeding, including feeding recently-fledged young out of the nest (Harrison and Underhill 1997). In contrast, 4.1% of the 32 566 records of Greater Striped Swallow *Hirundo cucullata* recorded breeding (Earlé 1997a). Thus breeding records of the Black Saw-wing seem worthy of recording, especially if they differ from the usual nest description.

In the Bettys Bay flood of 2004, the Dawidskraal River, which flows from the Harold Porter National Botanic Gardens to the sea changed its course, washing away the Dawidskraal Road and creating a new



**Fig 1** – The vertical bank with the nest site indicated by the arrow.

estuary to the sea about 300 m west of the previous estuary. Along most of the new course, the river has almost vertical banks. The flood scoured the route of the roadway, removing the gravel and the subsoil below it, down to bedrock, a depth of about 3 m (pers. obs.). This road was not repaired, and remains the watercourse.

At 08:15 on 30 December 2012, I found a 3 m bank which contained a Black Saw-wing nest (Figures 1 and 2). The nest was located about one-third of the distance from Clarence Drive to Otter Creek (S34° 31' 13", E18° 55' 28"). Below the nest was a rock pool, perhaps 1 m deep. The nest was located 70% of the way to the top of the bank. This is a considerably higher bank for a nest than those described by Tarboton (2001, 2011).

Both adults were actively visiting the nest, flying directly into the



**Fig 2** – Close up of the nest site of the Black Saw-wing.

burrow without a pause at the entrance, spending about a minute inside and then flying off. On one occasion, both adults arrived simultaneously. One adult entered the burrow, while the other flew out of sight, and returned a few minutes later after the first adult had left the nest. Thus presumably they were feeding chicks within the nest.

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