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SPECKLED ROCK SKINK *TRACHYLEPIS PUNCTATISSIMA* PREDATION OF CAPE WHITE-EYE *ZOSTEROPS VIRENS* EGGS

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PREDATION**SPECKLED ROCK SKINK *TRACHYLEPIS PUNCTATISSIMA* PREDATION OF CAPE WHITE-EYE *ZOSTEROPS VIRENS* EGGS***Derek Engelbrecht*

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The Speckled Rock Skink *Trachylepis punctatissima* is a common, diurnal, rupicolous or arboreal lizard, often living commensally with humans. It is endemic to the grasslands and higher lying savannahs of the southern third of Africa, as far north as eastern Zambia (Masterson 2014). The species was originally considered a subspecies of the Striped Skink *Trachylepis striata* but was elevated to species status by Broadley (2000). Much of our knowledge of the biology of the Speckled Rock Skink is therefore subsumed under the Striped Skink complex with no specific details on the diet of the Speckled Rock Skink *per se*. However, it is likely to be similar to the diet of the Striped Skink which is predominantly insectivorous (Heideman & Bates 1999; Alexander & Marais 2007). Most *Trachylepis* skinks are active, opportunistic foragers and will consume a range of insects and small arthropods of different sizes. They also exhibit some dietary flexibility as urban populations regularly exploit anthropogenic food sources such as provisioned fat and scraps of meat as well as vegetable matter. Although consumption of vertebrates forms part of the regular diet of some *Trachylepis* species (de Brooke & Houston 1983; Alexander & Marais 2007), it is seemingly rare in the Striped Skink complex. Heideman & Bates (1999) reported the tail of a conspecific in the alimentary canal of a Wahlberg's Striped Skink *Trachylepis*

wahlbergii (formerly a subspecies of the Striped Skink) but the authors could not establish if it was the result of predation or autotomy during an agonistic encounter. Here I report on video footage obtained of a Speckled Rock Skink preying on the nest of a Cape White-eye *Zosterops virens* in a suburban garden in Polokwane, South Africa.

The Cape White-eye nest was situated within a Blood Red Trumpet Vine *Distictis buccinatoria*, approximately 2.2 m above ground level. To record parental activity of the white-eyes at the nest, a Sony HDR-XR160 digital video camera was placed approximately 0.5 m from the nest and left to record continuously until the batteries became exhausted. On 21 September 2015 at 12h20 a Speckled Rock Skink was recorded attempting to reach the nest containing two eggs, 3 and 4 days old respectively (Fig. 1a). However, the attending parent successfully rebuffed the attempt by preventing the skink from approaching too close to the nest. The skink retreated and at 12:31 it lunged at the nest from below, causing the incubating parent to flush from the nest. The skink paused a few seconds on the rim of the nest before it broke one egg, partially consumed its contents and then grabbed the other broken egg in its jaws before scuttling off with it (Fig. 1b). The skink did not consume the eggshells as the one eggshell was found in the nest and the other was found on the ground below the nest. The dimensions of the eggs were 17.05 x 11.35 mm and 17.21 x 12.00 mm. A short video clip of the first unsuccessful attempt and the second successful predation event can be seen at <https://youtu.be/8d8ixDuPCBw>.

Skinks are active foragers that seize their prey after a short dash and the strategy observed here fits this description well. However, it is worth noting that the skink here appeared to show some degree of "planning" as it first approached the nest from above and behind the nest but retreated when the Cape White-eye parent stood its ground. It then returned 10 minutes later with a surprise dash from the front and below which startled the attending parent which left the nest and its contents open to attack.



Fig. 1. (a) The Speckled Rock Skink's (red arrow) first attempt at preying the eggs of a Cape White-eye (yellow arrow) was from above and the back of the nest but the bird successfully rebuffed this attempt. (b) The Speckled Rock Skink's second attempt was from below and the side and was successful

The observations above represent, as far as I am aware, the first record of a Speckled Rock Skink predation of bird eggs. It remains to be seen if this was a once-off, opportunistic predation event or if eggs form part of the regular diet of this species, or at least of this suburban population. These observations also raise the possibility that the species may prey on the eggs of other commensal lizards such as geckos.

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