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PREDATION

BOOMSLANG *DISPHOLIDUS TYPUS* ROBS CAPE WEAVER *PLOCEUS CAPENSIS* NEST

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Boomslangs *Dispholidus typus* are known to prey on Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* nestlings; in fact, they are the only reptilian nest predator listed for Cape Weavers in Roberts 7 (Craig 2005). On 30 December 2016, we observed a female boomslang successfully robbing a Cape Weaver nest in Schoenmakerskop (34°02'S, 25°32'E), outside Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

We had been observing a female Cape Weaver feeding her chicks for several days. Just before 10:00 on 30 December 2016, our attention was drawn outside by an unusual and persistent bird call. It was the weaver, hopping from branch to branch in the vicinity of her nest, repeatedly giving a short “chack” call. After some minutes, we noticed an olive-grey snake, perhaps slightly over 1 m in length, which we later identified as a female boomslang, approaching the active nest. (There were many empty nests in the same tree; we did not see the snake approach any of these.) As the snake got closer, a male Southern Masked Weaver *P. velatus* approached and began to attack the snake. This did not appear to deter the snake at all.

When the snake reached the nest and put her head inside, the chicks began making the same calls that they had made when the female arrived to feed them. This continued for perhaps a minute or

two before they were eventually silenced. The snake remained busy in the nest for what seemed like an improbably long time; it may have been as much as five minutes (Fig. 1). Eventually she emerged, with bulges indicating the progress of the chicks down her gullet. There were two or three of these bulges. Without much delay, and still under attack from the Southern Masked Weaver, she made her way back up the branch and out of the tree and the garden.

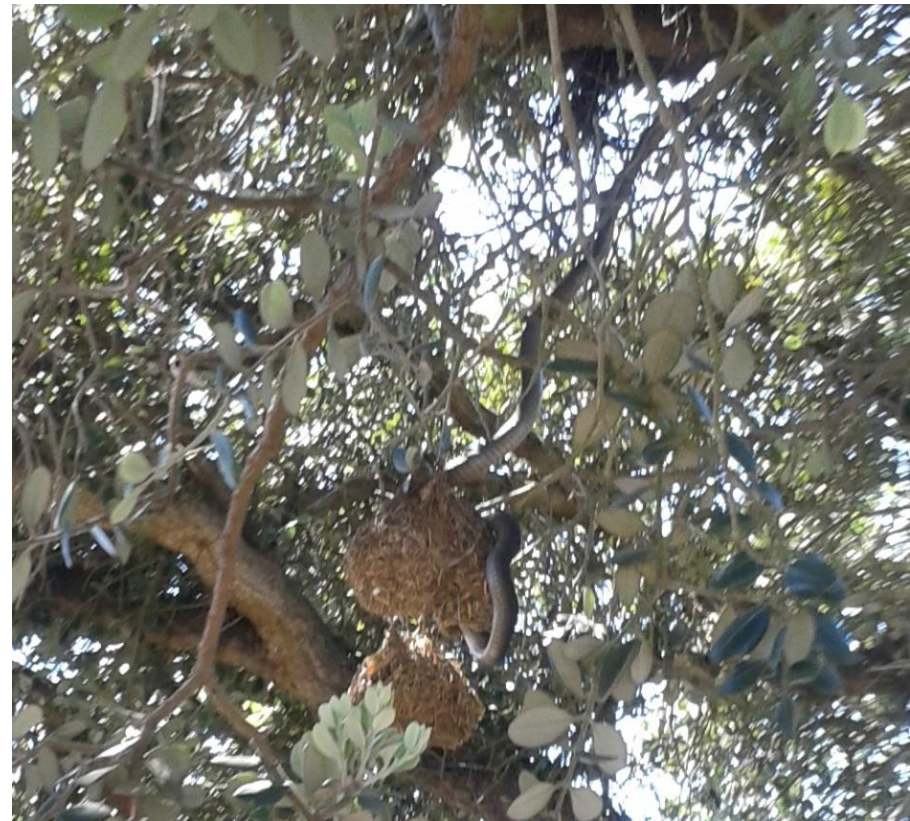


Figure 1 - Female boomslang *Dispholidus typus* robbing a Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* nest in Schoenmakerskop. Photograph ©Marc Burman

Representatives of at least seven different bird species were present for at least some of the attack, alarm-calling and (in the case of the Southern Masked Weaver) attacking the snake. Early on a Cape Bulbul *Pycnonotus capensis* was present, but it did not stay for long. Several Cape White-eyes *Zosterops capensis* alarm-called around the nest for the duration of the attack. Somewhat less vocal were two or three Cape Sparrows *Passer melanurus*, one Greater Double-collared Sunbird *Nectarinia afra* and an immature male Amethyst Sunbird *N. amethystina*.

After the commotion had died down and the snake had disappeared, the female Cape Weaver approached the now-empty nest several times, hopping from branch to branch around the nest, looking at it, but never (as far as we saw) going inside. She was also not calling audibly, although it looked like she was trying to ascertain whether any chicks remained alive in the nest.

An hour or so later, we again heard white-eyes and weavers alarm-calling, and we then saw a male boomslang moving through the upper branches of the trees. He appeared to be hunting, but as far as we could see he was not successful. From time to time the white-eyes would commence alarm-calling, and sometimes other birds would join in. In addition to all of the previously mentioned species, we also saw the following: a Black-collared Barbet *Lybius torquatus* watching briefly, but not alarm-calling; two or three Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, calling and apparently attacking the snake for a brief period; and a Spectacled Weaver *P. ocularis* and male Cape Weaver vigorously attacking the snake for some time (Fig. 2). Interestingly, the Cape Weaver appeared to be reluctant to strike the snake from above, even when there was clear access from above but not from below (Fig. 3). It seemed clear that the Southern Masked Weaver and Cape Weaver males made contact with the snakes, but these strikes appeared to have hardly any effect.



Figure 2 - Several species of birds alarm-calling near a male Boomslang *Dispholidus typus* (out of frame) in Schoenmakerskop. Photograph © Marc Burman



Figure 3 - A Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* or Spectacled Weaver *P. ocularis* mobbing a male boomslang *Dispholidus typus* (arrow) from below in Schoenmakerskop.
Photograph © Marc Burman

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References

Craig AJFK 2005. Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis*. In: Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds). Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7th edn. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, pp.1012–1013.

This record has been submitted to the ADU Virtual Museum:

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