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AFRING NEWS

UNUSUAL PREY OF A SOUTHERN WHITE-CROWNED SHRIKE

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Southern White-crowned Shrikes *Eurocephalus anguitimens* are fairly common inhabitants of arid and semi-arid, deciduous savannah woodlands and riverine bush with sparse ground cover (Parker 1997; Harris and Arnott 1988). They typically live in groups of 4 to 8 birds, but flocks of up to 20 have been recorded in the dry season (Harris and Arnott 1988). Their striking dark brown and white plumage and characteristic harsh, raucous calls make them rather conspicuous while foraging. Southern White-crowned Shrikes are almost entirely insectivorous, feeding on a great variety of invertebrate prey such as locusts, beetles, millipedes, caterpillars, termites (including alate termites), ants and wasps, and occasionally small fruits (McLachlan and Liversidge 1970; Dean 1978; Harris and Arnott 1988; Steyn 1988; Styles 1995). There is also an interesting record of five individuals seemingly feeding on parasites, possibly ticks, on a Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis* in the Bulawayo region, Zimbabwe (Baker 2006). Given their relatively large size, Southern White-crowned Shrikes also tend to feed on large invertebrates.

On 1st July 2017, while ringing birds in the Blouberg Nature Reserve in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, our attention was drawn to a cacophony of noise near one of the mist nets. A Southern White-crowned Shrike was caught in one of the mist nets and as we

approached it we noticed something 'pinkish' protruding from its mouth. Our first impression was that the bird was 'tongued', i.e. the bird's tongue got tangled in the mesh of the mist net. Upon closer inspection, we were most surprised to see the bird had actually partially swallowed a worm lizard (Squamata: Amphibaenidae). Worm lizards are fossorial reptiles that seldom surface but will occasionally hide under rocks or logs. Exactly how the shrike located and secured its prey is unknown. After securing the worm lizard, the shrike must have partially swallowed it before it was either disturbed and took flight, or it took off to process its catch elsewhere when it was caught in the mist net.



Figure 1 Southern White-crowned Shrike with a partially swallowed worm snake. Blouberg Nature Reserve, July 2017.

This is the first record of a Southern White-crowned Shrike preying on a vertebrate and represents an extension of the diet of this species. However, it is interesting to note that, according to Skead (1967), the species' specific name *anguitimens* was spelled incorrectly and should have been spelled *anguitinens*, meaning snake-holding/holder in Latin. Just like Skead (1967), we wonder if Dr. Andrew Smith's seemingly odd specific epitaph for the species was perhaps guided by observations of a Southern White-crowned Shrike catching a small snake - or perhaps even a worm lizard?



Figure 2 A close-up view of the Southern White-crowned Shrike swallowing a worm lizard. Blouberg Nature Reserve, July 2017.

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