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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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PLAY IN BIRDS – AFRICAN DARTER

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In April 2010, we visited a favourite local birding spot, Rietvlei Nature Reserve, situated on the Rietvlei Dam in Irene, near Pretoria. We stopped at one of the bird hides to observe the water birds there. There were a fair number of African Darters *Anhinga rufa* and Reed Cormorants *Microcarbo africanus* perching together on the remains of a dead tree. As we watched, we were amazed to see a juvenile African Darter apparently playing with a small stick. The bird was throwing it up into the air and catching it in its bill. The bird appeared to find this an absorbing activity and repeated the process over and over again. Eventually it dropped the stick into the water. The young darter leant over so far that it almost fell off its perch. The current moved the stick out of reach, at which point the juvenile finally gave up.

This behaviour of the juvenile African Darter apparently “playing”, intrigued us and raised the question – do wild birds actually play? According to our research little appears to have been written on this behaviour in birds. Information found on the website of Cornell Lab of Ornithology indicated that wild birds apparently do play. Playing in wild animals and birds is thought to enhance the learning of motor and sensory skills. Social behaviour also benefits although the activity may appear to serve no immediate purpose.

According to discussions in the Question and Answer section on the Cornell website some examples from the US include young screech owls pouncing at leaves. Young crows and jays picking up,



Figure 1: Juvenile African Darter with stick in bill

inspecting and hiding shiny objects were also observed. Other examples include young gulls and terns carrying small items aloft and dropping them, catching them in midair and then dropping and catching them again. All these activities are thought to help birds acquire the skills and co-ordination they will need for hunting when they reach adulthood. Other forms of behaviour possibly indicating play include so-called “locomotor play” – ducks have been observed floating through tidal rapids or fast-moving sections of rivers. They returned and repeated this activity more than once.



Figure 2: Trying to retrieve the stick

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References

Cornell Lab of Ornithology web site: www.birds.cornell.edu