

# 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.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

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## EYEWITNESS REPORT: CRESTED BARBET CHICKS KILLED BY LESSER HONEYGUIDES

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## EYEWITNESS REPORT: CRESTED BARBET CHICKS KILLED BY LESSER HONEYGUIDES

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### Introduction

We have recently had the opportunity of installing a CCTV (closed circuit television) camera in a Crested Barbet *Trachyphonus vaillantii* nest, only to observe what is believed to be astonishing and possibly previously unreported behaviour involving Crested Barbets and Lesser Honeyguides *Indicator minor*.

It is known that the Lesser Honeyguide is a brood parasite of the Crested Barbet (Vernon and Dean 2005). Lesser Honeyguides are polygynous (Tarboton 2001) and probably polygamous (Vernon and Dean 2005). It is believed that a female Honeyguide lays a single egg in each of a number of nests during a season – estimated 18-20 eggs per breeding season (Vernon and Dean 2005; Tarboton, 2011). Two birds may work together as a team, with the one distracting the hosts and drawing them away from their nest while the other enters the nest to lay her egg, or a female on her own may simply lay her egg when the nest is unattended. The female Honeyguide may damage or remove the host egg from the nest (Tarboton 2011).

This paper documents two Lesser Honeyguides brutally attacking an occupied Crested Barbet nest and intentionally killing Crested Barbet chicks. No previous record of this behaviour could be found. This leads to speculation on reasons for the behaviour of aggressors these bird species.

The following account chronicles four attempts of egg laying by the Crested Barbet and their outcomes.

### Observations

I put a new sisal nesting log in a tree next to our house, with a small infrared CCTV camera installed in the top of the log, and wired to the TV set in the house. Shortly thereafter, my wife and I were able to see the Crested Barbets hollow the log out to a depth of about 20 cm and take up residence. On 6 September 2011 they laid the first of 4 eggs, each one day apart. On 24 September, three of the eggs hatched and the fourth egg was discarded the following day – presumably infertile. On 28 September two chicks disappeared from the nest. The third died two days later. The Crested Barbets cleaned the nest, deepening the hollow in the log slightly. This housekeeping appeared to occur after each breeding attempt.

On 8 October, the Crested Barbets laid the first of a second batch of four eggs. We were then away for a few days and returned on the day we expected the eggs to hatch, only to find that the nest was empty.

On 1 November, the Crested Barbets again laid the first of a third batch of four eggs. Three of these eggs hatched on 17 November and the fourth hatched the next day. On 19 November while my wife and I were both watching the TV screen, two Lesser Honeyguides entered the nest. The one attacked the adult Crested Barbet in the nest by violently pecking it on the head while the other forced its way underneath the adult and attacked the chicks. I would normally have allowed nature to take its course, but considering the bad luck the Crested Barbets had already had, I ran outside to try and save the situation. When I got to the nest, the two Lesser Honeyguides flew out with the Crested Barbet in hot pursuit, chasing them until they were well out of the garden. On returning to the TV, it appeared that 3 of the chicks were dead. However, after the parent bird had covered them for a while, we saw that one was dead and one obviously weakened and 2 were still alive. The weakened chick died the next day. From this observation, we surmise that similar attacks by the Lesser Honeyguides caused failure of the first two breeding attempts. The remaining two chicks were 26 days old and almost



ready to leave the nest when we went away for a few days again, during which time we assume that they fledged successfully.

On 29 December the Crested Barbets laid the last egg of a fourth batch of four. On 12 January 2012, two of these eggs disappeared from the nest and on the morning of 14 January, when these eggs were expected to hatch, the nest was empty. It is unknown what happened to these eggs.

### Conclusions

A total of 16 eggs were laid by the Crested Barbets, but in all likelihood, only two fledged. Our observations suggest that at least one, but possibly more multiple attacks on the Crested Barbet nest were carried out by the Lesser Honeyguides. The explicit objective of these attacks apparently was to kill the Crested Barbet chicks and remove the eggs. The reason for this behaviour possibly was to force the female Crested Barbet to lay repeatedly in an attempt to synchronise Barbet and Honeyguide egg laying so that the Honeyguide could accomplish its laying as a brood parasite.

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