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CAUGHT IN THE ACT II: BOOMSLANG PREDATION ON SABOTA LARK NEST

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It is well known that ground nesting birds suffer heavy nest losses. Predation is usually invoked as the main cause of breeding failure, but the identity of the predator is often a matter of conjecture. It is rather surprising that such an important aspect of the breeding ecology of birds is often reduced to one or two sentences speculating about the identity of the perpetrator. Since the 1990's technological advances in camera technology has provided ecologists with the opportunity to study nesting behaviour and predation free from biases associated with opportunistic field observations, e.g. time of day or detectability of predators (Ribic *et al.* 2012).

We have been studying the nesting ecology of the Sabota Lark *Calendulauda sabota* in the Polokwane Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province, South Africa since 2011. One aspect of the study involves placing video cameras near nests in order to define the roles and relative contributions of the sexes in the nesting cycle and also to identify nest predators. On 16 January 2012 at 15:07 we recorded a predation event involving a female Boomslang *Dispholidus typus* at a nest (S23°58'04.47"; E29°28'20.85"; 1339 masl) with three 10-day old Sabota Lark nestlings.

The Boomslang approached the nest in a series of rapid, stop-start steps. The nestlings remained motionless even as the snake tucked



Fig 1 – The Sabota Lark nestlings remained motionless in the nest despite the female Boomslang putting her head into the nest.
Polokwane Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

its head into the nest (Fig. 1). This tactic of remaining motionless is a typical anti-predation strategy employed by nestlings of many lark species, but the extent to which these nestlings remained faithful to the strategy was a surprise. In fact, it appears as if the snake almost “bumped” two nestlings out of the nest in its attempt to get a grasp of its prey. It is only when it got a hold of the nestling and it uttered a distress call that the remaining two nestlings exploded (i.e. forced fledging) from the nest (Fig. 2). The Boomslang managed to grab the one nestling by the head/neck region and moved off with it (Fig. 3). The entire sequence of events from arrival of the Boomslang until it moved off with the nestling lasted 23 seconds. Interestingly, the same female Boomslang returned to the now empty nest 6 minutes and 20 seconds later and investigated it from all angles for about six seconds before moving off.



Fig 2 – Two of the Sabota Lark nestlings "exploding" from the nest as the female Boomslang got a hold of their sibling.
Polokwane Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province, South Africa.



Fig 3 – The Boomslang removing the Sabota Lark nestling from the nest before moving off with it.
Polokwane Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Although the Boomslang is mostly an arboreal hunter, it does descend to the ground occasionally to feed, especially along streams (Marais, 2004). This particular site in the Polokwane Nature Reserve is far from any surface water, but it is in open *Acacia* savannah which will provide suitable arboreal foraging habitat for the species. It is possible that the snake crossed open ground between trees when she came upon the nest. This is as far as we can establish the first account of a Boomslang depredating a lark nest.

A short video clip of the predation event and the female snake returning a few minutes later can be seen at <http://youtu.be/6XQLIGtN58k>

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- Ribic CA, Thompson FR and Pietz PJ (2012)** *Video Surveillance of Nesting birds*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

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