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NOTES ON THE DIET OF BIRDS IN THE FREE STATE AND LESOTHO, SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Abstract

Observations on the diet of 45 species from the Free State province, South Africa, and Lesotho, are presented. To date, little data was available on the diet of birds in these areas, especially in Lesotho. For most records, the following data are provided: species name; place and data of observations; number of foraging birds; name of food objects. Berries of shrubs *Sinchus molle*, *Pyracantha angustifolia*, *Rhamnus prinoides*, *Searsia burchellii*, seed of *Amaranthus hybridus* and grain of maize and sorghum proved to be very important source of diet for many species

Key words: diet, berries, Drakensberg, Maloti, grasslands.

Lesotho comprises mainly cultivated fields dominated by maize in the lowlands, foothills and Senqu Valley, with some natural bushy vegetation preserved along sand-stone cliffs and some exotic trees and shrubs encroaching water courses (Talukdar 1982). In highlands, natural *Festuca-Themeda* grasslands predominate, being utilized as pasture for cattle, sheep and goats (Ambrose *et al.* 2000).

The Free State province of South Africa is predominately *Cympopogon-Themeda* grassland, most of which is now transformed into cultivated fields.

During the years 1995-2001, I have made some observations on feeding habits of birds associated with these vegetations. Since, no data are available on the diet of many bird species occurring in these regions, especially in Lesotho (Kopij 2003, 2004, 2005; Kopij *et al.* 2004), it is justified to publish all available data pertaining to this issue.

For most records, the following data are provided: species name; place and data of observations; number of foraging birds; name of food objects.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Thabana Letsie; 16.12.2000: Orthoptera: Acrididae, Gryllidae; Coleoptera: Carabidae, Scarabaeidae.

Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala*

Ramabanta on Makhaleng River, 15.12.1999, in a heronry: Crustacea: crabs; Orthoptera: Gryllida, Acrididae; Mammalia: Microtidae.

Southern Bald Ibis *Geronticus calvus*

Moitsupeli; 15.08.2000: 2 adult birds foraged in the field of harvested maize, looking for the caterpillars of *Buseola fusca* (Lepidoptera: Noctuidae).

**Red-breasted Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter rufiventris*

Koro Koro; 01.08.2001: unsuccessful attack on a dove *Streptopelia* sp.

Ambrose & Maphisa (1999) recorded on the National University of Lesotho (NUL) campus at Roma: Southern Grey-headed Sparrow *Passer diffusus* and African Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotis nigricans* as prey.

Black Goshawk *Accipiter melanoleucos*

St. Joseph (Koro Koro) area, near a pine plantation; 21.11.2000: Pied Starling *Spreo bicolor* (they nested in nearby dongas) held in talons of passing adult Black Goshawk.

Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

Bloemfontein; December 1997: *Rhabdomys pumilio*: 12, *Otomys irroratus* -13, Rodentia unidentified – 3; January 1998: *Rhabdomys pumilio* – 3, *Mastomys* sp. 1, *Otomys irroratus* – 10, Rodentia unidentified - 2.

Martial Eagle *Pelomatus bellicosus*

Modder River near the Soetdoring Nature Reserve, Free State; August 1996: Ground Squirrel *Xerus inauris* – 4 skulls, Common Duiker *Sylvicapra grimmia* – 1, gallinaceous bird – 1.

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*

Ha Shale near Roma; 22.05.2000: unsuccessful attack on a domestic hen.

NUL campus at Roma; 14.07.2001: unsuccessful attack on the Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*.

Ambrose & Maphisa (1999) recorded a chicken as the prey on the NUL campus at Roma.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

Mellville near Thaba Nchu, Free State; December 1993-January 1994: Solifugae – 15; Coleoptera: Carabidae – 4, Scarabaeidae – 1; Orthoptera: Gryllidae 1.

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*

On Makhaleng river near St. Benedict; 11.04.1999: a flock of c. 30 birds foraged on maize grain; the same locality; 12.04.1999: 7 birds feeding on maize.

Marsh Owl *Asio capensis*

Bloemfontein, summer 1995: a large Scarabaeinae (Coleoptera).

Rock Pigeon *Columba guinea*

Phutiatsana river near Maseru; 06.09.2001: spinach leaves.

Semonkong; 10.01.1999, a flock of c. 30 foraging on wheat grain in a ploughed field.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Berea; 01.09.2001: 3 ad.: seeds of the parsley tree.

Roma, NUL campus; 10.05.2000: seeds of the pepper tree *Sinchus molle*.

Roma Valley; 01.05.1999: sorghum grain.

Observed also while hawking alete termites.

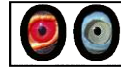
Speckled Mousebird *Colius striatus*

Roma Valley; 19.08.1998: *Pyracantha angustifolia* berries.

Roma Valley; 31.10.1998: fruits of the pepper tree.

Foothill of the Qeme Plateau; 11.08.2000 and 26.09.2000: a flock feeding on *Rhamnus prinoides* berries.

The same place; 26.09.2000: 3 ad. feeding on *Osiris lanceolata* berries.



Roma, NUL campus; 16.11.2001: 2 ad., plums. 19.06.2001: 8 ad., *Rhamnus prinoides* berries; Ha Makhoebe, 19.06.2001, 8 birds: *Rhamnus prinoides* fruits.

Berries of the *Rhamnus prinoides* are probably the most important winter diet in Lesotho.

Black-collared Barbet *Lybius torquatus*

Roma, NUL campus; 1998-2002: often seen feeding on fig fruits.

Crested Barbet *Trachyphonus vaillantii*

Roma, NUL campus; 01.11.1998: *Morus* berries.

Red-capped Lark *Calandrella cinerea*

Near Nkoeng, 15.05.2000: c. 15 birds feed on sorghum (harvested fields).

In winter, it is often observed in fields of harvested sorghum all over Lesotho.

African Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus nigricans*

On 24.01.2002 a fledgling was fed Bushman's grape berries.

Observed also hawking alete termites and flowers of the poisonous plant – *Homeria pallida* in the Roma Valley.

Sickle-winged Chat *Cercomela sinuata*

Thabana Ntlenyana area; 29.12.2001: a caterpillar, c. 4 mm in length, carried for chicks.

Cape Rock Thrush *Monticola rupestris*

Matsieng; 12.12.2000, 1 ad.: Diplopoda.

Sentinel Rock Thrush *Monticola explorator*

Makheta; 26.12.1999: an earthworm (Oligochaeta) carried to chicks.

Ha Kalepa (n. Semonkong) on Moletsunyane River: 10.01.1999: 1 ad, Diplopoda.

Semonkong, 17.01.1999, 1 ad., caterpillar carried to chicks.

Cape Longclaw *Macronyx capensis*

Roma Valley?; 11.08.2001: 1 ad. foraged on a field of harvested maize.

Common Fiscal *Lanius colaris*

Maseru; 12.02.2001: Diplopoda, c. 5 cm in length, impaled on a wire. Grasshoppers (Orthoptera: Acrididae) and beetles (Coleoptera) probably the most important prey in Lesotho lowlands.

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Roma, NUL; 23.05.1999: 2 ad.: *Pyracantha angusifolia* berries.

Pied Starling *Spreo bicolor*

Roma Valley; 16.09.1999: a flock of c. 20: sorghum in a harvested field.

Roma Valley; 01.05.1999: a flock of 28, maize grain in a harvested field.

Semonkong; 09.01.1999: a grasshopper (Orthoptera: Acrididae) carried to chicks.

Senqu River near Malibamatso confluence; 24.01.2002: 21 birds fed on Bushman's grape berries.

Thaba Tseka; 03.03.2001: 9 birds fed on *Searsia pyroides* berries;

Nazareth, 13.12.1999, 13 birds: *Rhamnus prinoides* berries.

Red-winged Starling *Onychognathus morio*

Rhamnus prinoides berries probably the most important food throughout the year, e.g. 13.12.1999, 16 ad.; 03.09.2001, 16 ad.

Berea; 03.09.2001: 2, 2 and 16 ad.: *Searsia burchellii* berries.



St. Michael; 29.09.1999: fruits of the pepper tree.
 Roma Valley; 14.08.1999, 3 ad.: flowers of the black wattle *Acacia dealbata*.
 Dikolobeng; 10.04.1999: sorghum in a harvested field.
 St. Michael, 29.09.1999: flowers of pepper tree.

Malachite Sunbird *Nectarinia famosa*

Nectar and pollen from *Aloe* spp. (in the lowlands and foothills mainly *A. maculata*) are the most important source of food in Lesotho. In the Highlands, apart from *Aloe* spp., *Knifophia* spp., flowers play also an important role, e.g. Semonkong, 25.02.1999, 4 birds, 27.02.1999, 5 birds. In the lowlands nectar from the following other plants were probed: *Halleria lucida* (4 birds at Morija on 23.10.1999; recorded 28.10.1999 at Roma, and 06.11.1999 at the foothills of the Qeme Plateau, 23.10.1999 at Morija, and 28.10.199 at Ha Horoi), *Nicotiana glauca* (recorded 06.05.2000 near Mahalanyane), *Buddleia* sp. (recorded on 25.09.1999 at Roma), *Callistemon viminalis* (on many occasions on the NUL campus at Roma) and *Aloe polyphylla*. Berea area; 08.09.2001: 6 birds, *Aloe maculata* flowers. Berea area; 03.09.2001: 20 birds on *Searsia burchelli* berries and 2 birds on *Rhamnus prinoides* berries.

Neddicky *Cisticola fulvocapilla*

St. Benedict on Makhaleng River; 11.04.1999, 1 ad.: a caterpillar.

Cape White-eye *Zosterops pallidus*

Nectar and pollen from the black wattle is the most important source of food in the lowlands in late winter/early spring (mainly in August). Other recorded plants: *Southerlandia* sp. (5 ad.; Roma Valley; 25.09.1999); *Gleditschia tricanthos* (Roma; 11.11.2001); *Malus pumila* (Roma; 15.09.1999); *Prunus persica* (Roma; 15.09.1999). Nazareth; 18.08.2001: a flock fed on aphids on *Populus canescens*

leaves (probably an important source of diet in late winter).

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Semonkong; 12.09.1996 and 31.12.2001, 1 ad.: a moth carried to chicks.

Cape Sparrow *Passer melanurus*

Dikolobeng; 10.04.1999: 2 birds, sorghum in a harvested field.
 Semonkong and Moitsupeli; 12.02.1999: sorghum in a harvested field.
 Semonkong; 10.01.1999: a flock fed on maize seeds.
 Semonkong; 31.12.2001: a male and 3 females fed on seeds from a Brassicaceae plant.
 Thaba Tseka, 12. 04. 1999 and 04.03.2001: Orthoptera.
 Thaba Tseka; 23.10.1999: *Buddleia* seeds.

Southern Grey-headed Sparrow *Passer diffusus*

Roma Valley; 10.05.2000, 15 birds: sorghum in a harvested field.

Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis*

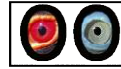
Roma Valley; 16.01.1999, a female: flowers of *Agave americana*.
 Moitsupeli; 12.02.1999: c. 10 birds fed on wheat grains.
 Semonkong; 10.01.1999, 6 birds: wheat and maize grains.
 Roma, NUL; 10.11.2001, 2 birds: flowers of *Gleditschia tricanthos*.

Southern Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus*

Thaba Tseka; 03.03.2001, 3 ad.: seeds of *Polygonum* sp.

Southern Red Bishop *Euplectes orix*

Moitsupeli; 12.02.1999, 5 birds: male flowers of the maize.
 Semonkong; 10.01.1999, a flock of c. 30: oat grains.
 Semonkong area; 26.02.1999 a flock: seeds of *Amaranthus hybridus*.

**Yellow-crowned Bishop** *Euplectes afer*

Moitsupeli; 12.02.1999, 5 birds: male maize flowers.

Red-collared Widow *Euplectes ardens*

Moitsupeli; 30.01.1999, a male: male maize flowers.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

Roma Valley; 28.11.1998, c. 120 birds: flowers of *Aloe* sp.

Roma Valley; 28.10.1999: a flock: flowers of *Searsia lancea*.

Sweet Waxbill *Coccothraupis melanotis*

In late winter/early spring (mainly August) aphids (Hemiptera: Aphidoidea) hidden in lower parts of leaves of *Populus canescens* constitute a stable diet in Lesotho lowlands; e.g. 18.08.2001 in Liphiring Gorge, 12 birds.

Black-throated Canary *Crithagra atrogularis*

Roma Valley; 14.07.2001, 2 ad.: seeds of *Amaranthus hybridus*.

St. Michael; 29.09.2000, 20 birds: flowers of *Prunus persica*.

Cape Canary *Serinus canicollis*

Seeds of Asteraceae are important summer food in highlands Moitsupeli and Nyakosuba; 12.02.1999, 5 birds: male flowers of the maize.

Roma Valley; 15.09.1999, 5 birds: flowers of *Prunus persica*.

Roma Valley; 28.11.1999, a flock: seeds of Asteraceae.

Roma Valley; 25.11.1999, a flock: flowers of Asteraceae.

Roma Valley; 10.05.2000, a flock: sorghum.

Roma Valley; c. 20 birds: seeds of *Bidens formosa*.

Near Marakabei; 23.12.2000, a flock: seeds of Asteraceae;

Semonkong; 31.12.2000, a flock: seeds of Dandelion *Taraxacum* spp.

Morija; 23.10.1999: flowers of *Buddleia*.

Roma Valley; 21.08.1999, 8 birds; pine buds;

Nyakosoba, 06.02.1999, 5 birds: maize seeds.

Drakensberg Siskin *Pseudochloroptila symonsi*

Sehlabathebe; 14.01.2001, a flock: seeds of *Helichrysum* sp.

Semonkong area; 25.02.1999: flowers of *Knofophia* sp.

Yellow Canary *Crithagra flaviventris*

Semonkong area; 25.02.1999, 4 birds: *Polygonum* sp. seeds

Streaky-headed Seedeater *Crithagra gularis*

Roma Valley; in August: *Casuarina equisetifolia* seeds important source of diet. Probably feed also on seeds from *Cedrus atlantica* cones.

Koro Koro; 01.08.2001, 10 birds: *Cheanopodium* sp. Seeds.

Motsekoa; 03.11.2001: flowers of *Buddleia* sp..

Roma Valley; 21.08.1999: *Rhamnus prinoides* berries.

Roma, NUL; 11.07.2001: *Amaranthus hybridus* seeds.

Cape Bunting *Emberiza capensis*

Roma Valley; 24.01.2002, 1 ad.: Bushman's grape berries.

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