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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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LOW ALTITUDE ATTACK: OVAMBO SPARROWHAWK PREYING ON SOUTHERN MASKED WEAVERS IN SUBURBAN GAUTENG

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The Ovambo Sparrowhawk *Accipiter ovampensis* is the most common accipiter in Gauteng. In the area of the Jukskei River a density of 27 pairs in 740 km² is documented (Allen *et al.* 1984). In atlasing surveys for the second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) I have recorded the species 233 times in eleven pentads (5' longitude x 5' latitude). At the end of February 2014 it represented a reporting rate of 14.5% of full protocol data cards submitted to the SABAP2 database. This species had been described as the "most falcon-like of accipiters with relatively long wings and short tail". Its hunting technique is also more falcon-like than that of other accipiters (Allen, 1997). It usually hunts in open areas. Typical recorded hunting methods involve "stooping after soaring to 100-150 m, or swooping from an exposed perch about 30 m high" (Allen 1997; Allen *et al.*, 1984). Ferguson-Lees (*et al.* 2001) add "[it] more typically forages on the wing over woodland or adjacent grassland and other open country and chases individual birds or flocks it flushes".

I have documented further hunting methods involving the forcing of water birds into the water with extended legs from low altitude and hunting from a low perch over open water (Branfield, 2014).

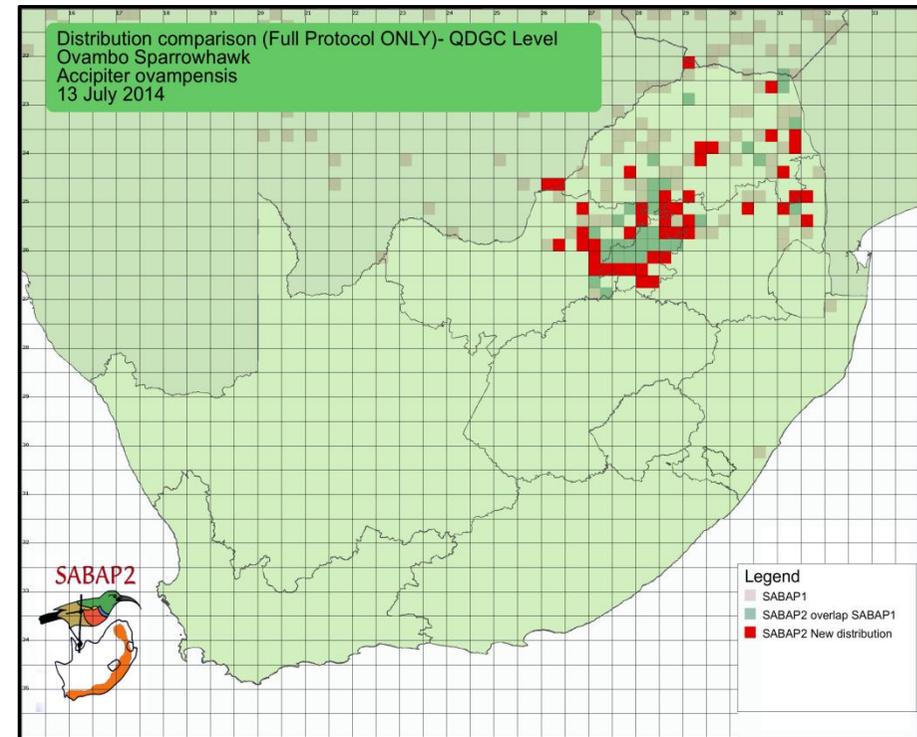


Fig 1 – The SABAP2 map indicating distribution of the Ovambo Sparrowhawk with the grey squares SABAP1 records, green squares the overlap between SABAP1 and SABAP2 and the red squares SABAP2 new distribution records.

Chases of 100-200 m with prey taken close to the ground with a success rate of 6 out of 46 attempts have been documented (Allen, 1997; Allan *et al.*, 1984). I have previously recorded largely unsuccessful attempts with much shorter chases close to the ground (Branfield, 2013). Documented prey are exclusively birds (Kemp *et al.*, 1975; Allan *et al.*, 1984; Tarboton *et al.*, 1984) and include doves (n=57), pipits (12), cuckoos (8), flycatchers(6), weavers(6),



Fig 2 – An Ovambo Sparrowhawk on its hunting perch.

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widows (6), swifts(3), kingfishers(2), and robin-chats(2). Other prey includes mousebirds, bee-eaters, wood-hoopoes, woodpeckers, swallows, drongos, prinias and escaped Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus* (1 each) (Hockey *et al.* 2005). In a previous account (Branfield, 2013) only the Green Wood-hoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* had been previously recorded as a prey item already. The

following species were added: Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* and Western Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis*. Predatory attacks on the following species are described in a further paper on the hunting behaviour of the Ovambo Sparrowhawk: Giant Kingfisher *Megaceryle maximus*, African Black Duck *Anas sparsa* and Reed Cormorant *Phalacrocorax africanus*. These all were unsuccessful attacks (Branfield, 2014). The largest documented prey item recorded was an African Olive Pigeon *Columba aquatrix* that was surprised and killed while feeding on the ground (Branfield, 2013).

This paper describes a series of successful attacks on several groups of Southern Masked Weavers *Ploceus velatus* by an adult male Ovambo Sparrowhawk using hunting techniques previously undescribed.

I have been monitoring the resident pair of Ovambo Sparrowhawks in the Saint Stithian's School property for many years (pentad 2605_2800). The school property is large and it is situated in Lyme Park, Sandton. Commendable concerted efforts have been made by the school to preserve the natural habitat and plant indigenous trees. Sometimes in the early evening I see either the adult male or female bird flying over their territory usually starting at low altitude and often circling to about 150 m before settling in for the night. The combination of both exotic and indigenous trees together with open areas makes the environment an ideal hunting and breeding ground for an avian predator like the Ovambo Sparrowhawk.

While atlasing around 18:30 on 12.02.2014 I saw an adult male Ovambo Sparrowhawk alight on the branch of an exotic Black Wattle tree *Acacia mearnsii*. The branch selected was about eight metres above the ground and it was surrounded by fairly dense foliage



which hid the bird from view but allowed it unrestricted taking off and landing on the bough. I was on the banks of a small dam in the north western corner of the school grounds on the dam wall with reed banks to the west and the tree just described to the north-east. To the north and east are open sports fields. Along the western side of the lower sports field is a row of indigenous *Acacia* trees, the tops of which were just above the level of the dam wall. The tree is next to the flight path of small groups of Southern Masked Weavers that had been out foraging and were returning to the reed beds to roost for the night. These birds were flying in a direct east-west direction at an altitude of about 10 m and directly towards the hidden accipiter. As the birds got to a distance of about 10 m from the predator, the Ovambo burst from cover and approached the group rapidly head on. As the group scattered in panic the Sparrowhawk pursued a single bird which it pursued at almost grass level in twisting flight. This attempt at acquiring a meal was unsuccessful and the accipiter returned to his hidden perch. The entire encounter lasted less than a minute. About ten minutes later a next group of weavers approached the hidden Ovambo. In a burst of activity the same process was repeated with tragic consequences for a female weaver this time. She was caught in flight at low altitude with an extended left leg and grasping talon. Disappearing from view, the sparrowhawk was lost within the dense canopy of an indigenous *Acacia* tree. Here I assume it dismembered and fed on it's prey. The entire successful action took less than a minute and it involved incredible agility in flight at low altitude with the chase occurring mainly over sports fields and a grass embankment.

I returned to the area the next day and at about 18:30 I observed another fatal interaction between the same two species. Using a similar technique of ambush and direct flight, the male again flew towards a returning flock of weavers, scattering them in panic. The

sparrowhawk pursued a single weaver, initially at low altitude, and then along the row of indigenous *Acacia* trees. He feined as if to return to the Black Wattle before suddenly diving into a small green tree where he had noticed some of the weavers were taking cover. Seconds later he emerged with a female weaver grasped in the right talon. The predator proceeded to fly north to enjoy his meal. Once more the entire ambush-pursuit-plunge-grasp action had taken less than a minute.

Although weavers have been documented previously as prey items the particular weaver species are not recorded (Hockey *et al.*, 2005). The prey items and the groups of birds involved in this account were all Southern Masked Weavers.

A female Southern Masked Weaver weighs about 30 g. Typical Ovambo Sparrowhawk prey weights are 10-60 g for males and up to 250 g in females (Ferguson-Lees *et al.*, 2001) so these are average sized prey items (Hockey *et al.*, 2005; Branfield, 2013).

Until recently the Ovambo Sparrowhawk has been described as specialising in catching birds in flight, using a falcon-like hunting technique. It either perches high up on the edge of woodland, preferring to chase birds over open areas rather than through vegetation, or it stooped at prey from a high soaring flight (Oberprieler, 2012; Branfield 2013).

I have now described two additional low altitude hunting techniques employed by the Ovambo Sparrowhawk to capture quarry:

The first involves a method of catching avian prey in flight while hunting from a low perch over open water and attempting to force the intended prey into the water (Branfield, 2014).



The second technique involves an attack from cover using direct flight at low altitude over open ground – a stealthy low altitude ambush and chase. as well as catching a roosting bird off a branch. The second method involved flying through and catching prey within vegetation.

The Ovambo Sparrowhawk is certainly a very accomplished avian predator using a number of highly effective methods. The list of documented avian prey items continues to grow.

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