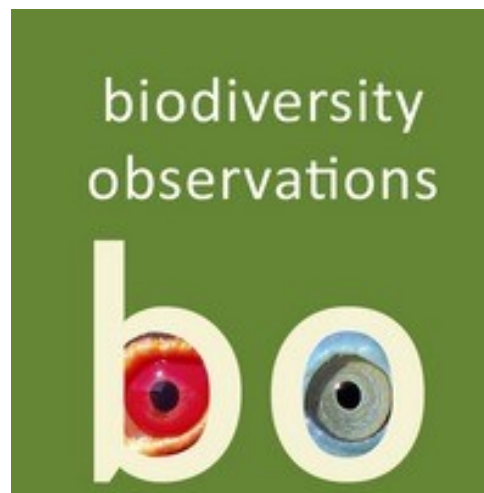


# Photographic record of anti-predator behaviour of a female Cardinal Woodpecker

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## ORNITHOLOGY

### Photographic record of anti-predator behaviour of a female Cardinal Woodpecker

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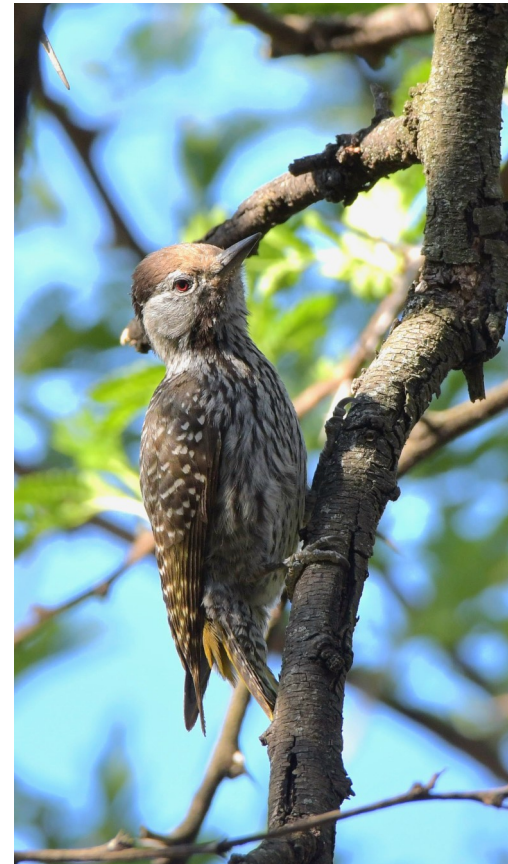
#### Abstract

On encountering a Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar*, the anti-predator behaviour of a female Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscescens* was observed. The woodpecker froze in place, adopting a stiff, upright posture. Slowly, she crept around the branch until it was between her and the goshawk. The observation is placed in context.

#### Observation

On 9 October 2024, while attempting to photograph a Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor* in one of the Sweet Thorn *Vachellia karroo* trees in our garden in Bethlehem, Free State, South Africa, I noticed a movement elsewhere in the branches of the tree. It was a female Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicos fuscescens* foraging on a thin branch (Figure 1).

Suddenly, a juvenile Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar* flew into the tree, causing all except one of the nearby birds to scatter. The woodpecker remained calm, observing the goshawk as it landed close to where she was foraging. Instead of fleeing, the woodpecker froze in place, adopting a stiff, upright posture. Slowly, she crept around the branch until it was between her and the goshawk (Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Female Cardinal Woodpecker, foraging in Sweet Thorn *Vachellia karroo*, Bethlehem, 9 October 2024.



**Figure 2:** Female Cardinal Woodpecker, in 'frozen' posture, Bethlehem, 9 October 2024.

Even after the goshawk flew away, the woodpecker remained in this concealed position for some time, gradually visibly relaxing (Figure 3) and only resuming her foraging activity once the perceived danger had passed (Figure 4).



**Figure 3:** Female Cardinal Woodpecker, starting to relax after departure of Gabar Goshawk, Bethlehem, 9 October 2024.



**Figure 4:** Female Cardinal Woodpecker, resuming normal foraging, Bethlehem, 9 October 2024.

## Discussion

Tarboton (2005b) noted, in what is clearly a “personal observation”, that Cardinal Woodpeckers hop behind a branch to avoid detection by predators. He also mentioned this behaviour in the species texts for Bearded Woodpecker *Dendropicos namaquus* and Bennett’s Woodpecker *Campethera bennettii* (Tarboton 2005a, c).

This behaviour has also been reported in various woodpecker species globally. In the 123-page introduction to the woodpecker (Picidae) family in the Handbook of the Birds of World, concealment behind a branch when threatened, is briefly mentioned in just one sentence, but was not illustrated (Winkler & Christie 2002). As a single example, one of the typical behaviours of the Acorn Woodpecker *Melanerpes formicivorus* to the approach of a hawk or falcon is “to move to the side of a branch opposite the approaching predator and remain motionless” (Koenig et al. 2020).



This behaviour is not limited to woodpeckers. Members of the nuthatch family (Sittidae) are also known to exhibit similar anti-predator tactics. For example, Eurasian Nuthatches *Sitta europaea* move to the far side of a tree trunk when threatened by raptors, using the trunk as cover to remain out of sight (Sibley 2001). Both woodpeckers and nuthatches belong to the feeding guild of tree-gleaners, and both employ this behaviour, likely as an adaptive strategy to avoid detection by visually-oriented predators. Both the woodpeckers and the nuthatch take advantage of the structural complexity of their habitats to avoid detection and predation. The tree-gleaners search for invertebrate prey on the branches of trees and the guild includes species from multiple bird families. A review of their anti-predator strategies would be a valuable undertaking.

This photographic record adds to our understanding of anti-predator tactics employed by woodpeckers and highlights the importance of close observation in uncovering such behavioural adaptations. It confirms the personal observation which was included in Tarboton (2005b). Photographic documentation of these behaviours can help to enrich our knowledge of avian predator avoidance strategies across species and regions.

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