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FORAGING FRENZY: MORE THAN 50 RAPTORS AT A TERMITE SWARM

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Hwange National Park, formerly called Wankie National Park is 14 000 km² in extent and the largest game reserve in Zimbabwe. The Park is divided from east to west, into three areas: Main Camp, Sinamatella and Robins. Approximately 70 km south-east from Main Camp is Ngweshla pan (Fig. 1) – a waterhole heavily frequented by game since before the park's proclamation in 1928 (Child et al. 1977).

In January 2009, in the middle of the rainy season, we observed a Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* next to a Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus* feeding on what we thought were insects in the green grass near Ngweshla pan (Fig. 2). The two birds were standing about 30 cm apart without paying attention to each other. Both of them were concentrating hard on what finally appeared to be termite alates swarming from the ground.

Tawny Eagles are easily confused with the closely related migrant Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis*, sharing a similar distribution, (Harrison et al. 1997). However, the gape only extending to the centre of the eye is clear and diagnostic of the Tawny Eagle species, (Brooke et al. 1972; Clark 1992). Tawny Eagles are known to feed on live-caught prey including insects such as grasshoppers and termites (Steyn, 1982). Hooded Vultures as well as Yellow-billed Kites *Milvus parasitus* also feed on termites (Brown, 1982; Mundy, 1992).

Most of our observations of termite dispersions in Hwange National Park occurred during the austral summer (November – March). Rains are indirectly responsible for stimulating the swarming of termite alates. The dispersive reproducers require moist soil for burrowing and the establishment of a new colony (Wilson, 1975). Swarming mostly takes place in conditions with no wind blowing (Akhtar et al. 1990).

The termite dispersion did not go unnoticed and the two raptors now had to share the spot where they were feeding with 50, if not more, Yellow-billed Kites (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). The eagle and the vulture always remained on the ground, near the area where the termites emerged, whereas the kites kept flying erratically above, catching the termites that managed to get through the two raptors on the ground. Kites were highly manoeuvrable in flight, swooping down to catch termites.

After five minutes, three more Hooded Vultures and five Tawny and Steppe Eagles arrived on site. Two of the vultures and two of the eagles landed in the grass and started feeding (Fig. 5), whereas the others perched on a tree nearby, watching the situation (Fig 6-8). The eagles in Figures 5 and 6 show characteristics of Steppe Eagles with an extensive gape and a stocky body. The ragged white a line through the folded wing (pale tips of the greater upper-wing coverts) is characteristics of juvenile Steppe Eagles and not of juvenile Tawny Eagles. The flow of termites was relatively slow but continuous. Few of the termites seemed to escape the numerous agile raptors.

We tried to move closer to the feeding birds, but they seemed to be

disturbed by our moving closer. We left the area after a while to prevent the birds being disturbed further by our presence.

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Fig 1 – Ngweshla pan in Hwange National Park

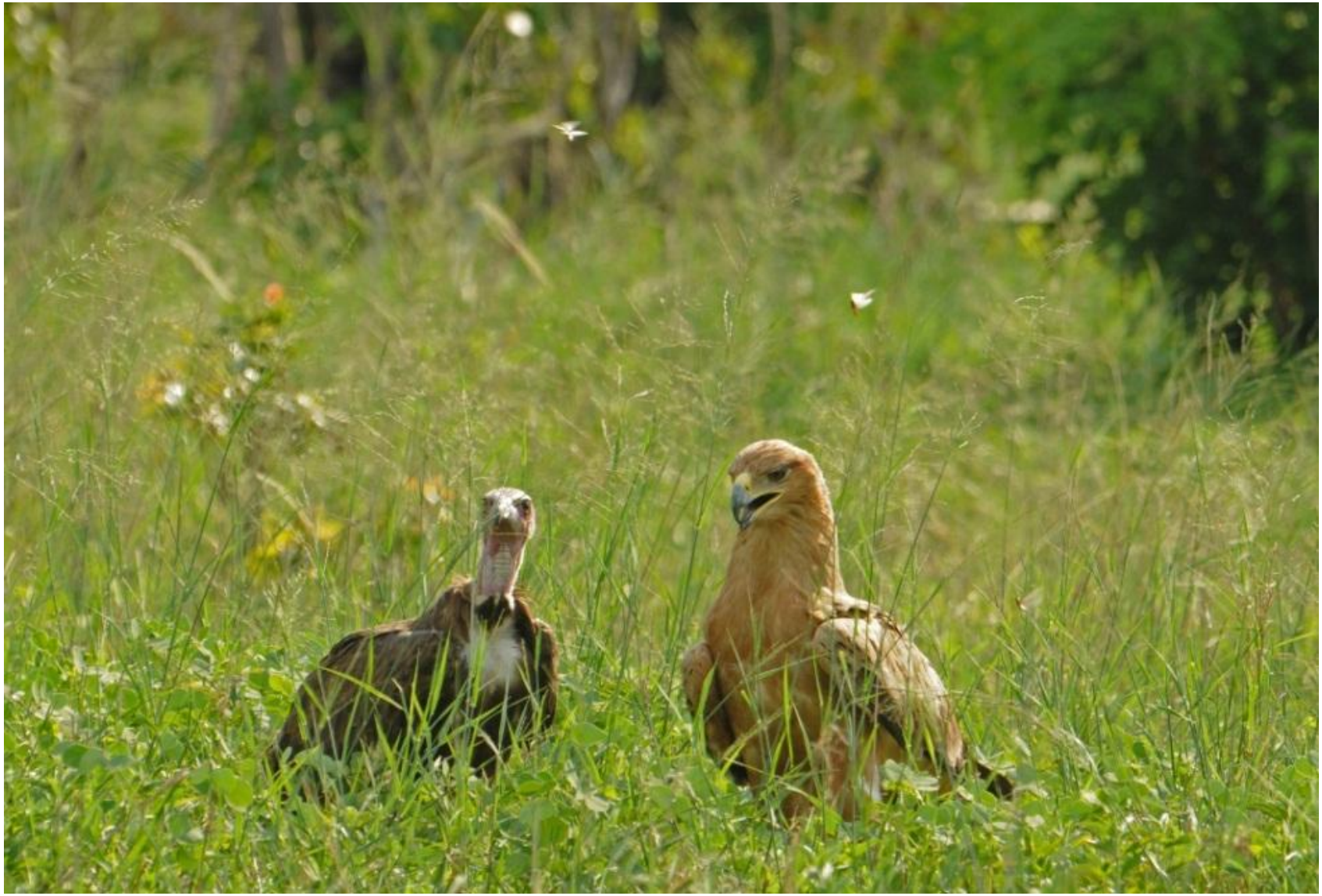

Fig 2 – A Tawny Eagle and a Hooded Vulture feeding on termites

Fig 3 – Arrival of around 50 Yellow-Billed Kites on the site

Fig 4 – Eagles and vultures on the ground, kites flying above – feeding on the emerging termites.

Fig 5 – Two Hooded Vultures and a Steppe Eagle on the ground

Fig 6 – Hooded Vultures and a Steppe Eagle perched on a tree close to the termite dispersion

Fig 7 – Left: Tawny Eagle based on size and rich tawny-coloured plumage. Right: Adult Steppe Eagle based on larger size and dark, uniform plumage.

Fig 8 – A Tawny Eagle perched on a tree close to the termite dispersion. The tawny-coloured plumage and pale eye are characteristics.