

# Ornithological Observations



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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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## **ANOTHER BIRD-SNAKE ENCOUNTER: JACKAL BUZZARD VS MOLE SNAKE**

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## ANOTHER BIRD-SNAKE ENCOUNTER: JACKAL BUZZARD VS MOLE SNAKE

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On the farm, Jonkersrivier, between Worcester and Villiersdorp in the Western Cape, Jackal Buzzards *Buteo rufofuscus* are a common sight. The farmer, Philip Botha, considers this beautiful bird as an important key species in the natural environment and ecosystems found on the farm. Jackal Buzzards feed on small mammals, carrion, insects and reptiles (Oberprieler and Cillie, 2009). They therefore fulfil an important role in managing rodents and other species affecting farming practices.

This incident happened about ten years ago when my mother, Judene Botha, went for her daily walk with our dogs. She came across a Jackal Buzzard struggling on the grass as if something was keeping it from flying off. The dogs were already very excited and posed as a hazard hurting the bird. Judene decided to take them home and went to fetch Philip and a visiting friend. They came to inspect the situation and realized the Jackal Buzzard was being held down by a Mole Snake *Pseudaspis cana*, having its body tangled around the buzzard's foot (Fig 1) and already halfway down its hole. Both parties were in trouble, as the buzzard could not escape, and clearly the Mole Snake was also not giving up the fight.

Some would say one should never interfere with nature's course and there may be different opinions about the situation, but Philip decided



**Fig 1** – Close up of the foot of the Jackal Buzzard entangled by the Mole Snake halfway down its hole.

to intervene and save both buzzard and snake from the on-going fight (which may have been going on for hours already). He managed to loosen the buzzard's claws of which one was already partly piercing through the body of the snake.

The Jackal Buzzard is a raptor species endemic to Southern Africa and can be described as a "smaller version of an eagle" (Oberprieler and Cillie, 2009). They are fairly abundant and endemic to Southern Africa. Jackal Buzzards are often solitary or in pairs, and can be found perching conspicuously on rocks, poles or high ground from where they inspect their hunting territory. Amongst the food sources Jackal Buzzards prefer, about 65% consist of small mammals, birds (doves, etc.) make up around 23%, followed by reptiles forming about 12% of their diet (Allan 2005).



**Fig 2** – The ongoing struggle between the bird and the snake

Incidents where predators face dangerous risks from getting injured by their prey are very rarely documented. This can however be detrimental concerning foraging costs and taking risks. In raptors, several injuries have been documented caused by small carnivores and included dislocated joints, broken toes and flight feathers as well as injured eyes (Mukherje and Heithaus, 2013).

One would not expect that, knowing small mammals and reptiles being regular prey for Jackal Buzzards, that a Mole Snake would cause this kind of detriment to a raptor of its size. Mole snakes do reach a length of two metres, and being in the right place at the right time – halfway down its hole – this one might have been in a more fortunate position.

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