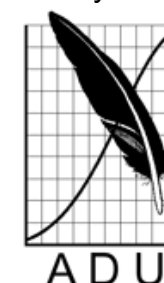


# Ornithological Observations



An electronic journal published by BirdLife South Africa and the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town



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.

**Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen**

---

## BATELEUR SUNBATHING AT PUNDA MARIA

**Don Reid**

Recommended citation format:

**Reid D 2014.** Bateleur sunbathing at Punda Maria. Ornithological Observations, Vol 5: 33-36

URL: <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=113>

Published online: 11 February 2014

**- ISSN 2219-0341 -**



## BATELEUR SUNBATHING AT PUNDA MARIA

*Don Reid\**

Address

\* Corresponding author: [don.reid@meweb.co.za](mailto:don.reid@meweb.co.za)

I had the opportunity of participating in the "Punda Mania" Team birding event at Punda Maria camp in the Kruger National Park over the period 15-18 November 2012. During the event, on Saturday 17 November 2012 around 15:00, I visited the hide situated on the edge of the camp. It overlooks a waterhole frequented by various game and several bird species.

Conditions at the waterhole were hot – estimated 36°C – with a light wind and sunny with scattered clouds. The waterhole held enough water to allow game to drink. There was a large adjoining area made up of mud and small pools of water formed by the footprints of the animals approaching the water.

After about 30 minutes of observing the animal and bird species present at the water-hole, my attention was drawn by a male Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus*. It landed at the edge of the waterhole and he proceeded with a drinking and sunbathing routine which can be described as following.

He scanned the area for a couple of minutes and then walked to the muddy area and made his way to one of the small pools of water (Fig 1 and 2). The drinking routine was methodical and slow, taking up to 10 minutes in all and made up of several dips followed by a long pause after each dip (Fig 3).



**Fig 1** – The Bateleur approaching muddy area of waterhole.

Once he had taken in enough water he made his way out of the muddy area and spread his wings wide with the lower wings exposed to the sun (Fig 4). There was no visible contact of the Bateleur's body or wings with the water in the small pools during the drinking routine and there was no obvious moisture or rain in the air. Therefore I can only assume this sunbathing was for other purposes than the drying of wet feathers. This spreading of the wings is a well known habit of the Bateleur according to several sources. This particular Bateleur was not satisfied with sunbathing the front only. After 3 to 4 minutes of sunbathing upright, he flopped onto his belly with wings still spread, as if wanting to sunbathe his back and upper wings in the same way (Fig 5).



**Fig 2** – The Bateleur dropping into the muddy area of waterhole.

After 2 to 3 minutes in this pose he stood up, once again scanned the surrounding area and then took off (Fig 6).

It seems that the Bateleur was sunbathing in order to control body temperature, bearing in mind that birds do not sweat and have to employ other methods in order to stay cool. In this case the bird had taken in water very slowly and methodically for some ten minutes, which would have had the effect of cooling it down. The fact that it was standing in a wet muddy area while drinking would have contributed to the cooling effect. It is surmised that the sunbathing straight after leaving the wet, muddy area must therefore be linked to getting its body temperature back to a normal range as quickly as possible.



**Fig 3** – The Bateleur drinking from small pool within muddy area.

The Bateleur is one of the most prominent raptors in the Kruger National Park. The name "Bateleur" is derived from the French name for a "tight-rope walker" based on the bird's characteristic habit of tipping the ends of the wings in flight, as if catching its balance. Although it spends a large part of the day on the wing, it may also be seen in its preferred habitat perched for long periods, often in the vicinity of carrion or a waterhole.

The Bateleur was named by Francois Levillant, a French naturalist and explorer. In some countries it is known as the "Conifer Eagle" or "Pine Eagle" due to its feathers resembling a conifer cone when fluffed up. It is also sometimes known as the "Serpent Eagle" based





**Fig 4** – The Bateleur sunbathing lower body and wings.

on its preference for snakes - its very short tail allows it to be the only raptor that can walk backwards, allowing it to keep out of reach of a striking snake. The Afrikaans name "Stompstertarend" is quite apt in this regard. The scientific name *ecaudatus* is derived from the Latin for "without tail". It is surmised that the Bateleur is the origin of the "Zimbabwe bird", the national emblem of Zimbabwe.

- oo0oo -



**Fig 5** – The Bateleur sunbathing upper body and wings

#### Literature consulted

**Carnaby T 2008** Beat about the Bush. Jacana Media, Johannesburg.

**Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds) 2005.** Roberts - Birds of Southern Africa, VIIIth ed. The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town.

**Steyn P 1982.** Birds of Prey of Southern Africa. David Philip Publisher, Cape Town.



**Fig 6** – The Bateleur about to take off after drinking and sunbathing

The following websites, authors unknown, were also consulted:

[www.avianweb.com/bateleur](http://www.avianweb.com/bateleur)

[www.owl-help.org.uk/page3/files](http://www.owl-help.org.uk/page3/files) - a tightrope-walking raptor