

# 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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## THE LEARNING CURVE: HALF-COLLARED KINGFISHER LEARNS TO FISH

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## THE LEARNING CURVE: HALF-COLLARED KINGFISHER LEARNS TO FISH

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In March 2013 I observed a pair of Half-collared Kingfishers *Alcedo semitorquata*, feeding two juveniles. I observed the birds over a period of three consecutive days – teaching and learning.

On the first day I spent ±6 hours watching the parents feeding their offspring. The adult Half-collared Kingfisher would present the fish to the fledgling and as soon as the youngster has taken the fish, the adult would immediately make 4 or 5 "fake dives" directly under the youngster. This behaviour was repeated every time after the adult fed the youngster.

My conclusion was that the adult made these "training dives" to show the juveniles where the food comes from. On the first day none of the juveniles attempted any dive.

On the second day though, one of the juveniles started attempting dives with very humoristic results! The juvenile was completely unsure how this diving technique actually works! I could also see that the parent was a bit annoyed with the slow learner in her family, and started to stay away for longer periods before returning with food.

I then observed a change in behaviour of the parents. They would bring a smallish fish to one of the chicks, but did not feed it right

away, even though the chick was obviously very hungry and tried everything to grab the fish from the parent. Then, just before the chick could grab the fish, the parent dropped the fish into the water, both adult and chick looking at the fish now falling in the water. The parent then took a dive and retrieved the half-dead fish. This behaviour was repeated three times, before the parent gave the fish to the begging youngster! The parent was definitely trying to teach the chick how to capture prey! (Cf series of photographs).

On the third day I was astonished to see how agile the young birds had become, diving left and right in the water, catching a small fish in about every 5th or 6th dive! The mother continued to bring little crabs and fish, perhaps to keep the energy levels of the learning chicks up!

*"feeding rate falls in the last weeks, particularly on day before fledgling. Ads may withhold food at this stage to encourage fledglings to emerge... Fledglings not closely attended by ads; apparently learn to dive within 4 hr. Post fledgling period unknown, but probably short"* (Turpie, 2005).

I spent ±18 hours in total watching the antics of the parents and fledglings, and my conclusion is that the fledglings took at least 2 days to learn to dive.

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### References

**Turpie JK 2005.** Half-collared Kingfisher *Alcedo semitorquata*. In: Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds) 2005. Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7<sup>th</sup> edn. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town.













