



# Biodiversity Observations

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## BREEDING

## BIZARRE BREEDING BEHAVIOUR OF A BLACK SPARROWHAWK

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The Black Sparrowhawk *Accipiter melanoleucus* builds a large, stick platform nest, high up in a tall, often alien tree. The cup of the nest is lined with green leaves.

Given this, I was very sceptical when a birding friend was contacted by a lady in Somerset West claiming to have a Black Sparrowhawk sitting on an egg on her lawn. The bird had been there since the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2017 and seemed to be quite content.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> September, I went to investigate, and low and behold there the bird was, on the lawn, a mere 30 meters from the driveway to the house, sitting quite happily on what we presumed was her nest (Figures 1 and 2).

There were very tall Eucalyptus trees nearby but not close enough to suggest that a nest, and or egg, had fallen from the tree and landed on the grass.

I approached with caution in order to photograph this most unusual, and possibly unrecorded, event. The bird seemed quite happy and allowed me to get a few images (Figure 3).



Figure 1 – The nest site and position



Figure 2 – The nest site and position



Figure 3 – Female incubating day 6



Figure 4 – Nest & egg day 6

I returned to the house to marvel over what I had just seen and just as I was about to leave, some 45 minutes later, the bird flew off.

This presented an opportunity to look at the “nest” which was in fact, non-existent, as the egg was just on the grass with no feathers or anything vaguely resembling a nest (Figure 4).

Within about a minute and a half the bird appeared in the trees, carrying a small leafy twig which it dropped when moving to another perch where it called for a minute or so (Figure 5 and 6).



Figure 5 – Female bringing twigs



**Figure 6** – Female observing

Not wanting to stress the bird I moved back to the house and respectfully asked the de Vink family to notify me of any developments so that I could record and monitor the events.

That evening I sent photos and brief comments, about the bird nesting on the ground, and whether there was any record of such behaviour, to two of our local experts, for their input.

Peter Steyn commented that “One remarkable ‘nest’ was a mere depression in leaves on the ground at the base of a poplar tree” (Steyn 1982, p.170, bottom left). He further commented “Quite extraordinary to have another one and not even an apology of a nest”.

Ann Koeslag commented that “That is the most bizarre thing I have seen in a long time. I don't think that that is a Black Sparrowhawk egg and looking at its surface it looks old. If I was to take a stab at what is going on here I would say her hormones are driving her to breed and she hasn't found a territory or a partner, so she is brooding an old egg she has found. Only time will tell. By the colour of her eye she is probably eighteen months to two years old which also might also account for her strange behaviour. I of course, could be very wrong about what is happening here, so I am very glad that Basil will be following this closely”.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> September, I returned to do more observations and found that the “nest” now had 1 leafy twig near the egg (Figure 7).



**Figure 7** – Nest & egg day 7



**Figure 8** – Female incubating day 7

She, a female as we now know, seemed quite happy to allow me near the egg (Figure 8). Other than lying flat when the resident Egyptian Goose swooped over, she was quite content (Figure 9).

I received a call early on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> September from Mrs. De Vink to say that there was a “kill” on the lawn and what appeared to be a smaller Black Sparrowhawk was feeding on it.

I rushed over and there was the carcass of a Hadeda Ibis (Figure 10).



**Figure 9** – Female lying low



**Figure 10** – Hadeda kill

The female bird was on the nest and a smaller, presumably male, bird was happily feeding on the kill (Figure 11).

We now had proof that we had a pair of Black Sparrowhawks.



**Figure 11** – Male feeding

It has been suggested that the female most probably did the “kill” as she is nearly twice the size and weight of the male. Unfortunately this was not observed.

I asked Mr. de Vink (a retired engineer who had callipers) if he would measure the size of the egg the next time the female left the nest, so that we could try to identify it.

I returned later that afternoon for some more photographs of the male (Figures 12).

We could establish that the “nest” now had a few more leafy twigs near the egg (Figure 13). According to Ann, the Black Sparrowhawk egg is usually pale blue and about 56 x 44mm (Tarboton 2001) [*Editor: Roberts 8 gives 49.2–61.3 x 38.1–47.2 (55.8 x 43.3 mm)*]. This egg measured 47 x 39mm which is a bit small for a Black Sparrowhawk. The plot again thickens. What egg is this?



**Figure 12** – Male observing



**Figure 13** – Nest & egg day 12

During the time I was there, the male bird flew off but returned shortly afterwards and continued to feed on the kill, at one time dragging the carcass nearer the nest.

At all times we kept our distance so as not to stress the birds.

On the following day, Mrs. de Vink noticed that the female left the nest briefly and shooed off the male from the Hadedda kill so that she could feed. When she returned to the nest, the male was allowed to continue his feeding.

A few days later, Mrs. de Vink reported that the female had weathered the overnight rain and had shooed off the male on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> September so that she could feed on what was only the scraps of the “kill”. There was no carcass, only a few feathers and it was suggested that the local Pied Crows or cats must have cleaned up.

She definitely seemed to be the more aggressive partner and had a set-to with the resident Egyptian Goose when it got too close. The goose, however, managed to send her packing and she flew into the tree but returned to the nest shortly thereafter.

That day the male occasionally made an appearance but not to incubate or feed her.

The following day the male no longer seemed to be in the picture. Could it be that he came across the kill, stayed for a day or two just to feed, and then disappeared to greener pastures? It is not known when the female feeds as she only seems to be away from the nest for very short times.

In the days following, it was observed that in the heat of the day, the female would periodically, stand up, wings spread open so as to shade the egg and have a stretch.

We had howling wind and rain overnight on 3<sup>rd</sup> October but this did not seem to have affected the female who, despite being wet, remained on her nest.

She had now been incubating for 21 days.



**Figure 14** – Female incubating in the rain day 26

After 26 days there are more twigs surrounding the nest. The female is still sitting tight even though there are a few drops of rain falling (Figure 14). She seems to be determined on incubating the egg.

Only once was the female observed taking a dove in the trees on the property and hurriedly feeding on it before returning to the nest. No other hunting or feeding was observed.

What a fighter she has turned out to be as she still sits tight after 38 days of incubation and despite more rain showers and some gusty wind.

Both Ann and Peter suggested that, unless something hatches, I remove the egg after 42 days for her own health and safety.

It is hoped that she would then be able to replenish her hormones and revert to normality, find a mate and resume her normal life. Sitting like she has been on the ground was always a danger to her safety.

Well, she again was a step ahead and after incubating for 41 days, she decided to call it a day and abandoned the nest and egg on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> October and did not return.

The nest was now quite a hollow on the grass, had a few feathers around it as well as a variety of leafy twigs (Figure 15).



Figure 15 – Nest and egg day 41

I also found a regurgitated pellet which contained a Pigeon Ring belonging to a fancier with a loft in the area. She had no doubt had an expensive meal.

I was phoned 2 days later to say that the bird had just flown past as if to say goodbye.

I enlisted the services of a Tertius Gouws, a fellow birder and veterinarian, who carefully sawed open the egg only to reveal that it was infertile. He was pretty certain, however, that it was a Black Sparrowhawk egg, possibly the 1st egg of a young female, hence the smaller than usual size. His theory is that the bird was on the ground for whatever reason when the urge to lay the egg she was carrying caused her to deposit the egg right there. Who knows?

I photographed the egg shell which was pale blue inside, re-enforcing the theory that the egg was in fact that of a Black Sparrowhawk (Figure 16).



Figure 16 – Egg shells



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### Acknowledgements

Thanks to the de Vink family for allowing me to share in this very special event, for confining their dog to areas of the property away from the nest, and for keeping me updated during the 41 days.

Thanks also to Ann Koeslag and Peter Steyn for their expert opinions and sound advice.

### References

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