

House Sparrow as Prey of the Nankeen Night Heron

On 20 December 1997, at approximately 1030 h, an adult Nankeen Night Heron *Nycticorax caledonicus* was observed perched in the lower branches of a small tree growing in a busy section of the Southgate complex in Melbourne. This area is beside the Yarra River, close to the city. Several nearby House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* were noticeably agitated at the presence of the Night Heron, and appeared to be mobbing it. After remaining motionless for at least 10 minutes, the Night Heron lunged forward, snatched an adult Sparrow from the air, and quickly dispatched it with several snaps of the bill. The Night Heron continued to manipulate the prey for approximately 10 minutes, and, after several attempts, swallowed the Sparrow whole. The Night Heron then made several unsuccessful lunges at some other nearby Sparrows. Throughout this episode, a small crowd of people had gathered to watch, but the Night Heron seemed oblivious to their presence.

Nankeen Night Herons have been recorded preying upon a range of other organisms, including small fish, frogs, mussels, a variety of arthropods, the eggs of several species of waterbirds, turtle hatchlings and mice (MacGillivray 1917, Hobbs 1976, Barker & Vestjens 1989, Marchant & Higgins 1990). Although the species is often regarded as preying primarily on fish and other aquatic prey, this is based on relatively little empirical data, with only three published accounts of stomach contents (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Given the cryptic and often nocturnal or crepuscular habits of this species, stomach contents are the most reliable index of the variety of food taken, and should be examined further.

In assessing the significance of this sighting, it is noteworthy that although Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* have been reported as prey items previously (Barker & Vestjens 1989, Marchant & Higgins 1990), this appears to be based on two circumstantial records (Le Souëf 1902, Bedggood 1973). In neither case was the Night Heron seen to consume the prey, and it is unclear whether a Night Heron would be capable of swallowing a Starling. In the light of this sighting, these previous records now appear more probable. Although Nankeen Night Herons have been observed 'to devour quail and dotterel that were confined with them in the same enclosure' (Le Souëf 1902), and ducklings in a park (Le Souëf 1922), the capture and consumption of an adult bird in the wild appears to be new for the species, and possibly the genus.

The three other species of *Nycticorax* night herons differ in the variety of food taken: the widespread Black-crowned Night Heron *N. nycticorax* is an opportunistic generalist, similar to the Nankeen Night Heron (Davis 1993); the Yellow-crowned Night Heron *N. violaceus* of the Americas primarily specialises on crustaceans; and the poorly known White-backed Night Heron *N. leuconotus* of Africa is apparently a broad generalist (del Hoyo et al. 1992).

Other authors have noted that the Nankeen Night Heron often specialises on prey items that are unusually abundant, with one study finding a mean of 60% frequency of House Mice *Mus domesticus* in 100 stomachs of birds collected during a mouse plague (Hobbs 1976). These Night Herons may even time their breeding to coincide with such a peak in availability of food, as was noted by MacGillivray (1917) with Night Herons preying upon turtle hatchlings in northern Queensland.

Although this may have been an isolated incident, and may be a learned behaviour of an individual bird, it could be more widespread. Given the broad range of dietary items summarised here, the Nankeen Night Heron is best considered an opportunistic

generalist, exploiting a wide variety of prey, though sometimes temporarily specialising on especially abundant organisms.

References

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