

## **Feeding Behaviour of a Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura***

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Breeding Square-tailed Kites *Lophoictinia isura* feed their young primarily on nestling birds (Marchant & Higgins 1993). However, the actual feeding technique has been reported only for the domed nests of finches (Debus & Czechura 1989) and the only information on diet in the non-breeding season is from a single Kite's stomach from the Northern Territory, which contained a skink and four insects (Hitchcock & McKean 1969). The following observations were made on Starcke Station in northern Queensland, at a time when non-breeding Square-tailed Kites visit northern Australia (Marchant & Higgins 1993).

At 1715 h on 9 July 1993 a Square-tailed Kite was flushed in open savannah woodland, after which it circled several times within ten metres of the canopy. After about 10 minutes it landed in a dead tree. Shortly afterwards a Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis* and a Peaceful Dove *G. placida* landed on a nearby branch. A few minutes later the Kite flew down out of sight into the foliage of a nearby tree where it remained for about two minutes. It was next seen gliding swiftly down into the shrub layer where it was seen perched with wings lifted awkwardly, at first pecking at something near its feet then looking around. It remained there for about 90 seconds, then flew clumsily away and out of sight. Subsequent inspection of the site where it had landed revealed the empty nest of a dove, probably that of a Bar-shouldered Dove, which was built 1.5 m up in a fork on a sloping tree. There was no evidence that the nest had previously been occupied but the Kite had certainly landed on the nest.

The Kite was at least attempting to take the contents of a birds' nest, suggesting that nestling birds constitute part of the diet of the Square-tailed Kite in the non-breeding season just as they do in the breeding season. This may be why Kites move to the tropics in the southern winter (Debus & Czechura 1989) because at least some bird species breed there throughout the year (Lavery 1986). However, because the breeding season is less intense, the specialisation on nestlings as the major food source may mean that breeding is only possible in southern Australia when most birds breed over the period of a few months (Beruldsen 1980), and food is therefore abundant.

This observation also suggests that feeding is not confined to canopy-nesting birds, but that open nests can be robbed from whatever level in the canopy they occur, provided they are visible from the canopy. Unconcealed perch-hunting of the type used here, not previously reported for the Square-tailed Kite (Marchant & Higgins 1993), would facilitate the robbing of subcanopy nests.

The feeding behaviour appeared clumsy, but such awkwardness seems to be characteristic of nest-robbing raptors, such as the African Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides radiatus* which robs the nests of weaverbirds Ploceidae (R. Loyn & D. Tully pers. obs.). Square-tailed Kites observed robbing finch nests also appeared to need to spread their wings for balancing (Debus & Czechura 1989). The wing structure appears to be adapted for long periods of searching, but not for movement within foliage.

## References

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