

## SHORT NOTE

### The behaviour of a Tawny Eagle at carrion

by

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The Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* has versatile feeding habits, obtaining food by killing its own prey, by piracy and by scavenging. Carrion, ranging in size from small road kills to large ungulates, forms an important part of this eagle's diet (Steyn 1982). This note reports on the detailed behaviour of an adult Tawny Eagle feeding on a horse carcass.

The horse died on 1 October 1983 on the farm Claratal some 40 km south-west of Windhoek. It was placed in an open area and slit along the belly. A vehicle, parked about 75 m away and covered by a tarpaulin, was used as a hide. A video camera with a zoom lens (X6) was used to film the activities of the Tawny Eagle, from its arrival at 15h38 on 2 October to its departure a little over 32 minutes later. The video cassette was played back through a TV. monitor, and all recognisable activities were recorded, timed and counted (Table 1).

Activities were analysed by dividing them into four categories, namely "Feeding", "Looking", "Moving" and "Other".

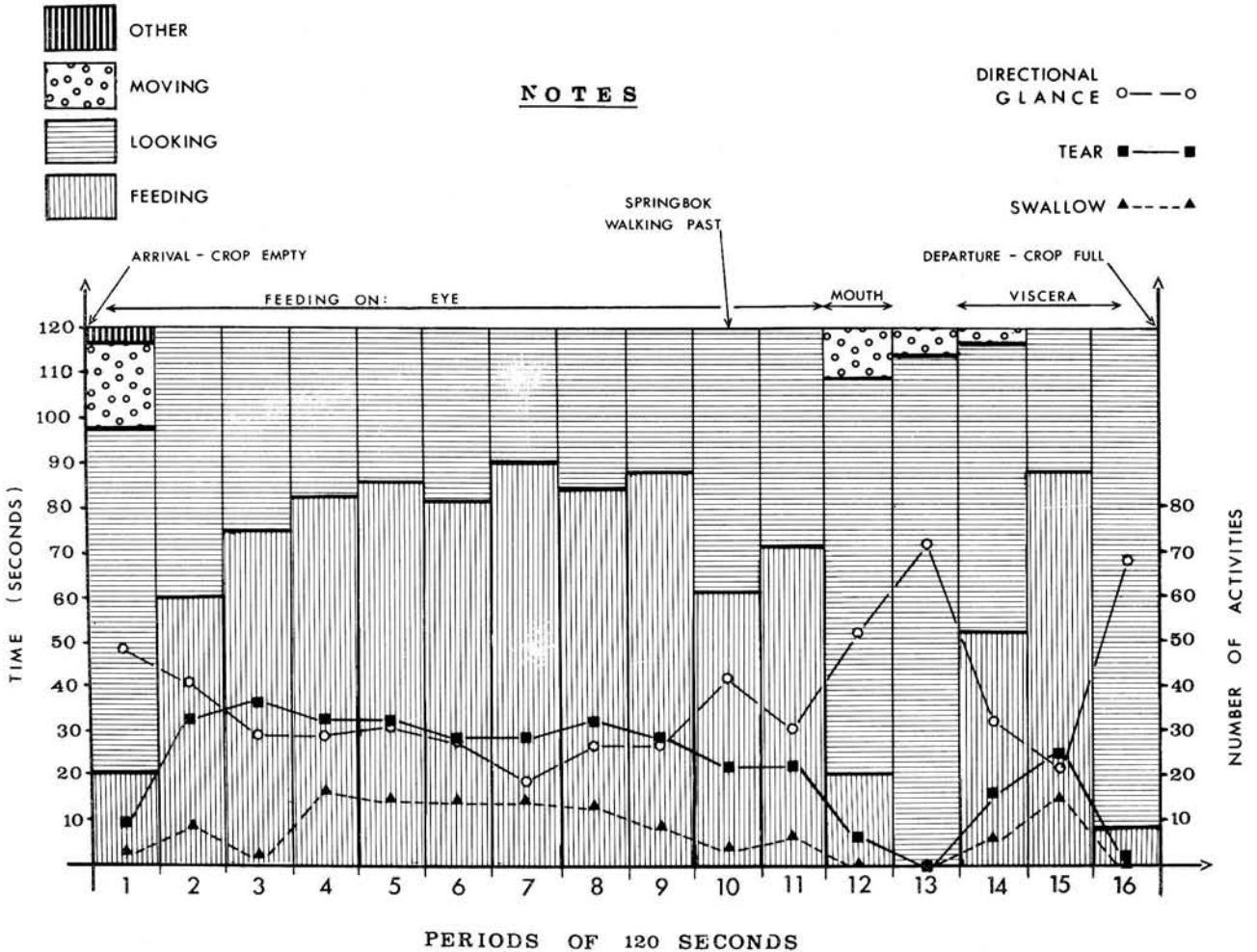
- i) "Feeding" consisted of the eagle tearing off pieces of meat and swallowing them, and was timed from the moment the bird lowered its head after looking about, to when it next lifted its head. The number of times the bird fed per period of 120 seconds was counted. In addition, the number of times it tore at the carcass, and the number of times it actually swallowed food were recorded.
- ii) "Looking". The length of time spent looking about between feedings was recorded. In addition, the number of times it looked in different directions (directional glances) was counted.
- iii) "Moving". The time spent in moving to different areas of the carcass was recorded.
- iv) "Other". The time spent in activities other than those described above (in this case scratching head with foot) was also recorded.

"Feeding" and "Looking" formed the bulk of the activities by time (50% and 47% respectively), followed by "Moving" (2%). Figure 1 illustrates the activities of the eagle, from its arrival with empty crop until its departure with full crop. It landed some 2 m from the horse's head, and, after nervously looking about, walked over and commenced feeding on the eye and surrounding area. An increase in feeding with a resulting decrease in observation time and number of directional glances is apparent during the first three 120 s periods. From period four to nine, feeding and observation times were fairly constant (means of 86 s and 34 s respectively). During period 10 a springbok walked past at about 180 m, resulting in an increase in observation time. During the 12th period the eagle attempted to feed on the mouth area but was unable to tear off food, then moving to the slit belly, where a number of largish pieces of viscera were swallowed.

It is surprising that the eagle did not start feeding on the viscera, as this food source was more readily available than that of the eye area, which required some ini-

TABLE 1: Behavioural analysis of a Tawny Eagle feeding on carrion.

Period 120 seconds	Feeding				Looking			Moving		Other		Feeding Area
	Time	No.	No. Tears	No. Swallows	Time	No.	No. Dir. Glances	Time	No.	Time	No.	
1	20	5	9	2	78	9	49	19	2	3	1	Eye
2	60	13	31	8	60	12	41	0	0	0	0	Eye
3	76	16	37	2	44	16	29	0	0	0	0	Eye
4	83	14	33	16	37	14	29	0	0	0	0	Eye
5	87	12	33	13	33	12	30	0	0	0	0	Eye
6	82	12	28	13	38	12	27	0	0	0	0	Eye
7	90	11	28	13	30	12	18	0	0	0	0	Eye
8	85	14	31	12	35	13	26	0	0	0	0	Eye
9	88	12	29	8	32	12	27	0	0	0	0	Eye
10	61	10	21	4	59	11	43	0	0	0	0	Eye
11	71	12	21	6	49	11	30	0	0	0	0	Eye
12	20	4	7	0	89	8	53	11	2	0	0	Mouth
13	0	0	0	0	116	2	71	4	3	0	0	Not Feeding
14	52	4	17	7	66	5	33	2	1	0	0	Viscera
15	88	7	25	14	32	8	21	0	0	0	0	Viscera
16	8	2	2	0	112	2	68	0	0	0	0	Viscera
	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	Not Feeding
TOTALS 1923 s (32' 3")	971	148	352	118	913	149	597	36	8	3	1	



tial tearing and preparation before food was swallowed. Mundy (1982) has shown that of the 91 carcasses he observed, Tawny Eagles were the first to begin feeding at five of these. Considering the relatively low density of Tawny Eagles (compared to other avian scavengers), this probably means that an individual Tawny Eagle fairly frequently arrives first at a carcass. As most carrion is obtained not from predator "kills", but from animals dying of other causes — mainly disease (Houston 1974) — the carcass is usually unopened and thus inaccessible to the eagle except for the eye area. Mundy (1982) has also shown that when eagles or kites have been the first to arrive at a carcass, in 50% of cases vultures have arrived within 20 min and in 75%, within 40 min. Therefore, if Tawny Eagles arrive first at a carcass, they have to begin feeding promptly on an area which is assured of providing them with procurable food before being evicted by the larger vultures.

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