SHORT NOTE

Diet of the owl *Claucidium perlatum* in the Etosha National Park

by

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During recent years the analyses of prey items recovered from owl pellets, in particular those of the barn owl, *Tyto alba,* have received much attention (Coetzee, 1963; Dean, 1973; Stuart, 1975; Vernon, 1971 and others).

Perusal of available literature shows, however, that little has been recorded concerning the smaller owl spectrum in southern Africa. The diet of the diminutive pearl-spotted owl (*Claucidium perlatum*) is given as insects, lizards and very small mammals, small snakes and birds (Mackworth-Praed and Grant, 1952) and as mainly large insects, small mammals and birds (Roberts ' Birds of S. Africa). Pellets from this owl, collected along the Fish River south of Mariental, contained fragments of lizards, bats, insects and rodents (Vernon, 1971).

Over the period October 1975 to May 1976 a total of 154 prey items was recovered from 85 pearl-spotted owl pellets, collected within the Etosha National Park in Namibia. The results of this analysis are contained in Table 1.

COMMENTS ON PREY GROUPS

1 Arthropods: These were by far the most important group, representing 65,1 % of the total prey items, with diurnal Solifuges dominating. Of importance, however, was the recovery in the January sample of six specimens of the Formicidae and a single complete Gasterophillidae larva (prey items not included in Table 1). These items are unusual and may have been ingested with carrion. The fragmented specimens (heads only) of the Formicidae would tend to support this.

2 Mollusca: The Molluscs, *Namibiella hottentota* and *Xerocerastus nitens* represented 19,4 % of the total prey items recovered. Shells were recovered from pellets collected during November and December only. The frequency of occurrence in pellets was 89 % for November and 20 % for the December sample. Out of a total of 38 prey items recovered for November 27 (71 %) were mollusc shells. The possibility that mollusc shells were of secondary origin cannot be ruled out but the overall large percentage recovered in relation to other prey items makes this improbable. This is further supported by the fact that the November sample contained no prey items that could be remotely suspected of feeding on molluscs (see Table 1). Both *Namibiella* and *Xerocerastus* are seasonally plentiful (after rains) over much of the Etosha National Park.

3 Reptilia: A total of 15 reptiles, representing at least four species and making up 9,7 % of the total prey items, was recovered. The majority of this prey group was represented by the well-known diurnal lizards, *Mabuyu varigata* and *Agama hispida.*

TABLE 1: Prey species recovered from *Claucidium perlatum* pellets in the Etosha National Park.

Prey species	Oct 1975	Nov 1975	Dec 1975	Jan 1976	Feb 1976	May 1976	Total prey items	Percent of total prey
Mammalia	1	1		2		3	7	4,5 %
Leggada (Mus) minutoides	1	1		1		3	6	
Aethomys	–	–		1			1	
Aves			1			1	2	1,3 %
Sporipes squamifrons						1	1	
Unidentified			1				1	
Reptilia			2	5	8		15	9,7 %
Mabuya varigata				1	7		8	
Agama hispida aculeata				4			4	
Riopa sp.					1		1	
Unidentified			2				2	
Mollusca		27	3				30	19,4 %
	59	10	6	22	2	1	100	65,1 %
Arachnida solifugidae	55	2					57	
scorpionidae		1	1	1			3	
Orthoptera acrididae	1	1		1		1	4	
gryllidae				1			1	
Coleoptera scarabaeidae								
cetoniinae				1	2		3	
coprinae		2	2	12			16	
melolonthinae	1		3				4	
dynastinae		1					1	
elateridae		1					1	
tenebrionidae	2	1		4			7	
curculionidae				2			2	
Isoptera hodotermitidae		1					1	
Total prey species	60	38	12	29	10	5	154	100,0 %

4 Mammalia: This group constituted only 4,5 % of the total prey items, the main prey being the dwarf mouse, *Leggada (Mus) minutoides.*

5 Aves: Two bird skulls were recovered, one of which could not be identified with certainty, the other represented the diurnal finch, *Sporipes squamifrons.*

6 Other items: In addition to the foregoing, two small balls of silver paper (tin foil), an amount of ground squirrel (*Xerus inauris*) hair and pieces of unidentified bone chips were also recovered. This material was well distributed in a number of pellets from the November sample only.

DISCUSSION

The number of diurnal reptiles and solifugids recovered was of considerable interest. This lends support to general observations that this owl is active during daylight hours (Mackworth-Praed and Grant, 1952; Roberts – Birds of S. Africa). In fact, it is highly probable that this owl species is far more of a diurnal / crepuscular raptor than present records would indicate. Moreover, the large number of molluscs taken, as well as the non-organic matter, hair and bone of animals obviously carrion fauna, suggest unusual and unknown feeding habits.

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