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# AHN

## AFRICAN HERP NEWS

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The HAA is dedicated to the study and conservation of African reptiles and amphibians. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in the African herpetofauna. Members receive the Association's journal, African Journal of Herpetology (which publishes review papers, research articles, and short communications – subject to peer review) and African Herp News, the Newsletter (which includes short communications, natural history notes, book reviews, bibliographies, husbandry hints, announcements and news items).

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**COVER PHOTOGRAPH**: *Python natalensis* Photograph by: Graham Alexander

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AHN
AHN FORWARD

## LETTER FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

On behalf of the new HAA committee, I would like to thank the members for giving us the opportunity to promote and foster African herpetology for both the established and the next generation of herpetologists. The new committee has met several times since its formation as there were a number of outstanding issues, as well as new initiatives to discuss. We would like to share these with the members. Firstly, our membership has decreased substantially over recent years. We now have less than 150 members. Most of the loss has been from overseas members, most likely due to the lack of a mechanism to make payments to the society. We are looking into new methods, such as PayPal. While ease of payment might boost our membership, the committee also discussed why one would want to be a member. What is the advantage and why should we value membership in the HAA? We tossed around some ideas such as access to the journal, receiving the newsletter and cheaper conference fees. But ultimately, the group agreed that we really are members because it gives us a sense of belonging. We are a community, we have common ground, and we want to encourage others to participate so that herpetology in Africa grows. Thus, our goal for the next 2 years is to support scientific endeavors, to recognize excellence within our community and foster young researchers. Our first obvious step is to update the website and to step things up with social media on the FaceBook page. There will be frequent postings regarding the journal content and other activities. The FaceBook page will also become a more active student forum, where students can post questions and we will encourage our more seasoned members to engage with the students and provide advice.

This is just the beginning of our work and the committee will be meeting fairly regularly so if members have comments or recommendations, please contact us at our new committee email address: haa.herps@gmail.com.

*Krystal Tolley*
HAA Chairperson

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after several minutes. All three hunting attempts witnessed were successful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## SCINCINAE

### *Trachylepis occidentalis*

(Peters, 1867)
Western Three-striped Skink

## AVIAN PREDATION

P. CUNNINGHAM

Although lizards are known to fall prey to a variety of predators (e.g. Branch 1998, Marais 1992, Alexander & Marais 2007) there is often a paucity of data regarding specific species and/or predators with most data on predators being anecdotal. This is especially true for the genus *Trachylepis*. However, some predators are mentioned, albeit mostly at genus level – e.g. Shine et al. (2006) include *Trachylepis* in the diet of Psammophiine (Colubridae) snakes; Marais (1992) include *Trachylepis* spp. in the diet of the Cape wolf snake (*Lycophidion capense* ); Branch (1998) indicate that domestic cats prey on *Trachylepis capensis* and Clauss & Clauss (2002) mention snakes, monitors, raptors, small mammals (e.g. shrews, mongoose, African wild cat and domestic cat) preying on *Trachylepis wahlbergii*. Known avian predators of *Trachylepis* spp. are various raptors and lilac-breasted roller (Clauss & Clauss 2002).

On 21 July 2017 I found a juvenile *Trachylepis occidentalis* individual (SVL 50 mm & Tail 78 mm – identified by colour pattern and known presence on the farm) impaled on a *Rhigozum trichotomum* shrub (at a height of 70 cm on a shrub with a total height of 100 cm) by a common fiscal (*Lanius collaris*) on a farm approximately 70 km northeast of Noordoewer in the Karas Region, southern Namibia (28°16'12.7"S & 18°03'44.1"E; 740m). Although the actual impaling process was not observed, this is inferred as common fiscal are resident on farm and often seen preying on invertebrates (Fig. 1).

Common fiscal's have a catholic diet and are known predators of vertebrates - e.g. blindworms, lizards, chameleons, snakes, frogs, birds, rodents, bats (Hockey *et al.* 2005) although these usually make up a small percentage of the diet (e.g. <10% of the diet in KwaZulu/Natal – e.g. Soobramoney *et al.* 2004). Prey items are often impaled or wedged on thorns, wood splinters, and barbs of wire fence (Hockey *et al.* 2005) which serves as a 'storage' function (Bevan & England 1969) or as a display for territorial advertisement and to attract females (Yosef & Pinchow 1989). However, common fiscal do not cache as much as their northern hemisphere counterparts (Harris & Arnot 1988).

Figure 1. Juvenile *Trachylepis occidentalis* impaled on *Rhigozum trichotomum* shrub by common fiscal.

Common fiscal are seen daily on the farm and although this was the first impaled prey item encountered, most other foraging observations have been of arthropods and even a scorpion, but no reptiles. The last few years on the farm have been associated with below average annual rainfall. This overall dry spell and probably general lack of arthropod prey items may have influenced the bird to attempt larger reptile prey. On the other hand, the breeding season for common fiscal is between August and January (Tarboton 2001) which could imply that the *Trachylepis occidentalis* "kill and display" could serve a social function although the placement of the carcass within the

shrub contradicts this although it is not clear how common fiscal view their surroundings. Nevertheless, this is a first record of *Trachylepis occidentalis* as prey by common fiscal as far as I could determine (See Broadley 1974 for other prey items).

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## PSAMMOPHIINAE

### *Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia*
(Günther, 1864)
Eastern Bark Snake

## HUNTING STRATEGY


M. PETFORD & R. VAN HUYSSTEEN


On November 16, 2016 while sampling at Medike Mountain Sanctuary, Soutpansberg, Limpopo Province, South Africa (QDG 2229DC, 22°59'35"S, 29°36'82"E); a sub-adult Eastern Bark Snake (*Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia*) was observed hunting a Cape Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus capensis*). What was notable about this observation was that the snake used caudal luring in its attempt to capture the gecko.

The snake initially took about five minutes observing the *Lygodactylus* before moving to within 80cm of the gecko. Once the snake had taken up position it began to wriggle its tail in a caterpillar like motion, attracting the attention of the gecko. The gecko became increasingly interested in the movement of the tail, turning around, raising its head and inching forward toward tail. However, as the gecko was inching closer the snake appeared to make a slight movement of the head and the gecko retreated.

Caudal luring has been recorded many times before in numerous different snake species and families. It usually involves the use of a bright, conspicuous tail tip (Sazima 1992; Martins *et al.* 2002; Andrade 2010), but may be even further developed in the 'spider' caudal lure of *Pseudocerastes urarachnoides* (Fathinia *et al.* 2009). The individual Eastern Bark Snake we observed displaying caudal luring was a sub-adult, but adults of this species also have orange or yellow tipped tails and may also utilize this behaviour (Branch 1998).

To our knowledge this is the first observation of *Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia* caudal luring and the first species within the Psammophiinae which has been observed to do so.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


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Fig. 1. *Hemirhagerrhis nototaenia* from Soutpansberg. Note bright coloration of tail tip. Photo Ryan van Huyssteen.

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