

Can Verreaux's Eagles defend their nests against baboons?

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VERREAUX'S (BLACK) EAGLES *Aquila verreauxii* and chacma baboons *Papio ursinus* live and forage in similar montane environments and must be old foes: the eagles build their nests on steep cliffs while baboons seek out cliffs on which to shelter at night. Both are predators and each may perceive the other as a threat.

Baboon infants left unattended may become prey to the eagles and, similarly, unattended eagle nestlings may become prey to baboons. This is more than just a theoretical

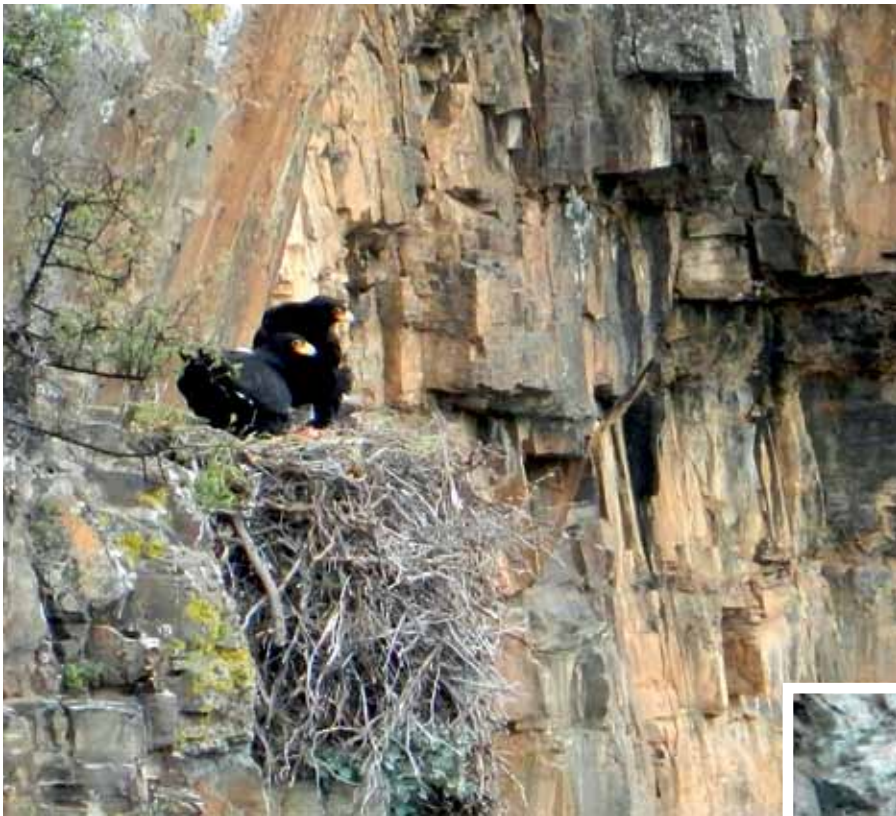
possibility as several cases of each have been recorded (Gargett 1990, Simmons 2005).

When searching for eagle nests, we often look for the largest, steepest cliffs and the massive structures that the birds build. Yet experience shows that baboons – agile, strong, and superb climbers – are quite capable of reaching such nests if they are sufficiently determined.

Recently I observed a predation attempt by a large male baboon on a Verreaux's Eagle nest and the behaviour of the eagle pair in attendance.

On 5 July 2014, while walking in sleet in the central Karoo mountains, I was alerted to the presence of a troop of baboons barking from a nearby cliff. Shortly after that I heard the softer 'chupp-chupp-chupp' of a pair of Verreaux's Eagles from the same location, and, scanning, I became aware of the reason for the eagles' calling.

The troop of baboons was ascending the cliff – the younger baboons ran along the lower ledges, while the larger animals scaled the 30- to 40-metre cliffs vertically. The eagles



left The attentive eagle pair look down from the nest after the baboons had left the area and relative calm had returned.

below The male eagle hovers close over the baboon (circled) clinging to the rock face, defending his nest, while the female eagle mantles over her two very small chicks in the nest.



had a large nest and the baboons were already within five to 10 metres of it. The male eagle was sailing back and forth along the cliff face, passing very close to the climbing baboons, while the female remained on the nest, mantling and calling. (Mantling is a display in which a bird spreads its wings over its prey or chicks to protect them from being stolen or taken as prey.)

As I watched from a distance of 150 to 200 metres, a large male baboon climbed the cliff to about five metres from the nest, then moved upwards towards it and approached to within two to three metres. The male eagle immediately appeared to hover directly above the baboon, causing him to bark.

The female eagle was on the nest, facing the baboon, still mantling aggressively, and possibly calling at him. The baboon appeared to need both hands to climb this steep section (I watched him test several handholds with both hands before he hauled himself up), making

him vulnerable to being hit from behind by the eagle. I was not able to see from my position if the eagle struck the baboon, but the primate changed course and headed up and diagonally left from the nest, looking across at the still-mantling female eagle from a distance of about six to eight metres.

The male eagle continued to make several low passes over the baboons, even after they began moving away from the nest to the cliffs above.

As I drew level with the nest, it became apparent that it was built under an overhang (protecting it from the snow flurries that had replaced the sleet). The cliff section leading to the nest was not so steep that an agile baboon could not have scaled the remaining few metres. I concluded that it was the behaviour of the adult eagles vigorously defending their nest that prevented the baboons from raiding it, as they were too vulnerable to being injured by the eagles.



above The male baboon (circled), now on a less precarious perch, looks across at the mantling female eagle on her nest, knowing there is little chance of an easy eagle meal.



left The male eagle continues to dive low over the retreating baboons, causing them to bark and move away.



Like other raptors, the female Verreaux's Eagle undertakes the majority of the nest duties. Here she is seen carefully feeding the first hatched (above), and protecting it from the elements (right). Some researchers believe her larger size has also been selected to allow her to better defend the nest against predators such as baboons and leopards.

Checking the nest, I observed that it held two white downy chicks of about five and one to two days old respectively. They would have been a worthwhile reward for a determined baboon.

My conclusion is supported by a detailed description by Dirk de Kock of an adult male baboon climbing down to a Verreaux's Eagle nest in the Rooi Els area of the Western Cape. His account records a large male baboon making a direct approach to an active eagle nest. The baboon was not deterred by the close attendance of one eagle diving at it (the baboon even jumped at the swooping bird, apparently trying to catch it). However, when both eagles took it in turn to fly at the baboon in tandem (one closely following the other), the baboon turned around and headed away from the nest. That nest above Rooi Els was successful.

However, other Verreaux's Eagle nests have not been so successful. Two long-time eagle experts, Dr Rob Davies and PhD student Megan Murgatroyd, shared some interesting observations on their experiences.



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Rob reports, from his extensive eagle work in the Karoo National Park, that he once saw the Kookfontein eagles clearly swooping at baboons on their nest cliff, nearly making contact, with no sign of a successful raid by baboons. However, the same baboons chased Rob off their turf (i.e. the cliff) when he was collecting prey remains at the eagle nest, with five males coming within a few metres of him at the nest. On a second occasion he found an exposed nest with the chick destroyed, and he assumed that baboons were the culprits.

Megan reports that in 2013 one of her eagle nest cameras recorded baboons sleeping on a nest after it had failed (the chick died in rain, aged 15 days). Possibly the eagles had been less protective of their nest and the baboons kept the adult birds away?

These observations indicate that the eagles are not always successful in defending their nests against baboons and the tables can be turned in favour of the mammal predators. They also suggest that however inaccessible eagle nests may be, many are vulnerable to baboons, and it is probably the mobbing actions of the eagles that help prevent many of

them from falling victim to these primates.

Thanks to Marlei Martins, Cat Simmons, Dr Rob Davies and Megan Murgatroyd for their thoughts and inputs.

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References

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