



# LIGHTING strike

African Harrier-Hawks  
in Cape Town

The African Harrier-Hawk *Polyboroides typus* may have changed its name from *Gymnogene* but hasn't changed its hunting antics. This sequence of images of an immature bird literally scratching a House Sparrow out of a street light was photographed by Neil Shannon in Kenwyn, Cape Town.

Having apparently taken a liking to Cape Town's greenbelt of leafy suburbs and adjacent plantations and forests, Harrier-Hawks are now fairly frequently seen as they feed on introduced bird species such as this House Sparrow and on the alien grey squirrels. Although these raptors have a varied diet, including reptiles, frogs and small mammals, they particularly favour the eggs and nestlings of smaller birds, often colonial nesters like weavers, swallows and swifts, and will even rob nests at heronries.

The Harrier-Hawk's long legs and bare facial skin are obvious characteristics while it clambers about on trees, delving into crevices and cavities in the hope of grabbing hold of any prey that may be taking refuge. Although seemingly clumsy with broad, outstretched wings flapping while the bird moves from branch to branch, these are persistent, successful hunters. Their legs are uniquely adapted to bend backwards and sideways at the tarsal joint, enabling them to dig into awkward small spaces for their prey. Their buoyant flight is also



characteristic, appearing almost lazy, with deep, slow wing-beats.

The forays of this large bird of prey into Cape Town's suburbs are somewhat unexpected, so it is perhaps not surprising that of all the enquiries we receive from the public requesting the identification of a raptor, the majority involve immature African Harrier-Hawks such as this.

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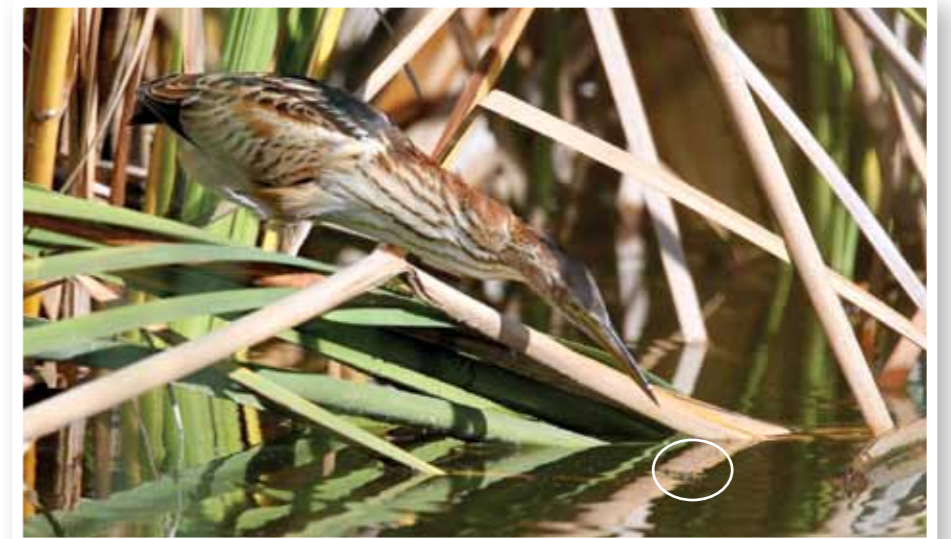


# tool TIME

Bait fishing by a Little Bittern

The Green-backed Heron is renowned for fishing using bait (insects, spiders, worms, bread) or lures (twigs, leaves, feathers, paper) to attract fish. The behaviour is rare, but has been observed in North and South America, Africa and Asia. Locally, it has been noted in Botswana and Kruger National Park (insects) and in Durban (bread). Bait fishing has attracted considerable attention because of the apparent intelligence displayed by the bird: one can't help but be impressed by the way the herons repeatedly place their bait in just the right place to attract fish within striking range.

Baiting is not confined to the Green-backed Heron; it has been recorded in four other herons – Little Egrets in Kenya (bread), Goliath Herons in Tanzania (sticks), Squacco Herons in Botswana (insects), and Black-crowned Night Herons in the USA (bread). Phillip Green's photographs of a young Little Bittern, taken at Rondevlei, Cape Town, on 8 May 2010, show that this species also occasionally baits for fish. Phillip watched the bittern repeatedly place a grasshopper



PHILLIP GREEN (2)

on the surface of the water, watch it intently, then retrieve it when it started to drift out of range. This process was repeated several times, but unfortunately he did not see whether the bittern's patience was rewarded with a fish.

Bait fishing also has been recorded in other bird groups. A captive Lesser Black-backed Gull used bread to catch fish in a Durban bird park, and this has since been observed in wild Herring Gulls in Paris. Other birds recorded using bread to attract fish include Carrion Crows (Israel), Pied Kingfishers (Africa) and Black Kites (Australia), and a captive Sunbittern used mealworms to lure fish.

Bait fishing appears to be a learned behaviour. Proficiency improves with age; adult Green-backed Herons use more baits than lures compared to juveniles, and are more adept at catching fish. The behaviour may spread when birds observe other individuals baiting, but probably arises initially when an individual learns to associate fish with floating items. So-called 'passive fishing' provides a plausible intermediate step in this process. Several herons have been observed taking fish attracted to bread thrown into ponds to feed ducks or fish, and it is a small step from there to gathering their own bread to use as bait.

The rather skulking Little Bittern is unlikely to have learned this approach in such a setting,

but young piscivores often hone their hunting skills by repeatedly catching sticks and other non-prey items. The bittern probably learned that dropping such items onto the water sometimes resulted in an easy meal.

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