

Crows make a killing on Aldabra



In general, corvids are renowned for their intelligence, and many people have shown how quickly these birds can learn to take advantage of new food sources, often in unusual ways. The Pied Crow *Corvus albus* is a common and conspicuous resident in much of Africa and many of its associated islands. It in particular is a classic opportunist scavenger and predator, and has even been recorded catching birds and bats on the wing. However, until fairly recently there were no records of it systematically catching live birds.

When I visited Aldabra Atoll in the Seychelles, I began to find feathers of the Aldabra Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata copingeri* scattered around in a way that suggested foul play. I asked staff at the research station if they knew anything about this, and Tony Jupiter, then head ranger, told me the Pied Crows were regularly catching doves.

Tony and I set out to observe and document their behaviour. It turned out that the crows were taking advantage of an unusual combination of factors. First of these was the innate naïvety of the doves, typical of island species that don't regularly get chased and eaten by predators. But more important was the role of man. Some of the staff enjoyed putting food out for the doves, and there were also a few watering points that attracted flocks of doves during the frequent dry spells. Doves gathered in large numbers when food or water was provided for them, milling about and creating something of an avian feeding frenzy.

The crows, being big and intelligent, soon joined the fray and did a good job of competing for the food. They managed to establish themselves in the centre of the crowd, forcing the doves onto the periphery. Occasionally, crows would 'snap' at a nearby dove, essentially warning them off. But these 'mock

charges' never appeared to actually threaten the doves. However, from there, one dominant crow realised that there was an opportunity, and had begun to do something quite extraordinary.

While the other crows and doves were scrapping for the spoils, the dominant crow would be looking around in the midst of the frenzy, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to get close enough. As soon as one did, the crow made its move. In a flash, it would lunge at a dove and grab hold of it by whatever part it could. As soon as it had secured the bird, it would stand on its hapless victim, pin it down and start to pull its feathers out with its bill. It didn't try to kill the dove, but simply began to tear it open. In a very short time, some of the other members of the crow flock would also get involved in finishing off their prey, while ignoring the remaining doves.

Interestingly, in every observation of this behaviour, it seemed that only the one individual had learned to catch birds; in one instance it also caught a Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* in the same manner. The crow was recognisable as being dominant and was in excellent condition – its feathers were always a glossy black and snow white. In comparison, the other

members of the flock were submissive, and had brownish, often somewhat tatty feathers. As far as we could ascertain, this was the first instance of Pied Crows systematically killing free-living birds.

Some people saw this interaction as a reason to dislike the crows, and even suggested they be persecuted. This is a fairly typical human reaction to crows, best illustrated by the old collective noun: an unkindness of crows. However, one has to appreciate how amazingly quick and intelligent the crows were to take advantage of a situation. It is also a small but interesting lesson in the unpredictable outcomes that arise when man starts to interfere with the natural order of things, however innocent and well-intentioned we may be.

As a postscript to this story, when I returned to Aldabra eight months after seeing this behaviour, the warden of the island had put an end to the practice of feeding the doves. This also put a stop to the daily dove deaths.

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First reported in Wanless, R.M. & Jupiter, T.A. 2002. 'Predation on doves by Pied Crows *Corvus albus* on Aldabra Atoll.' Ostrich 73: 73. □



A murder of crows... One of the dominant Pied Crows on Aldabra learned that by separating a Turtle Dove from the rest of a feeding flock, it could attack and kill it. It would soon be joined by other crows which also took advantage of this opportunistic behaviour.