



ANTHONY LOWNEY

Southern Ground-Hornbills thwarted by a terrapin shell

Although I've been living in South Africa for close to five years, I didn't manage to get to the Kruger National Park until fairly recently. Everyone I met recommended a

visit, but I still had doubts. I mean, how good could it really be? So far I'd had the great fortune to spend most of the time I'd been in South Africa on a private reserve in the Kalahari, where I was constantly

bumping into some of the famous large African megafauna, and more excitingly, lesser known animals such as armadillos and aardwolves. I also had a reasonable bird list of more than 170 species within the reserve. So, apart from elephants and a few bird species, what could Kruger really offer me?

When the Raptor Research Foundation announced that it would hold its annual conference at Skukuza in November 2018, I knew I was being given the perfect opportunity to not only learn more about raptor research and conservation, but also find out why Kruger was held in such high esteem. After three days of listening to talks about raptor research, some friends and I headed north to see as much as we could in a week. And it was a fantastic time. I saw many species that were new to me, including serval, Böhm's Spinetail and Southern Yellow White-eye, but while it's always rewarding to add new species to your list, it's the interactions between individuals and species that make a trip memorable.



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On the second day we headed west of Satara to try to locate some cheetahs that had been reported earlier in the day. We didn't find them, but stumbled upon something far more exciting. Initially we stopped for a Lappet-faced Vulture standing by a waterhole next to the road. It wasn't doing much, but we were amazed by its size – it's only when you see the species up close that you realise how big the birds really are. We were so focused on the vulture that we almost failed to notice the family of Southern Ground-Hornbills nearby.

There were three hornbills, an adult male and female and a juvenile, and the female was trying to smash something using her beak. Identifying it as the shell of a serrated hinged terrapin, we were amazed as we watched her carrying the dead animal around and stabbing down with her strong beak in an attempt to break open its shell. She soon gave up and joined her mate and the noisy juvenile in the shade. The latter then investigated the abandoned terrapin and began trying to crack the shell open to get at the meat inside. First it struck the shell with its beak as the female had done, smashing down quickly and tirelessly, although the heat was blazing and the bird was panting noisily. Next it swung the terrapin around by its head, probably in an attempt to tear the head off. For about 20 minutes the young bird alternated between these two methods, but to no avail.

Then the adult male emerged from the shade. It was time for him to step up and show the youngster how it was done. The juvenile was stubborn and reluctant to give up, but eventually it stepped aside and let the more experienced adult take over. The male started by inserting his beak into the holes where the terrapin's legs had been. He pulled out tiny pieces of meat he could reach, but soon resorted to the smashing method demonstrated by the female and the juvenile. His larger beak and his ability to generate considerable force were of no help, so then he tried the 'swinging the terrapin by the head' technique. By now the youngster was getting impatient



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and at the first opportunity it grabbed the terrapin back and resumed pecking. This time the combination of heat and energy-sapping smashing took its toll and the juvenile sank down to take a short rest. We watched it for a further 10 minutes as it alternated the smashing and swinging strategies, until more game viewers arrived and we felt that it was only fair to allow them to experience this extraordinary behaviour too.

It was an intriguing episode to watch, though we did feel a little sorry for the hornbills as they used so much energy during the heat of the day for so little

above *The adult male hornbill has a turn at trying to remove the head of the terrapin.*

opposite, above *The juvenile changes its grip on the terrapin.*

opposite, below *Watched by the juvenile, the male adult tries to reach inside the terrapin's shell via a hole where a leg had been.*

reward. The interaction was a highlight of the trip to Kruger and now, having spent nearly two weeks in the park, I fully understand people's passion for it. ANTHONY LOWNEY