

SHORT-SIGHTED TWITCHERS

Having been woken at 06h30 on 18 July 2016 with the news that a Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin was present at Zeekoevlei, I excitedly set off to see the bird.

Half an hour before sunrise I located a few birders braving the 10°C dawn while waiting for the bird to appear. Shortly after sunrise the bird was seen and in no time about 40 birders had gathered. I recall suggesting that we stand a little further back to let the robin emerge if it felt so inclined, but this had little impact.

It seemed as if the anticipation had taken over control and everyone was



PETER RYAN

Birders at the Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin twitch at Zeekoevlei.

concerned that if they didn't see the bird immediately, life would end.

Considering that the average camera and lens may cost in the vicinity of at least R50k and the average binocular price

may be about R10k, if half the people had cameras and everyone had a pair of binoculars, the total value of the optics present must have been in the region of R1.4 million. With that optical capacity one would think we could get our enjoyment and memories from at least 30 metres away from the bird. But the need to be as close as possible was overwhelming and it was not clear who had 'precedence' – those wielding binoculars or the photographers. It left me wondering if the birders present lacked confidence in their prized optics or if they just wanted to be closer than the person alongside them. Unsettled by this embarrassing dilemma, I was the first to leave the fray.

ROB LITTLE

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LEFT FOR DEAD

Driving back to Letaba camp in the Kruger National Park late one afternoon in October we saw several cars pulled over and the passengers watching something. But being birders, we had spotted two Tawny Eagles at the top of trees close by and stopped to view and photograph them. We then decided to investigate and see what the others were watching. Squeezing between cars, we saw a pile of feathers and what appeared to be a dead bird and an equally dead snake!

After taking more photographs and chatting to people in neighbouring cars, we speculated that the creatures had killed each other. After about 10 minutes and just as we were about to leave, we saw some movement in the heap of feathers, so we waited a few more minutes. Suddenly the bird lifted its head, opened its eyes and glared at us. It was a juvenile Black-chested Snake Eagle – and alive.

The bird gradually started recovering, seemingly a feather at a time, and as soon as it was standing almost upright it began eating the snake, head first.

It was evident that the bird was experiencing problems with its right wing and as it turned we could see that the snake was coiled over the wing. Slowly the snake eagle managed to free itself of the snake, but the wing appeared to



be damaged, especially at the 'shoulder'. The episode had taken about 40 minutes, but unfortunately we were not able to see what happened next because we had to return to camp.

We wondered whether the bird had been bitten and speculated about its seemingly miraculous 'recovery'. We realised, however, that as we had missed seeing the initial fight between the two, possibly the eagle had simply been exhausted when

we first encountered the protagonists and both appeared to be dead.

Subsequently, herpetologist Johan Marais identified the snake as a rufous beaked snake *Rhamphiophis rostratus*, which can attain about 1.6 metres in length. He confirmed that the species is mildly venomous and its venom will have virtually no effect on such a large bird.

BRENDA BROMFIELD ◆