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group DYNAMICS

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DICK BOS (5)

In June 2013 we paid a wonderful visit to the Kruger National Park, and took a great many photographs, among them a series of 'hunting' Southern Ground Hornbills *Bucorvus leadbeateri*. It was a group of seven birds, all adults except for one juvenile. They were marching around looking for food and we were amazed to see how easily they managed to find their prey.

At one point we saw one of the adult birds catch a flap-necked chameleon. Rather than immediately eat it, it held the reptile up high and called to the juvenile to come and see, which it did. The adult then carried the

chameleon away, with the youngster trailing behind. It did not feed the catch to the juvenile, but instead ate it itself. Unfortunately the hornbill consumed most of its meal while behind a bush, so when it emerged again all we saw was the chameleon's tail sticking out of its beak, before it was swallowed. A while later a different adult fed the juvenile a small snake. As we watched the group on the hunt we saw them catch another chameleon and just before we lost sight of them, one of the hornbills carried away what appeared to be a lizard.

The final picture in this series was taken about a week later in a different area. On this occasion once again an adult had found what we believe may have been the shrivelled carcass of a chameleon. It then also vocalised to the youngster in the group, walked over to it, showed and then ate the prey.

We were intrigued by our observations and wondered if this was intended to be an educational exercise to demonstrate to the juvenile what is edible? Are the adults supposed to feed the young (assuming it was the parent that fed the snake to the juvenile)?

DICK BOS



2

Renowned hornbill researcher Dr Alan Kemp comments: All the images of adults are of fully mature males (that is, more than four or five years old, and having all-red throats without any dark blue patch under the throat).



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The first four images, referring to the group of seven, start with male 1 carrying a fine adult flap-necked chameleon. He has probably been digging, as he has pale mud almost up to the base of his normally all-black bill.

The second image is of the same male with apparently the only juvenile, and the male is performing a sub-climax form of threat display, in which the bill is raised and the throat exposed, as if to say 'come and take this if you dare'. At highest intensity the bill would be completely vertical and the throat directed full-on at the subordinate.

The third image of the same male and juvenile reveals that this is not the previous summer's but the year before's chick (that is, about 15 months post-fledging, given normal end of March emergence. This is evidenced by the start of body moult of new black upper-wing covert feathers among the original browner juvenile plumage. At this age facial skin colours are still very juvenile-like save for a tinge of pink, something that often leads to claims of two chicks being fledged from the previous summer). The calling attributed to this male is more likely to have been a brief begging bray from the juvenile but if not, may have been a low hum or *brom* from the male expressing his displeasure at being begged from. A juvenile of this age is quite capable of feeding itself, although it tries to get whatever it can for as long as possible, and it may have another year of some support, given that a new previous-summer's juvenile seemed absent.

The fourth photograph shows a different adult male (based on bill form and lack of grey mud), which is feeding the snake to the juvenile, showing that persistence pays. I also suspect that the male in the other photographs was the alpha breeding male, based on its dominance and throat swelling. He would be top of the social heap, except for the single alpha female, while the second male was a subordinate non-breeding helper, assisting as he should.

The fifth image was taken elsewhere, although if it was within 10 kilometres of the first sighting and a similar group size it could have been the same birds. This again shows a different adult male (with small patches of dark tick larvae on his neck), and my guess is that the main food item is a scorpion with its tail hanging down and legs sticking out, plus a few other small invertebrates,



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that were then eaten. Typically, ground hornbills can carry several food items at once, putting down their load if they spot more prey, catching it, and then picking up the previous items together with the latest addition to the bolus. Adults are generally more reluctant to share large food items, for obvious reasons, but often give way with smaller, less 'valuable' ones.