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Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* attacked by Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris*

While living in Bedele, Illubabor, Ethiopia a few years back (16 September 1989) we came across an incident worth reporting after more than 20 years.

At about 14:00 our attention was drawn to a group of four Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris*, normally a noisy species, but the present ones appeared to be unusually agitated in a nearby acacia tree.

As we approached, a Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides radiatus* flew off with two ravens in close pursuit and all disappeared from sight, but the ravens returned after about two minutes. Almost immediately afterwards, what appeared to be a Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi* also flew away with another two ravens in pursuit. It landed in a nearby dead tree, and was thereafter ignored by the ravens.

Although two possible candidates for the consternation had gone, the agitated calling continued unabated and was increased through the arrival of a pair of vociferous Cape Rooks *Corvus capensis*. It was now obvious that there was some other cause for the mobbing behaviour of the ravens. On closer approach we found a fully grown Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* perched high in the tree being closely attacked by the ravens. The Cape Rooks provided a rather more distant but very noisy support. The owl was well placed within a tangle of thorny twigs among which it was protected from the ravens' beaks which were only able to attempt to reach it one at a time through one opening among the branches. At this point one of the ravens (frustrated in its attempt to reach the owl?) began to deliberately break off the twigs with its beak in order to increase the size of the hole.

After a few minutes, all four ravens adapted this activity, and soon made an opening large enough for them all to get through and attack the owl from several directions. Despite their numbers, large size and powerful bills, the ravens were very wary of the owl, never facing it and always striking at it by jumping up and pecking at its rear. After a few minutes of being forced to fight against four attackers simultaneously the owl took off pursued by the ravens. It alighted again in a nearby tree, but was almost immediately forced to fly again into another where it remained until dark, continually mobbed by the ravens. The owl was not there the following morning and we did not see it again.

Of particular interest to us was the persistence and ferocity of the attacking ravens, and the fact that two other species of potential predators were also present, and apparently had been attracted to the scene. The late Leslie Brown in his book *African Birds of Prey* (1970) has reported Verreaux's Eagle Owls preying on the young of Pied

Crows and buzzards, so that probably all the corvids and raptors involved in this incident were reacting to the owl as a potential predator of their young.

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Observations on two nests of the Black-headed Siskin *Serinus nigriceps* in the Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

The Bale Mountains in southeast Ethiopia support an exceptionally varied avifauna, including six Ethiopian endemic species and a further 16 near endemic species (shared with Eritrea) (Williams *et al.* 2004, Asefa 2007). But this avifauna remains rather poorly studied, with little information on breeding biology in particular. One of these endemics, the Black-headed Siskin *Serinus caniceps* is found in the western and southeastern highlands of Ethiopia, in Afro-alpine moorlands, highland grasslands and open areas of montane forest (Urban & Brown 1971, Urban 1980, Vivero Pol 2002, Ash & Atkins 2009). During September–October 2007, we observed breeding of this species in Bale Mountains National Park. Two nests were found in the northern woodlands at 7°05' N, 39°47' E; 3150 m, in an area dominated by *Juniperus procera*, *Hagenia abyssinica* and *H. revolutum* woodland, shrubs such as *Euphorbia dumalis*, *Solanum marginatum* and *Acanthus sennii*, grasses including *Agrostis* spp., *Andropogon* spp., *Poa* spp. and *Festuca* spp., and herbs *Satureja paradoxa*, *S. simensis* and various *Trifolium* spp. This area experiences light rains from March to June and heavy rains from July to October with a dry season from November to February (Hillman 1986, Asefa 2005).

Observations were made between 12 September and 20 October. A first nest (nest A) was discovered by AA on 11 September. Construction was almost complete and eggs not yet laid. AA then found another nest (nest B) with three chicks on 14 October. We watched both nests using 8 x 40 binoculars, usually standing concealed among shrubs about 7 m away. We observed nest building activity (nest A) for 2 h each day for three days, noting frequency of visits, type of materials delivered, and any nest building or courtship behaviour of the male and female. We made further observations twice each day, from 08:30 to 09:00 and from 15:30 to 16:00, from the first egg-laying date to hatching date. We measured nest height and dimensions, and major (C1) and minor (C2) egg circumferences. We checked both nests each morning until all chicks had left and also noted nest site selection and egg morphology. The major (D1) and minor (D2) egg diameters were calculated from C1 and C2, using the formula, $D_i = C_i / 2\pi$.

Nest site selection and nest building behaviour

Both nests were built in *H. revolutum* shrubs, 1.85 m and 1.65 m tall respectively.