

Red-necked Falcons *Falco chicquera* hunting at a roost of African Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus parvus*

The Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera ruficollis* is a medium-sized falcon that is found in large parts of eastern and southern Africa and from Somalia west into Senegambia along the sub-Saharan region (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). It favours open grasslands, marshes, *dambos* (wetland) and floodplains where it is most often associated with *Borassus* and *Hyphane* palm trees (Kemp 1994, Osborne 1981, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2006), but also with dry thorn tree savanna with isolated palms (Colebrook-Robjent & Osborne 1974). Throughout its range, the Red-necked Falcon mainly hunts birds, and to a lesser extent bats, rodents, reptiles and insects (Brown & Amadon 1968, Osborne 1981, Maclean 1985, Kemp 1994). Because of its association with palm trees, the Red-necked Falcon lives in close proximity to another African bird species that is associated with palm trees, the African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus* (Moreau 1941, Fry *et al.* 1988, Chantler 1999, Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2006). Despite this, interactions between both species, that are bound to occur, have not been described in detail.

On 18 July 2013, at around 17:30, I observed a pair of Red-necked Falcons perching in a tree top in the town of Nsanje (formerly known as Port Herald, 16°56' S, 35°16' E), southern Malawi. I had seen the falcons making hunting sorties from that same tree-top around dawn and sunset on previous occasions that month, but I was unable to see what prey they were hunting. The falcons were situated 30 m from a large *Borassus aethiopicum* palm tree where approximately 30 African Palm Swifts were gathering at dusk. The swifts gathered to roost in between the palm leaves but seemed hesitant to enter the roost. Instead, they circled the area, calling and showing signs of agitation. The male Red-necked Falcon attacked the swarming swifts from his perch in a fast level flight, but this did not result in a catch. The swifts scattered and both falcons moved on.

Both falcons returned to their perch the following morning at 06:00. The male was plucking and eating a small passerine bird, while the female was making begging calls. Eventually the female took the half-eaten prey from the male's talons and finished it. Around the base of the tree I found some prey remains that were dropped by the falcons. These consisted of feathers and bills belonging to a male House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and a Cut-throat Finch *Amadina fasciata*, and a couple of primary feathers of an African Palm Swift.

I conducted a search using Google Scholar with keywords *Falco chicquera/ruficollis*, *Cypsiurus parvus*, and consulted the online tables of contents of African ornithological journals (*Bulletin of the African Bird Club*, *Gabar*, *Scopus*, *Malimbus* and *Ostrich*). It seems that African Palm Swift has not previously been recorded as a prey species of Red-necked Falcon. The same applies to the Cut-throat Finch. However, information on prey composition in Africa is scarce. Osborne (1981) is one of the few sources with a substantial list of prey species (n=292). He noted at least 13 identified bird species taken in Zambia, as well as a number of undetermined bird, mammal and insect species. African Palm Swift and other swift species were not recorded in his account. Cade (1982) mentions 'swifts', as a food source for the Red-necked Falcon but does not specify any species. Bijlsma *et al.* (1994) observed Red-necked Falcons attacking a large roost of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* in Botswana. A pair managed to catch a Barn Swallow on a cooperative hunt in twilight. These crepuscular hunting habits seem to be normal in Red-necked Falcons outside the breeding season (Brown

& Amadon 1986). This behaviour is also described for the nominate race (*Falco c. chicquera*), sometimes called Red-headed Falcon, that occurs from south-eastern Iran, east to Bangladesh (Naoroji 2011). Besides birds gathering to roost, both races also attack emerging bats (Fry 1964, Hanmer 1984, Foysal 2015). Hanmer 1984 describes how Red-necked Falcons attacked emerging bats at Nchalo, Malawi with fast horizontal attacks from an elevated perch. A method very similar to the one I described above.

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