

SCOOP!

4

Bird-hunting jackals
of the Kgalagadi

AMBUSH IN NOSSOB

EVOLUTION AT WORK AT THE WATERHOLES
OF A REMOTE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARK

Several Black-backed
jackals *Canis mesomelas*
have learned to ambush birds
coming to drink at the
waterholes of Nossob camp,
in the Kgalagadi National Park.

A female jackal jumps unsuccessfully at her intended prey. Despite appearances, the jackals always target a specific bird and do not strike at random.



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Nossob is one of the most important visitors' camps of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier (ex-Kalahari Gemsbok) National Park of South Africa, up far in the north and sharing a long straight western border with Namibia. The Park itself is not well known outside South Africa, and Nossob camp is just a hub of bungalows with a supposedly lion-proof fence around it built in the middle of nowhere. But something very special has been going on here, for quite some time. Water is desperately scarce in the Kgalagadi, and the Park features lots of man-made

waterholes - little concrete pools which get filled with drinking water pumped from underground by a solar-powered pump (until a lion cub doesn't break it to pieces - we saw this happening twice in a week). As it is to be expected, wildlife stays in the area all year-round just because of the water provided by these, and waterholes have become a dependable sighting spot - so much, in fact, that at some camps spacious hides are often built overlooking one, and some are even floodlit at night to allow viewing of nocturnal animals. At a couple of

waterholes of Nossob, several Black-backed jackals *Canis mesomelas* have learned to ambush the hundreds of Cape doves and sandgrouse which flock daily to the pool for a much needed morning or evening drink - waiting patiently for the birds to land and start drinking, creeping stealthily and intensely focused towards one in particular (despite appearances, the jackals do not strike randomly, but unfailingly target a single individual in the flock) and then finally bolting at full speed in the middle of the milling birds, all taking off simultaneously in panic. The success rate is

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Strike! A Cape turtle dove *Streptopilia capicola* is caught in mid-air and hurriedly carried a few meters away to be immediately consumed.



Attack runs last a few meters only and usually end in a jump. About one ambush in four meets success.



The act of successfully snatching a flying bird in mid-air lasts a fraction of a second and is not easily caught on camera. Focusing is also difficult given the number of birds taking off in all directions.



Approaching very stealthily, jackals will also occasionally catch a drinking Cape dove by surprise, from behind. Most attacks are however launched to the birds taking off en masse, when they hinder each other.

incredibly high - we've calculated that about one strike in four ends in a kill. The bird is gulped down frantically and basically whole, often on the run - less experienced in the fine art of dove-catching, other jackals close in quickly on the successful hunter to steal its prey. The whole spectacle is always fast and dramatic (some would say entertaining), but what makes it really fascinating is that we are watching what we might call a *culture* evolving at Nossob's waterholes. The older, most experienced and most successful (one could say most intelligent) jackals have obviously learned from direct observation and experience that waterholes are a dependable source of food, that flocks of birds come daily, that while busy drinking they are at their most vulnerable - and these proficient hunters are passing on this *stored information* to the younger generations and even to other unrelated jackals, which watch intently and finally learn. The hunters always follow the same routine, depending on the individual - some crash in from the right, others from the left. They will even occasionally feint disinterest and pretend to sleep to avoid alarming the birds too much. There's a lot of intelligence and craftiness being shown by these clever, fascinating animals here - in conclusion, what one sees at Nossob camp is basically an evolutionary lab, and that makes the place rather unique in our experience.





Most attacks from behind are unsuccessful, and jackals have learned to utilize other ambush techniques.



Two separate attacks.
A jump will occasionally
also end with a mouthful
of feathers - usually a tail
- torn off with the Cape
dove flying away to live
another day.

A very focused jackal ■ bolts on its intended prey, a Cape dove busy drinking from the Nossob waterhole. Despite the bird actually being on the verge of taking off, this attack was successful (see page 9).



■ Watch and learn -
this female has become
a very experienced and
proficient hunter. Others -
possibly its own offspring
- will follow suit and learn
to do the same.

