

GREY KESTRELS IN TANGANYIKA

By

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I first saw the Grey Kestrels, Falco ardosiaceus Bonnaterre & Vieillot, on the day that we moved into the house of the District Commissioner, Shinyanga. The garden is a well-established one, the house was built in 1927, and there are plenty of big trees, which, in an area with comparatively few trees, such as this part of Sukumaland is, are an attraction to birds of many kinds. That was October 3rd., and I did not notice the birds again until the 7th. when I saw the pair of them flying across the garden making a lot of noise. Their call I should describe as a 'rattling whistle' (something like a squeaky bicycle) and it is distinctive and unmistakable.

I started my day to day observations on October 13th., when I had seen that they were nesting in a Hammerkop, Scopus umbretta (Gmelin), nest. This nest, high up in the fork of a tree, is a typical Hammerkop construction. It is very big and made of grass and twigs, with all sorts of things dangling from it:- bits of paper, old seedpods, pieces of material and so on. Whether or not the Kestrels drove the Hammerkops away I do not know, but the Hammerkops were certainly there at the end of August, when the previous District Commissioner took photographs of them at the nest. The Hammerkops returned on a number of occasions and each time they were driven away by the adult Kestrels. The last time I saw a Hammerkop was just after the young Kestrels had started to fly and, on this occasion, both the adult Kestrels attacked it with great ferocity and beat it down to the ground before it was able to get away.

I noticed that on the whole the Kestrels were quite fierce birds. Once I saw them chasing a Grey Hornbill, Tockus nasutus (Linn.), which had a lizard in its beak. They flew round and round the garden, the Hornbill trying to get away and using all sorts of dodges. Unfortunately I did not see if the Kestrel got the lizard. Another time one adult Kestrel chased a pair of Pied Crows, Corvus albus Muller, which were nowhere near the nest, and pulled feathers out of them. On the other hand, they took no notice of a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Clamator glandarius (Linn.), perched quite near the nest, which made a lot of noise; and they themselves were scared off by three Lilac Breasted Rollers, Coracias caudata Linn., which were also making a great deal of noise as they flew round indulging in their spectacular aerobatics. The Kestrels chased the bats which come out from under our roof in swarms in the evenings.

The adult Kestrels were very shy of me and though I tried to hide (this was before the beginning of the rains and the trees were bare) they always seemed aware of my presence and would not enter the nest if they could see me. Many times they returned with food for the young (sometimes carrying it in their beaks, sometimes in their claws) and they would perch and call, fly round again, perch and call, tear at whatever food they were carrying, fly round again and so on.

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Occasionally they would swoop up to the entrance hole of the nest and then swerve away again.

I first heard sounds from the nest (I should describe them as mewling) on October 14th., but it was not until the 21st. that I actually saw one of the adult Kestrels entering the nest carrying a lizard, and heard the same sounds which seemed to make it certain that there were young in the nest. The food that the adult Kestrels brought back that I saw was mainly mice, lizards, frogs, worms and large grasshoppers. By October 26th. both adult birds were hunting at the same time. They made a lot of noise often flying round and calling, or perching and calling for as long as 30 minutes at a time.

On October 27th. I saw two young birds near the entrance hole of the nest. It was difficult to see them very clearly because the nest is about 20 ft. from the ground and dark inside, but, with binoculars, I could see that their plumage was beige-fawn and their beaks were horn-coloured. The circle round the eye was white and the base of the beak (the cere) unlike the adult birds which are yellow in those places (a very helpful identification mark.)

From then on I saw the young Kestrels practically every day and noticed that they were more likely to be near the entrance hole when the adult birds were calling.

By November 5th. the young birds were very active in the nest and they seemed much bigger and greyer. They were scratching a lot and the down floated out of the nest; they were also much noisier.

On November 11th. two young (at this time I was not sure whether there were two or three young birds) were standing on the lip of the entrance hole and 'bobbing' from time to time. The young birds were quite uninterested in me and would stand and look down at me as I looked up at them, but the adult birds were still shy and would not enter the nest if they could see me.

On November 13th, the young Kestrels were making more noise and their call was developing into the 'rattling whistle' of the adult. They would stand and bob for long periods and I felt that it would not be long before they began to fly.

At this time the adult Kestrels changed their call. I thought at first that there was a 'new' bird in the garden and then I saw that it was the adult Kestrels. Instead of the 'rattling whistle' they were using a 'chattering alarm' note, as they flew round and when they were perched. Whether or not this was because the young were ready to fly and the parents were trying to encourage them I do not know, but, the next day November 14th. one young bird was out of the nest and perched on a nearby branch of the same tree. It was quite grey except for the barring on the underside of the tail and black streaks on the chest.

By now the rains had started and the nest was beginning to look rather the worse for wear with bits dropping off it and things dangling in front of the entrance hole. November 15th was very wet but when I heard a lot of noise from the nest I went out to see what was happening and saw one young Kestrel clinging to the side of the nest. It remained there for a few minutes clawing at the twigs and

flapping its wings, and then it flew to a tree about 20 yards away where it stayed for a short time, but the wind was rather strong and it did not seem very secure. It then flew to another tree nearer the nest and stayed there for at least half an hour. At one stage the adult Kestrel came back with a lizard for it which the young bird held in its claws to eat. The claws and legs of the young bird were yellow like the adults.

In the nest at the same time I could see one other young Kestrel standing on the lip of the entrance hole to the nest and bobbing, and, behind it I could see another bird but it was impossible to see if it was a young bird or an adult.

At lunchtime on November 16th, in extremely heavy rain, one young Kestrel was perched in a tree near the nest, and looking very bedraggled. However, it cleared later, and I spent the whole afternoon and early evening watching. There were now three young Kestrels in trees near to the nest. They spent their time flapping about and scrambling up the branches. From time to time the adults returned 'chattering' and carrying food. Once they brought a large grasshopper and another time a very large lizard. The young Kestrel which was on rather an awkward branch, had quite a time coping with so big a meal. It began with wings spread slightly to help it to maintain its balance while it tore at the lizard with its beak, then it got a better hold with one claw and held the lizard in the other claw. It eventually dropped the lizard to the ground having eaten more than half of it. At one time the three young Kestrels were all in the same tree with one adult, the young all 'rattling' and the adult 'chattering'. This was the day that the Hammerkop was so savagely attacked.

On November 17th, the young birds were all out early in the morning in branches of trees near the nest. Two seemed more sure of themselves than the bird which was still scrambling, and as it fluttered and clambered about it seemed that it might overbalance.

In the afternoon there were four Kestrels sitting on one branch of a tree just outside the garden. One must have been an adult but for once it let me come quite close before flying away and I must admit that I thought at first it was a fourth young bird but I do not think it could have been. However, the three remaining young ones sat and preened themselves and ate the food that the adults had brought them earlier. They were there for over an hour and did not move even when I climbed up into the tree to take a photograph of them from about 8 ft. away. I noticed that, as in the nest, they bobbed from time to time and also, that they sometimes sat holding on with one claw and with the other tucked up.

I was away all day on November 18th and neither saw nor heard the Kestrels and on the 19th, which was again, an exceptionally wet day I did not see or hear them; but, on the 20th in the afternoon, I heard them calling from a Baobab tree about 200 yards from the garden on the other side of the railway line. I went over and saw two young Kestrels in the tree and the third one on a telegraph pole not far away, where it was fed by one of the adult Kestrels.

The Kestrels remained in the Baobab and did not return to the nest or the garden. Until November 23rd. the three young remained

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in the Baobab and were fed by the adult birds which were still 'chattering' but, on November 28th, only one young Kestrel was seen and one adult, and I noticed that the adult had changed back to its original 'rattling whistle' once more. The young bird was still white around the eye and at the base of its beak.

I have not seen the Hammerkop since November 16th.

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