

OXPECKERS USE ELEPHANTS IN HWANGE NATIONAL PARK

Both species of oxpeckers use various mammalian ungulates as hosts but elephants *Loxodonta africana* have never been recorded as hosts of these tick-eating birds. This has been attributed to the elephant's ability to deter the birds with their trunks.

On 30 August 1990 we saw elephants being used as hosts by both species of oxpeckers in a remote area of Hwange National Park. The first sighting consisted of two individuals of undetermined species using an emaciated calf at a seep at Shabeshabe (1926 A3). The oxpeckers were not feeding and moved on the elephant in the same way as they do when using other ungulate hosts. Approximately 27 km north of this sighting, we noted a single adult Yellow-billed Oxpecker *Buphagus africanus* perched on an adult male elephant using a seep at Shakwanki (1927 A1). A few minutes later a flock of five Red-billed Oxpeckers *B. erythrorhynchus* arrived, two of them landing on the same elephant beside the Yellow-billed Oxpecker. We disturbed the elephant unintentionally and the oxpeckers flew off it. The Red-billed Oxpeckers landed on the ground next to the elephant and the Yellow-billed Oxpecker landed on another adult elephant standing about 100m away. The birds did not feed and perched on the back of the elephants near the base of the tail in all cases.

Three separate sightings of elephants being used as hosts by oxpeckers were made in one day suggesting that this is a common occurrence in this part of Hwange National Park. During aerial surveys of raptor nests in this area, Yellow-billed Oxpeckers were often seen in the vicinity of elephant herds which were drinking at the seeps, but whether they were perching on the animals was not determined (KH). This portion of Hwange comprises dry and unaccommodating habitat for the usual hosts of oxpeckers at this time of year. The only game that frequent the area permanently are elephants who get their water from seeps during the dry season. If oxpeckers are to survive here they are obliged to use elephants as hosts, simply because there are no other hosts to choose from. The elephants did not discourage the oxpeckers, and in this portion of the park they may be accustomed to having oxpeckers perched on them. It is possible that the oxpeckers only use the elephants in the dry season because during the wet season more conventional hosts would be available. Data on oxpecker host choice in this area during the wet season would be most interesting.

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