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SHIKRA Accipiter badius TAKING BATS - Lizards, small birds, rodents and large insects comprise the main diet of the Shikra, lizards reputedly forming its staple (Brown & Amadon 1968, Eagles, Hawks and Falcons of the World, Vol.2). Observations at Ahmadu Bello University campus, Zaria, suggest that bats may feature importantly in their diet, at least in semi-urban areas.

During the years I lived there (1969-1973) I saw Shikras take small bats on many occasions, all in the dry season or pre-rains period when the bird was generally inconspicuous, present in small numbers and presumably breeding. Bats were also taken by immature Shikras. They were taken almost invariably as they left their roosts in roofs, in the way that Shikras take small birds.

At the house I occupied in 1970-71, Shikras visited the compound daily from November to May. An immature bird missed very few nights over that period and less frequently an adult was also present. They arrived just before dusk, about 1745 hrs, and perched on tall trees near the house waiting for the bats to leave. Bats emerged noisily at irregular intervals in groups of 10 to 30, dropping 0.5-1.5 m as they left holes in the eaves before flying off. During this interval of 'free-fall' the Shikras swooped in, attempting to take the bats before they could fly any distance. More than half of these first attempts were successful. If the Shikra missed it rarely chased the singled-out bat for more than a few metres, being outpaced and outmanoevred by the bats. Since all of the bats usually left the roof in about ten minutes the Shikras rarely had the opportunity for more than three attempts, but there were few nights that were entirely unsuccessful. Captured bats were usually taken away to eat but sometimes birds returned to the vantage tree for the dismembering. The bat population declined conspicuously that season, from 160-200 at the beginning to 30-40 at the end. In other seasons Shikra predation was less regular.

During the dry season of 1972-73 I lived in another house on the campus where bats roosted in a disused chimney, which they left by towering upwards in erratically dispersing groups. This roost was only occasionally preyed upon by Shikras which obviously had a harder task taking these bats, and only occasionally caught stragglers at the end of the emerging groups.

The number of Shikras seen catching bats was small and in different years may have involved the same birds. The sudden termination of bat-catching at the beginning of the rains may reflect the exploitation of alternative foods, or else emigration of the birds concerned. In any event, bat-predation may be more widespread than the lack of records suggests.

Antony Pettet