

Predation on a Kittlitz's Plover chick by a Blacksmith Plover

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Both Blacksmith Plovers *Vanellus armatus* and Kittlitz's Plovers *Charadrius pecuarius* breed in an area of short grass above the high-tide mark on Robben Island, South Africa (see Underhill *et al.* 2001). Blacksmith Plovers breed from May to November and Kittlitz's Plovers breed from July to February, so there is an overlap between their breeding seasons (Tarboton 2001). Although Blacksmith and Kittlitz's Plovers both feed on small molluscs, crustaceans, worms and insects (Urban *et al.* 1986), it is likely that competition for food between the species is minimal, as Kittlitz's Plovers are less than a third of the mass of Blacksmith Plovers and probably feed on smaller prey.

On 31 October 2001, a non-breeding Blacksmith Plover was foraging in the breeding territory of a pair of Kittlitz's Plovers. The Kittlitz's Plovers had two chicks 2–3 days old and were brooding the chicks and foraging with them before the Blacksmith Plover entered their territory and foraged in it. After a few minutes the Blacksmith Plover had approached the Kittlitz's Plover family and started threatening the family, walking in a "hunched" aggressive posture, lunging at the adults and chicks. The Kittlitz's Plover adults started calling to their chicks, which attempted to hide behind vegetation and rocks. The Kittlitz's Plover adults started performing distraction displays to lead the Blacksmith Plover away from their chicks by scuttling with their bodies close to the ground and their wings spread behind them, fluttering, false brooding and injury feigning by lifting their wings and fanning their tails. The Blacksmith Plover was aggressive towards the adults in return, lunging at them. After about five minutes of aggression, the Blacksmith Plover found one of the Kittlitz's Plover chicks, picked it up in its bill and shook it. The chick

was desperately calling to its parents during this time. The Blacksmith Plover shook the chick until it died a few seconds later. The Blacksmith Plover swallowed the chick in two huge gulps and no remains of the chick were left. The whole time the adults were calling and performing distraction displays. The Blacksmith Plover left the Kittlitz's Plover territory soon thereafter and after about twenty minutes the Kittlitz's Plover adults and the remaining chick returned to foraging.

I have been unable to find any published examples of Blacksmith Plovers preying on the young of other birds, all references to feeding referring to invertebrate prey. Although Blacksmith Plovers are known to be aggressive towards other birds in their breeding territories (Hall 1964), this particular bird was not breeding; therefore the reason for preying on the Kittlitz's Plover chick may have been pure opportunism.

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