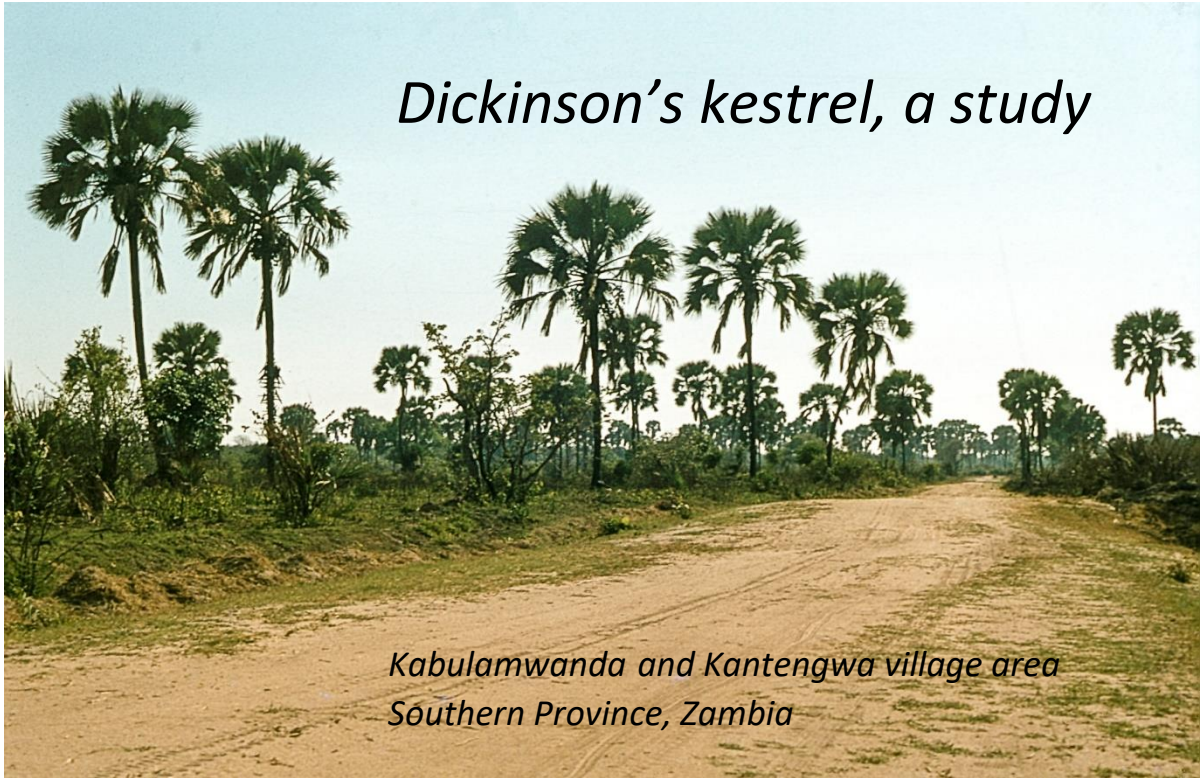


Dickinson's kestrel, a study



5th October 1976. John Colebrook-Robjent located a nest 9.6m up at the top of a dead *Hyphaene* stump. Four eggs had been laid in rotten palm-wood chips in a chamber 30cm below the lower lip of the open entrance. John contacted me. I hunted for enough scaffolding to reach that height and Dave Milne of Star Motors, in Lusaka, came up trumps. I ferried the load to Choma and then to the nest site. By 17th October the scaffolding had been erected in stages, some 5m from the nest stump.





During this period John was able to monitor the nest, the kestrels always showing their concern, but returning as soon as we had retreated to my parked vehicle.

The hide, re-worked remnants of the much earlier Lochinvar hide saga, was finally added on 20th October.



25 October, and the view from the ground was daunting: from the hide it was awesome!

I made my first ascent with a camera.



There was little activity. Had the chicks hatched, or was this still incubation?

31st October. John climbed again to the nest at 10h00. There were two chicks, estimated to be 1-2 days old. They weighed 27.2g and 25.6g. The two remaining eggs had not hatched; one was infertile and the other contained a dead chick. Between 10h56 and 12h25 the chicks were fed three times; all prey species were lizards. The adult birds brought no prey to the nest after that time, the hottest hours of the day, but they remained actively hunting in the near vicinity for their own sustenance.

6th November. The chicks were now 7-8 days old. At 10h05 an adult delivered a small insectivorous bat to the nest and an hour later the same adult returned with a partly skinned portion of a mouse. One of the adults had been seen earlier with a mouse, but had not been seen to take it to the nest.

21st November. The chicks were now 22-23 days old. John inspected the nest for the final time, bringing the two chicks down to be weighed, measured and photographed. Their weights were 211g and 190g. The chicks were then returned to the nest.



The parents immediately resumed feeding the chicks, providing three lizards and two grasshoppers, the last of which was the first occasion on which I was able to see a chick soliciting food.



At the end of that day we eased the hide and scaffolding nearer, to 3.6m from the nest stump.



27th November. The chicks were now 28-29 days old. Observations started late and were made from the ground. These were infrequent in the late morning period as repairs to the hide were necessary, due to considerable wind damage. During the repairs the adult birds frequently uttered “keee-keee-keee” in alarm, but they were not aggressive and did not approach nearer than 100m.

Throughout, the adults actively hunted in the area. One was seen with a small snake. One of the pair caught a lizard which was eaten on a nearby favourite palm stump perch. Between 17h21 and 18h08 an insect was brought to the nest, and then two further unidentified prey species.

28th November. The young were now 29-30 days old. 06h08 - 06h12; two green grasshoppers were delivered. At 06h30 - 06h32 the young made their first appearance, clambering up on to the ‘battlements’.



06h56 - 08h15; the young were fed five times with a lizard, and grasshoppers. It was confirmed that both sexes feed the young. Both chicks engaged in wing-stretching and testing their balance.



When the adult was returning carrying food it often uttered a soft, mewling “ki-ki-ki”, more rapid than the noisier “keee-keee-keee” alarm. The advertising call usually brought the young out of the nest cavity; the alarm caused them to drop back into it.

During the next hour seven more prey items were delivered; a black and yellow butterfly, a lizard, three grasshoppers and two unidentified items. Prey was delivered rapidly now, the adults taking just 2-3 seconds to pass it before flying off again.

29th November. The young were now 30-31 days old. It is a full day of observations on our final day.

06h00 – 06h55; the first prey, a frog, was delivered followed by four more in the time span. Each had had its head mangled, probably eaten by the adults.

08h27 – 09h52; the young were very active preening and stretching their wings. Two probable crickets, an unidentified prey and a chameleon were brought in that order.

10h30 The male brought a rat to the female perched in an adjacent living palm, then snatched it back and flew off with it before settling in another living *Hyphaene* where he deposited the prey on a frond. It was not until.....

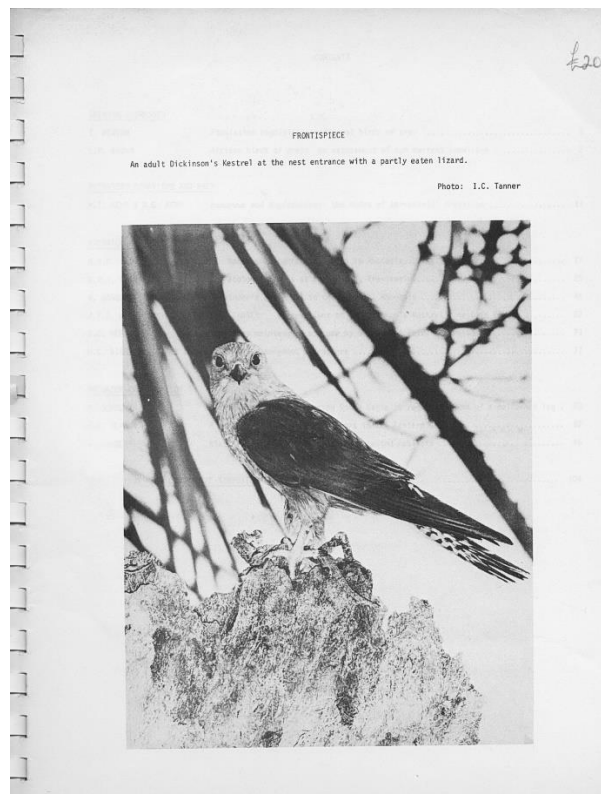
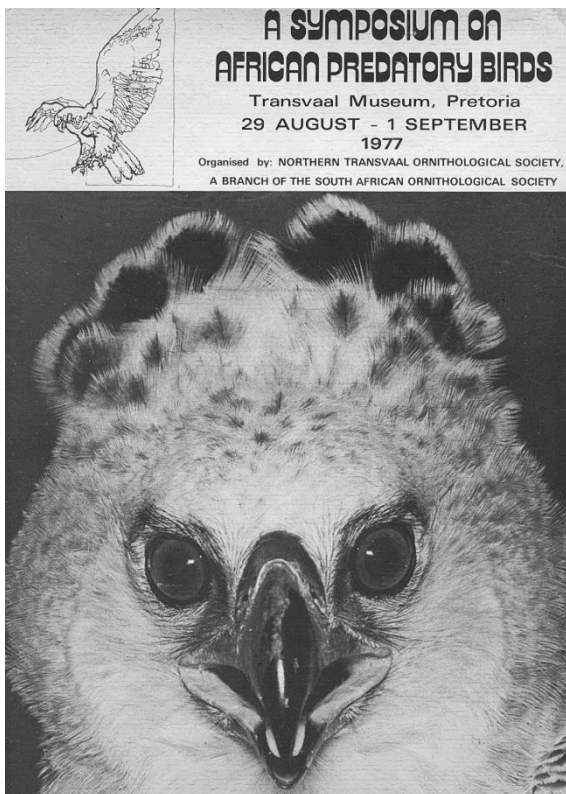
.....14h57 that the female retrieved this rat and fed it to the young, an interval of around 4.5 hours since its capture. No other prey items had been passed to the young between 09h52 and 14h57. 15h45 An adult returned with a chameleon, the tail of which snagged on the upper lip of the nest. Quite a tussle ensued before it was shaken free and was dropped into the nest. 16h50 – 18h30 The young, individually or together, spent the remainder of the day in vigorous preening and stretching and balancing on the ‘battlements’.

Summary of prey brought to nest on 29th November:

05h10	Start of observations	08h40	Cricket
06h07	Small amphibian	08h55	Unidentified
06h32	Small amphibian	09h52	Chameleon
06h35	Small amphibian	14h57	Rat
06h39	Small amphibian	15h45	Chameleon
06h55	Small amphibian	19h00	Cease observations

That marked the end of the observation period of the study. Ten days later the hide was brought down and the scaffolding removed from site.

Subsequently a paper on the study was accepted by the Northern Transvaal Ornithological Society. I met up with John in Pretoria for its presentation, a great experience.



A ‘highlight’ of the occasion was meeting Leslie Brown, who had brought to the symposium hand-outs of his updated checklist of African Birds of Prey, each species being ranked in terms of the level of detailed knowledge of the species, its breeding, incubation and fledging periods, habitat(s), prey and so on. He was ‘pleasantly displeased’ by the fact that *Falco dickinsoni* had, during the course of our presentation moved from a lowly ‘1’ rating to a ‘probable 6 or 7’.

I also met the artist Simon Calburn, and purchased from him a recent original bird painting, as yet unidentified!

Food, more food and bird friends! You see what happens when you “try photographing birds”



