

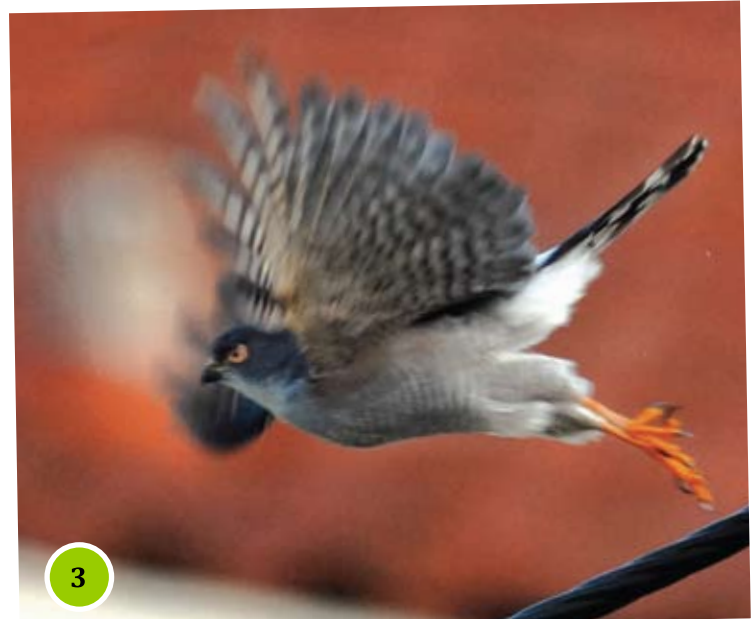


Stealth and the city

The predator of Nairobi streets



- 1) A pair of Speckled Mousebirds sit precariously on a powerline gravely aware of the danger of being hunted
- 2) A Little Sparrowhawk watches intently for prey
- 3) Little Sparrowhawk takes off after prey
- 4) Little Sparrowhawk perches close to a transformer wire oblivious of the dangers of electrocution





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BY MUNIR VIRANI

Every morning, as I sit in my office watching Nairobi's urban sprawl eat its way into the city's remaining green spaces, I can't help but smile. I ponder what will happen to the capital's vibrant birdlife over the next 10 years or so.

And then I see a ray of hope. All the chirping outside my balcony comes to a halt – there is pin-drop silence! A predator lurks. It comes in the form of a tiny stalking hunter. This is the Little Sparrowhawk – the avian equivalent of an urban stalking cheetah. Sparrowhawks and Goshawks are members of a group of specialized raptors called Accipiters. Larry, as I have nicknamed him, sits beside a lethal transformer, oblivious to the danger of getting electrocuted.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of birds are electrocuted by powerline structures when their wings touch live conductors. The risk of electrocution is significantly enhanced during the rains, as water is a good electrical conductor. But Larry is among the lucky ones. Like all Accipiters, he has a tiny frame with short, broad

wings and a long tail, for ease of manoeuvre.

Larry's wings are unlikely to touch two conductors at the same time. His mate however, might not be as lucky, as female birds of prey are larger than males (a phenomenon referred to as reversed sexual dimorphism). This is believed to be an evolutionary adaptation for territory-holding raptors to reduce competition between the sexes. Males hunt smaller agile prey, while females, that normally spend the early part of the breeding season defending the nest, can later help to hunt larger prey.

Nairobi is a great hotspot for Accipiters, mainly Black Sparrowhawks, African Goshawks and Little Sparrowhawks. They breed in tall Eucalypt trees and other exotics. They are a joy to watch especially early in the mornings and late in the evenings. Unfortunately, as the rate of building construction in Nairobi has reached a threshold level, these Accipiters are fast losing their man-made habitat.

Back to my office and there is a chaotic scurry of bird movement. I take a peep outside the window,

and Larry is back again on his perch – his head moving from side to side, scanning the area for potential prey.

And then, with lightning speed, he takes off. There is a chase, and wham! He has bagged a Speckled Mousebird. He hears his mate calling from the Eucalypt tree and Larry heads off with his prized quarry. He has to feed the female well in order to get her in prime breeding condition. Hopefully there should be some chicks in the coming months.

Meanwhile Larry is aloft again, flying to his favourite perch outside my office window. ●

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