

Short Communication**Documented Opportunistic Predation by the Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* on the Ocellated Skink *Chalcides ocellatus* in an Artificial Wetland at Ayla Oasis, Aqaba, Southern Jordan**

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Jordan lies along one of the principal migratory flyways linking Eurasia and Africa, and supports a wide range of waterbirds that use its wetlands as stopover, wintering, or occasional breeding sites (Porter and Aspinall 2010; BirdLife International 2023). Within this context, Aqaba represents a particularly important location as the country's only coastal outlet on the Gulf of Aqaba. Its position at the southern extremity of Jordan, combined with the presence of both natural and artificial wetlands, provides suitable habitats for numerous waterbird species throughout the year.

Among these, herons are regularly observed in the Aqaba region, where shallow water bodies offer favourable foraging conditions. Species such as the Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* are attracted by the availability of small aquatic and semi-aquatic prey, as well as the relatively stable environmental conditions compared to inland wetlands (Cramp and Simmons 1977; Hancock and Kushlan 1984). The development of artificial habitats has further enhanced these opportunities.

The Ayla Oasis Project, in particular, has created a network of artificial wetlands consist of sea water lagoons and fresh water bodies among the Golf course that maintain permanent water and support diverse prey communities. These conditions have made the site a consistent foraging area for herons and other waterbirds. Despite the well-documented presence and feeding activity of herons in such habitats, certain aspects of

their diet, particularly involving non-aquatic prey, remain infrequently reported (Kushlan *et al.*, 2020; del Hoyo *et al.*, 2024).

The observation was made on 14 April 2026 at approximately 11:00 h during a birdwatching visit by the author at Ayla Oasis, Aqaba, southern Jordan. An individual Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* was initially observed foraging along the shallow edge of the fresh water wetland. During the observation, the bird was noted handling and consuming an unusual prey item. The event was documented photographically using a 600 mm Sigma lens. Subsequent examination of the images allowed the prey to be identified as an Ocellated Skink *Chalcides ocellatus* (Figure 1).

This behaviour can be interpreted as opportunistic prey switching by the Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* under local prey limitations. The predation on the Ocellated Skink *Chalcides ocellatus* represents a deviation from the typical diet of *A. ralloides*, which is generally dominated by aquatic and semi-aquatic prey such as insects, fish and amphibians (Hancock and Kushlan 1984; Kushlan 1978). Studies on heron feeding ecology indicate that these species rely on visually detected prey and employ a range of foraging techniques shaped by local environmental conditions and prey availability (Kasprzykowski and Goławski 2024).

At Ayla Oasis, the absence of freshwater amphibians such as frogs and toads remove one of the key vertebrate prey groups

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Figure 1: The Squacco Heron is eating the Ocellated Skink *Calcidex ocellatus*.

commonly exploited by *A. ralloides* in freshwater wetlands. Although small fish occur in shallow areas, their relatively low abundance may constrain prey availability. Under such conditions, herons are known to broaden their prey spectrum and take alternative prey encountered within their foraging range. This pattern is consistent with general ardeid feeding ecology, where diet composition reflects local prey availability rather than strict specialization (Kushlan 1978; Fasola *et al.*, 1993). Similar responses have been documented in arid-zone wetlands, where variation in prey availability influences foraging tactics and prey selection in herons (Kasprzykowski and Goławski 2024).

Comparable evidence from studies of heron assemblages indicates that smaller

species such as *A. ralloides* typically exploit smaller prey items, mainly invertebrates, while larger prey are taken less frequently (Kasprzykowski and Goławski 2024). Occasional inclusion of reptiles, such as small lizards, has been reported within the family Ardeidae, but these represent a minor component of the diet relative to aquatic prey (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Such records support the interpretation that predation on *Calcidex ocellatus* by *Ardeola ralloides* falls within the broader, but infrequently documented, feeding plasticity of the group. The present observation is therefore best interpreted as a locally driven trophic response, where *A. ralloides* exploits an available terrestrial prey item, *C. ocellatus*, at the interface between aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Artificial wetlands such as those at

Ayla Oasis may enhance such interactions by concentrating both foraging individuals of *A. ralloides* and small reptiles within restricted habitat margins. Similar patterns have been described in modified or resource-variable wetlands, where prey composition influences foraging behaviour and trophic interactions among herons (Fasola et al. 1993; Kasprzykowski and Goławski 2024).

The present observation highlights the importance of continued, site-specific documentation of feeding ecology in waterbirds, particularly in artificial wetlands such as the Ayla Oasis Project. Such systems may facilitate interactions between aquatic and terrestrial prey within confined habitat margins. Targeted studies on the diet composition of *Ardeola ralloides* in the Aqaba region, based on systematic field observations and, where feasible, direct assessment of prey remains, would help to quantify the contribution of non-aquatic prey such as reptiles under local conditions. More broadly, further research is needed to evaluate how artificial wetlands in arid environments influence trophic interactions and foraging behaviour of waterbirds. These findings also emphasise the ecological significance of the Ayla wetlands as functional habitats supporting waterbird communities along the southern Jordanian flyway.

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