

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* preying on White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* in Egypt

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The Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* is a large falconid that occurs throughout Africa, southern Europe and the Middle East (Cramp & Simmons 1980). Various studies have described the Lanner as an opportunistic bird-eater, feeding on a wide range of species. Its diet has been reported to include mostly birds, captured both in the air and on the ground (Jenkins & Avery 1999, Leonardi 2001). Both resident and migrant birds occur in its diet, usually small to medium-sized species such as Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* and sandgrouse *Pterocles* spp, but also pigeons and doves, waders, migrant passerines and corvids (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Leonardi 2001).

Little has been written on the prey preferences of the Lanner Falcon in northern Africa (Goodman & Haynes 1989, 1992). Most summaries of Lanner prey selection are from data collected during the breeding season in the north Mediterranean region (Morimando & Pezzo 1997, Leonardi 1999, 2001) and in southern Africa (Kemp 1993, Jenkins & Avery 1999). Although a number of gull species, Laridae, occur within its range and a Lanner was seen to take a Common Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* from a flock near Benghazi, Libya (Baker 1982), we have not been able to find any other reports of them preying on gull species.

On 8 June 2009 we observed a Lanner carrying a large prey item to a rocky hill close to Marsa Alam (24° 41' N, 35° 04' E), on the Egyptian coast of the Red sea. The Lanner appeared to be an adult female *F. b. tanypterus* based on its plumage and large size (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Cade 1982). Immediately after landing the falcon started to feed on its prey. After a few minutes of watching, we approached the bird in order to take photos (Plates 1 & 2) and to identify its prey. The bird flew away when we were c30 m away, leaving its prey behind, which was identified as an adult male White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* (sex identification on culmen length, see Storer & Goodman 1988). The falcon had already consumed most of the breast muscle, wings and legs, leaving intact only the head, neck, wingtips and feet. Although we waited at a distance in the hope that the bird would return to its kill, we did not see it again. However, later the same day we observed two adult Lanners c5 km away, in Wadi Gamal national park (24° 40' N, 35° 10' E).

We found the remains of an adult female White-eyed Gull in a wadi close to Hurghada (Al Ghardaqa 27° 05' N, 33° 48' E) the following day, 9 June. We had observed Lanners in



Plates 1 & 2. Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* with remains of White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus*, close to Marsa Alam, Egypt, 8 June 2009. © István Moldován

this area on several occasions, and the gull remains, which comprised an intact head and neck, wings, and one leg, were similar to the remains seen near Marsa Alam, and consistent with those of a bird killed and partially consumed by a Lanner. No other diurnal bird of prey was observed in the area, however, Pharaoh Eagle Owls *Bubo ascalaphus* had been observed there irregularly (IM unpublished).

These observations were made close to areas frequented by large numbers of White-eyed Gulls. Close to Marsa Alam, many gulls breed on the offshore islands of Wadi Gamal national park, while at Hurghada, the proximity of a rubbish dump (c500 m from the carcass found) attracts large number of these birds (PERSGA/GEF 2003).

Some other larger species have been recorded as prey of Lanner Falcon, such as bustards (de Swardt 2006) and ducks, herons and bitterns (Goodman & Haynes 1992). The mass of White-eyed Gulls, mean 360.0 g males and 321.2 g females (Storer & Goodman 1988), is substantially less than that of a Lanner (500–600 g males, 700–900 g females, Cramp & Simmons 1980, Jenkins & Avery 1999). Preying on large-bodied gulls may be a good foraging strategy for the Lanner on Egypt's hyper-arid Red sea coast.

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