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ISSN 0256-9574

Website: www.hmpg.co.za

Journal: www.samj.org.za



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Subscription rates

Local subscriptions R852.00 p.a.
Foreign subscriptions R1 920.00 p.a.
Single copies R75.00

Members of the Association receive the SAMJ only on request, as part of their membership benefit.

Subscriptions: Tel. (012) 481-2071
 E-mail: members@samedical.org

**The SAMJ is published
 monthly by the
 Health and Medical Publishing
 Group (Pty) Ltd,
 Co registration 2004/0220 32/07,
 a subsidiary of SAMA.**

**28 Main Road (Cnr Devonshire Hill
 Road), Rondebosch, 7700**

**Please submit all letters and articles
 for publication online
 at www.samj.org.za**

Tel. (021) 681-7200. Fax (021) 685-1395.

E-mail: publishing@hmpg.co.za

Website: www.samedical.org

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 South African Medical Association

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PRINTED BY TANDYM PRINT



The Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk Accipiter rufiventris is an agile avian Spittfire capable of killing birds such as doves weighing almost as much as itself. It hunts by surprise, using its speed and manoeuvrability to outfly its quarry. Nests are often placed high up in a pine plantation but, in the Karoo, the planting of groves of poplar trees on farms has enabled it to expand its breeding range into more arid habitats. The normal clutch is three eggs. Once the chicks hatch, the parents are extremely bold in defence of them and will repeatedly strike anyone climbing up to the nest. In contrast, the closely related Northern Sparrowhawk in England keeps its distance in the presence of humans, behaviour that has evolved as the result of many generations of persecution by gamekeepers.

Photo and text: Peter Steyn
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