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First record of *Ardea alba* (Great Egret) preying on *Coereba flaveola* (Bananaquit)

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Photo: Timoteo Estévez

First record of *Ardea alba* (Great Egret) preying on *Coereba flaveola* (Bananaquit)

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Cover Page: *Ardea alba* (Great Egret) catching a *Coereba flaveola* (Bananaquit) at Hatillo Reservoir, Sánchez Ramírez Province, Dominican Republic, on 12 November 2022. Photograph by Timoteo Estévez.

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Abstract

We photographically document the first recorded predation event of *Coereba flaveola* (Bananaquit) by *Ardea alba* (Great Egret), a species known for its opportunistic and flexible diet. This event occurred at Hatillo Reservoir, Sánchez Ramírez Province, Dominican Republic, on 12 November 2022, expanding our knowledge of *A. alba*'s avian predation.

Keywords

Ardea alba, avian predation, *Coereba flaveola*, Hispaniola, passerine, photographic record, waterbirds

Resumen

Primer registro de *Ardea alba* depredando a *Coereba flaveola* • Documentamos fotográficamente el primer registro de depredación de *Coereba flaveola* por *Ardea alba*, una especie conocida por su dieta oportunista y flexible. Este evento ocurrió en el embalse Hatillo, provincia Sánchez Ramírez, República Dominicana, el 12 de noviembre de 2022, y amplía nuestro conocimiento sobre la depredación de aves por parte de *A. alba*.

Palabras clave

Ardea alba, aves acuáticas, *Coereba flaveola*, depredación de aves, Española, paseriforme, registro fotográfico

Résumé

Première observation d'*Ardea alba* (Grande aigrette) s'attaquant à *Coereba flaveola* (Sucrier à ventre jaune) • Nous documentons par des photographies le premier cas répertorié de prédation de *Coereba flaveola* (Sucrier à ventre jaune) par *Ardea alba* (Grande aigrette), une espèce connue pour son régime alimentaire opportuniste et flexible. Cela a été observé au réservoir de Hatillo, dans la province de Sánchez Ramírez, en République dominicaine, le 12 novembre 2022, enrichissant ainsi nos connaissances sur la prédation d'oiseaux par *A. alba*.

Mots clés

Ardea alba, *Coereba flaveola*, documentation photographique, Hispaniola, oiseaux d'eau, passereau, prédation aviaire

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Ardea alba (Great Egret) is a cosmopolitan species belonging to the family Ardeidae and is generally considered a piscivorous species. However, members of Ardeidae exhibit notable trophic plasticity, including the consumption of amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and birds (Kushlan and Hancock 2005). Opportunistic predation on birds has been documented in multiple heron species, including *Butorides virescens* (Green Heron; Wiley 2001), *Ardea ibis* (Cattle Egret; Cunningham 1965, Meese 2012), and *Ardea alba*.

In this context, we present the first documented case of successful predation of *Coereba flaveola* (Bananaquit) by *Ardea alba*, along with the first photographic



Fig. 1. Photographic evidence of an *Ardea alba* handling a *Coereba flaveola* at Hatillo Reservoir, Dominican Republic, 12 November 2022. Photographs by Timoteo Estévez.

evidence of *A. alba* preying on a passerine in the Dominican Republic, Hispaniola, and the Caribbean region. This observation contributes new information about the dietary breadth and opportunistic behavior of *A. alba*.

Observations

On 12 November 2022, at 08:30, an unusual predation event was observed at the southern edge of Hatillo Reservoir, Sánchez Ramírez Province, Dominican Republic (18°57'53.37"N, 70°15'56.71"W). During this observation, TE recorded an adult *Ardea alba* successfully capturing a *Coereba flaveola* (Fig. 1). The prey appeared to be a fully feathered individual, and age (adult/juvenile) could not be determined.

The event occurred while *C. flaveola* was actively foraging on a wire fence and fallen logs near the reservoir. *A. alba*, displaying its characteristic stealthy stalking behavior, approached carefully before launching a precise attack. The small bird was caught and firmly held in the egret's beak, struggling for several minutes before being fully ingested (Fig. 1).

The *Coereba flaveola* was part of a pair at the time of the observation; the second individual flew away at the moment of the attack. To our knowledge, this represents the first documented report of successful predation of *C. flaveola* by *A. alba*. While the literature suggests that *A. alba* may opportunistically include small birds in its diet (Appendix A), this observation provides

novel information about the trophic ecology of this egret in Dominican ecosystems.

Discussion

Although fishes, amphibians, and invertebrates form the core of *Ardea alba*'s diet (McCrimmon *et al.* 2020), documented cases reveal its opportunistic predation on birds. Observations include attempts to capture small birds (Campbell and Wolf 1977), and attacks can occur when small birds are in flight (Napier 2013). Two notes reference successful attacks and consumption of passerines (Genelly 1964, Freiday 2011), while others describe failed consumption (Campbell and Wolf 1997, Napier 2013). The variety of documented prey species including rails, sparrows, meadowlarks, and sandpipers (Appendix A) indicates that *A. alba* may prey on different species of birds depending on circumstances and prey vulnerability. Documented kleptoparasitism further suggests interactions with and potential consumption of other small birds or chicks of other heron species (McCrimmon *et al.* 2020).

Our report constitutes the first documented case of predation of a *Coereba flaveola* by an *Ardea alba* in the ornithological literature on the species. Although *A. alba* is primarily piscivorous, previous studies have reported opportunistic behaviors under specific circumstances (Genelly 1964, Freiday 2011, Napier 2013). Most of these cases involved ground-nesting species or

birds in highly vulnerable situations.

This observation provides additional evidence that *A. alba* is capable of actively hunting small passerines in terrestrial habitats (Freiday 2011, Napier 2013). Documenting such interactions is crucial for better understanding predatory dynamics and interspecies relationships, particularly in habitats under increasing anthropogenic pressure. This record contributes to the ornithological literature on *A. alba*, highlighting the species' trophic plasticity and its potential role as a predator of small birds in altered ecosystems. Future studies could explore the frequency of this type of bird–bird predation using fecal metabarcoding or stomach content analysis. Photographic evidence such as that presented here is essential to fill knowledge gaps regarding unusual interactions between wading birds and terrestrial birds.

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The authors declare that they have used generative artificial intelligence (gen AI) in the preparation of this manuscript in the following manner: ChatGPT (Large Language Model), OpenAI, GPT-4/5 series for grammar and writing improvements, to improve clarity, grammar, and academic tone of pre-written text, to suggest alternative wording in response to reviewer comments, and to enhance coherence and precision in figure captions and discussion sections. No prompts requested the generation of original scientific data, results, or interpretations beyond those provided by the authors. All AI-assisted text revisions were reviewed in detail by the authors. Scientific content, interpretations, citations, and conclusions were verified against the original data, primary literature, and reviewer comments. Final wording decisions were made by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. The authors affirm that the use of gen AI tools did not compromise the scientific accuracy, that data interpretation and conclusions were entirely under the authors' control, and that the use of gen AI tools did not diminish the originality of the manuscript. The authors further affirm that, as the copyright owners of the article under a

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Author Contributions

Fieldwork was conducted by TE. All authors contributed to species identification, literature research, and database searches. TE took the photographs. JGR and EBP drafted the manuscript, and all authors participated in editing and approving the final version.

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Appendix A. Some documented cases of avian predation by *Ardea alba*.

Order	Species	Predation Type	Age Class	Reference
<i>Gruiformes</i>	<i>Rallus limicola</i> Virginia Rail	Failed ingestion	Unknown	Campbell and Wolf (1977)
	<i>Laterallus jamaicensis</i> Black Rail	Successful ingestion	Unknown	Evens and Page (1986)
<i>Charadriiformes</i>	Unidentified shorebird*	Successful ingestion	Unknown	Repenning (1977)
<i>Podicipediformes</i>	<i>Rollandia rolland</i> White-tufted Grebe	Successful ingestion	Hatchlings	Figuroa and Corales Stappung (2003)
	<i>Podiceps</i> spp.	Successful ingestion	Hatchlings	Figuroa and Corales Stappung (2003)
<i>Wading birds</i>	Unidentified wading birds	Successful ingestion	Hatchlings	Figuroa and Corales Stappung (2003)
<i>Passeriformes</i>	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i> Western Meadowlark	Unknown ingestion	Unknown	Genelly (1964)
	<i>Ammospiza maritima</i> Seaside Sparrow	Successful ingestion	Juvenile	Freiday (2011)
	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i> Tree Swallow	Failed ingestion	Unknown	Napier (2013)

**Calidris minutilla* (Least Sandpiper) was abundant in the area.