SHORT COMMUNICATION

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Direct observation of avian carrion consumption by free-ranging common warthogs (*Phacochoerus africanus*)

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ABSTRACT Common warthogs (*Phacochoerus africanus*) are predominantly grazing herbivores but occasionally consume animal matter. We report an adult female and two juveniles consuming the carcass of a Crested Francolin (*Ortygornis sephaena*) in north-central Namibia. The female investigated, seized and tore open the carcass before both juveniles joined her. All three consumed soft tissue and bone, and almost the entire carcass was consumed within approximately five minutes. Previous studies report warthog scavenging and indirect evidence of francolin consumption, but our literature search located no previous direct field record of avian carrion consumption by common warthogs.

KEYWORDS carrion; common warthog; crested francolin; dietary flexibility; feeding behaviour; Namibia; scavenging; Suidae

INTRODUCTION

Common warthogs (*Phacochoerus africanus*) are predominantly grazing herbivores, with quantitative field studies demonstrating a strong reliance on grasses (Treydte et al. 2006, Edossa et al. 2021, Mgqatsa et al. 2024). Their plant diet is nevertheless broader than grass alone and can include forbs, woody plants, roots and rhizomes, as well as fruit and other seasonally available plant foods (Adjin et al. 2011, Mgqatsa et al. 2024). Animal matter can also occur in their diet. Roberts (2012) documented a warthog attacking a newborn Thomson's gazelle (*Eudorcas thomsonii*) and noted that, although warthogs are omnivorous, animal protein is only rarely consumed. Camera-trap monitoring of a greater kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) carcass in South Africa also recorded warthogs among the visiting scavenger assemblage. As decomposition progressed, warthogs and bushpigs (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) spent considerable time at the carcass and may have been responsible for much of the on-site bone consumption (Wadley 2020).

Particularly relevant is a study from southern Benin in which common warthogs were reported to consume small mammals, fish, francolins and francolin eggs, among other animal foods, with necrophagy also described as not unusual (Adjin et al. 2011). However, these dietary records were derived from hunter interviews, observations of food remains and faecal examination rather than witnessed feeding events, and the study did not distinguish whether francolins were obtained through predation or scavenging. Consumption of vertebrate tissue is not unique to warthogs among predominantly plant-eating African ungulates. Common duikers (*Sylvicapra grimmia*), which are primarily concentrate-selecting browsers (Hofmann 1973), have also been recorded consuming vertebrates, including reptiles (Bates & du Preez

2018). Here, we report a directly observed and video-supported case of free-ranging common warthogs consuming avian carrion.

OBSERVATION

On 5 September 2026, between 15h56 and 16h01 local time, an adult female common warthog accompanied by two juveniles was observed at a conservation research centre in the Otjiwarongo district, north-central Namibia (20.479°S, 17.030°E). The observation occurred during the late dry season, approximately 20 m from an occupied residence.

A carcass of a Crested Francolin (*Ortygornis sephaena*) was lying near the residence. The Crested Francolin is a resident breeder in north-central and north-eastern Namibia, with the Otjiwarongo district lying near the southern edge of its mapped Namibian range. The species can be locally common in suitable woodland and dense scrub habitats (Little 1997, Brown et al. 2017). The carcass was first noted at the observation site at approximately 15h45. One observer had passed the same location at approximately 13h30, when no carcass was present. The carcass had therefore appeared at the site during the intervening time. Its cause of death was unknown.

At approximately 15h56, the adult female approached first and investigated the carcass cautiously, repeatedly sniffing it before grasping the bird in her mouth. She then shook the carcass vigorously, tearing it open. The two juveniles subsequently began feeding, removing pieces of the carcass and, at times, moving a short distance away while consuming them. All three individuals consumed soft tissue and bone, with bone-crunching clearly audible during the observation.

Video footage obtained after feeding had commenced clearly shows the adult and both juveniles consuming portions of the francolin (Figure 1; Video 1). By approximately 16h01, within about five minutes of the initial interaction, almost the entire carcass had been consumed.

DISCUSSION

This observation provides direct behavioural evidence that common warthogs can rapidly exploit avian carrion. Previous studies establish that vertebrate tissue forms an unusual but genuine component of warthog feeding ecology (Adjin et al. 2011, Roberts 2012, Wadley 2020).

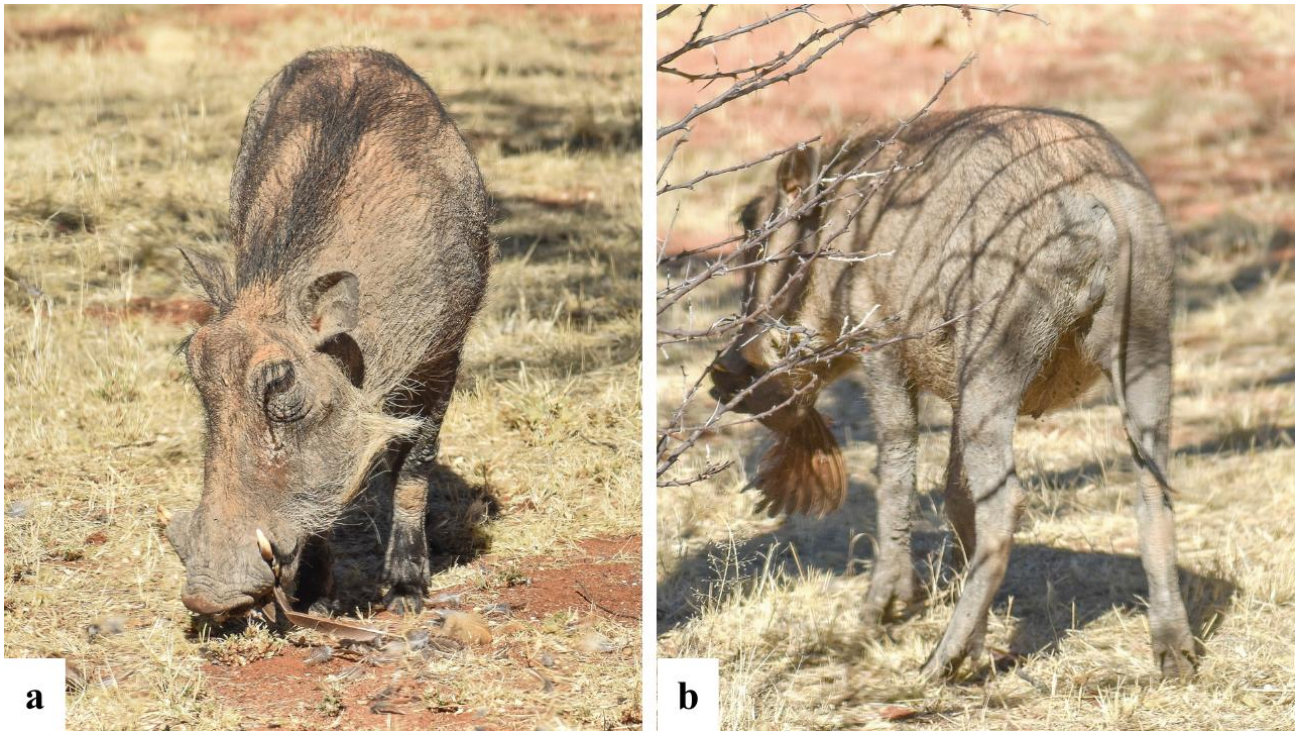


Figure 1 Common warthogs (*Phacochoerus africanus*) consuming portions of a Crested Francolin (*Ortygornis sephaena*) at a conservation research centre in north-central Namibia on 5 September 2026. (a) Adult female consuming a portion of the francolin carcass. (b) Juvenile consuming a portion of the francolin wing.



Video 1 Adult female common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*) and two juveniles consuming portions of a Crested Francolin (*Ortygornis sephaena*) carcass at a conservation research centre in north-central Namibia on 5 September 2026. Recording begins after the carcass had been torn apart, with all three individuals feeding on separate portions.

Our literature search located no previous direct field record of avian carrion consumption by common warthogs. To our knowledge, the present observation therefore appears to represent the first directly observed and video-supported record of this behaviour in free-ranging common warthogs.

The participation of both juveniles is also noteworthy. The adult female encountered and opened the carcass before the juveniles removed and consumed pieces. The juveniles therefore readily exploited animal tissue once it became accessible, although a single observation cannot determine whether their participation reflected social facilitation, learning or independent opportunistic feeding.

The event occurred near the end of the dry season in Namibia. Common warthogs retain a predominantly C4-based diet, but seasonal dietary variation has been documented, including increasing dietary niche separation from other African suids as dry seasons progress (Yang et al. 2024). Forage quality also declines through the dry season, with crude protein concentrations of tropical savanna grasses generally decreasing as grasses mature and senesce (Afolayan & Fafunsho 1978, Cooke et al. 2025). Under these conditions, animal tissue could provide a concentrated supplementary source of protein and energy.

The adult female was accompanied by two juveniles and may also have had elevated nutritional demands if she was still lactating. These factors provide plausible nutritional context for the observed behaviour, but a single observation cannot determine whether dry-season resource limitation or reproductive demands influenced carrion consumption.

The rapid, near-complete disappearance of a small vertebrate carcass suggests that comparable feeding events may be easily overlooked. Opportunistic consumption of animal matter could therefore occur more frequently than direct observations imply. This record adds to evidence that the feeding ecology of common warthogs includes occasional exploitation of avian vertebrate tissue despite their predominantly grazing diet.

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ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used as an editing aid to improve the clarity, structure and language of author-prepared manuscript text. Undermind was used to assist with identifying potentially relevant literature and checking source support, and the Academic Writing Toolkit was used to check British English and citation consistency. All cited sources and factual claims were independently reviewed and verified by the authors. No AI tool was used to generate or analyse data, or to determine the scientific interpretations or conclusions of the study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This report describes an opportunistic behavioural observation. No animals were handled, restrained, provisioned or otherwise manipulated.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Video footage supporting the observation is available as Supporting Information (Video 1).

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