

Prey choice of the Crested Serpent-Eagle in an Urban Environment

Chee-Yong Teoh & Peck-Choo Lim

Introduction

In Malaysia, the Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela* is a familiar raptor in both forested and urban environments, where its distinctive one-to-three note scream is frequently heard (Wells 1999; Clark et al. 2020). Despite significant environmental changes, the species has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. At Taman Tasik Cova (also known as Lake Cova), Crested Serpent-Eagles appear to have become habituated to human presence. In 2025, we observed a Crested Serpent-Eagle perched less than six meters above a paved pathway, unperturbed by the pedestrians and dogs passing below. Similar behaviour has been noted in other nearby urban parks. Taman Tasik Cova is located in Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, and spans approximately 10.5 hectares. Lake Cova's primary function is flood mitigation, serving as a stormwater retention basin for the surrounding township while also providing a recreational space for the community (Chen 2021). Unlike many other retention basins, it does not feature a permanent lake or pond, despite being fed by two small rivers. Siltation over the years has resulted in shallow water flows and the formation of numerous "sandbanks" due to the accumulation of mud and silt. These deposits have transformed the area into a mini-wetland habitat. Plates 1 and 2 show the general location where prey captures by the Crested Serpent-Eagle occurred at Taman Tasik Cova. The trees at the top left near the apartment building were where all the prey captures by Crested Serpent-Eagle were observed by us. This area was also the main entrance to the Cova park.



Plate 1: A view of Taman Tasik Cova showing where Sungai Rumpit flows into Tasik Cova. Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, Apr 2026.

One species thriving in this environment is the Asian Water Monitor *Varanus salvator*. On the morning of 20 April 2026, at least ten Asian Water Monitors - ranging from juveniles to large adults - were observed hunting or sunbathing. The park also supports large populations of

House Crows *Corvus splendens* and Javan Mynas *Acridotheres javanicus*. This environment served as the setting for the Crested Serpent-Eagle prey captures documented in this report.

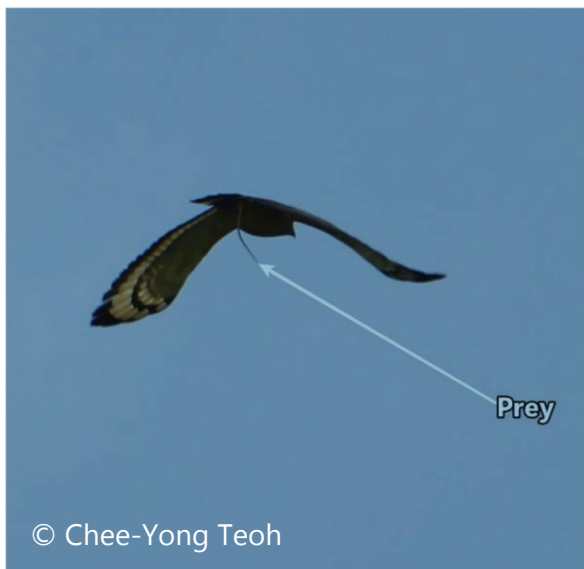


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Plate 2: A view of Taman Tasik Cova showing where Sungai Tambul flows in. Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, Apr 2026.

Observations

At Taman Tasik Cova, the preferred prey of the Crested Serpent-Eagle appeared to be juvenile lizards, specifically young Asian Water Monitors. On 10 April 2021 a Crested Serpent-Eagle was observed swooping down to capture a juvenile monitor on the ground before carrying it away into the distance (Plate 3). On 16 February 2025 a Crested Serpent-Eagle was seen perched on a branch with a captured juvenile Asian Water Monitor, feeding briefly before relocating to a nearby tree across the water (Plate 3).



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Plate 3: Asian Water Monitor prey: Left - flying away with lizard prey, Apr 2021. Right - perched with young lizard prey, Feb 2025. Taman Tasik Cova, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia.

On 10 May 2025, at approximately 1035 hrs, a flock of approximately ten House Crows were observed mobbing a Crested Serpent-Eagle. The eagle had captured a young Asian Water Monitor and raised its crest in a defensive posture against the crows while ensuring the prey was incapacitated (Plate 4).



Plate 4: Crested Serpent-Eagle with Asian Water Monitor prey. Left - crest raised in defensive posture; Right – incapacitating prey. Taman Tasik Cova, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, May 2025.

On the morning of 20 April 2026 at about 0915 hrs, we observed a Crested Serpent-Eagle swooping to the ground with a mob of House Crows trailing behind. When on the ground, it could be seen that the Crested Serpent-Eagle had a dead Javan Myna under its talons. The Crested Serpent-Eagle was on a pedestrian path, next to the car park entrance of the apartment (Plate 5). A car drove past the Crested Serpent-Eagle into the car park but the Crested Serpent-Eagle was unfazed by it. After about 5 minutes, the Crested Serpent-Eagle took its prey and flew to the other side of the water to eat it (Plate 5). This is the first instance we have observed a Crested Serpent-Eagle with a bird prey at Taman Tasik Cova.



Plate 5: Crested Serpent-Eagle with Javan Myna prey. Left - warning off the House crows; Right at a quieter location across the water. Taman Tasik Cova, Kota Damansara, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, Apr 2026.

A video recording of the Crested Serpent-Eagle with the Javan Myna prey can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq9HIKqa6gw>.

Discussion

While the name Crested 'Serpent-Eagle' suggests a specialized focus on snakes, its diet has been documented to be broad and opportunistic. Sharma and Bhopale (2015) noted that the Crested Serpent-Eagle consumes a variety of prey, including turtles, frogs, fish, lizards, and birds. In 2013 at the Kuala Selangor Nature Park, Peninsular Malaysia, a Crested Serpent-Eagle was observed foraging on the ground for earthworms following a rain event (Shepherd 2018). The eagle was seen extracting large worms from moist, bare soil over a fifteen-minute period. Ang (2021) cited an observation where a Crested Serpent-Eagle was feeding on a crab.

Wells (1999) notes that prey in Peninsular Malaysia includes snakes, lizards, frogs, toads and occasionally small, grassland birds like weavers, munias and pipits. There is one [Facebook post](#) by Jayesh Nagda from India in 2017 of a Crested Serpent-Eagle taking a myna chick. Our observation of an adult Javan Myna as a prey appeared to be unusual for the region.

However, a study conducted in India, that documented 173 prey items, showed that 74% were reptiles, 18% birds, 7% amphibians and 0.5% each fish and mammals (Gokula 2012). The bird prey identified in that study included Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Indian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* and an oriole.

The egg-laying season of the Asian Water Monitor typically extends from April to October (Shine et al. 1996). With the female Asian Water Monitor producing multiple clutches each season, presumably there should be enough prey for the Crested Serpent-Eagle. So was this Javan Myna prey just an opportunistic meal for this Crested Serpent-Eagle or was it part of its regular diet?

The study from India suggests that birds are more common in the diet of the Crested Serpent-Eagle than we have observed and may include larger birds than expected. Ongoing observations and studies at nesting sites would help quantify its diet better.

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