



Opportunistic Predation on a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) by a Captive Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) at the Madras Crocodile Bank, India

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The Gharial, *Gavialis gangeticus* (Gmelin 1789), commonly known as the Fish-eating Crocodile, is a Critically Endangered crocodilian endemic to the Indian Subcontinent (Choudhury et al. 2007). It is distinguished by its elongate, narrow snout and numerous interlocking teeth, morphological features that are typically associated with piscivory (Whitaker and Basu 1983). Although fish constitute the primary diet of Gharials, occasional evidence suggests that they might consume non-piscine prey under certain circumstances

(Whitaker and Basu 1983). However, such observations of non-fish predation rarely have been documented.

I herein report an incident of a captive adult male Gharial capturing and ingesting a fledgling Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT) in Tamil Nadu, India. At approximately 1130 h on 2 September 2009, I observed a fledgling Little Egret at the water's edge in a large open-air enclosure known as the "Temple Turtle Pond" at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust. The enclosure housed an adult

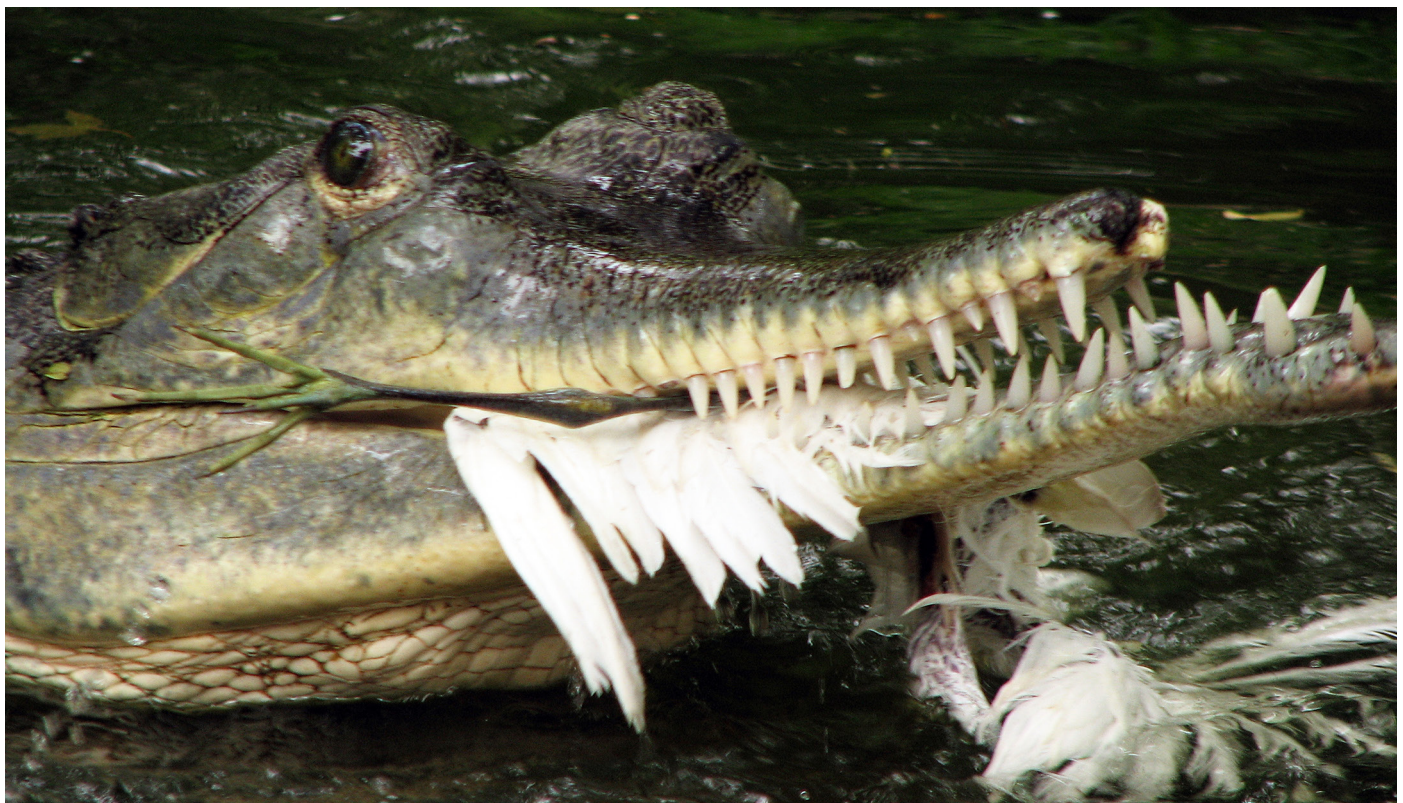


Figure 1. An adult male Gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) at the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust ingesting a fledgling Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). Photograph by Soham Mukherjee.

male Gharial (~4–5 m total length) with no previous records of consuming avian prey; this male was missing the anterior portion of its upper jaw following an intraspecific fight during a breeding season. The bird appeared inexperienced and ventured onto partially submerged stones near the Gharial. In a rapid lateral strike, the Gharial seized the egret, which had unknowingly approached or stepped on the crocodilian's head. Once grasped, the fledgling struggled briefly before the Gharial submerged it. After re-emerging, the crocodilian manipulated the egret and swallowed it head-first (Fig. 1). Floating feathers remained on the surface and the Gharial showed no signs of regurgitation or distress following ingestion. Although this individual had previously snapped at waterbirds that had trespassed onto its head, it had never been observed capturing and ingesting one.

The observation demonstrates that Gharials opportunistically exploit small waterbirds despite strong morphological specialization for piscivory (Whitaker and Basu 1983). The narrow snout and interlocking teeth — optimized for fish capture — evidently do not preclude successful predation on avian prey. This opportunistic event suggests that Gharials might be more ecologically versatile than previously assumed (Bezuijen et al. 2010).

Observations of Gharials feeding in nature are uncommon, and fledgling or naïve birds might be encountered only infrequently (Hussain 2009). Consequently, many opportunistic predation events likely go unrecorded. Captive environments that attract nesting waterbirds likely increase opportunities for observing such interactions. Although fish are the principal prey of Gharials, this report supports other anecdotal evidence indicating that Gharials exploit non-piscine prey under favorable conditions (Whitaker and Basu 1983).

Literature Cited

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