



SHEM COMPION (5)



TALON *contest*

The Yellow-billed Kite *Milvus aegyptius* is renowned as an aerial master: its wide wings and V-shaped tail allow it to glide, manoeuvre, twist and spiral through the air with apparent ease. I witnessed these skills first-hand in November 2007, while I was leading a photographic tour through Botswana. We were in the Savuti area, which was in prime condition following good rains.

Stopping at an ephemeral pool, we heard a toad calling from the water's

edge and a quick look through binoculars revealed it to be a guttural toad *Bufo gutturalis*. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, four kites appeared and soared over the pool. One of them spotted the amphibian and immediately stooped, effortlessly grasped it and flew up again. What ensued was a fascinating display of flight mastery as, one by one, the other kites mobbed and attacked the original predator.

They were clashing, talons thrusting in mid-air, dipping, swirling and

twisting away from one another in a bid to rob the victor of its spoils. The toad was dropped three times and each time nabbed by one of the other kites, which was, in turn, relentlessly pursued. At one stage, some of the kites waited on the ground while another two clashed in the air, alternately chasing and attacking the bird with the toad. Eventually, one kite stooped low, caught the amphibian and sped off with the long-dead prey.

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