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ECOLOGY

CAMELS SNACKING ON WHITE-BROWED SPARROW-WEAVER NESTS

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the design and structure of bird nests (Sheldon & Winkler 1999), including the knots used to construct nests by those species that weave their nest (Hansell 2000). Next to nothing has been recorded about the actual consumption of nests by other animals except for a fascination in the nutritional benefits of humans eating Edible-nest Swiftlet *Aerodramus fuciphagus* nests in Thailand (Marcone 2005). Brief reference has been made to an African Elephant *Loxodonta africana* consuming 30-40 nests of Cape Weavers *Ploceus capensis* in Addo Elephant Park, South Africa (Earlé 1974) and one other report of another African Elephant systematically consuming the nests of a White-browed Sparrow-Weaver *Ploceopasser mahali* colony in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe (Steyn 2000). Here we report the first known observations of White-browed Sparrow-Weaver nests being consumed by camels.

White-browed Sparrow-Weavers of the race *melanorhynchus* inhabit mostly dry, semi-arid areas of East Africa. In Kenya they range from the north through the centre of the country to northern Tanzania being absent from the Lake Victoria basin and coast. There are scattered colonies in the Kenyan highlands (Zimmerman et al. 1996), including Nairobi where they have colonized the city in the last 30 years (CHW Jackson, pers. obs.). They build their nests entirely out of dry grass and locate them in trees, most frequently acacias. Two types of nest are built, breeding nests and roosting nests both of which have an inverted U-shaped form. Roosting nests have two entrances, one at either extremity of the nest (Earlé 1983; Steyn 2000). Breeding nests account for less than 10% of the total number of nests. Roost nests are often converted into breeding nests by the closure of one entrance (Oschadleus 2012).

The Dromedary Camel *Camelus dromedarius* inhabits arid and semi-arid conditions characterised by a short rainy season (Nowak 1991). They are herbivores, primarily feeding on thorny plants, dry grasses and salt bushes, however, they will eat almost anything that grows in the desert (Oakland Zoo 2016). The Umbrella Acacia *Vachelia tortillis* is an arid climate specialist growing up to 20 m high. It is a species of tree that does well in savanna areas with high temperatures, sandy or stony soils and is known to tolerate drought.

SNACKING ON WEAVER NESTS

While doing avian surveys near Isiolo in northern Kenya during September 2015, JG came across a herd of about 250 camels. They were further south than where they are normally found, having moved south to seek better pasture due to the very dry conditions. Being the largest herd of camels JG had seen, they attracted his attention and while watching them through binoculars, he noticed that two were apparently feeding on a leafless *V. tortillis*. On approaching closer he saw that they were actually feeding on White-browed Sparrow-Weaver nests located about 3-4 m off the ground on the south-west side of the trees. There were 11 nests though several appeared abandoned. After seeing the camels eat the weaver nests, JG had a chat with the Boran pastoralist and learned that camels frequently eat nests made of grass when they come across them.

It was unclear as to whether the camels select only unoccupied nests or simply eat both nest, eggs and/or chicks if the nest is occupied. Whilst it is possible that camels might eat occupied nests to supplement their diet, this is probably unlikely and rather they are just after a handy mouthful-sized snack of carefully selected hay placed at a convenient head-height level. This is the first known published record of camels eating the nests of White-browed Sparrow-Weavers, or, in fact of any weaver species.

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