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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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TRAPPED! WEAVER NESTS AS DEATH TRAPS

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TRAPPED! WEAVER NESTS AS DEATH TRAPS

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Nests of weaver birds are enclosed structures, potentially allowing birds to be trapped inside. Oschadleus (1996) reviewed several examples of this from the literature. This paper describes several new incidents. Dates and localities are provided in the text: coordinates and additional photos and details of the weaver colonies may be viewed in PHOWN (Photos of Weaver Nests) with web links provided in the Appendix.



Figure 1. Dead juvenile Sociable Weaver, Beesdam farm, shed 2

In April 2011 I surveyed the southern-most Sociable Weaver *Philetairus socius* colonies (read more about the trip here: <http://weavers.adu.org.za/newstable.php?id=108>). Three farms had colonies that were associated with human buildings. Each farm contained dead birds hanging from threads that had been incorporated as nest material. Damhoek farm had the southern-most colony and was sited on top of a telephone post in front of the farm house. Two dead weavers were hanging from threads on 26 April. At Beesdam farm there were several nest masses on different outbuildings – one dead adult and a dead chick or juvenile were on one nest mass on shed 2 (fig. 1), and a dead adult on shed 3, also found on 26 April. Losberg farm had a nest mass on the roof of a shed, with a large amount of human fibres used as nest material: on 27 April two dead adults were hanging from the nest, with their feet tangled in threads (fig. 2). Breeding was active at all these colonies, with chicks being fed.



Figure 2. Dead Sociable Weavers (arrows), Losberg farm



Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* colonies on Robben Island were monitored in several years, particularly in 2003 (Oschadleus 2003) and 2010 (see <http://weavers.adu.org.za/newstable.php?id=83>). On 11 November 2003 a dead chick was seen half hanging out of a nest high up in a large gum tree colony (Workshop colony). The chick was well feathered and a foot probably became entangled in nest material when wanting to leave the nest for the first time (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Dead Cape Weaver nestling, Robben Island

On 28 October 2010 a dead chick was found hanging on a long cotton-type strand from a nest, interestingly again in the Workshop colony. This chick had pin feathers just starting to sprout, and hence was far from ready to fledge (fig. 4). No dead birds were found at the other colonies at any other time.



Figure 4. Dead Cape Weaver nestling, Robben Island

Pygmy Falcons *Polihierax semitorquatus* do not build their own nests but depend on weaver bird nests as hosts. The falcons are slightly larger than the weavers, but seem to manage well in entering and leaving the weaver chambers. In the course of surveying a large number of Sociable Weaver colonies for Pygmy Falcon occupancy at the Tswalu Kalahari Game Reserve (see trip report at <http://weavers.adu.org.za/newstable.php?id=166>), Robert Thomson found a dead Pygmy Falcon in a weaver chamber (colony 129). On pulling the carcass out, we found that an adult falcon had been trapped in the entrance and there was a dead falcon chick attached to the adult. The nestling had probably continually pushed against the trapped adult to obtain food and when both had died, had fused together (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Dead Pygmy Falcon adult and chick, Tswalu

On 12 November 2011 Alan Martin and I found a dead Cape Dwarf Chameleon *Bradypodion pumilum* in a Cape Weaver nest (fig. 6). This was a colony I have been observing regularly through the breeding season. The web page (see Appendix) shows a temporal record of the colony nest counts, showing that the chameleon was found in early November when the colony was at its maximum size of 18 nests. During the 2011 breeding season two male Cape Weavers were territory holders in this colony. The chameleon had its head facing out of the entrance and its hind claws had to be pried loose from the nest where it had been holding on before dying. The eyes were missing. The nest was a non-breeding nest, i.e. it contained no lining.

Discussion

The Sociable Weavers all died after their feet became tangled in threads used as nest material. Maclean (1973) freed five Sociable Weavers caught by the wing or foot in loops of thread built into nest chambers; one bird that was caught by the wing was inaccessible and died by the next day. Maclean (1973) noted that Sociable Weavers were only trapped like this at nests near human habitation, where threads were used as nest material.

Two Cape Weaver chicks were found caught in nest material. In one case the nest appeared to have only natural nest material. In the second case the chick was hanging from a thread. The reason for the young chick hanging out of its nest before being fledged, is unknown – it may have been evicted by a parent. It is unlikely to have been evicted by a cuckoo as Diederik Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx caprius* have not been recorded from Robben Island (Crawford & Dyer 2000, Sherley *et al.* 2011).

Pygmy Falcon chambers in Sociable Weaver colonies have a larger entrance hole than normal weaver entrances, either through active modification by the falcons or through neglect by the weavers (Robert Thomson, pers. comm.). How or why the falcon became stuck is not clear.



Figure 6. Dead Cape Dwarf Chameleon, Rondevlei

The one non-avian record of mortality in a weaver nest is one of a creature not normally associated with weaver nests. The most likely



explanation for the dead chameleon in a weaver nest is that it was foraging in the tree when it wandered on to this nest, either looking for food or shelter. Weaver nests often harbour arthropods (pers. obs.) which could provide food for a chameleon. The male Cape Weavers in the colony probably pecked it to death. The reptile was not entangled in the nest but appears to have been trapped (prevented from escaping) by the nest. Weavers have been recorded to attack chameleons, although the reason for this is unknown. Southern Masked Weavers *P. velatus*, in particular, have attacked chameleons in Gauteng and Zimbabwe (Steinbrucker 1967, Grohs 1967, Rickson 1982, Shaw 2001) – these were sometimes specified as Flap-neck Chameleons *Chamaeleo dilepsis*.

Weavers trapped in a weaver nest resulted in the death of the trapped weavers (records in Oschadleus 1996, this study), although one Southern Red Bishop *Euplectes orix* and five Sociable Weavers were freed by humans. The weavers were all trapped while actively breeding: adult males, generally while building, females while caring for eggs or chicks, or young birds that had been raised in the nests. Causes of being trapped were due to wings or feet caught in loops of nest material that had not been pulled through (or later came loose). In half of the cases the weavers were trapped in loops of natural nest material: one Cape Weaver chick (this study), a Southern Masked Weaver female (van Nierop 1956), a Southern Red Bishop female (Currie 1972), and a Village Weaver *P. cucullatus* male (Oschadleus 1989). The cases of being trapped by unnatural nest material in the nest included all Sociable Weaver records (Maclean 1973, this study), one Cape Weaver chick (this study), and a Lesser Masked Weaver *P. intermedius* male (Atkinson 1988, Bullen 1988). Weavers nesting near human habitation have the advantage of reduced predation, but carry the cost of adults sometimes including human materials (fishing line, threads, fabrics like cotton and wool, etc) which increases the chance of entangling the birds.

Non-weavers that have been trapped in weaver nests are birds closely associated with weavers, namely Diederik Cuckoos and

Pygmy Falcons. Oschadleus (1996) gave several records of Diederik Cuckoos that were trapped in weaver nests and Tarboton (2011) provides a photo of a cuckoo stuck in the nest of a Lesser Masked Weaver. There are many other bird species that regularly (e.g. Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala*), or occasionally (e.g. some flycatchers), use weaver nests for roosting or breeding. These birds would potentially be subject to similar dangers of being trapped. Non-avian fauna also make use of weaver nests, e.g. woolly bats as roost sites (Oschadleus 2008) and climbing mice as breeding sites. These animals are different morphologically to birds, and may thus have less chance of being trapped in weaver nests, or at least having a greater chance of escaping if ever being trapped (by chewing through the nest material).

Ledger (1973) and Tree (1974) warned that colour flags could cause sparrows and weavers to be entangled in nest material. Fortunately there have been no records of this to date.

POSTSCRIPT

At the time this article was being published, I found a reference to a Pygmy Falcon trapped in Sociable Weaver nest lining. Since this reference is not widely available, and due to the rarity of this event, the text is quoted here:

"One pair had met disaster, the male Falcon's one foot having become entangled in some coarse cotton thread used for nest lining by the weavers which had trapped it in a head-down position in the narrow entrance tunnel as it tried to leave. I found its mummified corpse in this position, with that of the female behind it in the nest, which contained no evidence of breeding activity." (Daneel, 1966)

The author does not give the date or location of this incident, but he had been checking Sociable Weaver nests on the way to, and inside, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in November 1965.



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Appendix 1. Additional colony details in PHOWN (Photos of Weaver Nests, <http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown.php>)

Sociable Weavers:

Losberg: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=764

Damhoek: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=748

Beesdam shed 2: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=752

Beesdam shed 3: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=753

Cape Weavers:

Robben 2003: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=1674

Robben 2010: http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=246

Pygmy Falcon:

http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=1569

Cape Dwarf Chameleon:

http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?vm=1512