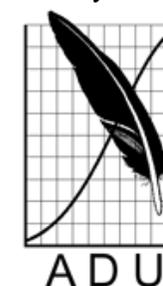


Ornithological Observations



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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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PALE-WINGED STARLING *ONYCHOGNATHUS NABOUROUP* BUILDING A NEST IN A QUIVER TREE *ALOE DICHOTOMA* IN THE NAMIBIAN PLAINS

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The Pale-winged Starling *Onychognathus nabouroup*, a near endemic to Southern Africa, live in rocky hills or valleys, where they roost and breed. They enter towns for food, but generally avoid man-modified areas (Craig, Hulley 1992, reference in Hockey *et al.* 2005). "An exception is Windhoek [...], where it is common in the city center, roosting and perching on high-rise buildings, although it has not been yet recorded nesting on these sites." (Brown, C.J. pers. communication, in Craig 1995).

In the beginning of 2013 we had, as every year, rented a house on a farm near Usakos in Namibia, some 15 km from the border to the Namib-Naukluft Park where the land tends more towards desert than savannah. It is a flat extended land with some rocky hills, dry riverbeds along which a few acacia trees and some bushes grow. These rocky areas, distant about 10 or more kilometers from the house, are home to the starlings and they can be seen frequently. Around the house, between other regular arid savannah roaming birds like Karoo Long-billed Lark *Certhilauda subcoronata*, Dusky Sunbird *Cynniris fuscus*, Mountain Wheatear *Oenathe monticola*, Crowned Lapwing *Vanellus coronatus*, Stark's Lark *Spizocorys starki*, Lark-like Bunting *Emberiza impetuani*, Bokmakierie *Thelophorus zeylonus*, Violet-backed Starling *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster* and many others, a few Pale-winged Starling show their presence from time to time.



Fig 1 - Adult Pale-winged Starling in typical Namibian habitat near an artificial waterhole where it came to drink.

Although in other areas, like the Spitzkoppe, where the Pale-winged Starlings are more used to human presence and even feed regularly on human food at the campsites, the birds in our area are completely wild and very shy, if investigative.

When we are ringing birds we quite often can observe a couple or a small group of Pale-winged Starlings land on the trees at the waterholes, but rarely they get caught in the nets, they just observe, discuss and fly away, as also Rosy-faced Lovebirds *Agapornis roseicollis* like to do.

We had been watching the starlings calling from the highest quiver tree in the garden, where also the Pale-Chanting Goshawk *Melierax*



Fig 2 - Pale-winged Starlings at a Spitzkoppe campsite, feeding on bread crumbs.

canorus comes to perch. But we had not perceived any nest building activity.

In February, we left for 20 days and when we returned to the house, the starlings had built a nest in the fork of a smaller, well-branched quiver tree, at a height of about 2,80 m from the ground. Our attention was drawn to the calling bird, sitting on top of this tree, in front of the veranda and about 5 m in distance from the house. Shortly after he flew off. Only the next day he came back, (to check out if we were still near his nest?), left and did not return.



Fig 3 - The chosen quiver tree in the garden, and possible nesting sites in the rocky hills in the background.



As far as I know, a nest in a tree has not been described, although it might have been well observed. Tarboton (2001) says, the Pale-winged Starling "breeds in semi-arid and arid shrubland (Karoo) and savanna, either associated with cliffs and other rocky habitats (especially mountainous country) or, less often with cities, towns and villages. The nest is typically placed in a deep crevice (usually at least 1 m deep) in a vertical rock face."(ibid.), "rarely on building or other site" (Fry et al. 2000, p. 593).

"The nest is a bulky, open-cupped bowl, its base made with coarse plant material (grass, twigs, roots, leaves, etc.); occasionally human debris (rags, etc.) is used." (Tarboton, 2001).

"Our" bird had used for the basis of the nest the long, dry leaves of the quiver tree, the nest itself consists of grass, some few twigs, feathers from the Rüppel's Korhaan and some strings of our mop.

As "both sexes build or refurbish the nest, and it may be re-used for successive broods and the site re-occupied in successive years" (Tarboton 2001), we hope that the starlings have taken up the nest after we left and maybe we see them again in the next breeding season?

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Fig 4 - Close-up of the nest, showing the nesting material, to the right and in the back feathers of Rüppel's Korhaan.



Fig 5 – The Quiver Tree with the nest visible in the fork of the tree.

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