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EGYPTIAN GEESE NESTING IN SECRETARYBIRD NESTS

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Secretarybird nests usually consist of a large platform about 100-150 cm diameter and 30-50 cm deep. The nest is built from sticks and it is lined with grass. The nest is placed on the top of a tree, usually about 3-5 m above the ground, but sometimes the nest can be as low as 2 m and at a height of more than 10 m (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) started a research project in 2011 to study the biology and movement patterns of Secretarybirds. During this project land owners were requested to report nests of this species to BLSA. One such nest was at the farm of Hermie Swart, about 20 km north of Warden in the Free State Province, South Africa. The nest, which was re-used for a number of years, was built on a lone standing tree, about 3 m in height. The tree was located on the side of a small hill with no water sources in the immediate vicinity.

During September 2013 Hermie Swart reported that he found an Egyptian Goose pair breeding on the Secretarybird nest. Upon further investigation we found that the nest contained 10 Egyptian Goose eggs. One of the Egyptian Goose parents left the nest when we arrived at the nest. The nest, which was about 400 mm in diameter and lined with down, was constructed in the centre of the Secretarybird nest (see Fig 1).

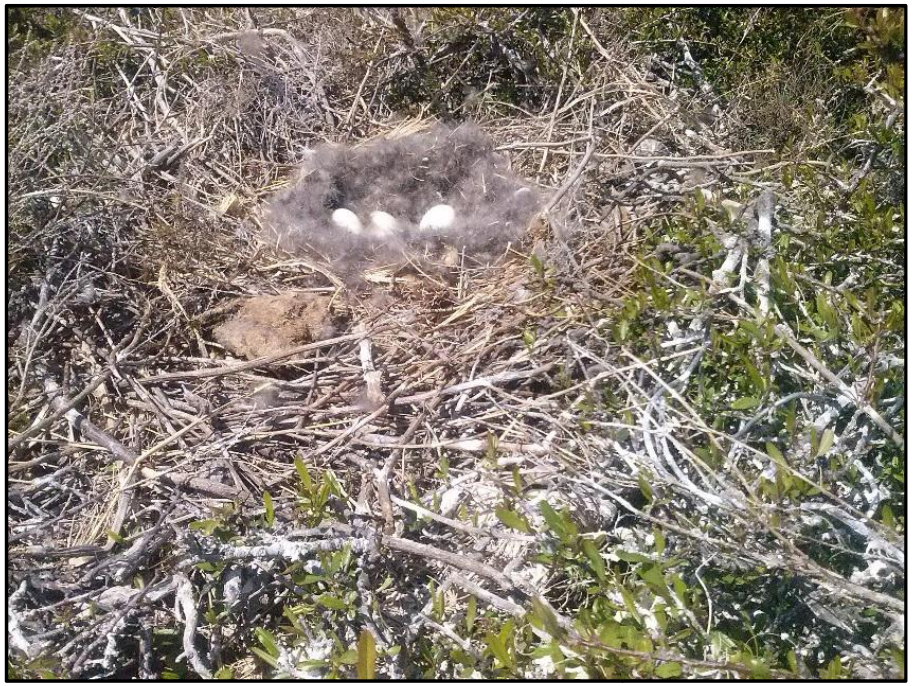

Fig 1 – Egyptian Goose nest in Secretarybird nest near Warden.
Photo: Ernst Retief

In January 2015 Dawie Kok sent us a photo of four eggs in a Secretarybird nest on his farm near Winburg. Two of the eggs were larger than the others and the two smaller eggs were identified as Egyptian Goose eggs: this was confirmed by Dr Warwick Tarboton (see Fig 2). One Secretarybird chick hatched, but the farmer later reported that the chick did not survive.

Fig 2 – Egyptian Goose eggs (the two smaller eggs) between two Secretarybird eggs. Photo: Dawie Kok

These sightings are in addition to the record published by Dawie de Swardt (De Swardt 2012) of an Egyptian Goose nest in a Secretarybird nest on the farm Klein Rustplaas, south of Bloemfontein. The nest had five Egyptian Goose eggs.

According to Tarboton (2011), Egyptian Geese make use of the stick nest sites of crows, bird of prey, herons and also the nests of the Hamerkop. The above mentioned records support this statement and show that Secretarybird nests are regularly used by Egyptian Geese.

This raises the question if the Egyptian Goose can be considered a threat to Secretarybirds? Egyptian Goose numbers are growing (and their range is expanding) and there will be an increasing need for nest sites, including those of raptors.

Of the above mentioned records, we only know the outcome from one nest where the Egyptian Goose pair failed to raise their chicks. It is therefore unclear if Egyptian Geese are able to usurp Secretarybirds from their nest sites and successfully breed in these nests. If they are, then this behaviour of Egyptian Geese can potentially be added to the long list of threats to the future of the Secretarybird.

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