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NOTES ON THE BREEDING OF THE PYGMY

LONG-TAILED SUNBIRD *Hedydipna platura platura* AT ZARIA.

N. J. Skinner.

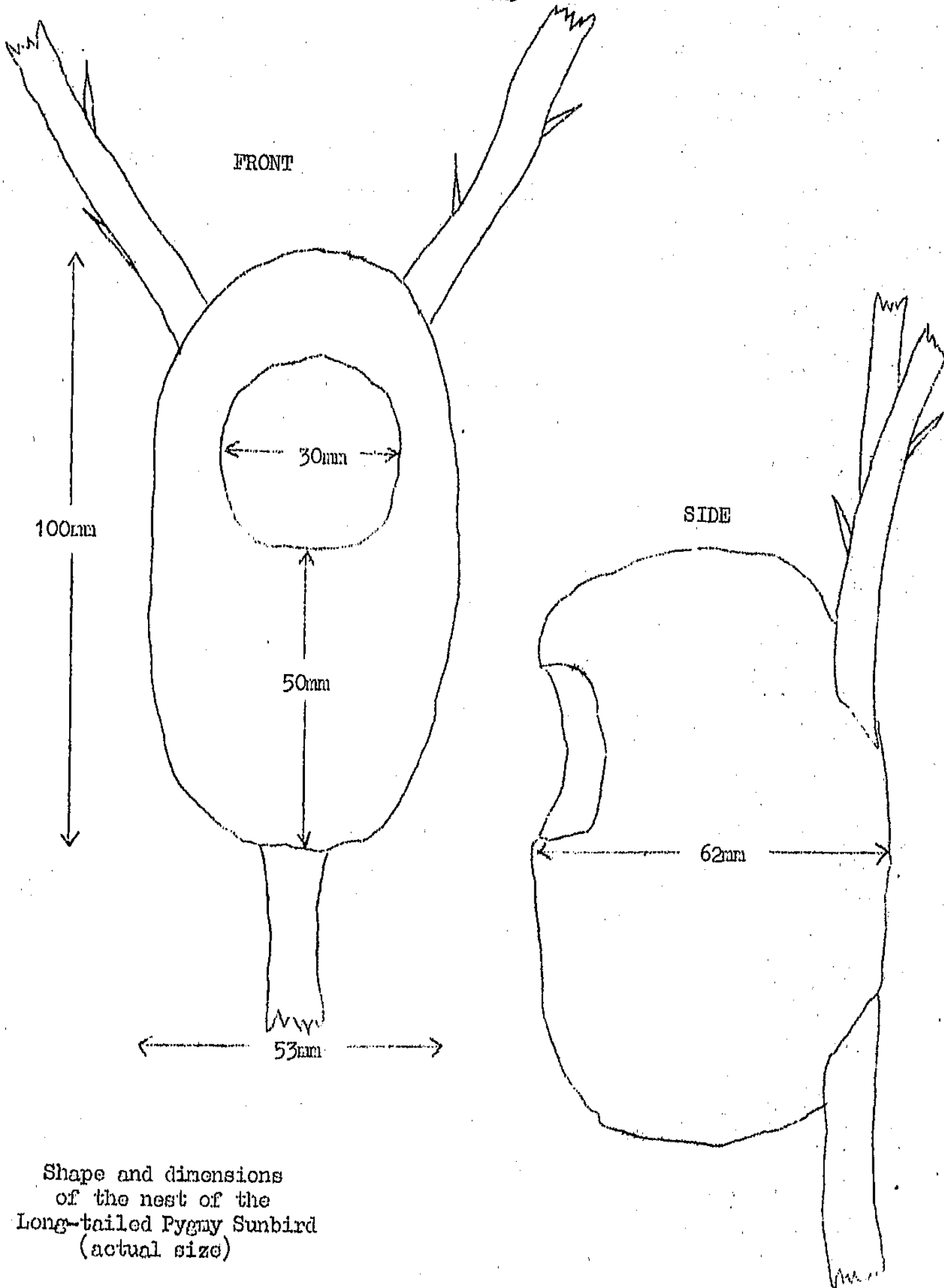
The Pygmy Long-tailed Sunbird *Hedydipna platura platura* is the commonest sunbird in the Zaria area during the dry season October-April (Fry 1965). It appears to be locally migrant and I have few records between the end of April and the middle of October. This sunbird is remarkable in that it breeds at the height of the dry season being one of the few birds in the Zaria area to do so. An account of the construction of the nest and a description of the eggs have been given by Serle (1940), who found the sunbird breeding in the Kafanchan district between December and March. The following notes were made during the breeding seasons of 1968 and 1969 and refer to a total of eight nests, all situated on or near the campus of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. All observations were made between the beginning of February and the end of the first week in April.

NESTS

Nest-building has not been observed at Zaria. The nests observed by Serle were constructed by the female bird with the male taking no part in the building process. The eight nests examined by the author were all similar in shape and size, and constructed of similar materials, to those described by Serle. The figure shows the main features and dimensions of a typical nest. The main fabric of the nest consists of cotton lint bound together with cobwebs and stronger cotton strands. In some cases, dead leaves have been attached to the outside of the nest, and fine grass has sometimes been used to help with the encapsulation of the cotton fibre. Four of the nests were built between heights of 7 and 9 feet from the ground in bougainvillae bushes along the busy corridors of the quadrangles between the science teaching blocks at Ahmadu Bello University. The nests were strapped firmly to main stems of the bushes, in one case being anchored by a long thorn projecting through the back of the nest. One nest became detached from the stem by strong winds and remained suspended from a horizontal branch, but continued to be used by the breeding birds. No 'pendant' nests similar to those constructed by other species of sunbirds were observed. In three cases the nests were lined with fine vegetable down from the seed pods of the Sodom Apple, *Allothrops procera* which grows in small numbers in the vicinity. It is interesting to note that Mackworth-Praed and Grant (1960) report an association between the eastern race of this sunbird, *H. p. metallica*, and the Sodom Apple, in the Sudan. The remaining four nests were found in the thorn-bush erosion gully area between the University and the Kubani stream. In each case they were placed 5 to 6 feet from the ground in isolated bushes of *Balanites aegyptiaca* or *Dichrostachys cinerea*. These nests were not lined with finer material.

EGGS

Clutches of 1 and 2 are found to occur with about equal probability. The eggs are plain white, slightly glossy and somewhat pointed ovate. The dimensions of four clutches measured are as follows:-- 14.2 x 11.6, 14.2 x 10.3 mm; 15.3 x 10.9, 15.8 x 11.1 mm; 15.0 x 10.6, 14.3 x 10.5 mm; 16.1 x 11.4 mm. All incubation is by the female, who seldom leaves the nest during the incubation period. The incubation time was not determined.



Shape and dimensions  
of the nest of the  
Long-tailed Pygmy Sunbird  
(actual size)

BEHAVIOR DURING THE FEEDING PERIOD

Both parent birds participate in the feeding of the nestlings. Observations were made for lengthy periods at two of the nests, in one case the observer being hidden in a nearby room. The female bird made more frequent visits to the nest than the male the average time interval between visits being 13 and 23 minutes respectively. Fewer visits than average were made during the early afternoon. The approach by the male was always more cautious than that of the female and he was more easily disturbed from the nest. The male usually chirped shrilly several times from a nearby perch both on approach and departure. On several occasions the female was seen to enter the nest for a few minutes and engage in apparent cleaning operations. The nest was always found to be clean and free from pellets. Until the chicks were about 5 days old the parents had to enter the nest almost completely for feeding operations. After about 5 days the chicks could reach out to the entrance hole of the nest and were then fed from outside by the parents clinging to the side of the nest.

It was difficult to determine the type of food used. The parents made frequent visits to red hibiscus blossoms, which were flowering at this time in the neighbourhood, and they were also seen to visit the red 'babblers' of the locust bean trees. On one occasion the female brought a large grub to the nest.

The female bird entered the nest early morning about 1815 (sunset) and apparently stayed until about 7:30 A.M. next morning. The time interval between the hatching of the eggs and the departure of the young birds from the nest varied between 12 and 15 days. On only one occasion was a young bird seen after leaving the nest, and this was seen being fed by the parents in a tree near the nest within a period of a few hours of departure. The male bird of one pair moulted its long tail streamers by 25th March but still assisted in feeding the nestlings until their departure.

RE-OCCUPATION OF NESTS AND RE-USE OF EGGS

One of the nests observed in 1959 was built in almost the identical position of a similar nest in 1953 and was probably occupied by the same pair of birds.

Double brooding in the same nest was observed twice. On one occasion the young flew on 2nd March and 5th April respectively, which would indicate that the incubation time for the second brood could not have been more than about 14 days. On the second occasion the first brood flew on 11th February and a second clutch was found on 3rd March. This was apparently infertile and was abandoned by the female on about 22nd March.

MIGRATION

As stated earlier, the Parry Long-tailed Starling apparently leaves the Zaria area at the close of the breeding season. It should be interesting to hear of records within West Africa during the period May to October when presumably the males are in Gambia, Senegal.

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