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Nocturnal roosting by Piapiacs *Ptilostomus afer* on a dockyard crane in Lagos, Nigeria

The Piapiac *Ptilostomus afer* is mainly a savanna species often associated with palm trees and villages (Fry 2000, Madge 2009). In Lagos, SW Nigeria, it is common in suburbs (Fry 2000). Its roosting habits have been reported only in general terms: Fry (2000) wrote that they often roost in palm crowns, and fly “to roost in compact flock,

uttering ‘pee-ip’ calls”. We describe here what must be atypical behaviour, given the scarcity of large cranes in the Piapiac’s range.

In a small dockyard on Victoria Island, Lagos, is a large waterside tower crane on runners. Two slender metal towers, one supporting a single large lamp, and the other, much shorter, capped with a cluster of unused floodlights (“floodlight tower”) are situated between the dockyard sheds. Piapiacs roost on the tower crane all year, and in January 2011 a pair of Black Kites *Milvus migrans* had a nest on it. For four evenings from 10–13 Jan 2011 we watched singles, pairs and parties of Piapiacs come to roost at the site. With sunset around 18h45 (never visible owing to harmattan haze) the birds appeared around 18h10, an hour after dockyard activity had subsided. They assembled in ones (rarely), twos or threes, usually in silence, from various directions. Over the next hour their cohesion appeared loose. Birds did not stay on their first perches, including those that had initially settled on the crane. Single birds often left a pair or group and flew off, often followed shortly by others. On the crane, the Piapiacs selected the most complex, perhaps least exposed parts, under the cabin and under the ballast structure. When one of the Black Kites flew to the back of the crane, Piapiacs there showed it moderate aggression, and once two of them displaced the raptor. Otherwise the Piapiacs showed little concern for the kites, but occasionally gave a sharp alarm call, *skwik skwik skwik*, in response to kite movements.

From 18h30 to 19h00 the Piapiacs often preened, sometimes allopreened (crown and scapular areas), and wiped their bills on their metal perches. The birds still occasionally moved between structures or out of sight into a garden area behind the sheds, but began to focus on the floodlight tower where their numbers increased, with by 19h00 up to ten birds on it at one time. Between 19h00 and 19h13 (when the first bats appeared) they flew silently in groups of four or five to the crane. On 13 January the total number on the crane was 14.

The crane is likely to be relatively free of nocturnal predators such as owls, snakes and mammals. However, the pre-roosting behaviour suggests careful assessment of the site in advance of its occupation for the night.

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