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THE VIOLET-BACKED SUNBIRD NESTING IN NIGERIA

D. Wells

In the absence* of any published record of a nest of Anthreptes longuemarei the Violet-backed Sunbird West of Cameroons (Bates, 1930), the following notes may be of interest. D. Kermode, C. Wood-Robinson and I discovered an occupied nest at Shaganu in the Borgu Division of Ilorin Province on 26th February 1966. It contained two young, being fed by the parents.

Site : Attached to a near-terminal twig approximately 20 ft from the ground in a clump of Mitrogyna inermis. The nest-tree stood in open bush on the landward margin of riparian woodland along the Niger.

Nest structure : One month after discovery the nest was collected and examined. It was bag-shaped and suspended from a thin twig running at an angle of 45° for a distance of 100 mm through the dome roof. The nest-chamber consisted of felted cobweb, woody plant-fibre, small leaf-ribs and small pieces of grass. It was lined with a small quantity of Bombax seed-fluff mixed with woody fibres. The dome consisted of a delicate lattice of cobweb and woody fibres. The entire nest was decorated with dead leaves (mainly Mitrogyna) and the dry frass of a wood-boring insect larva, all loosely attached by cobwebs. There was no obvious tail to the nest, nor was there a porch, though the entrance hole was disguised with leaves and fibres suspended on either side of it.

Nest dimensions : total length (minus suspended decor leaves) - 135 mm; internal diameter of nest chamber (maximum) - 40 mm; external diameter of nest chamber (maximum) - 60 mm.

The nests of two East African races are described by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1957). In A. l. nyassae there is a moss- or lichen-decor while in A. l. orientalis no external decor is used, but there is a porch, and sometimes a tail.

Nesting association : There was indication of positive selection of a tree very heavily colonised by Tailor-ants Oecophylla. Other trees of the same size and species in the immediate area had fewer ants' nests, and some none. It is inferred that these extremely aggressive ants afforded the birds some direct protection from ground predators (the author had a bad time collecting the nest!). The resemblance of the leaf-covered nest to a tailor-ant nest, moreover, suggested a possible indirect protective device through "nest mimicry" on the part of the bird. Such a hypothesis would, however, be impossible to test without a considerable of field data.

Dead-leaf decor has been described for the present race (A. l. haussarum) by Bates (1930), Chapin (1932) and Walsh (1966). None of these authors have in fact reported an insect nest-association, and Walsh informs me (pers. comm). that there was none in the nest he found.

According to Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1957), A. l. orientalis displays a consistent wasp association, and bee or wasp associations are, in fact, widespread among African passerines, particularly sunbirds and estrildines. Ant associations, however, have rarely been reported (Moreau, 1942; Maclaren, 1950).

Breeding season : There is evidence that A. longuemarei is insectivorous (Chapin, 1932) yet, in contrast to most insectivorous birds in the seasonal tropics, it appears to breed during the dry season. Both Nigerian breeding records are for February, when food must be scarce, even in a riparian habitat. Records from southern Sudan, southern Abyssinia and northern Congo are also for the dry season.

In the Borgu area it is possible that nesting occurs in response to a pre-rain flush of new foliage, which is stimulated, in part at least, by the passage of bush fires. It is difficult, however, to understand the adaptive advantage in dry-season breeding, particularly as the daily level of food intake in such a small bird is probably critical to survival. One possible reason might be avoidance of physical damage to, or prolonged brooding of, eggs and young under conditions of heavy rainfall. The nest-site at Shaganu was exposed and the nest structure very flimsy, even by sunbird standards. Such aberrant dry-season nesting in apparent avoidance of rainfall damage, has been recorded in an Ecuadorian hummingbird by Marchant (1959). Other sunbirds known to breed in the dry season include Hedydipna platura and, at least in the Nigerian forest zone, Chalcomitra adelberti (Fry, 1965; Wells, unpubl.).

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Footnote for p. 72 : *Unbeknown to the author, F. Walsh had discovered a breeding pair of A. longuemarei on 9th February 1966, approximately 50 miles South-East of the Shaganu site. His report appears in the preceding paper.

N O T E S

Addition to Local Avifaunas : Zaria. Good views were obtained of a single Black-tailed Godwit Limosa limosa in winter plumage at Maska Dam, South of Funtua, on 25th September, 1966. pp N.J.Skinner

Extension of Breeding Range into Nigeria of the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. The purpose of this note is to give preliminary notice of a remarkable extension of the breeding range by about 5° of latitude to the South of the Blue-cheeked Bee-eater Merops persicus. It is hoped that a detailed report will be subsequently published in this journal. A colony consisting of 14 nest holes and at least 17 adult birds was discovered in a sand-bank in the River Niger about 15 miles South of Kainji Dam in Kontagora Division, on 29th June, 1966. The birds were carrying food either to incubating mates or, more probably, young in the nests. One nest was dug out on 16th July and was found to contain a young Black-throated Honey-guide Indicator indicator on the point of fledging. Nestlings in the remaining nests would doubtless be at a comparable stage of development.

The species is very rare throughout Nigeria, except in northern Bornu Province, and all Nigerian records to date have been in the dry season and almost certainly refer to birds 'wintering' in the country and well South of their breeding range. It is not known where the Bornu birds breed, but there is a well-marked passage northwards at Maliam'fatori (13½° N. on the West shore of Lake Chad) at the end of the dry season. The most southerly breeding colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters reported hitherto was at 15° 8' N. approximately, 60 Km South of Ansongo (on the R. Niger South of Gao, French Sudan) (Koenig, 1956, J. Orn. 97 : 384-402). pp F. Walsh