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February / février 2010

Olive-backed Sunbird Cyanomitra verticalis.

At Mbaakon, in mission station garden, July 1964, April 1968. In the nearby Mbaakon N.A. Forest, Jan, 1968. Apparently an all-year resident, but in the dense forest in the dry season.

Cabanis Bunting Emberiza cabanisi.

Near Jato Akaa on 8th March, 1967.

Swainson's Spectacled Weaver Hyphanturgus brachypterus.

A pair feeding young in a nest 30ft high in a tree vine in Mbaakon N. A. Forest on 16th March, 1968. Also seen in rainy season at Mkar, near Gboko.

Orange-cheeked Waxbill Estrilda melpoda.

A few at Mbaakon in wet season. One carrying nesting material in July, 1966.

Nigerian Combassou Hypochera nigeriae.

Seems to be rare. One male at Shangbum, 15 miles south of Mbaakon on 16th October, 1965.

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PREUSS'S CLIFF SWALLOW Lecythoplastes preussi BREEDING IN WESTERN NIGERIA

R. W. Ashford.

The dam of the new Oyo resevoir, 3 miles west of Oyo, on the Iseyin road is about 200 yards long and 30 feet high. A spillway has been built at the West end, and in the centre, the flushing pipe leads from a tunnel which goes deep into the dam, into what used to be the course of the Awon River. The tunnel is about 10 feet high, and semi-circular in section. The entrance is half blocked by a wall which leaves only the top 5 feet open. In front of the tunnel is the old river bed. This is periodically flooded when the flushing pipe is open. The vegetation has been cleared for over 100 yards around, leaving well kept short grass. With a bit of scrambling it is possible to enter the tunnel and walk along the flushing pipe for about 60 feet.

Besides containing large numbers of dead fish, and very lively wasps Belonogaster species, the tunnel is the home of a colony of Preuss's Cliff Swallows Lecythoplastes preussi. This bird is said by Bannerman (1953) to be rare, and one of the most interesting of its group. It seems not to have been previously recorded from Western Nigeria.

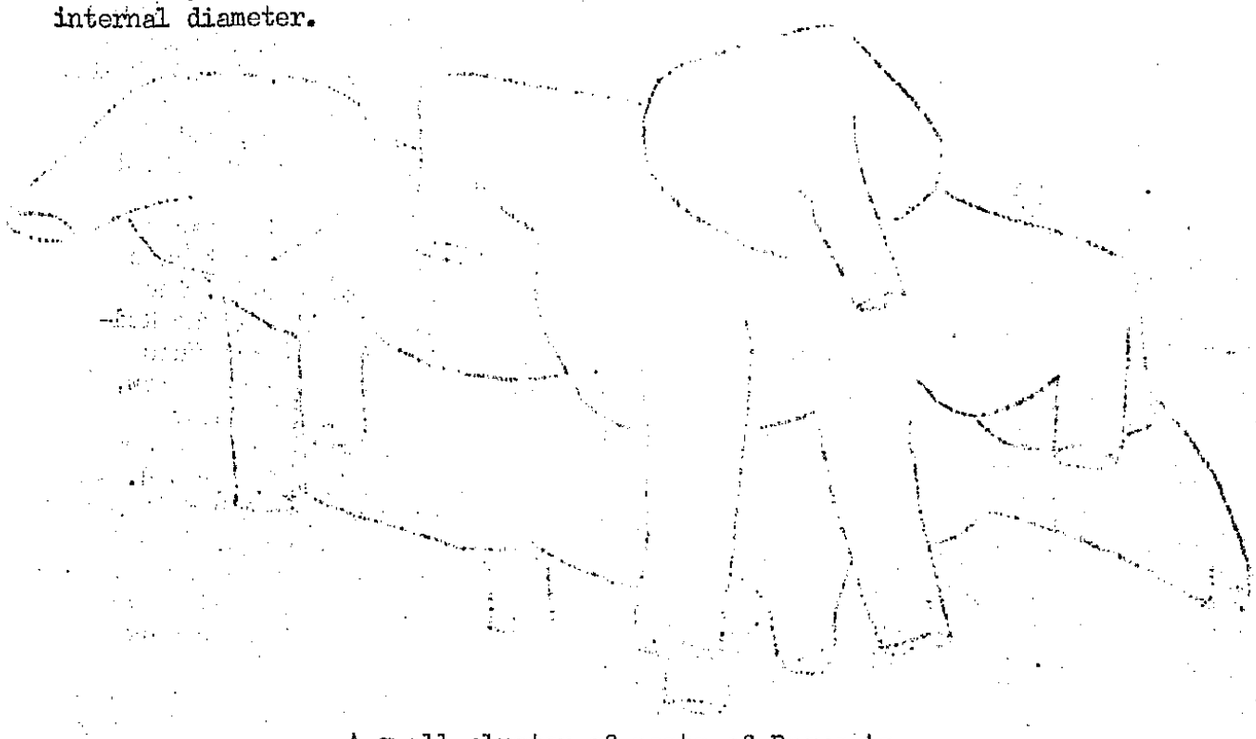
On 14th January, 1968, well over 100 birds were present. They flew in a very compact flock, wheeling round the entrance to the tunnel, when a few would leave or join the group, or flying away high, almost out of sight to hawk for insects. Sometimes the entire flock would disappear into the tunnel. They constantly called with a martin-like "prrp prrrp", but when alarmed, the whole group went silent and a few individuals called a single loud "pseep". The whole manner of these birds recalled breeding Sand Martins Riparia riparia.

Identification is easy when the birds are behaving and calling in this way, but lone birds might be confused with Red-rumped Swallows Hirundo rufula (not very familiar to me) or even very dirty House Martins Delichon urbica. The wings appear dull dark brown while the back has a bluish sheen. The patch of feathers with white bases on the back is sometimes surprisingly conspicuous. The rump and underparts are very pale pinkish, almost white. The best distinguishing feature, the white tail mirrors, is seen only when a good view is had. I have seen birds at all ranges from 3 feet, but have not been able to see the chestnut patch behind the eye mentioned by Bannerman. Clearly this is not a useful field character. In size and general shape these birds resemble short tailed Ethiopian Swallows Hirudo aethiopica

Although the resevoir was visited on 19th November, 1967, the Cliff Swallows were not seen until 14th January. Possibly the whole group had moved off temporarily, or they may not yet have arrived. On 14th January, there were about 65 nests

on the roof of the tunnel. These were in various states of disrepair, and did not seem to have been recently mended. Breeding had apparently not yet started. On 21st January, there was evidence of new building. On 22nd March, the birds were extremely agitated when we stood in the entrance to the tunnel, and eggs could be felt in the one nest which could be examined without fear of damage. At that time the flock was estimated at 150-200, and 93 nests were counted. On 20th June, there were 150 nests, but only about 40 birds were seen. This time they were much more scattered, and showed no great agitation at our approach. Thinking that breeding must have finished, we took down 4 nests to examine for ectoparasites. Surprisingly, 2 of these each contained 2 young swallows, probably about 10 days old. It seems, therefore, that breeding began towards the end of January, and continued at least until the end of June.

The nests themselves are shown in the accompanying drawing. They were constructed of mud pellets and suspended from the smooth concrete roof of the tunnel. Groups of nests were clustered together so that it was quite impossible to distinguish individuals. The largest cluster contained about 70 entrance tubes, and the 150 nests were arranged in 7 clusters, from 2 feet to 20 feet from the entrance. Unlike other hirundine nests, these have the entrance tube projecting vertically downwards. The tube was up to 6 inches long, and 1¾ to 2 inches in internal diameter.



A small cluster of nests of Preuss's Cliff Swallows Lecythoplastes preussi 20. 6.'68.

The nest lining was sparse, consisting of pieces of dry grass, a few feathers, unidentified hairy seeds and some sand scratched from the wall.

It is hoped to continue observations on this colony.

The new Oyo resevoir is an ideal place to observe other species of Swallow, as they hawk over the short grass, or drink from the resevoir. On 19th November, 1967, a flock of about 50 Banded Martins Riparia cincta were feeding over the spillway. The characteristic white eyebrow streak was seen only after half an hour of careful observation with very close views. This was partly due to the harsh light, but obviously this is a difficult field character. The birds appear larger and more powerful than the European Sand Martin Riparia riparia, but positive identification would be extremely difficult without a very good view.

On all the January to March visits there were large numbers of European Swallows Hirundo rustica. A few Red-rumped Swallows were seen on 21st January, and on all the visits, varying numbers of Ethiopian, Rufous-chested Swallows Hirundo semirufa, Mosque Swallows Hirundo senegalensis, Striped Swallows Hirundo abyssinica, and Wire-tailed Swallows Hirundo smithii were present.

The record of a flock of 50 Banded Martins is probably of considerable interest. Bannerman (1953), states that this species occurs only in West Africa singly or in pairs, between June and October. He mentions no records from Western Nigeria. The present record for November, and that given elsewhere in this issue of the Bulletin (Notes page), for January 1968 probably indicate that the species is commonly overlooked rather than that it is extending its range.

Bannerman, D.A. (1953). The Birds of West & Equatorial Africa. Volume 2. London. Oliver & Boyd.

***p.43(line 12.) Five birds observed carrying food into the tunnel, 26th July. Ed.

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ON BIRDS FEEDING ON RIPE FRUITS OF THE OIL-PALM, PARTICULARLY THE CASE OF THE WHITE-THROATED BEE-EATER.

Antony Pettet.

In a previous number of this Bulletin Fry(Bull.N.O.S. 3 : 16) recorded the presence of fibres of Oil-Palm nuts Elaeis guineensis in the gizzards of a number of White-throated Bee-eaters Aerops albicollis collected at Ibadan in April 1964. In the absence of any observations on their methods of obtaining this food he presumed the birds had stripped the epicarp from the fruits in the trees, rather than having descended to fallen fruits on the ground. What actually happens I discovered whilst studying the feeding habits of the birds in the grounds of the University of Ibadan during the dry season of 1967/68, and the explanation is stranger, perhaps, than the somewhat improbable suggestion made by Fry.

Throughout most of the dry season bee-eaters were seen consuming large quantities of strips from the oil-palm nuts, so much so that these must have made up a very substantial proportion of their diet during this period. The bee-eaters actually obtained this by exploiting the feeding habits of the Red-less Striped Squirrel Funisciurus anerythrus. When feeding on oil-palm nuts these squirrels sat on the frond bases, often more or less hidden from below, and stripped off the outer layers of the fruits to get at the more fleshy mesocarp below. The rejected outer layers usually dropped from the palm crown and these were intercepted by the bee-eaters before they reached the ground. On catching such strips the bee-eaters usually returned to nearby perches to hammer them, much in the manner they handle the larger insects which they normally feed on. A feeding squirrel, busy stripping nuts usually attracted up to a dozen bee-eaters which were conspicuous by the alacrity and competitive manner with which they collected the falling fibres, rarely seen when they are feeding on more orthodox prey.

Although most of the observations were made on birds wintering in the vicinity of the Fish Pond of the University, similar behaviour was seen in another group of birds wintering in the Botanic Gardens. Here, in addition to Funisciurus, another squirrel of similar habits, Heliosciurus gambianus, may also have been involved but I was never able to prove this owing to the difficulty of seeing the animals well in the tree tops. This feeding association between bee-eater and squirrel is likely to be more widespread than these rather localized records suggest and it probably will be found wherever the bee-eater, squirrel and oil-palm occur.

Bee-eaters were not the only birds exploiting the feeding habits of the squirrels. The Chestnut and Black Weaver Melanopteryx nigerrimus, Grey-crowned Negrofinch Nigrita canicapilla and, less frequently, the Blue-billed Mannikin Spermestes poensis have all been seen in attendance of feeding squirrels. In the case of these birds the pieces of nut epicarp were picked up from the frond bases where they lodged sometimes after being dropped by the squirrels. In addition I frequently saw weavers of several species, negrofinches and mannikins searching the crowns of palm-trees after the squirrels had left the area. On several occasions I found bee-eaters intercepting fibres disturbed by weavers feeding on piles of these left on the frond-bases by the squirrels. Squirrels appear to be an important part of the "chain" between oil-palm and bird.

The Chestnut and Black Weaver has also been seen exploiting the feeding activities of the Red-headed Malimbe Malimbus rubricollis in a similar manner. The malimbes are abke to dislodge nuts from the inflorescences and strip off the outer layers. Unlike the squirrels, they r rely finish stripping the nuts, usually leaving them on the frond-bases or letting them fall. The weavers have