

WHAT'S TAX GOT TO DO WITH IT?

With the loss in global biodiversity at an all-time high and one in eight birds threatened with extinction, environmentalists are facing a huge challenge. Extensive habitat destruction across all ecosystems is largely responsible for the increasing rate of extinctions, which is why BirdLife South Africa's Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) Programme seeks to protect the habitats of birds at a landscape level, taking multiple factors and stakeholders into account. This approach enables the IBA team to look at long-term means that will be financially sustainable in its bid to secure formal protection for key habitats.

So what has tax got to do with it? Despite having some environmental legislation to protect endangered species and their habitats, South Africa continues to suffer significant biodiversity loss. Provincial conservation agencies are often under-funded and subject to political pressure from those who believe that conservation impedes economic growth. The principal threats to biodiversity operate irrespective of whether properties are public or are privately owned, and the management of resources and biodiversity requires private as well as public participation. Thus incentives for private landowners as part of an overall biodiversity conservation strategy are vitally important. A mix of tools, including economic incentives, can encourage landowners to maintain and improve the biodiversity on their land.

BirdLife South Africa's Biodiversity Stewardship Fiscal Benefits Project is helping to advance this strategy in South Africa. In 2014 it saw the inclusion of a new tax incentive in the Income Tax Act, which allows private landowners to deduct from their taxable income the value of land declared as a nature reserve. This marks the beginning of fiscal incentives being used to bolster conservation efforts and create private protected areas that are financially sustainable. By alleviating management cost burdens and 'rewarding' conservation commitments made by private owners, we stand a chance to secure a future for birds and their habitats.

The Fiscal Benefits Project is discovering that existing fiscal benefits and economic incentives, although under-utilised, have potential waiting to be tapped. The project is funded by the WWF Nedbank Green Trust and works closely with the Department of Environmental Affairs, the South African Revenue Service, the South African National Biodiversity Institute, WWF-SA and provincial conservation agencies.

For more information, please visit www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/important-bird-areas/iba-projects/biodiversity-stewardship-fiscal-benefits-project

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BIRD OF THE YEAR 2016 SOCIABLE WEAVER



ALBERT FRONEMAN

NEST STRUCTURE & CONSTRUCTION

The Sociable Weaver is best known for its remarkable nest, a very large mass of dry grasses with multiple individual chambers that is built onto trees such as the camelthorn or man-made structures like telephone poles and wind pumps. Some of the largest nests provide a home for several hundred weavers (up to 500 birds have been recorded in a single colony) and, at more than four metres across and deep and weighing over a ton, they are among the biggest structures made by any bird.

Curiously, Sociable Weavers do not weave their nest as other weavers do. Instead, they push grass stalks into place and these are held together by friction. To start a new nest, the weavers first make a small pile of grass and then push more and more stalks into it until they have created a compact and robust structure. The individual chambers are added progressively and only their interiors are woven in typical weaver fashion, with a large share of the work being done by the females.

Each chamber is built and maintained by a pair or family group and used for breeding and roosting by the whole group throughout the year. Up to eight birds roost in a single chamber and larger groups often occupy two or even three chambers in the colony, particularly when there are eggs or chicks in one of the chambers. Each group is possessive about its chamber and if other weavers try to enter it they are chased away, even if they belong to the same colony.

The communal part of the nest, however, is looked after by all the colony members, although the males build more than the females do and the older males tend to do a larger share of the construction. In spite of their communal drive, though, these males concentrate on the part of the structure above their own chambers and those of their neighbours, which are usually relatives.

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