



BIRD OF THE YEAR 2016 SOCIABLE WEAVER

RENÉ VAN DIJK

# living together

**S**ociable Weaver nests are a popular dwelling for a wide range of species. Several bird species, including Pied Barbet, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Ashy Tit and Red-headed and Scaly-feathered finches, regularly roost or breed in the nest chambers. Remarkably, Africa's diminutive Pygmy Falcon breeds exclusively in these nests in their southern African range. Some of the birds that use the massive nests even appear to evict the weavers from nest chambers; worse still, Pygmy Falcons occasionally prey on young weavers, or even on adults.

Reptiles too, such as the Cape cobra, boomslang and Kalahari tree skink, are closely associated with the nests, as are insects and small mammals. Large mammals are known to gather in the shade of the structures on hot days, while large raptors may breed on top of the nests.

We don't know the exact nature of the interactions between the weavers and their

'guests', but it is likely to be made up of both costs and benefits. Sociable Weavers are a crucial component of the Kalahari animal community and probably serve as ecological engineers. Their nest colonies modify the habitat and create opportunities for species by mitigating thermal – and resource – stress in this arid environment, which is becoming harsher as climate change takes greater effect.

Their nest aside, Sociable Weavers play an important role both as an abundant year-round food source for numerous raptors and as a nuclear member of mixed-species foraging flocks. In particular, their association with co-forager the Fork-tailed Drongo provides fascinating insight into how interactions between species shape the evolution of animal behaviour. Weaver flocks are commonly accompanied by drongos, which glean disturbed invertebrates, much like Black-winged Pratincoles following a plough. Sociable Weavers benefit

*Red-headed Finches are one of many species that make use of Sociable Weaver nests.*

by treating the drongos as sentinels and eavesdropping on their alarms. Drongos also produce a special watchman's song for their foraging mates, which attracts weavers and enables them to invest more time in finding food. However, the drongos exploit this relationship by giving false alarm calls to scare weavers with large food items and then stealing the abandoned morsels. Drongos even use their watchman's song to call the weavers out from cover following false alarms, neatly illustrating how conflict and cooperation can co-exist in interactions between species.

ROBERT THOMSON & THOMAS FLOWER

SPONSORED BY

