

records give us historical data on where the birds were known to occur, but they also provided us with valuable information about the species' habitat and behaviour.

With climate change an imminent threat, it is impossible to predict how the ranges and behaviour of future generations of birds could be affected. Today's Broad-billed Sandpiper could become tomorrow's White-winged Flufftail. We urge birders to be naturalists rather than photographers when observing our rarities.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- The BirdLife South Africa National Rarities Committee consists of nine members and is representative of all the major regions of South Africa. The members are Trevor Hardaker (chairperson), Athol Marchant, John Graham, Adam Riley, Dave Hoddington, Etienne Marais, Phil Whittington, David Allan and Faansie Peacock.
- The Rarities Committee only evaluates records from within the borders of South Africa. Any records from neighbouring countries should be referred to the relevant country's rarities authority.
- The updated list of species considered to be national rarities in South Africa is available for download from the BirdLife South Africa website.
- Observers who participate in SABAP2 will automatically receive a notification via e-mail (with the national rarities form attached) should a record be flagged as a national rarity. Alternatively, the national rarities form is available for download from the BirdLife South Africa website.
- Completed forms should be sent to [rarities@birdlife.org.za](mailto:rarities@birdlife.org.za)

For more information about how to submit a record, or to download any of the documents mentioned above, go to [www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/national-rarities](http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/national-rarities)

If you have additional queries, contact Linda van den Heever at [rarities@birdlife.org.za](mailto:rarities@birdlife.org.za) or Hanneline Smit-Robinson at [conservation@birdlife.org.za](mailto:conservation@birdlife.org.za)

## BIRD OF THE YEAR 2016 SOCIABLE WEAVER



RENÉ VAN DIJK

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND COOPERATION

The aptly named Sociable Weaver *Philetairus socius* has a truly fascinating social structure. Not unlike that of traditional human society, the social structure of this small bird has three levels of organisation. The nuclear family, comprising a breeding pair and its young, stays together for a whole year and into the following breeding season (or sometimes longer) and roosts every night in the family chamber. Above the family unit, the neighbourhood often includes relatives living nearby (though not exclusively so). If a snake threatens a nest, the close relatives and neighbours are more likely than birds from another part of the colony to mob it.

Finally, all the different families and neighbourhoods come together to form a colony, which moves around as a cohesive group when the birds forage, with all the members keeping watch for predators such as Gabar Goshawks. But even though there is diversity

within a colony, and a large number of birds (some colonies have more than 300 residents), it is never good to mate with one's own relatives. So when it is time to breed, the females usually look for mates in another colony. The result of this sex-biased dispersal is that the males within a colony are usually related, but not the females.

As in any functioning society, Sociable Weavers cooperate on multiple tasks: grown-up young help to clean the nest and raise chicks, all the adults participate in nest building and maintenance and, of course, all watch for predators and warn their mates if danger approaches. But living together can also lead to conflict. There is a well-defined hierarchy among Sociable Weavers, conveniently indicated by the size of each bird's black bib, that helps all individuals to know how to interact with the different colony members and minimise the number of fights.

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