

the BIG NEST *test*

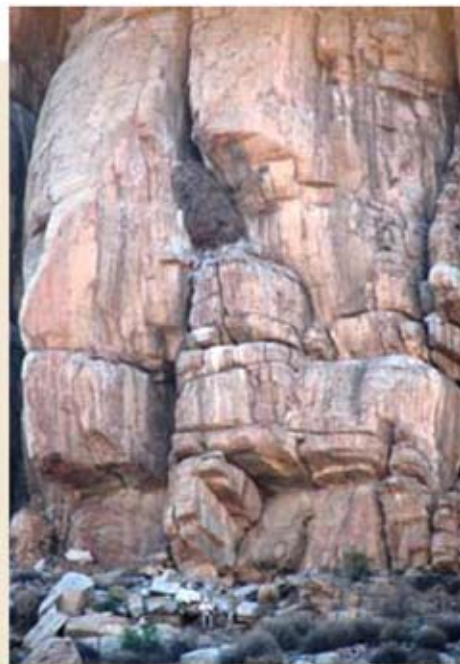
The Sociable Weaver is reputed to build the world's largest nest. This typically comprises masses of grass stems slowly accumulated over many years of building by colonies of industrious birds. Some nests reach huge proportions, exceeding seven metres in length and weighing more than a ton. This is heavy enough to break branches off the largest camel-thorn trees or even bring the whole tree down. But is it really the world's largest nest?

Some very large nests of other birds are known and, unsurprisingly, many of them are built by large eagles. The largest known to me is that of a Verreaux's Eagle nest estimated to be 4.1 metres high, recorded by Warwick Tarboton and David Allan during their surveys of raptors in the former Transvaal, South Africa. The photograph appears in their 1984 monograph on the raptors, but they don't report how they estimated the size. Rob Davies noted other large Verreaux's Eagle nests from the Beaufort West area in the Western Cape and, by carbon-dating the bottom layers of 'an extremely tall' 3.6-metre-high nest, estimated that they

were (amazingly) only about 20–30 years old (Davies & Vogel, 1992).

My contribution to the debate is a recently discovered and active nest of a Verreaux's Eagle pair found near Springbok, Northern Cape. It was inaccessible as usual, but I was able to estimate the height relatively accurately by photographing my assistant Marlei Martins, who was GPSing the nest at the base of the cliff. At 1.6 metres tall, she provided the perfect scale to gauge the nest height. From two different photographs, my estimate for the height was 4.2–4.4 metres. That's about a metre more than the average ceiling height of a room, and taller than the previously recorded nests mentioned above.

Using the same method, I gauged the visible diameter to vary between 1.44 and 2.8 metres (an average of 2.1 metres). The total volume from these measurements is an impressive 15.2 cubic metres of nest. That's a lot of sticks, a significant investment (stick by stick) and I estimate probably larger than the biggest single Sociable Weaver nest I've ever seen in Namibia.



ROB SIMMONS

An active Verreaux's Eagle nest near Springbok dwarfs Marlei Martins recording its position at the base of the cliff. Are Verreaux's Eagles architects of the world's largest nests?

Whether it is actually the structural strength of the tree that sets the upper limit to the size of the weaver nest is unknown. I've always wondered why Verreaux's Eagles prefer cliffs to trees!

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