



nest STRUCTURE & CONSTRUCTION

ALBERT FRONEMAN

BIGGER IS BETTER

Inspired by the Sociable Weaver-themed poster included with the March/April issue, reader Bertie Baard sent in this photograph of a nest to illustrate the lengths (and breadths) the weavers go to when constructing their homes.

Bertie writes: 'Having just received the latest issue of *African Birdlife* with a 2016 Bird of the Year poster, I thought I would share a photograph of the largest Sociable Weavers' nest I have ever seen. What I found as interesting as the size of the nest was its shape. This fascinating nest is located in the Witsand Nature Reserve in the Kalahari region of the Northern Cape. It also boasts a well-positioned sunken hide from which one can watch birds and game at their own level as they come to drink at a waterhole just a few metres away.'

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.

RITA COVAS

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