



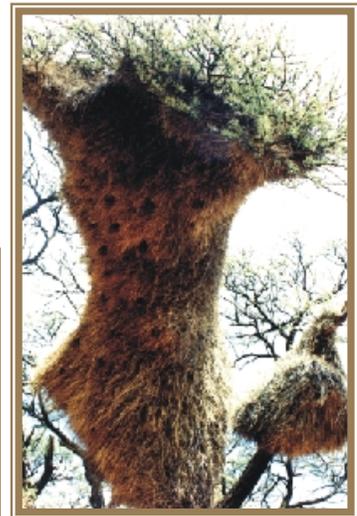
## McGregor Museum Kimberley

### Zoology Department: The Social Weaver – Master Thatcher of the Kalahari



These small, highly sociable bird architects are true Kalahari citizens. They are characterised by dull brown bodies, black face masks with bluish bills, neatly patterned backs and wings and bold, black speckled sides. Sociable Weavers (*Philetairus socius*) seldom drink water and forage together in large flocks in search of insects and seeds.

The nest, constructed by both sexes, is thatched (not woven) and resembles a large, hanging haystack. Twigs, coarse grass and straw are the main building materials. The roof is high, with the surface layers arranged to divert rainwater. The underside is dotted with up to 95 nest entrances. Each entrance is reinforced with pliable stems, while sharp grass straws, pointing downwards like spears, form an effective barrier against predators. The nest chambers are cozily lined with feathers, fur and soft plant material. The well-insulated nest forms a stable micro-climate. It is used for sleeping and breeding purposes and to escape the harsh midday Kalahari temperatures.

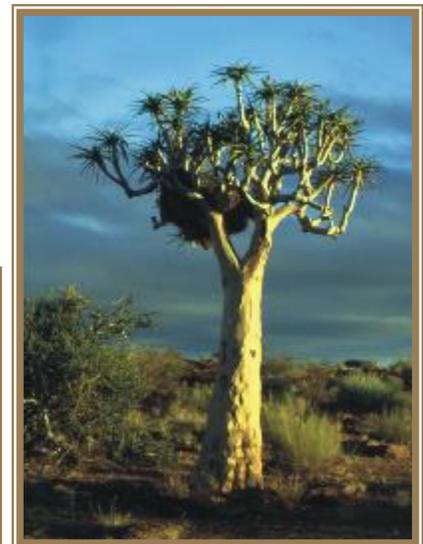
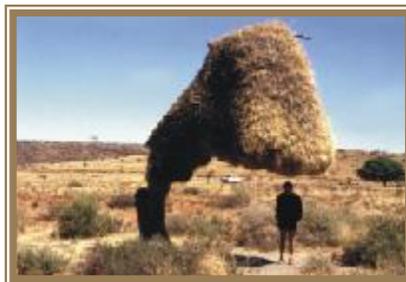




Sociable Weavers prefer certain Acacia species, especially the Camel Thorn (*Acacia erioloba*), in which they build their huge communal nests. In the absence of these trees, their “apartment blocks” are also constructed in

Quiver Trees (*Aloe dichotoma*), against rock faces and sometimes in the exotic Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus* sp.). Man-made structures such as telephone poles, power line pylons and windmill platforms are also regularly used. This results in an ever-expanding distribution of these birds into new areas.

The nests can reach amazing sizes of up to 7,4 m long, 4,4 m wide and 1,5 m high, with a volume of up to 56 m<sup>3</sup> and weighing more than a ton. A single nest can house up to 400 birds. Unoccupied nest chambers are often taken over by other species. These include Pygmy Falcons (*Polihierax semitorquatus*), Acacia Pied Barbets (*Tricholaema leucomelas*), Familiar Chats (*Cercomela familiaris*), Rosy-faced Lovebirds (*Agapornis roseicollis*), Red-headed Finches (*Amadina erythrocephala*) and even their main predators, the highly poisonous Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus*) and Cape Cobra (*Naja nivea*). The tops of nests are also regularly used as breeding platforms by Egyptian Geese (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*), Spur-winged Geese (*Plectropterus gambensis*), Giant Eagle Owls (*Bubo lacteus*) and Spotted Eagle Owls (*Bubo africanus*). One nest is known to have been in use for more than a century. The host tree eventually dies or simply collapses under the added weight as the nest continues to expand. Veld fires are considered the biggest threat to these weavers, leaving the whole colony stranded. In the semi-arid Northern Cape Province the nests are sometimes used as cattle fodder to sustain livestock during periods of drought.



Some photographs courtesy MD Anderson