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FROM RAGS TO RICHES

KLAUS AND PATTY GERSTLE

P.O. Box 1954, Windhoek

We hated mousebirds, more particularly the Whitebacked Mousebird, and chased them or tried to destroy them for the one simple reason that they are destructive and disrespectful, destroying all and everything from fruit, which has not had a chance to yet ripen fully, to seedlings of all and sundry kind, to cunningly pulling the hardly germinated succulent seed out of the ground, to young plants and vegetables. When trying to have a go at them they would take flight before one can get into action. When one has no bad intentions at all, they do not deem it necessary to move an inch, disrespectfully looking at you and carrying on sand-bathing, hanging on the fence or trees or hacking to pieces the last fig or guava which you had an eye on for some time.

When we moved into our new house up on the Eros Hills on the outskirts of Windhoek in May of 1992, we found a fairly big bird's nest constructed mainly of grass approximately hardly three meters away from and slightly below the nearest window on the extreme outer branches of an *Acacia* sp. tree. The nest was slightly more than four meters from the ground. Three main trunks stand grouped together about five meters away from the house forming a

Whitebacked Mousebird on nest.



well balanced big tree, which is approximately seven meters high with a circumference of about five meters.

We could not establish what kind of nest it was but presumed it had originally been constructed by Whitebrowed Sparrowweavers. At the time it was used by a pair of Great Sparrows as a roosting place. The burrow-like nest was ideally suited for this purpose. They dived right into it for the night like the Whitebrowed Sparrowweavers throughout the cold season.

We found the bird life to be something precious if not to say almost spectacular with the veld, open land, mountains and gorges forming one of our property boundaries. So far we have counted seventy different species in only eight months, in and about our property.

To a variety of bird seed which we offered regularly and liberally we eventually added fruit, mainly apple and oranges and sporadically whatever was available and sometimes even vegetables. The Redeyed Bulbuls now visited us more often, supported by the Whitebacked Mousebirds and, amongst others, even the Pied Barbet came to the feeding table on a regular basis. It is apparently believed that the latter does not frequent food tables, which was proved wrong in our case and we had confirmation thereof from at least one other bird watcher. Chestnut Weavers, which appear to be permanent guests in great numbers, also took apple and orange occasionally.

The Whitebacked Mousebirds became regular guests and their number grew. It sometimes appeared as if different flocks or groups came to feed. We also noticed some of them going about the nest mentioned earlier. Most likely it was one particular pair only. We did suspect eventual breeding. Because we did not see them regularly we did not pay too much attention, and this eventually proved to be a costly error.

In time the mousebirds had appropriated and flattened the original burrow-type nest. Although they had apparently completely rearranged this nest to their own liking we could not detect any other activity. Until one day while having lunch one mousebird came to the nest and another bird reared its head from within the nest opening its beak to receive a morsel from the newcomer. He or she was feeding his or her mate! From that moment our interest soared and this pair of Whitebacked Mousebirds became a treasure (focal point) for the next four weeks.

Maclean (1985; Roberts' birds of southern Africa) reports that the incubation and fledging period is unknown for these birds. This seemed to be an added bonus. We had missed the laying of the eggs but we could record the fledging period. We found four eggs in the nest and after the first three days of detailed observation the first egg hatched. After a further two days two more eggs hatched and then the last one on the following day.

One adult bird was always on the nest and since the cup within the nest was very deep it was difficult to see into it. We were further more reluctant to climb up to the nest and disturb the birds more than absolutely necessary. On the fifth day, after the first egg had hatched, we found two live and one dead chick in the nest. One chick had completely disappeared and after that inspection the second dead chick also disappeared without trace. The reason for these deaths is unknown. The speculation for the death of the second and third chick is that they got smothered by the adult birds. The entire nest was quite large (see photograph) and had hardly any overhead shade. Into this broad base the mousebirds had constructed a tiny depression for their actual nest. This depression was little bigger than an egg cup, approximately six by eight centimetres, but deeper and neatly shaped.

Throughout the hatching and raising of the chicks there was only one bird at the nest during the day and two birds during the night. At dawn in the morning at approximately 06h00 one bird would leave the nest to return after twenty to forty minutes, whereupon the other bird would leave, only to return in the evening at about between 18h45 to 19h20. A fixed time relative to the sun's setting seemed to be adhered to, whereas air temperatures also appeared to have some influence. We noticed adult feeding adult only once as described above, whilst it was obvious that both parents were feeding their young.

Unfortunately we were not able to distinguish between male and female, nor could we be sure beyond all doubt that the SAME two adults were tending to the nest all the time. In theory it could be possible that the birds returning to the nest at dawn in the morning and evening were "exchange units". However we must discard this possibility as highly unlikely. Assuming this deduction to be correct, there was no co-operative breeding taking place in this particular case.

The first and the fourth chicks could clearly be distinguished because of their size. It started to become quite hot at times particularly during midday. After the first chick had hatched, the adult bird started to stand in the nest throughout the hottest period, presumably for allowing its chicks underneath to breathe. Soon after the last egg had hatched the attending adult bird left the nest for short periods but stood watch from nearby. Eventually the nest remained unattended for longer and shorter periods with the adult moving off altogether. Whereas the adult bird,

while attending to the nest shaded the chicks for long periods by standing in the nest and spreading its wings, no such shade was available when it went "off duty".

By now the chicks started to climb out of the "egg cup" and onto the almost level part of the rim of the nest. During one lunchtime (one chick was ten days old, the other six) both of them clung to the outer rim of the nest and appeared to hang on for dear life, but managed quite easily to crawl up onto safer positions each time it became too hair-raising. The reason might have been primarily to seek shade and secondly growing up and experimenting. Two hours later Patty reported that the small chick had dropped to the ground and was dead. That left us with the first and only hatchling.

The suspected fledging time approached but we had to be away from home. We gratefully accepted Dieter Ludwig's offer to take over watch for a few days. On 3 November 1992, the eighteenth day after the first egg to hatch from a clutch of four and being the only chick to survive it took to flight. This appears to be new information, apparently not previously recorded as far as our knowledge goes.

Until the chick started to fly it was attended to by only two birds, presumed to be its parents, throughout. During the day without exception only one adult was present and during the night only two adults, usually sitting side by side facing the same or opposite directions. One particularly cold night we observed the adults to sleep on top of each other in the nest. We are particularly lucky that we could observe the nest virtually for 24 hours every day because of its position in relation to our house. Not only could we see it from the ground, climb up to it by way of a ladder but we could also look into the nest at any time, day or night, which was only three meters away from our study window and slightly below it. On the second day of the chick taking to flight it left the nest permanently during the day and only came to roost with its parents for the night. That same evening one "outsider" mousebird shared the nest with the family during the night and the following evening another one. The nest was now shared by five mousebirds, the family and two "strangers". From here onwards it was not possible to observe accurately who was feeding the young bird as none of them was ringed.

On 12 November 1992, the young bird was 27 days old and looked like any other mousebird, except not quite as big and had a shorter tail and its beak had not turned completely white. An attempt was made at about 21h00 to ring them. However, the disturbance made the birds move off the nest prematurely. One lost itself in the house where it could be caught and ringed. Another attempt on 15 November 1992 ended in complete failure. Although we were all better prepared and slipped the net easily over the nest all five of them sneaked out between nest and the ring of the net unnoticed. This was not anticipated and we could not see either, because we worked with a minimum of light.

Since then the birds did not roost in this tree again. What a disappointment since we anticipated further breeding activity. From that day on the mousebirds have become somewhat scarce at our place with one interesting exception. Towards the end of November, mousebirds partly demolished the old nest and took the material to build their altogether own nest in the same tree, directly opposite, much more protected and difficult to access. Nevertheless this was a short-lived consolation, because after construction was achieved the bird stayed away. Maybe they will come back at some later stage, after the long awaited rains have set in. From time to time we still see them slipping through the trees seemingly calling: "Oh catch me if you can" and presently showing us their backs!

NOTES ON CAPTIVE ORANGE RIVER FRANCOLIN

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During the period March 1989 to March 1992, data were collected on aspects of the ecology of Orange River Francolin (*Francolinus levaillantoides*). Two noteworthy events took place during the last two weeks of observation of captive birds.

Firstly, a case of double nesting (the first recorded for Orange River Francolin?) occurred and secondly, viable eggs of this double clutch were removed from the stomach of a Western Barred Spitting Cobra (commonly known as a Zebra Snake, *Naja nigricollis nigricincta*). Details of the double nesting will be submitted as a short note to "Ostrich", while the second event is described below.

Direct field observation of the cryptically coloured Orange River Francolin proved very frustrating in the Highland Savannah (mostly mountainous grass veldt with scattered trees and shrubs) of the study area (Farm Hoffnung #66, Windhoek). To facilitate observation of behavioural aspects, a pair of wild Orange River Francolin was therefore kept in a 9,1 x 3,61 x 1,5m enclosure, bordered on the one side by our garden, and on the other by the farm.

The male francolin, one of a pair, was captured approximately 0.6km from the enclosure at 11h40 on August 7 1989. By 18h20 a female francolin, presumably his mate, had arrived at the back of the aviary. She was again observed on August 11 and finally captured on August 13.

The pair, named Romeo and Juliet, subsequently successfully raised three broods between March 1990 and February 1991. (A fourth clutch was lost in August 1990 and replaced in October). The male died on February 17 1991 and was replaced by another wild male on August 6 1991. The latter male arrived to the calling of the by then very restless female and stayed in the vicinity of the female until captured 49 days later. The first chicks of this pair hatched on November 11, 1991. The two adult birds and their three surviving chicks shared the aviary with a year-old female, the offspring of Juliet and Romeo.

On February 14 1992, the year-old female started laying until the clutch of five eggs was completed on February 18 and incubation started. On February 24, Juliet started incubating in the same nest and only on February 27 was it discovered that the nest now contained ten eggs.

On February 27, the agitated "chuups" of Orange River Francolin in distress were heard and, on investigation, I discovered a 1,2m zebra snake at the nest (a scrape of grass). The snake's head was in the nest and the body curled around and under an adjacent rock. Only six eggs were left in the nest.

All six francolin (three adults and three 15 weeks of age) were moving about close to the nest, harassing the snake by making a lot of noise and moving close to it. On approaching, I thought the disturbance was once again caused by one of the two females attempting to dislodge the other from the nest and, on seeing the snake, was interested only in removing it as soon as