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It's not the Porsche that pulls the Chicks, but Real Estate

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Southern Masked-Weavers (*Ploceus velatus*), occur seemingly ubiquitous throughout Namibia, and are often overlooked for their commonness. Most people could point out and identify its "typical" nest structure and although males demolish unwanted nests (See e.g. Tarboton 2001 & Figures 1 to 3), "common knowledge" – occasionally even published in the local Namibian press – has it that the females do so after rejecting their suitor.

Figures 1-3: A sequence of images indicating a male Southern Masked-Weaver dismantling a nest in an *Acacia nigrescens* (Knob-thorn) tree as not deemed suitable by accompanying female.

Nest dimensions for a "typical" nest are 145-150 mm (front to back); 50 mm (width); 100 mm (height) with an entrance of 30 x 40 mm and a dry mass of 89 g (See e.g. Collias & Collias 1964, Skead 1995). Single nests are *de rigueur* with nests not reused (e.g. Maclean 1985, Tarboton 2001) and rarely suspended from the bottom of older nests (Oschadleus n.d.).

On two occasions – December 2013 & January 2014 – in my garden in Klein Windhoek, I have observed a Southern Masked-Weaver male constructing and using a "double-story" (Figure 4) and "triple-story" (Figure 5) nest in a small urban colony (e.g. maximum of 6 nests). This was the first time I have observed this in my garden although I can recall, although do not have any records, such nesting activity elsewhere – albeit rarely.

Double-story nest

The double-story nest was constructed in a *Combretum erythrophyllum* (River bushwillow) tree at a height of approximately 2.5m using mainly palm leaf fronds. The bottom nest was used for breeding while the top nest was used by the male for roosting on occasions.

Triple-story nest

The triple-story nest was constructed in an *Acacia mellifera* (Black thorn) tree at a height of approximately 3.5m using mainly palm leaf fronds. Although the topmost nest was not used for breeding (I cannot confirm roosting), the middle and bottom nests were both used for breeding.

Both double-story and triple-story nests were new constructions – i.e. not previous nesting attempts – with the male bird continuously adding onto the nests whilst wooing females and defending the area against interlopers. The topmost nest forming part of the triple-story structure seems as if it was abandoned before completion while a second attempt used the existing infrastructure. Why the third nest was added to this, remains unanswered. Although breeding was

confirmed in both double- and triple-story nest structures it is unknown if the advantages of such elaborate nests versus construction time versus breeding success benefitted this individual substantially.

The reason for this one male to build elaborate and unusual nests in two consecutive breeding spells is unknown, neither how often these phenomena occur throughout its range (rarely, according to Oschadleus n.d.). A quick web search resulted in an image of a double-story nest, although for Lesser Masked-Weaver (See: www.photographersdirect.com) while an elongated nest suspended from a washing line was submitted as a peculiarity to Weaver Watch (See: www.weavers.adu.org.za).

According to Walsh *et al.* (2010) the repeatability of nest dimensions for Southern Masked-Weaver was significant confirming a potential for a genetic component to nest building although with considerable within-male variation. Nest size also decreased during the breeding season indicating, amongst environmental variables and physical condition, possible advanced cognitive abilities (Walsh *et al.* 2010).

A third breeding spell – February 2014 – has currently only resulted in 1 "typical" nest being constructed, potentially supporting views by Walsh *et al.* (2010). However, I continue to monitor this individual who either knows more but is not telling or is a veritable builder with a passion, something hard to come by these days.

Figure 4: Double-story nest under construction during December 2013 in a *Combretum erythrophyllum* (River bushwillow) tree.

Figure 5: Triple-story nest under construction during January 2014 in an *Acacia mellifera* (Black thorn) tree.

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