

## Observations at a Termite “Take-Away”

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On the afternoon of 25 November 2007 Gudrun and I observed a feeding party of 23 species of birds (together with at least three yellow mongooses) preying on termite alates emerging from the Rykvoet Street circle in Klein Windhoek. Our count of 23 species includes those actively engaged in catching termites and those in close association with these species but excludes the Grey Go-Away Bird that watched proceedings aloofly from a perch on top of a nearly *Acacia tortilis* and the pair of Diderick Cuckoos that flew over. We were more intent on counting the species than in observing the behavior of individual birds but it seemed to us that the Lesser Honeyguide was not actively pursuing termites but merely associating with the other species that were.

Our observations prompted me to read up about the foraging and feeding habits of the species seen. I use the term “insects” very loosely hereinafter and mean it to include arachnids, termites, ants, caterpillars etc.

Of the twenty three species observed seven (Rock Martin, Greater Striped Swallow, African Palm- Swift, Little Swift, Lesser Honeyguide, Common Scimitarbill and Chestnut-Vented Tit-Babbler) are exclusively or almost exclusively insectivores although Greater Striped Swallow and Chestnut-Vented Tit-Babbler are recorded taking a certain amount of vegetable matter. Another five (Helmeted Guineafowl, House Sparrow, Southern Masked-Weaver, Black-Throated Canary and White-Browed Sparrow-Weaver) come close to being omnivores as they feed on a wide variety of items. The two sunbird species, (Dusky and Scarlet-Chested) are nectar feeders which also take insects, notably small spiders. Another three of the species (White-Backed Mousebird, *Acacia* Pied Barbet and African Red-Eyed Bulbul) are predominately fructivores. The Barbet and Bulbul are recorded feeding on insects and although Roberts VII makes no mention of Mousebirds feeding on insects I have often observed White-Backed Mousebirds pursuing termite alates in the streets. Of the remaining six

species five are predominately seedeaters which have been recorded taking insects as well. These are Red-Billed Quelea, Black-Faced Waxbill, Blue Waxbill, Laughing Dove and Southern Red Bishop.

It seems that very little is known of the feeding habits of the last species, Chestnut Weaver. Roberts VII gives it's diet as "primarily grass seed, particularly Guinea grasses (*Panicum* spp) : also nectar of *Aloe* spp." – no mention whatsoever of insects – and Roberts VI simply states "unrecorded" under the heading of "Food". In an old issue of *Lanioturdus*, A. Krieg notes Chestnut Weavers feeding on small birdseed, crushed white maize, sunflower seeds, whole yellow maize and cooked maize meal. Again no mention of insects although it appears that these records are from a feeding station and it is unlikely that insects were offered. It would be very interesting to know whether there are any records of this species feeding on termites.

This is the second time I have recorded the bird species in attendance at a termite alate emergence in this area and our count of 23 species compares with the 21 species observed some years ago. Unfortunately I no longer have the list of the species seen previously for comparison but I was then also under the impression that at least some of the species present were "observers" rather than participants in the feeding frenzy.

#### References:

- G.L. Maclean : Roberts Birds of Southern Africa – Sixth Edition 1993  
P.A.R. Hockey, W.R.J. Dean & P.G.Ryan : Roberts Birds of Southern Africa – Seventh Edition 2005  
A. Krieg : More about Chestnut Weavers – *Lanioturdus* Vol 24 No 1/2 1988