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## A Red-Headed Weaver in Halali, Etosha National Park

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On 27 December 2013 my wife and I were sitting on the stoep of our Halali bungalow, both very happy with our morning's sightings – she for the lions and I for the Red-necked Falcon we saw - sufficient reason to enjoy a brew.

Suddenly my attention was drawn to a flash of red flying past. I grabbed my camera and ran after it. After a cumbersome search I successfully located the bright red spot in one of the Omumborongbongo trees (*Combretum imberbe*).



The bright red spot turned out to be the head of a Red-headed Weaver. This bird is not often recorded in Etosha I remembered the only other time I had seen it was on a previous visit to Shamvura in the Kavango Region. So the day got better and better.

This is in fact a good sighting for Etosha as on my return home I consulted my SABAP 1 and it confirmed a below 2% reporting rate, that is a very low reporting rate, for the Red-headed Weaver for the Halali QDS.

Whilst continuing to enjoy my brew the weaver kept flying past my bungalow and then, to my great

surprise, I saw that the bird was busy constructing his nest directly next to our bungalow in a mopane tree (*Colophospermum mopane*).



Now, how much luckier could I get?? I must have done something right somewhere to deserve this!!!

According to the literature this would be a typical nest location for this weaver, two to ten meters above the ground and the nest being suspended from an end of a twig, with some of the leaves above the nest being stripped off.

As the Red-headed Weaver constructs its nest with long spells of interruption in between, I was even more fortunate to witness the busy period of nest building. I remember from my Shamvura visit some years ago that during our three day visit the Red-headed Weaver was seen only on the first day and on our day of departure!!

Warwick Tarboton (2001) describes the nest building of the Red-headed Weaver in good detail: "*The nest has a weaver-type structure but differs from other weaver nests in materials used, the way it is woven and by its rather long entrance tunnel.*"



In the half-finished nest the twig stripped of leaves is clearly seen. Note the green leaves at the end which are left for extra camouflage of the nest.

The dry leaves are attached to petioles broken off by the weaver and woven into the nest for additional water proofing (Hockey *et al* 2005).



I was able to witness the gathering of nest material, as described in Roberts VII, step by step: “*..strips midribs and twigs of their leaflets, tugs twigs until they break off and ribs of pliable twigs to knot them into the nest structure.*”



“*Twig-ends are woven into the nest by stripping loose a section of bark on the twig and knotting this onto other twigs in the nest wall*” (Tarboton 2001).



Roberts VII describes the weaving process as an “*alternate reverse winding used in building the nest (i.e. regularly looping strands back and forth)*” clearly seen in the above photograph.



Nest building continued into the afternoon until about 16h30 with a break of about one and a half hours. The next day, 28 December, and on the morning of 29 December when we had to leave Halali, no nest building activity took place.

Although the Red-headed Weaver often seems to breed near other weavers, the only other weavers nesting in the vicinity were Red-billed Buffalo Weavers, some 50 meters away.

On the morning of 29 December however my attention was drawn to the incessant calling of a pair of Fork-tailed Drongos around the bungalow. Eventually I solved this riddle when I recognized a Fork-tailed Drongo nesting in the same tree as where the Red-headed Weaver was building its nest.



December or rather the rainy season might not be the very best game viewing period in Etosha but I have

experienced many bird-related surprises during this time, more than in any other month.

#### References

Hockey PAR, Dean WJR, Ryan PG (eds) 2005, *Roberts – Birds of Southern Africa*, 7th ed. The John Voelker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town

Tarboton W, *A Guide to Eggs and Nests of Southern African Birds*, Struik Publishers, 2001, Cape Town