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## Sharp-tailed Starling nesting in Namibia

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All photos by Mark Paxton

In southern Africa, Sharp-tailed Starlings (*Lamprotornis acuticaudus*) occur only in the northern areas of Namibia, the Kavango and Zambezi (Caprivi) Regions, where they are considered “uncommon residents”. Nevertheless, even as residents, little or nothing is known of their breeding activities.



They continue to elude most birders to this region, being quite difficult to recognize by the tail, which varies between square to forked and not always wedge shaped. Their calls, behaviour and overall longer and slimmer body shape and chocolate brown under-wing and under-tail are however quite distinctive in separating them from other Starlings with whom they often congregate. Despite their elusiveness I managed to find and keep track of several groups within their large ranges in the vicinity of Shamvura Camp, where I have lived for over twelve years. These groups vary in size from single birds to as much as 38 individuals in a flock, which are then very vocal and obvious. Flocking occurs during the dry and hot months of August to October and

sometimes November, depending on the onset of rains. The larger flocks are made up of adults and sub-adults still in immature plumage. The breeding activity usually starts in November when the birds disperse into breeding pairs/groups.

In early January 2011, I found adult birds with food items feeding a fledgling which had left the nest and was flying strongly. On 02 December 2011, I found a nest containing very newly hatched chicks, judging by the very small food items being carried by the adults to the nest. Unfortunately I found the nest too late to get an accurate hatching date and incubation period. However I monitored this nest daily until the single chick left the nest 11 days later.



The nest was situated about 5 m high in a large *Guiboutia coleospermum* (Large False Mopane) in a cultivated Mahango (Pearl Millet) field, and about 150 m away from a village. Being in a field, it was relatively isolated but for several *Strychnos* spp. and *Shizophyton rauteneni* (Manketti) trees in the vicinity, the rest having been chopped out and cleared to make way for cultivation.

The nest tree, typical of this species, had several prominent and sturdy dead branches, one of which was hollow with a North facing hole left from a broken branch. The hole was sheltered from rain by a prominent knot above it, making it ideal as a nest chamber. The other dead branches were used as perches when the attending Starlings brought in food items.



At the time I found the nest there were two adult birds in attendance as well as one sub-adult. Five days later I saw another sub-adult join the group. All were seen feeding the young. I assumed them to be fledglings from the previous year. Co-operative feeding by the previous year's young appears to be uncommon amongst Starlings, recorded only for Cape Glossy and Pied Starlings. They did not move more than 500 m from the nest and seemed able to find enough insects within this distance to feed the young. They foraged for insects, mainly amongst the bark of the surrounding "Manketti" trees, although sometimes on the ground as well. The feeding process continued throughout the day, peaking early morning and late afternoon. All the birds vocalized regularly in and around the nest tree making no attempt to be secretive about their nesting activities.

Apart from insects brought to the nest, surprisingly, one of the adults brought a sprig of leaves presumably to put in the nest. Although this bird sat for some time nearby the nest with the sprig in its beak, it eventually discarded this offering without entering the nest hole.

The starlings chased away a Purple Roller from the nest tree, but completely ignored several Fork-tailed Drongos which were constantly in the vicinity often sharing the same perch with them. By the close proximity to an active local homestead they seemed to be very tolerant of human activity, and I could approach to within 20 m. The field around them was also being systematically ploughed every day, without causing them disturbance. They also appeared undisturbed by several herds of both cattle and goats which occupied the field and moved around or were herded close to the nest tree.



On 09 December, the first young chick was seen, when it showed its face at the nest hole entrance during several feeding sessions. The entrance was quite restrictive and only one was seen. It was therefore not yet known how many chicks were actually present in the nest.

The sub-adults appeared more attentive, often entering the nest and staying inside for extended periods or

hanging around perched inquisitively nearby the entrance hole. The adults, on the other hand tended to deliver food items and leave soon after, or enter the nest for a short while to reach the chick/s, before emerging and flying off immediately afterwards.

Food items delivered to the nest included termites (several at a time), cutworms, grasshoppers or caterpillars and winged insects. On one occasion one of the sub-adults was seen trying to subdue a centipede, but was unsuccessful and eventually gave up.

On 13 December, I found only a single newly fledged young bird being attended by four birds, two adults and two sub-adults, in the nearby forested area next to the field in which the nest tree was situated. The

fledgling was an overall dappled or striped grey under-body with a distinct mask and some iridescent green plumage on the wings and tail. The group was quite noisy about their business and seemed to make very little effort to hide the presence of the fledgling, which was able to fly relatively well although preferring to remain in one sheltered location, a thickly foliated "Manketti," for quite long while being fed by the other Starlings.

Six days after the fledgling left the nest, it was still seen with the group in the immediate vicinity of the nest, flying strongly and attempting to forage for itself but still being actively fed by the group. The little family flock then completely left the area.