Papers

Sociable Weavers drink water

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Introduction

Ringing can contribute to the biological knowledge of southern African birds through accidental observations. This happened to me in 1998 when I began ringing at Sonderwater Farm, Outjo District in Namibia. I set up a mistnet near the homestead stock dam at 19°15.394'S, 15°13.432'E to catch birds coming in to drink water. At first I caught a host of the usual Red-eyed Bulbuls *Pycnonotus nigricans*, sparrows and weavers. I used to ring birds in Zambia back in the 1970s but living in Alaska for the past 20 years caused a bit of rust to settle in on all the fine details of identification: i.e. plumage, age and sexual difference. As I caught each bird I would consult my bible, *Roberts' birds of southern Africa* (Maclean 1993), to see how to tell the sexes apart.

When I came to the Sociable Weavers *Philetarius socius* no sexual difference was noted but the phrase under the food section, 'seldom drinks water', caught my eye. I was netting at a waterhole and hundreds of Sociable Weavers were coming in to drink. I was intrigued by their behaviour and their obvious need for water and I wondered how far the birds were flying to the waterhole to drink. After catching 206 weavers at the dam I then set up nets at all the accessible Sociable Weaver nests on the farmlands surrounding the waterhole. The farm habitat is mainly Mopane *Colophospermum mopani* woodland with Black thorn *Acacia mellifera*, Purple pod Terminalia *Terminalia prunioides* in the rockier areas and some open plains.

We set up 9 m mistnets at each nest colony in the late evening and early morning to catch a sample size of 50 birds and to uniquely colour ring the birds at each nest. We counted all the individual nest entrance holes to determine if the nesting colony had at least 50 birds present. If there were fewer than 50 nest holes, we only ringed for one day. The farm had other boreholes and stock tanks, so any nesting colonies close to those water points were not sampled. We worked our way outwards from the homestead stock dam until the number of recaptured birds we found dropped off to zero. We assumed that birds at those nests were finding water at other sources. We slowly worked around the cardinal compass points until all nests had been sampled. There was one nest 600 m north of the homestead but it was on a neighbouring game farm within a lion proof game fence and the presence of lions precluded us climbing over the fence to net at dusk and dawn.

Results

Between 30 March and 2 December 1998 we mistnetted and ringed 206 Sociable Weavers at the homestead stock dam. We surveyed the farm and found most of the weaver colonies were located to the west of the homestead. There were no colonies in an area from the southeast to southwest as the bush was too thick, mainly composed of Acacia and Terminalia. The nearest water point was 3.9 km southeast and the nearest weaver colony was 5 km south. We netted at 13 colonies on the following dates: 30 January; 4, 5, 14, 15 April; and 9 May 1999. The weavers nested in Mopane trees (n = 10), *Acacia tortilis* (n = 2) and *Boscia albitrunca* (n = 1). The number of previously ringed weavers varied from 0–12 birds (Table1). The closer the nests were to the

Table 1. Distance Sociable Weavers in Namibia will fly to drink water.

Colony (no./name)	Distance (km)	Direction (degrees)	Number of nests	Number caught	Number ringed	Percentage ringed
67	2.24	278	5	0	0	0
68	3.19	286	15	30	0	0
69	3.68	271	27	32	0	0
Pink	3.45	265	81	36	11	30
71	3.31	267	15	19	0	0
72	3.62	308	4	0	0	0
Blue	1.22	72	25	30	8	27
Yellow	1.65	98	62	33	0	-
Purple	1.87	292	23	15	2	13
Red	2.23	288	71	61	11	18
Green	0.96	304	48	34	7	20
White	1.38	292	36	35	5	14
Orange	1.09	293	35	37	12	32

homestead the more ringed birds were found. The one nest to the north that was not netted probably had the highest percentage of ringed birds as it was only 600 m away. There was a windmill with a stock tank located 2.25 km at 145° from house. The Yellow colony was 1.53 km from that windmill and 1.65 km from the homestead. We found no ringed birds there which indicates that the weavers fly to the nearest water. The colonies no. 68 and 72 were 1.88 and 2.3 km respectively from a windmill on the next farm to the west.

After colour ringing the birds at the individual colonies we planned to net intensively at the homestead and use binoculars to look for colour rings. We wanted to see if some of the colonies that had no previously ringed birds were also watering at the homestead. However, the opportunity to purchase a farm 20 km to the east arose and we left Sonderwater. After building a house on the new farm, Windpoort (19°21.48'S, 15°29.02'E), we immediately set up a mistnet near a bird bath and proceeded to catch Sociable Weavers. The nearest colony was located 2.8 km away.

The farmer who owns Sonderwater told us that when he started his pumps at dry water points, the weavers would fly to the site upon hearing the pump engine run.

In conclusion we find that where water is available, Sociable Weavers will drink and will fly up to 3.5 km to find water to drink.

Reference

Maclean, G.L. 1993. Roberts' birds of southern Africa. Cape Town: John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.