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## Nesting trees used by a pest bird (Village Weaver, *Ploceus cucullatus*): a large field survey suggests further human conflicts with local stakeholders in Southern Nigeria

### Short communication

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### Abstract

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The village weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) is a common colonial nesting bird widespread throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. It is known to weave its nests from leaf strips from a variety of tree species (mainly coconuts trees, oil palm trees) associated with human settlement areas, grasses, and other available plants. In this regard, this bird was considered a pest for its impact on different economic activities. Although extensive literature is already available on the parasitic role of village weavers, there is still a lack of analytical data that outlines which tree species are used for nesting and in what proportion, as well as the related implications in terms of economic impacts. Here, we carried out the first comprehensive arrangement of trees used by this species for nesting in Southern Nigeria (West Africa), checking for possible different impacts on stakeholders. In April 2021, we searched for village weaver nesting in 95 sites in 77 communities from

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24 local government areas in Southern Nigeria, during 14 field surveys. Within each site, we collected GPS coordinates and counted the number of active nests, nesting birds and occupied trees. We recorded a total of 5,776 nests and 2,140 birds in 94 plants belonging to 23 tree species selected for nesting. Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*;  $n = 45$ ) was the most used tree species, as 2,990 (51.77%) nests and 873 (40.79%) birds were recorded. Our results indicate the preference for nesting on trees used by stakeholders belonging to agricultural (palm farmers), touristic (operators) and energy (gas flare stations) sectors with economic implications about the conflict with this pest species.

## Keywords

economic impact, *Elaeis guineensis*, pest species, tree check-list, stakeholders

## Introduction

The village weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) is a small passerine bird recognized for its innate ability to craft nests using leaf strips from various tree types, including coconut trees, oil palms and plantain stands among the others (AKANDE, 1978; EFENAKPO et al., 2017). These territorial, polygamous colonial breeders are predominantly found in Saharan Africa (LAHTI, 2003; EFENAKPO et al., 2017). Despite their fascinating behaviours, this species is often considered a pest in multiple countries, like other Ploceid species (MENGESHA et al., 2011; HIRON et al., 2014; AIYELOJA and ADEDEJI, 2015).

In Southern Nigeria, weaver birds frequently choose oil palm trees (*Elaeis guineensis*) as nesting sites (e.g., DIN, 1992), but the available data are quite anecdotal. However, the presence of these birds on oil palms poses concerns for palm fruits and frond harvesters. They fear that the nesting activities of weaver birds could lead to defoliation of the host trees and subsequently diminish palm fruit yields (AKANDE, 1978). Furthermore,

weaver birds face the risk of losing roosting trees due to logging activities or land development, which can have cascading effects on their habitat.

In this note, we provided an arrangement of tree species used by weaver birds for nesting in Southern Nigeria. This investigation is crucial as it sheds light on the potential impacts of the birds' pest-like behaviour on various stakeholders, including those involved in the local agricultural, touristic and energy economy. This study aims to provide valuable insights into the interactions between these birds and their environment, which could have broader ecological and economic implications. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive review on this topic for the Nigeria (Western Africa).

## Methods

### Study sites

The study was carried out in 95 sites in 77 communities

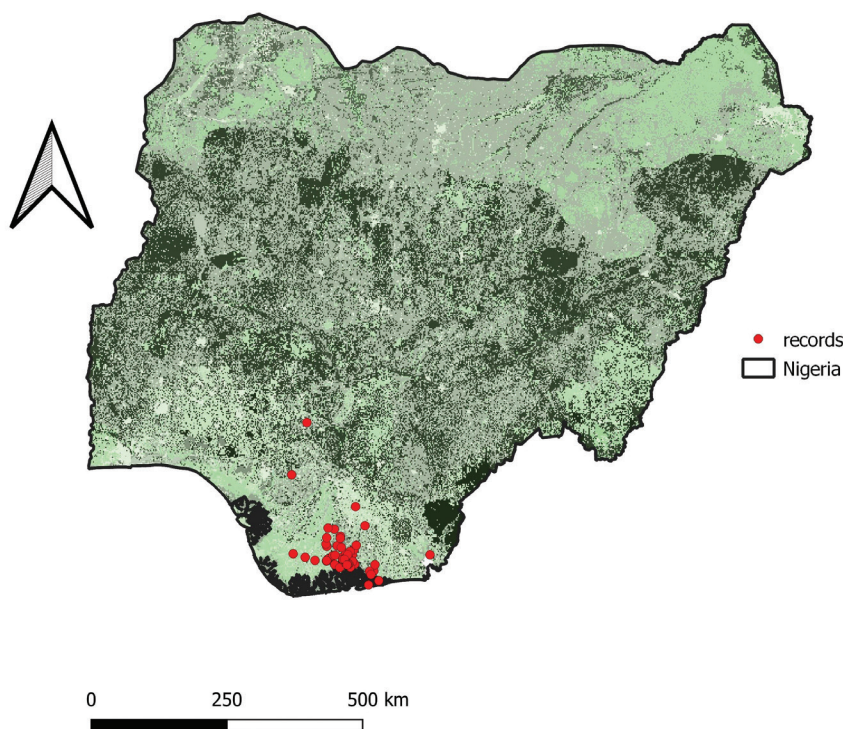


Fig. 1. Map of the study area. Location of records has been reported. See text for details.

from 24 local government areas (Abua/Odua, Ahoada West, Alimosho, Andoni, Asaritoru, Calabar South, Degema, Eleme, Emohua, Etche, Etsako West, Gokana, Ideato North, Ikwerre, Khana, Mbaise, Obio/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ohaji/Egbema, Okrika, Opobo/Nkoro, Owerri North, Port Harcourt and Yenagoa) in six states (Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Edo, Imo, Lagos and Rivers) in Southern Nigeria (see Supplementary material for geographical coordinates and number of records for each site). The climate of the area is hot humid equatorial climate with an average temperature range of 25–28 °C, and a relative humidity of 80%; the zone has an annual rainfall average of over 3,500 mm (NIGER DELTA ENVIRONMENTAL SURVEY - NDES, 1998; AKANI et al., 2007; AMADI, 2017). The general environment is characterized by wet forest fragments interspersed within wide plantations and urban settlements (Fig. 1).

### Data sampling and analysis

In April 2021, tree species that served as hosts for weaver birds and their active nests were surveyed over a span of 14 field days. Within each designated site, we gathered data on the location of each tree (hereafter, ‘nesting tree’), using a GPS Garmin E trex-enabled device. Additionally, photographic documentation of each tree was undertaken, accompanied by a tally of nest counts wherever feasible. More particularly, during particularly sunny days, especially when assessing tall trees, a methodology involving

tree photography was employed. Through this approach, the number of active nests and birds was directly counted from the captured images. To ensure an unbiased sampling process, it was ensured that each tree stand was evaluated only once and never subjected to repetition to avoid pseudo-replication (see BATTISTI et al., 2014). On average, a timeframe of 5 to 10 minutes was dedicated to evaluating each individual tree. Finally, both the number of active nests and birds have been normalized to the number of occupied trees, obtaining a ratio number of active nests/trees and number of sampled birds/trees.

To assess the pattern in frequency distribution of the active nests, we performed a diversity/dominance diagram (or Whittaker plots; MAGURRAN, 2004). In this regard, relative frequencies of each tree species have been ranked. Shape and slope of point line, obtained by comparing ranks and relative frequencies, allows inferring general property of the assemblage, illustrating the evenness (i.e., the pattern in frequency distribution of the tree species; see MAGURRAN, 2004). Considering S, the number of tree species, evenness index has been also quantified as:  $e = H'/H'_{\max}$ , where  $H'$  is the Shannon-Wiener diversity index (calculated on the assemblages of nests on different trees) and  $H'_{\max} = \ln S$  (PIELOU, 1966; MAGURRAN and MCGILL, 2011). Finally, the frequency distribution of nesting trees, sampled birds and occupied trees has been reported graphically using stacked charts (HAMMER and HARPER, 2001).

Observed-versus-expected  $\chi^2$  tests were used to

Table 1. Preferred host tree species, number of active nests, nest percentage frequency (% fr), number of sampled birds, number of occupied trees, and normalized number both for the sampled birds and active nests

Tree species	Nests	% fr	Birds	Trees	Normalized birds	Normalized nests
<i>Chrysophyllum albidum</i>	244	4.22	59	5	11.80	48.80
<i>Bambusa vulgaris</i>	182	3.15	107	1	107	182
<i>Terminalia mantaly</i>	51	0.88	34	2	17	25.50
<i>Pinus caribaea</i>	72	1.25	41	1	41	72
<i>Anacardium occidentale</i>	38	0.66	12	1	12	38
<i>Alchornea cordifolia</i>	6	0.10	2	1	2	6
<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	171	2.96	45	4	11.25	42.75
<i>Ficus sur</i>	68	1.18	19	1	19	68
<i>Terminalia catappa</i>	15	0.26	7	2	3.50	7.50
<i>Milicia excelsa</i>	325	5.63	82	1	82	325
<i>Jacaranda mimosifolia</i>	3	0.05	6	1	6	3
<i>Mangifera indica</i>	721	12.48	420	7	60	103
<i>Gmelina arborea</i>	248	4.29	119	6	19.83	41.33
<i>Moringa oleifera</i>	167	2.89	50	4	12.50	41.75
<i>Elaeis guineensis</i>	2,990	51.77	873	45	19.40	66.44
<i>Triplochiton scleroxylon</i>	32	0.55	25	1	25	32
<i>Citrus sinensis</i>	64	1.11	36	3	12	21.33
<i>Carica papaya</i>	1	0.02	0	1	0	1
<i>Pinus ponderosa</i>	6	0.10	4	1	4	6
<i>Roystonea regia</i>	122	2.11	79	2	39.50	61
<i>Ficus exasperata</i>	47	0.81	32	1	32	47
<i>Newbouldia laevis</i>	114	1.97	37	2	18.50	57
<i>Avicennia germinans</i>	89	1.54	51	1	51	89
Total = 23 species	5,776	100.00	2,140	94	22.77	61.45

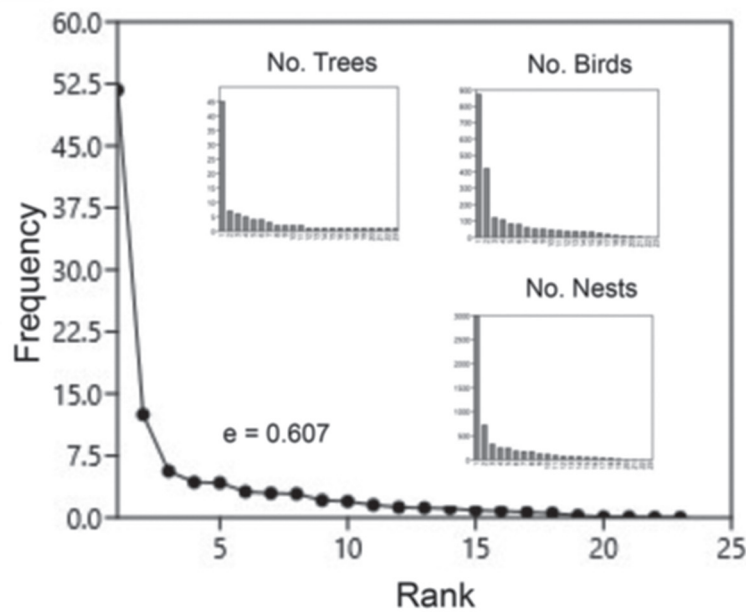


Fig. 2. Whittaker plot ranking the frequency of active nests (with stacked charts for number of trees, sampled birds and active nests). Evenness values has been reported. In any stacked chart, *Elaeis guineensis* and *Mangifera indica* were the first species dominant.

evaluate whether the various tree species were randomly selected by the weavers for nesting. Correlations (i) between number of nests per tree and number of sampled birds, and (ii) between availability of trees (expressed as the number of trees per species) and number of nests per tree, were assessed by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, after having verified that the variables were not normally distributed (DYTHAM, 2011). We performed an Ordinary Least Squares regression between both the number of birds and nests, once normalized to the number of trees. For statistical analyses, we used the PAST software (HAMMER and HARPER, 2001). Alpha was set at 0.05 level.

## Results

A total of 5,776 nests and 2,140 individuals of the village weaver were recorded from 94 stands of 23 species of trees (Table 1 and Supplementary material). The distribution of nests was uneven across tree species (observed-versus-expected  $\chi^2 = 74.7$ , d.f. = 30,  $p < 0.0001$ ; low evenness value: 0.607), as showed in Whittaker plot (Fig. 2). Among the various species, the oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*;  $n = 45$  stands) was the most preferred tree species, with 2,990 nests and 873 individuals recorded. A total of 51.77% of all observed nests and 40.79% of the recorded weaver birds were observed on this tree species. Similarly, 721 nests (12.48% of all recorded nests) and 420 individuals (19.63% of all observed individuals) were observed on 7 stands of the mango tree (*Mangifera indica*).

Predictably, the number of active nests per tree was positively correlated with the number of observed individuals ( $r_s = 0.97$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ; Fig. 3). However, the number of available trees per species did not influence the number of observed nests per tree ( $r_s = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.87$ ), thus confirming that it is not the relative availability of trees in

the field but the tree species that influenced the nests selection by village weavers.

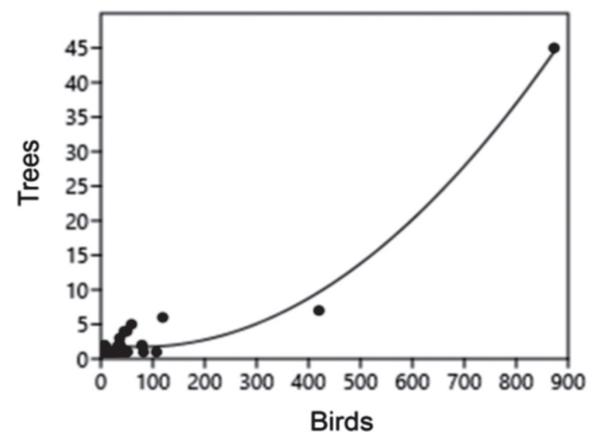


Fig. 3. Relationship between number of birds and number of trees.

Number of birds and nests normalized with the number of trees were highly correlated among them ( $r = 0.85$   $p > 0.001$ ; Ordinary Least Squares regression), with two trees (*Milicia excelsa* and *Bambusa vulgaris*) showed the highest values both for normalized number of birds and nests (Fig. 4): although these species were less common, they hosted a high number of birds and active nests.

## Discussion

We obtained data on a large number of tree species ( $n = 23$ ) used for nesting by village weaver in Southern Nigeria. However, Whittaker plots and stacked charts showed as frequency distribution among tree species was largely un-





justing their weaving pattern selection to the internodes of *Rhizophora* and *Avicennia* mangrove trees, for instance around Alakiri and Nembe flow stations in the Niger Delta (AKANI, 2008).

Our data suggests that the human-wildlife conflict between stakeholders and village weaver could increase in the next years: in fact, this species can be considered a pest not only for oil palm farmers but also by other categories of stakeholders (e.g., linked to tourist and energy activities). Wildlife practitioners should develop measures to mitigate this conflict, such as: (1) driving away breeding colonies with acoustic calls; (2) economic compensation for stakeholders; (3) planting of unsuitable trees for these birds in sensitive areas of conflict. Chemical repellent and other approaches to control populations, yet used for these and other pests (e.g., MARTIN, 1976), should be avoided. Finally, human dimension approaches involving stakeholders are further suggested (for Africa, see, e.g., NEWBY and GRETTEMBERGER, 1986).

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