

Short communications

Notes on the increasing use of urban nesting and roosting sites in Kenya: a nesting site for Yellow-billed Storks *Mycteria ibis* and Pink-backed Pelicans *Pelecanus rufescens* in Naivasha

Introduction

Historically, birds have been known to thrive in urban areas and close to human habitation where various species seem at home, feeding and nesting calmly without feeling threatened by the presence of man. Some species have even acquired names that relate to these sites. Common examples of urban nesters include the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Little Swift *Apus affinis*. Many members of the pigeon family have long used buildings for nesting, and various weaver and sparrow species such as the Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus* and the Kenya Rufous Sparrow *Passer rufocinctus* nest close to human residences. Some species have actually taken to nesting inside the roof gutters of houses.

Urban nesting in Kenya

Nesting in urban areas has become more common in Kenya in recent decades, and there are now many examples. One of the best known is a Marabou Stork *Leptoptilos crumeniferus* nesting site along Mombasa Road, Nairobi, next to Nyayo Stadium, which was recently publicized widely on audio-visual and social media platforms. Over 48 Angola Swallows *Hirundo angolensis* nested inside classrooms in Ol Bolossat Primary School and further individuals of this species utilized the Abasuba Cultural Museum buildings on Mfangano Island. Great Sparrowhawks *Accipiter melanoleucus* and Ayres's Hawk Eagles *Hieraaetus ayresii* have frequently nested very close to urban centres, houses or hotels in various parts of the country. A pair of Wahlberg's Eagles *Aquila wahlbergi* have often nested on a tree in a residential area of Thika, while Lanner Falcons *Falco biarmicus* and Great Sparrowhawks alternately use a nest site inside the National Museums of Kenya headquarters compound. Lanner Falcons have even nested on the eighteenth floor of the famous KICC building in the middle of Nairobi City, and it is well known that a pair of Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* has for many years nested on the Law Courts Building next door to the KICC. Lanner Falcons also often nest around buildings in different areas of Westlands, a suburb of Nairobi. Large predators like the Crowned Eagle *Stephanoaetus coronatus* often nest in very small forest blocks in urban areas, at times close to hotels, and some of the large raptors such as Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* and Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* may nest on electricity pylons. During the 2013/2014 wet season a pair of Augur Buzzards *Buteo augur* nested on trees beside Thika Road, Muthaiga, and White-backed Vultures *Gyps africanus* have attempted to nest in Nairobi on a tree beside Langata Road, near the Galleria Mall. Black Kites *Milvus migrans* have been observed nesting inside the Nairobi Arboretum and Kenyatta University main campus among other urban locations.

In Murungaru Town, North Kinangop, one *Eucalyptus* tree is currently being used

as a communal nesting site by Black-headed Herons *Ardea melanocephala*, Reed Cormorants *Phalacrocorax africanus* and Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*. An interesting feature here is that this tree is a rejuvenated shoot from trees used by the same species in the 1990s, which were cut down, displacing the birds, but to which they returned after the new shoots had matured. A similar colony of Black-headed Herons exists at the edge of Nyadorera Town in Nyanza. Pied Crows *Corvus albus* have for long been associated with nesting on human infrastructure such as power lines, telecommunication boosters and chimney pillars. However, in the last five years, some active nests have been built on tall leafless trees in urban centres, e.g. in Githurai market (Nairobi), Kabati market (Naivasha) and outside Kenyatta University main campus Administration Block. Silvery-cheeked Hornbills *Bycanistes brevis* have been reported nesting near Westlands, Nairobi. More recently, the rare Somali Sparrow *Passer castanopterus* has been found nesting at Archer's Gate, Samburu National Reserve, and this species (or a hybrid with House Sparrow) has been recorded doing a similar thing at Sala Gate, Tsavo East National Park.

Thus urban nesting seems to be a developing behavioural trait in Kenya among a range of bird species. It will undoubtedly be recorded in many more species in the coming years as habitat changes continue to occur.

Naivasha nesting site

One very interesting recent urban nesting site in Kenya involved a mixed colony of Yellow-billed Storks *Mycteria ibis* and Pink-backed Pelicans *Pelecanus rufescens* at Naivasha. This site was first recorded on 16 April 2013, but it is possibly older. There was a mix of the two species nesting on *Acacia xanthophloea* trees around the Banda-Kihoto area, with a dominance of Yellow-billed Storks. On 16 August 2013 the same site was visited and nesting activity recorded, with a good abundance of Pink-backed Pelicans. Over the following years, the same nesting pattern was observed at the same time of year. In February 2016, the birds were observed congregating at the nesting site, which had now extended to Moi Avenue in Naivasha Town, and in mid-April both Yellow-billed Storks and Pink-backed Pelicans were reported nesting again. Currently, the nest site extends from the Banda Fish Landing Beach to Naivasha Town (Moi Avenue). The stick nests are built on *Acacia xanthophloea* trees, positioned among the top branches. Yellow-billed Storks continue to dominate the nesting site over Pink-backed Pelicans. Broken egg shells are common underneath the nesting trees.



Figure 1. Yellow-billed Storks and Pink-backed Pelicans nesting in a single colony in Naivasha. Photos: W. Wachira.

The Yellow-billed Stork has been observed to nest when food is available (Hancock *et al.* 1992), but del Hoyo *et al.* (1992) note that breeding can occur either after the rains or during the dry season. Brown (1982) states that it often nests together with other species in small groups of 10 to 20 pairs, but Hancock *et al.* (*op. cit.*) note that as many as 50 pairs have been recorded. The nests are made of sticks and may be placed on small trees over water or high up in large trees on dry land (Hancock *et al.* 1992, del Hoyo *et al.* 1992), and spaced 1–3 m apart (Anderson 2005).

The Pink-backed Pelican is stated to nest in small groups or larger colonies of 20–500 pairs, often among other species. Stick nests can be in trees, reeds or low bushes along water fronts or more rarely on the ground on sandy islands or even in mangroves (Brown 1982, del Hoyo *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Langrand 1990, Ogilvie 1997, Nelson 2005). Nests are built close to each other and may often touch neighbouring nests (Ogilvie 1997). They are re-used and refurbished over many years until they collapse (Nelson 2005).

Discussion, and urban roosting

Urban nesting sites are very important in an ever-changing human world. Many habitat conversion activities are pushing species out of their breeding sites, forcing them to seek alternatives. Urban nesting may also improve species fitness, if proved to improve breeding success. Human presence may serve as a predator deterrence strategy, increasing chick fledging rates. Some species that have adapted to feeding strategies that are aided by human activities, such as dumpsite feeding, may also become more successful with urban nesting. Nests that are close to feeding sites are favourable as they reduce parent absence and increase chick survival through parental protection and sustainable food provision.

Apart from nesting, some species have taken to roosting in urban areas, a trait that may also become more common over the next few decades, as more wild areas become inhabited by man. A good example is a huge roosting flock of some 200 to 500 Pied Crows inside Kenyatta University main campus, gathering at around 17:00–19:00 and leaving around 06:00–08:00. At Crane's Haven Camp in the Sibanga area of Trans Nzoia, a flock of about 10–20 Eastern Grey Plantain-eaters *Crinifer zonurus* roosts in one tree just outside the camp, and are often joined by a pair of wintering Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus*. Marabou Storks have taken to roosting in Nairobi on roadside trees along Thika Road, in the Ruaraka area, in the Central Business District (Kenyatta Avenue), in Upper Hill, and along Mombasa Road. Black Kites also roost in huge numbers to the south of Nairobi City, with congregating flocks easily seen around the Central Business District and the Ngara area around 17:00–19:30, flocks depart south again at 06:00–08:00, while a smaller flock occasionally roosts in the Ngara area, along Murang'a Road. This small flock is seen every morning sunning communally (with all birds perched on the eastern edge of the tree – facing the rising sun) at a mango tree located along Murang'a Road. Cattle Egrets and Sacred Ibises *Threskiornis aethiopicus* are common communal roosting species around urban areas.

However, not all these urban flocks are doing so well. In the 1950s, Hooded Vultures *Necrosyrtes monachus* nested in the *Eucalyptus* trees close to the then Ainsworth Hotel, just across the road from the Nairobi Museum. This was a good urban population of this currently Critically Endangered species. Today, it is virtually extirpated in Nairobi and its urban populations seem to be confined to western Kenya, where it is still seen in towns like Busia and Eldoret. In other countries, it is doing better in urban

areas, for example in Kampala, Uganda. Urban sites may provide refuge for many species in the future in the light of the fast decline of natural habitats, and they should perhaps be better protected.

Acknowledgements

I highly appreciate comments and input from Don Turner and David Pearson, who helped review this article. Much appreciation also to all friends who joined me as I visited the sites, led by Samuel Muriuki.

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Scopus 37(1): 24–27, January 2017

Received 6 June 2016