

A breeding record of Abbott's Starling *Cinnyricinclus femoralis* from central Kenya

Abbott's Starling *Cinnyricinclus femoralis* is an East African endemic that inhabits montane forests of northern Tanzania and central Kenya. It is considered Globally Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2015) and little is known of its ecology (Bennun 1994, Feare & Craig 1998). There are very few breeding accounts of this species, with published records of active nests in February, March and October, from only Tanzania and without accompanying details (Brown & Britton 1980, Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). Given the paucity of ecological knowledge of this species, I share some observations of a pair of Abbott's Starlings found tending an active nest in the southern Kikuyu Escarpment forests in November 2015.

On 2 November 2015 at 1030, while birding in an isolated forest patch near the community of Gatwamba (1°03'S, 36°40'E), I first heard, and then visually located a pair of Abbott's Starlings in the high canopy of an African Olive *Olea africana*. The tree, and several like it, was growing adjacent to a forest stream at the bottom of a shallow valley, and towered 30m high or more, extending above much of the surrounding canopy. The birds appeared nervous of my presence, peering at me below them, and I suspected that they could be nesting. On watching them over the following 40 min, I noted the olive-brown female was visiting a nest cavity near the top of a large dead tree, next to and entwined within the canopy of the olive (Fig. 1). The occupied cavity was one of three holes near the terminus, and on the underside of a rotten branch, and I estimated its height above ground at approximately 25–28 m. The diameter of the branch was approximately 30–38 cm and the cavity itself had a diameter of approximately 7–9 cm.

During the course of my observations, the birds behaved in a distinctive and consistent manner. Initially, they would leave the olive to forage together in the canopy of another large tree 200 m upstream, before returning after a period of no more than 10 min. The male would then perch 8–10 m from the nest cavity, while only the female flew to the nest. On each visit I was unable to see if she was carrying food, although it seemed appropriate to me that this was the case. The female would spend no more than 1 or 2 min in the nest before peering out (Fig. 2), presumably checking the safety of her surroundings, and flying out to alight next to the male. The pair would then fly off to forage again. This sequence of behaviours was repeated three times, and strongly indicated that the female was feeding nestlings in the cavity.

Of interest, the male vocalized regularly while the female was in the nest cavity, with single, well-spaced and sharp "peet" notes, similar to but higher pitched than those made by Sharpe's Starling *Pholia sharpii*. Occasionally, these notes were punctuated by bursts of a tinkling song, which could perhaps be likened to the sound made by the shattering of fine glassware (sound recordings archived at www.Xeno-canto.org); again, similar to but higher pitched than Sharpe's Starling *Pholia sharpii*.



Figure 1. Photo of an African Olive *Olea africana* and adjacent dead tree supporting an Abbott's Starling nest cavity (yellow circle), Kikuyu Escarpment Forest, 2 November 2015.

In addition to the record above, another Abbott's Starling nest was located 7 km to the north of this site at Gatamaiyu Forest in October 2005 (Kariuki 2005, unpublished). That nest, like the one described above, was also thought to contain nestlings and it would appear that October–November could be the main breeding season for this species in central Kenya. It is also possible that old and tall emergent trees are favoured for nest sites and this possible requirement should be investigated further. Such trees are often rare, and patchily distributed within forests, and the availability of suitable cavities may be a limiting factor for population growth in this species.



Figure 2. Photo of female Abbott's Starling peering out of the nest cavity in a rotting branch, Kikuyu Escarpment Forest, 2 November 2015.

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