

David and April Lahti

2 October 1999

Banjul *Daily Observer*

### **The Village Weaverbird: A Common Bird of Uncommonly Great Concern**

“Look, Seeeeeeee!” cry dozens of voices, in approximate unison, from the great Bantang or silk cotton tree in the center of the village. At least, one can imagine that the garbled whistles sound like those words. The tree seems to bear more nests than leaves, as if these hanging baskets made of palm fronds and grass were its fruit. Over a hundred yellow and black birds (the males) are flapping their wings whilst swinging vigorously from those tightly woven nests, or else they are sitting on branches in a quivering, hunchbacked posture. A few green and yellow birds (the females) are being chased around the area by the excited singers. Each female may fly into a nest or just examine it from the outside. The noise of the colony rises to a deafening riot and falls to a soft chatter minute to minute, never stopping altogether during daylight hours.

This sight and sound is one of the most familiar in The Gambia, for nearly every village has its own resident colony of village weaverbirds, and towns usually have several such colonies. Groups of birds also nest in the acacias and Tembo palms along the river, although these are generally less populous and calmer than the bustling colonies in the midst of human habitations.

The village weaverbird is familiar not only because it is common, however. Its relationship with humans is more complex than the two merely being frequent neighbours. Perhaps no one in The Gambia needs to be told that this bird is probably the most significant agricultural pest in the country, consuming large quantities of rice, millet, cous, and other grains. In addition, its raucous colonies keep people awake in their compounds; the males build their nests by stripping palms, maize and other plants of their leaves, sometimes leaving them completely bare; and at least one hotel in the Bakau area has reported that tourists are being driven away from the beach by the noise and droppings of the weavers in the palms there.

Throughout the world this bird is known too, by scientists in the fields of ornithology, animal behaviour, ecology and evolutionary biology, for reasons completely unrelated to its being a pest. We came to The Gambia during July and August of last year, from the University of Michigan in the United States, to study the village weaverbird. Among other things, we examined certain aspects of their breeding behaviour which we hope will aid us in answering some interesting evolutionary questions. The village weaverbird has many characteristics that make it very scientifically interesting. Along with the other kinds of weaverbirds, they are chief among nest-builders. They are able to tie several different kinds of knots, and build nests truly by weaving rather than by the simpler thatching that other birds do. Also, a weaverbird colony tends to breed in synchrony, so that all of the young birds are the same age at the same time. Even before they breed, the males of a crowded colony can be seen swinging and calling together simultaneously. Finally, the village weaverbird lays eggs in what may be the greatest variety of colours and spotting patterns of any bird

in the world. A small group of scientists have been trying to discover more about these and other aspects of the village weaverbird for the last 40 years.

Clearly the most important issue in The Gambia regarding this bird is its pest status, however. The bird's population size seems to be limited mainly by the available food, for as more land becomes cultivated for rice and other grains, the village weaverbirds multiply accordingly. On and around Janjangbureh (Georgetown) Island, for example, the farmers and elders agree that the birds are becoming a worse pest each year. Fire, felling trees, bombs, guns, children with catapults, and other remedies have been attempted, but none have met with much success. "It is always difficult to free ourselves from the weaverbird", says Raffael Jawo, farmer and alkalo of the village of Tabanani with its ricefields. "The only solution we have so far is to cut the branches of the trees where the birds are nesting near our rice or millet, so they go elsewhere to nest. Maybe another, better solution exists." If it does exist, no one seems to have discovered it yet.

From both the scientific and the agricultural perspectives, the village weaverbird certainly deserves great concern and attention. Perhaps the best way to proceed in this matter is for people to become educated about the bird. On the one hand, the scientists of the world should hear not only about the bird's interesting behaviour, ecology, and evolution, but also about its impact on the agriculture of West Africa. Then future research can be directed in a way which may help with the crisis. We are in a position to begin this process of educating the scientific community after our recent research trip to The Gambia. On the other hand, Gambian farmers and others who are interested in dealing with the agricultural issue may benefit from learning about the biology of the village weaverbird. In the last four decades much has been discovered, and research still

continues. It is very possible that somewhere in the habits or life history of this bird, lies a key to solving the agricultural problem.

[Linda: if you wish, add the following:]

Comments and suggestions are welcome. Please send them to Dr. Linda Barnett, Research and Development Officer at the Department of Parks and Wildlife, Serrekunda.

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We thank Clive R. Barlow and Robert B. Payne for facilitating and informing our weaver research in The Gambia.