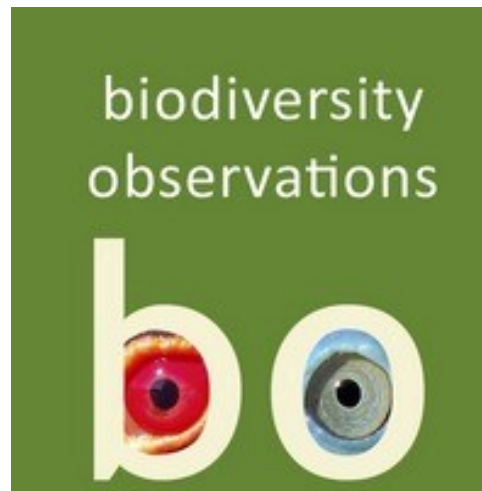


# Cape Sparrow trapped in Cape Weaver nest

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## Ornithology

### Cape Sparrow trapped in Cape Weaver nest

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On 29 November 2023, during a bird ringing session at the Vanrhynsdorp Sewage Works, we discovered a dead female Cape Sparrow *Passer melanurus* hanging from an old Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* breeding nest. This is the first record of a nest fatality of a Cape Sparrow in any weaver nest.

#### Observation

There is colony of Cape Weavers *Ploceus capensis* in a *Vachellia (Acacia) sieberiana* tree close to the office of the Vanrhynsdorp Sewage Works (31.6005°S, 18.7589°E), Western Cape, South Africa. The nests overhang a gravel road. 22 nests were present on the tree on a visit on 4 February 2023; in addition there were many nests lying on the ground. These were nests from the 2022 breeding season. On a second visit to the sewage works on 6 February, a male Cape Weav-

er was seen picking at nest material, even though the breeding season was long past.

A bird ringing session was undertaken at the Vanrhynsdorp Sewage Works on 29 November 2023. The same tree had been used again in the 2023 breeding season; breeding had been completed, and no Cape Weavers were observed at the colony. There were 15 old nests in the tree (Figure 1). Some of the nests had been used for breeding, identified by a narrower entrance and thick nest chamber. Most nests were about 3–4 m above ground. There was also an old Cape Sparrow *Passer melanurus* nest in the tree.

On this visit, a dead female Cape Sparrow was observed hanging from one of the old Cape Weaver breeding nests (Figures 2 and 3). On 2 December, the nest was cut from the tree to investigate further. The right leg of the sparrow was entwined in a long thread of fluff that was attached to the nest lining. She would have flapped while hanging upside down below the nest until dying. The sparrow was desiccated.

The narrow entrance of the nest indicated that it had been used by the weavers as a breeding nest. It was lined with a pad of soft white compacted fluff with a few feathers, presumably from domestic chickens. The amount of lining was not excessive, suggesting that additional lining had not been added. The nest was measured – nest length=190 mm, height=147 mm, width=145 mm, and entrance diameter = 50×50mm.

#### Discussion

A wide range of species has been recorded roosting and breeding in weaver nests (Oschadleus 2018). Rarely birds are trapped by nest material, as in the case of this Cape Sparrow. The Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus* is an obligate user of weaver nests, and two cases of these falcons being trapped in Sociable Weaver *Philetairus socius* nests have been recorded (Daneel 1966, Oschadleus 2012). The Red-headed Finch *Amadina erythrocephala* is a user of weaver



**Figure 1:** Cape Weaver colony at the Vanrhynsdorp Sewage Works; the red oval marks the nest with the Cape Sparrow fatality.



**Figure 2:** Female Cape Sparrow hanging by leg tangled in nest lining of a Cape Weaver nest.

nest users, and there is one published record of a bird trapped in a nest (Oschadleus 2016). Diederick Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx caprius* are regular brood parasites of weavers, and these too have been trapped in the nests of weavers (Oschadleus 1996). Rarely, weavers themselves have been trapped in their own nests (Oschadleus 1996, 2012).

Cape Sparrows usually build their own nests; these are untidy ball structures, usually in trees, and are used for both breeding and roosting (Hockey et al. 2005). Occasionally, they roost and breed in weaver nests. Cape Weaver nests are used preferentially, because these are larger than most other weaver nests in the range of these sparrows (Oschadleus & McCarthy 2015, Oschadleus 2017). A pair of Cape Sparrows was observed roosting in an old Cape Weaver nest at

Botuin Cottages in Vanrhynsdorp in February 2023. This pair returned to the weaver nest during the night after being disturbed (Oschadleus 2023).

It is possible that the dead Cape Sparrow was one of a pair which used the weaver nest as a roost site and had started using the nest once the Cape Weavers had completed breeding. This is the first record of a nest fatality of a Cape Sparrow at any weaver nest.

The nest with the dead sparrow was slightly larger than dimensions given in Hockey et al. (2005): Front to back c. 170 mm, width 110 mm, height 120 mm. A breeding nest from Cape Town in the Tring Museum measured length=170 mm, height=125 mm, inside diameter of entrance 45×55 mm (Collias & Collias 1964). Other nests in the colony were not measured, but this suggests that the sparrows may have chosen a slightly larger than average nest to roost in.



**Figure 3:** Close-up of trapped Cape Sparrow after removing nest from colony.

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