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Ornithological Observations accepts papers containing faunistic information about birds. This includes descriptions of distribution, behaviour, breeding, foraging, food, movement, measurements, habitat and plumage. It will also consider for publication a variety of other interesting or relevant ornithological material: reports of projects and conferences, annotated checklists for a site or region, specialist bibliographies, and any other interesting or relevant material.

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Jacky Spiby

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NOT SO FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS: PYGMY FALCON EATING SOCIABLE WEAVER NESTLING

*Jacky Spiby**

Animal Demography Unit, Department of Biological Sciences,
University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa

*Corresponding author: jackyspiby@gmail.com

The Pygmy Falcon *Polihierax semitorquatus* is the smallest raptor on the African continent with an average wing span of 37,2 cm and weighing 54–64 g (Spottiswoode, 2005). They rely on Sociable Weaver *Philetairus socius* nests for breeding and roosting and it is believed that the two species have a mutually beneficial relationship (Maclean 1970). They feed mostly on small reptiles and large insects (Maclean 1970) but on occasion have been observed feeding on their hosts' nestlings (pers. obs, Maclean 1970).

From 18 February to 18 March 2014, I was research assistant on a Sociable Weaver research project on Benfontein Game Farm (S28°53' E24°51') approximately 6 km outside of Kimberley. On 20 February 2014, Margaux Rat and I arrived at Study Colony 11 to do our two-hour afternoon observation session. Not long after that a Pygmy Falcon pair arrived and most of the weavers left the nest. The weavers alarm-called for a little while before leaving the nest and flying off. A few individuals stayed, continuing to alarm-call occasionally but carried on incubating eggs and feeding chicks. The Pygmy Falcons spent a long time exploring the nest chambers (Fig 1 and 2), often going back into the same chamber a couple of times with what seemed like no success in finding prey. One of the falcons finally flew out with something in its talons and landed on a branch near to where I was sitting. On closer inspection, we could make out



Fig 1 – The female Pygmy Falcon exploring the chambers of the Sociable Weaver nest.

the bald, pink body of a weaver nestling (less than five days old, Covas *et al.* 2004) that the falcon was eating. I managed to get some photos (Fig 4) of this happening. After the observation session had ended and the Pygmy Falcons had flown off, we went to inspect the ground below where the chick was eaten but there was nothing to see. Either the chick was completely consumed or the bird flew off with it without us seeing this.

For the next week I saw the pair hanging around and entering chambers at the same colony every morning during my observation sessions. Although it was very exciting to see them in action, it made it very difficult for me to get good observation data on the weavers. The weavers would just fly off and stay away from the nest for the entire time the falcons were present. These observations of the



Fig 2 – The female Pygmy Falcon entering one of the chambers of the weaver nest.

weavers being absent are unusual because most reports state that the Pygmy Falcons do not influence the weavers' behaviour much, and especially do not frighten them off completely (Covas *et al.* 2004).

These observations were rather unusual, although a couple weeks later similar behaviour by the weavers was witnessed at another colony by one of my co-assistants.

More research should be done into the relationship between Sociable Weavers and Pygmy Falcons and just how beneficial the falcons are to the weaver colony. There is a lot of uncertainty so anything like this seen again should be recorded and photos



Fig 3 – The Pygmy Falcon with the remains of the tiny weaver chick still in its talons just before it flew off.

uploaded to the PHOWN (Photos of weaver nests) virtual museum at <http://vmus.adu.org.za>.

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Fig 4 – Series of photographs showing the Pygmy Falcon eating the Sociable Weaver nestling on a branch in the same tree as the nest.



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