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PRIME PROPERTY: ROCK MARTINS UTILISING NEW INFRASTRUCTURE FOR BREEDING

Doug M. Harebottle

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AVIAN BREEDING

PRIME PROPERTY: ROCK MARTINS UTILISING NEW INFRASTRUCTURE FOR BREEDING

Doug M. Harebottle

School of Natural and Applied Sciences, Sol Plaatje University, P/Bag X5008, Kimberley, 8300

As an institution, Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, Northern Cape, South Africa, was established in September 2014 and construction on the student residences and first main academic building started soon thereafter on what is now Central Campus. The academic building, known as C-block, was completed in early April 2016 and consists of three storeys comprising office space and lecture facilities. Occupation of the building started towards the end of April 2016. Around this time, construction of the Media Centre, adjacent to C-block, started together with the new Education building just to the north of the student residences.

After occupying my office in C-block, I noticed that some bird species – Speckled Pigeon *Columba guinea*, Familiar Chat *Cercomela familiaris*, Rock Martin *Hirundo fuligula* and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* – immediately started to make use of the new infrastructure. The Speckled Pigeons used the outside of C-block and the university residence for perching and even tried nesting in a few places in C-block, but without success. The sparrows made use of C-block, particularly the railings, for perching and the corridors and ground areas for feeding. Familiar Chats were seen on occasion perching on scaffolding equipment that was being used for the Media Centre construction. Rock Martins were first noticed flying around the new infrastructure in July 2016 and used the ledges on the outside of the buildings on which to perch and roost. Besides the Speckled Pigeons attempting to breed in C-block, no other confirmed breeding was recorded.

Figure 1. C-block on Central Campus, Sol Plaatje University. The red arrow indicates the location of the Rock Martin nest.

It was with great excitement then that I noticed a Rock Martin flying into a nest on the western side of C-block on 31 March 2017. This was the first Rock Martin nest that I had observed since the completion of C-block. The nest was built under the second floor level adjacent to a pipe that runs through the wall and the floor (Figure 1). On 3 April I photographed three, fairly well-developed chicks in the nest (Figure 2). On 6 April, I photographed the chicks again which had shown signs of growth and evident by the nestlings being cramped in the nest (Figure 3). On 11 April, when I next had opportunity to check the nest, it was empty; five birds were seen the

same day flying around Central Campus which provided strong evidence that all three chicks fledged successfully.

Figure 2. Rock Martin nest with three chicks, 3 April 2017.

Rock Martins have adapted well to anthropogenic environments and are often associated with buildings and/or bridges in towns and cities (Earle 1997, Hockey et al. 2005). Such infrastructure, provides ideal perching and nesting opportunities, the latter made possible by beams, pipes or similar structures abutting walls or foundations at 90° which the birds often require for nest placement. In the absence of its natural rocky and mountainous habitat, and where man-made infrastructure exists, species such as the Rock Martin, are able to adapt easily and make beneficial use of the built environment. This has undoubtedly led to this species colonising new areas where natural features are lacking (Earle 1997).

Figure 3. Rock Martin nest with three chicks, 6 April 2017.

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