

## TOP SPOT

WORDS & PICTURES  
MARK D ANDERSON

# Master thatchers

Visitors to the Kalahari and Namibia marvel at the “haystacks” in trees and on utility poles. Mark D Anderson tells us about the builders of these giant nests – sociable weavers.



SOCIABLE WEAVER



NEST IN CAMEL THORN TREE



PYGMY FALCON



ACACIA PIED BARBET

### Wow, they're enormous!

One nest can house up to 500 birds and weigh up to a ton – as much as a Fiat Uno!

The advantage of such a large communal nest is the same as living in a thatched rondavel: It's cool in summer and warm in winter.

### Busy bodies

Unlike their cousins that weave beautiful hanging nests, sociable weavers just stuff stems of stiff Bushman grasses into a mass, and friction holds it all together.

Contrary to popular belief, the nests are not interconnected. They have lots of separate chambers, each home to a pair of birds and their babies. Sociable weavers are co-operative breeders, so the birds from previous broods help raise their younger brothers and sisters.

They like to use camel thorn and quiver trees as a base for their large nests, but they also nest on electricity pylons. This adds to Eskom's headaches – when it rains, a large, wet nest can trigger short-circuits.

### We've got guests...

Other birds and animals also like to hang around sociable weavers' nests. A telltale pinkish-white ring of droppings around the entrance of a nest is a sign that it is (or was)

occupied by pygmy falcons, which feed on small reptiles and insects. They've also been seen snacking on the odd weaver.

Red-headed finches, acacia pied barbets and rosy-faced lovebirds also use the nests; and Verreaux's eagle-owls, tawny eagles and white-backed vultures sometimes build their own nests right on top.

Some less welcome visitors in the Kalahari include nasty paper wasps (their stings are *eina*) and Cape cobras, which visit during the breeding season to feast on the newly hatched nestlings.

If you plan to take a closer look, also watch out for those soft-bodied ticks called sand tampans, which live in the sand under camel thorn trees. They can inflict a nasty bite.

### Where can I see them?

A sociable weaver, which is about the size of a sparrow, is easily recognised by its black “chin”, blue-grey bill and scale-like feathers on its flanks.

You'll see the nests in the southern Kalahari, parts of the Northern Cape's Bushmanland and large parts of Namibia.

In the Au-grabies Falls National Park and the Kgalagadi Trans-frontier Park there are many accessible nests where you can take pictures from up close. 