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## OBSERVATIONS OF SWEE WAXBILL INTERACTIONS WITH PIN-TAILED WHYDAHs

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The Pin-tailed Whydah *Vidua macroura* is a brood parasite and lays its eggs in the nests of Common Waxbills *Estrilda astrild* (Steyn 1996, Hockey *et al.* 2005). MacLean (1993) and Tarboton (2011) provided an anecdotal list of six potential hosts, among which is the Swee Waxbill *Coccygia melanotis*. To our knowledge there is only one observation account of Pin-tailed Whydahs parasitizing Swee Waxbills, when in 1982 Swee Waxbill parents were seen to feed a newly-fledged Pin-tailed Whydah chick (Martin 1983).

Here we report some detailed observations on the feeding, social and breeding behaviour of Pin-tailed Whydahs and Swee Waxbills from May 2012 until August 2014. The observations were recorded at 18 Bernardt Crescent, Somerset West, where the birds feed on the lawn on the northern side of the home of the observer (R. Meredith), and nest in two trees south of the house.

### Feeding activities of Swee Waxbills in association with Pin-tailed Whydahs

Swee Waxbills (hereafter called waxbills) were regularly seen feeding on the lawn at the study site and Pin-tailed Whydahs (hereafter called whydahs) frequently joined feeding groups of waxbills (Fig 1). The whydahs were seen in different moult stages;



Fig 1 – Swee Waxbills feeding with Pin-tailed Whydahs

in June whydah males were seen to have tail feathers just exceeding the tail lengths of their female counterparts. By the end of July these tails were approaching full length.

On average, flocks of about 12 waxbills were seen with about 7-9 whydahs. On 19 July 2014, 43 waxbills were counted feeding, accompanied by 11 whydahs. On this day, a male whydah was seen "dancing" over a female which was perched in the tree above the lawn where they were feeding. This behaviour suggests that copulation may have occurred (Hockey *et al.* 2005), and if this was the case, the female might then have needed a nest in which to deposit her eggs.



### **Nest use of Swee Waxbills in relation to weather conditions**

On 17 June 2014, a waxbill was seen taking nesting material to a well-hidden nest at the top of a *Ficus* tree, about 8 m above ground. At around 18:00, the nest branch was gently nudged about 3 m below the nest by the observer, using an aluminium pole. Two waxbills were seen to exit the nest. They re-entered the nest 2-3 minutes later. The nest was monitored daily for waxbill presence using this method. Through monitoring the nest at regular intervals during the day, it was established that waxbills were absent from the nest during daytime, and that the pair arrived to roost every evening just before nightfall (between 17:50 and 18:15 for June, July and August). When the birds returned to the nesting tree, they would move about within the canopy of the nesting branch for two or three minutes before perching on a branch about 40 cm below the nest. From here, the birds would take three hops to specific branches, in an upward, clockwise direction towards the nest entrance which faced south. This routine was repeated by each bird in precisely the same sequence every time they re-entered the nest. On a particularly cold and rainy day with heavy cloud cover (4 August 2014), it was established that one bird was in the nest at 16:50, more than an hour earlier than the regular roosting time.

From these observations we suggest that this nest was used for two purposes: as a place to sleep at night, and as a place for protection from cold and wet conditions during the day (Steyn 1996). Small birds use nests as shelters to help them thermo-regulate (Cizek 1999). Small birds have a large surface area to volume ratio ( $x^2:x^3$ ), and are therefore more susceptible to cold temperatures that act through the surface of the body (Cizek 1999). Grey Penduline Tits *Anthoscopus caroli* for example, are known to roost in nests during cold temperatures (Steyn 1996), and are of similar size to Swee Waxbills (6.5 vs. 6.5–8.4 g respectively, Hockey *et al.* 2005).

### **An interesting observation at this nest**

On 14 July 2014 at 17:45, a single bird arrived from a southerly direction and entered the nest. A second bird arrived from an easterly direction about two minutes later, and after the normal routine of approaching the nest, it entered. To ensure that no other bird had escaped observation, a gentle "nudge" confirmed the presence of only two birds in the nest. Then two more birds arrived from an easterly direction and now four birds were interacting within the nest branch canopy. One of these birds flew away in a northerly direction leaving three birds which then entered the nest. A few seconds later, the three "burst" out of the nest without being disturbed by the observer. After two or three minutes, all three were back in the nest. Again, after only a few seconds, all three "burst" out of the nest. This order of events was repeated a third time. The final re-entry was not observed due to fading light, but a "nudge" flushed two birds that were roosting. After two or three minutes the pair re-entered for the night. We believe that the two resident birds occupying the roosting nest had evicted the two intruders which had evidently attempted to share this nest.

### **Interactions of Pin-tailed Whydahs around the nests of Swee Waxbills**

On 12 May 2012, whydahs were seen for the first time by the observer to be active within 1 m of a waxbill nest. From that date, whydahs were seen around waxbill nests on many occasions. On 21 July 2014, a second nest was found when a waxbill carried nesting material to a dense clump of leaves near the top of a *Ficus* tree, approximately 6 m from the "roosting nest" discussed above. Nest building continued until 24 July, when the male arrived from a westerly direction and perched about 1.8 m from the nest. The bird remained motionless at this perch for about five minutes, and there was no indication of nest building. The female was nowhere to be



seen, possibly indicating she might have been brooding eggs or chicks in the nest.

The first hint of whydah interest in this nest was observed on 30 July, when a whydah female was observed on a small branch about 50 cm below the nest. Two days later a female whydah was again seen at this location. On 5 August, no whydah or waxbill activity was seen, but a "nudge" of the nest branch flushed two waxbills from the nest. On 9 August, a waxbill male was seen with a grass blade at the nest. On 11 August a male whydah was seen sitting on a branch about 2 m from the nest and a day later a female whydah was seen several times around the breeding nest. One was seen to make its way to the nest entrance, but actual entry was obscured due to leaf cover. On 14 August, a female whydah visited the nest twice within five minutes. An attempt to inspect the nest failed on 15 August, but two waxbills left the nest during the attempt. On 19 August, two waxbills were seen to enter the nest at 15:15. This activity suggested possible chick-feeding. During this period, waxbills were observed frantically chasing whydahs on several occasions, indicating defence of the nest against brood parasitism (Hockey *et al.* 2005).

All whydah activity appeared to cease from mid-August. The feeding parties of whydahs and waxbills also faded and most likely these birds had moved on to new pastures during September.

These observations strongly suggest the possibility of Pin-tailed Whydahs parasitizing Swee Waxbills, the second time this behaviour has been observed and documented.

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