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# Nesting trees used by a pest bird (Village Weaver, *Ploceus cucullatus*): a large field survey suggests further human conflicts with local stake-holdersin Southern Nigeria

**Short communication**

**Nioking Amadi1, Fidelia Tasie[1], Luca Luiselli[1,3,4], Julia E. Fa[5,6], Nyimale G. Alawa[1], Chidinma Amuzie[1], Fabio Petrozzi[7], Albert Owoh[1], Chimela Wala[1], Peace S. Wodi[1], Corrado Battisti[8]*, Godfrey C. Akani1, Mercy G. Ajuru[2]**

[1]Wildlife and Ecology unit, Department of Animal and Environmental Biology,
Faculty of Science, Rivers State University, Nkpolu Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt P.M.B. 5080, Nigeria
[2]Department of Plant Science and Biotechnology, Faculty of Science, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt. P.M.B. 5080, Nigeria
[3]IDECC-Institute for Development, Ecology, Conservation and Cooperation,
via G. Tomasi di Lampedusa 33, I-00144 Rome, Italy
[4]Département de Zoologie et Biologie Animale, Faculté des Sciences, Université de Lomé,
Lomé 1515, Togo
[5]Department of Natural Sciences, School of Science and the Environment,
Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M1 5QA, UK
[6]Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Jalan CIFOR, Situ Gede, Sindang Barang,
Bogor 16115, Indonesia
[7]Ecolobby, via Edoardo Jenner 70, I-00151 Rome, Italy
[8]"Torre Flavia" LTER (Long Term Ecological Research) Station, Città Metropolitana di Roma Capitale,
Servizio Aree protette - parchi regionali, Viale G. Ribotta 41, 00144 Roma

**Abstract**

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The village weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) is a common colonial nesting bird widespread throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. It is known to weave its nests from leaf strips from a variety of tree species (mainly coconuts trees, oil palm trees) associated with human settlement areas, grasses, and other available plants. In this regard, this bird was considered a pest for its impact on different economic activities. Although extensive literature is already available on the parasitic role of village weavers, there is still a lack of analytical data that outlines which tree species are used for nesting and in what proportion, as well as the related implications in terms of economic impacts. Here, we carried out the first comprehensive arrangement of trees used by this species for nesting in Southern Nigeria (West Africa), checking for possible different impacts on stakeholders. In April 2021, we searched for village weaver nesting in 95 sites in 77 communities from

*Corresponding author:
e-mail: c.battisti@cittametropolitanaroma.it

24 local government areas in Southern Nigeria, during 14 field surveys. Within each site, we collected GPS coordinates and counted the number of active nests, nesting birds and occupied trees. We recorded a total of 5,776 nests and 2,140 birds in 94 plants belongings to 23 tree species selected for nesting. Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*; n = 45) was the most used tree species, as 2,990 (51.77%) nests and 873 (40.79%) birds were recorded. Our results indicate the preference for nesting on trees used by stakeholders belonging to agricultural (palm farmers), touristic (operators) and energy (gas flare stations) sectors with economic implications about the conflict with this pest species.

**Keywords**
economic impact, *Elaeis guineensis*, pest species, tree check-list, stakeholders

## Introduction

The village weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) is a small passerine bird recognized for its innate ability to craft nests using leaf strips from various tree types, including coconut trees, oil palms and plantain stands among the others (Akande, 1978; Efenakpo et al., 2017). These territorial, polygamous colonial breeders are predominantly found in Saharan Africa (Lahti, 2003; Efenakpo et al., 2017). Despite their fascinating behaviours, this species is often considered a pest in multiple countries, like other Ploceid species (Mengesha et al., 2011; Hiron et al., 2014; Aiyeloja and Adedeji, 2015).

In Southern Nigeria, weaver birds frequently choose oil palm trees (*Elaeis guineensis*) as nesting sites (e.g., Din, 1992), but the available data are quite anecdotal. However, the presence of these birds on oil palms poses concerns for palm fruits and frond harvesters. They fear that the nesting activities of weaver birds could lead to defoliation of the host trees and subsequently diminish palm fruit yields (Akande, 1978). Furthermore, weaver birds face the risk of losing roosting trees due to logging activities or land development, which can have cascading effects on their habitat.

In this note, we provided an arrangement of tree species used by weaver birds for nesting in Southern Nigeria. This investigation is crucial as it sheds light on the potential impacts of the birds' pest-like behaviour on various stakeholders, including those involved in the local agricultural, touristic and energy economy. This study aims to provide valuable insights into the interactions between these birds and their environment, which could have broader ecological and economic implications. To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive review on this topic for the Nigeria (Western Africa).

## Methods

### Study sites

The study was carried out in 95 sites in 77 communities

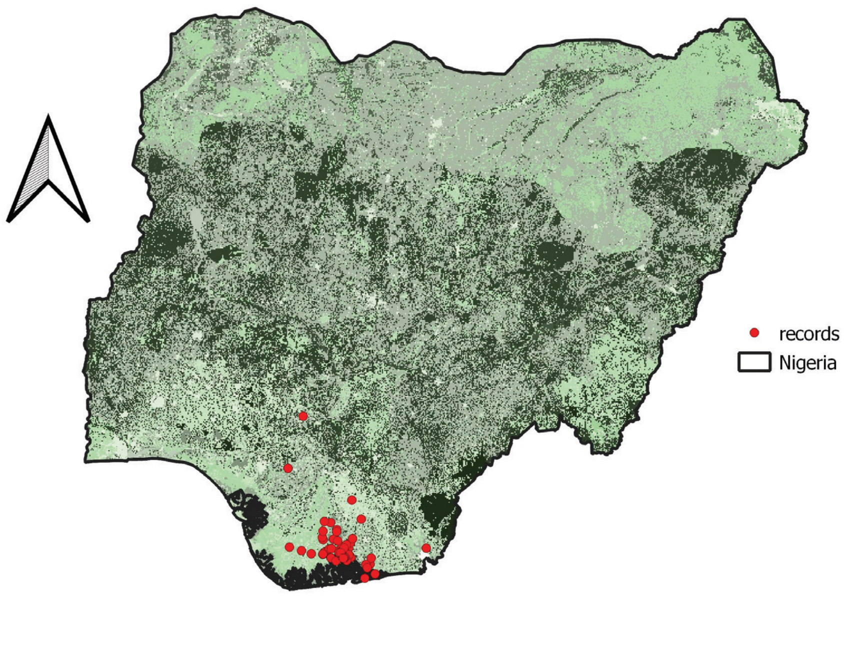


Fig. 1. Map of the study area. Location of records has been reported. See text for details.

from 24 local government areas (Abua/Odua, Ahoada West, Alimosho, Andoni, Asaritoru, Calabar South, Degema, Eleme, Emohua, Etche, Etsako West, Gokana, Ideato North, Ikwerre, Khana, Mbaise, Obio/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ohaji/Egbema, Okrika, Opobo/Nkoro, Owerri North, Port Harcourt and Yenagoa) in six states (Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Edo, Imo, Lagos and Rivers) in Southern Nigeria (see Supplementary material for geographical coordinates and number of records for each site). The climate of the area is hot humid equatorial climate with an average temperature range of 25–28 °C, and a relative humidity of 80%; the zone has an annual rainfall average of over 3,500 mm (Niger Delta Environmental Survey - NDES, 1998; Akani et al., 2007; Amadi, 2017). The general environment is characterized by wet forest fragments interspersed within wide plantations and urban settlements (Fig. 1).

**Data sampling and analysis**

In April 2021, tree species that served as hosts for weaver birds and their active nests were surveyed over a span of 14 field days. Within each designated site, we gathered data on the location of each tree (hereafter, 'nesting tree'), using a GPS Garmin E trex-enabled device. Additionally, photographic documentation of each tree was undertaken, accompanied by a tally of nest counts wherever feasible. More particularly, during particularly sunny days, especially when assessing tall trees, a methodology involving tree photography was employed. Through this approach, the number of active nests and birds was directly counted from the captured images. To ensure an unbiased sampling process, it was ensured that each tree stand was evaluated only once and never subjected to repetition to avoid pseudo-replication (see Battisti et al., 2014). On average, a timeframe of 5 to 10 minutes was dedicated to evaluating each individual tree. Finally, both the number of active nests and birds have been normalized to the number of occupied trees, obtaining a ratio number of active nests/trees and number of sampled birds/trees.

To assess the pattern in frequency distribution of the active nests, we performed a diversity/dominance diagram (or Whittaker plots; Magurran, 2004). In this regard, relative frequencies of each tree species have been ranked. Shape and slope of point line, obtained by comparing ranks and relative frequencies, allows inferring general property of the assemblage, illustrating the evenness (i.e., the pattern in frequency distribution of the tree species; see Magurran, 2004). Considering S, the number of tree species, evenness index has been also quantified as: e = H'/H'max, where H' is the Shannon-Wiener diversity index (calculated on the assemblages of nets on different trees) and H'max = ln S (Pielou, 1966; Magurran and McGill, 2011). Finally, the frequency distribution of nesting trees, sampled birds and occupied trees has been reported graphically using stacked charts (Hammer and Harper, 2001).

Observed-versus-expected $\chi^2$ tests were used to

Table 1. Preferred host tree species, number of active nests, nest percentage frequency (% fr), number of sampled birds, number of occupied trees, and normalized number both for the sampled birds and active nests

| Tree species | Nests | % fr | Birds | Trees | Normalized birds | Normalized nests |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Chrysophyllum albidum* | 244 | 4.22 | 59 | 5 | 11.80 | 48.80 |
| *Bambusa vulgaris* | 182 | 3.15 | 107 | 1 | 107 | 182 |
| *Terminalia mantaly* | 51 | 0.88 | 34 | 2 | 17 | 25.50 |
| *Pinus caribaea* | 72 | 1.25 | 41 | 1 | 41 | 72 |
| *Anacardium occidentale* | 38 | 0.66 | 12 | 1 | 12 | 38 |
| *Alchornea cordifolia* | 6 | 0.10 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| *Cocos nucifera* | 171 | 2.96 | 45 | 4 | 11.25 | 42.75 |
| *Ficus sur* | 68 | 1.18 | 19 | 1 | 19 | 68 |
| *Terminalia catappa* | 15 | 0.26 | 7 | 2 | 3.50 | 7.50 |
| *Milicia excelsa* | 325 | 5.63 | 82 | 1 | 82 | 325 |
| *Jacaranda mimosifolia* | 3 | 0.05 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 3 |
| *Mangifera indica* | 721 | 12.48 | 420 | 7 | 60 | 103 |
| *Gmelina arborea* | 248 | 4.29 | 119 | 6 | 19.83 | 41.33 |
| *Moringa oleifera* | 167 | 2.89 | 50 | 4 | 12.50 | 41.75 |
| *Elaeis guineensis* | 2,990 | 51.77 | 873 | 45 | 19.40 | 66.44 |
| *Triplochiton scleroxylon* | 32 | 0.55 | 25 | 1 | 25 | 32 |
| *Citrus sinensis* | 64 | 1.11 | 36 | 3 | 12 | 21.33 |
| *Carica papaya* | 1 | 0.02 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| *Pinus ponderosa* | 6 | 0.10 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 6 |
| *Roystonea regia* | 122 | 2.11 | 79 | 2 | 39.50 | 61 |
| *Ficus exasperata* | 47 | 0.81 | 32 | 1 | 32 | 47 |
| *Newbouldia laevis* | 114 | 1.97 | 37 | 2 | 18.50 | 57 |
| *Avicennia germinans* | 89 | 1.54 | 51 | 1 | 51 | 89 |
| Total = 23 species | 5,776 | 100.00 | 2,140 | 94 | 22.77 | 61.45 |

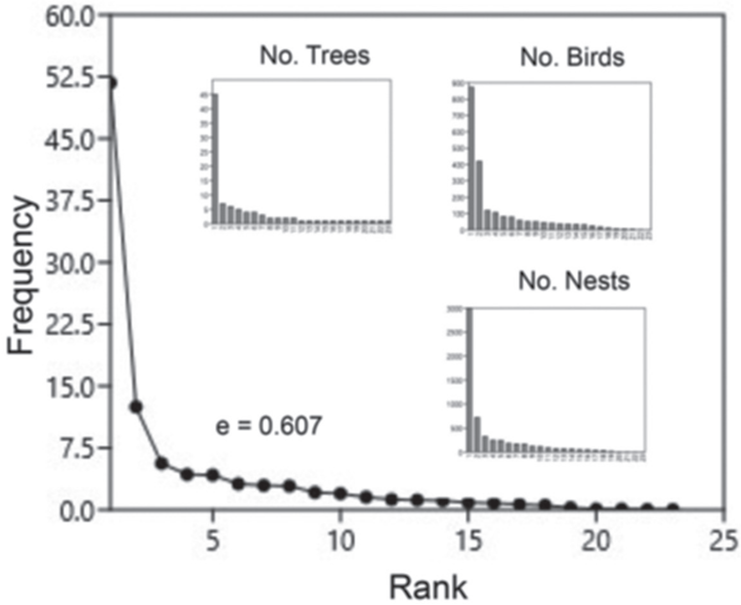


Fig. 2. Whittaker plot ranking the frequency of active nests (with stacked charts for number of trees, sampled birds and active nests). Evenness values has been reported. In any stacked chart, *Elaeis guineensis* and *Mangifera indica* were the first species dominant.

evaluate whether the various tree species were randomly selected by the weavers for nesting. Correlations (i) between number of nests per tree and number of sampled birds, and (ii) between availability of trees (expressed as the number of trees per species) and number of nests per tree, were assessed by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, after having verified that the variables were not normally distributed (Dytham, 2011). We performed an Ordinary Least Squares regression between both the number of birds and nests, once normalized to the number of trees. For statistical analyses, we used the PAST software (Hammer and Harper, 2001). Alpha was set at 0.05 level.

**Results**

A total of 5,776 nests and 2,140 individuals of the village weaver were recorded from 94 stands of 23 species of trees (Table 1 and Supplementary material). The distribution of nests was uneven across tree species (observed-versus-expected $\chi^2 = 74.7$, d.f. = 30, $p < 0.0001$; low evenness value: 0.607), as showed in Whittaker plot (Fig. 2). Among the various species, the oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*; n = 45 stands) was the most preferred tree species, with 2,990 nests and 873 individuals recorded. A total of 51.77% of all observed nests and 40.79% of the recorded weaver birds were observed on this tree species. Similarly, 721 nests (12.48% of all recorded nests) and 420 individuals (19.63% of all observed individuals) were observed on 7 stands of the mango tree (*Mangifera indica*).

Predictably, the number of active nests per tree was positively correlated with the number of observed individuals ($r_s = 0.97$, $p < 0.0001$; Fig. 3). However, the number of available trees per species did not influence the number of observed nests per tree ($r_s = 0.03$, $p = 0.87$), thus confirming that it is not the relative availability of trees in the field but the tree species that influenced the nests selection by village weavers.

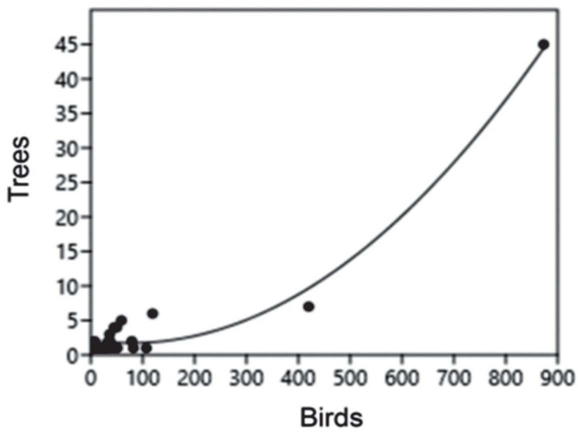


Fig. 3. Relationship between number of birds and number of trees.

Number of birds and nests normalized with the number of trees were highly correlated among them (r = 0.85 p > 0.001; Ordinary Least Squares regression), with two trees (*Milicia excelsa* and *Bambusa vulgaris*) showed the highest values both for normalized number of birds and nests (Fig. 4): although these species were less common, they hosted a high number of birds and active nests.

**Discussion**

We obtained data on a large number of tree species (n = 23) used for nesting by village weaver in Sothern Nigeria. However, Whittaker plots and stacked charts showed as frequency distribution among tree species was largely un-

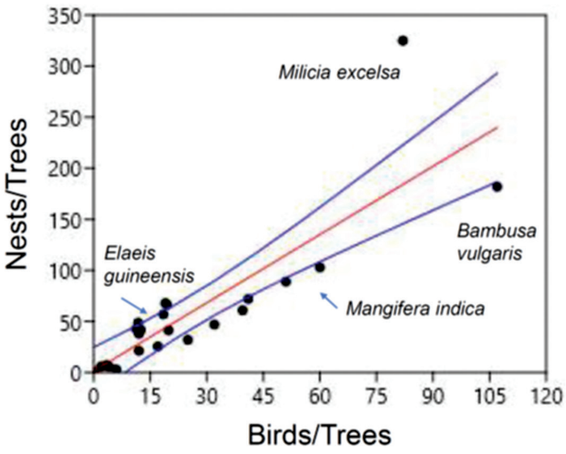


Fig. 4. Ordinary Least Squares regression between normalized birds and nests. Line represents the relationship between normalized number of nests and birds. The location of the first two dominant species (*Elaeis guineensis* and *Mangifera indica*) and the two species with the highest values in normalized sampled birds and active nests (*Bambusa vulgaris* and *Milicia excelsa*) have been reported.

even, with two dominant species (oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis,* and mango tree, *Mangifera indica*) representing about the 64% of the whole nesting tree assemblage.

Oil palm tree (*Elaeis guineensis*), the most common tree species in the studied localities of Southern Nigeria (Reading et al., 1995), represents, locally, the most preferred tree used by the village weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*) for nesting. The affinity for oil palm trees by weaver birds was likely due to the multilayered fronds of this species which do not only protect them from rain but also serves as a reserve for nest materials (e.g., Din, 1992). We observed, especially in intensive cultivation of oil palms and coconuts, that the nesting materials (leaf stripes) usually came from host trees, which were defoliated (see Adegoke, 1983).

Everywhere, the observed nest building materials included grasses, plantain, and palm fronds. This result is in line with the findings of Efenakpo et al. (2017) who stated that the families of Arecaceae and Poaceae always form part of the village weaver nests; because of their relatively high availability in the study area as well as the fibrous nature of the leaves to withstand weathering conditions. Interestingly, species of the Poaceae are grass-like plants that are also commonly used by humans for building thatch houses (Efenakpo et al., 2017). The result also indicates that the bulk of the nest weaving materials are sourced more from monocot (oil palm tree, coconut, royal palm, plantain, banana, grass, etc.) than dicot plants. The parallel vein leaves may be making the strip collection easier for the weaver birds (see Crook, 1960).

The study reveals that the selection of a potential nesting tree by weaver birds is possibly dependent on the availability of tree species that could support many birds, provide easy access to nest making materials, protect nest and juveniles from intruders, and finally, be in proximity to foraging sites (e.g., maize farm), from which the fledglings will be fed (our unpublished observations).

Mango tree (*Mangifera indica*) represented the second dominant species, occupied by active nests, confirming the pattern for West Africa (e.g., Yisau et al., 2014). However, two tree species (*Bambusa vulgaris* and *Milicia excelsa*) showed high values in normalized number of active nests and birds (Fig. 3), with possible impact on plants and conflicts with stakeholders carrying out local economic activities: the African teak (*Milicia excelsa*) and common bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris*), the first being a species of high conservation concern (near threatened, sensu IUCN, 2004) of high commercial interest (Keogh, 2009), the second a non-native grass of large ornamental, construction, food, medicine use, both worldwide (Lobovikov et al., 2007), and locally (Ogunjinmi et al., 2009; Nwaihu et al., 2015). Differently, the two dominant tree (*Elaeis guineensis* and *Mangifera indica*), having the highest number of occupied plants, showed lower values in normalized number of nests and birds.

The nesting activities of these birds are often injurious to certain urban ornamental trees, for instance in Yenagoa (Bayelsa State, Nigeria). The activities of these birds were predominantly responsible for the massive defoliation of the royal palm (*Roystonea regia*) which was serially planted along the entrance of the city with implication for touristic economy and local people wellness, corroborating previous records (Aiyeloja and Adedeji, 2015).

The practice of using leaf strips from oil palm trees as well as plantain and banana leaves was largely responsible for the defoliation of the economic plants and negative effects in photosynthetic activity (Aiyeloja and Adedeji, 2015). Such defoliating activities and the suspicion that they may be instrumental in the transmission of plant parasites between trees they interact with, as well as the constant noise emanating from the colonies of these birds were responsible for their eviction and outright felling of their host trees in some localities (personal observations).

The nesting activities of these birds in certain parts of Southern Nigeria were unpleasant to oil palm farmers and even touristic operators (Akande, 1978). For instance, we observed as in Egbema community of Imo State, a flock of weaver birds were responsible for defoliating over 500 trees prepared for supply; similarly, in a Port Harcourt, the weaver birds were responsible for defoliating two stands of coconut planted in touristic resorts (pers. obs.). The nesting activities of these birds would have an economic impact on touristic operators and commercial palm growers. In other words, these birds can negatively affect the local economy of the human settlements in southern Nigeria. In addition, the selection of trees in the vicinity of gas flare stations as nesting sites by village weavers in Nigeria was reported for the first time by Akani (2008). In his opinion the Village weavers were attracted by the elevated temperature of the environment due to gas flaring, which possibly enhanced hatchability of their eggs by shortening the incubation period, because 80% of all the weaver nests he examined in all the stations contained some hatchlings. He also reported that the bulk of the nests were 100–200 m away from the flare stack (”gasophilic” birds, Akani , 2008). Village weaver response to gas flare site to nest is a case of niche expansion, as they are adjusting their weaving pattern selection to the internodes of *Rhizophora* and *Avicennia* mangrove trees, for instance around Alakiri and Nembe flow stations in the Niger Delta (Akani, 2008).

Our data suggests that the human-wildlife conflict between stakeholders and village weaver could increase in the next years: in fact, this species can be considered a pest not only for oil palm farmers but also by other categories of stakeholders (e.g., linked to tourist and energy activities). Wildlife practitioners should develop measures to mitigate this conflict, such as: (1) driving away breeding colonies with acoustic calls; (2) economic compensation for stakeholders; (3) planting of unsuitable trees for these birds in sensitive areas of conflict. Chemical repellent and other approaches to control populations, yet used for these and other pests (e.g., Martin, 1976), should be avoided. Finally, human dimension approaches involving stakeholders are further suggested (for Africa, see, e.g., Newby and Grettenberger, 1986).

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