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THE NESTING OF THE SENEGAL KINGFISHERHalcyon senegalensis

Netta Robinson.

These observations on the nesting of the Senegal Kingfisher Halcyon senegalensis were made in the Turnbull Road area of Ikoyi, along what is locally known as the Bund - an embankment extending from Turnbull Road at the one end to Ikoyi Park at the other. On one side runs the "Five Cowrie Creek" bordered with mangrove swamp and opening on to the Lagos Lagoon, and on the other side lies an enclosed area of reclaimed marshland comprising spiky reed grasses and flat pans with some mangrove, and where water levels are controlled by tidal sluice gates. A stretch of wooded thicket fringes the boundary between the marsh swamp and the road. The authors viewing point was from the embankment of the creek side across a stretch of water to the nesting site which was in the centre tree of three dead knarled trunks on the swamp. The recordings ranged over a period from July 29th - September 2nd, 1969.

29th July. A.M. A Senegal Kingfisher was observed entering hole in dead tree trunk, had been seen to be perched on top of neighbouring dead tree prior to entering hole. The bird did not emerge again although watching continued for twenty minutes. Presumed to be incubating eggs.

30th July. A.M. Bird again observed perched on tree before entering nest hole. Did not reap ear during a further watching period of half an hour.

1st August. P.M. 5-6. Kingfisher seen just inside entrance to hole before it emerged and flew off to nearby tree. Several Blue-breasted Kingfishers Halcyon malinbicus were active in the same area. The mate of the Senegal Kingfisher not yet seen in nesting vicinity.

2nd August. A.M. A half hour visit to the nesting site produced no evidence of the bird in or out of nest hole.

15th August. A.M. The first sighting of the bird since the last date, although a visit was made on most days. A Senegal Kingfisher was clinging to a tree just outside the nest hole and then after about half a minute flew off seawards. The head and bill of the female bird could be seen inside the nest hole. After some minutes, at the strident cry of a heron she emerged, looked around and then flew to a nearby tree, returning to the hole after about five minutes only to appear again almost at once to fly off in the direction of the wooded part of Turnbull Road. There was as yet no evidence of live young in the nest.

22nd August. P.M. An evening visit was rewarded at last by proof that a brood had hatched. The nestlings could be heard and just seen when the parent bird visited the nest carrying food in her bill, she returned at intervals of around five minutes with more food and was then absent for fifteen minutes or more, during which time watching ceased.

23rd August. P.M. A brief visit with no sign of the mother although the nestlings could be heard chirruping and movement in the nest seen.

24th August. P.M. During an hours watching the parent bird appeared only at the end of that time, although the nestlings could be seen and heard; one youngster could be seen very clearly with bill wide agape, near to the entrance of the nest hole during what seemed to be a small fracas inside. When the mother arrived, first alighting as was her habit, on one of the adjacent trees, always the same one and at the same point before going to the nest tree, she was carrying a medium sized Agama Lizard in her bill and deposited it complete in to the nest before flying off again. A good deal of squabbling over the meal could be heard from the nest. Watching ceased at this point. Senegal Kingfishers had been seen previously in the Turnbull Road area, with Agama Lizards in their bills.

26th August. P.M. A short visit of half an hour, during which the mother visited the nest twice, each time carrying food in her bill. The young seemed very vigorous, one youngster with bill wide open nearly jumping out of the nest in its eagerness for food. A glint of blue plumage was discernable.

27th August. P.M. A watch of an hour and the mother only visited the nest once; at the end of that time she arrived, and it seemed, pushed food into one open mouth only.

28th & 29th August. No visit was made to the nest.

30th August. A.M. As the nest site was approached on this date there was a noticeable absence of twittering from the nest hole and no distinguishable movement from within. The mother soon arrived - looking very muddied - and carrying a small fish in her bill. After the usual procedure of surveying the area from the next tree, she approached the nest hole and pushed in the fish, there was no sound from the nest and no sign of movement. The mother flew off to return almost at once with another fish but at this point another Senegal Kingfisher turned up, her mate presumably, and commenced a display flight of aerobatics and play with the mother, in the course of which the fish was either taken from her or was dropped. Both birds then perched together on the next tree, facing landwards, called so it seemed, to other kingfishers heard in the vicinity and then both flew off in a westerly direction. On the way from the nest site a Senegal Kingfisher which was thought to be a juvenile was seen sitting in a mangrove near the creek. Noted was its all black bill, although on close inspection through glasses the upper mandible could be seen to have a reddish almost purplish tinge. There is no mention by Bannerman (Birds of West & Equatorial Africa, Vol.1, 1953) of any variations in juveniles. It was not seriously thought that this juvenile could be one of the young from the nest site.

31st August. A.M. Over an hours vigil at the nest site and no sight, sign nor sound of either young or parent bird. At this stage the conclusion was sadly reached that the young must surely have died in the nest hole, the mother having failed to rear her brood.

1st & 2nd September. Visits on both these dates proved abortive and the study reluctantly written off. An attempt was made to cross the dividing stretch of water to investigate the inside of the nest hole, but the water was estimated

to be around 6 feet deep and was very muddy and the opposite bank and marsh was judged not firm enough to set foot upon. At the time of writing - January 1970 - the nest hole has had a deal of longish dry grass jammed into it and on several occasions a Grey-headed Woodpecker Mesopicos goertae has been observed on the tree top drilling purposefully away.

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REQUEST FOR INFORMATION AND COMMENT.

C. H. Fry.

When the ranges of two closely-related and/or ecologically similar bird species meet, there is usually 'character displacement' in the zone of overlap (differences between the species being more exaggerated where they are sympatric than where allopatric). In time this promotes ecological and morphological differentiation, so that the species can co-exist without much competition and become widely sympatric.

In exceptional cases, it has been postulated that the converse process of 'character convergence' can happen, with resulting similarities in colour, pattern and voice, promoting interspecific territoriality*. Amongst some other birds there may also be convergence in appearance and behaviour to facilitate interspecific social interactions like flocking**.

Some very impressive examples have been discussed, chiefly amongst Neotropical birds; if the theoretical explanations are further clarified, and if it can be shown that this 'social mimicry' or 'character convergence' is a widespread phenomenon, a field of extraordinary interest for experimentally-minded naturalists will be opened up and many affinities within and between genera will have to be examined afresh.

So far as I am aware, very little has been written about African birds in this context, but in a preliminary look at the field I have been impressed by the number of potential candidates for this sort of mimicry. However, my own experience is limited mainly to west Africa, and I would be glad to hear of other possible examples that you know of. No constructive theoretical development is likely to arise from such a compilation, because insufficient is generally known about the biology of the birds concerned; but publication, if warranted, may spur on more studies in the field if there is reason to suppose that visual and auditory resemblances between African birds interacting in nature are commonplace.

Attached is a list of pairs of species which may be worth closer consideration. Generally the criteria have been: (a) they are confusingly similar in the field; (b) there is an area of sympatry which is a substantial proportion of each species' range; (c) their habitats are similar or at least they meet often; and (d) they are probably not as closely related with each other as at least one of the pair is with other sympatric congeners. Perhaps the similarity between the species in some of the listed pairs is adventitious