



Snacks for sneaks

When it comes to sociable weavers, one predator stands above all others, the Cape cobra. Fortunately, the situation is not all doom and gloom for these charismatic weavers. **By Robin and Bryan Maritz**

Red sand dunes, sparse vegetation, dry riverbeds and an occasional tree amid the rising heat haze. Few places feel as harsh as the Kalahari during summer. While it may seem that few animals could survive in such a landscape, the environment is rich in animal diversity, if you know where to look.

Scattered throughout the landscape are the nests of the gregarious sociable weavers. These are like weaver egg and chick factories, with dozens of freshly produced, free-range snacks for any predator that can access them. One such predator is the iconic Cape cobra.

Using information gathered by dissecting and identifying the stomach contents of preserved museum specimens, reading older scientific papers and, more excitingly, by examining photographs of feeding Cape

cobras posted online, researchers from the University of the Western Cape have shown that Cape cobras eat a remarkably diverse diet. They appear ready to feed on almost any animal they can kill and swallow. Rodents, birds, bird eggs, lizards, other snakes and even tortoises have all at one time or another been recorded in the diet of these amazing predators.

A hungry cobra will use its sense of smell to inspect the various chambers until it finds eggs or chicks.

The rough bark of the camelthorn tree provides enough friction for a cobra to climb up and into the nesting chambers of the weavers. Upon reaching the nest, a hungry cobra will use its sense of smell, flicking

its tongue repeatedly, tasting the air as it inspects the various chambers until it finds eggs or chicks. Then, without much ado, the snake will swallow any chicks or eggs encountered.

Climbing cobras are able to maintain ▶

In the days following a cobra raid, the resident breeding birds will often lay another clutch of eggs.

a grip with their body and tail as they poke their head back out and around into neighbouring chambers. Occasionally, a snake will push directly through the chamber wall to reach the next nest. During a single feeding bout, a cobra can easily consume all the eggs and nestlings in a colony, after which it might shelter in one of the chambers or simply slither out of the tree on its merry way.

In a landscape where resources are challenging to find, finding a hub of breeding sociable weavers is the equivalent of hitting the jackpot for a Cape cobra. However, the situation is not all doom and gloom for the charismatic weavers. In the days following a cobra raid, the resident breeding birds will often lay another clutch of eggs and attempt to fledge chicks once again. This high reproductive rate acts as a buffer against the strong predation pressure that the cobras have on the system.

Much like lions and cheetahs can influence the size of antelope populations, Cape cobras play a measurable role in controlling the size of sociable weaver populations. Animals must eat to survive and the sociable weavers are simply part of the Kgalagadi food web.

Elsewhere in the west of southern Africa, Cape cobras encounter and compete with boomslang, which also utilise sociable weaver colonies. Boomslang are excellent

climbers and spend most of their time in trees and shrubs. Consequently, chicks and eggs make up a large portion of their diet. Much like Cape cobras, boomslang can consume an entire colony of eggs and nestlings.

Although the two snake species may be competing for the rich resource that is a breeding sociable weaver colony, the competition is not exactly fair. Cape cobras have a sneaky trick up their figurative sleeves in that they have a voracious appetite for other snakes. Researchers estimate that snakes account for nearly a third of their prey items. Within the Kgalagadi, Cape cobras have been documented eating puff adders and mole snakes. Given the opportunity, a hungry cobra is unlikely to turn down a boomslang meal. This means that boomslang are at risk of being eaten by a cobra if they visit a weaver colony that houses a sneaky cobra resident.

In regions where sociable weavers are absent, such as West Coast National Park, Cape cobras consume small mammals and reptiles rather than birds, highlighting how important the sociable weavers may be for these yellow-coloured hunters in arid regions. So the next time you visit the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, take a moment to inspect the impressive nesting structures situated among the branches of camelthorn trees. Among the grass and sticks of the sociable weaver colony, you may just catch a glimpse of a foraging Cape cobra. 🐍



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ANTONIO DA CRUZ



TAKEAWAY JOINT
For Cape cobras sociable weaver nests present a ready supply of fresh, free-range snacks.