feather LIGHT

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
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Many years ago, Richard Randall and I were enjoying some very early morning birding around the solid-waste site just outside of Maun, Botswana.

The site attracts a lot of vultures and Marabou Storks and, when not foraging, they often roost in the trees surrounding the waste site. On this particular morning there were good numbers of vultures in the vicinity.

We soon observed that there were also a lot of African Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus parvus* around and I was amazed to see a strange palm swift-like bird with long, white, trailing whiskers flash past me. The identity of the bird had me completely flummoxed and I excitedly told Richard about it as I honestly thought that it was a strange, vagrant swift, such as one of the tree swifts from Malaysia, pictures of which I could remember seeing as a child.

We spent the next few minutes scrutinising all the swifts whizzing past us and then Richard also saw the bird with the trailing whiskers. Our excitement level mounted as we were now certain that we had a rare vagrant in our midst.

However, as we began to concentrate on scanning the swifts, we noticed increasingly more 'whiskered' birds. Eventually, after a lot of discussion, it dawned on us that we were watching African Palm Swifts collecting downy feathers in their bills and then carrying them off to build their nests.

Once we realised what was going on, we noticed that many of the roosting vultures were preening and, in doing so, releasing soft, downy feathers that were drifting away. Joining the dots, we saw that the floating feathers were invariably snapped up within a few seconds by a swift.

It is well known that in our region African Palm Swifts use the local *Hyphaene* palm trees in which to nest and, as there are no palm trees within five kilometres of the waste site, it was obvious that the swifts were making special, early morning trips out to the site to collect nesting material from the birds preening at the roost. Later in the day, once the vultures had departed, there was not a palm swift to be seen.

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At that time this was an activity that had not been previously documented but, having now become aware of this behaviour, I have subsequently observed it at a couple of heronries in the Okavango Delta. Early every morning the swift activity escalates as the nesting birds preen, and as the feathers drift away they are snatched up by a swift.

Over the years I had always wanted to photograph an African Palm Swift nest site and so, in 2014, I was pleased when a good friend of mine, Ken Oake, told me that he had located a nest site in an accessible position in a palm tree not far from my home.

Over the next couple of weeks I watched as these elegant aerialists proceeded with their intriguing breeding cycle and I monitored their rather ugly chicks as they >

An adult African Palm Swift incubating its eggs, which have been 'cemented' onto the feather nest with its saliva.

right *The adult has just landed with food for the young and its extended crop can clearly be seen.*

left *When one of the adults flies in to relieve its mate, it carefully moves over the back of the incubating bird to get into position.*

above *When the adults came in to feed the chicks, they would invariably make a couple of passes and call as they did so. This would alert the chicks, which would perk up and stare out in the direction from which the adult was approaching.*

right *As night fell, the adults would come in one at a time to roost. They would scuttle up the palm frond, settling just above the chicks, and then cuddle together for the night.*

morphed into the streamlined adults that sweep so effortlessly through the skies.

The nest, an elongated cup of feathers and plant material, is glued together and attached to a palm frond with the bird's saliva. The eggs are likewise 'cemented' to the nest with saliva, which means that, unusually, they are not turned by the incubating adults. I was constantly astounded that the eggs could remain in the tiny nest and later how the chicks could maintain their hold on the palm frond as it was tossed about in the strong winds that we often experience in September and October. It was extremely gratifying that the two chicks in the nest survived to fledge.

Most of my nest watching was carried out in the early evenings, as I found that during the day the frequency of the adults' visits to the nest site decreased dramatically. However, as the sun set and the temperature dropped, there would be a flurry of feeding visits to the nest. I was interested to note just how late the birds continued to forage successfully, with some feeding visits taking place so late that I could not see the birds fly in if I was not using binoculars. They must have the most remarkable eyesight to be able to catch prey in the very last light of the day.

I was not able to watch the chicks fledge, as one afternoon when I arrived the nest was empty and the youngsters did not return. ◆