

Cape cobras are major predators of Sociable Weaver *Philetairus socius* nests. They methodically search every nest chamber, devouring all the eggs and chicks they can find, often consuming the entire contents of a colony. Boomslangs and, where they occur, black mambas are also common visitors at Sociable Weaver colonies. As a result, more than 70 per cent of clutches laid don't survive to fledge.

There isn't much that Sociable Weavers can do to protect themselves against these predators. When a snake raids a colony, the weavers utter a characteristic alarm call that rallies other weavers, but they seldom mob the snakes, presumably because this would be ineffective. The weavers follow the snake's progress, as seen here, but on only one occasion have I observed an adult weaver actually hitting a cobra – and that didn't deter the snake from exploring the colony.

It might seem odd that this conspicuous, colonial nesting behaviour has evolved if it is such an easy target for snakes. However, high nest predation seems to be a fact of life for most southern African passerines, and the colonies confer excellent protection against raptors and buffer the Kalahari's temperature extremes.

RITA COVAS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHRIS VAN ROOYEN

THATCH *dispatcher*