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# The Hamerkop

*Scopus umbretta* The Hamerkop is called the lightning bird because in some parts of Africa, there is a legend that if the bird lands on your house, it will be struck by lightning. While it seems very unlikely that this is true, no doubt it once happened!

The name Hamerkop is derived from the hammer-shaped head which in Afrikaans / Dutch is Hamer.

The bird is viewed by some with awe because of its enormous nest. The pair of Hamerkops build a huge domed structure, usually about 1,5 metres wide by 1,5 metres high, which could weigh several hundred kilogrammes. However, some are much bigger. I have seen nests which were over two metres tall.

The selection of a suitable site requires a large tree strong enough to hold the nest. They also sometimes nest on a rock on a cliff. The nest entrance must be high enough to deter predators, especially man, but there seems to be no limit to how high above ground they place the nests.

It usually takes about three to four months to build the nest. Work starts at first light and goes on for about two or three hours daily. Normally the female remains at the nest while the male collects sticks and other items, which she arranges as a platform then raising the sides to form a huge basin. Both birds bring in mud to plaster the nest so that the structure is extremely strong. Once the chamber is as high as the bird stands they build a roof, which is a domed affair of sticks and mud. The entrance faces outwards and downwards so that it is difficult for predators to enter.

Towards the end of construction, the birds will bring in various unusual items for decoration, such as feathers, sloughed off snake-skins, and so forth. They may even pick up man-made objects like old pots and plastic.

The nest would be big enough to house eight full-grown chicks if food was plentiful and all the chicks survived to fledge. However, most birds lay three to five eggs, which are incubated by both parents for over 30 days.

The chicks are fed on aquatic organisms, with frogs being a major portion of their diet. The adults catch "Platannas" (*Xenopus laevis*) by feeling for them in the mud of shallow pans and rivers.

The Hamerkop nest is extremely durable and can be used by the birds for several seasons. It is strong enough for a man to jump on without damaging the roof! When the Hamerkops have finished using it, it is highly prized by other species, such as Barn owls or Dickinson's kestrels.

As the nest starts to collapse, one may find Egyptian geese nesting inside or on top. Giant eagle owls also nest on the top. I have seen Rusty-spotted genets living in a small chamber near the top of the nest while the Hamerkops were still in residence!

Paper wasps may build their nests under the shelter of the huge structure. Some weaver birds will also attach their nests under the Hamerkop's for protection. Thus, while we cannot explain why the Hamerkops invest so much time and energy in their nests, there are many other birds and animals which are grateful to them.