Kalahari Apartment Blocks

As you drive through the Kalahari you can't help but notice the large iconic sociable weaver colonies. These are the largest structures built by any bird species in the world and can be seen on many of the large trees and man-made structures. Yet, despite being built on electricity poles and windmills, they are rarely constructed on non-native trees. Starting with a single piece of grass wedged into the bark of a camelthorn or placed between the twigs of a Shepherd's tree, it can be surprising how quickly these structures increase in size. Once the initial pieces are in position sticks and twigs are placed on top to create a thatch roof. Materials with more flexibility are required to shape the nest chambers, therefore grass stems are used especially after rain when green grasses are available. Finally, the chambers themselves are lined with soft dry materials, including grass blades or seed heads and it is also common to find artificial fabrics such as string, wool and cotton entwined into the chamber lining.

The constant building and maintenance of these colonies means that they can persist for many years, with reports that some have remained for more than one hundred years. The larger colonies can contain over a hundred chambers and house many more individuals. Often the nests become so large that the supporting branch can no longer hold the weight. When this happens, the branch will break, but the weavers are quick to rebuild, and where possible they will recycle building materials from fallen sections.

The harsh Kalahari environment may provide the answer to why the weavers build these super structures. The nests have been shown to buffer the temperatures, keeping the chambers cooler during the hot summer days and warmer during the cold winter nights. It is no surprise then that the weavers use these chambers all-year round. The temperatures within the chambers are also much more stable, making it an ideal environment for incubating eggs and raising chicks.