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An unusual nesting site of a Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica* on Mauritius

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Short Note

An unusual nesting site of a Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica* on Mauritius

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The breeding range of the Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica* is restricted to Madagascar, Mauritius and La Réunion (Turner and Rose 1989, Cheke and Hume 2008) and the species is currently classified as Least Concern (IUCN 2010). The Mascarene Martin is described as being common on Madagascar and uncommon on Mauritius and La Réunion (Sinclair and Langrand 2003).

On 21 and 22 October 2010 a pair of Mascarene Martins was observed flying in and out of the bow of a small boat. The boat was permanently moored, judging by the sea-life growing on its keel and mooring rope, approximately 20 m from the beach (20°17'38" S, 57°21'47" E) just south of the town of Flic en Flac on the western seaboard of Mauritius.

On the morning of 21 October, SWE swam out to and boarded the small boat to inspect the nest and confirm breeding. The bow of the boat resembled an underground passage or cave (Figure 1). The bowl of the nest was approximately 0.5 m above the water. This nest appeared to be composed mostly of straw and very few dry twigs and no *Casuarina* needles, dry stems or algae (Figure 1). The nest was not observed closely enough to see what the bowl was lined with.

While SWE was on the boat, the breeding pair was joined by an additional two Mascarene Martins. The same happened on the afternoon of 21 October when SWE paddled out to and boarded the small boat to photograph the nest. On both occasions the four birds flew around the boat in a loose group with much vocalising. The additional two birds departed from the area soon after SWE disembarked from the boat. The adult Mascarene Martins were observed feeding the nestlings within approximately 5 min of SWE departing from the boat.

This breeding record is within the usual breeding period and range for Mascarene Martins on Mauritius, which occurs in the wet season from September to early January (Cheke 1987), and is along the southern and western coast and inland on cliffs, respectively (Turner and Rose 1989, Cheke and Hume 2008).

This solitary nest and nesting site was unusual. Throughout their breeding range, Mascarene Martins usually breed in groups of 3–12 pairs, with one site containing approximately 20 pairs (Rand 1936, Turner and Rose 1989).

A solitary nest is unusual and in this instance probably because only one suitable ledge was present on which a nest could be built (Figure 1). Mascarene Martins usually locate their nests 3–5 m above the water on slate ledges, in rocks, behind tufts of grass or ferns, in roofs, in buildings and underground passages, also in caves on La Réunion (Turner and Rose 1989) and Madagascar (SM Goodman pers. comm.) and bridges on Mauritius (Cheke and Hume 2008). The shallow cup-shaped nest usually consists of twigs, dry stems, dry grass (straw), *Casuarina* needles and algae and lined with finer vegetation and a few feathers (Turner and Rose 1989).

The clutch size of Mascarene Martins is two on Madagascar and Mauritius, and two or three on La Réunion (Turner and Rose 1989). On SWE's approach the one, perhaps two, Mascarene Martin nestlings on the nest appeared to be adequately provisioned as they lay flat in the nest and did not beg for food.

Observed from the beach, the adult Mascarene Martins were regularly observed flying into and out of the bow of the small boat approximately once every 5 min. This suggested that they were provisioning nestlings. Often, both Mascarene Martin adults would arrive at the boat simultaneously. One bird would immediately proceed to provision the nestlings and the second bird would perch on the edge of the boat. Once the first bird had exited the nest site, the second bird would take its turn at provisioning the nestlings.

As far as we know, this is the first record of a Mascarene Martin breeding on a boat. In North America several pairs of Tree Swallows *Tachycineta bicolor* nested on a ferry across the St Lawrence River (Bull and Farrand 1977). Another pair nested on a daily ferry that crossed the Mississippi River between McGregor and Prairie du Chien (Hemesath 1996). In Europe a pair of House Martins *Delichon urbica* once nested aboard a ferry travelling eight times a day between Copenhagen and Malmo in Sweden (Lind 1960, Turner and Rose 1989). The nest was situated on a ledge beneath a bulkhead close to the port rail (Lind 1960). In Australia, the Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxina* has been recorded nesting aboard moving boats (Campbell 1901). While the Mascarene Martin nested on a



Figure 1: Nest of a Mascarene Martin in the bow of a small boat. The arrow indicates the position of the open cup-shaped nest

permanently moored boat the other examples of swallows nesting on boats were all on boats still in use. Swallows nesting on boats that are in use, especially boats ferrying people, are more likely to be noticed and documented compared to swallows nesting on disused boats.

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