

C h e s t n u t - h e a d e d  
**Oropendola Nests**

*P s a r o c o l i u s w a g l e r i*



Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth



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*P s a r o c o l i u s w a g l e r i*

A l t a V e r a p a z , G u a t e m a l a

All my life I have known only Montezuma Oropendola, since they are common around Tikal. You can find Montezuma Oropendola from Peten down through Izabal (Rio Dulce area). The nests woven by these birds are so incredible that we did an entire satirical comic book on them, “The Architect Bird”).

But in late August, while driving through the Neotropical seasonal rain-forest covered mountains of Alta Verapaz, our Q’eqchi’ guide found THREE trees filled with nests of a second species of Oropendola: Chestnut-headed oropendola, *Psarocolius wagleri*. Their nests appear to be identical to those of Montezuma Oropendola (through we have a lot of research to finish before we know whether they are identical or merely similar). But in the meantime, what is clear, is that the yellow-beaked oropendola nests are the same enormous size as those of Montezuma Oropendola.

And the beak is the way to distinguish the two species (for local people who are neither ornithologists nor bird-watchers, so I call the second species “yellow-beaked oropendola”).

The first tree was on the road to Canguacha, Alta Verapaz. If you drive up the mountains towards San Nicolas (en route to Senahu), you will find the turnoff to Canguacha.


Due to the late hour of the day, we did not notice any birds, so we have photos only of the nests.





Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth






Road from near San Nicolas towards Canguacha, Alta Verapaz.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





Here you can clearly see the bull-horn spines on the branches of the acacia. Road from near San Nicolas towards Canguacha, Alta Verapaz. We will have to wait until we can find these acacia trees blooming, so with the help of their flowers we can identify their species.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth



Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth

5

bull-horn spines





Road from near San Nicolas towards  
Canguacha, Alta Verapaz.

6

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





## Then we found two more bull horn acacia trees Each with oropendola colonies

After getting back on the main highway towards Senahu, after about half an hour our guide noticed two more trees filled with oropendola colonies. Since it was late in the day by then, we decided to return the next morning to do photography. We spent the night in Senahu.





David Santos with Canon and 300mm prime lens. We could do an even better job with a 500mm prime lens..







Photograph by David Santos





Photograph by David Santos

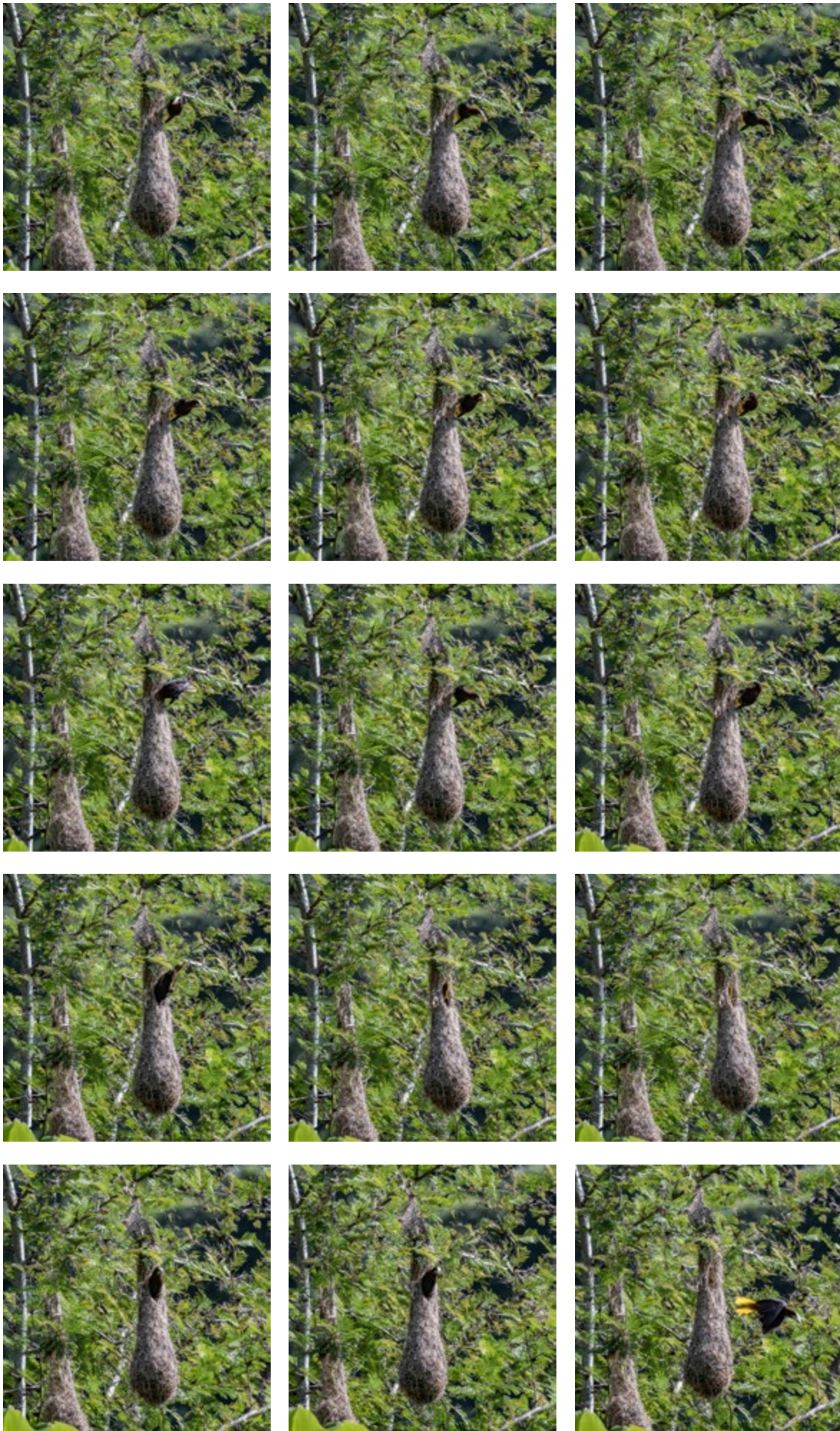


Here you can see that the bull-horn acacia trunk is not very thick. Compare this with a *Ceiba pentandra*, one of the largest trees in Central America.





Sequence of an oropen-dola coming to the nest to leave food for the babies inside (then flying away to harvest more food nearby).



Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth



A photograph of a bird, possibly a species of woodpecker or similar, perched on a tree trunk. The bird has a long, straight white beak, a blue eye, and brownish plumage. It is facing right, with its head slightly turned. The tree trunk is covered in a dense, light-colored, fibrous material, possibly lichen or a specific type of bark. The background is filled with green foliage, including many ferns, creating a lush, natural setting. The lighting is bright, suggesting daylight.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





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Notice that a food source, guarumo (*Cecropia* species), is growing right next to the host tree.



Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth







Another view of the guarumo which is adjacent to the nest tree.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





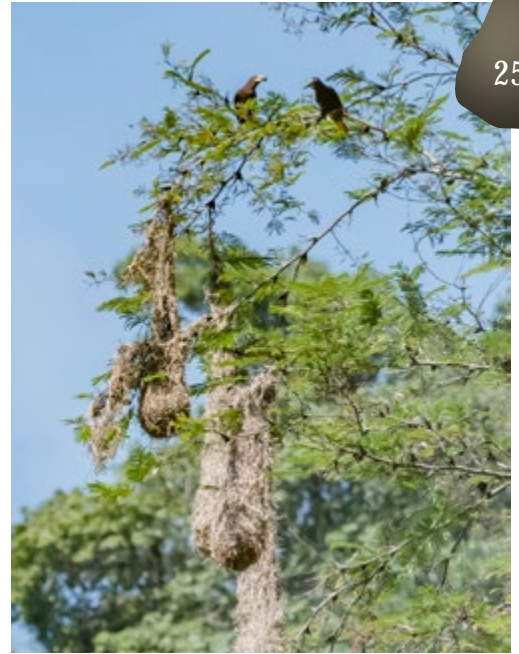
Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth





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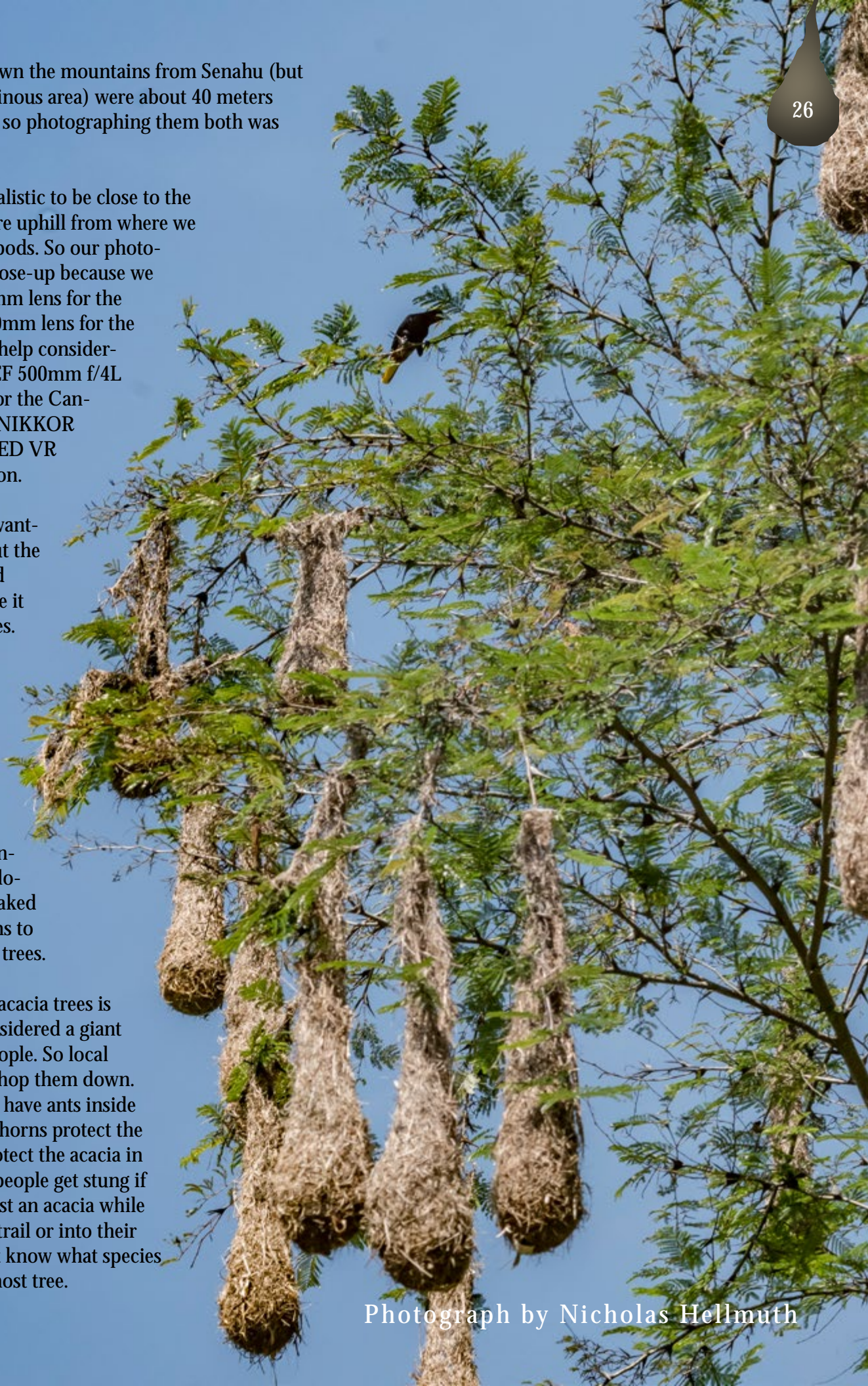
the two trees down the mountains from Senahu (but still in a mountainous area) were about 40 meters from each other, so photographing them both was very convenient.

But it was not realistic to be close to the trees, as they were uphill from where we could set our tripods. So our photographs are not close-up because we have only a 300mm lens for the Canon and a 400mm lens for the Nikon. It would help considerably to have an EF 500mm f/4L IS II USM lens for the Canon and an AF-S NIKKOR 600mm f/4E FL ED VR Lens for the Nikon.

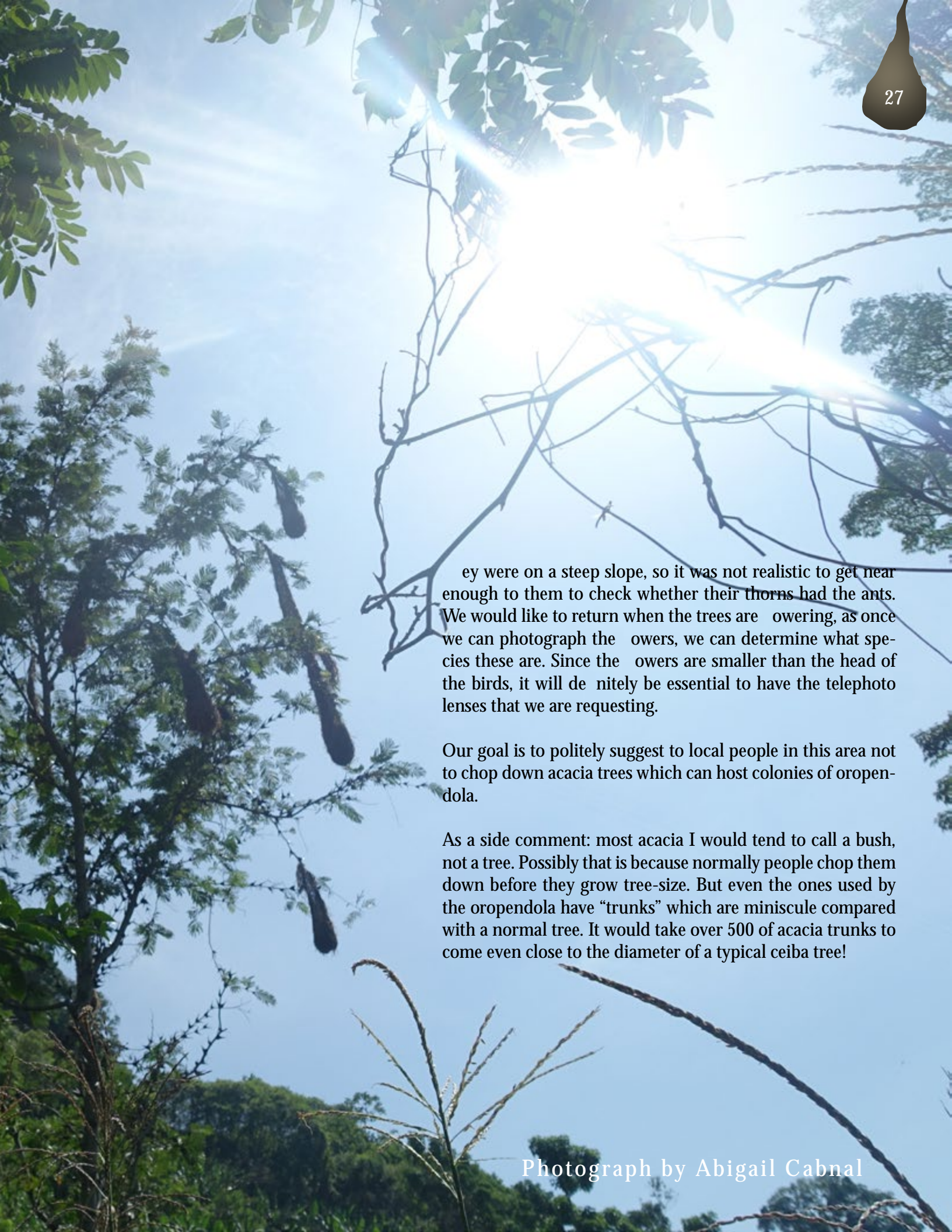
One reason for wanting to write about the Chestnut-headed species is because it favors acacia trees. Although this yellow-beaked oropendola also makes colonies in the same giant Ceiba pentandra trees as does its low-land relative Montezuma Oropendola, the yellow-beaked oropendola seems to really like acacia trees.

A problem with acacia trees is that they are considered a giant weed by local people. So local people want to chop them down. Bull-horn acacia have ants inside the thorns. The thorns protect the ants: the ants protect the acacia in return. So local people get stung if they brush against an acacia while walking along a trail or into their fields. We do not know what species of acacia is this host tree.

Photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth







ey were on a steep slope, so it was not realistic to get near enough to them to check whether their thorns had the ants. We would like to return when the trees are flowering, as once we can photograph the flowers, we can determine what species these are. Since the flowers are smaller than the head of the birds, it will definitely be essential to have the telephoto lenses that we are requesting.

Our goal is to politely suggest to local people in this area not to chop down acacia trees which can host colonies of oropendola.

As a side comment: most acacia I would tend to call a bush, not a tree. Possibly that is because normally people chop them down before they grow tree-size. But even the ones used by the oropendola have “trunks” which are miniscule compared with a normal tree. It would take over 500 of acacia trunks to come even close to the diameter of a typical ceiba tree!