

# Freak accidental death of a White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

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**O**n 18th April 2004 while birdwatching in the Nagzira Wildlife Sanctuary (Sakoli tahsil, Bhandara district, Maharashtra), I was following a nature trail on the banks of a lake, when I saw a White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* on a Mahua *Madhuca indica* tree, at the height of about 6 m from the ground. I instructed my fellow birdwatchers to be silent and approached the bird with my camera. Strangely, the kingfisher did not move at all. We started talking amongst ourselves about this strange kingfisher that did not take notice of our group, until we realized that it was dead. Adding to the mystery, there was a tuft of whitish feathers attached to the tip of its massive red beak, which indicated that the tragedy might have taken place fairly recently, possibly within 24 hours. Had the bird died earlier, those feathers would have been blown away by the westerly wind.

The dead bird was dangling upright as if glued firmly to the horizontal bough of the tree with its long partly open beak. To me the whole bird seemed quite intact, without any conspicuous external injury. However, both eyes were missing. I could not resist the temptation of climbing the tree along with Rupchand Tulshiram Bhalawi and Radheshyam Kevalram Ooikay, both of whom are nature guides in the sanctuary. On reaching the branch, I examined the bird carefully. The only part of the bird's body touching the branch was the tip of its lower mandible. Its left leg was held a bit upwards in readiness to perch. All the toes of both legs were drawn inwards and they had become stiff. There were greenish-yellow contour feathers caught in its beak and the tip of the lower mandible was embedded into the branch.

It seemed that the cosmopolitan kingfisher had unsuccessfully attempted to prey upon an Oriental White-Eye *Zosterops palpebrosus*. It missed its target and crashed into the branch of the mahua. The impact was so great that the bird's beak pierced the branch. The quarry might have escaped, leaving the predator anchored firmly to the branch in the most unbelievable fashion, even preventing the struggling bird from freeing itself. Ultimately it might have completely exhausted itself and died. Red tree ants had attacked the bird and eaten both its eyes.

I also found an opening near the lower part of the flanks into which ants were going. Bluebottle flies had also attacked the bird. Three maggots were found in its body. Close scrutiny of the bird revealed that 1.5 cm of its lower mandible

was imbedded into the branch and as we took the bird off the branch, we realized that a part of the lower mandible was partly broken, perhaps due to bird's struggles and its body weight.



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Fig. 1. Freak accidental death of White-breasted Kingfisher