—*A flight down memory lane*—
The Yellow-rumped Honeyguide

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The very first time I saw the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide *Indicator xanthonotus* was in the early 1950s. I was on a trek to the Valley of Flowers in the Gharwal region of today's Uttarakhand. This valley was made famous by the book written on it by Frank Smythe, an Englishman who was a leading mountaineer in his day. The area had not then been notified a sanctuary. The path into the fabled valley was up the Bhyundar Ganga a tributary of the Alaknanda, which flows down from the sacred shrine of Badrinath. One crossed the river by a suspension bridge and then followed a bridle path zigzagging up into the side valley. After passing the hamlet of Gangria, the path crosses the stream at a point where it has to pass under a great beetling crag. The altitude is a little above 2,133 m. In those days, there were good temperate deciduous forests. Suspended from the overhanging rocks were several huge hives of the large rock bee *Apis dorsata*. A couple of the hives were deserted and it was on one of these that I saw a small sparrow-sized bird, which through binoculars showed yellow on its forehead. The bird was my first honeyguide. It was busily feeding off what seemed to be the wax of the hive. As I watched another bird arrived and there was much chasing around which seemed to me to be a territorial fight.

In 1976 or thereabout, the BNHS organised a trip to the Valley of Flowers with S. A. Hussain leading it. I suggested he look up at the cliff on crossing the Bhyundar and if he was lucky he would see the Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, a bird very few birdwatchers have seen, let alone studied. On his return, he informed me that he had indeed seen the bird. I have visited the Valley of Flowers three times and on every occasion I have looked up at the hives and seen a couple of these enigmatic birds.

Arun P. Singh

Yellow-rumped Honeyguide

Another place that I saw the bird was Nepal, in the summer of 1965. I was trekking up the Imja Khola to Namche Bazaar on the approach to Mt. Everest. At one point, the valley narrows and the altitude is about that of Gangria with similar forests and here there is a large rock overhang. Sure enough there was a large beehive, this time occupied by bees and to my delight, there was an attendant Yellow-rumped Honeyguide!

The third time I saw this bird was in Bhutan where I was travelling up the Sankosh River and at a turn in the road, under construction, there were several large hives of bees very close down to the road and there to my delight were not a couple, but up to half a dozen Yellow-rumped Honeyguides, aggressively chasing each other and posturing. It was later that I learnt that male honeyguides stake out ownership of particular hives and the females are courted indiscriminately. It was S. A. Hussain who had later visited this site and brought back photographs of the birds, which he showed at the Society during a talk on the biology of this singular species. Incidentally, the Bhutan site overlooked densely forested slopes of sub tropical evergreen forests.

From my observations, I think this bird is far more uniformly distributed along the Himalayan range between elevations of 1,525–2150+ m, the prerequisite being, the prevalence of the fierce *dorsata* bees. These bees construct huge hives hanging from rock overhangs or from tall trees with spreading branches like the tall *Bombax*. I would not be surprised should honeyguides be found in the Terai, at the foot of the mountains, since there are plenty of huge Bombax trees with bee hives. It is just that most birdwatchers fail to examine beehives more diligently and certainly do not give more than a cursory glance at cliffs for hives and attendant birds. But here we have a problem to resolve.

If bees are a prerequisite for the occurrence of honeyguides, then, this strange little bird should be widespread across the Indian Subcontinent. Rock bees are found everywhere, even in urban settings with trees and other flowering vegetation. In Africa, a closely related species is found across the open forests bordering the savannahs. Mulling over the problem, I have come to the conclusion that our honeyguide is almost exclusively dependant on the large hives for sustenance, feeding on the wax, honey and possibly grubs as well. An active hive would not be a fly-in-restaurant knowing the ferocity of the insect owners; it is the deserted hives that provide the bonanza, which the birds zealously guard. At the higher altitudinal range of the rock bees, hives are deserted before the onset of autumn cold and the paucity of flowers. The bees migrate to lower altitudes, leaving the now unguarded hives for the birds to feed off. Apart from the wax, there would be dead grubs and considerable honey left behind. In the tropical jungles, the bees are less prone to desert their hives and so the birds cannot get access to the food.

One last interesting fact about this enigmatic bird—it is a brood parasite on barbets (Capitonidae), which excavate holes in tree trunks and branches. In India, we have several species of barbets fairly plentiful everywhere. So the moot question is, why the African honeyguide has spread across the tropical jungles and our species is restricted to the Himalayan slopes? Could the African bird be more versatile in habitat use?