Olive-backed Sunbird *Cinnyris jugularis* nesting from electric wires in Great Nicobar Island

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Introduction

Three races of Olive-backed Sunbird *Cinnyris jugularis* occur in India. *C. j. andamanica* is restricted to the Andaman Islands, *C. j. proselia* is a resident of Car Nicobar Island and *C. j. klossi* occurs on Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar Islands and the Nancowry archipelago (Ali & Ripley 1974; Chandra & Kumar 1994; Chandra & Rajan 2004; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Rao & Sastry 2007). During our January 2007 avifaunal survey of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands , we recorded all these three races of the Olive-backed Sunbird (Pande *et al*. 2007). Here we present an unusual nesting behaviour of *C. j. klossi* from Great Nicobar Island.

The Olive-backed Sunbird is known to occur in forest, scrub and, coastal mangroves (Baker 1923; Ali & Ripley 1974). Its breeding season is January–February and May–July. Its nest is an oval, pear-shaped purse with a lateral entrance hole and an overhanging porch made of grass, leaves, moss, bark, lichen, fibres, cocoons, cobwebs, etc., and internally lined with soft grass and down. It is usually suspended over water, from a twig or branch, in mangroves (Ali & Ripley 1974). Its clutch comprises two eggs that range in colour from pale greyish-white to pale-brown.

Observations

During our survey we counted 100 individuals of *C. j. klossi*, of which about 40 were recorded at Camorta in the Nancowry archipelago and about 60 were recorded on Great Nicobar Island (Pande *et al*. 2007). We did not find any nests of *klossi* in Camorta. At Great Nicobar we spotted 23 nests of *klossi* in various habitats, particularly in forest, open land, gardens and near human dwellings, in hilly as well as in plains country, during a roadside survey from Campbell Bay along the East-West highway, over a distance of about 24 km in a non-intersecting line transect. All the nests were typically as described above, but with some extra rubbish attached to the neat pouch on the lower side. All nests were also active and were either occupied by a sunbird, or a sunbird was seen adjacent to the nest or was seen feeding the chicks.

We recorded two types of locations from where nests were suspended. In the first type, 20 nests were suspended from live overhead electric wires, being located between the two poles at a height of about 5 m from the ground. The nearest distance of a nest from a pole was about 6 m, while most of the nests were suspended equidistant from the adjacent poles. In the second type, three nests were seen suspended from the metallic guy-wires used to steady electric poles and tied to the pole at an angle of about 30–40 degrees. The lowest nest was 1 m from the ground while the highest was 2.5 m from the ground. The lowest nest was within 1 m of a footpath used by villagers. Two chicks were present in each nest (n=3). Brief observations revealed that both male and female *klossi* fed the chicks in the nest but the female did so more frequently than her mate (3:1). Spiders, insects and small butterflies were amongst food items brought for the young.

We witnessed a fight between two male *klossi* wherein both birds fell to the ground while energetically pecking at one another. Though the victorious sunbird flew to an adjacent branch, the 'vanquished' male lay on the ground on its back, seemingly unable to fly. Dharmakumarsinhji [1955] reports such pugnacious behaviour amongst sunbirds. We promptly rescued the latter male, releasing it subsequently after confirming that there was no injury.

Discussion

Suspending nests from metal wires, whether live or not cannot be considered an exception since 23 such nests of *klossi* sunbirds were recorded during a brief survey. The use of live electric wires and guy wires as anchors for suspended nests, in open habitats, has not been reported previously for sunbirds. Sunbirds of various species appear to be adaptive in nest site selection, as evident by various nest sites like twigs, branches, thorny shrubs, overhangs, doors frames, trellis work in verandas, dangling wires and bulb sockets in houses, hedges near footpaths and sidewalks, gardens and various other places near human habitation (Ali & Ripley 1974; Pande 1999; Pande *et al*. 2003). However, Baya Weavers *Ploceus phillipinus* are known to suspend their nests from overhead electric wires in open habitats—a possible adaptation to a reduction in their traditional nest sites due to habitat destruction.

Though *klossi* has been recorded in Great Nicobar as a common bird by previous observers, there is no mention of nesting on overhead wires (Chandra & Kumar 1994). It is likely that during our survey we noticed nests of *klossi* suspended from wires because of their conspicuous location, so uncharacteristic among sunbirds. It is also likely that the usual nest sites, like branches and twigs near human habitations, were also being used simultaneously by these sunbirds in Great Nicobar, but we failed to spot them. Enquiry with local people revealed that the trend of nesting on wires was recent, apparently having developed in the past two-odd years. On the other hand, some local people were not even aware of the nests, thereby strengthening the possibility that the nest site was recent. All the nests that were suspended from wires were at least a few kilometres away from the seacoast. The known nesting site of *klossi* is in mangroves, suspended over water (Ali & Ripley 1974). The trend of *klossi* using wires as anchors for their suspended nests is likely to be new, as it was not reported earlier, although electricity has been available on Great Nicobar from June 1967 and was operational from July 1970 when the work of overhead wires

was completed (Kailash Chandra, *verbally*). It is hypothesized that the tsunami that struck the Great Nicobar coastline in late December 2004 devastated the coastal habitat, including the mangroves, the traditional nesting grounds of *klossi* sunbirds. This may have prompted the sunbirds to look for alternate nest sites and the use of wires is their immediate response to a situation. However, only further study can confirm whether this nesting strategy holds in the future or whether the birds revert to using coastal mangroves to locate their nests. The conspicuousness of the nests on open wires appears to be a disadvantage as they can attract the attention of predators. Interestingly one of the commonest predators of small birds' nests, crows, are absent from Great Nicobar Island (Pande *et al*. 2007). The only predatory threat to nesting sunbirds on this island is the presence of large troops of marauding crab-eating macaques *Macaca fascicularis* that, report villagers, predate on nestlings, crabs, snails, insects, fruits, *etc*. These macaques do not venture to on open and live electric wires—therefore a potentially safe place for sunbirds to locate their nests. It shall be interesting to observe the fate of this recent unusual nesting trend of *klossi* in the future.

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