Nest material kleptoparasitism by the Oriental White-eye Zosterops palpebrosus

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The term kleptoparasitism, or ‘parasitism by theft’, is used in ecology to describe a “strategy of stealing items, such as food or nest materials, from other individuals” (Sibley 2001). In birds, kleptoparasitism is relatively uncommon in passerines but well known in skuas (Stercorariidae), and frigatebirds (Fregatidae), which rely extensively on such behavior to obtain food. Other groups such as raptors (Accipitridae; Falconidae), gulls (Laridae), terns (Laridae), coots (Rallidae), some ducks (Anatidae), and shorebirds are known to engage in opportunistic kleptoparasitism.

Nest material stealing by passerines has been reported in the Japanese White-eye Zosterops japonica, Cedar Waxwing Bombycilla cedrorum, Cerulean Warbler Dendroica cerulea, American Redstart Setophaga ruticilla, Blue-gray Gnat-catcher Polioptila caerulea, Red-eyed Vireo Vireo olivaceus, Black-throated Green Warbler Dendroica virens, Northern Parula Parula americana, House Sparrow Passer domesticus, and Orchard Oriole Icterus spurius (Jones et al. 2007; McGillivray 1980). Members of the Tyrannidae, Ploceidae, and other colonial nesters, are known to indulge in interspecific, and intraspecific kleptoparasitism (Hansell 2000). This behavior is said to be common in the Japanese White-eyes in Oahu, Hawaii, where material was lifted from the nests of House Sparrow, Linnet Carpodacus mexicanus, and the Elepaio Chasiempis sandwicensis (Guest 1973; Frings 1968).

On 23 May 2009, during a routine birding trip to Nandi Hills, Bengaluru, we spotted an Oriental White-eye Zosterops palpebrosus inside thick undergrowth. It was perched below a cup-shaped nest about a meter and a half above ground, and appeared to be constructing the nest. We took a photograph that shows the white-eye holding the lint of a flying seed in its beak (Fig. 1). On our way back we checked the same spot, and noticed that a Red-whiskered Bulbul Pycnonotus jocosus occupied the nest—on further examination it was obvious that the nest was that of a bulbul and not of a white-eye (Fig. 2).

Notes on bird Behavior are often not published by birdwatchers in the Indian region, and this appears to be the first published record of kleptoparasitism in the Oriental White-eye, but it is possible that the behavior is commoner, considering the behavior of the Japanese White-eye as well as reports on the interactions of the Oriental White-eye with other nesting species—such as the records of interspecific feeding (Balar 2009; Tehsin & Tehsin 1998). In the latter case, Oriental White-eye appears to have gone to the nest for stealing nest material but was ‘trapped’ by the gaping chicks (Tehsin & Tehsin 1998).

References

Fig. 1. An Oriental White-eye Zosterops palpebrosus stealing nesting material from the nest of a Red-whiskered Bulbul Pycnonotus jocosus, Nandi Hills, Bengaluru.

Fig. 2. Nest of Red-whiskered Bulbul Pycnonotus jocosus, Nandi Hills, Bengaluru.
one can pick, from the ground below, an odd assortment of raw guavas, badam, jamun, or mango smuggled in from neighbouring gardens, and chewed at leisure—hanging upside-down by the toes, that is.

Green pigeons, elusive residents of the forests, disguise themselves in the leaf-shadows of the Umri. They feed on figs in groups of twenty or thirty, and take care to remain incognito. Nothing will betray their presence but a seductive—’coo-ee’? A sneeze is enough to scatter them in a flash of yellow feet, olive wings.

A curious phenomenon sweeps over our tree every year around the time of the Navratri festival—mid-September to mid-October. A rain of brown, sand-sized droppings covers the floor of the garden. If one listens carefully, a whisper is audible in the canopy. Minimize a thousand-fold the sound of a person going through a packet of chips, and you will comprehend the sound. It is the murmur of a tree full of wild silk-moth caterpillars systematically chewing up all the leaves.

At first we watched in horror as the tree lost most of its foliage. But the bare tree provided excellent views of cuckoos, and golden orioles that relish the caterpillars. Soon all the leaves that survived the holocaust were covered with bright green pupae. The next act in this mesmerising natural drama was a spectacular show in aerodynamics as the pupae metamorphosed into adult moths that emerged on transparent wings. The sky above the Umri was fragmented by thousands of glassy shards. Bee-eaters caught them from wires under the glare of the sun, drongos stationed themselves on the topmost branches, and flycatchers chased them from the shade of the tree, swiveling their heads from side to side as if watching a tennis match. After an entire month, the Umri restored every single leaf, and behaved as if nothing had happened.

Living next to this Ficus glomerata is like having the Great Gatsby as one’s neighbour. It was at one of its famous orgies that we spotted our first minivet. I had never seen such a shade of vermilion in a bird before!

Langurs adore the fruit. After gorging themselves, they fill up the staircase to our terrace—one on each step—in a daze of inaction, most un-monkey like.

Yet it was the coppersmith that was most addicted to fig popping. She came to us in a CD container after being rescued from a bowl of sambar at a sit-out eatery. Her constant refrain of

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**Fig leaf**

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