

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* feeding on bird in Sundarbans, West Bengal, India

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An extensive perusal of literature shows that the diet of the Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* (Piciformes: Picidae) comprises, almost exclusively, ants, ant larvae and pupae, spiders, small coleopterans, and occasionally, berries (Terres 1980; Winkler *et al.* 1995). There are also rare reports of Wryneck feeding on a terrestrial gastropod, *Limacus flavus*, and tadpoles (Allen 2004; Burnie *et al.* 2007). Despite being a member of the woodpecker family, Wrynecks seem to feed more on the ground than on trees, but have also been known to pick insects off branches and bark crevices (Ali & Ripley 1983). During a recent visit to the Indian Sundarbans, West Bengal, from 20–26 January 2010, we observed an unusual feeding behaviour of Wryneck that is reported below:

On 25 January 2010, in the early evening at about 1630 hrs, in the Tiger Camp Resort at Sathjalia Island, we spotted a Wryneck sitting very still on a lamp-post. This species has been listed as an uncommon winter migrant in the Indian Sundarbans (Chowdhury & Roy 2005). While one of us (NVM) quietly approached the bird to take a photograph, we were distracted by an agitated skirmish, and a peculiar shriek, in the bushes nearby. We searched the bushes and spotted a second Wryneck, sitting on a low branch, holding a smaller head-less dead bird, in its toes (Fig. 1). The dead bird was black-and-white in colour, and we could see a prominent tail. When we attempted to get closer for a better photograph, the startled Wryneck transferred the bird to its beak and flew to a higher branch in another tree where it started feeding upon the carcass. It held the bird pinned under its toes and systematically plucked its feathers in small clumps to get to the body (Fig. 2). Its feeding method was very much like that of small raptors and carrion consumers. Our observations suggest that this was a practised, natural feeding activity. We continued to observe the feeding for another five minutes before it flew away still clutching the remaining carcass. From the discarded black and white feathers, we believe that the dead bird was an Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*, very common in that area.

Since the carcass was head-less when we first saw it, it is possible that the bird was not alive when the Wryneck picked it. This is why we have not deliberately used the term “prey” here, crediting this Wryneck the status of a “predator” in the strict sense. Wryneck is certainly a predator of ants, and other invertebrates, but it could also be an opportunistic scavenger that feeds on dead animals including dead birds. Are Wrynecks capable of hunting small birds? Was the skirmish we heard in the bush, before sighting the bird, the sound of its physically hunting the Oriental Magpie-Robin that resulted in the removal of the latter’s head, or was it the result of an encounter between scavengers



Fig. 1. Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* with a headless dead bird, possibly an Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*.

vying for the same carcass? We did look for the decapitated head, but could not locate it; nor did we spot another potential scavenger in the area.

Wrynecks are noisy at their nest sites and have also been known to evict other hole-nesting birds (ARKive 2010). Do they kill the evicted bird, or it’s nestling, and secure a meal in the process? Our observations, in addition to reporting an unusual feeding behaviour, raise several questions about the food and feeding habits of Wryneck (Mermod *et al.* 2009).

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Fig. 2. Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* with a bunch of plucked feathers in its beak.