

## Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosus* and Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* feeding on yellow oleander *Thevetia peruviana*

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Yellow oleander *Thevetia peruviana* is an alien invasive species introduced purportedly from Tropical America (Reddy *et al.* 2008). Its native range includes the West Indies, and Mexico's dry and hot areas. It has found its range extended as an ornamental plant in the tropics (Krishen 2006). In India, its date and nature of introduction is unknown. Its primary promoters in India are the urban horticulturists and they use it extensively to 'green' urban areas, and it makes a pretty picture with its white, peach and yellow flowers lining the roads of our cities and towns. Its range is not confined to urban areas, but extends to rural areas of India. It is able to thrive in poor soils. Cattle do not feed on the leaves, enabling its survival, and which is one of the reasons why horticulturists favour this plant. Though, considered as an alien invasive species, its impact on the ecosystems that it invades is not much understood. It is one of the known poisonous plants of the world and all its parts are poisonous. But surprisingly, some birds have been observed to feed on its nectar and fruits.

A few of a flock of approximately ten Oriental White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* were observed feeding on the unripe fruit which was still on the tree, of the poisonous yellow oleander tree on 7 December 2009. The yellow oleander trees were avenue trees in Palam Vihar, a residential colony in Gurgaon. This is an addition to the list of birds reported to have fruits of yellow oleander as part of their diet—Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* (Krishnan 1952; Kannan 1992), Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris* (Neelakantan 1953), Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, (Krishnan 1954), Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis* (Raj 1963), Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* (Raj 1960), White-headed Babbler *Turdoides affinis*, White-browed Bulbul *P. luteolus* (Raj 1960), Red-whiskered Bulbul *P. jocosus* (Raj 1963), Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* (Raj 1963), and domestic fowl (Rajasingh & Rajasingh 1971). The ground below was littered with half eaten fruit indicating that the birds avidly ate the fruits. The half-eaten fruit litter was very like that of parakeets' feast of guava fruits in an orchard. Purple Sunbirds *Nectarinia asiatica* were also observed feasting on the nectar of flowers of yellow oleander.

It is well known that all parts of yellow oleander are poisonous to humans. What are not known are the immune properties of these birds *vis-à-vis* the poison contained in the fruits and flowers of yellow oleander and whether the poison is neutralised by ingestion of a neutralising agent. Also, whether the fruits of the yellow oleander are an integral part of the regular diet of these birds, or only taken during times of food scarcity. It is also not clear whether this is a phenomenon confined only to areas where the tree has been widely introduced by civic agencies in greening areas, especially urban, which could imply that given its relatively recent addition to the local ecosystems, it has increased the food diversity and security, especially, of urban populations of Oriental White-eyes. Further, it is also not known whether there is any impact of the toxins on predators of birds that have fed on the fruits and flower nectar of yellow oleander.

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