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Possible bark ingestion behaviour in a Brown-headed Barbet *Psilopogon zeylanicus*

On 26 September 2025, at 1705 h, while birding near Oriya Road in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India (24.627°N, 72.741°E; 1,200 m asl), I observed a Brown-headed Barbet *Psilopogon zeylanicus* engaging in unusual behaviour involving possible bark fragment ingestion from a branch of a Cluster Fig *Ficus racemosa* [200]. The bird was observed chipping-off bark fragments in its bill, and then manipulating the bark fragments by repeatedly tossing pieces in the air; but it struggled to manage the larger fragments [201–202]. Some pieces fell to the ground, which were eventually retrieved, and the bird then attempted to break them into smaller pieces. The bird was seen ingesting 2–3 smaller bark fragments over a period of c.5 min, before flying away carrying a remaining piece in its bill (Sahil 2025). During my observations, there was no apparent evidence of insects on the bark. Some branches, including the one on which the bird was perched, bore fungal growth, but the bird appeared to have chipped-off a section of bark from an adjacent branch without visible fungus, suggesting the behaviour may not have been solely related to foraging for small invertebrates.

The Brown-headed Barbet is primarily frugivorous, occasionally takes insects and animal matter, and known to excavate nest cavities in dead wood. The species generally feeds on a variety of berries and fruits, and also consumes flower parts (Ali & Ripley 1983; Short & Horne 2001; Krishnan 2021). Similar diets are typical across Asian Barbets (Megalaimidae), which are mainly arboreal frugivores and supplement with insects during breeding. Certain African Barbets (Lybiidae), as well as Coppersmith Barbet *P. haemacephalus*, a species common in the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia, feed on insects and larvae, which the birds seek among branches and crevices of bark (Marshall & Marshall 1871). There appears to be no literature available on intentional bark ingestion feeding behaviour for Brown-headed Barbet. Some frugivorous bird species ingest small stones and grit to aid in digestion (Dean & Milton 1991; Gionfriddo & Best 1995). Woody material, twigs, or cambium is occasionally eaten to assist



200. Brown-headed Barbet manipulating bark fragments in its bill.



201. Brown-headed Barbet tossing bark fragments.



202. Brown-headed Barbet manipulating bark fragments in its bill.

digestion or obtain minerals in a few unrelated groups, such as Ruffed Grouse *Bonasa umbellus* and certain parrots (Forshaw 2010; Rusch et al. 2020).

In correspondence with the author of the *Birds of the World* species account for Brown-headed Barbet (Krishnan 2021), the following explanations were proposed and are considered here: (1) the bird may have been extracting small invertebrates concealed within the bark; (2) bark fragments may have been ingested to function as gastroliths or to aid digestion in the gizzard; and (3) the individual may have been collecting wood fragments

for use as nest lining or nest construction, given that Brown-headed Barbet uses wood chips and excavated material in nests which are usually constructed in cavities of a dead or partly dead tree trunk or branch. The lack of obvious surface invertebrates does not exclude hidden prey, and the apparent deliberate retrieval and transport of fragments could be for either digestive or nesting purposes; however, ingestion of bark material is unique. Comparable cases of true bark ingestion have not been documented in Asian barbets, though bark-stripping and wood-pecking behaviours are noted in related groups such as woodpeckers (Tate 1973; Winkler et al. 1995). In Malaysia, "woodpecking" has been observed with a Red-throated Barbet *P. mystacophanos* to extract insect larvae, representing a rare instance of true woodpecker-like foraging (Short 1973). The nature of this behaviour indicates deliberate foraging rather than incidental excavation and suggests that some barbets exhibit woodpecker-like feeding behaviour and capabilities, with implications for understanding feeding flexibility and evolutionary relationships. Bark itself may provide limited direct nutrition but can harbour secondary food sources such as fungi, lichens, or concealed invertebrates; alternatively, bark fragments might serve a functional role in digestion. Without repeated observations or gut/behavioural-study data, it is not possible to distinguish between opportunistic foraging, gizzard-related ingestion, or transport for nesting. The observation therefore highlights the need for additional records and for any future observers to document context, and whether fragments are retained at a nest site, or whether multiple individuals exhibit similar behaviour.

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Status of the Little Owl *Athene noctua* in Himachal Pradesh, India

The Little Owl *Athene noctua* is a compact, plump, and relatively small owl with broad and rounded wings (Holt et al. 2020). It is sandy-brown in colour, with white spotting on the upperparts and white streaking on the crown, and has brown streaking over whitish underparts (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Little Owl is larger than the similar Spotted Owlet *A. brama*, and the two species are sympatric only in Baluchistan (Pakistan) (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Little Owl shows streaking on the crown, breast, and flanks, and broader whitish bands on tail, compared to the Spotted Owlet showing a spotted crown, scaled or barred underparts, and narrower banding on tail (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This note documents the sightings of the Little Owl from the Lahaul and Spiti District of Himachal Pradesh, India.

On 23 August 2016, AV and KG reached Thinam (32.312°N, 78.063°E; c.4,665 m asl), a temporary settlement in the Spiti Valley, Lahaul and Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh. Beyond this point, they trekked along the mountain base as the dirt road ends here. After c.1 km, in a rocky area with numerous large boulders scattered across the terrain (32.317°N, 78.062°E; c.4,715 m asl), they observed an owl. It was immediately identified as a Little Owl as per features, and given that no other similar species occur in this habitat. The individual was shy and did not allow a close approach. A few photographs were taken with binoculars and phone before we left the site [203].



203. Little Owl at Thinam on 23 August 2016.

On 07 October 2017, Rima Dhillon, Sarabjeet Kaur, Navjit Singh, and Narbir Kahlon from the Chandigarh Bird Club were birding in the Lahaul and Spiti District. While travelling between Batal (32.358°N, 77.619°E; c.4,020 m asl) and Chhota Dara (32.294°N, 77.522°E; c.3,800 m asl) in Lahaul, they reached an unnamed location, roughly halfway between these two settlements. They observed an owl perched on a boulder near the road and identified it as a Little Owl (Kaur 2017). The area lies between the mountains and the Chandrabhaga River, and the habitat was boulder-strewn and rocky. A few photographs were taken before continuing their journey.

While birding around Tashigang village (32.293°N, 78.053°E; c.4,430 m asl), Spiti, on the afternoon of 08 June 2025, MAS noticed an owl, which flew close to him and settled on a nearby rock. The individual was seen carrying a vole *Alticola cf. stoliczkanus* that it had probably hunted. It was identified as a Little Owl based on features. The same individual was observed again a few days later, roosting during the day on a large rock on the hillside. The site was surrounded by stony slopes, supporting sparse herbaceous cover and scrub, dominated by