NOTEBOOK

Presumed coprophagia by female Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis* on Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trochileum* chick, Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia

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On 29 July 2012 whilst birdwatching on the campus of Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta (7.785°S 110.394°E), between about 12h15 and 13h38 we watched a female Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis* behaving in a way we had not previously seen. This bird was using its bill to suck at a fecal sac protruding from the cloaca of a Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trochileum* chick which was perched about 3 m up in a Pohon Kupu-kupu *Bauhinia purpurea* tree.

We had been watching a pair of Scarlet-headed Flowerpeckers feeding the chick when, suddenly, a female Olive-backed Sunbird appeared and started sucking the cloaca of the Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker chick whilst the mother flowerpecker continued to feed it (Plates 1 & 2). The behaviour was repeated twice more during the time we watched the tree (Plate 3).

We deduced that this was an act of coprophagia (consumption of faeces) of the Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker chick by the female Olive-backed Sunbird. The Olive-backed Sunbird is known to be an insectivore and nectarivore. Adults have been recorded eating spiders and termites, and possibly nectar (Maher 1991). It also forages on a wide range of flowering plants (Cheke et al. 2001, MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993) including mistletoe.

The behaviour of the female Olive-backed Sunbird we observed may be described as interspecific coprophagia—when a species eats the

Plate 1. The first interactions seen: female Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trochileum* feeding chick, while female Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis* approaches from below, 29 July 2012.

Plate 2. Female Olive-backed Sunbird now in position to suck the cloaca of chick Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker, 29 July 2012.
faeces of another species. The purpose of coprophagia in some cases is to optimise the absorption of nutrients and ingest beneficial microorganisms (e.g. that confer natural immunity). It may also be abnormal behaviour, brought about by stress, feeding problems or environmental influences. Bas van Balen (pers. comm.) confirmed that there was nothing about coprophagia in sunbirds in the literature available to him. He further commented that young flowerpeckers are mainly fed with mistletoe fruits, which make very sticky fecals, which the birds get rid of only by wiping them off against branches. This may be the reason why the sunbird sucked at rather than ate the protruding fecal sac.

Coprophagy is uncommon in birds, except for the consumption of nestlings’ faeces by parents in songbird species (Hurd et al. 1991). Vultures like Egyptian Neophron percnopterus and Hooded Necrosyrtes monachus are well known for eating deposited faeces, as are domestic fowl and cagebirds—Budgerigars Melopsittacus undulatus and Cockatiels Nymphicus hollandicus. The Egyptian Vulture includes ungulate faeces in its diet for cosmetic purposes (Negro et al. 2002). However, we have received information about other possible cases of cloacal coprophagia in Java by Green Peafowl Pavo muticus in Baluran National Park, East Java (K. Baskoro pers. comm. 2012). Mr Baskoro told us that he had occasionally seen what he thought was interspecific cloacal coprophagia (Plate 4), but usually birds foraged and fed normally.

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References

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