

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 *Poliioptila 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 nest material 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 sandwichensis* (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).

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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.

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Fig leaf

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Bhatt, N. 2010. Fig leaf. *Indian Birds* 10 (1): 23–24.

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Our ‘*adda*’ does brisk business. We never suffer low spirits or bootlegger-trouble though we do operate from a ‘dry’ state. In fact, what began as a pilot plant in the backyard, grew to develop offshoots across our neighbourhood. No publicity needed either, to tempt in the steady flow of customers! They crawl in under the gates, leap walls, or simply drop out of the sky.

Ankle deep in russets, corduroy browns, and shocking pink, the ‘*Udumbar*’ (Sanskrit) or ‘*Gular*’ (Hindi/Urdu) grows in a steam of its own ferment leaning against our compound wall like a voluptuous *yakshini*. ‘*Umri*’ (in the language of the Bhil tribe from Banswara, Rajasthan), our wild fig tree, is patronized by an eclectic clientele—birds, beasts, and humans.

Figs are poked, pecked, and flung from trunk, and branches, where they cluster, weaving a thick carpet beneath. With equal speed a workforce of ants, beetles, earthworms, grubs, *etc.*, unravel its gaudy fabric as they wheel the broken fruit to underground factories. For a week every month the house reeks of spilled liquor. To step into the garden is to wade into a pot of afternoon-toddy.

“Oh, so you have an *Athi* in your garden!” exclaimed an acquaintance as she began to recall her hometown, Coorg, and the wild fig trees grown there to shade coffee plantations. “Buffaloes too are fed its fruit to increase milk-yield, and yet”, she giggled, “to be called an *Athi*, is to be compared to a very beautiful, very indolent, woman!”

Some of those who frequent our ‘*Shebeen*’¹ are no larger than particles of light. The tiny fig wasp that lays its eggs in the raw fig is one such. When it ripens and bursts, the adult wasps crowd out from its plush interiors like an after-show mob at the movies. In search of insects numerous feathered creatures flicker among the leaves, performing dizzy acrobatics—the black-and-yellow songster—*iora*, tailorbird, wren-warbler, and fantail-flycatcher.

Rosy pastors arrive by the bus-load—like a wedding party descending in a din of excitement followed by much feasting, yelling, grooming, and generally hanging out. Butterscotch, and sooty black—members of the ‘*Starling*’ family—they emigrate from Eastern Europe where they breed in summer. Their CVs claim they are some of the greediest locust eaters of India.

On any odd day one can spot a number of garden lizards tip-toeing up the *Umra*’s trunk. They grow pale upon its branches, blush in a cluster of figs, or scuttle with gaping mouth after moths. In hot pursuit of the lizards come the crow-pheasants, fondly known as ‘*Dholku*’ (country drum) after its resonating call.

Our tavern stays open all night for flying foxes. These large fruit bats descend in a flourish of designer capes. In the morning

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.

A feral pig too was a regular for some months, sleeping off the high under the tree, and lurching out every evening.

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