



Afrotropical Bird Biology

Journal of the Natural History of African Birds

Vol 3

Mutualism between Lesser Honeyguide and Bushbuck

Keith Layfield

TC Robertson Nature Reserve Scottburgh, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

email: tcrobertsonnaturereserve2015@gmail.com

Abstract

Lesser Honeyguide is mainly cerophagous, but it is also known to feed on invertebrates such as bees and their larvae, wasps and termite alates. This note reports on an observation of a Lesser Honeyguide gleaning ticks and possibly other invertebrates off a Bushbuck.

Keywords: Lesser Honeyguide, *Indicator minor*, Bushbuck, *Tragelaphus sylvaticus*, cerophagy, mutualism

Bird-mammal associations are well-known phenomena and have been reported for many species (Mikula *et al.* 2018). Birds use their larger mammalian hosts as perches, as food sources, e.g., gleaning ectoparasites and bits of the host's tissues, to increase protection against predators, and even as a source of nesting material (Oatley 1982; Symes 2017; Mikula *et al.* 2018). The mutualistic relationship between oxpeckers and mammalian herbivores is arguably the best-known example, but there are many other examples of bird-mammal mutualistic associations (Mikula *et al.* 2018). Various associations (e.g., mutualism, commensalism, symbiotic) between Bushbuck *Tragelaphus sylvaticus* and birds have been reported. They include Yellow-bellied Greenbul *Chlorocichla flaviventris*, African Dusky Flycatcher *Muscicapa adusta*, Chorister Robin-Chat *Cossypha dichroa*, Red-billed Oxpecker *Buphagus erythrorhynchus*, and Yellow-billed Oxpecker *B. africanus* (Vernon and Dean 1988; Symes *et al.* 2015; Symes 2017; Campbell and Colyn 2017; Mikula *et al.* 2018).

In my experience with these secretive forest-dwelling antelope, I have noted Fork-tailed Drongos *Dicrurus adsimilis* and, to a lesser extent, Red-winged Starlings *Onychognathus morio*, settling on the back of Bushbuck, presumably using it as a beater to flush insects or possibly to feed on ticks. The antelope generally seemed edgy with the birds on their backs, flinching, bucking, and fleeing into deep cover to drive the birds off.

On the 13th of November 2022, at approximately 10:30, I watched a Bushbuck ewe in the TC Robertson Nature Reserve (30.28043 S, 30.7545 E) stand motionless for approximately 10 minutes while a Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor* was feeding on it. The female stood placidly while the honeyguide gleaned ticks and possibly other invertebrates all over her face, around her eyes, in and around her ears, neck, shoulders, flanks, and legs. After that, having picked with amazing dexterity and efficiency, the bird flew off, and the buck continued browsing, slowly moving away into the forest.

Lesser Honeyguides are well-known for gleaning invertebrates from leaves and bark crevices, with a particular fondness for bees, their larvae and beeswax (Friedman 1955). Adult bees and wasps are readily hawked, as are termite alates (Vernon and Dean 2005). This record appears to be the first of ticks in the diet of a Lesser Honeyguide

References

- Campbell AM, Colyn R. 2017. Insight into the opportunistic feeding habits of Chorister Robin-chat *Cossypha dichroa*. *Biodiversity Observations* 8.32: 1–4.
- Dean WRJ, MacDonald IAW. 1981. A review of African birds feeding in association with mammals. *Ostrich* 52: 135–155.



- Friedman H. 1955. *The Honey-guides*. United States National Museum Bulletin 208. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Mikula P, Hadrava J, Albrecht T, Tryjanowski P. 2018. Large-scale assessment of commensalistic-mutualistic associations between African birds and herbivorous mammals using internet photos. *PeerJ* 6:e4520; DOI 10.7717/peerj.4520. doi: 10.7717/peerj.4520.
- Oatley T. 1959. Notes on the genus *Cossypha* with particular reference to *C. natalensis* Smith and *C. dichroa*. *Ostrich* 30(S1): 426–434.
- Oatley TB. 1970. Observations on the food and feeding habits of some African robins (Aves: Turdinae). *Annals of the Natal Museum* 20: 293–327.
- Oatley TB. 1982. The Starred Robin in Natal, Part 3: Breeding, populations and plumages. *Ostrich* 53: 206–221
- Skead CJ. 1997. *Life history notes on East Cape bird species biology. Vol 2. 1940-1990*. Port Elizabeth: Algoa Regional Services Council.
- Symes CT. 2017. Mammal-associated perching in Yellow-bellied Greenbul *Chlorocichla flaviventris*. *Biodiversity Observations* 8.41: 1–3
- Symes CT, Rees T, Nelson K. 2015. Chorister Robin-Chat *Cossypha dichroa* gleaning on Bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*. *Ornithological Observations* 6: 44–45
- Vernon C, Dean WRJ. 1988. Further African bird-mammal feeding associations. *Ostrich* 59(1): 38–39.
- Vernon CJ, Dean WRJ. 2005. Lesser Honeyguide *Indicator minor*. In: Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (eds), *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa. 7th edn*. Cape Town: Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund. pp 124–125.

Afrotropical Bird Biology (ABB) is a free, open-access, online journal for articles that describe aspects of the natural and cultural history of birds in the Afrotropical region, including its offshore islands. These include, but are not restricted to, identification features, sounds, distribution and demography, movements, habitats, diseases and parasites, general habits, foraging and food, breeding, interactions with humans, human cultural beliefs and practices as they pertain to birds, moult and biometrics of birds. ABB publishes original contributions focused on presenting information about the natural history of Afrotropical birds. This includes short communications (<2 500 words, including references) and data papers. All contributions will be reviewed by at least one editor and external, independent referees may also be employed at the discretion of the editors.

All papers are published under the [Attribution-NonCommercial CC BY-NC license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

<https://journals.uct.ac.za/index.php/ABB>