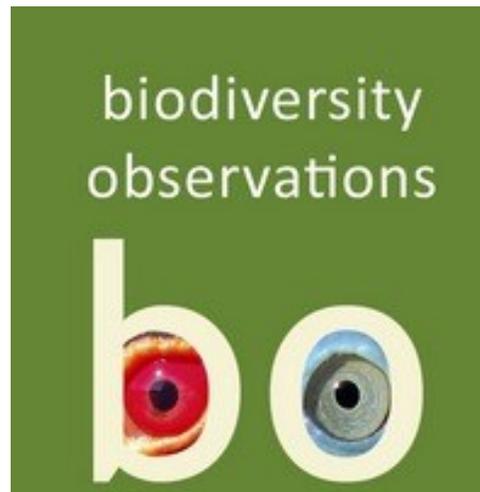


Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* observed feeding on the caterpillar of the Highveld Lappet *Eutricha obscura*

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Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* observed feeding on the caterpillar of the Highveld Lappet *Eutricha obscura*

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Abstract

The observation reported here is the first report of the Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* feeding of the caterpillar of the Highveld Lappet *Eutricha obscura* as part of its diet.

Observation

On 21 December 2024, a Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus* was observed foraging in a large Sweet Thorn tree *Vachellia karroo* in a garden in Bethlehem, Free State. The bird plucked a large *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar from the tree's branches.

Eutricha obscura (Figure 1) is a moth known as the Highveld Lappet occurs in the highveld region of northeastern South Africa (Staude et al. 2023). Caterpillars of this species employ several defence strategies to deter predation. By day, they often aggregate in large groups on tree trunks or branches (Figure 2), leveraging collective visibility to appear more intimidating to predators. Their bodies are covered in dense, hair-like structures, which can cause irritation or deter handling by potential predators. Additionally, their colouration and patterns provide some camouflage against tree bark, while their nocturnal feeding habits further reduce exposure to daytime threats. These tactics make them a challenging prey item for many predators, including birds.



Figure 1: Highveld Lappet Moth caterpillar *Eutricha obscura*.



Figure 2: Highveld Lappet Moth caterpillars *Eutricha obscura* congregate in large groups.

The initial capture of the caterpillar was not observed, but during handling, the Woodhoopoe dropped the caterpillar to the ground. However, it quickly descended, retrieved the prey, and returned to a low branch (Figure 3).

The bird then engaged in meticulously cleaning the hairy caterpillar (Figure 4), repeatedly rubbing it against the bark of the tree. This behaviour lasted several minutes, likely aimed at removing the defensive hairs of the *Eutricha obscura* larvae. Once satisfied, the bird swallowed the caterpillar whole, a process that required some effort due to its size. It seems as if this caterpillar was significantly larger than the usual prey items for this .

Although the Green Woodhoopoe is known to prey on various insect larvae, I could not find a specific record of *Eutricha obscura* as part of its diet (du Plessis 2005, Ligon & Kirwan 2020). This observation may thus represent an undocumented prey item for the species.



Figure 3: Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, with *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar, Bethlehem, 21 December 2024 .



Figure 4: Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, 'cleaning' the *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar, Bethlehem, 21 December 2024.

Eutricha obscura is however a favoured prey item of both the Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius* (Figure 5) and the Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* (Figure 6), both of which have been observed feeding on this caterpillar in our garden.

This foraging behaviour underscores the ecological value of indigenous trees in residential gardens, providing critical resources for avian species.

Further to the initial observation, similar behaviour was observed on 31 December 2024, at the same location (Figure 7). However, on this occasion, it was not only one individual preying on the *Eutricha obscura* caterpillars but the whole family group. At one point, two birds were using the same branch to "clean" the caterpillars simultaneously .



Figure 5: Red-chested Cuckoo (*Cuculus solitarius*) with *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar, Bethlehem.



Figure 7: Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, 'cleaning' the *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar, Bethlehem, 31 December 2024



Figure 6: Female Diederik Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* with *Eutricha obscura* caterpillar, Bethlehem.



Figure 8: Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, busy with elaborate performance, Bethlehem, 31 December 2024.



Figure 9: Immature Green Woodhoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*, Bethlehem, 31 December 2024.

One bird, which I assumed was a male, meticulously cleaned a caterpillar. Once cleaned, it went into an elaborate display while holding the caterpillar. It bowed down on the branch, with its tail held erect and wings spread out (Figure 8). He then proceeded to lift his head while simultaneously dropping his tail. While bobbing up and down like this, he kept calling loudly.

Another bird (which I assumed was the female) came to investigate. The male then handed over the caterpillar to the female, who proceeded to eat it. The male flew off, presumably to continue foraging. If this was a pair-bonding ritual, it would seem as if the birds were intent on a second breeding attempt for the season, because there were juvenile birds (Figure 9) present in the same family group .

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