

Doon Watch Nature Series in Dehradun Live, The Hindustan Times

by Sanjay Sondhi

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The Homely Hornbills

The “swoosh” sound of wings overhead alerted me. I watched with bated breath as a pair of large grey birds gracefully swooped onto a banyan tree



just above me. Clumsily settling on a branch, the birds peered down at me even as they uttered loud, raucous call notes of “*kaeeyae, kaeeyae*”. It seemed to me the bird was saying "hey you, hey you" greeting the only birdwatcher in their territory.

The birds, a pair of Common Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris* are a reasonably common sight in the wooded areas of Dehradun. They are large grayish-brown birds, almost two feet in length with long tails. The bird's name “hornbill” is on account of their long broad blackish beak topped with an elegant protrusion or casque. The function of the casque is not clearly understood, though it is believed to amplify their calls. Elegant fliers, they beat their wings every now and then, and then proceeding to glide gracefully through the air. Largely fruit eaters, they pluck the fruit, toss it up into the air, catch it in their broad beaks, and swallow the fruit whole. If you have a fruiting banyan tree near your house, you are sure to observe them pay frequent visits.

Occasionally, hornbills eat insects and small reptiles. Once, I had the amusing experience of watching hornbills eating winged termites. The hornbills presented a really comical sight-these large birds, with their bills specially adapted for eating fruit, attempting to behave like agile flycatchers, catching winged insects as they flew by. Often, the birds collided into each other, and fell to the ground. It seemed to me that other birds cackled with laughter as the hornbills' antics provided them with some free entertainment. Our feathered friends very own reality show!

One of nine species of hornbills found in India, the Common Grey Hornbill has an amazing marital story to tell. The hornbills nest in natural tree hollows. Once the birds have mated, the female enters the hollow. Using mud and excreta, the birds proceed to seal up the tree hollow with the female inside. The imprisoned female makes a small crack through which the male can feed her. Over the next few weeks, the female lays her eggs and incubates them, even as the diligent male takes the onus of feeding her through the crack. What a supportive and dedicated husband the hornbill makes-I hope our wives don't seriously expect us to take lessons from the hornbill's lives too seriously!

Once the eggs hatch, the female breaks out of her “prison” and seals the nest hole once again. Together, the male and female birds take on parenting responsibilities feed the young birds through the crack. Once the fledglings

are large enough, they break out of their nest, and take to wing, free to bless Dehradun with their presence. Even as I watched, the two hornbills affectionately rubbed beaks and whispered some sweet nothings to each other. The hornbills launched themselves airborne once more, only this time their “*kaeeyae*” calls seemed to be saying “see ya” to me.

As I wistfully gazed at these marvelous creatures winging their way to another summer’s love story, I was left wondering-given the rate at which large trees get chopped down for development, will there come a day when the hornbills will no longer find a tree hollow to nest in?

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

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