contrasting with the tactile feeding of 'our' slowly-walking Milky Stork.

Discussion

For the Milky Stork observed, foraging on an exposed flat, the estimated wet weight of the fish eaten in 39 minutes was 225 g (estimated by comparison with weights of fishes of similar length). In the Wood Stork, Kahl (1964) found the daily intake of fish for birds in captivity was up to 16% of the body weight, and estimated the intake of wild Wood Storks at 21% of their body weight. As the estimated weight of a Milky Stork is about 3 kg, one may expect a daily intake of 630 g of fish. This means that a Milky Stork may be able to capture its daily ration in only about two hours of intensive feeding. Feeding on exposed flats depends on the tides, but on most days ebb tide is low enough to be used by the birds in this way.

Vast mudflats teeming with mudskippers occur along the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Therefore it seems that the decline of the breeding population of the Milky Stork in Malaysia, of which only 115 individuals are left (Parish 1984), cannot be caused by lack of food or of potential feeding grounds.

Thanks are due to the Director General and Staff of the Malaysian National Parks and Wildlife Department for providing logistical support and advice during our stay at the Kuala Gula Ranger Post of the Matang Forest Reserve in Perak.

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Collapse of a nest tree used by Finch-billed Mynas *Scissirostrum dubium* in North Sulawesi

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Finch-billed Mynas *Scissirostrum dubium* are endemic to Sulawesi (formerly known as Celebes) and several smaller neighbouring islands in Indonesia (White and Bruce 1986). The species is highly gregarious, and during a visit to Tangkoko-Batuangus Nature Reserve (1°32'N 125°13'E), North Sulawesi, we commonly observed it foraging in the canopy of lowland forest in noisy flocks of up to 50 or more birds. These mynas nest colonially in the trunks of dead trees (Stresemann 1940, Watling 1983, White and Bruce 1986) and colonies may contain hundreds of pairs of birds (Stresemann 1940). It is believed that the heavy, pointed bill of this species is an adaptation for excavating nest holes (White and Bruce 1986).

On 13 May 1987, while walking through the reserve in lowland forest approximately 1 km from the sea coast, we discovered a large, recently fallen tree used by a colony of Finch-billed Mynas for nesting. The carcasses of 15 to 20 nestlings were visible on the ground next to the tree and additional searching revealed more young buried beneath broken wood debris or inside partially intact nest cavities. A total of 82 nestlings and one adult were eventually collected but more birds were undoubtedly present. No eggs were found. All but two of the birds were dead, with both of the surviving young still chirping weakly. Nearly all of the nestlings were similar in size and extent of feather development. Most were 8–10 cm long with pinfeathers present on the wings, tail and head. These birds were estimated to be about seven days old. Reddish rump feathers, which are a characteristic of subadult and adult plumages, were beginning to show on some of the birds. Two smaller young were also found, these being about 5 cm long and naked and estimated to be less than three days of age.

The nest tree was approximately 36 m tall with its top having previously broken off. It possessed large buttresses that were about 5 m tall and had a straight trunk with a diameter of 1 m at the tops of the buttresses. Several hundred nest cavities occurred in the upper 14 m of the snag, with the lowest cavity being approximately 22 m above the ground. Bole diameter in this section of the tree was about 0.6 m. Nest cavities were densely concentrated on all sides of the trunk. The entrance holes of most cavities were approximately 40 mm in diameter and cavity depths varied through 25–30 cm. Cavities were teardrop-shaped and angled downward at 30–60°.

Because two of the young mynas were found alive, it seems likely that the nest tree had fallen sometime during the previous 24 hours. No strong winds were noted on the previous day and the tree had probably toppled under its

own weight. The tree was badly rotted as indicated by the way the upper half of the trunk had broken apart on hitting the ground. No limbs or bark remained on the tree, further indicating that the tree had reached an advanced state of decay before falling.

From these brief observations, we conclude that colonies of Finch-billed Mynas are occasionally susceptible to catastrophic events such as the loss of occupied nest trees. Breeding appears to be highly synchronized and, within this colony, most hatching occurred in early May. Although the clutch-size of Finch-billed Mynas has not been previously reported, the scattered nature of the dead nestlings found at our site may indicate that only one young is produced per clutch. If this is indeed true, then this colony probably contained more than one hundred breeding pairs of mynas.

G.J.W. thanks Tulende Wodi and the other staff at Tangkoko-Batuangus Nature Reserve for their hospitality during his visit. Their familiarity with the reserve's birds and knowledge of scientific bird names were invaluable. We kindly thank D. Scott Klotzbach, Derek Holmes, Craig Robson, Paul J. Conry, Frank Rozendaal and Peter Holmes for information and advice.

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Letter: Was the 'Chinese' White-eyed River-Martin an Oriental Pratincole?

I have read with much interest E. C. Dickinson's tentative identification of the birds in the Chinese painting reproduced as the cover of *Forktail* 2 as White-eyed River-Martins *Pseudochelidon sirintarae*.

I would like to offer an alternative identification, one that is less speculative from the zoogeographic viewpoint. I believe that this painting portrays a species well known in China, the Oriental Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum*. The character that first caught my eye was the buffy throat set off by a thin dark necklace. Other arguments in favour of the identification as *Glareola* rather than *Pseudochelidon* include the broad somewhat hooked red bill, the brown rather than black dorsal colour, the pale underparts (rather than black all over as in the River-Martin), and the forked tail, with elongation of the outer rectrices (with some white in the longest) rather than the filament-like central rectrices protruding from a 'normal'-shaped tail of *Pseudochelidon*. Arguments against the identification as pratincoles would include the lack of a pale rump (which, as Dickinson pointed out, is also an argument against the river-martin identification), the absence of chestnut wing linings (which at least one field guide says are hard to see), the greatly exaggerated fork of the tail (relatively short and shallowly formed in *G. maldivarum*, rather than elongated and deeply forked as portrayed in the King-Woodcock-Dickinson field guide) and the bill painted as wholly red rather than red merely at the base (the last two characters courtesy of Tim Inskipp, who knows the Oriental Pratincole in life, as I do not). The apparent white eye is, I think, a 'red herring.' I have seen many Chinese paintings that have this 'bug-eyed' look even for birds known to have dark irides, and the pratincole does have at least a narrow white eye-ring.

Although ornithological subjects in Chinese paintings are often rendered quite realistically, in many instances artistic licence has prevailed to the extent that the pictured birds utterly defy identification. The painting on the cover of *Forktail* 2 is not an accurate rendition of *any* known species, but I believe that the weight of the argument is on the side of *Glareola* over *Pseudochelidon*.

I am pleased to say that I have corresponded with Mr. Dickinson about this point, and that he now agrees that my identification is the more probable.

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20 October 1987

Editor's Note: The identification of the cover illustration as Oriental Pratincole was made independently by C. D. R. Heard in a letter to J. T. R. Sharrock and passed direct to E. C. Dickinson, who has urged publication of this judgement.