

## SOME KINANGOP SUNBIRDS.

By SIR CHARLES F. BELCHER.

Four species of Sunbird commonly occur in the valley of the Chania at South Kinangop. These are *Nectarinia famosa aeneigularis*, Sharpe, the Kenya Malachite Sunbird; *Nectarinia tacazze* (Stanley), the Tacazze Sunbird; *Drepanorhynchus reichenowi*, Fischer, the Golden-winged Sunbird; and *Cinnyris mediocris mediocris*, Shelley, the Kenya Double-collared Sunbird. The association of these four species was observed long ago by Sir Frederick Jackson (*vide* what is unquestionably an original note of his in the recently-published "Birds of Kenya and Uganda," edited by W. L. Sclater, at page 1342 in the third volume). So far, during a residence of nearly twelve months on the Kinangop, I have not met with the Bronzy Sunbird (*N. kilimensis kilimensis*, Shelley) which might be expected to occur and has been taken as near as Limoru at an altitude not more than 1,500 feet below us, but which I think must be regarded as definitely a bird of, in these parts at least, lower altitudes than the Kinangop Plateau; and another species not yet noted is the Scarlet-tufted Malachite Sunbird (*Nectarinia johnstoni johnstoni*, Shelley) which though quoted by Sclater as occurring on Kilimanjaro and Kenya Mountains only, certainly is found as well on the higher parts of the Aberdares; and, as I am informed by Dr. van Someren, has once been noted on Major Ward's estate which is at much the same level as the main run of the Kinangop close in to the mountain, i.e. about 8,500 feet above the sea. It would doubtless be an occasional visitor only from the higher levels.

Field identification of the four commoner birds is easy enough, in both sexes. *Drepanorhynchus* is marked out from the other three by the bright yellow wing-bar which both male and female have. I believe there is a song which at times the male produces, but the note commonly heard from both sexes is a harsh "sawing" one. The male of *N. famosa* has yellow pectoral tufts, and the female has traces of them too; but conspicuous as are these tufts in the hand, or when one has to do with a skin, I have never yet been able to make them out in the living bird. What is a certain mark is the general bluish colour of the male below the chest, and in the female the tint of yellow on the underparts, not flammulated with grey feather-centres as is the brighter yellow-breasted *N. kilimensis* female, supposing that to be here a possibility. It is remarkable that Sclater does not mention the blue in the plumage of the male. The female is smaller than that of *N. tacazze* and is without any light superciliary stripe. The male *famosa* has a song in three sections, beginning with a few sharp chirps, then quickening into shorter ones,

and ending with a confused warble, a sort of "cheedle-eedle." *N. tacazze* male must be rather difficult to tell on a brief glance from the same sex in *N. kilimensis*, but where the latter bird does not occur there is really nothing to confuse with it, it being the only long-tailed Sunbird up here without obvious blue in the plumage, and also without the yellow wing-bar of *Drepanorhynchus*. Jackson (p. 1319 of the work above-mentioned) once saw a full-plumaged male *tacazze* in a Nairobi garden and says that it was quite unmistakable alongside a pair of *N. kilimensis*; there is a gloss of violet or violet-lilac on the breast, shoulders, and upper tail coverts of *N. tacazze* which is not found in *N. kilimensis* and this may always be visible to good sight as the bird moves about. In the skin it appears only in certain lights, the same feathers having otherwise the bronze iridescence which characterises the plumage generally, except on the abdomen and wings, which are dull black. So far, I have not traced any song to the male of *N. tacazze*, only a series of chirps; but most likely it does sing occasionally, like the greater number of Sunbird species.

Both male and female of *Cinnyris mediocris* have the short tails which are characteristic of that genus, so that they cannot be mixed up in the field with any of the "long-tails" as regards the male, and the smaller size and shorter bill renders it unlikely that one would confuse the female with that of any of the three other larger species. In the male the scarlet breast-patch, and the yellow pectoral tufts, are readily observable in the field; though the tufts are not constantly in evidence, they are shown at times, not concealed as in *N. famosa*. The male has a very pleasant little warbling strain.

There are some differences in habitat which should be noted. *N. famosa* stands apart from the rest in that it is a bird of the open, loving patches of *Hypericums*, nettles, and *Leonotis* out on the grassy plains as well as flower-gardens and the river-side scrub which it occasionally visits. The nettles and *Leonotis* are usually met with on or about the sites of the manyattas of departed Masai, and in these places when there is a good supply of flowers *famosa* is extraordinarily plentiful; in October you may see a dozen males round one small clump of tall nettles with the Sasumwa (*Hypericum*) trees growing above them. But I have never yet seen any other kind of Sunbird in such places. I am aware how dangerous generalisations are when one is saying anything about birds, and I daresay if I had watched longer I should have seen some if not all of the other three. Meanwhile one can but say what one finds. I have come across a good many nests of *N. famosa*, and they have all been built in low bushes or at least within hand reach, and all well away from the immediate valley of the river Chania. *N. tacazze*, *D.*

*reichenowi*, and *C. mediocris* are all birds of the riverside trees and scrub. *Mediocris* may tend to go a little farther away from the stream at times than the other two, and I should say it was numerically the most plentiful. It is usually in pairs. I am told by people who have extensive gardens that *Drepanorhynchus* is far more shy, and less often seen close about the house, than the others. On the other hand in the valley of the stream it is more conspicuous than the rest, and I should say easily outnumbered *N. tacazze*.

With all four species, nesting seems to take place at almost any time between mid-May and the end of the year, that is to say at any time except during the dry season of the first three or four months. But it is not so much one continuous season as two, linked by casual nesting; or perhaps it is that there are two peaks in the same long season, one about June and the other, during which the activity is much greater, in October and November, after which it tails off with the drying of the vegetation.

To begin with *N. famosa*, I may say that this is the only Sunbird of whose nest you can feel absolutely certain at a glance and without seeing the birds. As said above, the localities chosen are away from those where the other Sunbirds nest. Then the nest itself is distinctive. The other three are often hidden in masses of *Usnea*: *famosa*'s nest is always unencumbered and unhidden. It is more spherical than the others, and carries so much ornamentation (if that is the idea) of cocoons on the outside that the white patches look like fids of wool and render the nest conspicuous. A very favourite site is in the middle of a clump of low hypericum bushes at a height of three or four feet from the ground. The entrance, which is as usual with Sunbirds at one side near the top, has no projecting porch. The interior of the nest is thickly lined with vegetable down, fur, and often feathers.

I have found five pretty certain nests of *N. tacazze*, although in the case of only one did I make absolutely sure by securing the female. I find it far more exciting to try and identify nesting birds with the aid of glasses alone, and regard having to shoot one as rather a confession of failure. The other four nests were in all respects like that from which I got the bird. All are built mainly of *Usnea*, which unfortunately does not serve to distinguish them from the nests of any other river-building Sunbird in a locality where nine out of ten Passerines use this material when nesting in trees near the stream. One characteristic all five nests possess which I find in none of the other three species and which I am therefore disposed to consider as diagnostic, and that is a thick pad of feathers as lining which

generally show up also at the entrance. Three out of the five nests have a longish smooth "beard" of *Usnea* below the entrance, looking as if it had been smoothed down level with some care. A fourth has traces of this, but the fifth nest has neither beard, nor the long broadening attachment above the nest which all the other four exhibit. But in one undoubted nest of *Cinnyris mediocris* there occur both beard and over-nest attachment, so that neither of these can be called distinctive of *N. tacazze*. Most nests of *N. tacazze* are built relatively high up in the *Hypericum* trees, say at twelve feet and over; one only, hanging over the river from a projecting juniper bough, was within reach of a crook-handled walking-stick. All may be described as pendent.

Common as is the bird, the nest of *Drepanorhynchus* is for me a comparative rarity and I have only one of which I feel sure, though another from which one or more eggs fell and broke is very like it and probably not *C. mediocris* the other possibility. Both these nests are small for the bird, have no beard or upper long attachment-strip, are lined throughout with vegetable down only, without feathers. Both were built within hand-reach and not at all concealed, one in a *hypericum* bush and the other near the top of a shrub with fairly broad leaves. This is the one I am not so certain about, and it differs from the identified nest in having something of a projecting porch of thin stiff grass-stalks which are also used as an overall binding for the nest as a whole. It must be said, however, that this grass is also conspicuous about the entrance of the identified nest, though without forming a porch. The latter is largely built of *Usnea* which is only present in a small quantity in the other. Both nests are well dotted on the outside with bits of grey-white insect webbing, but not so extensively as happens with *N. famosa*. It is a curious thing, but in at least four cases where I have seen the female of *Drepanorhynchus* building, without my disturbing her in any way or her exhibiting any embarrassment at my presence, a later visit showed the nest to have been either abandoned or carried away. All nests of this species that I have seen have been within six feet of the ground, and two or three of them within a couple of feet of it. Fairly close thickets of *Leonotis* on the river bank, or spots about which there is a good growth of *hypericum* and thus a certain concealment of the immediate locality, are favoured.

Of the nest of *Cinnyris mediocris* I have very little definite to say. My one absolutely identified nest (from the eggs and presence of both birds at it) would pass for a nest of *N. tacazze* (see above) from its beard and long lead-down above the top, but is at once distinguishable by its lining, wholly of seed down,

feathers being conspicuously absent. Also, like most nests both of *N. tacazze* and *Drepanorhynchus*, it has some of the thin wiry grass about the entrance. Any height seems to suit this bird to nest at, and the nest is rather fixed-in to *Usnea* than pendent.

But bulky as the nest is, the inside cavity is noticeably smaller than in any of the nests of the other three species, shallower a good deal for instance than that of *Drepanorhynchus* which seems to be generally no larger a nest. This particular nest was at six feet from the ground in a *Hypericum*, attached to an outer branch, not hanging free in the air as the nest of *N. tacazze* generally does, but not greatly concealed unless it were by being fitted in as it was to a clump of the same *Usnea* of which material it is itself constructed. Another nest was much smaller, but unfortunately it was not preserved though the pair of eggs are certainly those of *C. mediocris*.

Now a word as to the various eggs. Those of *N. tacazze* appear to be far the largest. One taken 27th July measures 21 x 14, one taken 12th September 20.5 x 15, and a third, taken 6th November (this was the one identified from the bird being obtained) 21 x 13.5. I have a still larger egg, which was too far gone to preserve intact but measures about 22.5 x 13.5. These eggs cannot be mistaken for any of the others. Only one egg seems to form a full clutch. At the other end of the scale come the eggs of *Cinnyris mediocris*, two to the clutch. Two sets measure as follows: one taken 12th November 17 x 11.5, 17.25 x 11.75, and one taken 19th November 16 x 11.5, 16.25 x 11.5. These might possibly be confused with eggs of *N. famosa*, of which three clutches, one taken on the 12th October and the other two two days later, measure respectively 17.5 x 12.75, 17 x 12.5; 18.75 x 13, 19.25 x 13.5; and (a single) 18 x 12.75. It will be seen, however, that there is no actual overlapping, so far as my examples show, between these two species, and the nests could hardly be mixed up. My sole identified egg of *Drepanorhynchus* measures 20 x 14; it may be that this bird's egg-measurements will turn out therefore to overlap those of *N. tacazze*, but this one egg is much broader in proportion to its length, more of a true oval and less elongate, than the eggs I have of *N. tacazze*. I am told locally that *Drepanorhynchus*, like *Tacazze*, lays only one egg. There is so much uniformity running through the eggs of all Sunbirds, with their ground of greyish or greenish white and plentiful freckles of shades of grey and brown, usually darkening at the cap, that I cannot be sure that any of my eggs exhibit markings characteristic of and peculiar to the particular species. In the same species some are relatively dark, some light. Size is probably a better criterion.

