

## BIRD NOTES FROM MOLO 2. The Garden

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In the golden glow of first light when all the world is hushed, waiting for the dawn, the silence is broken by 'chup, chup, chup, seee chup chup, seee chup—' followed by bursts of harsh metallic chattering. The Tacazze Sunbird, always early to rise and late to bed, has started on his rounds slitting the throats of my snapdragons and fuschias, and soon the sun will be turning his coat, near-black in the half light, into a shimmering mantle of purple, violet, rose, bronze and green. Of all the local sunbirds he is, perhaps, the most beautiful. Certainly he's the most aggressive, though chiefly towards his own species. Many a time, when grubbing in the garden, I have been nearly scalped by a pair of these 'jets' pursuing each other at incredible speed in a frenzy of love or hate.

When the 'Lions' Ears' are full of honey we are visited by the shining emerald Malachites, but they're shy birds and seldom seen in the garden. Double-collared Sunbirds are common throughout the year and the Variable Sunbird (what an unimaginative misnomer for a bird of such vivid hues!) are irregular visitors. Their specialities seem to be sweet-peas and the bush salvia with small carmine flowers. One October the garden was invaded for the first time by Golden-winged Sunbirds. There have always been large numbers of these handsome and very noisy sunbirds around the forest edges, especially when the *Crotellaria agitaflora* are in bloom, but never before have they become so domesticated, completely annexing the fuschias in front of the veranda to the exclusion even of the pugnacious Tacazzes. I found one of their nests this year (Jan. 25) quite near the house, in a clump of *Leonotis Elliotii* right beside a path and at head level—obvious for all to see. It was most beautifully woven of the finest grasses lined with plant-down and as I approached to peer in, a young bird, fully fledged, flew out.

Our veranda is a never-ending treasure trove for the sunbirds; a well-stocked larder and building store. Almost any day they can be seen insect-hunting among the cobwebs or under the bark of the off-cuts, insects, I'm convinced, forming as big a part of their diet as honey. Last March a pair of Tacazzes decided to build on a low branch of a big fir tree about 20 yards from the house and almost all the material came from the veranda. I have an Ethiopian fly-whisk hanging up, a horse's tail in an ivory handle, and this was a great find, as were a bunch of chickens' feathers which I misguidedly thought, when stuck into potatoes on the end of a string, would keep the birds away from my peas. The remains of these had got shoved away under a bit of loose bark and served a better purpose lining the sunbird's nest. Strips of bark were used and dead leaves and cobwebs and even the fluff out of the doormat, which was most carefully 'teased' on the spot before being carried off to the nest. And all the while the hen-bird so patiently collected the material to weave her intricate nest, her mate chivvied her around in a frenzy of impatience, hurling what sounded like vitriolic abuse at her.

Voices! strident, muted, musical, discordant! a multitude of voices. The screeching of the Red-headed Parrots as they fly over in the early mornings to the

olive trees; the wild shriek of the Crowned Hornbills flopping, ungainly, into the treetops and the rattling chatter of the White-headed Wood-Hoopoes scrambling up and down the tree-trunks in search of insects. The beautiful but melancholy cadence of the Coucal and the monotonous two-toned whistle of his diminutive cousin, Klaas' Cuckoo; the lovely liquid notes of the Black-headed Oriole, the clear bell-like duet of the Boubou Shrikes and the mournful wailing of the Fiscal Shrikes. The voice of the Olive Thrush, blackbird-like in range and quality and the conversation of the Robin-Chat, so aptly named; the thin whistle of the Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater as he flashes his gorgeous green mantle in the sunlight, the croaking of the Hartlaub's Louries up in the tree-tops and the derisive laughter of my enemies the Mousebirds. The cheerful songs of the Canaries and Seed-eaters, the grating feeding note of the White-breasted Tits and the melodious warbling of the Yellow Mountain Flycatcher. All these and many more are as much part of my garden as the trees and flowers; without them it would indeed be a poor empty thing. One of our most brilliant birds, the emerald green and white Klaas' Cuckoo, is heard far more often than seen; in fact we feel he should qualify for the nickname of 'brain fever bird,' so maddeningly monotonous is his song and so difficult is he to locate. I think he must be something of a ventriloquist.

On the 1st November last I had an S.O.S. from a near neighbour to come and identify a large and ugly baby being fed by sunbirds. I found not one, but two, young Klaas' Cuckoos being fed by Tacazzes within 20 yards of each other. They were almost fully-fledged, their mantles already showing a good deal of green, their white breasts strongly barred with grey. It is not often one has the good fortune to watch even one young cuckoo being fed within a few yards of one's house: it is surely unusual to see two.

There have been many red-letter days. The day I watched the mighty Eagle-Owl being mobbed by small birds in a tree by our garage and a few minutes later saw a Mountain Buzzard perched on a gum branch behind the stables, one foot on a large rat, also being mobbed by Tacazze Sunbirds. The day I first identified our Wryneck, often suspected but never before seen close enough to be certain, and the day last March when I first saw the beautiful little Black-crowned Waxbills—fairly frequent visitors since. And there was the unforgettable morning which the Paradise Flycatcher spent with us, his pure white tail streaming behind him like a chiffon scarf, yet never getting entangled, as he hawked so nimbly among the olive branches.

The visits of migrants, too, are always occasions to remember. Of local ones the most surprising were a pair of Namaqua Doves that spent a day with us last April. They, like the Fork-tailed Drongos, that we see occasionally, belong, I feel, to lower altitudes and warmer climes. In May we were visited by a large party of Rufous-backed Mannikins, never seen here before or since, and last February a number of chocolate-faced White-eyes stopped about a fortnight in the garden feeding among a flock of the common Green variety, which I have been unable to identify. (Note: these 'chocolate-faced' White-eyes were probably birds whose facial plumage was stained with pollen).

We had Harlequin Quail for supper once after a number of them had committed suicide on the veranda while we were out—dazzled no doubt by the lights.

Of European migrants I have only recorded two species in the garden apart from birds of prey—the Blackcap and the Willow Warbler, both singing on arrival in October. A cock and hen Blackcap were feeding together in December and I heard of a pair that wintered together in a garden at Kipkabus. Is it common, I wonder, for these birds to winter in pairs?

But the most exciting of all red-letter days was the day we had a hatch of flying ants in our wood and a great concourse assembled to gorge on the spoils. We stood on the lawn with the ants swarming round our heads and watched fascinated the following incredible varieties of birds, all hawking from one small olivetree. Boubou Shrike, Fiscal Shrike, Olive Thrush, Robin-Chat, Toppie, Pied Wagtail, Reichenow's Weaver, Klaas' Cuckoo, Slaty and Wattle-eyed Flycatchers, Golden winged and Tacazze Sunbird, White-breasted Tit, White-eye, Brown-headed Weaver and Chestnut-throated Apalis Warbler, Golden-rumped Tinker-Bird Yellow-crowned Canary, Streaky Seed-Eater, Glossy Starling, and Cardinal Woodpecker. The latter, in spite of his usual ungainly flight, proving the most agile of the lot, hardly ever scoring a miss. In the midst of this frenzied activity, just to add to the excitement, a pair of Augur Buzzards, one white and one melanistic, came swooping close over our heads scattering, temporarily, both hunters and hunted.

It is not often one has the good fortune to witness a sight such as this, but it is equally true to say that not often a day passes without some incident of interest: a new habit observed in an old acquaintance, a choice of food or tone of voice not previously noted. There is something fresh to learn daily for those that have eyes to see and ears to hear.

And even when darkness falls and we light the fire and draw the curtains and can no longer see, we can still listen to the special good-night notes of the late-to-bedders, the Sunbirds, Thrushes, Robins and Slaty Flycatchers, then later to the cry of the Nightjars, starting their day's work as others finish. Later too, if we're lucky, we'll be thrilled by the deep-throated 'hooo-cuk' followed by demoniacal barking of the king of the night—the Eagle-Owl.

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### 'Drumming' by Swifts

Over a dam at Langata, ten miles from the centre of Nairobi, I have frequently seen parties of Mottled Swifts (*Apus aequatorialis* (Muller)); their visits appear to be primarily for the purpose of drinking from the surface of the dam.

On the 27th April 1958 I heard a loud 'prrrpt-prrrpt-prrrpt' repeated at frequent intervals while the swifts were present. My wife and I had them under observation with binoculars for about half-an-hour and discovered that this noise was being made by the birds spreading and depressing their tails and twisting them sideways (usually to the right) so that the outer feathers on that side projected into the slipstream. The 'leading' feathers were quite clearly seen to vibrate at the same time that the noise was heard. This phenomenon was not confined to a single bird, as many were seen to make it.

I can find no reference to such 'drumming' by a member of the swift family: it has been recorded for certain species of honey-guide and is, of course, a well-known habit of certain species of snipe.

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