

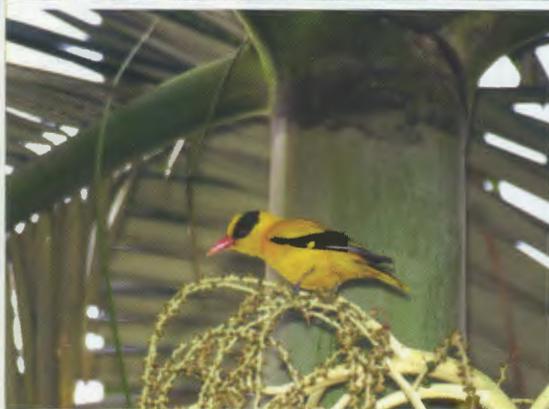
Of Palms and Birds

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Palm trees are everywhere in Singapore and so are birds. Palms and birds intermingle readily to create a colourful yet complex feature of nature. Wee Yeow Chin observes how the palms in his garden provide a multitude of uses to visiting birds.



The Asian Palm Swift builds its nest on the lower surface of an old palm frond. Picture by **Paul Huang**



Top to bottom: A pair of Southern Pied Hornbills on a rare visit; Black-naped Oriole is a regular visitor to the garden; The pair of 30-year old Ceram palms that attract a wide range of birds to the garden

My fascination with palms and the birds they attract was nurtured in my garden when a pair of House Crows (*Corvus splendens*) started building their nest in the crown of one of my two Ceram palms (*Rhopaloblaste ceramica*) (see Nature Watch, Vol. 13 No.1, Pg. 22-25). These are 30 metre high palms, grown from seedlings purchased from a nursery some 30 years ago. Originating from the Moluccas, these handsome palms have, for the past few years, been flowering and fruiting regularly. It was a sight to follow the green inflorescences slowly transforming themselves into clusters of attractive, scarlet fruits. With the fruits came the birds.

The House Crows, large, loud and bold, have always been around the area, picking discarded household food from trash bags left along the road. I guess they decided to nest in the crowns of these palms because of their height, as they tower over the neighbourhood trees. Once I kept watch on the pair, I became keenly aware of the presence of other birds. The haunting calls of the Asian Koels (*Eudynamis scolopacea*) during the early morning and late evening of certain months of the year, were difficult to ignore. They were seen mostly on the surrounding trees but once in a while they would sneak near to the crow's nest. The male Koel would distract the crows while the female took the opportunity to sneak in and lay her egg. The few breeding cycles I managed to observe always resulted in a Koel chick or chicks emerging from the nest.

Birds That Visited My Ceram Palms

One of the most colourful and melodious birds that regularly visited these palms was the Black-naped

Oriole (*Oriolus chinensis*). Individuals made stopovers, perching along the back of the fronds or around the flowering and fruiting branches. This naturally exposed them to the fury of the crows, especially when the latter were breeding. I actually found two carcasses of this beautiful bird in my garden.

From 2002 to the early part of 2004, the crows used these palms to build their nests. Then suddenly they left, maybe victims of our crow exterminators. Or can it be that they return to the same place to nest for only two or three years in a row, as reported for the Common Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)? House crows are still present in the neighbourhood but their number has been greatly reduced. This means that many other birds are now flocking to these palms.

Among the regular visitors were Asian Glossy Starling (*Aplonis panayensis*), Yellow-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus goiavier*), Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*), Javan Myna (*Acridotheres javanicus*), Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum cruentatum*), Oriental Magpie-robin (*Copsychus saularis*) and Blue-crowned Hanging-parrot (*Loriculus galgulus*). These birds probably were there to forage for insects but not the parrots. They were observed actively eating the ripe fruits. Tanimbar Corella (*Cacatua goffini*) has also been an irregular visitor but whether this bird came for the fruits, I am not able to say.

One evening I was alerted to a new sound from the crowns of these palms. On looking up I was pleasantly surprised to see a pair of Southern Pied Hornbills (*Antbracoceros albirostris convexus*). They were taking a rest before suddenly flying off in the direction of the nearby catchment forest.



Left to right: Blue-crowned Hanging-parrot is another visitor that go for the Ceram fruits; Crows' nest on one of the Ceram palms

Small flocks of noisy Long-tailed Parakeets (*Psittacula longicauda*) regularly raided the nearby Rambutan tree (*Nephelium lappaceum*) during the fruiting seasons. As with these birds, they would suddenly fly off en masse as if by a pre-arranged signal, to land on the back of these palms fronds. And just as suddenly, they would again take off. No doubt the tallness of these palms provided ideal sites for such a purpose. Similarly, during

certain months, groups of Pink-necked Green-pigeons (*Treron vernans*) used these fronds during their morning and evening respite. Perched comfortably along the dorsal midrib of the fronds, they would engage in their courtship display. The males would slowly slide nearer and nearer to a nearby female or fly off to a nearby frond to join another female. Their soft gurgling sounds during such displays never failed to attract my attention.

The trunk of these palms regularly attracted the Common Flameback (*Dinopium javanense*) and Banded Woodpecker (*Picus miniaceus*). The maturity of the trunks must have attracted insects that made the cracked surfaces their homes.

It would be naive to claim that just because so many species of birds found their way on to these palms during the last few years, Ceram palms by themselves attract so many



Left to right: Male Asian Koel on the fruiting branch of the Alexandra palm; Asian Glossy Starling feasting on the fruits of the Ceram palm



Top to bottom: Common Flameback foraging for insects along the trunk of the Ceram palm; An avenue of Sealing Wax palms; Long-tailed Parakeet taking a rest after raiding the neighbour's Rambutan tree



birds. Their tallness, among a sea of lower storied trees made them attractive temporary perches as these urban birds fly from one site to the next. The presence of insects and fruits was an added bonus.

Palms As Urban Plantings

Palms are always impressive, with their straight stems topped with a crown of large fronds. Most palms have a single stem and remain so for the life of the plant. Others develop suckers at the base so that with time a clump develops. This is seen in the MacArthur palm (*Ptychosperma macarthurii*) and Nibong (*Oncosperma tigillarum*). A few palms have branched stems, as seen in the Indian Doum palm (*Hyphaene dichotoma*).

We have an excellent collection of about 240 species of palms in the Singapore Botanic Gardens. These have been accumulated from all over the world during the nearly one and a half centuries of the Gardens' history. A number have been used in urban plantings during the years when the country was embarking on the road towards a Garden City. But palms do not make good shade trees, even those clumped species like MacArthur and Nibong. However, they make impressive avenue plants, especially when grown along both sides of the road. These can be viewed in the Singapore Botanic Gardens where the rows of Sealing Wax palms (*Cyrtostachys renda*) and feathery Cabbage palms (*Roystonea oleracea*) are always admired.





Top: An unidentified nest hanging from the frond of a palm.

Palms And Birds

In urban areas, palms can be grown in parks and gardens to attract wildlife. Birds are attracted to these plants either because of the presence of insects or because of the succulent fruits they produce. Many palm flowers give out a fragrance or secrete nectar to attract insects that assist in pollination. A good example is the Coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). The presence of insects in turn attracts birds.

The succulent palm fruits, with their attractive yellow, orange or red colours, similarly attract birds. These fruits are single seeded, with an outer pulpy covering that can be soft like in the MacArthur, or harder as in Alexandra (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*) and the Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*). Crows, bulbuls, starlings, parrots, pigeons and hornbills eat the fruits, tearing off the outer covering or swallowing them whole to excrete the seeds some distance away. These birds play the role of seed dispersers.

Fishtail (*Caryota mitis*), Royal (*Roystonea regia*), Manila (*Veitchia merrillii*), Chinese Fan (*Livistona chinensis*), Alexandra, MacArthur and Sealing Wax palms are those commonly planted in urban areas. Their fruits regularly attract hordes

of Asian Glossy Starlings, Yellow-vented Bulbuls, Black-naped Orioles, Asian Koels and Pink-necked Green-pigeons. Those of the Oil palm attract hordes of noisy Long-tailed Parakeets. Spotted Doves (*Streptopelia chinensis*) are similarly attracted to these fruits.

Besides providing food for birds, palms are favourite nesting sites for many species of birds. The Chinese Fan palm has large, palmately lobed fronds. The dead fronds collect as a dense skirt below the crown, and if these are not trimmed off, they attract the Asian Palm Swift (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*). This swift builds its nest on the lower surface of older fronds that hang down. Made up mainly of the woolly hairs found in the fruits of Kapok (*Ceiba pentandra*), the nest is glued to the frond surface using the bird's saliva.

Birds like Spotted Dove, Oriental Magpie-robin and Scaly-breasted Munia have been noted to sometimes construct their nests among the base of palm fronds. The Baya Weaver (*Ploceus philippinus*) mostly builds its nest in groups on trees, attached to the ends of branches. This prominently large, flask-like nest is sometimes found suspended from a single leaflet of a coconut frond. It collects its nesting materials from the tall grasses that grow near freshwater. A freshly made nest is always green, turning brown as the grass blades dry.

The stems of old as well as dead palms, like those of Coconut and Areca palm (*Areca catechu*), may provide cavities for the nesting of woodpeckers, like the Laced Woodpecker (*Picus vittatus*). When a Coconut palm dies as a result of attacks by Rhinoceros beetles (*Oryctes rhinoceros*) on its apical shoot, the

fronds die and the trunk slowly rots away. During the interim, birds like Mynas and the Dollarbird (*Eurystomus orientalis*) often build their nests at the top.

Although palms are not suitable as shade plants, they have their charm when planted in isolation in gardens or in rows along avenues. Tall palms that tower over roadside trees are favored by birds as resting points. Their crowns and stems are sometimes sought after as nesting sites and their fruits provide food for birds. Palm flowers that secrete nectar attract insects that in turn attract birds. Palms should be encouraged in the urban environment to provide an added varied habitat for birds. 🌴

Wee Yeow Chin is a retired botanist who is now a sometime bird watcher. He is a founder member of the newly formed Bird Ecology Study Group, Nature Society (Singapore).

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