

Ornithological Observations



An electronic journal published by the Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town and BirdLife South Africa



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Editor: Arnold van der Westhuizen

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Recommended citation format:

Wiesler, K 2014. In search of the Green Tinkerbird – an eyewitness report. Ornithological Observations, Vol 5: 294-300.

URL: <http://oo.adu.org.za/content.php?id=135>

Published online: 26 June 2014

- ISSN 2219-0341 -



IN SEARCH OF THE GREEN TINKERBIRD – AN EYE WITNESS REPORT

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During a birding trip with Reach Africa Safaris 12 birders got to enjoy extended views of a Green Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus simplex* at its nest site.

No Green Tinkerbird nest had been scientifically described from any part of its range (Chittenden, 2005; Davies and Chittenden, 2013). The observation discussed in this paper is of particular significance as it describes not only the third sighting of the bird in southern Africa. The previous sightings being in January 1958 and an unconfirmed sighting in June 1968 (Chittenden 2005). Furthermore this paper presents photographic evidence of both the bird and its nest – in a possible breeding attempt.

On the afternoon of 3 March 2014 our group visited the Boniane-Ungwana area of the Inhambane Province of Mozambique in search of the Green Tinkerbird. We searched at S23°02.633' E35°05.613 about 7 km west of the EN1 main road in the general vicinity where the tinkerbirds are said to be located. We did not find any signs of the birds.

We returned early the next morning, 4 March 2014. The general area that we searched was around S23°03.770' E035°11.162'. We heard one or maybe two birds calling but the calls were infrequent, moved

around continuously and the bird(s) did not respond to playbacks¹. As we were unable to pin-point a location we decided to divide into smaller groups to cover the area more effectively while searching for the bird(s).

Whilst walking down a footpath through the forest (coastal-type evergreen thicket) I noticed a dead branch that appeared to be "decorated". On closer inspection I found that the decorations were the sticky seeds of mistletoe. I was aware that the Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird *Pogoniulus chrysocomus* ate mistletoe and regurgitated the seeds and that the Green Tinkerbird also probably fed on the fruits of mistletoe plants (Chittenden, 2005). Based on the amount of seeds I realised that the site was well utilised by either a Green Tinkerbird or another species of tinkerbird. I decided to try my luck and staked out the site.

While on the stakeout I was joined by Rolf Wiesler who thought he heard a Green Tinkerbird calling. Although the call was not quite the same as on tape, he decided to try a playback and received an immediate response when a single bird landed on some vegetation near the "decorated branch".

The bird settled and I called our group leader, Grahame Snow, who rounded up the rest of our party. This bird stayed in the area long enough for everyone to get good views.

When the bird eventually flew off one of our party, Altus Lombard, went to examine the branch more closely as he was interested in the seeds. He noticed a small hole, surrounded by sticky mistletoe

¹ Editor's note: The injudicious use of tapes and playbacks to lure birds closer when they are breeding may disturb breeding birds and may lead to nest abandonment in some species, especially highly territorial birds.



Fig 1 - Green Tinkerbird responding to playback. © Rolf Wiesler



Fig 2 - Green Tinkerbird nest hole. © Altus Lombard



seeds, on the far side of the branch and suspected that it was a Green Tinkerbird nest.

Altus also mentioned that he had flushed a bird earlier that morning, very close to where we found the nest. The bird flew into a dense thicket about 1 m above the ground where it sat for about a minute before flying away.

We all returned about 30 minutes later and were rewarded with sightings of the bird in its nest hole. The nest was situated at eye-level, about 1.6 m off the ground and from the right angle it was fairly easy to view.

Various members of our party spent time watching the bird at its nest site. Some of the observations made are as follows:

- Only one bird seemed to be in attendance, that is, when it left the nest no other bird seem to take over the guard;
- The bird would sit in the nest for about twenty minutes, usually with its head out the hole, and then leave the nest to forage;
- On returning it emitted a call different to that in our recording. The call is of a higher pitch alternating with a slower and lower pitch;
- At one stage Altus noticed that the bird seemed to be feeding young inside the nest, although there were no sounds emanating from the nest. He did not want to get too close in case he disturbed the proceeding.

The nest site was located in a dense thicket, about 30 m from a small cultivated field. Unfortunately, the nest was located in a dead branch already detached from the tree and looking rotten in places. It is doubtful if it will still be there next year. There was also the concern that the branch may be collected for firewood as it was close to a path used by the local population.

Some additional information provided by John Bradshaw (pers. comm.) may indicate a breeding attempt. On 5 February 2014 he and Wally Davey observed nuptial feeding taking place between two birds in the same general vicinity where we found the nest. They were alerted by a begging call which was quite different to the normal call, and which they initially took to be an alarm call. While soliciting food the receiving bird (female) shook its wings and moved its tail up and down.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Altus Lombard and Rolf Wiesler for their input in this paper and the use of their photographs of the nest sites. John Bradshaw is thanked for the additional information relating to the courtship display and Wally Davey for the use of his photograph.

All birders owe Greg Davies and Hugh Chittenden a huge vote of thanks for the excellent piece of detective work that they did in order to "re-discover" this bird.

References

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Fig 3 - Green Tinkerbird in the nest. © Rolf Wiesler



Fig 4 - Green Tinkerbird appearing to feed young inside the nest. © Altus Lombard



Fig 5 - Female Green Tinkerbird soliciting food. © Wally Davey