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Observation of a Nilgiri Wood Pigeon (*Columba elphinstonii*) feeding on boiled peanuts at Doddabetta Peak, The Nilgiris, India

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Abstract - In this study, we report the observation of the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon (*Columba elphinstonii*) feeding on boiled peanuts scattered on the ground at Doddabetta Peak. This behavior was first noted incidentally and was subsequently monitored over the course of a week. During this period, the species was consistently observed feeding on the peanuts in the evening hours. Notably, these observations were made during the breeding season of the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, suggesting an adaptive foraging in response to local ecological pressures, fluctuating resource availability, and the nutritional demands of the breeding season.

Key words: Columbidae, endemic species, Western Ghats, straying, foraging behavior.

The Nilgiri Wood Pigeon is predominantly frugivorous but also eats leaf buds, flowers, ground invertebrates like snails and beetle grubs, and soil (Somasundaram & Vijayan, 2011). Additionally, the species has been seen ingesting soil, likely for mineral intake or to aid digestion (Somasundaram & Vijayan, 2011). Its diet of large fruits suggests a significant role in seed dispersal for various forest trees (Ganesh & Davidar, 2001). The species presence has been mentioned as ‘erratic’, often influenced by the availability and timing of fruiting trees (Baker *et al.*, 1913; Somasundaram & Vijayan, 2010; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012; Koparde *et al.*, 2015). The Nilgiri Wood Pigeon typically breeds between March and July (Hume & Oates, 1890; Blanford, 1898; Baker *et al.*, 1913; Ali & Ripley, 1982; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012). In the Western Ghats, nesting is mostly observed from May to July, with peak egg-laying in May and June (Morgan, 1875; Hume & Oates, 1889–1890; Baker, 1932–1935; Goodwin, 1967). In contrast, records from Nandi Hills show nesting may begin as early as November or December and continue through April or May (Karthikeyan, 2000; Subramanya, 2005). In this report, we document observation of a *Columba elphinstonii* confidently foraging on boiled peanuts without displaying shyness.

On the evening of March 10, we made a visit to Doddabetta Peak as part of our fieldwork. To our surprise, we spotted a Nilgiri Wood Pigeon feeding on boiled peanuts (Fig. 1) in front of a peanut shop (11.4026, 76.7363). Curious about this behavior, we began observing the pigeon regularly during the evening time for one week from the date of our first sighting. During this observation period, we consistently saw the Pigeon feeding on boiled peanuts scattered in the ground and despite the presence of human activity and disturbance in the area, the bird appeared unbothered and continued feeding in front of the peanut shop.

This observation of a *C. elphinstonii* actively feeding on boiled peanuts, in a disturbed, human-dominated place, to the best of our knowledge, is the first such documented instance of dietary straying in the species. Notably, this behavior occurred during its breeding season, a time when nutritional demands are elevated due to the energetic requirements of reproduction and chick-rearing

(Somasundaram & Vijayan, 2011). Anthropogenic food sources can have negative impacts on birds, including increased disease transmission (Fischer & Miller, 2015; Pennycott *et al.*, 2007; Burt *et al.*, 2020). Consumption of pesticide-contaminated food may cause physiological stress, producing weaker chicks and reducing reproductive success (Gaffard *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, pesticide accumulation such as DDT has led to eggshell thinning and higher chick mortality in species like the peregrine falcon (Stiling, 2012). This shift towards anthropogenic food sources may represent adaptive foraging in response to local ecological pressures, fluctuating resource availability, and the nutritional demands of the breeding season. Such behavioral flexibility, particularly in a vulnerable and endemic species, raises critical questions about the impact of human altered habitats on its ecology and conservation. This underscores the need for further study on the long-term effects of this behavior.

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Fig. 1 – *Columba elphinstonii* near a woman (left) and straying on the boiled peanut from the ground (right) with *Turdus simillimus* (Indian Blackbird).