

LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD

Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti* in Pantí Forest Reserve, Malaysia

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Introduction

The status of the Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti* in Peninsular Malaysia is not well known. It is seldom seen, and even more seldom photographed, with reportedly less than one sighting per year. On 18 February 2012 we were on the Bunker Trail in Pantí Forest Reserve, Johor, Peninsular Malaysia, when we stopped to check activity at a fruiting tree. LJS was first to notice several Brown-backed Flowerpeckers, and we all spent the next two hours observing four, possibly five, birds feeding on the ripe fruits of a Sunda Fig *Ficus sundaica*, a species of strangler fig.

The flowerpeckers typically fed for 10 minutes or so and then retreated to the canopy of a nearby high tree, and after 20 to 30 minutes returned to feed again. They usually started feeding near the top of the tree, which fortunately had some low-hanging branches to which they came down occasionally, hence we were able to obtain photographs and sound recordings.

Also feeding in the tree were Crimson-breasted *Prionochilus percussus*, Yellow-breasted *P. maculatus*, Yellow-vented *D. chrysorrheum* and Orange-bellied *D. trignonostigma* Flowerpeckers, as well as Greater Green *Chloropsis sonnerati*, Lesser Green *C. cyanopogon* and Blue-winged *C. cochinchinensis* Leafbirds and a Blue-eared Barbet *Megalaima australis*. It was quite a feast; the tree was fully laden with ripe fruits.

Description

Compared with Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* the head, upperparts and upperwing-coverts were greyish-brown rather than greyish-olive. There was a central median stripe running down the breast from the throat to the belly which was whitish, tinged with yellow. Streaking on the breast was less than in Thick-billed and there was a very faint malar stripe. There was no white in the tail, nor was any side-to-side flicking of the tail observed, as would be expected of Thick-billed Flowerpecker (Wells 2007, Robson 2008).

Plate 1. Male Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti*, Pantí Forest Reserve, Johor, Malaysia, 18 February 2012.





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Plate 2. Female Brown-backed Flowerpecker, Pantli Forest Reserve, Johor, Malaysia, 18 February 2012.

The eyes had a pale iris which in good lighting appeared pale yellow. The bill was similar to that of Thick-billed Flowerpecker but appeared slightly thicker with the upper mandible greyish and the lower mandible a pale lead-blue with a dark tip. The legs were dark greyish-brown (Plates 1 & 2).

We observed a possible sexual dimorphism in the birds we saw. They appeared to be pairing up

for the breeding season, with one bird chasing another. The bird thought to be a male showed a brown edge to the carpal, tinged with white, and apparent pectoral tufts were visible (Plate 1). The pectoral tufts were absent in the presumed female, on which the carpal edge was brown, tinged with buffy-yellowish rather than white (Plates 2 & 3).

Plate 3. Female Brown-backed Flowerpecker, Pantli Forest Reserve, Johor, Malaysia, 18 February 2012.



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Vocalisation

The first sonogram (Figure 1a) shows a series of three single-note calls, believed to be contact calls. Each call shows an inverted J-shaped mark and an inverted V-shaped mark (Figure 1b) and has an average duration of 0.04 sec. The inverted J-shaped mark has a frequency range of 3.5–7 kHz. The rising part takes 0.03 sec and has a narrower frequency range of 4.8–7 kHz compared with the descending part, 0.01 sec duration and range 3.5–7 kHz. In the inverted V-shaped mark the frequency range is higher at 11.5–13.4 kHz. The rising part is longer at 0.02 sec and covers the full frequency range of 11.5–13.4 kHz compared to the descending part, 0.01 sec and range 12–13.4 kHz.

In comparison, the call of the closest confusion species, Thick-billed Flowerpecker, is represented by a series of inverted V-shaped marks (Figure 2), differing from the Brown-backed Flowerpecker's combination of inverted J- and V-shaped marks.

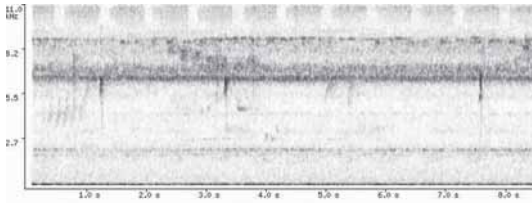


Figure 1a. Series of three calls of Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti* (Lau Jia Sheng).

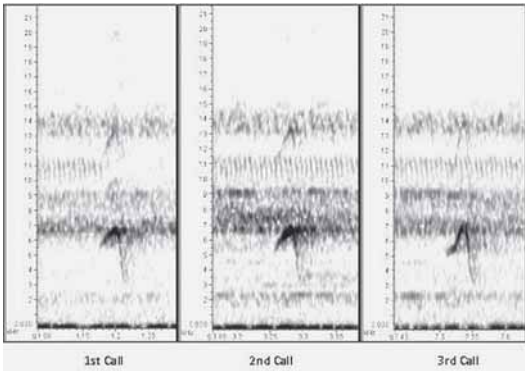


Figure 1b. Analysis of three single note calls of Brown-backed Flowerpecker (Lau Jia Sheng).

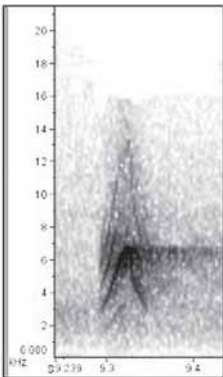


Figure 2. Call of Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*, India (D. Farrow).

These inverted V-shaped marks have central peaks when compared to the right-leaning marks of the Brown-backed Flowerpecker and there is a distinct frequency gap of 4.5 kHz between the two described marks in the Brown-backed Flowerpecker’s sonogram which is not apparent in that of Thick-billed Flowerpecker. However, we have to admit that such differences are probably inaudible in the field.

Discussion

The Brown-backed Flowerpecker has been recorded in southern Peninsular Malaysia, the Riau archipelago (off Sumatra), Borneo and the Natuna archipelago, although it is apparently sparse throughout its range. It is thought possible that it may occur on mainland Sumatra although it is as yet unrecorded there (Wells 2007). At one time the Peninsular Malaysian birds were described as a distinct race, *sordidum*, but it is now regarded as part of the nominate *everetti* (Wells 2007).

From conversations with other birdwatchers who frequent Panti FR, Brown-backed Flowerpecker has been seen rarely and irregularly, although it was photographed there in May 2010. It may be under-recorded as it seems to favour the canopy for feeding, and we also wonder if it may be nomadic in its behaviour and therefore less easily located. We recorded four, possibly five, birds but observers who tried to see them the following day and subsequently were unsuccessful. The possible features of sexual dimorphism remain to be confirmed through more sightings or the examination of skins.

Acknowledgements

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References

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