

Nectar Sources in the Diet of the Whitehead's Spiderhunter

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There is limited information on the diet of the Whitehead's Spiderhunter *Arachnothera juliae*. Smythies and Davidson (1999) note that it is a nectarivore, an insectivore and a frugivore; it regularly feeds on the nectar of rhododendron blossoms but is known to take insects and small berries. On its diet, Cheke, Mann and Allen (2001) say "*presumably includes berries, nectar and small arthropods. Known food-plants Rhododendron sp.*".

Wong (2013) identified one nectar source as *Wightia borneensis* (Paulowniaceae). This plant is found at the park headquarters in Kinabalu National Park, Sabah, North Borneo and Whitehead's Spiderhunters can invariably be seen when the plant is flowering (see Plate 1 and 2).



Plate 1: Whitehead's Spiderhunter feeding on *Wightia borneensis* nectar, Kinabalu National Park, Sabah, June 2024



Plate 2: Whitehead's Spiderhunter feeding on *Wightia borneensis* nectar, Trusmadi, Sabah, October 2023

Phillipps and Phillipps (2014) offer some details on nectar sources. They state that the distribution of Whitehead's Spiderhunter parallels the growth of the montane epiphyte *Rhododendron praetervisum* (Julia's Rhododendron) and that it is the only known pollinator of this plant; this plant is endemic to Borneo.

A review of the Macaulay Library image database showed a number of other nectar sources. Of the ones that could be identified include:

- *Neonauclea gigantea* (Rubiaceae) - Stephen Chang; Rafflesia Information Centre, Sabah; August 2017. This plant is endemic to Borneo.
- *Radermachera ramiflora* (Bignoniaceae) - Muangpai Suetrong; Sayap Substation, Kinabalu National Park, Sabah; 06 April 2023. This plant is endemic to Borneo.

- *Erythrina subumbrans* (Fabaceae) - Neil Osborne; Masakob Waterfall, Tambunan, Sabah; 27 February 2020.
- *Dendrophthoe longituba* (Lorantaceae) - Mike Tuer (20 August 2017) Timpohon Gate and Jinchi Han (07 August 2023); Bukit Ular Trail, Kinabalu National Park, Sabah. Native to Borneo and the Philippines.
- *Lepeostegeres centiflorus* (Lorantaceae) - Nigel Voadenm (01 July 2009) and Julian Teh (30 January 2016); Kinabalu National Park, Sabah. This plant is endemic to Borneo, especially North Borneo.

Two additional species of epiphytic plants that are commonly found growing around the Kinabalu Park Headquarters, at the middle of the forest canopy in low montane forests, that will attract the attention of Whitehead's Spiderhunter for nectar (personal observation Alim Biun) include *Aeschynanthus speciosus* (Gesneriaceae) and *Aeschynanthus magnificus* (Gesneriaceae).

It is interesting to note that four of the plants identified are endemic to Borneo, suggesting how important this Spiderhunter is to pollinating some endemic plant species.

But there are yet many unidentified sources of nectar for this species. We hope bird watchers and photographers will work with us to help identify more food sources for the species.

References

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