

Active Anting in the Van Hasselt's Sunbird in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo

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Introduction

Anting is a specialised maintenance behaviour in which birds interact with ants or other arthropods, either by allowing them to crawl through the plumage (passive anting) or by deliberately rubbing them onto the feathers (active anting) (Morozov 2015; Hendricks 2016). Recent local observations documented both passive and active anting in several Malaysian bird species, including active anting in Blue-winged Leafbird *Chloropsis moluccensis* and Pin-striped Tit-Babbler *Mixornis gularis* (Amar-Singh HSS et al. 2024). Here, I report active anting by Van Hasselt's Sunbird *Leptocoma brasiliana*.

Observation

While observing birds in a peat swamp forest near Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, on 23 April 2026, an adult male Van Hasselt's Sunbird was observed picking up a red ant from vegetation and immediately applying it to its plumage in its first application [Plate 1(A)]. Rather than consuming the ant, it repeatedly applied the ant, using rapid rubbing movements [Plate 1(A) & 1(C)]. The ant remained held in the bill after the first application [Plate 1(B)] before being reapplied [Plate 1(C)] and subsequently discarded. The bird then briefly rubbed its bill against nearby twigs before obtaining a second red ant, which it applied once. The ant remained visible in the bill after the application [Plate 1(D)] before being discarded.



Plate 1: Active anting by an adult male. (A) First application immediately after picking up the ant. (B) Holding the ant after the first application. (C) Re-applying the same ant. (D) Holding the second ant after its application, with the juvenile visible in the same frame.

While the adult was performing its second anting episode, a juvenile became visible in the video frame [Plate 2(A) & 1(D)] and remained facing the adult for approximately two seconds before obtaining its own ant [Plate 2(B)]. It then began applying the ant to the underwing [Plate 2(C)]. During the first application, it lost its footing and dropped onto a lower branch while still holding the ant. After briefly regaining its balance, it reapplied the same ant before discarding it [Plate 2(D)]. The entire adult–juvenile sequence was observed continuously without interruption. A video recording of the complete behavioural sequence can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/9TkQOxdx0a4>.



Plate 2: Active anting by a juvenile, following the adult's second anting bout. (A) Juvenile facing the adult before obtaining its own ant. (B) Picking up the ant. (C) Applying the ant before losing its footing and dropping onto a lower branch. (D) Re-applying the same ant after regaining its footing.

Discussion

The observed behaviour is consistent with active anting, distinguished from passive anting by the deliberate application of ants to the plumage. To my knowledge, active anting has not previously been reported in Van Hasselt's Sunbird. The repeated anting bouts by the adult using different ants suggest that the behaviour was deliberate rather than incidental prey handling.

The juvenile's performance of similar behaviour immediately following the adult's second anting bout is noteworthy. Although this sequence raises the possibility of behavioural copying or other forms of social learning, a single observation cannot distinguish these from the

independent expression of an innate behaviour. Nevertheless, this observation adds to the documented behavioural repertoire of the species and highlights an aspect of its natural history that warrants further observation.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Malaysian Bird Report for encouraging the documentation of this observation. I would like to thank Wai-Mun Choy for reviewing the manuscript.

References

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Citation: Dixon Lau. (2026). Active Anting in the Van Hasselt's Sunbird in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2026, Sept 2026: pg. 89-91.