

Bird Tree Series:

Macaranga bancana – the Ice Cream of the Forest

Amar-Singh HSS

I call the *Macaranga bancana* (Common Mahang) the 'ice cream' of the forest as it attracts a wide and large range of birds and mammals. It fruits twice a year, usually in July and December but at times outside these months. During the December fruiting season many migrant birds will also be found feeding at the tree. For bird watchers and photographers this is a 'prince among trees' for birds and they should be alert as to its presence and fruiting.

M. bancana is native to Thailand, West Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra. It is a light-demanding, fast-growing tree reaching seven to eight meters in height (Plate 1). It is often found in secondary forest or along open trails or recent open spaces within primary forest. The tree is nondescript but you can identify it by the tri-lobed leaves (Plate 2) with a palmate venation – this is a leaf venation pattern where the main veins radiate from a common point, similar to how fingers branch out from the palm of a hand.

The flowers are unisexual with male and female flowers found in separate trees. The tiny fruits found in female trees are in clusters. The flowers are ~ one mm in diameter, green-whitish and clustered together on branched inflorescences. The best identification of the *M. bancana* is the fruits which are deep purple-red when ripe, 10–11 mm in size (Plate 2). They have a thin layer of lipid-rich pulp, which attracts many species of birds (Yeow-Chin Wee 2014). The twigs are hollow and inhabited by ants, making them of interest to Rufous Piculets *Sasia abnormis* (Amar-Singh HSS 2016) and other woodpeckers who come to feed.

The tree has a short life span and often dies out after three to six fruiting seasons. Fruits are usually produced after two to three years when the tree reaches about three meters in height.



© Amar-Singh HSS

Plate 1: *M. bancana* (Common Mahang) with fruit.



Plate 2: Close up of *M. bancana* (Common Mahang) leaves and ripe fruit (right).

Birds that I have personally observed, over many years, feeding on the *Macaranga bancana* fruit include (Amar-Singh HSS 2015; Yeow-Chin Wee 2014) (Plate 3):

1. Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*
2. Gold-whiskered Barbet *Megalaima chrysopogon*
3. Sooty Barbet *Caloramphus hayii*
4. Checker-throated Woodpecker *Chrysophlegma mentale*
5. Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot *Loriculus galgulus*
6. Green Iora *Aegithina viridissima*
7. Cream-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus simplex*
8. Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus brunneus*
9. Spectacled Bulbul *Pycnonotus erythrophthalmus*
10. Hairy-backed Bulbul *Tricholestes criniger*
11. Buff-vented Bulbul *Iole charlottae*
12. Scaly-Breasted Bulbul *Pycnonotus squamatus*
13. Black-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus atriceps*
14. Stripe-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus finlaysoni*
15. Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier*
16. Hume's White-eye *Zosterops auriventer*
17. Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*
18. One Thrush, ID unknown
19. Mugimaki Flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki*
20. Green-backed Flycatcher *Ficedula elisae*
21. Yellow-rumped Flycatcher *Ficedula zanthopygia*
22. Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*
23. Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassinus*
24. Blue-and-white Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cyanomelana*
25. Asian Fairy-bluebird *Irena puella*
26. Blue-winged Leafbird *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*

27. Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati*
28. Lesser Green Leafbird *Chloropsis cyanopogon*
29. Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus percussus*
30. Grey-breasted Spiderhunter *Arachnothera modesta*
31. Yellow-eared Spiderhunter *Arachnothera chrysogenys*
32. Spectacled Spiderhunter *Arachnothera flavigaster*
33. Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*
34. Ruby-cheeked Sunbird *Chalcoparia singalensis*
35. Red-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes rhodolaemus*
36. Plain Sunbird *Anthreptes simplex*
37. Ruby-cheeked Sunbird *Chalcoparia singalensis*
38. Brown-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes malacensis*
39. Purple-naped Spiderhunter *Kurochkinogramma hypogrammicum*



Plate 3: A selection of birds feeding on *M. bancana* fruit - From top left Checker-throated Woodpecker, Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot, Hairy-backed Bulbul, Hume's White-eye, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Grey-breasted Spiderhunter, Yellow-eared Spiderhunter, Spectacled Spiderhunter, Red-throated Sunbird.

Diverse bird species will come in large numbers to a fruiting *M. bancana* and there is often intraspecific and interspecific competitive feeding. The Spectacled Spiderhunter is the most 'troublesome' and will attempt to chase other birds away (Amar-Singh HSS 2013) (Plate 4). Spiderhunters will have to 'juggle' the ripe fruit to manoeuvre it down the long beak. The fruit

is not always easily accessible and many birds will hover to reach it. The Emerald Dove will often feed on fruit fallen to the ground but the lure of the fruit is such that they will perch on branches to gain access to fruit (Plate 4).



Plate 4: Left - Spectacled Spiderhunter attempting to chase away a Checker-throated Woodpecker. Right – immature Emerald Dove checking to see if the fruit is ripe.

Birds are willing to tolerate human presence at close distances, perhaps because *M. bancana* fruit is a preferred food being competed for and not to be abandoned readily. Fruiting usually lasts about seven to eight days. Note that peak feeding times are from sunrise until about 1000 hrs, after which ripe fruits for the day have been nearly exhausted and there is a marked drop in the number of birds. The smaller birds often forage till later, gleaning what is left over.

I am always amused to see many birds, like the Emerald Dove, spiderhunters and sunbirds, visit the tree to check on whether it is fruiting or ripe (Plate 4). I am certain there are more birds to add to the list, including other woodpeckers, babblers and migratory thrushes.

M. bancana has all the biological attributes of a top-class component of any parkland planting scheme designed to attract and support frugivorous birds. Trees will have to be selected to ensure we have both male and female plants and regrown every few years.

References

1. POWO (2024). *Plants of the World Online*. Facilitated by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Published on the Internet.
<https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:351044-1> Accessed 20 September 2024.
2. Amar-Singh HSS. (2013). Frugivory by spiderhunter *Arachnothera* species in Peninsular Malaysia. *BirdingASIA* 20: 76–81.



3. Amar-Singh HSS. (2015). Two more species of birds attracted to *Macaranga bancana* fruits. *Bird Ecology Study Group*. [online] <https://besgroup.org/2015/07/12/two-more-species-of-birds-attracted-to-macaranga-bancana-fruits/> Accessed 20 September 2024.
4. Amar-Singh HSS. (2016). Rufous Piculet – Feeding observations. *Bird Ecology Study Group*. [online] <https://besgroup.org/2016/10/02/rufous-piculet-feeding-observations/> Accessed 20 September 2024.
5. Yeow-Chin Wee. (2014). Trees for Birds: 2. *Macaranga bancana* (Common Mahang). *Bird Ecology Study Group*. [online] <https://besgroup.org/2014/04/24/trees-for-birds-2-macaranga-bancana-common-mahang/> Accessed 20 September 2024.

Citation: Amar-Singh HSS. (2024). *Macaranga bancana* – the Ice Cream of the Forest. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2024, Sept 2024: pg. 64-68.