

Bird Tree Series:

***Muntingia calabura* – a Favourite Village Cherry**

Amar-Singh HSS

Muntingia calabura was introduced from tropical America to South-East Asia in the late 19th century. It is spread mainly by birds and bats (Yeow-Chin Wee 2003; Yih-Horng Cheah 2018). It has many local names including Buah Cheri, Ceri Kampung, Malayan Cherry, Cherry Tree and Bird's Cherry. Some of us will remember, as children, eating the 'cotton candy' tasting ripe fruit or using the fruit as a pellet to play with our wooden guns.

The tree can thrive on poor soils and is commonly seen growing in the city roadsides and secondary growth areas. When planted in a village adjacent to primary forest, many forest birds will come out to feed on the fruit. It was once a popular road-side tree but some found the presence of numerous birds with their dropping unsightly. Hence, it is sadly slowly becoming less common in our cities.

Muntingia calabura is a small tree of three to 12 m in height with spread out, fan-like branches (Plate 1). It has fragrant white flowers and simple, ovate-lanceolate, dark-green leaves (Flora Fauna Web 2024). Fruits are 1-1.5 cm in diameter; initially green and orange-red when ripe. The seeds are fine and number in their thousands in each fruit. It is a fast growing tree and will bear fruit within one or two years of planting.



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Plate 1: A male Pink-necked Green-Pigeon taking a *Muntingia calabura* fruit

It fruits intermittently, throughout the year and a large variety of birds can be seen feeding on the fruit. Birds that have been observed feeding on the fruit of *Muntingia calabura* include: (Amar-Singh HSS 2011, 2012 and personal observation):

1. Pink-necked Green-Pigeon *Treron vernans*
2. Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata*
3. Gold-whiskered Barbet *Megalaima chrysopogon*
4. Yellow Vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier*
5. Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*
6. Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati*
7. Yellow-vented Flowerpecker *Dicaeum chrysorrheum*
8. Crimson-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus percussus*
9. Orange-bellied Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trigonostigma*
10. Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum*

Other birds that feed on the fruit of *Muntingia calabura*, either reported in literature or identified in an online image search, include:

1. Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula whartoni* (Australia)
2. Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot *Loriculus galgulus* (Amar-Singh HSS 2024)
3. Sulawesi Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus stigmatus* (Indonesia)
4. Tanimbar Corella *Cacatua goffiniana* (feral bird in Singapore)
5. Yellow-chevroned Parakeet *Brotogeris chiriri* (Brazil)
6. Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopaceus* (Singapore)
7. White-cheeked Barbet *Psilopogon viridis* (India)
8. Sooty-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus aurigaster* (Rohman *et al* 2020)
9. Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus* (Fishpool *et al* 2020)
10. Red-keeled Flowerpecker *Dicaeum austral* (Philippines)
11. Pygmy Flowerpecker *Dicaeum pygmaeum* (Philippines)
12. Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos* (India)
13. Grey-sided Flowerpecker *Dicaeum celebicum* (Indonesia)
14. Blood-breasted Flowerpecker (Sumba) *Dicaeum sanguinolentum* (Indonesia)
15. Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* (Australia)
16. Scarlet-headed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum trochileum* (Rohman *et al* 2020)
17. Blue-grey Tanager *Thraupis episcopus* (La Mariposa 2015)
18. Hoffmann's Woodpecker *Melanerpes hoffmannii* (La Mariposa 2015)
19. Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus* (La Mariposa 2015)
20. Orchard Oriole *Icterus spurius* (La Mariposa 2015)
21. Spot-breasted Oriole *Icterus pectoralis* (La Mariposa 2015)
22. Saltator and Motmot species (La Mariposa 2015)

The above species list is not exhaustive and I suspect many other birds could be added to the list locally and internationally.

The technique of feeding on the *Muntingia calabura* is quite different for different species. For example, the Pink-necked Green-Pigeon will swallow the fruit whole. Parrots will hold the fruit in a claw and bite off pieces. Orange-bellied and Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker look for really

ripe fruit and then peck at it to get an opening and then piecemeal address the fruit. The Yellow-vented Flowerpecker is a 'master' feeder, despite its small size. It will choose very ripe soft fruit and the pucker them with the beak. It then holds the fruit upwards and squeezes it until drained completely (plate 2). Even the much bigger Greater Green Leafbirds are not able to do this as well. Often birds will not wait for the fruit to ripen and will take it while it is still green.



Plate 2: Composite image of a Yellow-vented Flowerpecker squeezing the juice out of a *Muntingia calabura* fruit

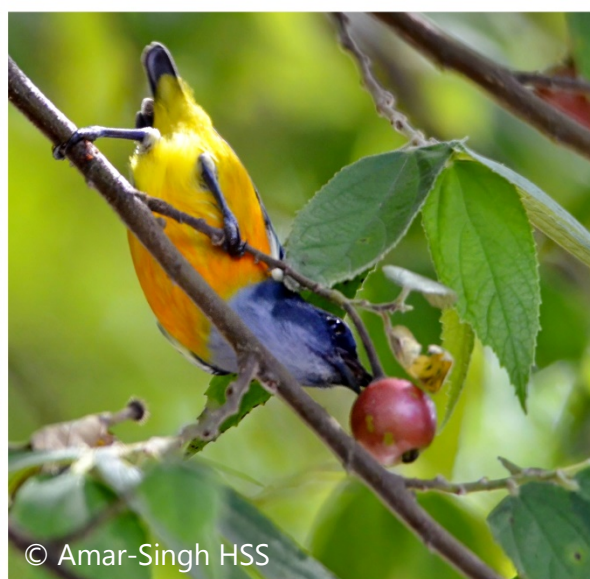
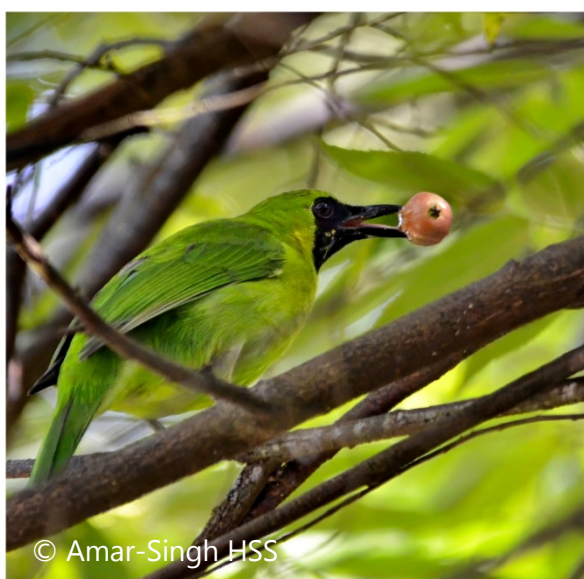


Plate 3: A male Greater Green Leafbird (left) and male Orange-bellied Flowerpecker feeding on *Muntingia calabura* fruit

If anyone wants a garden full of birds or has a home near the forest, the *Muntingia calabura* is the tree to plant. It will bring no end of delight to watch numerous different species come to feed on its fruit.

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