

Bird Trees Series:

Sterculia sp – Fruit Trees for Hornbills and other Big Birds

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Introduction

Sterculia is a genus of 182 flowering plants in the family, Malvaceae: subfamily Sterculioideae; colloquially known as 'tropical chestnuts'. Of these at least 28 species are found in Malaysia (MyBIS 2025) with some planted as ornamental trees along the roadside (Tropical Plants Database 2025). A few bear fruits attractive to birds; these include *Sterculia parviflora*, *S. lanceolata* and *S. coccinea* (Hails & Kavanagh 2013, MyBIS 2025) (note that *S. coccinea* is considered by some to be a variant of *S. lanceolata*). *S. parviflora* and *S. lanceolata* are locally known as 'Kelumpang Burung' "because the birds love to eat its fruit" (MyBIS 2025). Another older name given to these and other trees with yellow or red fruit that have large pulpy seeds is 'Tangisong Burong' (crying birds) (Corner 1952). Despite their attractiveness to birds, these native trees are poorly known to birdwatchers and inadequately used as trees to attract birds in urban settings.

S. parviflora is a tall tree and can grow up to 30 m, while *S. lanceolata* is smaller at 4m. The hallmark of these trees is the bright red or orange fruit that splits open like petals to reveal shiny black seeds. Birds feed on the flesh of the fruit, on the seed and some on the nectar of the flowers. Table 1 outlines selected *Sterculia* species and their distribution.

Table 1: Selected *Sterculia* species and their distribution

Species	Synonym	Malay Name	IUCN Global Status	Forest type	Distribution
<i>Sterculia parviflora</i>	<i>Sterculia maingayi</i>	Kelumpang Burung	LC	LDF, HDF	PM, Borneo
<i>Sterculia lanceolata</i>	<i>Sterculia coccinea</i>	Kelumpang Burung	LC	LDF, UR	PM, Borneo
<i>Sterculia foetida</i>	<i>Sterculia polyphylla</i>	Kelumpang Jari	NE	CF, UR	PM, Borneo
<i>Sterculia rubiginosa</i>	<i>Sterculia angustifolia</i>	Kelumpang Bukit	NE	LDF, HDF	PM, Borneo
<i>Firmiana colorata</i>	<i>Sterculia colorata</i>	Kelumpang	NE	CF, UR	PM

Key: LC = Least Concern; NE = Not Evaluated; LDF = Lowland dipterocarp forest; HDF = Hill dipterocarp forest; CF = Coastal forest; SF = Secondary forest; UR = Urban Landscape; PM = Peninsular Malaysia.

Observations

On 27 July 2025, Qayyum joined several members in a flora identification workshop held at the recreational forest of Kampung Bukit Jana, Taiping, Malaysia. The programme, organised by Diribumi and Rimba Bukit Jana with support from the Taiping Heritage Society, in collaboration with Sustainable Tourism Malaysia and funded by the Ministry of Finance Malaysia, was designed to strengthen community skills in recognising forest plants and trees.

At around 1200 hours, while examining a stand of forest trees, Qayyum's attention shifted from plants to birds. An adult Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis* appeared among the branches of a *S. parviflora* (Common Sterculia), which was fruiting at the time. The malkoha

was deliberately moving from one branch to another, plucking exposed seeds from the fruit open pods and feeding actively (Plate 1).

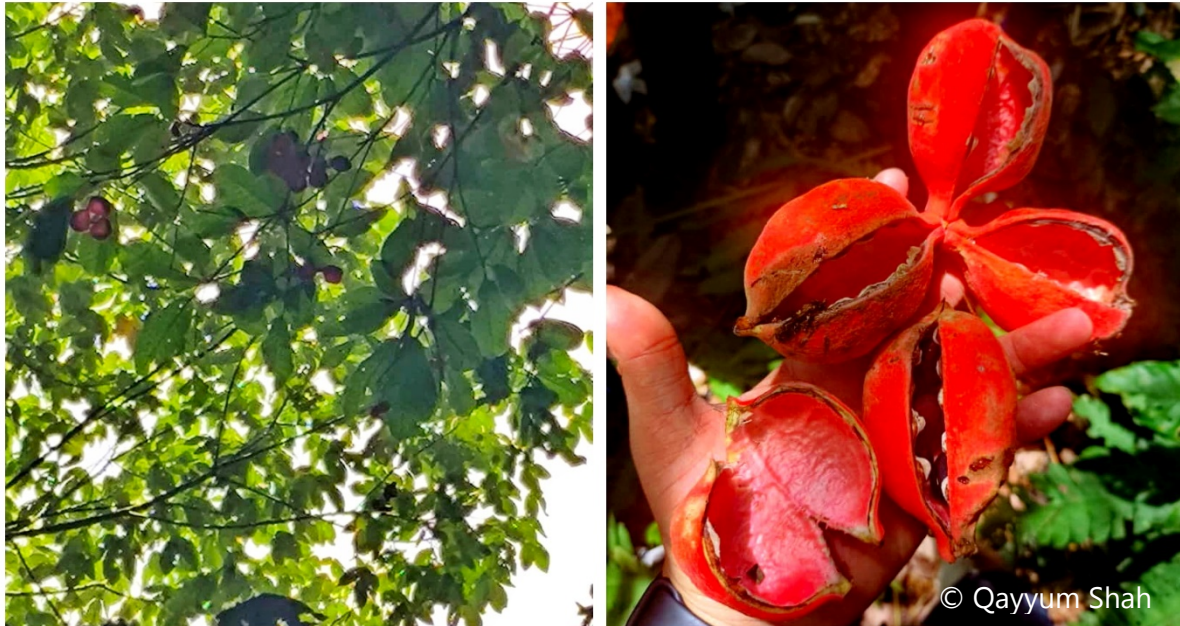


Plate 1: Hanging *S. parviflora* (Common Sterculia) fruits pods that are still hanging (left) and fruits pods that had dropped on the ground (right).

On further research, *S. parviflora* often attracts frugivorous birds during the fruiting season. In lowland dipterocarp forests, the flowering pattern occurs from January to March, followed by fruiting from March to July (e-Flora of Thailand 2001). This may vary by location, as some observations have reported *S. parviflora* fruiting during November–December in urban landscapes (Teo 2019) (Figure1).

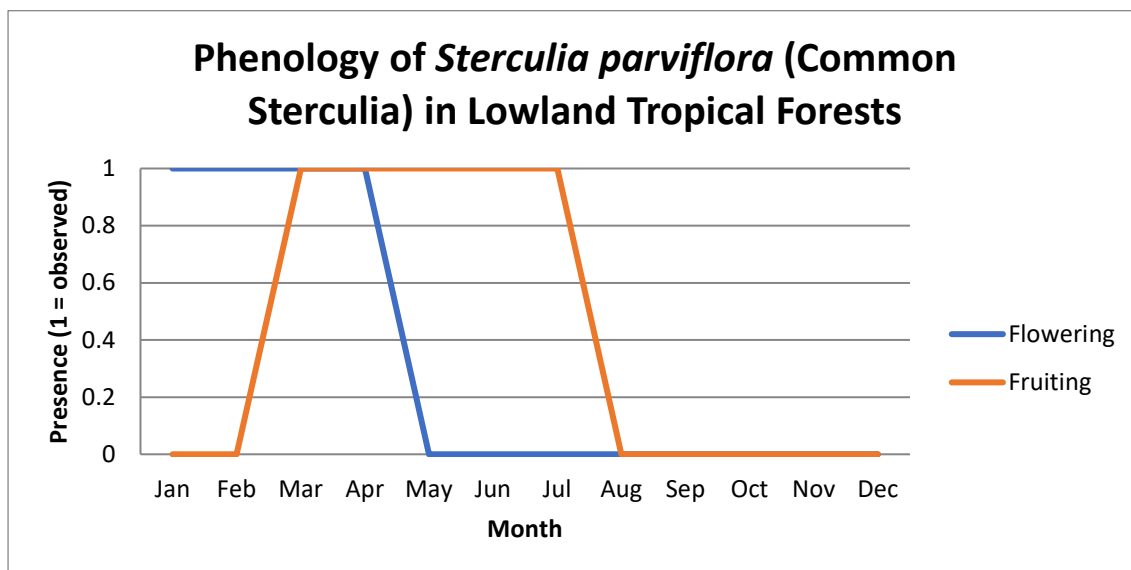


Figure 1: Phenology of *S. parviflora* (Common Sterculia) in Lowland Dipterocarp Forests.

Such interactions highlight the ecological role of *S. parviflora* as a seasonal food source for birds. Beyond a single observation, *Sterculia* species have long been recognised as vital food plants for wildlife in Peninsular Malaysia (Norsham Suhaina Yaakob 2005), including *S. foetida*, *S. parviflora*, and several others. Watching the Green-billed Malkoha feed among the fruiting pods was not just a fleeting moment in the forest, but a reminder of how these trees sustain life and weave connections between plants and animals across the forest.

Ganesan Siba Siba has observed large birds feeding on *S. lanceolate* fruit in his neighbourhood in Singapore. In July 2021 he observed a pair of Oriental Pied-Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris* (Plate 2) and three Tanimbar Corella *Cacatua goffiniana* (Plate 2) feed on the fruit and flowers. He has a *S. lanceolate* tree located below his apartment and, as he says, "it was a sight to behold to see the cockatoos and hornbills amidst the blazing red fruit". All these birds have big strong beaks to bite and split the tough fruits and seeds of the *Sterculia* trees.



Plate 2: Oriental Pied-Hornbill (left) and Tanimbar Corella feeding on *S. lanceolate* fruit, Singapore, July 2021.

Birds have also been noted to feed on the nectar of some *Sterculia* sp. The *S. colorata* (Bonfire Tree, native to the forests of the Western Ghats and the Deccan in India) has been planted in Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia since the 1960s. It flowers once a year and sheds all its leaves at the same time. Brilliant orange flowers, hanging downwards, are produced in dense panicles at the ends of branches. Amar observed a number of birds feeding which included the Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis*, Brown-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes malacensis* and Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier* (Amar-Singh HSS 2019) (Plate 3).



Plate 3: Black-naped Oriole (left) and Brown-throated Sunbird feeding on the nectar of *S. colorata*, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, April 2019.

Other Birds Identified to Feed on *Sterculia* sp Fruit

An online search of images and key words identified more birds that feed on the fruit of *Sterculia* sp. They include:

1. Oriental Pied-Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris* feed on *S. parviflora* or *macrophylla* fruit and *S. lanceolata* fruit (Singapore) (Marcus Ng 2012).
2. Malabar Gray Hornbill *Ocyrceros griseus* feed on *S. guttata* pods (Mudappa & Raman 2023).
3. White-crowned Hornbill *Berenicornis comatus* feed on *Sterculia* sp fruit (IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group 2025).
4. Narcondam Hornbill *Rhyticeros narcondami* feed on *S. rubiginosa* fruit (Naniwadekar 2020).
5. Bradfield's Hornbill *Lophoceros bradfieldi*, feed on *S. quinqueloba* fruit (Kemp & Kirwan 2020).
6. Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis* feed on the seeds of *S. lanceolata*. https://www.instagram.com/p/CRA47_Sg_dg/ & <https://identify.plantnet.org/k-world-flora/species/Sterculia%20parviflora%20Roxb.%20ex%20G.Don/data>
7. Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopaceus* feed on the fruit and possibly the seeds of the *S. foetida* (Limparungpatthanakij 2024).

The Black Hornbill *A. malayanus* is said to feed on *S. cordata* fruit and the Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus goiavier* on the seeds of *Sterculia* sp fruit but we are not able to find references.

Note that many of the birds that feed on *Sterculia* sp. fruit are large birds; smaller birds feed on the seeds or nectar. The fruit of *Sterculia* sp. is especially well documented in the diet of hornbill species (Lum & Poonswad 2005). We require additional observations to determine what local hornbill and malkoha species feed on the fruit and if barbets and other large forest birds do so as well.

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