

Field Notes

Nesting of the Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher

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Introduction

The Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis* has a wide range in tropical Asia (Clement 2020). It is common in both Peninsular and Bornean Malaysia; the subspecies in Peninsular Malaysia is *C. c. antioxantha* (Clement 2020; Puan et al. 2020). While there is some local and regional data on nesting, it is generally limited. We report four nests, one parasitised by a cuckoo species, to add to the available information on the breeding ecology.

Disclosure on Nest Observations

The first and third nests were observed by a number of individuals over time. Generally, observers stayed at a distance of approximately six to seven meters from the nest and used long lens and videography equipment. The second and fourth nest were observed by two of us. One had terrain limitations and we stayed about five to six meters from the nest site but were shielded from the nest by a row of trees and foliage. At all nesting sites the adults appeared to be comfortable with being observed and did not show any alarm.

Observations

Nest One

The first nest was located at the Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia. It was identified on 24 March 2024 by Susan and monitored until 13 April 2024. The nest was attached to the upright trunk of a tree growing in mixed primary and secondary forest at the height of five meters. It was built of a variety of bryophytes, plant fibre, small ferns and other material (possibly lichen) and held together by spider webs (Plate 1).



Plate 1: Front & side views of the first nest. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 01 Apr 2024.

There was a distinctive trailing extension, attached to and hanging below the main nest; reminiscent of structures seen in some other flycatcher nests. Overarching the nest was a circular structure made of plant fibres and bryophytes, continuous with the main nest; shaped like a wreath. The bryophytes used for the nest matched the colour of the bryophytes growing on the tree trunk

When adults were keeping the nestling warm, they were hard to see as the cavity allowed all but the tail to be hidden. At times the head and eye of the adult could be seen, possibly when they were checking for any danger (Plate 2).



Plate 2: View of adult Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher when in the nest. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 01 Apr 2024.

When the nest was first discovered, the adults appeared to be feeding chick(s) inside nest but the head of the chick(s) could not be seen. Feeding continued on subsequent days as we monitored the nest to determine the duration of fledging. Around 08 April 2024 we were able to confirm the nestling was a cuckoo chick and recognised that the nest had been parasitised.

Both adults brought food to the single cuckoo nestling. Adults often used a branch, 4-5 m from the nest as a staging area before alighting on the lip of the nest to reach in and feed the nestling (Plates 3 & 4). There were 30 feeding episodes over a two hour continual observation period from 0815 to 1015 hrs on 01 April 2024. Feeding frequency occurred at a mean of 3.8 minutes (SD 3.0, median 3.0, mode 3.0). Given that this was a cuckoo nestling, the feeding frequency cannot be taken as that of Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher nestlings.

A link to an edited video of feeding episodes is here: <https://youtu.be/6evtZ0BZnlo>.



Plate 3: Left - Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher at staging area with small berries in beak, 28 Mar 2024. Right – Adult at nest to feed, 01 Apr 2024. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia.

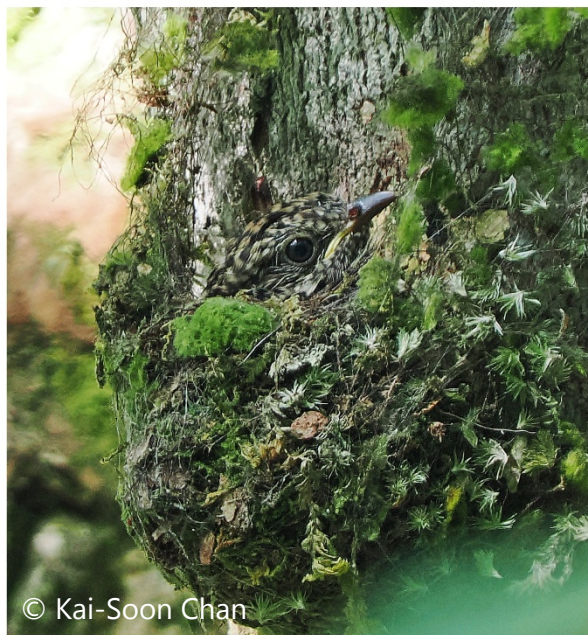


Plate 4: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher feeding cuckoo chick (left) and chick in nest. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 09 Apr 2024.

Food items were small and were hard to determine. The majority appeared to be small insects. Items that were identified included small fruits on two occasions, small moths three times and small worm-like invertebrates brought in a batch of three items.

Adults usually spent between three to eight seconds at the nest. At times adults appeared to wait expectantly for a faecal sac, even though none was produced. We observed two faecal

sacs being removed (Plate 5) over a two hour continual observation from 0815 to 1015 hrs on 01 April 2024. The faecal sac was presented by the cuckoo nestling and was removed far from the nest. It was not consumed by the adults.



Plate 5: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher removing cuckoo nestling faecal sac. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 08 Apr 2024.

Adult sexes are alike in plumage making determination of parental responsibilities difficult. Wells (2007) states that females are "*as male except smaller; size dimorphism greater than in other muscicapid flycatcher genera*". However, this was not easy to appreciate in the field. Plate 6 shows a composite image of the adult pair when they arrived to feed eight seconds apart. Although the postures are not identical, it can be seen that the presumed adult male was slightly larger with a longer tail than the adult female.

The park was closed on 11-12 April 2024 for the Hari Raya holidays. The nest was checked again on 13 April 2024 and found to be empty although the nest structure was largely intact. On 27 May 2024, we found a pair of Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers feeding a cuckoo fledgling near the back gate area. This site is less than 500 m from the recent flycatcher nest which was located at the entrance to the birding trail. We suspect this cuckoo fledgling was likely from that nest. It was a Sunda Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis sepulcralis* (Plate 7). An adult Sunda Brush Cuckoo was also seen in the same area a few days apart from the chick sighting. Repeat observation on 29 and 31 May 2024 found that the cuckoo fledgling was still being fed by the Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers (Plate 8). However, on subsequent days these birds could not be found anymore.



Plate 6: Adult Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher at nest. Presumed female left and male right. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 01 Apr 2024. Captured still images from a video.



Plate 7: Sunda Brush Cuckoo juvenile. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 26 May 2024.



Plate 8: Fledged Sunda Brush Cuckoo being fed by Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 31 May 2024.

Nest Two

On the morning of 29 January 2026, a pair of Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers were observed by Nick at the Kledang Saiong Forest Reserve at Ulu Chepor, Perak, Malaysia, 2km away from the first nest. One of the pair was photographed with nesting material in its beak (Plate 9). In order not to disturb the birds any further the area was soon vacated, and no attempt was made to locate a possible nest that day. During a subsequent visit on 05 February 2026 a completed nest was located at the exact same location. The nest was fixed to the upright trunk of a tree growing in primary forest in a steep ravine adjacent to a rushing stream. The nest was approximately 8-10 metres up the tree trunk and was constructed predominantly of bryophytes and spider web with some possible plant fibres.



Plate 9: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher with nesting material. Ulu Chepor, Kledang Saiong Forest Reserve, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 29 Jan 2026.

Unlike the first nest it did not have much of a trailing extension or an overarching circular structure although there were suggestions of small upward extensions at the upper sides of the nest. The adult was hidden, except for the tail, when incubating in the nest (Plate 10).

We were only able to watch the nest until 16 February 2026, after which the site was closed due to the Muslim fasting month. Limited observations showed that the pair were incubating but, due to limited sexual dichromatism, we cannot be certain if both adults shared the responsibility. One continual nesting observation was done on 16 February 2026 from 0840 to 0940 hrs using long lens videography with the observer standing some distance away. The nest was empty on arrival. Both adults came at 0909 hrs and one entered the nest to incubate. The other stayed outside, nearby. The bird outside sang/called intermittently; possibly contact calls. The bird in the nest left at 0934 hrs with no change over observed. An edited video of the activity and adult incubating is available here: [https://youtu.be/ TYd7qRIPUw](https://youtu.be/TYd7qRIPUw).



Plate 10: Front & side views of second nest with adult Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher incubating. Ulu Chepor, Kledang Saiong Forest Reserve, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 09 (right) & 16 (left) Feb 2026.

Nest Three

The third nest was located at the Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia. It was identified on 09 March 2026 by Susan and monitored until 20 April 2026. At the time of first observation the birds were in the final stages of nest building (Plate 11) with adults using bryophytes to build the nest.

The nest was attached to the upright trunk of a tree growing in mixed secondary and primary forest at the height of seven to eight meters. It was located below a bend in the tree trunk which may have offered some shelter from the rain (Plate 12). It was about five to six meters from a stream and about 150 m from the first nest. The nest material was similar to previous nests but there was more plant material – leaves and plant fibre. It had a well-developed overarching circular structure making the nest look like a 'cavity' from the front. The side view showed that the primary bulk of the nest was the lower portion. There was a small amount of nesting material attached at the base of the nest but no trailing extension.



Plate 11: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers nest building. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 09 Mar 2026.



Plate 12: A view of the third nest. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 16 Apr 2026.

Observations on 19, 24 and 29 March 2026 showed no nest building activity or birds in the nest, although the nest appeared complete and adults were seen feeding near the nest. On 04 April 2026 it was noted that one adult was incubating (Plate 13) but it was not known when incubation had started. By 10 April 2026 feeding of chicks had started, although chicks were too small to be seen. Prey was predominantly small insects including flies. Once a small moth was brought back but had to be discarded, presumably because the nestlings could not swallow it (Plate 14).



Plate 13: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers incubating (left) 04 April 2026 and feeding nestlings (right) 15 April 2026. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia.



Plate 14: Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers bringing food to nestlings. Right a moth prey that was too large for chicks to feed on. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia. 11 April 2026.

Both adults brought food to the nestlings. Adults often used a branch of an adjacent tree, 2-3 m from the nest as a staging area before alighting on the lip of the nest to reach in and feed the nestling. A 45 min continual video recording from 1404 to 1449 hrs on 16 April 2026 showed 19 feeding episodes. Feeding frequency occurred at a mean of 1.7 minutes (SD 1.1, median 1.5, mode 1.0). Nestlings appeared to anticipate the arrival of the adults. A link to an edited video of feeding episodes is here: <https://youtu.be/-4SaHdPYL-A>. Food items were small. Two items brought to nestlings were moths. On one occasion, a cricket/grasshopper was offered to the nestlings and had to be re-offered before it could be taken. Adults usually spent between two to five seconds at the nest. We observed two faecal sacs being removed

during the 45 min continual observation period. The faecal sac was not consumed by the adults and was removed far from the nest.

The last observation of feeding in the nest was 18 April 2026. When the nest was visited on 20 April 2026 it was empty and the chicks had possibly fledged. Note that this pair of adult Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers appeared very tolerant of human presence and had built the nest above an area where picnickers often swim in the river and prepare barbecues. Feeding was observed even as smoke from the barbecue was blown towards the nest. Feeding of nestlings carried on even as park staff were clearing leaves in the area using loud leaf blowers.

Nest Four

The fourth nest was located by Nick at the Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia on 25 May 2026. Adults were seen actively feeding what appeared to be young nestlings, as they had to reach deep into the nest to do so. It was located along a trail in primary forest and attached to the trunk of a tree at the height of seven meters. The nest was located on the leaning side of the tree, which may have offered some shelter from the rain (Plate 15). The nest material appeared to be similar to previous nests but there was more spider web used. It lacked the overarching circular structure and had no trailing extension. We were not able to follow up on this nest.

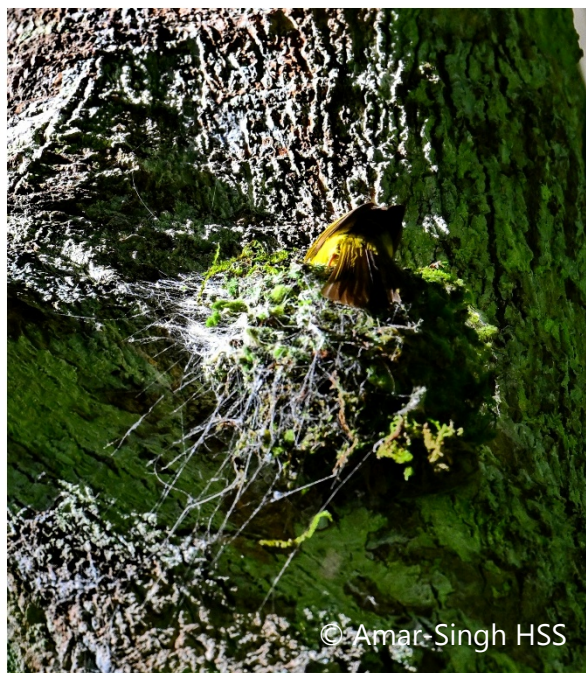


Plate 15: Overview of fourth nest. Kledang Saiong Forest Eco Park, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 25 May 2026.

This nest was noted to be re-used (pers. obs. Sein-Chiong Chiu).

Discussion

There are only two previous local nesting records (Wells 2007), one on the flat face of a large boulder and the other on the upright trunk of a tree growing in a forest stream; one was 1.5 m from the ground. Wells (2007) notes that nest "*sides produced into lateral wings that curve*

with and attach across its surface". In the three nests we observed locally two had a similar structure but of different degrees.

Of interest is how the birds attach the nest to the flat surface of a tree trunk. Plate 16 shows a Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher nest in early construction. The bird appears to first lay down a foundation of spider web in the shape planned and then adds bryophytes to it. This will then be anchored with more spider web and plant material.



Plate 16: Early stages of Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher nest construction. Bagar Talla, Nainital, Uttarakhand, India. 11 Apr 2024.

There is no information on the duration of incubation and fledging periods (Clement 2020). The observations at nest three suggest that the incubation period is in the range 7-12 days and the fledging period in the range 9-12 days. It is possible that chicks fledge early. A previous observation in June 2012 at 1,800 m ASL on Gunung Brinchang, Pahang, Malaysia showed adults feeding three, recently fledged, young juveniles (Plate 17).

In the literature (Sharpe & Whitehead 1890) there is a report of a *Hierococcyx fugax* cuckoo, Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo in today's terminology, parasitising a Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher nest in the Kinabalu area, Sabah, Malaysia. We observed parasitisation by a Sunda Brush Cuckoo which adds a new local record of brood parasitism.



Plate 17: Recently fledged Grey-headed Canary-Flycatchers. Gunung Brinchang, Pahang, Malaysia. Jun 2012.

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