

Rain or Shine: A Case of Hornbill Fidelity and Survival

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This report documents the extraordinary resilience and fidelity of a male Oriental Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris* following the collapse of its nesting tree during a severe storm at Taiping Lake Gardens on 14 February 2025.

Introduction

Hornbills are known to pair for life and have a unique nesting strategy of raising their young in tree cavities. As secondary tree cavity nesters, they rely on natural holes created by other birds/wildlife or cavities formed by broken branches or abandoned by other species. Once a suitable cavity is identified and the pair is ready to nest, the female seals herself inside the tree cavity using a mixture of fruits, mud, and her own faeces, reducing the entrance to a narrow vertical opening just big enough for the male hornbill to pass food through (Kemp, 1969; Ng *et al.* 2011). The seal serves to protect her and the chick from predators.

Depending on the species, Hornbills typically remain sealed in the nest cavity for 2–5 months. The Oriental Pied Hornbill has a breeding cycle of 74–82 days, from the moment the female seals the nest to the time the chicks fledge (Kemp & Boesman 2020). For a female hornbill to stay in a confined space for such a long period - from incubating the eggs to raising the chick until it is ready to feed itself - is extraordinary in the avian world. Yet despite the precariousness of this nesting strategy, the female places complete trust to her partner to provide food and continuous protection throughout the nesting period. This report highlights a remarkable incident that vividly demonstrates this trust.

Observations

A pair of Oriental Pied Hornbills had been nesting for several weeks, in a sealed tree cavity of a 140-year-old *Samanea saman* Rain Tree at Taiping Lake Gardens, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, and the male had been actively feeding his partner and chick. However, on Valentine's Day, 14 February 2025, as if testing the commitment of the pair's bond, a sudden thunderstorm struck late in the evening, bringing strong winds and torrential rain. The nesting tree was mercilessly uprooted (Plate 1).



Plate1: Crisis on Valentine's Day - the uprooted Rain Tree, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 14 Feb 2025.

When we arrived at the scene, the male hornbill was seen anxiously and frantically flying around the fallen tree, desperately trying to reach the now-horizontal cavity lying at the water's edge. Concerns quickly arose that the female and chick might not survive the fall and that the male might abandon the nest if he could not access them. Winnie immediately made several calls and reached out to Sanjitpaal Singh who works with Gaia, a hornbill conservation organisation. He quickly contacted the relevant authorities for help. As the day drew to a close, the situation appeared dire, but nothing could be done except to wait for help to arrive.

Late in the evening, just as hope was fading, the male hornbill was seen perching beside the fallen nest entrance slit and successfully feeding his family – an effort captured on video by Choy-Loi Ng at 1919 hrs (link to video: <https://youtu.be/qxUrtrvIE-o>). This demonstrated not only the survival of the female & chick, but also the male's unwavering commitment (Plate 2).



Plate 2: The male Oriental Pied Hornbill's sole objective was to provide for its family, rain or shine (left). The female Oriental Pied Hornbill and its chick (butt facing out) in the nest cavity of the fallen Rain Tree (Right). Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 0835 hrs, 15 Feb 2025.

The following morning, as widely reported in the news (Manjit Kaur 2025), Taiping Zoo Management together with Majlis Perbandaran Taiping (MPT) moved swiftly into action (Plate 3) to install a sturdy wooden plank to facilitate easier access for the male to reach for its family. MPT later announced that the fallen Rain Tree would remain undisturbed until the nesting period had concluded, ensuring no further disturbance to the vulnerable mother and chick.

Against all odds, the nesting continued seamlessly. Day after day the male returned with unwavering commitment, delivering food through the narrow opening as though nothing had changed (Plate 4). A video of the male at fallen nest after the support plank installed is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVVJAxmoImU>.



Plate 3: Majlis Perbandaran Taiping and Zoo Taiping present to install a plank for the nesting Oriental Pied Hornbills, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 0848 hrs, 15 Feb 2025.



Plate 4: The male Oriental Pied Hornbill got full support from the community of Taiping. Feeding using the wooden plank installed – fruit (left, 26 Feb 2025) and a protein supplement (a small bird) fed to the chick (right, 24 Feb 2025), Taiping, Perak, Malaysia.

A month later, the dramatic chapter reached a heart-lifting finale - the chick successfully fledged. Yet even its first flight carried a twist of fate – the young bird plunged straight into the lake below. In an unexpected turn, visiting Hong Kong Birders, Chien-Pui Sum & Woo-Sau Chan spotted the struggling fledgling. Without hesitation, Woo-Sau Chan reached down to pull it from the water and gently placed it on the bank, giving the little hornbill the precious second chance it needed (Plate 5). Plate 6 shows the fledgling Oriental Pied Hornbill enjoying the lake gardens.

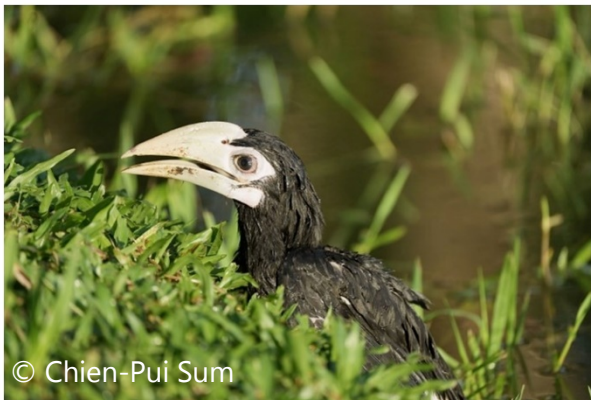


Plate 5: The fledgling Oriental Pied Hornbill fell into the lake on its maiden flight, all drenched (left) and parent coaxing the young fledgling away from the open (right), Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 15 Mar 2025.



Plate 6: The fledgling Oriental Pied Hornbill growing up, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 25 Mar 2025.

Discussion

No observer would have imagined that the female/chick could survive the fall of a large Rain Tree while sealed inside the cavity, nor that the male would remain such a steadfast and devoted partner in such extreme circumstances. We are convinced that, even if there was no help from the authorities, the male hornbill would have found a way to overcome challenges. This incident provides compelling observational evidence of hornbill pair commitment & their behavioural adaptability during nest crises - a bond that remains unbroken, rain or shine.

Epilogue

The Rain Tree has since been rehabilitated with the nest hole still intact (Plate 7). The presumed same pair of Oriental Pied Hornbill have been seen checking it out (Plate 8) (video link of activity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIzgUFQB73I>). We can hope they will use it again.



Plate 7: Rain Tree rehabilitated, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 21 Nov 2025.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Choy-Loi Ng, Chien-Pui Sum and Woo-Sau Chan for the kind use of their images and support. We thank Amar-Singh HSS for reviewing the manuscript.



Plate 8: Oriental Pied Hornbill checking the nesting hole, Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 21 Nov 2025.

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Citation: Winnie Ooi & Li-Li Wong. (2025). Rain or Shine: A Case of Hornbill Fidelity and Survival. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 4/2025, Dec 2025: pg. 68-72.