

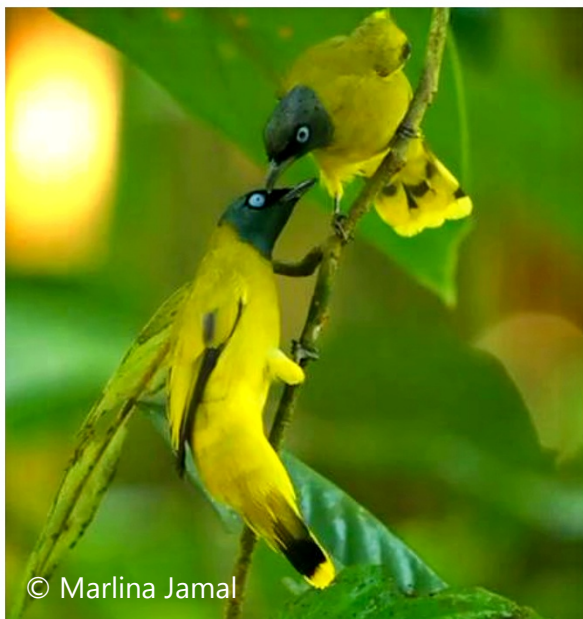
Photo-Shorts

Intraspecific Agonistic Behaviour in the Black-headed Bulbul

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The Black-headed Bulbul *Microtarsus melanocephalos* is a sociable species, often seen in small social groups of six to eight individuals. I am unaware of any published accounts of social interaction for the species (Wells 2007; Fishpool & Tobias 2023; Amar-Singh HSS & Sein-Chiong Chiu 2023).

On 03 May 2026, I was watching birds at Sungai Congkak, Selangor, Malaysia. It was a clear morning and I was seated near a small stream in the jungle around 1100 hrs. There were around six to seven Black-headed Bulbuls flying around the area. One Black-headed Bulbul landed on a branch near where I was sitting and appeared to observe me briefly (upper bird in the images and video). It stayed there for longer than I expected, when a second Black-headed Bulbul landed on the same branch a step below (bird at the bottom in the images and video). The second bird appeared to 'challenge' the position of the first bird and an altercation began. The first bird started furiously flapping its wings and both birds were intensely looking at each other (Plate 1). Note how their pupils are constricted, especially that of the second bird which may be consistent with a threat response. There was no vocalisation and no physical contact although they were very close to each other. It seemed like the first bird was trying to stand its ground by flapping its wings, but without success. The second bird continued to persist and the first bird decided to fly away after a few seconds. Very soon after the second bird flew away and seemed to chase the first bird. They both flew out of my view. The total interaction lasted approximately 15 seconds. A short video clip of the social interaction can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQr2W4UfPHU>.



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Plate 1: Screen grab from video recording of agonistic behaviour in Black-headed Bulbuls. Sungai Congkak, Selangor, Malaysia, 03 May 2026.

I considered the possibility that this might be begging behaviour, as seen in juveniles. But the behaviour was too intense and the bird flapping the wings was an adult. The sex of both individuals could not be determined as the species is sexually monomorphic. The specific display described – wing-flapping, intense mutual gaze, no vocalisation, no contact, ending in displacement – all fits well within intraspecific agonistic display or threat/dominance display.

Kenyon and Martin (2022), who reviewed photographic and video evidence of aggressive interactions across 164 bird species, found that many birds open their wings and tails to increase apparent body size in aggressive displays. Aggressive postures included orientating their bodies and heads forward with their bills pointing towards their opponent.

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