

Photo-Shorts

Snakes in the Diet of Hornbills

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Introduction

To the uninitiated, it may seem that hornbills are frugivores as we frequently see them at fruiting trees. Our belief was challenged after seeing a White-crowned Hornbill *Berenicornis comatus* gobble up a snake. We have come to realise their diet is more varied than we thought.

Observation

We were birding in a relatively well-known area in Frasers Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, when we chanced upon this event in late July 2025. We were along a road, at an elevation of about 1200m. Imagine the adrenaline rush we felt when we saw a long, green snake fall from the trees near where we were standing, onto the road. We were lucky it did not fall onto us! Shortly after, a pair of White-crowned Hornbills came to the ground for the kill. The snake, which was identified as a Siamese Peninsular Pit Viper *Trimeresurus sabahi frucatus*, managed to slither its way rapidly to a grassy area next to the road. It stayed silent and motionless, seemingly to avoid detection.

The pair of White-crowned Hornbills (Plate 1) flew up to regroup, with the male perched on a telephone wire, while the female found a low hanging branch. Both were on high alert, almost constantly calling with their strange hoots while keeping the snake in direct vision.



Plate 1: Male (left) and female White-crowned Hornbills, Frasers Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, July 2025.

After a few minutes, the female again descended for the kill, but it was successfully repelled by the snake which had now realised that its efforts to be camouflaged were futile. Interestingly enough the female seemed to make only one attempt to go for the head before flying away with a whimper. Link to a video recording of the female's attempt:

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

One would have expected the male to go in for the kill immediately after the female, but he was patient. We believe they were more calculated in their efforts because, throughout our observation period, there were a few passing cars. Ten minutes had elapsed since the female's attempt. In a flash, the male swooped down and went for the kill (Plate 2). He first landed barely a meter away from the snake, and in one smooth motion hopped once and went for the head. Link to a video recording of the male in action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUfSeZf0WBw>



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Plate 2: Male White-crowned Hornbill in confrontation with Siamese Peninsular Pit Viper, Frasers Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, July 2025.

This time, it was decisive. There was no escape as the snake got held by its neck. The bird proceeded to take its time in ensuring the snake was lifeless before carefully manipulating it and swallowing it whole (Plate 3). This was truly a sight to behold! Links to video recordings of the male feeding:

<https://youtu.be/P8GzoGJI7iI>

<https://youtu.be/LHoN83SCN-s>

<https://youtu.be/G7AJpkeu7UM>.

Unexpectedly, we even saw, what we think to be, tantrum throwing behaviour by the female hornbill. It did sound annoyed and started biting a branch in frustration; it could have been quite hungry (Plate 4). Link to a video recording of the female's behaviour:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gc-Np4DUioM>



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Plate 3: Male White-crowned Hornbill with Siamese Peninsular Pit Viper prey, Frasers Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, July 2025.



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Plate 4: Female White-crowned Hornbill showing possible dissatisfaction at not acquiring prey, Frasers Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, July 2025.

Discussion

In literature the White-crowned Hornbill is stated to have a varied diet with a large proportion of animal prey which includes insects, snakes, lizards, flying squirrel, small bird's chicks, eggs and mice (Wells 1999, Kemp & Boesman 2020, IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group 2025).

Other hornbill species are also known to take snakes as prey and those mentioned on the IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group website include:

1. Tickell's Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus tickelli*
2. Narcondam Hornbill *Rhyticeros narcondami*
3. Southern Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri*
4. White-crowned Hornbill *Berenicornis comatus*
5. Austen's Brown hornbill *Anorrhinus austeni*
6. Rufous-necked hornbill *Aceros nipalensis*

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References

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