



Articles

Ornithological Controversies Series:

Is the Purple-naped Sunbird really a Spiderhunter?

Robert A. Cheke

Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich at Medway, Central Avenue, Chatham Maritime, Kent, ME4 4TB, UK

The Purple-naped Sunbird was until recently known scientifically as *Hypogramma hypogrammicum* (Müller 1843) but its generic name was pre-occupied by a moth, so the sunbird's name is now *Kurochkinogramma hypogrammicum* Kashin 1978. This nomenclatural conundrum is not the only controversial character of the species since it is sometimes considered to be a spiderhunter and not a sunbird at all. This claim is based on molecular work by Moyle *et al.* (2011) who analysed genetic data and concluded that the species was firmly placed within the spiderhunter genus *Arachnothera*.

However, this conclusion conflicts with most of the species's morphological and behavioural attributes. *K. hypogrammicum* differs markedly from *Arachnothera* in

- (a) tongue structure, which is short with a brush-like structure at its end unlike the very long tongues of spiderhunters;
- (b) marked sexual dimorphism;
- (c) the presence of some iridescent plumage in the male;
- (d) the presence of tufts of elongated feathers at the base of the lower back in males;
- (e) a much shorter bill compared to the body length than is the case in spiderhunters and
- (f) skulking behaviour: although the birds may ascend high in vegetation, they prefer to remain low.



Plate 1: A male (left) and female "Purple-naped Sunbird" showing the features mentioned in the article.

Nevertheless, a recently found nest of the subspecies *K. h. nuchale* was about 1.3m above ground and more closely resembled a spiderhunter's nest than a sunbird's. In particular, it was

stitched into a dead leaf, something that spiderhunters do routinely (Amar-Singh HSS, 2023. See pages 44-49 of this publication). However, two other nests were more sunbird-like, one being described as pear-shaped the other as a pendant ball.

Perhaps the last word should go to another molecular study: Campillo *et al.* (2017) disputed the conclusions of Moyle *et al.* (2011), concluding that the Purple-naped Sunbird is indeed a sunbird and not a spiderhunter after all.

References

1. Amar-Singh HSS (2023). Nest Structure of the Purple-naped Spiderhunter *Kurochkinogramma hypogrammicum* in Peninsular Malaysia. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2023, September 2023: pg. 44-49.
2. Campillo, L. C., Oliveros, C. H., Frederick H. Sheldon, F. H. & Moyle, R. G. 2017. Genomic data resolve gene tree discordance in spiderhunters (Nectariniidae, *Arachnothera*). *Mol. Phyl. Evol.* 120: 151-157.
3. Moyle, R. G., Taylor, S. S., Oliveros, C. H., Lim, H. C., Haines, C. L., Rahman, M. A. & Sheldon, F. H. (2011) Diversification of an endemic Southeast Asian genus: phylogenetic relationships of the spiderhunters (Nectariniidae: *Arachnothera*). *Auk* 128: 777-788.

Editorial Note:

Note that Checklist of Malaysian Birds 2020 names this species Purple-naped Spiderhunter.

Citation: Cheke, R. A. (2023). Ornithological Controversies Series: Is the Purple-naped Sunbird really a Spiderhunter? *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2023, September 2023: pg. 51-52.