

Trumpeter hornbill (*Bycanistes bucinator*) bill colouration

Hugh Chittenden

Author email: hugh@rarebirds.co.za

An observant birder, Hazel Nevin, from the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) South Coast, South Africa recently inquired whether the male Trumpeter hornbill *Bycanistes bucinator* she had photographed had an injury to the back of its casque, resembling a raw wound. This summation may appear accurate but in this instance was incorrect. Adult Trumpeter hornbills all display a reddish or deep pink colour to the “blunt” or rear end of their casques (Fig. 1) This growth tissue is more prominent in males, but because the rear end to the casque is usually concealed by feathers, it is not often observed. The interesting fact about the reddish rear end to the

casque is that it is not a seasonal phenomenon, as the reddish colour does not change in brightness, or intensity between breeding, and non-breeding seasons. Photographic evidence shows that the rear casque end is as red in the winter, non-breeding months as it is during the breeding and summer season, and almost matches the colour of their facial skin (Fig. 2). Trumpeter hornbills are unique in this respect. No other hornbills in Africa show this rear end casque colouration, although Silvery-cheeked hornbills *Bycanistes brevis* seem to show very slight rear casque colouration when breeding, but not in the non-breeding season. Observ-



Fig. 1. A mature male with a well-worn casque that reaches the tip of its bill (August). Note the serrated bill that enables it to get a better grip on hard, slippery fruit and prey such as woodlice and millipedes.



Fig. 2. A male preening a female in mid-winter shows the pinkish rear end to its casque.



Fig. 3. The red rear end to the casque is usually covered, as with this bird collecting mud to plaster its nest entrance (end October).

ing male Trumpeter hornbills from side-on, the reddish rear end to the casque is often difficult to detect as it is usually covered by feathers (Fig. 3). The reddish casque patch is more difficult to detect in females as the casque doesn't protrude as high as in males (Fig. 4). Unlike many other hornbill species that have relatively smooth, shiny looking bills, those of

the Trumpeter hornbill are rough-looking, often well-worn and even flaky (Fig. 5). Bills which appear "clean" and polished are only observed in juveniles recently emerged from their nests. Their bills are more pale than adults and have a shiny, glossy appearance, however, the reddish casque patch is still observed (Fig. 6 and 7). The juveniles also display rufous-coloured



Fig. 4. The juvenile male on the left has a more robust (and growing) casque than the mature female on the right that has a blunt front end to the casque.



Fig. 5. A mature female showing an aged, well-worn bill, and typically, a short 'half-length' casque (October). The reddish casque patch is partially visible



Fig. 6. Even young birds such as this immature male shows the red/pink casque patch.



Fig. 7. The rufous colouration on juveniles varies with age. At a distance, juvenile males are difficult to separate from adult females.

forecrown feathers for the first few years after fledging. These rufous-coloured feathers vary in intensity and with age (Fig. 7).

Finally, Next time you find yourself standing near Trumpeter hornbills, salute these remarkable creatures. My world would definitely be a lot poorer without them.

Acknowledgments

I thank Alan Kemp for useful comments and Jarryd Alexander for editing this note for publication in the Hornbill Natural History and Conservation.