

Malabar Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros griseus* feeding on Surinam Cherry *Eugenia uniflora* from a home garden in Gudalur Taluk of Nilgiris district, India

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The Malabar Grey Hornbill *Ocyceros griseus* is an endemic hornbill species limited to the evergreen and deciduous forests from plains to 1600 m of the Western Ghats, southwest India (Maheswaran and Balasubramanian, 2003). Malabar Grey Hornbill (hereafter MGH) is the smallest of the nine hornbills present in India (Mudappa, 2000). MGH is classified as vulnerable by the IUCN, due to conversion of forest land into monoculture plantations with exotic tree species, for dam construction and other developmental works (Mudappa and Kannan, 1997; Mudappa, 2000). It is also a relatively common hornbill species in the Western Ghats above 600 m elevation, especially where fig trees are present in large numbers, and also extends its ranges into gardens, tea plantations, coffee plantations and tall shade trees in the cardamom plantations (Kemp, 1995). Their diet includes fruits and berries, particularly figs, also insects and lizards; rarely, flowers (Hoyo *et al.* 2001).

On 21 March 2021 at 12:17, I recorded a male MGH (Figure 1) feeding on the fruit, Surinam Cherry *Eugenia uniflora* (Family Myrtaceae) in a house garden (11°27'00.3"N 76°28'44.5"E) in Choondy village of O' Valley town Panchayat in Gudalur taluk in the Tamil Nadu state. This garden was surrounded by the tea & areca

nut plantations and a stream. During this observation, this male bird was often coming and feeding on the fruits from this Surinam Cherry tree (Figure 2). Surinam Cherry is native to tropical America, cultivated as hedges in gardens and the fruits are used in jelly, jam and other flavoring items (Flowers of India, 2022). The fruits of Surinam Cherry have the appearance of small pumpkins, are green in colour in an immature state and when ripened, they become orange or red to dark purple colour. The fleshiness of Surinam Cherry is highly variable, with an average of 77% pulp and 33% seed (Franzon *et al.*, 2018). When I inquired with local people about this bird, they said that this bird often comes to their garden to feed on this fruit and it is also not afraid of their presence.

In the earlier study, Pawar *et al.* (2021) have confirmed the year-round use of modified habitats such as plantation by Asian Hornbills. My observation of male MGH feeding on the Surinam Cherry in the house garden is the first report of native hornbill feeding on this invasive fruit. Mudappa and Raman (2020) reported that MGH feeds on at least 19 species of fruits (including *Syzygium* species of the family Myrtaceae), five species of vertebrates and eight types of invertebrates



Fig. 1. A photo of the male Malabar Grey Hornbill found in the home garden. Photo: P. Selvaraj



Fig. 2. A photo of Surinam Cherry. Photo: P. Selvaraj

during the breeding season. Santhoshkumar and Balasubramanian (2014) reported Indian Grey Hornbill consumes fruits belonging to 26 plant species (which includes two species from the Family Myrtaceae namely *Psidium guajava* and *Syzygium cumini*) during their breeding season. Due to specific nesting requirements and diet, hornbills are vulnerable to large scale habitat modification (Pawar et al. 2021). As Pawar et al. (2018) recommended it is important to increase native hornbill food plants as shade trees in the coffee and tea plantations to be at least half as much as in contiguous forest. Although there have been studies of hornbills feeding on the fruits, no record of MGH feeding on the *E. uniflora* has been reported before this. This field note is the starting point for the future investigations on the impact of endemic MGH feeding on the invasive fruit plants.

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