

Unusual behaviour of Cape Sugarbirds

Phil Whittington

Avian Demography Unit, Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701

On 6 October 2002, I was travelling southwards from the N2 in the West ern Cape Province, on the west ern side of the Gourits River valley, towards Stilbaai on the south coast. The road passes through rolling hills covered with fynbos, in which there is a high incidence of Protea bushes. I was surprised by the sheer abundance of Cape Sugarbirds *Promerops cafer*, which were constantly flying backwards and forwards across the road.

I noticed two female sugarbirds that were pecking at what appeared to be a dead bird in the road. I watched the birds for several minutes as they stood over the corpse, occasionally pecking at it. On closer examination, the road casualty was found to be a female Cape Sugarbird. Within the next 100 m, I came across a group of about 10 sugarbirds in the road and again, the focus of their attention was the body of a dead bird. One or two of the birds perched over the corpse, flicking their wings occasionally, presumably to maintain balance, and taking occasional pecks at the dead bird. The birds seemed to bicker at times for "possession" of the corpse and one even appeared to try and fight with it, dragging the body for several metres across the tarmac. Again, the casualty was found to be a female Cape Sugarbird.

I can offer little by way of explanation for this behaviour. It would seem unlikely that a species that feeds principally on nectar and insects would view a dead member of their species as a potential food source. It may be that the birds were picking invertebrate larvae or pupae from the carcasses, but these were not apparent when the bodies were examined.

Another possibility is that the birds were showing aggression to an "intruder" within their territory. Fry (2000) stated that the Cape Sugarbird is strongly territorial and that it is usually the males that exhibit the strongest agonistic behaviour. None of the birds seen at the two road kills were identifiable as adult males; all had short tails indicative of female or immature birds, although the possibility of the presence of male birds in moult should perhaps be considered.

A further possibility is that the live birds may have been related to the dead ones and may, for instance, have been adults trying to "revive" their fledged young that had been killed by a vehicle (K. Calf pers. comm.).

If anyone has witnessed similar behaviour in this or other species, I would be interested to hear their views.

Fry C.H. 2000. *Promerops cafer*. In: Fry C.H., Keith S. & Urban E.K. (eds). *The birds of Africa*. Vol. 6. Academic Press, London: 328–336.

