

# THE INDIAN GREY HORNBILL: THE FIG DISPERSER

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

The Indian Grey Hornbill | Photo Credit: [Abhishek Gulshan](#)

The Indian Grey Hornbill (*Ocyrceros birostris*) is a fairly common hornbill species found only in the Indian subcontinent. It is a medium-sized hornbill with a beak to tail length of about 50 cm, but one of the larger conspicuous birds we may see in our backyards.

With a brownish-grey body, a long black-and-white tipped tail, and red eyes, it has a signature heavy curved blackish-yellow beak surmounted by a casque (a protuberance of sorts). Unlike a lot of other birds, the male and female look similar, though the females have a smaller casque.

These birds are known to be arboreal, i.e. spend most of their time on tall trees, but may descend for food and to collect mud pellets for nesting. They feed on fruits and berries from fig trees, insects, reptiles (snakes, lizards), small birds (mostly fledglings) but on occasion can go after slightly bigger adult birds as well.

They play an essential role in the ecosystem as prime dispersers of seeds. In cities, we may find them feeding on fig trees like banyan, Goolar (a variety of fig), usually choosing old tall dense trees for nesting. They are cavity nesters, making use of big hollows in trees as nesting sites.

They may excavate further to suit their needs and size. When they pair up, they keep a regular check on the chosen cavity, clean it regularly and defend this space from other cavity nesters like common mynas and rose-ringed parakeets.

Their courtship and nesting lasts from March until July, which covers most of the summer months and early monsoon, when food is never scarce. These birds get extremely vocal around this time with their long calls 'shi...shi...shi'. During the courtship period, the males woo the females by constantly offering them fruits, lizards and other 'delicacies'.

The pair is often involved in a lot of friendly aerial jousting and bill grappling and passing of food to commemorate their togetherness, slowly leading the females to the nest cavity.

During the nesting period, the female seals itself in a large hole of a tree by building a wall with its excreta (with visible fig seeds) and mud-pellets, provided by the male, leaving only a narrow slit open. The male will offer food through the slit, as she will not leave this cavity for the next two to three months. Later, when the juveniles mature and the female comes out of the nest, both parents cater to the needs of the juveniles together. We need to observe from a distance, so we don't disturb the nest, even to take a picture.

Once the juveniles are capable of leaving the nest, other common birds like mynas, parakeets and sometimes owls, occupy these cavities for themselves.

These gentle giants are threatened primarily by habitat loss in the city and the cutting down of large trees, which is important for both food and nesting. We must protect the natural heritage of our city by conserving these old beneficial trees around our houses and avoid planting ornamental ones, which may take up more ground water and simply don't have the space for cavity nesters that help the urban ecosystem.

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