

A juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker feeding another juvenile

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The Thick-billed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*) is small flowerpecker sp. seen widely in Gujarat. It visits our campus in Dharpur, Patan, regularly due to the presence of many fruit-bearing trees. Amongst these trees, the Cluster Fig tree (*Ficus racemosa*) is one of their favorites. In the fruiting season, we used to hear their call from the fig tree almost every day, during the mornings, afternoons and evenings.



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On 11 April 2018, early in the morning, we heard a peculiar call from the fig tree, which we suspected belonged to juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpeckers. On closer observation, we spotted three Thick-billed Flowerpeckers; two of them were juveniles and one was an adult. We took some photographs and observed their behaviour. The juvenile birds looked like they had fairly recently come out of the nest, and had already started to peck and feed on fruits from the tree. The adult bird came to feed them with protein diet – mostly arthropod prey, at relatively long intervals. The juveniles continued feeding, foraging and kept calling for the adults the whole time.

One juvenile was more actively foraging, pecking and feeding in comparison to the other. The active juvenile was pecking at the fruit, puncturing and feeding from it. The other juvenile came to feed from same fruit. Both the juveniles perched side by side and fed from the same fruit turn by turn. Suddenly, we observed that one juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker was demanding – begging for food – from the other juvenile bird. To our surprise, the first juvenile actually fed the second juvenile with fruit mash! This was repeated several times. We took photographs and also recorded a video of this behaviour. We were quite amazed as we had never seen this behavior before. We observed their presence in same area for another five days in a row.

To us, this behaviour indicated the strong tendency of juveniles in copying the habits of adults. As they pecked

at the figs, the juveniles also replicated the feeding style of adults as they wiped their bills (which had seeds stuck on them) on a branch while feeding on fig mash and sometimes, probably also copying the feeding tendency of adults in one juvenile feeding another. This behavioral video can be seen on following link: <https://youtu.be/a2z4WCjxw6s>.

[This type of behaviour wherein one bird feeds another is called *allo-feeding*. *Allo-feeding* is a common social behaviour in birds and refers to food-sharing behaviour between adults, in parental care with the adults feeding nestlings, in courtship, incubation, etc.

The behaviour observed by the authors here is quite surprising and relates to *allo-feeding* amongst juveniles of one brood. This type of behaviour wherein one juvenile was seen feeding another juvenile has not been documented previously in the Thick-billed Flowerpecker. As stated by the authors, it could be the juveniles copying the habits of adults or it is possible that the dominant juvenile fed the other juvenile due to its begging behaviour. In African Pied Starlings (*Turdus bicolor*), sub-adults are the most active group in *allo-feeding*, since this may be a means of establishing bonds with other individuals, as in many cases, the participants had been members of the same breeding group in the previous season (Feare & Craig 1999). In a detailed study on *allo-feeding* in a tame population of Arabian Babblers (*Turdoides squamiceps*) in Israel, this behaviour was mainly considered as a display of dominance (Kalishov et al. 2005).

The observations by the authors here of a juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker feeding another juvenile need further study and it is not known if *allo-feeding* has been observed earlier between juveniles of the same brood. The reasons for this type of behaviour are not known and it will be interesting to see if there are instances where this has been observed in other bird species – Eds]

References

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- Kalishov, A., Zahavi, A., & Zahavi, A. 2005. *Allofeeding* in Arabian babblers (*Turdoides squamiceps*). *Journal of Ornithology*. 146 (2): 141-150 □