

# Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus* feeding two Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* fledglings in Botswana

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**Guêpier nain *Merops pusillus* nourrissant deux jeunes Grands Indicateurs *Indicator indicator* au Botswana.** Un Guêpier nain *Merops pusillus* en train de nourrir deux jeunes Grands Indicateurs *Indicator indicator* a été observé près de Savuti Camp dans la Concession Linyanti, Botswana, le 27 novembre 2010. Des photos de cette observation constituent la première documentation matérielle d'un cas pareil.

**Summary.** A Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus* was observed feeding two fledgling Greater Honeyguides *Indicator indicator* near Savuti Camp in Linyanti Concession, Botswana, on 27 November 2010. Photographs of this observation represent the first material record of such an event.

On 27 November 2010, while on a mammal-watching tour in Botswana, KMB and five other observers encountered an adult Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus* feeding two fledgling Greater Honeyguides *Indicator indicator*. The observation, which lasted *c.*15 minutes (from *c.*14.00 hrs) and was documented photographically, occurred in the Savuti Camp area, in the Linyanti Concession bordering Savuti and Chobe National Parks.

The potential significance of the record was not fully appreciated until early 2018, when KMB became aware of GAJ's work on Africa's brood-parasitic birds and contacted him about it.

Greater Honeyguides are obligate brood-parasites, laying their eggs in the nests of other bird species (Short & Horne 2001). At least 29 hosts have been recorded, principally species that nest in tunnels in earth banks or tree holes (Tarboton 2011). We know of just a single published record of a host-parent feeding more than one Greater Honeyguide chick: an observation by Skead

(1970) of a Greater Striped Swallow *Cecropis cucullata* feeding two young honeyguides. To our knowledge, the observation in Botswana represents the first time such a case has been documented photographically.

The reasons why cases of two honeyguides reared in a single nest are expected to be rare are twofold. First, when visiting a nest to lay her egg, a female Greater Honeyguide frequently, but not invariably, punctures the hosts' and any other parasite egg she detects (Spottiswoode & Colebrook-Robjent 2007, Spottiswoode 2013). Secondly, Greater Honeyguide nestlings kill their nest mates, using a sharp hook at the bill tip to kill other chicks in the nest (Spottiswoode & Koorevaar 2012). Therefore, even if more than one female honeyguide lays in the same nest, we would expect the honeyguide that hatches first to kill any siblings. This makes it even more unlikely that two Greater Honeyguide chicks will fledge at a single nest.



**Figure 1.** One of the two Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* fledglings being fed by an adult Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*, Linyati Concession, Botswana, 27 November 2010 (A. K. Hood)

Un des deux jeunes Grands Indicateurs *Indicator indicator* en train d'être nourri par un Guêpier nain *Merops pusillus* adulte, Concession Linyati, Botswana, 27 novembre 2010 (A. K. Hood)



**Figure 2.** Two Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator* fledglings with an adult Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*, Linyati Concession, Botswana, 27 November 2010 (A. K. Hood)

Deux jeunes Grands Indicateurs *Indicator indicator* avec un Guépier nain *Merops pusillus* adulte, Concession Linyati, Botswana, 27 novembre 2010 (A. K. Hood)

Two possible scenarios may explain the observed case of a Little Bee-eater feeding two Greater Honeyguide fledglings:

Two honeyguide eggs were laid in the same nest (probably by different females). The second female did not detect the first honeyguide egg in the nest. Subsequently, the first honeyguide chick to hatch did not succeed in killing all of the other chicks in the nest meaning that two honeyguides were successfully reared alongside each other.

One of the two fledgling honeyguides was raised in another nest nearby and the bee-eater adult fed it even though it had not raised the young itself. In other species, such as Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, it appears that chicks are occasionally fed by hosts other than those that raised them (Owen 1912, McBride 1984).

The current observation does not permit us to determine which of these two possibilities was the most likely.

We would be interested to learn of other sightings of multiple brood-parasite chicks being fed by a single host adult, especially of brood parasites that typically kill their nest mates, such as *Cuculus*, *Chrysococcyx* and *Pacchycoccyx* cuckoos, and other honeyguide species. Information can be sent to either GAJ or Prof. Claire Spottiswoode (e-mail: [cns26@cam.ac.uk](mailto:cns26@cam.ac.uk)).

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