



Nature stories for young readers

OWNERS AND APPROPRIATORS

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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Online

A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION

The story is based on observations made at institutional campuses in South Delhi during the months of May and June 2010.

Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.



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I was dumbstruck and stood gaping. A big grey bird with a very big weird beak was laboriously emptying leaves into a tree hole! One leaf after the other. And a few berries too. This bird had to throw back its head and shake it up for the leaf to emerge from wherever to the tip of the beak.





**This happened for perhaps a good five minutes!
The bird then wiped its beak against the bark
and flew away.**

**The hole was very high up on a tall tree for me
to see anything clearly. I had heard of squirrels
hiding nuts in holes; could this bird be doing
something similar?**

**In a dazed manner, I leaned back against a
neighbouring tree to wait for the bird to return.**

And this time, I got a fright! There was something inside the tree that was making a sort of a gurgling sound. A continuous hoarse gurgle. "Another hole!" I exclaimed, spotting a small opening in the tree.

I could peep into the hole if I stood on tip toe but could see nothing inside. The sound was coming from within the hole.

Even as I was wondering what could be in the





hole, a loud rolling laugh made me jump out of my skin. Turning around, I was surprised to see a small head peeping out of another hole in a nearby Persian Lilac tree! A circular hole in the lowest branch. I walked towards the tree to get a better look.

“Woodpecker chicks!” I exclaimed, seeing two of them inside.

“Almost fledged!” Said Woodpecker proudly,

clinging on to the tree trunk.

“Fledged?” I asked.

“Ready to leave the nest and look after themselves,” said the bird with a broad smile.

The chicks were peeping out, one at a time. With bright eyes, they were surveying the world they would be entering soon. And then, another rolling wild laugh from the chick.





“Oops! I never knew birds had a tongue!” I said, admiring the chick and the way it called.

“Of course we do. Some birds have short tongues and some long. We have a real long one. Much longer than our beak,” said Woodpecker, “We need to –”

Woodpecker got distracted when a green bird, the size of a Myna, alighted on a branch of the same tree. Its beak was jam packed with Fig fruit! The

bird sat there for a while looking around. It had a very big red beak. A bit too big for its body.

After a while, the bird flew straight into the hole from where the weird gurgling sound was coming. The sound within changed to louder jabbering and gurgling. A couple of seconds later, the bird emerged with its beak full of filth!

“Uck! What’s this?” I asked the bird. The bird could obviously not answer.





“She is housekeeping. To keep the hole clean for her chicks,” said Woodpecker.

“Chicks! Chicks in there?”

“Didn’t you hear them?” Asked the bird surprised at my ignorance.

“Oh Goodness! The sound... chicks making THAT sound!” I was amazed but relieved to learn what the sound was about.

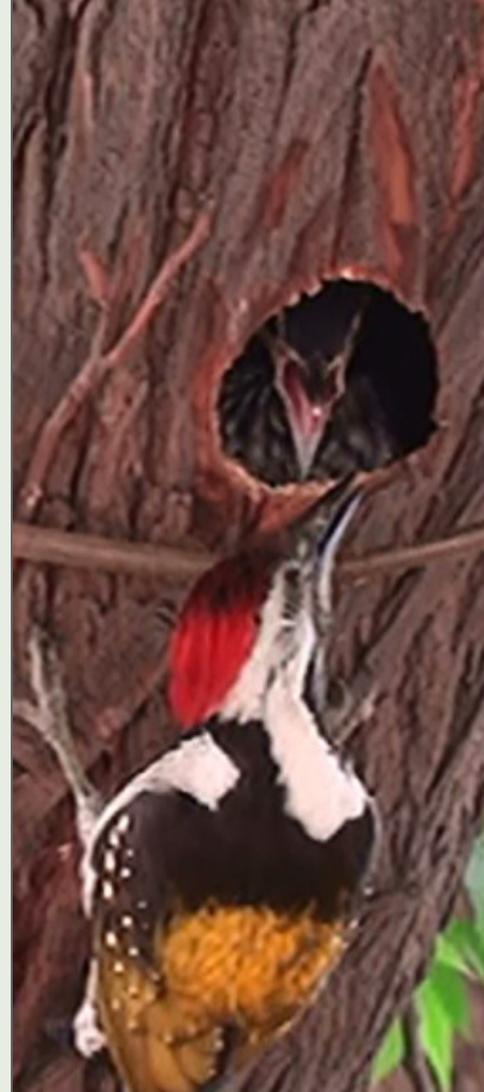
“This is nesting season for all of us. All of us are busy raising chicks.”

“Oh! Then the big grey bird was also feeding chicks!”

“No. His wife.”

I was stumped! Had I heard the bird correctly?

“What –” My question remained incomplete, for,





mynas and parakeets started a loud squabble in the neighbouring Gulmohur tree.

“Whatever is happening?” I asked.

“Hole fight,” said Woodpecker.

“Now what’s that?”

“Both Mynas and Parakeets are claiming the same hole in that tree. They also nest in tree

holes. And holes are always in short supply!”

“Why should anybody quarrel over holes? Makers are owners!” The matter appeared simple enough to me.

“There is no such thing as an owner,” said the bird, “and nobody remembers who made the holes.”

Woodpecker was kind enough to throw more





light on tree holes. As trees get older their protective bark gets injured. Branches are also torn down by heavy storms or when cut off by people. Then insects, fungi, rain water and wind gain easy entry into the tree. The centre of a tree trunk or a big branch is made of dead wood and is called heartwood. When the heartwood gets exposed to water and fungi, it rots. Trees become hollow in such places.

The small grove had many trees and all of them

were many years old. Most of the trees had holes!

“Hollows are natural. Nobody can own them,” declared the bird.

“But your nest has a neat circular opening. It does not look natural.”

“Openings can be natural or bird made. If you see a circular opening in any tree here, it is the





creation of either a Woodpecker or a Barbet.”

“A Barbet?”

“Why, the green bird you saw earlier is a Barbet. The full name is Brown-headed Barbet. We have another...”

“Ah! So that’s a Barbet,” I said, pointing to the bird who once again made a dash into the hole. And once again, chicks within jabbered.

“Yes. These birds keep their beak open and bang away at the tree to make a circular opening. They then work on the heartwood and make the cavity perfect for their nest. Just like us!”

I had never paid much attention to beaks of birds. All of different shapes and different sizes.

“One look at the Parakeet’s curved beak and you know it can’t make a hole. But what about the Myna?”





“How wrong you are! Parakeets can work on trees and make a hole bigger to suit themselves. But Mynas, they are appropriators. In fact, both can nest in any suitable hole; even holes in walls!”

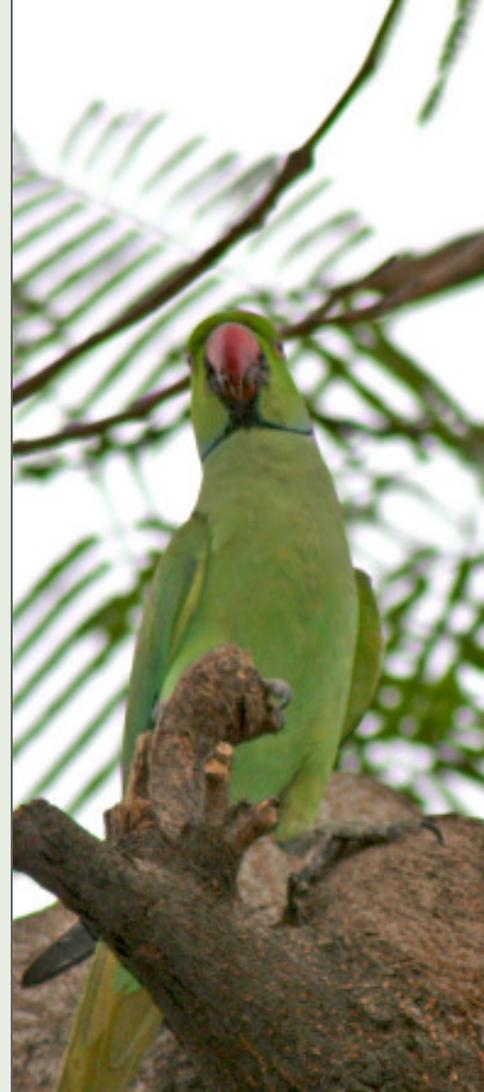
“You mean Parakeets and Mynas steal holes?”

“No question of stealing. All of us need holes. Some of us make them and others..., find them! It is up to us to defend our holes.”

The grove had become peaceful. The quarrel was over and Parakeets had taken control of the hole. I mentioned this to Woodpecker.

“Don’t be too sure. This could be a truce. Both birds are aggressive. One can never say,” said Woodpecker and told me how Mynas often succeed in evicting Barbets from their holes.

“But that is unfair,” I protested, not quite liking the idea of some birds dominating others.





“No, it is not,” the bird said, without giving any reason.

I was thinking about the aggressiveness of birds when something whooshed past. Startled, I looked around bewildered.

“Hornbill is back,” said Woodpecker looking up at the high tree hole. “They are quiet when they nest. But you can always hear them when they fly past.”

Hornbill. I learnt the name of the strange bird. But I still did not know why he had to feed his wife. “You mentioned the Hornbill’s wife. Didn’t you?”

“Oh yes! Unlike us, Mother Hornbill remains inside the hole until her eggs hatch and her chicks are a few weeks old. She remains there for more than a month. And all the while, the hole is completely closed except for a small slit! Father Hornbill passes on food to her through the slit.”





I was stunned. A bird staying in a dark hollow for such a long time. This is certainly a strange bird. A sealed hole with a small slit. An imprisonment! I was troubled. I didn't know if this was fair or unfair. I knew Woodpecker would not think it unfair.

"Look!" Cried out Woodpecker. A Myna was attacking Hornbill both physically and verbally. Perhaps the same one that was fighting earlier. Losing balance, Hornbill retreated quickly to a

neighbouring branch. Each time Hornbill came over to continue feeding, Myna tried to shoo him away.

“My! Mynas are persistent birds. But Hornbill is not protesting!”

“That,” declared Woodpecker, “is the secret of the imprisonment!”





Introducing the characters: Goldenbacked Woodpecker...



Goldenbacked Woodpecker chicks...



Brown-headed Barbet...



Father Roseringed Parakeet and Mother Roseringed Parakeet...



Common Myna...



and Father Common Grey Hornbill.



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