

Iredale (1950) refers scathingly to “this fantastic hybridisation theory.” Despite the irrefutable evidence of the existence of hybridisation, Iredale was just unable to accept that it does occur in the wild. Its occurrence between some birds of paradise in the wild is now well known, accepted and documented (Stresemann 1930, Gilliard 1969, Coates 1990, Peckover 1992 etc.).

Len Tolhurst’s comments on the earlier draft of this response are gratefully acknowledged.

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Peckover, W.S. 1992. **Birds of Paradise**. Robert Brown.
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UNUSUAL FORAGING BEHAVIOUR BY *APLONIS* STARLINGS BELIEVED TO BE *APLONIS METALLICA*

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INTRODUCTION

I report here an unusual foraging behaviour by *Aplonis* sp. starlings, believed to be *Aplonis metallica*, in which aquatic prey were taken from the Fly River, in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

OBSERVATIONS

Between 3 September and 20 October 1988 I was at Middletown on the lower Kikori River, about one hour upstream from Kikori township by motorised canoe. Whilst there I noticed on a number of occasions, but always from a distance, flocks of what appeared to be *Aplonis* starlings foraging over the River Kikori just before sunset. I was puzzled at the time, partly because I was not completely convinced of the birds’ identity and partly because I could discern no swarms of insects on which they might have been feeding.

Between 30 May and 9 June 1989 I was at Kumul Base on the Fly River, about half an hour upstream from Kiunga township by motorised canoe, in the Western Province of Papua

New Guinea. On various occasions I again saw flocks of *Aplonis* starlings foraging over the river at dusk. This time I was able to observe them much more closely. The foraging behaviour took place in the extreme late afternoon, in the last half hour before complete darkness fell. Foraging ranged up and down the river over several hundred metres. The flocks were fairly cohesive and varied in size between 20 and 40 birds. Occasionally two flocks were seen in the same vicinity. As before, I could discern no swarms of insects, but again and again I clearly saw birds stop, hover for a brief period, then pick something from the water with the beak and continue flying. The objects picked from the water were not large, but I did on one occasion clearly see a drooping object in the beak, i.e., a non-rigid body drooping either side of the beak. It was impossible to track individual birds to see how often an individual obtained prey, but on any one time the majority of the flock would be quartering at the same time as only one or two individuals would be obtaining prey.

The birds were black *Aplonis* starlings with longish graduated tails. There was no sign of any light coloured iris — all appeared dark. There were no juveniles apparent. Viewing distance varied, with the closest being ten metres or so and the farthest several hundred metres. The clearest views were obtained between ten and fifty metres. The starlings were definitely *Aplonis* and, on balance, almost certainly *Aplonis metallica*.

I had noticed at Kumul that this particular foraging seemed more common at times when the river was in flood and there was a considerable amount of spume and flotsam in the water. However, it is important to note that the capture of the prey was not confined to spume covered water, nor was this foraging behaviour confined to the times when the rivers were in flood.

DISCUSSION

Although unidentified, the prey was obviously aquatic. There is, of course, the faint possibility that at Kumul, in the Western Province, the starlings might have been *Aplonis mystacea*, but the size of the flocks and the apparent absence of any light coloured irides would make it much more likely that they were *A. metallica*. There is, of course, little doubt that *A. metallica* was involved at Middletown, in the Gulf Province, but it must be pointed out that no clear view of the foraging behaviour was obtained there.

This particular foraging behaviour is not mentioned in any of the literature, and is presented here as the first reported observation of *Aplonis* starlings taking aquatic prey on the island of New Guinea.

[Note that Ian Burrows reports various starling species feeding on hatching mayfly in an apparently similar manner on p. 32 of this issue, Ed.]

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