

BAYA WEAVER AND HAWKMOTH LARVA

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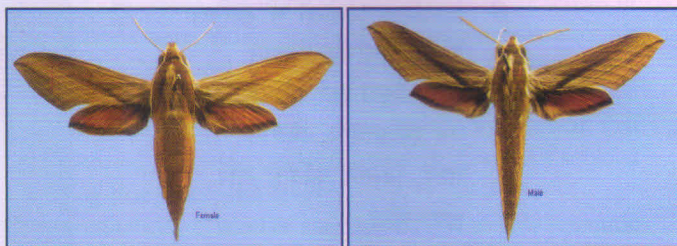
IN South Bengal, the “Babui Pakhi”, better known in English as Baya Weaver, is a quite familiar bird. Just as the Baya weaver has earned a reputation for its ability to build excellent nests, it is no less infamous for destroying crops in flocks in large stretches of grain fields. For a long time, these birds have been known as “pest birds” — enemies of the crops. They feed mainly on crop grains, paddy and wheat being the main grains in South Bengal. However, recently, wheat cultivation in this region has decreased to a large extent due to a devastating fungal disease, Wheat Blast (WB), caused by *Magnaporthe oryzae pathotype Triticum* (MoT). As a result, the only food available for them in this part has been rice grains in the last few years. The name of the village where I watch these birds is Majdia, West Bengal. I have been an inhabitant of this village since my birth.

In South Bengal, the breeding activity of Bayas, like nesting, starts in April, before the onset of monsoon. When their chicks hatch, the monsoon begins naturally. Monsoon rains in South Bengal start by the end of May or the beginning of June. In our village, before the arrival of the monsoon, the farmers cultivate jute, which grows to a height of one and a half to two cubits with the onset of the monsoon. Moths lay eggs on the green leaves of jute. Numerous caterpillars spawn that are a source of valuable protein for newborn Baya-chicks. This beautiful rhythmic life flow of nature, people and birds has been going on for ages in our village.

Though Baya weavers feed mainly on grains, they are no less efficient in catching caterpillars. However, some definite evidence has been found in Malaysia that they consume nectar from ‘bottlebrush’ flowers (*Callistemon viminalis*). Besides, they also eat various insects, butterflies, snails and small frogs.

There is nothing unusual about Baya Weavers eating caterpillars; the caterpillar I saw the Baya Weavers catch in our village in August 2021 was completely new to me.

A caterpillar is only a larva of a hawkmoth, which comes under the genus ‘Hippotion’. There are only 22 species of this genus in the world. All species are found in tropical or subtropical climates. Out of those 22 species, only five species are found in India. They are *celerio*, *echeclus*, *boerhaviae*, *rafflesi*, and *volex*. Of these five species in India, only one species uses water hyacinth as a host plant, i.e. *Hippotion echeclus* — the Black-based striated Hawkmoth.



Black-based striated Hawkmoth

The water hyacinth that plays the host role is *Pontederia hastate* or *Monochoria hastaeifolia*. It belongs to the Pontederiaceae family and comes under the pickerel weed family.



Pontederia hastate or *Monochoria hastaeifolia*

The number of Baya Weavers in our village is still considerable. They stay in groups during the winter, i.e., during non-breeding season. Each group will not be less than three hundred in number.