

# The Golden Honeyeater (*Cleptornis marchei*): Notes on Behaviour, Vocalizations and Taxonomic Affinities

by

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## Introduction

The Golden Honeyeater (*Cleptornis marchei* [Oust., 1889]) represents the only avian genus endemic to the Mariana Islands of Micronesia where it has been recorded from Saipan (Baker 1951: 303) and Agiguan (R. P. Owen in litt.). In his monograph of Micronesian birds Baker (op. cit.) could only summarise the incidental observations recorded by military personnel during 1945–46 and little has been added since, e.g. Kobayashi (1970). I visited Saipan from 14 to 16 April to study this bird and most of my limited time in the field was spent at two selected localities: Fanunchuluyan Point and near Profile Beach, both in the northeast of the island, where there has been little recent human disturbance. Marshall (1949: 219) recorded the breeding season as January to April and most birds studied were in small family groups. I considered the species to be in good numbers, perhaps localised, but not endangered, as reported by R. P. Owen (in litt.). In June 1976 H. D. Pratt, P. L. Bruner and D. G. Berrett found *Cleptornis* to be quite common and conspicuous throughout Saipan (Pratt et al. MS). I have summarised my notes on the appearance, behaviour and vocalizations of *Cleptornis*, followed by a preliminary review of its taxonomic history affinities.

## Appearance

*Cleptornis* is slightly larger than the Cardinal Honeyeater (*Myzomela cardinalis*), also found on Saipan, but it normally has a short-necked, compact appearance in contrast to the more characteristic slender look of *Myzomela* and other small honeyeaters. In this respect it is more similar to the Bridled White-eye (*Zosterops conspicillatus*) of Micronesia and other Zosteropids. Marshall noted *Cleptornis* as having a "trush-like build" (1949: 216). In the field the bright orange-yellow of the bill, legs and feet match the rich golden-yellow of the head and underparts and contrast with the darker greenish-yellow of the back, wings and tail. There is a pale white or pale yellowish-white eye-ring but it is not as conspicuous as in *Zosterops*. The juveniles are generally darker and duller than the

adults. The bill is slightly darker to blackish, particularly along the edge of the culmen; the legs are a dull pinkish-orange, tending to dark blackish on the feet, especially the toes. One bird was noted to be partially albinistic — the outer primaries were a light creamy-white.

### Behaviour

The Golden Honeyeater is found singly, in pairs or small groups of three to six at all levels and in all available vegetation, usually between one and three metres above the ground, where its often acrobatic movements are both active and slowly deliberate. When perched, the tail is often cocked upward and sometimes moved slowly up and down. The wings are usually held slightly drooped but often flicked slightly outward during feeding activities. Marshall (loc. cit.) did not record *Cleptornis* feeding on the ground, but I occasionally saw birds feeding there; one group of five on and near the ground called noisily to each other before dispersing in different directions but keeping within visual range of each other. Many immature birds in the family groups were still being fed by their parents. One, however, did not beg but had insects pushed into its throat by the parent bird and after such force feeding it sat motionless for a few minutes before it began to move about slowly.

This bird uses its strong feet and long legs to advantage for probing in bark crevices on tree trunks and large branches, when hopping back and forth on vertical branches and vines, hanging upside-down to examine the extremities of leafy twigs and even peering into knotholes in trunks and under flaking pieces of bark. The prey items taken are mostly insects (adult and larval forms) and other arthropods; also berries. One bird I saw feeding at a blossom appeared to be only probing for insects; another secured three insect larvae from within a cluster of fallen vegetation in the crotch of two branches after a few seconds of poking and scratching through the cluster with its bill. Each larva in turn was beaten twice against a small branch before it was swallowed. An additional foraging technique was noted when one bird briefly flashed its wings outward at a slightly raised angle before catching an insect flushed from a few inches in front of it. The use of the wings was similar to that described by Hubbard & Hubbard (1970) for the Blue Flycatcher (*Elminia longicauda*) of Africa but differing in that the head was only slightly lowered and the tail was held downward without spreading any rectrices.

In the upper canopy *Cleptornis* feeds in looser groups; flocks of white-eyes were also here and foraging in a similar way although keeping further out towards the ends of branches, depending on the proximity of honey-

eaters. Both species call during feeding activities, but the white-eye calls are higher pitched, longer and thinner, sometimes two-noted or mixed with a slightly harsh, grating note. Both species scratch indirectly, bringing the foot forward and over the wing. Allopreening was noted for *Cleptornis* within pairs and small groups, where one bird raises its head slightly to present a submissive posture and the other preens the feathers of the neck, followed by those of the nape, breast and the upperparts.

Marshall (loc. cit.) observed that these birds "chase each other"; the chases would only last for a few seconds at most before both birds continued foraging, sometimes after noisy vocal encounters involving two or more birds. Interspecific encounters with white-eyes occurred during canopy foraging; *Cleptornis* would fly at a white-eye and partially extend both wings outward towards it and drive it away. This action is accompanied by calls and the display of an open bill at the peak of the wing-spreading; foraging was resumed after each aggressive display.

### Vocalizations

Song: Marshall (loc. cit.) commented that it "appears not to sing at all" Pratt et al. (MS) recorded a song of melodious whistles heard a few times only that was traced to *Cleptornis* by playback. It probably does not sing during the latter part of the breeding season.

Contact calls: A "tzreep", sometimes more like a "tzip", repeated at various frequencies, single or double-noted; similar to *Zosterops* but slightly louder and deeper in tone. A short, chirping whistle was sometimes made by birds flying between foraging sites. A sharp, rapid sequence of the "tzreep" call, heard only occasionally, may have been an alarm call. Short bursts of the "tzip" call were heard during aggressive displays.

Food call: A short, double-noted, ascending whistle; also a harsh "tzeet-weeoo . . . tzeet-weeoo . . . tzeet-weeoo . . .", varying in frequency. Noted by Marshall (loc. cit.) as a "plaintive mellow whistle".

### The taxonomic affinities of *Cleptornis*: preliminary conclusions

Oustalet (1889) originally described this bird in the genus *Ptilotis* (= *Meliphaga*), but considered it sufficiently differentiated to offer a generic name for it, *Cleptornis* (the only other species that this name has been applied to is the Large Palau White-eye, *Megazosterops palauensis*, of the Palau Islands). He indicated possible affinities with New Guinea and Australian forms and Mayr (1940: 203) listed its "next relative" as in the "Papuan Region". Baker (1951: 304) was uncertain of its relationships after

extensive comparisons with other honeyeaters. He pointed out its overall similarities to *Timeliopsis* of New Guinea, and Australian *Meliphaga* (*M. penicillata*, *M. flava*). Salomonsen (1967: 393) placed it as the third genus after *Meliphaga*, between *Foulehaio* of Fiji and Samoa and *Apalopteron* of the Bonin Islands, in his treatment of Meliphagidae.

While its placement near *Apalopteron familiare* may be one of geographical convenience, I consider this Bonin endemic to be a close relative of *Cleptornis*. Deignan's (1958) proposal to treat *Apalopteron* as a Palaeartic outlier of the Meliphagidae has recently been questioned (Ornithological Society of Japan 1974: 293). My studies indicated that the nearest relatives of these two birds may be found in the Zosteropidae, amongst *Lophozosterops*, *Heleia*, and allied forms, perhaps including *Rukia* and *Megazosterops*. The absence of Zosteropidae in the Bonin Islands, apart from introductions (Mees 1957: 106), and of a second species in the Mariana Islands, in contrast to the Caroline and Palau Islands, where two or three species may co-exist, cf. Lack (1971: 344), suggest that the similarities in appearance and behaviour may only be due to convergence. However, further study of the genera and species involved here, many poorly known in life, is required to clarify their relationships, and no change in the current treatment of *Cleptornis* is advocated here.

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### Zusammenfassung

Der Goldhonigfresser, *Cleptornis marchei* (Oust., 1889), repräsentiert das einzige endemische Vogelgenus auf den Marianen (Mikronesien). Der in der Gestalt mehr einem Brillenvogel als einem der kleineren Honigfresser ähnliche Vogel lebt einzeln, paarweise oder in kleinen Gesellschaften meist 1 bis 3 m über dem Erdboden im Pflanzenwuchs und ernährt sich in erster Linie von Insekten und deren Larven; auch Beeren werden genommen. Die Vögel kratzen den Kopf „hintenherum“ und üben paarweise oder in kleinen Gruppen soziale Gefiederpflege. Die Lautäußerungen von *Cleptornis* werden beschrieben, *Cleptornis* ist vermutlich nahe verwandt mit dem eigenartigen *Apalopteron familiare* von den Bonin-Inseln, und beide scheinen den Zosteropidae näher zu stehen als den Meliphagidae, zu denen sie bisher gerechnet wurden; weitere Untersuchungen sind jedoch nötig.

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