

# ETHNO-ORNITHOLOGY

## A MERRY-GO-ROUND STORY OF A GREATER HONEYGUIDE

N.C. Chiweshe and J. Dale

On 17 June 1990, while we were studying bustards at Debshan Ranch, 40 km south-east of Shangani (QDS 2029 B1), we were lucky enough to get led to a bee colony by a Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator*. We were relaxing, reading and writing the morning patrol notes of our bustard studies, just after starting a small fire to make tea, when our ears were invaded by a *vic-vic-vic* ...-like sound just above us, in a big msasa tree under which our patrol tents were erected. Dean (1985) stated that honeyguides are attracted to certain human activities, such as wood chopping and fire building, so perhaps it was our fire that initially attracted the bird to our site. NCC pointed out to JD an adult male Greater Honeyguide (Shona - Tsoro; Ndebele - uNomtsheketshe) still calling the *vic-vic-vic* sound continuously. Immediately we rushed for our binoculars and started observing it.

The honeyguide flew away and perched in another msasa tree, about 20 m away from where we first saw it. It continued chattering and flitting about, exposing its two white outer-tail feathers, and we followed it. While we were following the bird, JD asked NCC how far he agreed about the stories that honeyguides really lead people to beehives. NCC replied that he personally believed in the stories because he had been led, with other people at his home area (Centenary), on four different occasions and succeeded in locating the bee colonies. But NCC warned JD that these birds can also lead a person to a dangerous creature, animal or snake. The honeyguides do this as a sort of revenge for the bad treatment they may have experienced after showing a person a beehive site, but he did not even leave a single honeycomb for the bird after he had extracted the honey.

The honeyguide flew away from its

second perch and perched at a small bush on an anthill and continued calling. NCC started whistling with a certain tone that is commonly used when following these birds with the hope of being led to a beehive. This type of whistling tells the bird that we are responding to its guidance to wherever it may be leading us. The bird stopped calling, but when we got nearer it flew away and perched about 80 m off and started calling again.

This time NCC became more determined to follow this bird, whistling the response call, mainly to show JD that they do not often lie to people when calling. NCC also told JD to be very careful and always look on the ground and in trees for anything like snakes or dangerous animals, for the bird could be leading us to danger.

The honeyguide in fact led us to a rocky area where there were many big trees. We were very careful here on our approach. A honeyguide normally stops calling whenever it gets to where either the dangerous animal, snake or the beehive will be. Here the bird did not stop calling. It flew away and perched at the bushes around an anthill and stopped calling. We looked around the bushes but nothing was seen. The bird flew away again and perched at a third place it had perched previously from the original perch, the tree at our camp site, and resumed calling.

We followed, with JD behind NCC, losing hope now. The bird flew away when NCC was about to get near to the tree, and headed straight for the bushes around the anthill again. JD was almost halfway following NCC to where he was. He went back to the anthill where the bird was while NCC searched for the beehive in the tree and on the ground under the tree. The

honeyguide stopped calling again when it perched at the bushes. NCC called JD to thoroughly look below the bushes and around the anthill. NCC was still under the trees when JD called saying that he had found the beehive.

The bees were getting in and out through a small hole in the ground under the bushes on the anthill. We were really happy and JD was actually amazed by this discovery. We went to borrow a hoe from the hunting safari attendant so that we could open the mouth through which we could extract the honey from the hive, and for the honeyguide.

In the interest of science and folklore, we managed to extract the honey three days later, mainly because of our coming back very late from our bustard studies. The honey was extracted on the 20<sup>th</sup>, during the evening when it was a bit dark.

NCC dug and extracted the honey while JD kept the fire going and supplying him with some smoky firewood (which NCC used to put inside the hive for short periods to calm the bees so that they could not sting too much). Anyway, despite this precaution, NCC was stung three times on his hands and once under his armpit by a bee that found its way into his overalls while he was busy extracting the honey.

What a funny person JD was during the honey extraction period. NCC had never seen him as busy as he was during this period. He kept the fire going, at times moving about in the darkness looking for more firewood. He (JD) jumped once, making a weird sound NCC had never heard before. Asking him the reason why he had done that, JD told NCC that he had been stung by a bee which he said was still inside his trousers. In actual fact, all of this was not true (judging from his reactions). He only wanted to show NCC his sympathy for his being stung by the bees.

There was plenty of honey in the hive. We filled a 20 litre bucket with honeycombs. We also left a lot of it in the hive because the entrance we had made was too small to go

any further. The hive was quite a big and long one, so NCC could not go further in than arm's length.

After supper, we melted the honeycombs in a pot and extracted the honey. Unfortunately we did not have any suitable utensils that we could use to sieve the honey but we nearly managed to fill a 2.5 litre bottle with pure liquid honey.

The following morning NCC went to put three honeycombs (with larvae and honey) for the honeyguide at the beehive site. On checking in the afternoon we saw a male and a female Greater Honeyguide feeding from the honeycombs. This really made us feel happy because seeing the birds coming back to feed on the honeycombs was the aim of our experiment.

We kept on adding more and more residues from which we had extracted the honey for our own consumption, because we wanted to keep on watching these interesting birds. To our surprise, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of the same month, we saw a Lesser Honeyguide *I. minor* also feeding from the combs together with the pair of Greater Honeyguides.

Since NCC had never seen a Greater Honeyguide from such a close range, and never seen a Lesser Honeyguide before, he really was pleased by the outcome of this whole exercise. NCC learnt that a male and a female Greater Honeyguide are quite distinctive and, most of all, concluded that these are the only living organisms that can lead a human being to one of the most valued natural foods in the world.

JD was stung under his armpit on the 24<sup>th</sup> while we were resting at our camp site just after lunch. NCC laughed at him very much until some tears started dripping from his eyes. NCC's laughter was as a result of JD's reactions - jumping about and shouting in agony. This reaction was the real one that a stung person shows, unlike what he did when we were at the hive the other day. This laughter was NCC's best revenge to JD for laughing at him and pretending as though he

had been stung, while NCC was actually the extracted  
one being stung on the night the honey was

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**N.C. CHIWESHE**, *Department of National Parks, P.O. Box 2283, Bulawayo.*

**J. DALE**, *Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA.*