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Foot deformities in Variable Sunbirds

Chris Wood

Box 50301, Lusaka, Zambia; cwood30@hotmail.com

I have been ringing in Zambia for the last 8 months and have come across a peculiar deformity in some of the Variable (Yellow-bellied) Sunbirds.

The toes are often swollen and almost spatulate / flattened in some, and in others the toes have become knob-shaped. This condition is sometimes found on all the toes of the bird and sometimes on only a few; sometimes on both feet and sometimes on one foot only. The growths cover the claw entirely and they get very entangled in nets, making it a difficult process to extract the feet.

At least a third of the birds suffer from this condition (8 out of 25) but the number is certainly higher as I did not make written notes on the condition at first. On a recent ringing day I caught four Variable Sunbirds, and all were suffering from this condition. It appears to be more common in immature birds but is not confined to them. One of the birds was still a juvenile, and yet it already this deformity on all toes on both feet.

It is too soon, and the numbers too low, to ascertain whether it is having any effect on survival. Birds do seem able to perch, but my feeling is that it must make it difficult for them to grasp slightly thicker twigs, and on some of the more extremely deformed feet it is difficult to see how they can grasp anything at all.

At first I thought it was a deformity of the foot itself, but recently when I was untangling a bird from the net, I managed to pull the growth off a claw, leaving the nail exposed. On examining the feet with a hand lens I discovered that the growth appears to be the skin on the toes first swelling slightly and then growing down in a sheath over the claw. This then seems to swell, producing the knob-shaped and spatulate shapes over the nails that I have seen. In certain birds it can appear to be so severe that the feet resemble those of London pigeons.

Does anyone else have any records of this deformity and can anyone tell me what it is? I suspect some sort of fungal disease, but this is a pure guess. Is it confined to Variable Sunbirds? I have no records from other birds as yet.