

# The Little Spiderhunter

By **Jerry Theis**, Sonoran Audubon Society Board  
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Some species in the avian world have names which indicate their primary/favored food source, such as fruiteater, berrypecker, bee-eater, fish-eagle, crab plover, and nutcracker. Here's a good example of the name fits the bird's food preference.

In January, 2012, in Khao Yai N.P., Thailand, our van pulled into a designated lunch spot, replete with busloads of children and picnicing adults. As lunch was being prepared by Wat and his staff, we scanned the trees along a river and had a most fortunate sighting of a **Little Spiderhunter**.

Spiderhunters are omnivorous, extracting spiders from the center of their webs. As with many hummingbirds, they also hover near spider webs, extracting the silk for nest building, further contributing to their name. Other arthropod prey of the spiderhunter includes crickets, caterpillars, butterflies, stick insects, and ants, but they often favor nectar from flowers.

Spiderhunters are birds of the genus *Arachnothera*, part of the sunbird family *Nectariniidae*, nectar feeders, the old world equivalent of our hummingbirds. The genus contains thirteen species, confined to the Oriental zoogeographic region, found primarily in the forests of southern and southeastern Asia. They have drab plumage (unlike the other brightly colored sunbirds), containing no iridescence, and they possess long, strongly decurved, stout bills, at least twice the length of the head.



Little Spiderhunter

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The uppersides of most species are olive-green, sometimes darker on the head, the throat is white, and the undersides are dull white or yellowish. The tongue forms a complete tube for most of its length and is pushed against the top of the upper mandible of the bill, then pulled in and out, creating a pressure difference, allowing the nectar to be sucked into the mouth. Spiderhunters are important plant pollinators but they may also rob nectar without contacting pollen by directly piercing a flower. Their grass/leaf nest is suspended underneath a large leaf, usually a banana, using cobwebs and vegetable fiber as “pop-rivets.” Unlike the other sunbirds, both male and female incubate the two to three eggs. Hodgson’s Hawk-cuckoo and Violet Cuckoo are brood parasites of spiderhunter species.

Spiderhunters are among the largest of their family. They occur from India east to the Philippines and from the Himalayas south to Java, reaching their greatest species diversity in the Thai-Malay peninsula. They are mostly forest birds, occupying a wide range

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of lowland forest types including true rain, dipterocarp, swamp, bamboo, mangrove, secondary, broadleafed evergreen, semi-evergreen, forest edge and other highly degraded forests. In addition, some occur in human-created habitats such as gardens and plantations.

Spiderhunters are less gregarious than other sunbirds, usually seen alone or in pairs. Chance meeting of a spiderhunter is uncommon, hence our fortune on that day. They are birds of fixed habits and return to the same cluster of trees for nectar at a scheduled time, favoring wild *Musaceae*, wild banana, ginger, Indian silk cotton, Indian coral, and *Loranthus sp.* Birders can follow their daily pattern, especially that of the Little Spiderhunter, the most frequently seen of the family. Its' calls include a loud abrasive *itch* or *chit*, or a simple metallic *tzeck*, repeated multiple times to form a monotonous *wit-wit-wit-wit-wit-wit* song, a squeaky whistle.

In Sarawak, the Kayan, Kenyah, and Punan people consider the Little Spiderhunter a bird of good omen and when they are out collecting camphor, the men will wait until they have heard the *sit* call of one of these spiderhunters to resume their task.

Note by the way: The Little Spiderhunter does not get its name because it hunts only little spiders, rather because it is the smallest member of the family, 16.5 cm. in length!



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