

BSS Article – The Woodhoopoes – Family Phoeniculidae

In my series of articles about lesser known birds rarely appearing on stamps, I have mentioned that a large majority of bird stamps feature familiar and popular species such as Penguins or Owls or those with distinctive and/or colourful plumage such as Bee-eaters, Kingfishers, Rollers or Hornbills. There are however surprisingly few that depict the Woodhoopoes (Phoeniculidae), a sub-Saharan family of medium-sized arboreal birds with long, down-curved bills and generally dark and glossy plumage with long tails. From a scientific classification viewpoint, the family is placed between the Rollers and Hornbills and, as might be expected, are closely allied to the more familiar Eurasian or African Hoopoe which is widely available on stamps from dozens of countries. There are only two genera and eight species of Woodhoopoes and the following miniature sheets from the Ivory Coast offers a good summary for half of these:-



Green, Forest and Black Woodhoopoes



**White-headed Woodhoopoe
(on the stamp)**

When I started to write this article, I read that there is still some debate about the taxonomic status of the family and was amused to think Phoeniculidae reminded me of the Neapolitan song *Funiculi Funicula* written in 1880 to celebrate the opening of a funicular railway up Vesuvius; while the song endures as a popular piece of music, the railway was destroyed in 1944 by an eruption of the volcano – my apologies for this diversion from the ornithology!

I mentioned that the family are essentially arboreal and thus require a habitat with plenty of trees in which the birds search for their diet (mostly arthropods) and have recourse to tree hollows for nesting and roosting activities. The diet also includes some small reptiles such as lizards, insect larvae and some vegetable matter. The long thin bills, longer in the males, act almost like tweezers enabling the extraction of prey from small cavities in the woodwork or being used to pry off pieces of bark to access the food items beneath. Caterpillars often provide a large percentage of the diet when available and species also take advantage of seasonal hatching of certain invertebrates such as termites. Notwithstanding this typical behaviour, some species do feed on the ground, even in the case of the scimitar bill species with their pronounced bill shape.

Most species of Woodhoopoes are highly vocal and highly social and exhibit co-operative breeding behaviour where several individuals may provide food for nestlings or help to guard a nest from predators.



Violet Woodhoopoe



White-headed Woodhoopoe

Apart from these activities, Woodhoopoes often engage in displays known as rallies where several birds will perch side by side and carry out a rocking motion simultaneously emitting their typical “rattling” cries often depicted as “*kakelaar, kakelaar, kakelaar*”. These occasions apparently serve to promote flock unity and cohesion.

As mentioned earlier, most species use tree hollows for nesting although there are a few isolated examples that escape this generalisation. Unusually for cavity dwelling species the eggs are not white as in, for example kingfishers or wood peckers, but typically greenish-blue and often with chalky pits in the surface; a clutch is typically 3-5 eggs and nesting can occur at any time during the year but usually after the onset of the local rainy season which supports food availability. Some species are known to have produced three broods in a single calendar year.

There are only about a dozen stamps illustrating this interesting family and sometimes there appears to be confusion about the Black Woodhoopoe and the Black-billed Woodhoopoe. The three examples below highlight the extra curvature of the scimitar billed species.



As usual, I am most grateful to Kjell Scharning’s website and the authors of Birds of the World for much of the material in this article although I am pleased to say that I have seen at least two of these species in the wild.

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