No. M1

# Natural History Snippets

**Brief reports by members based on their observations of nature**

Members are invited to submit their photographs and stories to muhudubella@gmail.com for publication

## LORANTHUS - Beauty or Beast?

A garden is a wondrous place with much to observe. Judgements as to what is 'good' or 'bad' depends on one's perception. Discussed here is a plant which was known many years ago as '*Loranthus*' as shown in H.F. Macmillan's 'Tropical Planting and Gardening'. Macmillan indicates in his chapter on Weeds that there were 6 indigenous species of the low-country, 3 up-country and 3 in the dry zone. (Macmillan, 1948 (5th Edition), p. 450.)

My garden abounds in flowerpeckers, sunbirds and tailorbirds among the babblers, orioles, magpie-robins, the seasonally heard koel (*koha*) and occasional woodpeckers and other garden avifauna. The smaller birds flit among the trees and nest in the hedges.

The neighbouring avocado tree was where the 'Loranthus' was first spotted. It gradually spread to the very aggressive Ceylon ivy (*Ficus repens*) or creeping fig, and then onto the karapincha (*Murraya koenigii*) and atteriya (*Murraya paniculata*) trees. The flowers are shed after the birds feast on the nectar, carrying the sticky seeds to the next tree. The karapincha is now, sadly, severely lopped to be rid of the aggressive Loranthus. Loranthus is the host plant of the Common Jezebel butterfly, but my observation has been that the Jezebel flits lazily around the Ceylon orange blossom, the atteriya, that is its nectaring plant (MoERE (2014) Butterfly Conservation Action Plan of Sri Lanka' p. 75).


The taxonomy of 'Loranthus', known in Sinhala as '*Pililla*' and '*Kuruvichai*' in Tamil, is baffling with some chronological clarity offered by Wikipedia. Flora of Sri Lanka lists it as *Dendrophthoe falcata* (L,f,) Ettingsh. The original family Loranthaceae is now known as Dendropemon, the family of mistletoes. As a parasite it saps the energy of the host tree causing it to weaken and decay.

Loranthus, as it is still commonly called, is a 'partial parasite'. It has leaves for photosynthesis for energy production, while it also taps into the host and obtains nutrients therefrom.

Landscape management is non-chemical with removal of affected parts of the host tree and sanitary disposal, usually by burning.

The large, leathery leaves of Loranthus stand out clearly from the host's leaves (top image). The two images below show the inflorescence as it appears on the plant (left), and a close-up showing the long, tubular flowers with a crown of tiny, curled petals.

The plants form 'haustoria' or 'sucker roots' to attach to the host by penetrating the host plant's bark, through which water and nutrients are obtained.

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