

# Beauty of the Beast

THE BLUE-TAILED BEE-EATER

## BIRDS OF BEAUTY AND BLISS

A photographic tribute and a scientific documentation of an iconic bird species by our Indian contributor Raghavendra Pattar





## *Merops philippinus*

The Blue-tailed bee-eater *Merops philippinus* is a near passerine bird in the bee-eater family *Meropidae*. It breeds in southeastern Asia. It is strongly migratory, seen seasonally in much of peninsular India. This species is sometimes considered to be conspecific with the Blue-cheeked bee-eater *Merops persicus*. Here a bee is offered by the male to the female during courtship.



TEXTS AND PHOTOS  
BY RAGHAVENDRA PATTAR

*A*midst the enveloping dusk, the spotted ducks and egrets were a delight to watch in the magical village of Naguvanahalli. Situated in Shrirangapattana Taluk in Mandya district, this small village is a part of Mysore division and is located at 32 kms toward west from District headquarters of Mandya and 3 kms from Shrirangapattna which is 137 kms from the State Capital Bangalore. I set my journey to Naguvanahalli, a 3-hrs drive from the capital city, which is slowly making a mark on the birding map of India. Inhabited with nearly 46 species of birds, I found the Little green bee eaters had excavated their nesting tunnels on the earthen bund counting close to 60 to 70 active nests. Many bird watchers have a special love for bee-eaters—there’s just so much power and personality packed in that tiny bundle of feathers.

reach and took to air in a jiffy. In mid-air it clicked its pointed beak over the winged insect, fluttered for a moment, cartwheeled and sallied back to its perch. In no time, it battered the dragonfly on the perch and took it to the nest to feed its chicks. The bee-eaters at the nesting colony were maintaining contact with each other, with their pleasant unmistakable jingling tree-tree-tree and teerp-teerp-teerp calls, all day long.

Across the river lay a barren stretch that had nearly hundreds of Blue-tailed bee-eaters swarming around in the air and perching almost at ground level. I was ecstatic! Blue-tailed bee-eaters are rare, colorful birds which feed on dragon flies and bees and are found in grassland, thin scrub and forest often quite far from water. To make sure this was no mirage, we proceeded towards this patch - crossed a small canal, got all muddy, before realizing we have another track that can lead us straight to this patch by road, and yes this place was for real! We settled down and were awestruck at the sight –

We formally began bird watching and photography by 8.00 am. Our first Little green bee-eater was smugly perched on a twig, and glancing on all sides, as if admiring the landscape. It detected a dragonfly about 100 feet away, where no human eye could

*Merops philippinus*

Like all bee-eaters, this species predominantly eats insects - especially bees, wasps and hornets - which are caught in the air by fast, swooping sorties from an open perch, to which the bird usually returns after catching its prey.



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This species probably takes bees and dragonflies in roughly equal numbers. The insects that are caught are repeatedly beaten on the perch to kill and break the exoskeleton before being tossed in the air and eaten. This habit is seen in many other members of the coraciiformes order.

Blue-tailed bee-eaters are supposed to be strongly migratory and are seen seasonally in much of peninsular India, and finding these slender, richly colored birds in the midst of a dhobi ghat (quiet literally) was definitely like paradise! A paradise because of the sheer number of these birds found here and because of the joy true nature enthusiasts experience up and close with them. On the flip side, these birds choose sandy banks or open flat areas as their nesting grounds and unfortunately this particular site is a dhobi ghat often used by villagers, who make the banks as colorful as the bird itself by littering it with plastic and other harmful wastes. Also, these birds frequent this area by March to breed and abandon nests by end of April, and during breeding time the birds often face a lot of disturbance due to the dhobi's who let their donkeys loose to graze, which often scare and disturb these birds from their nesting grounds.

Like other species, Blue-tailed bee-eaters predominantly eat insects, especially bees, wasps and ants, which are caught in the air by sorties from an open perch. Before swallowing prey, a bee-eater removes stings and breaks the exoskeleton of the prey by repeatedly thrashing it on the perch. Migration is not known but they make seasonal movements in response to rainfall. These

birds are somewhat sluggish in the mornings and may be found huddled next to each other on wires sometimes with their bills tucked in their backs well after sunrise. Blue-tailed bee-eaters sandbathe more frequently than other bee-eater species and will sometimes bathe in water by dipping into water in flight. They are usually seen in small groups and often roost communally in large numbers (200-300). The birds move excitedly at the roost site and call loudly, often explosively dispersing before settling back to the roost tree. This behavior is generally observed between the hours of 7:00 and 8:00am, and after 4:00pm.

The breeding season is from March to June. Unlike many bee-eaters, these are often solitary nesters, making a tunnel in a sandy bank. Bee-eaters are seasonally monogamous, and some species are monogamous over multiple seasons. Migratory species however are thought to form new pair bonds each breeding season. The courtship displays of the bee-eaters are rather unspectacular, with the exception of the "butterfly display" (where the wings of both sexes are held out while calling). Most members of the family engage in courtship feeding, where the male presents prey items to the female, and such feeding can account for much if not all of the energy females



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These bee-eaters are gregarious, nesting colonially in sandy banks or open flat areas. They make a relatively long tunnel in which the 5 to 7 spherical white eggs are laid. Both the male and the female - here seen mating - take care of the eggs. These birds also feed and roost communally.

require for egg creation. Like almost all Coraciiforms the bee-eaters are cavity nesters. The nests are burrows dug into the ground, either into the sides of earth cliffs or directly into level ground. Both types of nesting site are vulnerable, those on level ground are vulnerable to trampling and small predators, whereas those in cliffs, which are often the banks of rivers, are vulnerable to flash floods, which can wipe out dozens or hundreds of nests. Many species nest either on cliffs or on level ground but prefers cliffs, however the Blue-tailed bee-eater always nests on level ground. The burrows are dug by both birds in the pair as well as any helpers that have joined the pair. The soil or sand is loosened with jabs of the sharp bill, then the feet are used to kick out the loose substrate. There may be several false starts where nests are dug partway before being abandoned; in solitary species this can give the impression of colonial living even when they are not. The process of nest building can take as long as twenty days to complete, during which the bill can be both blunted and shortened. Nests are generally used only for a single season and are rarely used twice by the bee-eaters, but abandoned bee-eater nests may be used by a host of birds, snakes and bats as shelter and breeding places. Bee-eaters may nest as single pairs, loose colonies or dense colonies. Smaller species tend to nest solitarily, while medium sized species do so in the smaller colonies and larger and

This species, like other bee-eaters, is a richly coloured, slender bird. It is predominantly green; its face has a narrow blue patch with a black eye stripe, and a yellow and brown throat; the tail is blue and the beak is black.

It can reach a length of 23–26 cm, including the two elongated central tail feathers. Sexes are alike, and The call is similar to that of the European bee-eater *Merops apiaster*.



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migratory species nest in large colonies that can number in the thousands. In some instances colonies may contain more than one species of bee-eater.

A note to photographers: Please avoid going too close to the nest as this prevent the parents from taking food to the chicks inside the nest.

Conservation: Human activities can and will disrupt Bee-eater nests built in active mines or quarries. The local villagers visiting to the river bank to wash clothes have started drying their clothes on the ground or on the boulders, thus hindering nesting of the birds. Sand mining in the area too has led to the decrease in bird nesting. This place in particular used to see birds numbering to thousands, which have now drastically reduced. If the same continues, in the long term the birds may stop migrating here. ●

*Author Raghavendra Pattar is a working professional with a passion for wildlife photography. He is a certified Eco Volunteer from Government of Karnataka, India, and has travelled extensively to document the country's rich bio-diversity. He is also deeply committed to the cause of wildlife conservation and follows ethical practices while photographing his subjects in the wild. He is a firm believer that education is the first step in the process of conservation.*

Pairs will often briefly perch at the entrance of their burrow, using their stiff tail feathers to prop themselves up on soft sand banks.



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