

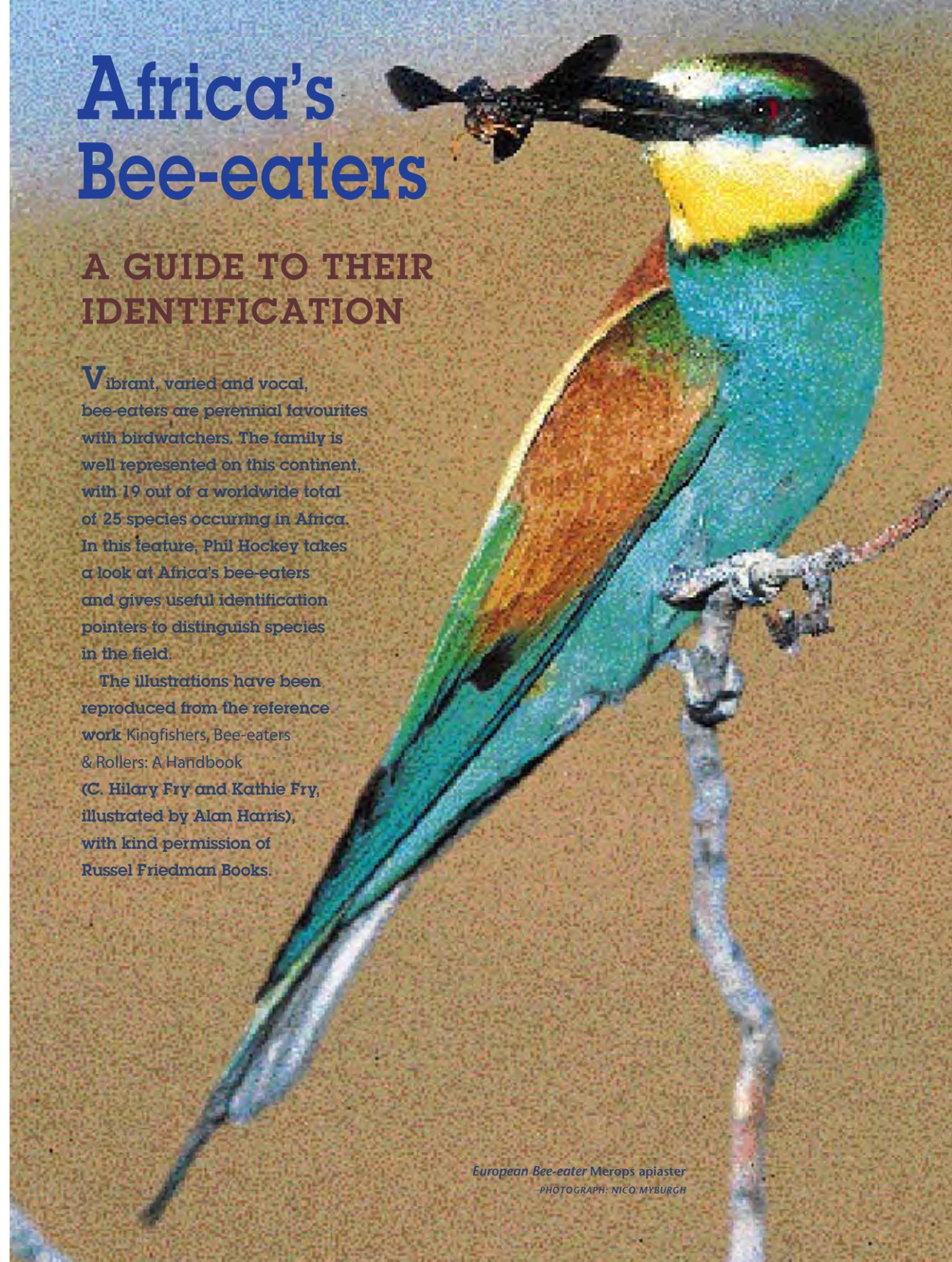
Africa's Bee-eaters

A GUIDE TO THEIR IDENTIFICATION

Vibrant, varied and vocal, bee-eaters are perennial favourites with birdwatchers. The family is well represented on this continent, with 19 out of a worldwide total of 25 species occurring in Africa. In this feature, Phil Hockey takes a look at Africa's bee-eaters and gives useful identification pointers to distinguish species in the field.

The illustrations have been reproduced from the reference work *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters & Rollers: A Handbook* (C. Hilary Fry and Kathie Fry, illustrated by Alan Harris), with kind permission of Russel Friedman Books.

European Bee-eater Merops apiaster
PHOTOGRAPH: NICO MYBURGH



~ AFRICA'S BEE-EATERS ~

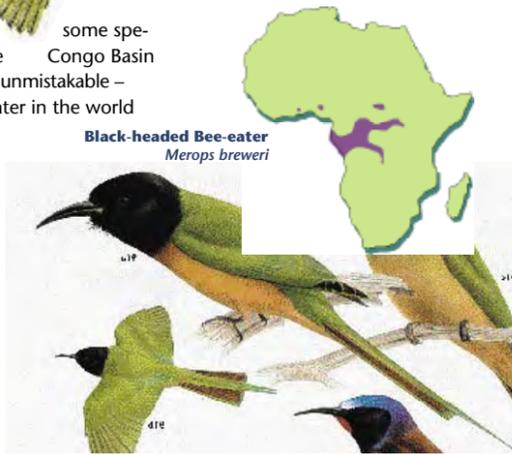
A guide to their identification

BLACK-HEADED BEE-EATER

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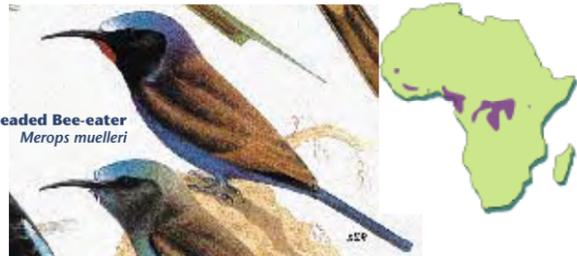
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Black-headed Bee-eater
Merops breweri



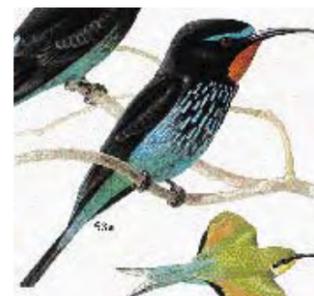
BLUE-HEADED AND BLACK BEE-EATERS

Blue-headed Bee-eater
Merops muelleri



The ranges of these two startlingly beautiful bee-eaters overlap extensively. Both inhabit the forests of central and West Africa but, whereas the Blue-headed Bee-eater is a true forest species, the Black Bee-eater is much more likely to be encountered in forest clearings and along forest fringes. Adults of both species have red throats and blue bellies, but the upperparts of the Black Bee-eater are much darker and more uniformly coloured than those of the Blue-headed Bee-eater.

There is some geographic variation. The Blue-headed Bee-eater illustrated is from the east of the species' range; the race from the west of the range has a much darker crown and forehead. The Black Bee-eater shown is the western race; the eastern race lacks the brilliant cobalt-blue eyebrow stripe (supercilium). The Blue-headed Bee-eater is the rarer of the two species, being common only in Gabon – very few nests of this species have ever been found. The Black Bee-eater, unlike many others, is a solitary nester.

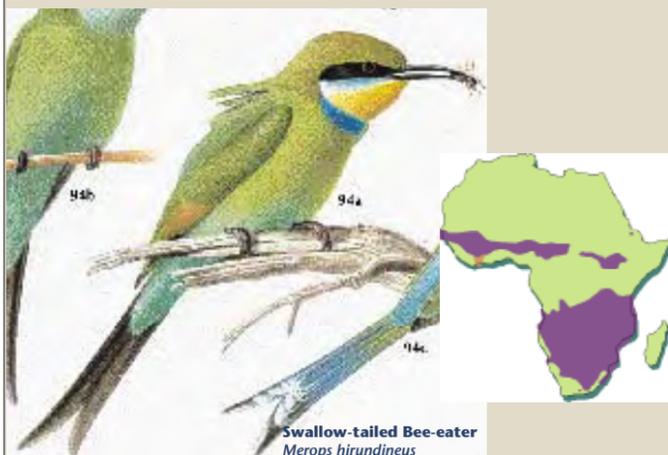


Black Bee-eater
Merops gularis

KEY TO DISTRIBUTION MAPS

| | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|--|----------------------|
| | RESIDENT OR SEDENTARY SPECIES | | NON-BREEDING VISITOR |
| | BREEDING VISITOR | | |

SWALLOW-TAILED, LITTLE, BLUE-BREADED AND CINNAMON-CHESTED BEE-EATERS



Swallow-tailed Bee-eater
Merops hirundineus

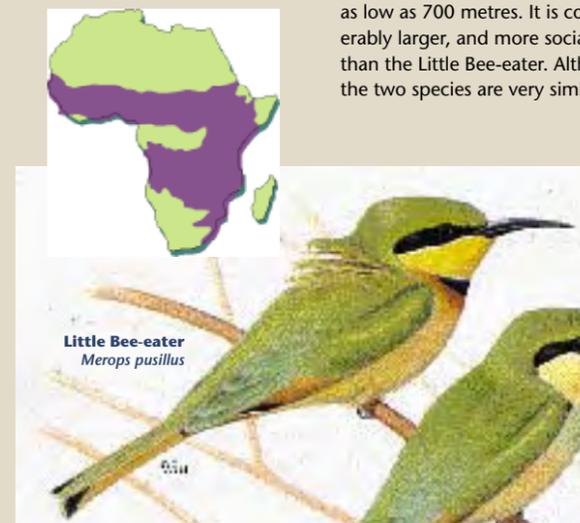
This group of bee-eaters is characterized by all species having a yellow throat, a dark stripe through the eye and a blue or blue-black breast band. The Swallow-tailed Bee-eater differs from the other three species in having an obviously forked tail which is predominantly blue above: it is also the only one of the four to have a blue rump. It is found in quite a range of habitats, from mopane and *Brachystegia* woodland through to the dry riverbeds of the Kalahari Desert.

The other three species could cause confusion, as their ranges overlap considerably, although the Blue-breasted Bee-eater replaces the Little Bee-eater over much of the Congo Basin. The three differ in size, with the Little Bee-eater being the smallest and the Cinnamon-chested

Bee-eater the largest. The two smaller species also have several races, which differ subtly in their plumage patterns.

All races of the Little Bee-eater can be distinguished from the other two species because they lack a white flash on the side of the neck. The colour of the breast band ranges from blue to black in both Little and Blue-breasted bee-eaters and is not a good identification feature. The Blue-breasted Bee-eater is a species of moist lowlands in the west of its range and mountainous country in the east of its range, but the Little Bee-eater also occurs in similar habitats.

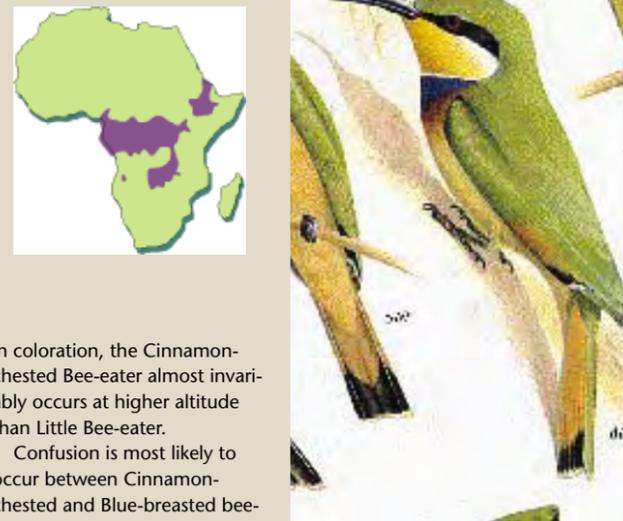
The Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater is more confined to highland areas around 2 000 metres altitude. It does occur as high as 3 000 metres and, in Sudan, as low as 700 metres. It is considerably larger, and more social, than the Little Bee-eater. Although the two species are very similar



Little Bee-eater
Merops pusillus

Blue-breasted Bee-eater

Blue-breasted Bee-eater
Merops variegatus

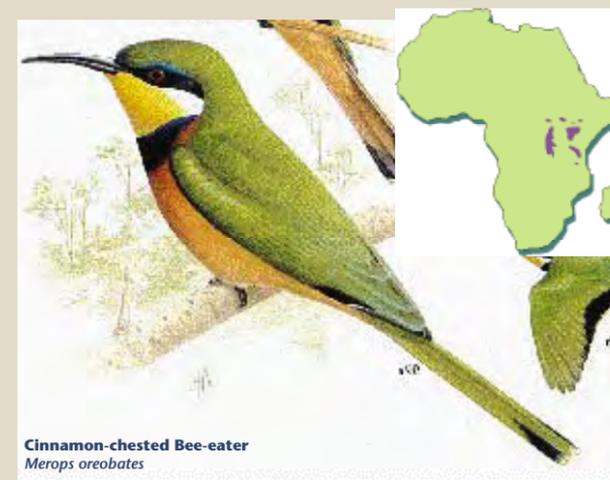


in coloration, the Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater almost invariably occurs at higher altitude than Little Bee-eater.

Confusion is most likely to occur between Cinnamon-chested and Blue-breasted bee-eaters – both have a white flash on the side of the neck and the breast band colour is variable. In East Africa, the two species are often confused and can appear so similar that it has been suggested they may be the same species. For example, Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters have been reported several times from southern Ethiopia, but these are almost certainly mis-identifications of Blue-breasted Bee-eaters. The breeding behaviour of the two species is different – the Blue-breasted Bee-eater is a solitary nester whereas Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters frequently breed in small colonies. Interestingly, the latter are regularly parasitized by Greater Honeyguides *Indicator indicator*.

Juveniles of these three species

can cause as many identification problems as can the adults. Juvenile Little Bee-eaters can be distinguished from the others by their lack of a white neck flash, but separating juvenile Blue-breasted and Cinnamon-chested bee-eaters is much more of a problem. Although the two species are largely separated by altitude, juveniles are best distinguished on size rather than coloration. Even size is a dubious criterion, as weights of the two species do overlap. The bill of the Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater is about 10 per cent longer than that of Blue-breasted Bee-eater but, without direct comparison, this would be a difficult character to use in the field.



Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater
Merops oreobates

RED-THROATED AND WHITE-FRONTED BEE-EATERS

Red-throated Bee-eater
Merops bullocki

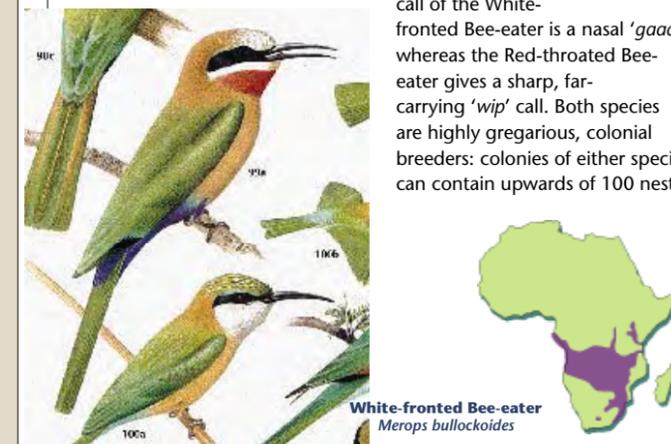


The ranges of these two, rather similar species barely overlap, the only place where they occur together being the Virunga National Park in Za'ire. Both are species of wooded savannas and they can be considered as ecological equivalents of one another, perhaps explaining why their ranges are largely separate. Their overall plumage pattern is similar, but with two important differences.

The White-fronted Bee-eater has a white forehead and a thin white band separating the black eyestripe from the red throat. It also has a deep blue rump whereas that of the Red-throated Bee-eater is green. There is no racial variation in White-fronted Bee-eaters, but Red-throated Bee-eaters differ in colour between the western and eastern populations, which are isolated from one another. The western race is illustrated here (top), but the eastern race has a thin, bright blue line above and below the black eyestripe. The blue stripe

above the eye continues around the front of the head, forming a narrow blue forehead. There is a rare colour form of this species in which the normally red throat is bright yellow. At first glance, this could be mistaken for a Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater, but the yellow-throated form of Red-throated Bee-eater lacks the dark breast band and has a rich blue, not ochre, vent.

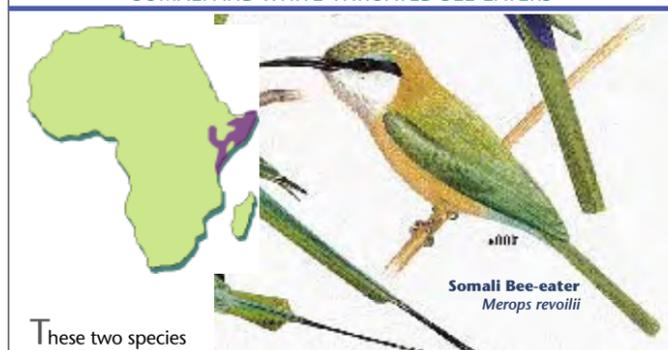
Even when flying high overhead, these two species can be distinguished by their calls. The call of the White-fronted Bee-eater is a nasal 'gaad', whereas the Red-throated Bee-eater gives a sharp, far-carrying 'wip' call. Both species are highly gregarious, colonial breeders: colonies of either species can contain upwards of 100 nests.



White-fronted Bee-eater
Merops bullockoides

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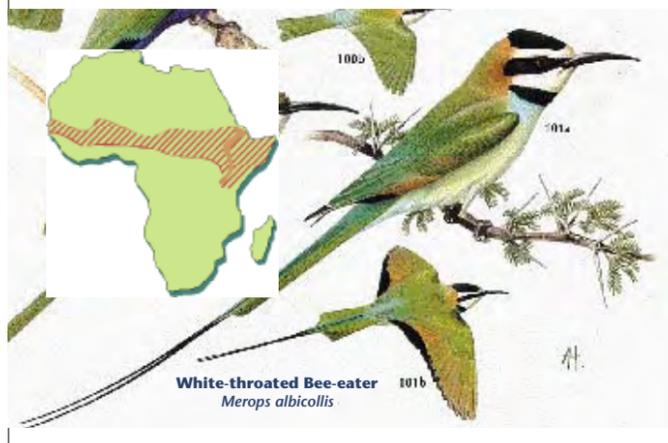
SOMALI AND WHITE-THROATED BEE-EATERS



Somali Bee-eater
Merops revoilii

These two species share a bright white throat and a pale blue rump, but are unlikely to be confused with one another. The Somali Bee-eater is a resident species of dry, thorny scrubland, and has a range extending from Somalia south to northern Tanzania. Unlike the White-throated

Bee-eater, it lacks elongated central tail feathers. The White-throated Bee-eater is further distinguished by its black crown and a black band across the lower throat. Below, the Somali Bee-eater is predominantly buff, whereas the White-throated Bee-eater is pale blue-green.



White-throated Bee-eater
Merops albicollis

BÖHM'S AND LITTLE GREEN BEE-EATERS



Böhm's Bee-eater
Merops boehmi

The ranges of these two, rather similar, species do not overlap. Böhm's Bee-eater is confined to the open woodlands of south-central and eastern Africa, while the range of the Little Green Bee-eater extends in a narrow latitudinal band from sub-Saharan West Africa east to Vietnam and Burma.

There is no racial variation in Böhm's Bee-eater, which always has a brown crown and throat separated by a narrow black eyestripe with a thin blue line below it behind the eye. Both species are predominantly green with elongated central tail feathers, but Little Green Bee-eater always has a dark stripe across the upper breast, which is wide or narrow, depending on the race. The throat ranges in colour from yellow in north-eastern Africa to blue-green or bright blue in the Middle East. The race illustrated (*viridissimus*) is the most widespread in Africa, being found from Senegal east to Ethiopia.



Little Green Bee-eater
Merops orientalis

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ROSY AND CARMINE BEE-EATERS



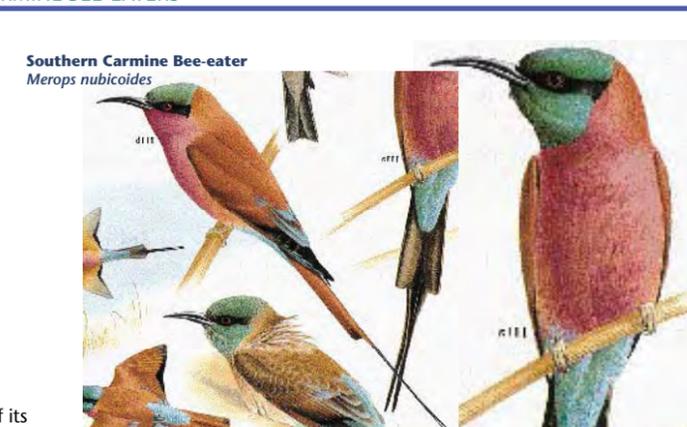
Rosy Bee-eater
Merops malimbicus

These are the only bee-eaters in the world that are predominantly pink below. In both adult and juvenile plumages, however, the Rosy Bee-eater can never be confused with the other two species because of its totally dark upperparts and conspicuous white moustachial streak. It is largely associated with rivers and nests colonially in burrows on sandbars which become exposed as water levels fall during the dry season. It is a gregarious and noisy species which



is very common in some parts of its rather restricted range. Although few nesting colonies have been found, some that have been are spectacularly large: no fewer than 23 700 nests were counted at a single colony!

The carmine bee-eaters are a bit of a taxonomic enigma, and there is some debate as to whether they should be treated as one or two species. One population breeds over a wide longitudinal range immediately to the south of the Sahara, while the other breeds in south-central and south-eastern Africa. Both populations are partially migratory, the northern one moving south, and vice versa, at the end of the breeding season. Although both reach equatorial latitudes outside their breeding seasons, the ranges of the two never overlap. Not only do their ranges not meet, but birds from the two populations look quite

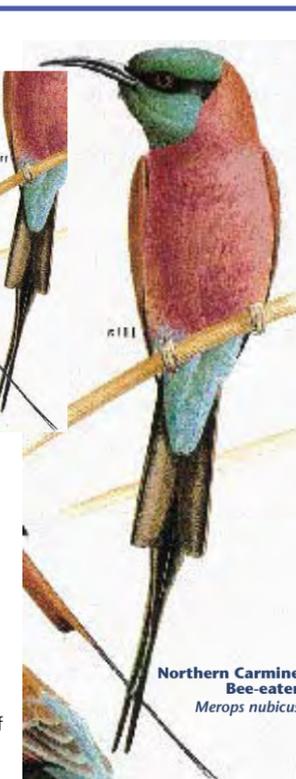


Southern Carmine Bee-eater
Merops nubicoides

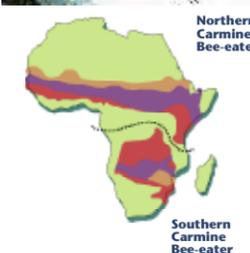
different, and I have chosen to treat them as separate species.

Both are predominantly pink in colour. The Northern Carmine Bee-eater has a turquoise crown and throat separated by a black eyestripe. The Southern Carmine Bee-eater differs in having a pink throat which is the same colour as its breast. These differences in head colour are also evident in the juveniles – the throat of the juvenile Northern Carmine Bee-eater is a dirty greyish-blue, whereas that of the Southern Carmine Bee-eater is pale pink.

On rare occasions, however, juvenile Southern Carmine Bee-eaters have been recorded with bluish throats. Care should therefore be taken not to misidentify these rare, blue-throated juvenile Southern Carmine Bee-eaters as Northern Carmine Bee-eaters.



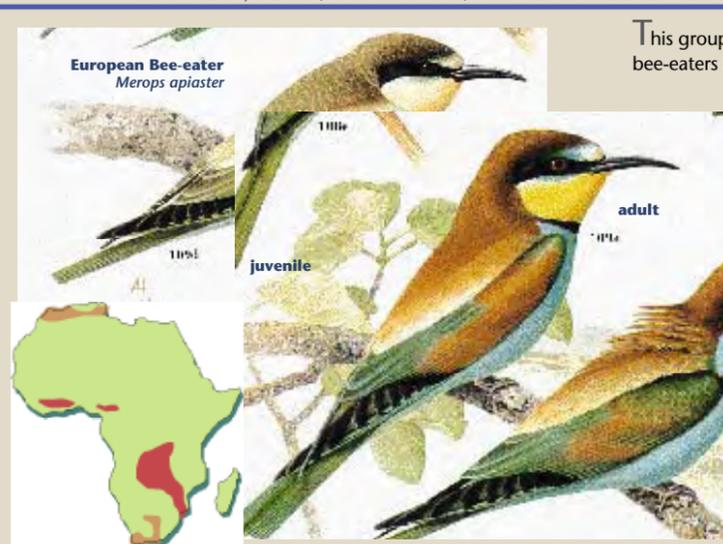
Northern Carmine Bee-eater
Merops nubicus



Northern Carmine Bee-eater

Southern Carmine Bee-eater

EUROPEAN, OLIVE (MADAGASCAR) AND BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATERS



European Bee-eater
Merops apiaster

This group of similarly coloured bee-eaters regularly causes confusion among observers. However, the head pattern and back coloration of the European Bee-eater are always sufficiently distinct from the other two that this species should not cause a problem. At rest, the adult shows a rich rufous crown and back, and the scapulars are a beautiful golden-yellow colour. The other two species always have



Olive Bee-eater
Merops superciliosus

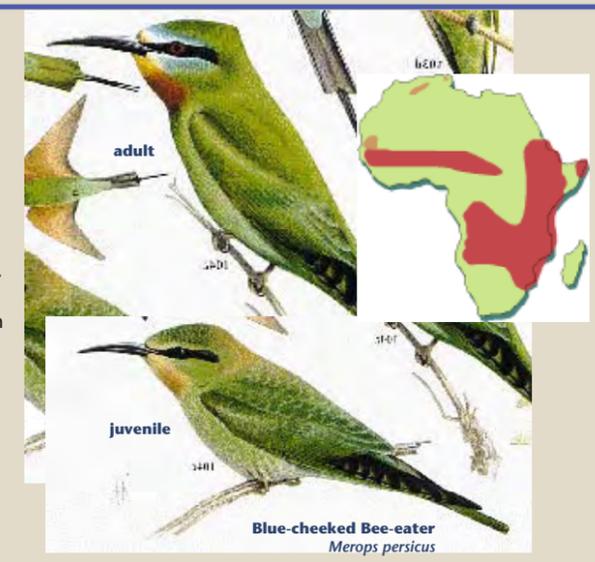
EUROPEAN, OLIVE (MADAGASCAR) AND BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATERS

green backs. The throat of the adult European Bee-eater is bright yellow, and is separated from the blue breast and belly by a well-defined black line. Neither Blue-cheeked nor Olive Bee-eater has a black throat band in any plumage. Even if details of the head colour cannot be seen, the European Bee-eater is equally easy to distinguish in flight. The rump is yellow, not green, and the inner region of the upper wing displays a large chestnut patch. The inner wings of the other two species are green. Olive and Blue-cheeked bee-eaters are a much more problematic pair, and misidentifications are frequent. In particular, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in worn plumage are regularly misidentified as Olive Bee-eaters where the two co-occur.

Adults in fresh plumage should never cause a problem in Africa, but there is an Asian race of the Olive Bee-eater which has

blue cheeks and a greenish crown and is considerably more difficult to distinguish from Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. The wing of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater is longer than that of Olive Bee-eater, but the secret to separating the two species lies in the head coloration. Both have a predominantly brown throat with a yellowish chin (more obvious in Blue-cheeked Bee-eater), and both have a conspicuous black stripe through the eye.

However, the crown colour is quite different: Blue-cheeked Bee-eater has a green crown and Olive Bee-eater has a brown crown. Both have a pale area above and below the eyestripe, but in Blue-cheeked Bee-eater this is blue, whereas in Olive Bee-eater it is off-white. The pale stripe below the eye of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater does not continue unbroken and of the same colour on to the chin, whereas it does in Olive Bee-eater.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
Merops persicus