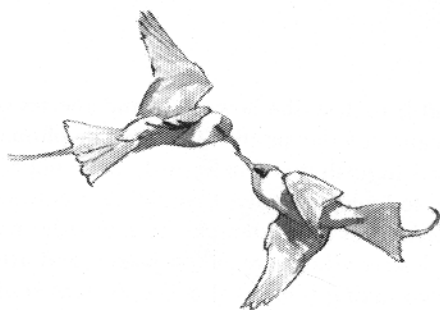




Preface

Exactly one hundred years ago there was published in London a sumptuous treatise which has remained until now the only work in any language devoted exclusively to bee-eaters. It was *A Monograph of the Meropidae, or Family of the Bee-Eaters* by H. Dresser, and is nowadays a collector's item. The text is ample, and yet to the modern ornithologist it has hardly anything of interest to say. I mean no disrespect to the memory of Dresser, a great ornithologist in his day—if his monograph expounds little it is for the simple reason that when it was written practically nothing was known about the birds except what could be gleaned from museum specimens and their collectors' scant field notes. Of only one sort was anything more than the most rudimentary details of its natural history known, the sole species breeding in Europe: *The Bee-eater*, or the European Bee-eater*.

Recently, European Bee-eaters have been studied intensively, because the way they hunt makes them ideal subjects for research upon the energetic 'cost' of foraging. Some Australian and African bee-eaters have attracted even more intensive investigations, because of their extraordinary societies with 'helpers' joining parents in rearing the young: Red-throated and White-fronted Bee-eaters are now amongst the best studied of all African birds.

It has seemed to me that the time is ripe for this second book about bee-eaters, to set down what is known and to identify some of the many areas where further effort in the field is likely to pay rich dividends. My first aim is like that attributed to my illustrious predecessor by a reviewer of his *Monograph*, in the *Ibis* of 1886, to "summarize all that can be gathered together concerning a set of birds which are not generally very well

*'European Bee-eater' is unconsciously jingoistic too—what a pity that the neutral and aesthetic 'Golden Bee-eater' was never adopted, which Russians use in distinction from their Blue-checked Bee-eater.

known". My second is to describe how races and species originate and to explain the significance of the small differences in plumage, size, shape and society which distinguish them: in a word, their evolution. If this book had been addressed to biologists only, I would have entitled it *Evolutionary Biology of the Meropidae*; but it is intended for a broader readership and I have tried to write it accordingly, avoiding jargon and attempting to put across the one or two taxing biological concepts in everyday terms.

The evolutionary emphasis reflects my own interest, but the bee-eaters do in fact demonstrate a number of evolutionary principles very well indeed. It is my hope that students and bird-watchers who have been puzzled by the multiplicity of similar birds around them (one has only to open an American, African or Australian field guide for a host of examples), will find some explanation for it here—or at least that they will finish with a better understanding about species' adaptations and the unending diversity of nature. At the same time I mean to publicize these admirable birds, that others may come to enjoy them too, and be prompted to seek for themselves the pleasures of study and the rewards of discovery.

'Admirable' is the word for bee-eaters. Being birds of the sun, none live in Britain and so they have never been accorded the special place in English traditions and affections of the Swan or the Swallow, or indeed of that distant cousin the Kingfisher. Yet thoroughly attractive birds they undoubtedly are—sleek and graceful, melodious, restrainedly colourful, tractable, confiding and sociable; and wherever the various kinds occur they are regarded (except by bee-keepers!) with affection. In southern Australia the arrival of their bee-eater, the Rainbowbird, is taken to herald the spring; throughout Africa villagers take proprietary pride in any nearby colony of Carmine Bee-eaters; while a clamorous nesting colony of 50,000 Rosy Bee-eaters is one of the seven wonders of the ornithological world. I shall forego the satisfaction of rhapsodizing any further, and let the birds speak for themselves.