



THE RAINBOW BEE-EATER

Merops ornatus

By Richard Chilton

Bee-eaters are a subgroup of the family Meropidae. Most species are found in Africa but others occur in southern Europe, Madagascar, Australia and New Guinea. They are characterised by richly coloured plumage, slender bodies and usually elongated central tail feathers. All are colourful and have long downturned bills and pointed wings, which give them a swallow-like appearance when seen in the distance.

The Australian representative of the group is the Rainbow Bee-eater. They are brilliantly coloured birds 18cm to 20cm in length, including the elongated tail feathers. The upper-back and wings are green in colour, and the lower-back and under-tail coverts are bright blue. The undersides

of the wings and primary flight feathers are red, tipped with black, and the tail is deep violet to black. The birds' two central tail feathers are longer than the rest of the tail feathers, and are longer in the female than in the male. The crown of the head, stomach, breast, and throat are pale yellowish in colour; and they have a black bib and a black eye-stripe.

This is a migratory species that spends the summer over a large area of southern Australia and Tasmania, but tends to avoid forested areas. During winter they move northwards to northern Australia, New Guinea, and some of the more southerly islands of Indonesia. During my years in Port Moresby the most common birds in the garden were Peaceful Doves, Willy Wag-tails; and, during the southern winter, Rainbow Bee-eaters. Like all Bee-eaters, they are very social birds. When not breeding they roost together in large groups in dense undergrowth or large trees. Groups of Bee-eaters are often seen hawking insects from power lines or tall trees.

In northern Australia the breeding season is before and after the rainy season, and from November to January in the south. In South Australia they occur as close to the city as the Gawler River district, where they nest in the sandy banks of the Gawler River and other local waterways. The male will bring the female food while she digs the burrow. She digs the burrow by balancing on her wings and feet, and digs with her beak, then pushes the loose soil backwards with her feet while balancing on her beak. A female Bee-eater can dig about three inches every day. The nesting tunnel is very narrow, and the birds' bodies press very tightly against the tunnel walls so that when they enter and exit their movement acts like a piston, pumping in fresh air and pushing out stale air.

They have also been known to share their nesting tunnels with other Bee-eaters; and sometimes with other species of birds. The female lays between three and seven glossy white eggs, which are incubated for about 24 days. When still in the nest the young are fed in a most unusual manner... the parents bring suitably stunned insects to the nest and leave them on the sandy floor, the young (even before their eyes open) then forage in the sand for them. They fledge after 29-30 days and are fed by both parents, as well as any older ones that have not have paired, or may have lost their mate.

Rainbow Bee-eaters eat many types of flying insects, but, as their name suggests, they are partial to the taste of bees. They are always on the lookout for flying insects, and can spot a potential meal up to 45m away. Once an insect has been sighted a Bee-eater will swoop down and snap it up in its long beak and fly back up to its perch. They will then knock their prey against the perch to kill it. Even though the species is actually immune to bee and wasps stings, they rub the insect's stinger against the perch to dislodge it, closing their eyes to avoid being squirted with the contents of the ruptured poison sac. They can eat several hundred bees a day, so are resented by apiarists, but the damage they do to the bee population is almost certainly balanced by the number of insect pests they consume.

Prior to 1972, when the current fauna laws came into force, young Rainbow Bee-eaters were sometimes taken from the wild for aviary inmates; and a colourful show they made. As the young feed themselves by foraging for the food their parents take to the nest, they were very easy to hand-raise **until they fledged!** The usual raising method was to place the young in a closed perforated box, often a shoe box, with sand on the bottom. Various types of live-food were then placed in the box and devoured by the young. Then the fun started. As they had no close human contact during the pre-fledging phase they had not imprinted on their human foster parents. Consequently, they were nervous of the hand that tried to feed them; and it was necessary to resort to force feeding until they realised that they wouldn't come to any harm. After a short period they accepted food from the hand quite readily, and thereafter became extremely tame and confiding; readily sitting on the hand to accept a mealworm, or other such treats.