MEROPS APIASTER. Linn.

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Bee-eater.

Merops apiaster, Linn. Mus. Ad. Fr., tom. ii. p. 21.

——— *chrysocephalus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 463.

——— *schaggha*, Forsk. Faun. Arab., 1.

——— *hungariæ*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 146, tab. xi. fig. i.

THE members of the family *Meropidae* or Bee-eaters, so widely distributed over the Old World, are remarkable for the elegance of their forms and the gaiety of their colouring. Those constituting the restricted genus *Merops* are seven in number; of these, two, *M. apiaster* and *M. Ægyptius*, inhabit Europe and Egypt, and extend their range westward to Afghanistan; *M. philippensis* frequents the whole of India, Southern China, Formosa, Flores, and Timor; and *M. viridis* is common in Burmah and Siam; *M. bicolor* is peculiar to the Malayan provinces; *M. quinticolor* is a native of the Indo-Chinese countries, Southern India, and Ceylon, and *M. ornatus* of Australia and the Papuan Islands.

Many of these beautiful birds are migratory, or at least change their locale according to the seasons; the species here represented passes the greater portion of its life in the light ethereal air of subtropical regions, and the azure-blue skies of Greece, Italy, and Spain are far more congenial to its habits and economy than the cold blasts of more northern countries; its occurrence in the British Islands, however, has been sufficiently frequent to entitle it to a place in our avifauna. During the last century nearly fifty have been recorded as having been shot in England, and one or two in Ireland. The following are the instances enumerated by the late Mr. Yarrell:—One at Kingsgate, in the Isle of Thanet; another at Godalming, in Surrey; a third at Christchurch, in Hampshire; a fourth at Chidecock, in Dorsetshire; three in Devonshire; four in the parish of Madern, in Cornwall; a flock of twelve near Helston, in the same county, of which eleven were killed; four or five in Suffolk and Norfolk; and a few others, the localities of which are not mentioned. Since the completion of Mr. Yarrell's work, others have from time to time made their appearance; these, like their predecessors, must have been driven out of their regular route of migration, and alighted in England, the first land they came to. One of its most recent occurrences is recorded in the 'Zoologist' for June 1866. Mr. George Harding, junior, there states that four specimens were shot near Bristol during the first week of the preceding month, and remarks that when first observed "they were hawking for bees round a number of fruit-trees in blossom, and in the neighbourhood of a number of beehives; at one moment soaring in circles at a great height, and at the next darting with velocity after their prey, which was often apparently some of the largest species of *Bombus*; when one of these was caught, it was carried for half a minute or more at the point of the bill, and then, with a sudden and peculiar turn of the head and neck, swallowed entire. At other times the birds sat upon the dead branches of a large elm and of a cherry-tree, whence they made short excursions after bees flying past or gathering round the fruit-flowers, sometimes returning to the same perch, like the flycatcher, but more often circling round for a short time before settling. The bees appeared to be always swallowed while the birds were on the wing."

So much information respecting the habits and economy of this bird has been recorded by the Rev. Mr. Tristram, Mr. Stafford S. Allen, and others, in 'The Ibis,' that it is but fair to those accurate observers to give a transcript of it in their own words.

"The Bee-eater," says Mr. Tristram, in his account of the Ornithology of Palestine, "appeared simultaneously in large flocks, and remained more or less gregarious throughout the summer in every part of the country. It does not frequently perch, but remains for hours on the wing, skimming, swallow-like, up and down a nullah or wady, or systematically ranging and quartering a barley-plain in pursuit of insects on the wing. Seen athwart the sunbeams as they passed overhead, their colour has the appearance of burnished copper. They feed as well as breed in colonies, preferring low banks to the steeper declivities, and seeming to rely for protection against lizards and other enemies on the structure and turnings of their dwellings rather than on their position. I have taken the eggs from a nest in the side of a low sand mound on the plain, out of which I startled the bird by riding over its hole.

"It does not, so far as I can ascertain, utilize the borings of the previous year; whether from the number of parasitic insects it leaves behind, or from the fact that the lizards generally squat in the vacant dwellings, I cannot say. It has been stated that it lines its nest with the elytra and legs of beetles. This I conceive to be mistake. When the eggs are first laid, there are no insect-remains to be found; but as the female continues to sit, the *débris* of her meals becomes heaped around her,

and in old nests one might generally fill a quart pot with the elytra of the Coleoptera on which the young have been reared. It is called 'warwar' by the natives, from its cry, and is mentioned by Russell as being considered delicate eating by the Syrians."

Mr. Stafford S. Allen, speaking of the bird as observed by him in Egypt, states that it arrives in the lower part of that country "early in April, on its way from its winter-quarters in the equatorial regions of Africa, across the Mediterranean and Asia Minor to Eastern Europe and the shores of the Black Sea, for the purpose of breeding. It mostly flies in flocks of twenty or thirty, but sometimes in much greater numbers. While on their way in the daytime they keep at a considerable height, and sail about like Swallows, though not so rapidly, descending at night to roost on trees. They utter a sharp twittering cry, which is often distinctly audible when the birds are almost out of sight."

Lieut. R. M. Sperling says, "this graceful bird is common on the shores of the Mediterranean, and is certainly one of the most beautiful members of their avifauna. In the hottest days their bubbling bell-like notes sound from far off as they float towards you, glittering like green flakes when the sun strikes the varied tints of their plumage. They are generally seen in flocks of about ten or twelve; and I noticed that after they have been in one place about half an hour, they move off and 'beat' in another locality. They leave Africa for Europe about the 10th of April."

In his five months' birds'-nesting in the Eastern Atlas, Mr. Salvin states that "the Bee-eater is plentiful about Djendeli, and breeds, boring the hole for its nest, in banks of the river Chemora and the ditches that drain the low land near the lake. There the soil is alluvial and soft, and the bird finds little difficulty in making its excavation. During our stay, I took several nests, and latterly became an adept at knowing at once which holes were tenanted, and where and when to dig. A little circumspection is necessary at first; for not unfrequently the occupant is a toad or snake. The scratchings made by the bird's feet in passing in and out, and the absence of fresh earth beneath the orifice, are generally sure indications of the excavation having been completed, and consequently of the probability of there being eggs within. The holes usually consist of a horizontal passage about three or four feet in length, with the entrance at various heights from the level ground. This passage, at first a circular opening, gradually enlarges horizontally, and ends in a domed chamber of about a foot in diameter; here the eggs are frequently deposited. Should, however, none be found, it becomes necessary to feel all round the chamber, when in many instances another passage of about a foot in length will be found communicating with a second chamber in all respects similar to the first, in this, if it exists, the eggs are placed. The bird makes no nest; but the floor of the chamber is strewn with the legs and wings of *Coleoptera* in such abundance that a handful may be taken up at once. In most instances I caught one of the old birds in the chamber containing the eggs; while the hole was being enlarged, it every now and then attempted to escape. The eggs are laid early in June, and are usually six in number."

"At Jaffa Mr. Chambers fell in with large flocks of *Merops apiaster* flying during the whole day at a great elevation, and only coming down late in the evening to roost in the orange-groves." Lord Lilford states that "the Bee-eater arrives in Corfu and Epirus in great numbers during the month of April, and breeds in the latter country on the banks of the Kataito River, near Mursyah, and many other similar localities. In all the holes examined, the eggs were laid on the bare sand, without any attempt at a nest. I several times observed three, and once or twice four birds fly from the same hole. The parents leave the country as soon as the young are able to fly. I have never seen them later than the beginning of August, and I observed also, during the same month in 1858, that although the banks of Guadalquivir, near San Juan de Alfarache, where there was a large colony of this species, were mined in every direction, and exhibited signs of recent occupation, not a Bee-eater was to be seen."

Dr. Henry Giglioli, in his paper on the birds observed at Pisa and in its neighbourhood in 1864, says, "During the first days of May large flocks of the Common Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) passed over the place, flying northwards. They continually betray their presence by their loud rolling whistle, but rarely stop near here, unless in the olive-plantations at the foot of the Monte Pisano."

Little more need be said except that the sexes are very similar in colour, the female being merely a trifle less brilliant than the male, and that the young assume a plumage like that of the adult from the time they leave the nest; but two years elapse before the central tail-feathers become as long as those of their parents.

The Plate represents an adult male, of the size of life, and a young bird in the distance.

Gould, John. 1873. "Bee-eater, *Merops apiaster* [Pl. 9]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323824>.

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