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The White-fronted Bee-eater

by Glen Holland, Eshowe, South Africa

The White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullackoides* originates from Gabon to Angola, Kenya and Natal. The sexes are alike. Their calls are varied but most commonly a nasal "chroop, cherow" and a twittering "krrrrt."

In the natural state they have certain preferred perches, normally a dead branch, from where they "hawk" their prey. Although colonial, the birds spread out into individual hunting areas when feeding. They nest in sand banks, most often along river courses. Within the nesting colony are a number of "clans" which consist of a nesting pair, old parents, brothers and sisters and even cousins. Each clan is made up of about five birds.

Having completed an indigenous aviary for environmental education in the Pilanesberg National Park in what is now the north west region of South Africa, I was granted permits to collect certain species or their chicks. The idea was to create a close encounters education concept where the hand raised birds would actually land on the visitors. My avicultural experience with these birds is based on a group of eight birds all of which I hand raised.

The chicks which I collected for hand rearing varied from newly hatched to about a week old. Additional warmth was supplied to the point where the feathers started to appear on the chest. If the chicks were cold, they became sluggish and would not feed properly. They also refused to feed if they were about to regurgitate a pellet. Once the pellet was regurgitated, feeding resumed as normal.

They were fed hourly from 6:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. The food was presented using a thin forceps tweezers. Hand rearing foods consisted of 50% ox-heart moistened with a multi-vitamin and with a calcium supplement added once a day. The other 50% was made up of insects such as meal worm beetles and larvae, winged termites, moths, butterflies and grasshoppers. The insects were killed before feeding and when the chicks were still very small the larger insects were broken into smaller pieces. The chicks are

voracious feeders and would attempt to swallow half the tweezers as well as the insect. They are extremely aggressive towards each other and, in nature, a maximum of two chicks will survive but usually only one will fledge. Their beaks are very sharp and they get into a frenzy when hungry and will latch onto the beak, wings or legs of their nestmates. Smaller chicks are literally thrown around the nest.

Once fledged, they lose this aggressive instinct. As the chicks began to feather, I separated them into different brooder boxes. One of the chicks was an obvious runt but eventually it caught up with the others and could not be told apart.

No serious aggression occurred within this group. I have never seen bee-eaters initiate aggression against any other species. Due to the obvious competition for food, nesting sites and hunting perches, it is advisable to keep only one species of bee-eater per aviary.

As bee-eaters spend much of their time on the wing they must be kept in large planted aviaries with plenty of dry perches in exposed positions. The plants used in the aviary should be planned so that they will flower at different times of the year to attract insects. An open pool of water will supply a bathing site for the birds. They do not settle in the water to bathe but will drop from a perch into the water and fly out, back to the perch. This is repeated four to six times.

Bee-eaters are also fond of sand baths and this is a communal activity where most of the colony will join in and have a good chat while they are busy. A dry patch of light, dusty soil must be provided for this. They also enjoy sunning themselves, and particularly on cold mornings, they will sit motionless in the sun with the head cocked to the side and all the feathers on the head, neck and back puffed out to absorb the sun's rays. When on the ground they also lie on their bellies with wings outstretched, baking in the sun.

Their natural diet consists of flying insects, particularly bees and wasps but also butterflies, grasshoppers, flies,



When White-fronted Bee-eaters are hand raised they become quite tame and will take food from the keepers hand or "hawk" it from his or her shoulder.

etc. Most of the prey is caught on the wing but I have occasionally seen bee-eaters land on the ground to pick up the odd insect. Sometimes the prey is so small that although the bird can be seen watching or chasing an insect in

the air, the insect cannot be seen by the human eye.

Bee-eaters are extremely fast and agile and if prey is dropped from a perch, it is caught again before reaching the ground. In common with

rollers and kingfishers, bee-eaters kill their prey by bashing it against a perch. The insect's head is normally pulverized and sometimes in this process the head is broken off. Once killed, the prey is tossed into the throat and swallowed whole.

In captivity, newly acquired bee-eaters are difficult to train to accept artificial diets and, initially, they will take only live food. Hand raised birds grow up with substitute diets and are much easier avicultural subjects. Even hand raised birds, however, will always take insects in preference to artificial diets. I feed my birds by hand, twice a day in the warm months when insects are plentiful in the aviary, and three times per day during the cold months. Artificial foods are always fed first, followed by insects. Even dead food is beaten to "kill" it.

Bee-eaters will sit on your shoulder or hand to receive food but prefer to feed on the wing. The food can be thrown into the air as the birds are called with a repetitive whistle, or the food can be held in the air with a forceps tweezers and released as the birds snatch it while they fly past. Another advantage of throwing the food into the air for bee-eaters is that they will nearly always beat the other aviary inhabitants to the insects. When the food is held in the hand, larger and more aggressive species have the advantage over the bee-eaters.

In a planted aviary the natural influx of insects greatly assists in maintaining bee-eaters in peak condition. At the time of writing, I have not bred these birds in captivity but the White-fronteds have begun to excavate in a sand bank. We had a problem in that a pair of Brown-hooded Kingfishers moved into the sandbank and evicted the bee-eaters.

The sandbank was constructed by building sand up within a scaffold-plank framework. The sand was 1.2 m (4 ft.) deep and 1.6 m (5.25 ft.) front to rear. This was well watered and planted on top with shrubs that have shallow root systems. After a month the planks were removed exposing the face of the sandbank.

There are records of bee-eaters being bred in captivity. A sandbank such as the one mentioned, and a plentiful supply of live food are essential for success. The two to five white eggs hatch after 20 days and the chicks fledge 27-29 days later. They require a 3 mm ring. ➔

The author received special permits to collect eight chicks from the wild. They were taken from three different nests to keep a genetic diversity in this small foundation breeding stock. The babies responded well to hand feeding and became part of a wonderful study and educational display.

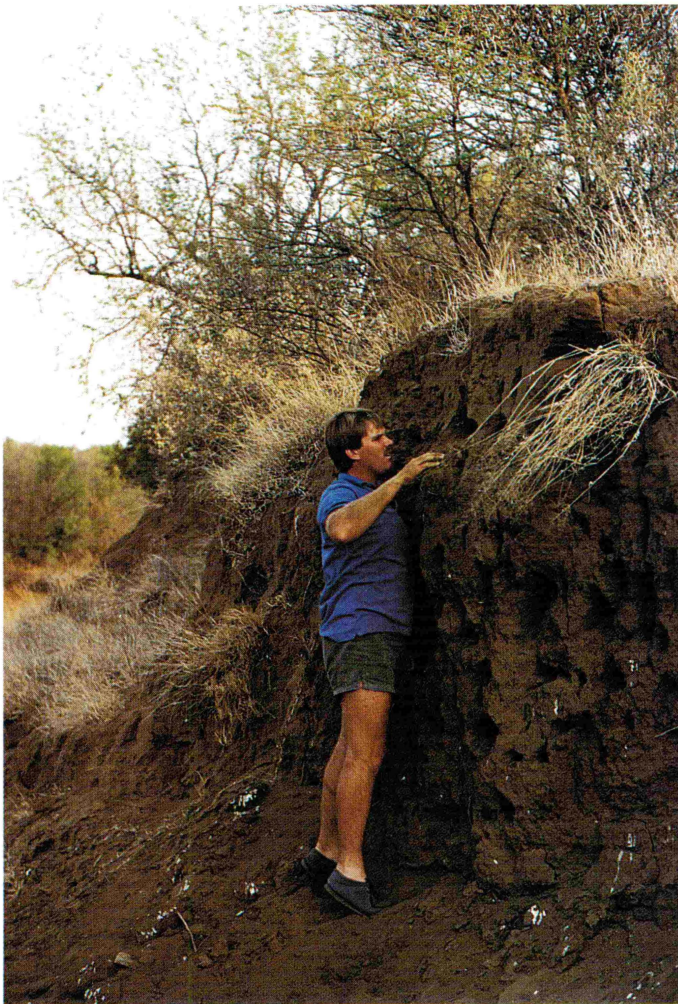


Photo by Glen Holland, Eshowe, South Africa