

# The bird & the bees

**TOP SPOT**

**WORDS & PICTURE**  
MARK D ANDERSON

Forget about man and his dog. A small brown bird called the honeyguide lays claim to one of the oldest relationships between humans and animals, says Mark D Anderson.

In the old days, people would follow a honeyguide to a wild bee nest, where they would smoke out the bees and rob the nest. The bird's reward for leading humans to honey would be a feast of beeswax and bee larvae.

Scientists suggest that this relationship goes back to prehistoric times when we all still had to forage for our sugar fix. In modern times, honeyguides are still so tuned in to human behaviour that they will even attempt to guide boats and motor vehicles to bee nests.

The honeyguide is the only bird species able to digest beeswax, and it has a tough skin to protect it against bee stings.

## Honey, I'm here...

If you're in the bush and notice a small brown bird chattering away to attract your attention and then flying ahead of you, only to land on a nearby bush, you may well have met a greater honeyguide (the one species in South Africa known to interact with humans in this way). Once the bird has got your attention, it will flick its tail, fly to the next bush and wait for you to follow, gradually leading you to a bee nest.


## Honey hex


In African folklore there's a belief that if you fail to reward the honeyguide, it will bring misfortune upon your head, and next time it will show you the way to a black mamba instead of a sweet treat.

## Honey who?

In Kenya, the Boran people still actively use the honeyguide to find honey. The Boran are, however, gradually being excluded from game reserves, leading some scientists to argue that people following this tradition should be allowed to collect wild honey just to keep this ancient relationship going.

## Honeyguides and honey badgers

There is a popular fallacy that honey badgers (and perhaps baboons and mongooses) are also guided to beehives by greater honeyguides. The idea came from early traveller and naturalist Anders Sparrman, who wrote about this in 1785 based on what he had been told. But in the more than 200 years since, no biologist or naturalist has observed this behaviour. So keep your camera and notebook handy – you could be the first person to document teamwork between this bird and an animal other than humans. 



**SPOTTING THE HONEYS.** The male greater honeyguide is identified by its pink bill, black throat and white ear patches. The female has no bold facial markings and she has a blackish bill.