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TOP SPOT

WORDS MARK D ANDERSON
PICTURE CHRIS VAN ROOYEN



Birds of many colours

Do bee-eaters really eat bees? Mark D Anderson tells us more about some of the prettiest birds you'll ever see in southern Africa.

In Kimberley, where I live, the start of the hot weather is signalled by the arrival of the European bee-eaters. Any day between 6 and 10 September I'll hear their first calls from a poplar tree roost site behind my house. Last year they were three weeks late, and I wondered whether this was due to global warming.

Of the nine species of bee-eater you can see in South Africa, three are migratory: The southern carmine treks down from north Africa, and the blue-cheeked and European travel from north and central Africa and Eurasia to spend their summers here.

So what do they eat? They prefer flying insects, predominantly bees, and lots of them! White-fronted bee-eaters will make up to 300

sorties a day to feed, and the little bee-eater catches between 12 and 18 insects an hour. The southern carmine bee-eater perches on the back of an antelope, secretarybird, ostrich or kori bustard and catches insects that are disturbed as the animal walks across the veld.

Why don't they get stung? The bird handles its prey very carefully. It will kill a bee or wasp by hitting it against a branch and brushing it to and fro against the bark to get rid of the sting before eating it.

Underground movement. Many people are surprised to learn that bee-eaters nest in excavated cavities in river banks and ditches, and even in the roofs of aardvark burrows. This makes them vulnerable to predators such as egg-eating snakes and monitor lizards.

Small is beautiful. Visitors to the Kruger can see the little bee-eater, the smallest of the species. An adult measures 15 to 17 cm and weighs only 15 g. It is also Africa's most common bee-eater, with a population that may number between 60 and 86 million birds!

The slightly larger swallow-tailed bee-eater is more common in the arid west, and is especially widespread in Botswana, Namibia and the Northern Cape. The Kgala-gadi's picnic sites and rest camps are great places to watch and photograph these beautiful birds.

Red jewel of Africa. Photographs taken in the Okavango nearly always include great ones of southern carmine bee-eaters snuggled together on a roost. This is the largest of Africa's bee-eaters and arguably the most beauti-

BEE-EATER BALLET. Photographer Chris van Rooyen shot this picture of a southern carmine bee-eater from a boat moored on the Zambezi in the Caprivi. He entered it in the 2008 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition, run by *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and London's Natural History Museum – and it was highly commended in the category "Animal Portraits".

ful, with its magnificent rosy red plumage, emerald green forehead, azure back feathers and pale blue belly. They breed in massive colonies in river banks, sometimes numbering a thousand nests.

Get involved. If you would like to contribute to the conservation of birds, join BirdLife South Africa. For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za