

The Spectacular Lives of Bee-eaters



Back to the perch after skydiving

The lives of the petite and brightly coloured bee-eaters that dart and dive through the air like arrows, snapping bees and other insects mid-air, are entertaining to watch.

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Chestnut headed bee-eater on guard

Home to as many as 237 resident avians of which 34 are endemic, and another 216 species recorded to be purely migratory, Sri Lanka is a much sought after destination for birdwatching. Bee-eaters amongst them are a fairly common group of birds, where only four species are found here. These are colourful birds that dart across the sky with a characteristic black stripe across their eyes, yet are sparingly 'small-medium' sized. True to their name they feed on bees, and other flying insects that are 'snatchable' mid-air. Bee-eaters can be found almost anywhere in the island, and far from being shy they are well adapted to settle in and around human areas.

Their opulent hues are vibrant and do not fail to catch one's attention when they do make their presence felt. Being social creatures they often appear as groups lined on twigs, branches and anywhere they can readily observe the actions of a flying insect. Its physique is such that the bird has the ability to twist and turn abruptly, its bills acting like chopsticks in mid-air.

Once it snatches its prey it returns to its perch then detoxifies wasps or bees prior to tossing them high up and gulping them down. Of the four species found in the island the little green bee-eater and the chestnut headed bee-eater are resident species and are seen throughout the year. While a vast majority of blue tailed bee-eaters migrate, during the non-migratory season small populations can be found resident distributed in the southern-eastern coastal belt extending from Bundala to Pottuvil. The fourth species, the European bee-eater, is a very rare winter visitor. Vagrant populations of less than as many as 30 can be observed in Yala and Lunugamvehera for a few days during the time they arrive. All bee-eaters build their nests on burrows on soil banks in a wide variety of habitats. Some prefer loose soil while others build on relatively hard soil, their selection being species specific.

The little green bee-eater is the smallest of the four and the most abundant resident. They are commonly seen in the dry, arid and intermediate zones of the island. It's plumes are predominantly a luminous green with its chin and throat a bluish hue. Closer to their roosting grounds large flocks sail the skies by dusk, and their endless chirping can be deadly at times, as the aerial predators such as the shikras, peregrine and shaheen falcons are always on the lookout for an easy prey. Often seen perched on barb wires and dry twigs in small groups, these birds never take a moment's rest while preening in between their hunting strikes. Their action-packed spectacular aerial strikes are indeed rewarding opportunities for a wildlife photographer. By mid-October flock after flock of blue-tailed bee-eaters and forest wagtails dot the western sky by dusk. Their endless repartee heralds the migratory season and the end of a monotonous solitary atmosphere that had prevailed for nearly six months. They all swarm in at the end of each day during this period by dusk to roost as a colony. One such mass roosting site closer to Colombo is situated at Muthurajawela. To watch them swarm in darting at eye level is an experience of a lifetime. The blue-tailed bee-eater, is a little larger than the little green bee-eater and has a characteristic blue tail, with a predominantly greenish hue on the rest of its body. During the migratory season they can be

found on practically every corner of the island. Both the little green and the blue tailed bee-eaters have in common a feature absent in the other two species: a couple of centrally protruding tail feathers. It's common for bee-eater flocks to sand bathe almost any day of the year. Being social creatures, this is an important activity where the birds seem to enjoy the splendour of dust on their feathers, especially on sandy roads, in an attempt to get rid of parasites.



One wins, the other missed

The petite and colourful chestnut headed bee-eater, has a unique chestnut colouration right at the top of its head, marked quite contrastingly against its much lighter yellowish region beneath the black stripe on the eye. From behind, the chestnut colour appears as a veil from top to about mid length of its whole body length. Being residents these attractive birds prefer to build their nests on burrows of relatively hard soil embankments. The overall process of excavating the burrow is a tedious process which can last for days at a stretch. It uses its sharp sickle of a bill to penetrate forward and its feet act like two speedy shovels working in unison, pushing the soil out of the burrow. Once the chicks hatch out, the parents take turns in feeding their young.

When nesting as a colony, each couple of parents benefits from the team spirit of the birds. When hungry predators arrive at their homes to prey on the chicks, the predators often lose in the battle against a violent gathering of angry bee-eaters.

And where exactly can you find these delightfully striking birds, one might ask? One of the best locations is Yala National Park where the green bee-eater can be often found between the months of March and June perched on an old tree stump or bathing in sand. Since they roost communally, it won't be difficult to spot hundreds of them as they chirp loudly at each other. The sight will truly be a memorable experience and an excellent induction into the many beautiful and exotic bird species found around the island.

