Keeping and Breeding Bee-eaters

by Maarten de Ruiter
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Bee-eaters (Family - *Meropidae*) are imported quite frequently into Europe. The African species of bee-eaters are the most commonly offered. Private aviculturists rarely acquire and breed the bee-eaters because this group of birds have a reputation as being "difficult" to keep and reproduce. I feel that bee-eaters are as easy to keep as many other softbills when the following points are taken into account.

Diet

Bee-eaters are insectivorous and it is difficult to feed them a diet other than live food. The species I have been involved with were fed mealworms and crickets in large volume. They were also given a mixture of insect-food and then strips of beef which were occasionally eaten by accident. Other food items given to these birds were spiders, wax-moths, grasshoppers, flies and, of course, bees.

Housing

Bee-eaters are tropical birds and must be kept in heated enclosures during the winter in very cold climated areas.

Nesting Habits

Like motmots and many kingfishers, bee-eaters nest in earthen walls. If one is planning to breed these birds, an earthen or mud wall or bank must first be constructed.

In Walsrode Birdpark in the northern part of Germany, I was privileged to care for several species of motmots. These included the European *(Merops apiaster)*, White-throated *(M. albicollis)*, Little *(M. pusillus)*, Cinnamon-chested *(M. oreobates)* and Black *(M. gularis)* bee-eaters. Three of these species made breeding attempts while I was there.

The first was the European Bee-eater. It is the northern-most species and its breeding grounds are mainly in southern Europe. In the northern countries like Germany and the Netherlands, only a few successful breedings are accomplished. At Walsrode a colony of six birds was kept in a large European free-flight aviary. This exhibit also housed European rollers, avocets and ruffs. We constructed an artificial nesting wall especially for the bee-eater. Although they laid eggs, no successful breedings took place. Because the wild population of European Bee-eaters goes south during the winter months, we removed the captive colony from the free-flight and housed them in heated enclosures.

The Little Bee-eaters were also kept in a colony of six birds. Being an African species, they were housed in an aviary in the Tropical Hall. This enclosure measured 6m x 3m x 2.2m high

Photos by Maarten de Ruiter

The Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater uses an earthen or mud wall or bank to build their tunnel nests. Their natural habitat is the forests of east and central Africa.

This immature Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater lacks the cinnamon breast color of the adults. This youngster represents the world's first breeding of this species done by Walsrode Birdpark in northern Germany in 1986.

(19-1/2 ft x 10 ft x 7-1/4 ft high). They shared this enclosure with a pair of Superb Sunbirds and a group of Kittlitz's Sand Plovers. In the back of the enclosure a 6m x 1m x 1.5m high (12 ft x 3-1/4 ft x 5 ft high) artificial wall was constructed in which were placed several nesting pipes. Two pairs of Little Bee-eaters made use of these nests but after about a week threw their incubated eggs out of the nest. Therefore success was not achieved.

We had much better success with the Cinnamon-chested Bee-eaters. A trio of this species was kept with some Wattle-eyes and a White-bellied Pigeon in another aviary (10 ft x 10 ft x 7-1/4 ft high) in the Tropical Hall. This exhibit had a small pool placed in its center and some rubber trees had been planted in it. In one corner a small earthen wall had been constructed and in 1986 the bee-eaters had their first successful breeding. Very little information was gathered from this nesting as observation was very difficult. However, two young were reared. One month after the young had fledged the nest, the adult female started a second clutch. We now made some closer observations and three eggs were laid. Of these, two young hatched after an incubation period of 18 days. One of the young died in the nest but the other left the nest at the age of 31 days. This youngster was a little smaller than the adults and, instead of the cinnamon chest of the adult, had a green colored chest. This breeding of the Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater represented a world's first breeding.

Walsrode obtained a large collection of Carmine Bee-eaters *(Merops nubicus)* after I left the Birdpark to work elsewhere. In 1993, the Carmine Bee-eaters made their first attempts toward reproducing and no fewer than five pairs were successful. This also represented a world first breeding.

As the above notes confirm, when the right care is given, bee-eaters can be kept very well and even breeding is possible.●

Species Profiles:

White-crested Laughing Thrush

(Garrulax leucolophus)

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This striking laughing thrush is found as a common resident in the forest undergrowth areas throughout southeast Asia. Imported on a somewhat frequent basis, its numbers still remain relatively low in captivity. There are around 50 individuals currently housed in U.S. zoos (private sector population unknown).

Typical of the larger laughing thrushes, it can have an aggressive nature. Although it is sometimes difficult to house in a mixed species aviary, individuals have had success keeping them in larger aviaries with other birds such as the Gold-crested Mynah, Crested Wood Partridge, Bleeding Heart Dove and Red-billed Leiothrix. The key factor seems to be in avoiding species which compete for food or nesting niches. On the positive side, it is an extremely personable species with an explosive and variable call.

A few zoos have had success breeding these birds in captivity. The Minnesota Zoo has produced young with regularity. Bird Curator Jim Pichner has noted that their birds breed throughout the year. Nesting is stimulated with the addition of lots of nest-