



**West African Ornithological Society**  
**Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest**  
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AN ALBINISTIC EXAMPLE OF MEROPS BULLOCKI - Albinistic plumage is evidently of very rare occurrence amongst bee-eaters, and we know of records of only one specimen each in the White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullockoides* (Benson & Irwin 1964, *Occ. Pap. Nat. Mus. S. Rhod.* 27B: 127), the European Bee-eater *M. apiaster* (Garcia 1976, *Ostrich* 47: 136) and the Carmine Bee-eater *M. nubicus* (Ash 1978, *Ostrich* 49: 91). Between us we have handled over a thousand and closely observed several thousand Red-throated Bee-eaters *M. bulocki*, but have only just come across a partial albino of this species. On 24 November 1979 we netted 55 Red-throated Bee-eaters in Yankari Game Reserve, 09°35'N 10°25'E, Nigeria, for ringing and tagging, and one of them was a semi-albino with one wholly white and two partly white secondaries in the right wing, irregular white primary and secondary coverts in both wings, asymmetrically, and a few white feathers in the head, back, scapulars and rump. Two or three contour feathers were part white and part green, but the majority of albino contour feathers were entirely white, so that the albinism was almost exactly like that reported by Ash in the Carmine Bee-eater.

C.H. Fry and H.Q.P. Crick

LEVEL-GROUND NESTING BY MEROPS BULLOCKI - All bee-eaters excavate a long tunnel with terminal nest chamber, in soil. A few species habitually use vertical cliffs for the purpose, several others habitually nest in flat ground, and yet other species use both situations. Red-throated Bee-eaters *Merops bulocki* have been thought of as obligate cliff-nesters; for not only have nest holes never previously been found other than in sandy or lateritic cliffs from 0.5 to 5.0 m high, but the only formation of nest tunnel reported is the slightly inclining one which could not possibly be excavated in level ground. Indeed, the nest architecture of *M. bulocki* seems to be expressly adapted to cliff sites, the rising lip before the nest chamber preventing eggs from rolling out (Fry 1973, *The Living Bird* 11: 75-112); the ascending tunnel could be held to keep out rain were it not that the species nests so early that it seldom encounters rain then, and instead it could conceivably function to maintain an equable microclimate.

HQPC is making a study of Red-throated Bee-eaters in Yankari Game Reserve, 09°35'N 10°25'E, Nigeria, where in January 1979 he found two colony sites 400 m apart, inspected also by CHF in November, which were not in cliff faces. The smaller one was in gently sloping sand by a dry road-culvert, with the nests scattered over an area about 1 x 4 m, the entrances to the lowermost tunnels being on a contour only a few cm below the topmost ones. The larger colony had 103 nests excavated in a line in a 'cliff' from 4 to 20 cm high, where the hard-baked topsoil of a large, flat, grassy piece of ground broke at the top of the gently sloping (about 20°) sand banks bordering the River Gaji. In places the 'cliff' was so low that many nest tunnel entrances had a ceiling only 2 cm thick, and instead of ascending the tunnels were straight and descending. The nest-chamber floor of one tunnel 116 cm long which we opened was 20 cm

lower than the entrance hole. The situation was very like that often adopted by Least Bee-eaters *M. pusillus* for their nests, and it appeared to be fraught with risks from floods, snakes, monitor lizards and - since the area is hard by a salt lick and is much used by large mammals watering themselves at the river - accidental destruction by elephants, buffaloes or antelopes. Indeed, monitor lizards dug out several of the nests in January 1980, and elephants trampled others.

Unusual behaviour by the bee-eaters consequent upon this extraordinary site were that those social interactions between birds in the colony which elsewhere generally occur on cliff-face vegetation perches, here took place on sloping sand in front of the nest entrances; and that the birds used an excavation posture hitherto unrecorded in *M. bulocki*. They supported their weight on the tripod of wrists and beak, freeing both legs rapidly to scabble loose soil backwards out of the tunnel entrance. Other species of level-ground-nesting bee-eaters commonly adopt that posture; very likely *M. bulocki* regularly does so too in cliff-face nest chambers (less likely in the narrow tunnels), but such has not yet been seen.

H.Q.P. Crick and C.H. Fry



Above and opposite: The larger of the two 'level-ground' colonies of Red-throated Bee-eaters, Nigeria, November 1979.

