

# Rainbow Bee-eaters

*Merops ornatus*



## Home and away

One of Australia's most colourful birds, the Rainbow bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*), calls the Bundaberg Region home between September and January before many of them seek warmer weather and migrate to Northern Australia and New Guinea between February and April.

Research has shown a 50% reduction in bee-eater sightings along the East Coast of Australia since 2001.<sup>1</sup> This factsheet outlines how we can all help to reverse this alarming trend.

## Prime real estate

If you are lucky enough to have these masked acrobats move into your neighbourhood, you can watch one of Australia's few species of bird that builds a nesting tunnel in the ground. Bee-eaters have strict real estate criteria, setting up home where there is a bare patch of sandy soil, a few trees to sleep in, good visibility to catch food and watch for predators and in a quiet area.

In known breeding locations, Council stops mowing to allow the birds a safe space to complete nest building and raise their chicks. Our Natural Areas team protect eleven bushland reserves providing important habitats for these beautiful birds.

## How can you help?

- **Report underground nests that are located on Council land** including parks and footpaths.
- **Park your car or other vehicle away from the nests.** The weight of your vehicle can crush underground nests, eggs and young birds.
- **Avoid digging or excavating near the nesting area.** This can cause the entrance and nest area to collapse suffocating young and destroying eggs.
- **Avoid mowing over nesting areas.** The noise and machinery can scare off parents and destroy the underground tunnels due to vibration.
- **Keep your distance from nest sites.** Your presence can scare parents delaying the young being fed. Instead enjoy watching them from a distance.
- **Keep dogs and pets away** to avoid scaring birds, digging in tunnels and poo at the site.
- **Humanely dispose of cane toads** who use nests as homes and eat chicks. A Queensland study showed that toads are responsible for a third of all deaths of eggs and young. Cane toads who were removed 1200m away from nests made their way back to the burrows.<sup>2</sup>
- **Plant natives** to attract insects for Bee-eaters to eat.
- **Keep trees on your property.** Bee-eaters need them to sleep in and eat their meals in.

## Where can you find bee-eaters?

Bee-eaters live across Australia in open forest, woodland, shrubland, quarries, mines, farmlands, except open desert areas and Tasmania. In the Bundaberg Region they have been spotted at Baldwin Swamp Environmental Reserve, Queens Park, Innes Park, Woodgate and Burnett Heads.

## What's on the menu?

As their name suggests, they love eating bees, and even though they are immune to bee stings they will still close their eyes to avoid venom and rub the bee against a branch to remove the sting. Bee-eaters are 'sit and wait' hunters, catching dragonflies, wasps, flies, butterflies, and flying termites in mid-air with the flight skills to rival a fighter pilot.

## Born underground

Balancing on her slender bill and wings, the female will push loose soil backwards with her feet in a 'cycling' motion, until she creates a one metre tunnel with a nesting chamber at the end, only stopping when the male brings her insect meals.

After laying 3-7 round pearl white eggs mum and dad take turns to sit on the eggs for 24 days. Hatchlings spend another month underground, before leaving the safety of the nest when mum and dad will continue to feed them for another two weeks.



24 cm in length\*

## Look for:

- **Two feathers**, called streamers, that are **longer than the tip of the tail**
- **Helper birds** - younger or unpartnered birds often help the parents care for their young
- Bee-eaters **spitting out black pellets** containing indigestible body parts like insect wings

## Did you know, bee-eaters:

- Are **24cm in length** from top to tail tip
- Spot meals from **45 metres** away
- **Eat hundreds of insects** in a day
- Rarely drink water but will **nest near water** as this attracts insects
- **Are often heard before being seen** - listen for a repetitive 'prrr-prrr' trill then look for a bee-eater on the nearest tree, powerline or fence
- **Build narrow nesting tunnels** helping pump fresh air in and push stale air out each time the parents squeeze their bodies through
- **Partner for life**
- Only have a **two year life span**, so successful nesting is critical to ensure the species survival
- **Sleep in a tree near their nests** just before sunset and wake at dawn
- Have to **eat 70% of their body weight** before starting the long-haul flight back north

## References

<sup>1</sup> J O'Connor, G Ehmke and RB Cummingham, 'State of Australia's Birds 2015: Headline Trends for Terrestrial Birds', *Australian Government*, 2015

<sup>2</sup> CRJ Boland, 'Evolutionary Ecology of Rainbow Bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*)', 2004

\*measurement accurate when printed to actual size