



# SOUTHERNS' BREEDING SPECTACLE

When hundreds - sometimes thousands - of southern carmine bee-eaters gather to breed, the banks of some of southern Africa's larger rivers pulsate with colour. **Tim Jackson** describes this annual phenomenon.

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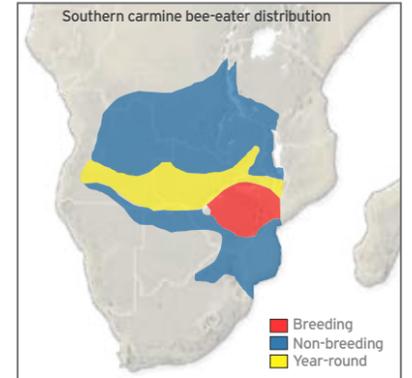
**T**he largest of all African bee-eaters, carmines comprise two species: the southern *Merops nubicoides* and the northern *M. nubicus*. Both are quite distinctive from other bee-eaters, with their long tails and bright crimson coloration, the southern with a vivid pink throat and the northern with a greenish-blue one.

Although some southern carmines are resident all year, most are inveterate travellers, moving extensively through their range in a three-stage migration. After spending the winter in the savannas of Angola, southern Democratic Republic of Congo, western Tanzania and Malawi, between July and September they fly south and, ahead of the breeding season, congregate at sites along rivers in a belt that stretches across the sub-continent from southern Angola and Zambia through north-eastern Namibia and Botswana to Zimbabwe. From December onwards, once they have completed their nesting duties, they disperse widely, flying as far afield as South Africa, Swaziland and southern Mozambique; some individuals have been tracked covering at least 650 kilometres between their breeding grounds in

Zambia and KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. They then return north for the winter.

A multitude of pink flashes darting in all directions above a lazy river must be one of the most memorable sights of southern Africa. Southern carmines are gregarious by nature and their breeding colonies can number between 100 and 1000 nests, although as many as 10 000 have been recorded at a single site. The birds generally return to the same stretch of river year after year, but flooding or the erosion of a cliff may compel them to shift their breeding site a kilometre or more.

Laying takes place in September and October and usually two to four eggs are produced. They are laid roughly two days apart and hatch at different times too, so there can be a considerable discrepancy in the size of one brood's chicks; those that hatch later are unable to compete with their siblings for food and often starve to death. By the time the chicks are about two weeks old they bear some resemblance to small hedgehogs - their feather papillae have elongated into spines but have not yet broken open into feathers. After another two weeks or so they are ready to leave the nest. ▶



**OPPOSITE** In the early part of the southern carmine bee-eaters' breeding season the colony is a hive of mating activity, which is sometimes preceded by an aerial 'dance'. The birds may start by scuffling together on the ground before taking to the air and indulging in what at first sight looks like aggressive behaviour, but is more probably a courtship chase. On occasion the pair make contact in flight or, as has been observed, a bird may pluck a feather from its mate.

**BELOW** Southern carmines' nest burrows are often cut into the high sandy cliffs that typically border large meandering rivers, but where such cliffs are not available the birds tunnel into flat expanses of sand. Both members of the pair do the excavating, initially using their bills and then shifting the sand by 'cycling' it away with their feet.





**ABOVE** For several weeks after leaving the nest, young bee-eaters still rely on their parents for food. They don't let the adults out of their sight, perching nearby and flying in close pursuit when the older bird takes off in search of prey. Their coloration is greenish when they leave the burrow and it gradually turns more red, so that by the time the juveniles leave the area in April they are quite similar to the adults.

**RIGHT** Visiting a ground-level bee-eater colony before the chicks fledged, this marabou stork patrolled the burrow entrances on the lookout for an unwary youngster. Alerted by the adults' alarm calls, the chicks retreated deep into the nest, safe from the marabou's probing bill. But the stork was patient and stood statue-like at a nest-hole. Although the parent owners stayed away, their less cautious neighbours resumed feeding their chicks. The young birds' cries encouraged the besieged chick to venture to the burrow entrance, where it was snapped up by the waiting stork.

**OPPOSITE** Satisfying the appetites of their brood keeps the parent carmine bee-eaters busy throughout the nesting season and at the Linyanti colony, where this bird was photographed, they regularly make 10- to 15-kilometre round trips to catch enough insect prey for their growing offspring. Virtually any insect - bees and wasps, flies, grasshoppers and locusts, mantids, dragonflies, lacewings, beetles and butterflies - will do, including a cicada such as this. ▶





When adult carmine bee-eaters first arrive at their southern African breeding grounds, their plumage is at its best: the throat is resplendently pink and the tail feathers are attractively long. By the time courtship and breeding are over, the pink coloration has become dull and the plumage overall is showing signs of wear and tear. 