

RANGER SEAN'S BUSHVELD DIARIES

DAY 3

QUITE THE CATCH

There are few sightings more welcoming when on safari in Africa than technicoloured birds displaying and calling in flight.

The white-fronted bee-eater is beautifully green with a white and crimson throat. The white section is just below the beak and eyes, while the rump appears as a striking blue. These colours are sensationally noticeable when this marvellous little bird twists and turns in flight. There are various kinds of bee-eaters that one can find in southern Africa and my guests and I were lucky enough to witness one fly across the front of our game drive vehicle when driving back to the lodge.

This rather vocal bird turned from one way to another, putting on quite a show and making various 'creaking' noises sounding like 'qerrr'. We noticed they were actually looking for breakfast: insects.

The bee-eater swooped towards the ground from its branch in an effortless motion and, within the blink of an eye, it suddenly had something in its beak. The poor wasp never saw it coming, and the bee-eater was quickly back on its branch with a full beak.

But just as we thought the action had concluded, the bird began shaking its head vigorously from side to side. It was trying to remove the sting from the wasp it had caught by rubbing it against the branch. These clever little near passerine birds (in the family Meropidae) often retract their tongues, and remove the sting from the insect before swallowing it: a clever way to prevent harm and enjoy a meal.

Bee-eaters have a complex social organisation, often rejoicing after a successful catch. A family of these birds consists of one pair, male and female, and up to five helper birds. They form close bonds with other families and together they make a 'clan'. These clans fearlessly defend their feeding territory against other clans.



The white-fronted bee-eater is a common resident in Grassland and Savanna areas, and is usually found near rivers and wetlands. Their conservation status indicates that they are not threatened and their range has expanded along rivers and waterways where they were historically absent.

QUIZ

- 1) What colour is the white-fronted bee-eater's rump?
- 2) How do these birds remove stings from their prey before eating them?
- 3) How many helper birds are there in a bee-eater family?
- 4) What is a group of bee-eater families called?
- 5) Where are these birds most commonly found?