

RENDEZVOUS

WITH

AN

ARTIST



Rendezvous With An Artist

A fairy from a world beyond our own,
Blue tailed bee eater flies in to its hole,
Feathers immersed in shades so vibrant,
Soaking our soul with a touch of an artist.



River banks are frequently marauded by sand mafia, plundering the wealth of life supported by the ecosystem. It will not be long before these spectacular birds will vanish succumbing to the pressures of the city's ever growing greed to expand

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The greatest irony in Nature is, she is most simple, vibrant and elegant at the same time. This truth is for everyone to discover at a paradise carved out of mother Earth, where river Cauvery meanders at a pace as graceful as its colorful inhabitants in flight. This magical place is Naguvana-halli, a small village near the historic city of Mysore, located in the southern part of India within the state of Karnataka. Blessed with water from river Cauvery almost all through the year, the village is a visual treat, replete with scenes of emerald green paddy fields, dotted by coconut palm trees. Farming methods are as diverse as the culture in India. An early morning drive through this village, reminds one of those laid back villages with its steamy coffee shops where villagers have gathered with no greater purpose in life but to discuss some petty politics.

The life of a blue tailed bee eater is set to clockwork precision. It is every one's knowledge that a bird's life, like any other life forms, depend on seasons and the undulations in weather. Monsoon rain is the lifeline of peninsular India. But for the bee eaters of Naguvana-halli, its life is set to race against the rising levels of Cauvery following monsoon rains. This fascinating story of blue tailed bee eaters unfolds the shrouded mystery surrounding its life, shrouded by its often described dietary habits and an electric blue tail.

Before we move on to illustrate the drama of blue tailed bee eaters we may pause to learn some trivia concerning our protagonist. Bee eaters belong to the Meropidae family and are typically characterized by their brilliant colored plumage, a body built to be dexterous in flight and most of them sport an elongated central tail feather. There are an estimated 26 species of bee eaters. They are spread across Asia, Africa and some are found in Australia and Europe too. Blue tailed bee eaters (*Merops philippinus* Linnaeus) are found patchily in the Indian subcontinent. Little may be known about their migratory behavior although they are believed to migrate locally from North to South during winter. They breed during the summer months between March and May and their eggs are white in color, supposedly numbering between 5 and 7. A black stripe through its eyes resembling the mask of Zorro, deep chestnut throat, blue rump and a tail might summarize our first impression of this amazing bird.

Greed and luxury surrounds every element of human ambition. A stark contrast to this behavior is evident in every other form of life. Mahatma Gandhi once told that nature has everything in it for every one's need but not for every one's greed. After being with these birds for a while, one might seriously like to redefine intelligence by a life form's ability to live sustainably in its environment than its ability to engineer and destroy its environment. Our point of view in redefining intelligence might be bold but is not new to the present world. We will see evidences of superior intelligence among these colorful birds as we read on.

A functional nest, dug out of a mound of sand or tunneled in to Cauvery river's bank is all it takes to kick start a life filled with action. Males are usually active in excavating the nest and if opportunity presents itself, older tunnels might be reused. The bird pivots itself on its beak and uses both its legs alternately to excavate the tunnel kicking up dust in the air. Tunnels can be almost 5 feet in length. These tunnels have a fantastic ability to keep its inhabitants safe from the environment and predators, if only they are carved out of the river bank and is inclined inwards; most tunnels dug on a plain sand surface might be vulnerable. Both male and female birds tend to their nest with a devotion unparalleled in any society. If we are to go by Darwinian principles, all this is done with a strong purpose to pass on its genes to the next generation.

Courtship, is an elaborate behavior of dexterity in flight, display of its magnificent feathers, chivalry and of course love. If there is one rule in the world of blue tailed bee eaters, when it comes to courtship, females rule the roost. Males try hard to impress on the equally fairer sex by gifting colorful dragonflies. Dragonflies of every size, color and hue make it to the breakfast, lunch and dinner table. A pre-monsoon shower assures a bountiful supply of who is who in the insect world to choose from. The female rewards only the most perseverant, handsome and creative hunter with an opportunity to pair up with her. And mating is a delicate, balancing act.

Territory among our colored winged friends vary with the context of the intruder. Like any other biped they have a minimum distance beyond which they can't be stalked by bipeds of our kind! Well, what is more interesting is the cautious way by which a lost territory is reclaimed by these birds particularly at a nesting hole. A sentry takes up position for a while keeping a watch on the intruder. Thankfully, this sentry has no more ammunition than a vociferous call, otherwise the intruder's only choice is to scurry for a cover. Then, the gracious fly pasts begin one after the other by the bombers with no bombs to drop. Any visual distraction is not taken lightly and the whole mission is aborted and repeated until visual distractions are cleared. A stone moved out of its place or a mound ever so small created out of no where is enough of a distraction. Well, all cleared, more sentinels join in along the periphery of the nesting holes. A little later, visits to the nest resume. So much for their co-operative behavior and their common concern to guard their homes. If the intruder is another male of its kind, then it's a different ball game in itself. Brandishing its beak like a sword, the Zorros fight is brief and ferocious and the aerial display is worth a lesson for pilots guarding our air-space. There is a darker side to our character too. Rowdy-ish behavior is most commonly exhibited towards the smaller green bee eaters by preventing them to roost or even enter its nesting hole. Sometimes, rival males among the same clan also get the same treatment. Times when a white throated king fisher is nesting in the vicinity of blue tailed bee eaters nest, the peck order is for all to see; the king fisher scares the hell out of our character.

If there is one behavior in these bee eaters, that is sure to rise our eyebrows, it is the dexterity exhibited by them in flight. There is no one association possible to blue tailed bee eaters like these list of similes: flying like a bullet, gliding like an eagle or hovering like a humming bird. Our friends can perform all these and much more. They can snatch a bee in flight even if it means a somersault at high speeds, yet be graceful in action, unlike the ugly metallic birds we humans create. As for as their hygiene is concerned, they mercilessly whack the bee to get rid of its sting and squeeze the venom from it, before the bee is swallowed head first, sometimes after playfully tossing it in air.

How grossly unjust might it be to tag a bird's name with its dietary habits and its colored tail, having read about its multifaceted outlook? If one puts all these behavioral aspects of blue tailed bee eaters on a timeline that's bound to convey a message at the least...A few months of winter and the summer months before the march of monsoon, the drama should come to a cheerful close. Otherwise, the nests is sure to meet its watery grave. As though these pressures due to several natural phenomenon were not sufficient to contend with, our colorful protagonists have to stand up to the menace of the sand mining mafia, albeit unsuccessfully. Our greed to paint our earth black with asphalted roads, grow buildings as far as they can feel the outer space in as much numbers as we can, leaves little hope for these birds of a paradise we know as Naguvana-halli. Thankfully, this paradise is still out of reach of the ugly tentacles of the sand mafia and is rightfully protected by some villagers like Prakash and a host of nature lovers.



Detoxifying the bee by whacking it on a twig



The male combat—it's like two look alike are fencing for a territory



The courtship display and Courtship feeding by a male



The ritual of mating is a delicate balancing act



An adult bee-eater leaps to catch a butterfly:
River banks are a veritable source of butterflies and dragonflies. If an adult bee-eater consumes, on an average 50 insects in a day, a colony of 100 might devour a whopping 5000 insects. Needless to say that the ecosystem should be special enough to support such a voracious eating habit.



Eager young bee-eater waiting to be fed by its parent



Bee-eaters relentless feed their young ones all through the day



A responsible parent enticing its young one to accept the price catch away from the comfort of its nest



Baby's day out—fraught with fear and trepidation, the baby explores its new world

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