

NOTEBOOK

A Blue-throated Bee-eater *Merops viridis* preys on a bat

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On 12 June 2017 we visited a narrow riparian forest strip bordering the Segama River in the Sabahmas oil palm plantation, Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysian Borneo (5.174°N 118.387°E). This 30 m-wide strip consists of naturally regenerating trees and some unmanaged oil palms.

At about 16h30 our attention was drawn to an unidentified bird scolding in a tangle of dead fronds hanging from the crown of an oil palm near the edge of the riparian strip. The unseen bird flushed a medium-sized bat (estimated wingspan 250 mm) from beneath the dead leaves; the bat then flew out of the oil palm and towards the edge of the dirt road bisecting the riparian strip and a mature managed plantation. Suddenly, a Blue-throated Bee-eater *Merops viridis* swooped out of the riparian trees and, with a loud ‘clap’, caught the bat. The bee-eater flew off, powerfully looping back into the trees, with the bat—wings still flapping—in its bill.

Despite searching for about 15 minutes, we never managed to relocate the bee-eater and thus do not know whether it managed to consume its prey. To our knowledge, this is the first such observation in Asia and only the second observation globally of a bee-eater catching a mammal. In 2015 a European Bee-eater *M. apiaster* was caught on camera on the Judean plains, Nahala, Israel, killing and then attempting to eat a bat, possibly a Kuhl’s Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii*, but the bee-eater eventually flew off with its prey (Sarchet 2015) and whether it managed to consume the bat remains unknown.

Some bee-eater species are known to infrequently catch and consume other vertebrate taxa. Small bones have been found in the pellets of Blue-throated Bee-eater, perhaps from small lizards, whilst they are thought to catch small fish when they splash-dive into water (Fry & Boesman 2017a). The Blue-tailed Bee-eater *M. philippinus* is also known to occasionally take small fish (Fry & Boesman 2017b). A pair of Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis amictus* were recorded taking Common Gliding Lizards *Draco sumatranus* to

their nest on six occasions in Panti Forest Reserve, Johor, Peninsular Malaysia (Foley & Yong 2011). In Africa the White-throated Bee-eater *M. albicollis* occasionally takes small lizards (Fry & Boesman 2017c) and Blue-breasted Bee-eater *M. variegatus* exceptionally plunge-dives into shallows to catch small fish (Fry *et al.* 2017).

Our observation adds to the growing body of evidence that bee-eaters will capture vertebrate prey should the opportunity present itself. It is thus plausible that other species of Asian bee-eater may be found opportunistically taking vertebrate prey although, in the case of bats, their normally nocturnal habits will presumably mean that predation by bee-eaters will remain a very rare event.

References

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