

MEROPS ORNATUS, *Lath.*

Australian Bee-eater.

Merops ornatus, Lath. Ind. Orn., Supp. p. xxxv.

Mountain Bee-eater, Lewin, Birds of New Holl., pl. 18.

Variegated Bee-eater, Lath. Gen. Syn., Supp., vol. ii. p. 155, pl. 128.—Ib. Gen. Hist., vol. iv. p. 130, pl. lxix.—Shaw, Gen. Zool., vol. viii. p. 158.

Merops melanurus, Vig. and Horsf. in Linn. Trans., vol. xv. p. 208.—Less. Traité d'Orn., p. 238.

Dee-weed-gang, Aborigines of New South Wales.

Bée-roo-bée-roo-long, Aborigines of the lowland, and

Ber-rin-ber-rin, Aborigines of the mountain districts of Western Australia.

Bee-eater of the Colonists.

THERE can, I think, be little doubt of the present being the only species of Bee eater inhabiting Australia, since no other came under my notice during my expedition; nor have I seen examples differing from those here figured in any of the numerous collections I have had opportunities of examining, consequently the specific term of *ornatus* long since applied to it by Dr. Latham must be the one adopted, that of *melanurus* given by Messrs. Vigors and Horsfield sinking into a synonym.

This bird has so many attractions that it will doubtless be always regarded as a general favourite with the Australians; the extreme beauty of its plumage, the elegance of its form and the graceful manner of its flight all combining to render it especially worthy of their notice; besides which, many pleasing associations are connected with it, for, like the Swallow and the Cuckoo of Europe, its arrival is a certain harbinger of the return of spring, which in the southern hemisphere is, as is well known, at the opposite period of the year to that of the northern; hence the Australian Bee-eater, which is strictly migratory, arrives in New South Wales and all parts of the same latitude in August, and departs northwards in March, the intervening period being employed in the duties of incubation and of rearing its progeny. During the summer months it is universally spread over the whole southern portion of the continent from east to west; and it will be interesting to ornithologists generally, as it was to myself, to know that at Port Essington on the northern coast it is also strictly migratory, being abundantly dispersed over that part of the country when it is absent from the southern. “On my arrival at Port Essington in July,” says Mr. Gilbert, “this bird was extremely abundant in every variety of situation. It is a migratory bird in this part of Australia; a few pairs perhaps remaining to breed, as is evident from the natives being well acquainted with their mode of incubating, and also from my having in one instance seen a pair of old birds with their young, which could not long have left the nest as they were still being fed by their parents. With the exception of these I did not observe this species in any part of the Peninsula or the adjacent islands, from the latter part of August to the time of my leaving in the following March.”

I have never seen this bird either in collections from New Guinea or from any other of the Indian islands; hence we may naturally conclude that the extreme northern parts of Australia form the boundary of its range in that direction, as New South Wales and the same degree of latitude do on the southern. In South Australia and at Swan River it is equally numerous as in New South Wales, generally giving preference to the inland districts rather than to those near the coast; hence it is rarely to be met with in the neighbourhood of Perth, while in the York district it is very common. In New South Wales I found it especially abundant on the Upper Hunter, and all other parts towards the interior, as far as I had an opportunity of exploring. Its favourite resorts during the day are the open, arid and thinly timbered forests; and in the evening the banks and sides of rivers, where numbers may frequently be seen in company. It almost invariably selects a dead or leafless branch whereon to perch, and from which it darts forth to capture the passing insect, much after the manner of many other of the Fissirostral birds, particularly the Kingfishers, to which it also assimilates in the upright position it assumes while perched. Its flight somewhat resembles that of the *Artami*, and although it is capable of being sustained for some time, the bird more frequently performs short excursions, and returns to the branch it had left.

I have had frequent opportunities of observing both the eggs and young, which are deposited and reared in holes, made in the sandy banks of rivers or any similar situation in the forest favourable for the purpose. The entrance is about the size of a mouse-hole, and is continued for a yard in depth, at the end of which is an excavation of sufficient size for the reception of the parent, and the deposition on the bare sand of four or five beautiful white eggs, which are ten lines long by eight or nine lines broad.

The stomach is tolerably muscular, and the food consists of various insects, principally coleoptera and neuroptera.

The sexes are alike in plumage, and may be thus described:—

Forehead, line over the eye, back and wing-coverts brownish-green; crown of the head and nape orange-brown; wings orange-brown, passing into green on the extremities of the primaries, and broadly tipped with black; two or three of the scapularies, lower part of the back, rump and upper tail-coverts cœrulean blue; tail black, most of the feathers, particularly the two centre ones, slightly margined with blue; lores, line beneath and behind the eye and ear-coverts velvety-black; beneath which is a stripe of cœrulean blue; throat rich yellow, passing into orange on the sides of the neck; beneath this a broad band of deep black; under surface like the back, becoming green on the lower part of the abdomen; under tail-coverts light blue; irides light brownish-red; bill black; legs and feet mealy greenish-grey.

The young are destitute of the black on the throat, and of the blue line beneath the eye.

The figures are of the natural size.