MEROPS APIASTER, *Linn.*

Bee-eater.

Merops apiaster, Linn. Mus. Ad. Fr., tom. ii. p. 21.
——— *chrysocephalus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 463.
——— *schæghagha*, Forsk. Faun. Arab., 1.
——— *hungariæ*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 146, tab. xi. fig. 1.

The members of the family *Meropidæ* or Bee-eaters, so widely distributed over the Old World, are remarkable for the elegance of their forms and the gaiety of their colouring. Those constituting the restricted genus *Merops* are seven in number; of these, two, *M. apiaster* and *M. Ægyptius*, inhabit Europe and Egypt, and extend their range westward to Affghanistan; *M. philippensis* frequents the whole of India, Southern China, Formosa, Flores, and Timor; and *M. viridis* is common in Burmah and Siam; *M. bicolor* is peculiar to the Malayan provinces; *M. quinticolor* is a native of the Indo-Chinese countries, Southern India, and Ceylon, and *M. ornatus* of Australia and the Papuan Islands.

Many of these beautiful birds are migratory, or at least change their locale according to the seasons; the species here represented passes the greater portion of its life in the light ethereal air of subtropical regions, and the azure-blue skies of Greece, Italy, and Spain are far more congenial to its habits and economy than the cold blasts of more northern countries; its occurrence in the British Islands, however, has been sufficiently frequent to entitle it to a place in our avifauna. During the last century nearly fifty have been recorded as having been shot in England, and one or two in Ireland. The following are the instances enumerated by the late Mr. Yarrell:—One at Kingsgate, in the Isle of Thanet; another at Goldalming, in Surrey; a third at Christchurch, in Hampshire; a fourth at Chidcock, in Dorsetshire; three in Devonshire; four in the parish of Madern, in Cornwall; a flock of twelve near Helston, in the same county, of which eleven were killed; four or five in Suffolk and Norfolk; and a few others, the localities of which are not mentioned. Since the completion of Mr. Yarrell's work, others have from time to time made their appearance; these, like their predecessors, must have been driven out of their regular route of migration, and alighted in England, the first land they came to. One of its most recent occurrences is recorded in the 'Zoologist' for June 1866. Mr. George Harding, junior, there states that four specimens were shot near Bristol during the first week of the preceding month, and remarks that when first observed "they were hawking for bees round a number of fruit-trees in blossom, and in the neighbourhood of a number of beehives; at one moment soaring in circles at a great height, and at the next darting with velocity after their prey, which was often apparently some of the largest species of Bombus; when one of these was caught, it was carried for half a minute or more at the point of the bill, and then, with a sudden and peculiar turn of the head and neck, swallowed entire. At other times the birds sat upon the dead branches of a large elm and of a cherry-tree, whence they made short excursions after bees flying past or gathering round the fruit-flowers, sometimes returning to the same perch, like the flycatcher, but more often circling round for a short time before settling. The bees appeared to be always swallowed while the birds were on the wing."

So much information respecting the habits and economy of this bird has been recorded by the Rev. Mr. Tristram, Mr. Stafford S. Allen, and others, in 'The Ibis,' that it is but fair to those accurate observers to give a transcript of it in their own words.

"The Bee-eater," says Mr. Tristram, in his account of the Ornithology of Palestine, "appeared simultaneously in large flocks, and remained more or less gregarious throughout the summer in every part of the country. It does not frequently perch, but remains for hours on the wing, skimming, swallow-like, up and down a nullah or wady, or systematically ranging and quartering a barley-plain in pursuit of insects on the wing. Seen athwart the sunbeams as they passed overhead, their colour has the appearance of burnished copper. They feed as well as breed in colonies, preferring low banks to the steeper declivities, and seeming to rely for protection against lizards and other enemies on the structure and turnings of their dwellings rather than on their position. I have taken the eggs from a nest in the side of a low sand mound on the plain, out of which I startled the bird by riding over its hole.

"It does not, so far as I can ascertain, utilize the borings of the previous year; whether from the number of parasitic insects it leaves behind, or from the fact that the lizards generally squat in the vacant dwellings, I cannot say. It has been stated that it lines its nest with the elytra and legs of beetles. This I conceive to be mistake. When the eggs are first laid, there are no insect-remains to be found; but as the female continues to sit, the *débris* of her meals becomes heaped around her,

Walter, Imp.