

Common Name/*Scientific name*:

**Rainbow Bee-eater/ *Merops ornatus***

The Rainbow Bee-eater is a spectacular bird. With its green, blue, chestnut and yellow plumage, its slim build, slender curved bill and distinctive streamers that extend from the end of its tail, it is simply beautiful. Bee-eaters are a familiar sight in many lightly-timbered parts of mainland Australia, where they often perch on fence-posts or overhead wires, then launch after flying insects, flying swiftly, sometimes with rapid twists and turns, before snapping the insect in its bill, and returning to the perch to eat it.



Rainbow Bee-eater

Mary Hynes

**Description:** A striking, colourful bird, the Rainbow Bee-eater is medium sized, with a long slim curved bill and a long tail with distinctive tail-streamers. It has a golden crown and a red eye set in a wide black stripe from the base of the bill to the ears, which is edged with a thin blue line. The throat is orange-yellow, with a broad black band separating it from a green breast. The upperparts are green, with the flight feathers coppery and black tipped. The underwings are bright orange, with a black edge. The lower abdomen is blue. The tail is black, including the long tail streamers, with a blue tinge. Females have shorter, thicker tail streamers than males, but are otherwise similar. Young birds are duller and greener, lacking the black band on the chest and the long tail streamers.

**Where seen in the gardens:** The Rainbow Bee-eater is most often found in open forests, woodlands and shrublands, and cleared areas, usually near water, across Australia except in the most arid areas. In the gardens often seen in lighter forested areas away from the major creeks. Seen most of the year except perhaps mid-winter. We may be seeing less of them in future, as research since 2001 has shown a decline in numbers of over 50% in eastern Australia's coastal areas.

**Feeding & Behaviour in the gardens:** Rainbow Bee-eaters eat insects, mainly catching bees and wasps, as well as dragonflies, beetles, butterflies and moths. They catch flying insects on the wing and carry them back to a perch to beat them against it before swallowing them. Bees and wasps are rubbed against the perch to remove the stings and venom glands.

**Nesting:** Rainbow Bee-eaters gather in small flocks before returning to summer breeding areas after over-wintering in the north (apart from the resident northern populations). Both males and females select a suitable nesting site in a sandy bank and dig a long tunnel (average length: 89.4 cm) leading to a nesting chamber, which is often lined with grasses. Both parents incubate the eggs and both feed the young, sometimes with the assistance of auxiliaries (helpers).

**Similar Species in the gardens:** The Rainbow Bee-eater may resemble some kingfishers; however the kingfishers are plumper, with strong straight beaks, and never catch prey in flight.