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Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*: first record for Kenya

On 21 May 2000, while birding around the extensive pools of the Sand Quarry in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest near the Gede forest station mid-morning with Tansy Bliss, she suddenly noticed a small bird sail out from the top of a tree and return to it with an insect. As it perched on an exposed branch we found ourselves looking at the back of a largely green bee-eater with a striking long blue and very deeply forked tail with extensive white tips. It was a species I was not familiar with so we therefore took detailed field notes of it. We watched it for about four minutes including seeing it fly from the first perch to another one lower down and set against the darker background of dense foliage. It still had its back turned to us but it moved enough to briefly show a narrow, darkish breast band below a bright yellow throat and the broad, black eye-stripe looking like a mask. It was quite vocal, giving a typical bee-eater high-pitched trilling call though not particularly loudly. It stayed long enough for us to watch it for a total of 3 to 4 minutes after which it took off and flew up and away over the trees to the east, still calling. In spite of trying to follow it, the bird was not seen or heard again.

When we reached home and consulted the literature, it was very easily identified by the long blue, forked tail as a Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*. I immediately informed John Fanshawe before heading back up to the swamp armed with camera and 500 mm lens. I spent a further two hours around the same area and

towards where the bird had been seen to fly but was unable to relocate it. JF also visited the area and watched for an hour but also without luck. The bird was not reported again by any other visitor during the following week and must have simply moved on.

Discussion

Identification of this species is thankfully not very difficult, the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater being the only bee-eater in the world with the long, blue, deeply-forked tail. Indeed, this field character serves "...to distinguish this species from all other bee-eaters and indeed from all other birds" (Fry *et al.* 1992).

M. hirundineus is recognized as comprising of four sub-species. *M.h. chrysolaimus* in West Africa and *M.h. heuglini* in Sudan, Ethiopia, DR Congo and Uganda both have green tails—the Arabuko-Sokoke bird had a clearly had a blue tail and thus could not have been either of these. The bird was not seen well enough to note the detail of further racial features on the forehead and throat but from a distribution of the races one is far more likely than the others. *M.h. hirundineus* is found in central and western southern Africa and so is much less likely than *M.h. furcatus* which occurs further east and north into the southern half of Tanzania up to around 5°S with only 2–3 records just north of this.

The species is known to be somewhat migratory though its movements are as yet poorly understood. This bird was an adult, immatures lacking the yellow throat, and is likely to have moved up the coastline from south of Dar es Salaam ending up in some favourable habitat in Arabuko-Sokoke.

The species is said to have been recorded in Vanga on the southern Kenya coast (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989); however, the record(s) was unverified and the species removed from the Kenya list. This being the case, the bird seen in Arabuko-Sokoke and described here is the first record for Kenya.

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Remarks concerning the East African coastal form of the Tropical Boubou *Laniarius aethiopicus sublacteus* (Cassin 1851), and its supposed black morph

The Tropical Boubou *Laniarius aethiopicus* is a common and widespread black-and-white bushshrike of forests, woodlands and thickets throughout much of East Africa. The coastal form *sublacteus*, treated recently as a race of this species, was described by John Cassin in 1851 as *Dryoscopus sublacteus*. The type was part of the Massena (Rivoli) Collection of African birds acquired for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1846. Cassin gave "Eastern Africa" as the type locality, though