

First record of Ethiopian Bee-eater *Merops lafresnayii* for Somaliland

On 9 December 2021, while surveying the dry Geed Deeble riverbed/wadi (09°46'09"N, 44°00'56"E), Somaliland, on foot, a single bee-eater was spotted in riverside vegetation (Fig. 1). The bird was green above with a yellow throat, and had a distinct blue supercilium and forehead, distinctly blue (and black) gorget, and a chestnut breast, all features that distinguish it from the Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*. The blue gorget was clearly visible when viewed from the front rather than the side. Based on the relative size compared to the *Prosopis* leaflets (on the photo), its total length is estimated to be about 18 to 21 cm. It appeared to lack a distinct white wedge on the cheeks but otherwise closely matched the features of the Blue-breasted Bee-eater *Merops (variegatus) lafresnayii* as described by Redman *et al.* (2011). This taxon has recently been elevated to full species status by the international ornithological community as the Ethiopian Bee-eater *Merops lafresnayii* (Gill *et al.* 2021)



Figure 1. Ethiopian Bee-eater at the Geed Deeble Wadi, 9 December 2021 (photo: W. Giesen).

The Ethiopian Bee-eater *Merops (variegatus) lafresnayii* is considered a near-endemic species, largely confined to Ethiopia and Eritrea, but also occurring very marginally in South Sudan, and is common in a wide range of wooded habitats from 500 to 2500 masl (Redman *et al.* 2011). The species has a large range, with a substantial and stable population and hence is listed as 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International DataZone 2021). It occurs mainly in highland areas and is considered to be largely sedentary. There are rather few records east of 40° E in Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009).

The bird was perched in a grove of the invasive shrub *Prosopis juliflora* lining the low banks of the dry wadi, which is further characterized by *Balanites glabra*, *Maerua crassifolia*, *Vachellia (Acacia) tortilis* and *Zizyphus mucronata*, often festooned with the climber *Cissus rotundifolia*. The location is about 20 km north of Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, at an altitude of 1090 m. This is slightly lower than the altitude of nearby Hargeisa (1350 m), which receives around 400 mm of rainfall a year. Rainfall amount at the Geed Deeble Wadi is likely to be slightly lower.

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Extensive livestock grazing and browsing is the main type of land-use in this area and there are many pastoralist families herding goats, sheep, dromedary camels and donkeys. Market gardening occurs on a limited scale near local borehole sites where several large, fenced-off areas have been developed for the cultivation of cash crops such as watermelon, onion, mango and lemon. These are all irrigated by pumped groundwater and located at least several kilometres from the site where the bird was observed.

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