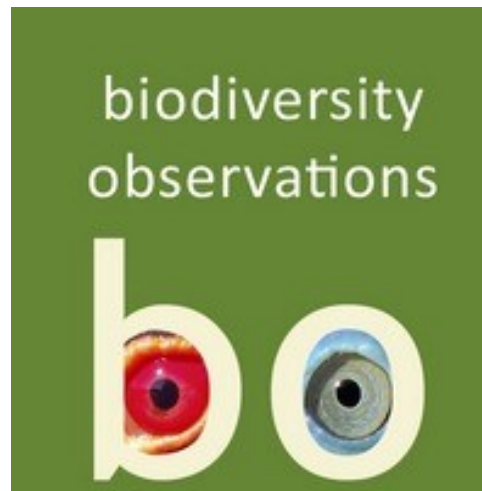


White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullockoides* increasing its presence along the Orange River in southern Namibia

Peter L Cunningham (Snr) & Peter L Cunningham (Jnr)



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White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullockoides* increasing its presence along the Orange River in southern Namibia

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Abstract

The White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullockoides* is common in northeastern Namibia, in the Caprivi Strip. This paper reports the first records for southern Namibia, along the Orange River. The first record was made in 2010, in southeastern Namibia. By 2023, they were observed in small groups on seven out of 12 days on a canoe trip downstream of the 2010 sighting, as far west as Senderlingsdrift.

Observation

Hockey et al. (2005) described the distribution of the White-fronted Bee-eater *Merops bullockoides* from Namibia as “In Namibia, restricted to far north; common in Caprivi”. Although viewed as common in the Lowveld Woodland areas of the North West, Limpopo, Mpuma-

langa and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces in South Africa (Barnes 1997), isolated populations had been recorded since the 1960s along the Vaal, Modder Riet and Vet Rivers in the Free State and Northern Cape Provinces (Craig & Burman 1974). There are no published records of White-fronted Bee-eater along the lower Orange River; for example, it was not recorded in the annotated bird lists for the Noordoewer area (Simmons & Allan 2002) nor for the Orange River mouth (Anderson 2006).

On 4 September 2010, while surveying for a proposed development (Cunningham 2010), we observed White-fronted Bee-eaters along the Orange River for the first time; we were on the farm Komsberg, close to where the Orange River enters Namibia. The bee-eaters were observed hawking aerial arthropods from *Phragmites australis* reeds (Figure 1). G Louw (pers. comm.) informed us that they had been in



Figure 1: White-fronted Bee-eaters perched on *Phragmites australis* and first observed on 4 September 2010 at 17h31 in the Komsberg area, Orange River. Photograph: the authors.

the area since 2008 and had even been observed breeding in sand banks in the area. This sighting in southeastern Namibia was the first record in the south of the country (Thomson 2010).

This record was followed, in December 2023, by observations of White-fronted Bee-eaters, usually in small groups of between two to five birds, on seven of 12 days during a canoe trip, between Komsberg and the area downstream of Sendelingsdrift (Figure 2). These records are downstream of the 2010 records. During this canoe trip, White-fronted Bee-eaters were not common anywhere, and when ob-

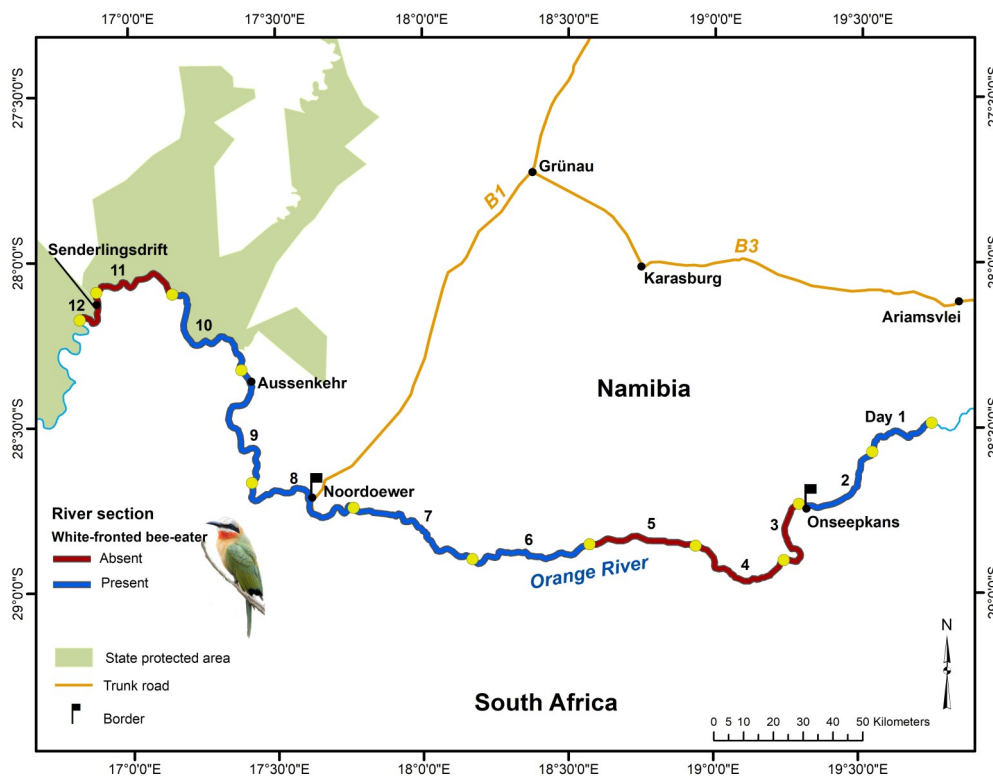


Figure 2. Sections along the Orange River covered each day during a 12-day canoe trip between 12 and 23 December 2023. White-fronted bee-eaters were observed on days 1 and 2 and days 6 to 10 (blue shading) and not on days with red shading.

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served were in small groups of one to five birds, usually observed perched on branches overhanging the Orange River and hawking aerial arthropods along the riparian zone. Most often they were first heard and then spotted because they favoured shaded areas.

During SABAP1, which completed fieldwork in 1992, the nearest White-fronted Bee-eater records to Namibia were c. 300 km distant (Barnes 1997); however, the species had already been expanding its range westwards through the Free State and adjacent Northern Cape along the major rivers and irrigation schemes on the rivers since the 1970s (Craig & Burman 1974, Earlé & Grobler 1987, Barnes 1997). The distribution map for the White-fronted Bee-eater from the Second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) (Lee et al. 2022) demonstrates that this westward expansion has continued; by early 2024, it had been recorded along the Orange River, with a patchy distribution of records to a point to the east of Sendelingsdrift. (Figure 3).

These observations, together with our confirmed sightings (2010 and 2023), indicate that White-fronted Bee-eaters have extended their range westwards along the section of the Orange River which is the border between Namibia and South Africa since 2010. It is probably only a matter of time before they reach the Oranjemund coastal area, especially because there is suitable breeding habitat in the area; for example, Brown-throated Martins *Riparia paludicola* breed in the Oranjemund area (Anderson 2006). This westward movement along rivers has been documented since the mid-1970s (Craig & Burman 1974) and is likely have been assisted by human activities (e.g., earthworks, sand quarries, erosion gullies) (Barnes 1997).

In parallel with this westwards range expansion along the Orange River, White-fronted Bee-eaters are also expanding their range westwards along the coastal plain of the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces (Edwards & Binley 2024). The observation which prompted that paper was made along the Brede River, in a similar environment to those on the Orange River.

Although we ourselves did not confirm breeding during December 2023 or in the Komsberg area during 2010 (although breeding there

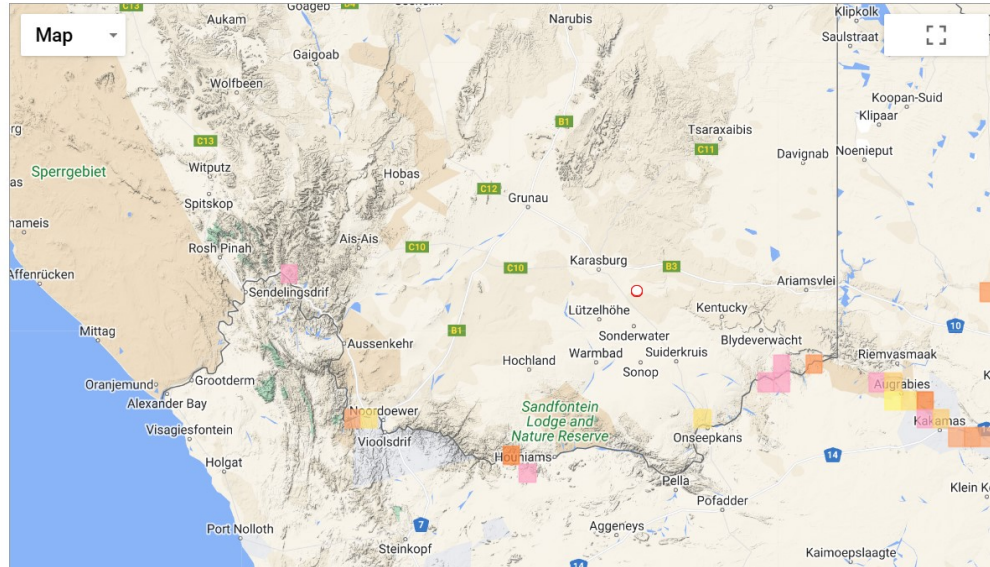
Species summary: Bee-eater, White-fronted (*Merops bullockoides*)

Figure 3. Distribution summary map from the Second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) for the White-fronted Bee-eater. Downloaded 28 February 2024.

was reported: by G Louw (pers. comm.), suitable sandbank habitat with nest openings (potentially belonging to various species) were observed along numerous sections of the Orange River (Figure 4). It is probable indicating that breeding does occur

The impact that a new avian predator may have on the arthropod assemblages along the lower Orange River is unknown but an interesting ecological question. Similarly, there is a potential impact on other sandbank-nesting bird species.

Acknowledgement

Our appreciation goes to Tony Robertson (Jaro Consulting, Namibia) for the map (Figure 2).



Figure 4. Suitable breeding habitat with cavities, although not confirmed as white-fronted bee-eater nesting sites, observed along the Orange River. Photograph: the authors.

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