

Notes

European Bee-eaters using artificial nest sites in Italy

The European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* is a widespread breeding bird throughout much of Italy, although more localised in Sicily, with an estimated population of 7,000–13,000 pairs (Brichetti & Fracasso 2007). The species' range has expanded during the twentieth century, particularly since the mid 1980s, mainly in the central Po Valley, but also in the southern regions and in Sicily (Fraissinet & Mastronardi 1997).

This note describes Bee-eaters using an artificial nest site, which was established in May 2013 in a complex of newly built terraced houses (of which only one was inhabited), on the outskirts of Cadignano, a small rural village near Verolanuova, in a lowland area of Brescia, in northern Italy. The houses are bordered on two sides by arable fields, separated by lines of trees. The wall used for nesting is a concrete retaining wall, which forms the boundary on three sides of a small yard, in front of the entrance to a row of garages. The wall is about 30 cm thick, 2.85 m high (although on one side 2.30 m of the wall is below ground level) and 61 m long, most of it facing south. During construction, 16 holes were built into the wall for water drainage. The entrance holes are 9–10 cm in diameter and sited 1.30 m above ground and 4 m apart; coated inside with a plastic tube, the entrance is a rather irregular spherical shape (fig. 1, plate 132).

During May–August 2013, the site was visited seven times. On the first visit, on 15th May, there were 24 adults in the vicinity of the holes, either feeding nearby or resting on suitable perches. Visits on 17th and 23rd May confirmed the presence of roughly the same number of adults, which were attending ten of the holes. Unfortunately, on subsequent visits, nine of

the holes were blocked by local residents and one was unusable by Bee-eaters because the entrance was too small. On 6th June, a total of ten adults were present, while on 5th July four pairs were attending nest holes regularly. On 30th July, successful nesting in these four burrows was confirmed by the presence of insect remains and earthy material below the nest entrance and/or adults entering burrows with food. On this visit, 11 fledged young were counted. On 28th August the colony had been abandoned, and the depth of the nest holes of the four successful burrows were 70, 80, 125 and 140 cm (these figures include 30 cm of the concrete hole). In the two remaining holes, the total burrow depth was only 40 cm, indicating that nests had



Pierandrea Brichetti

132. A group of adult European Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* resting on a wire mesh fence above the concrete retaining wall described in this note, and with entrance holes visible; Cadignano di Verolanuova, Brescia, Italy, May 2013.

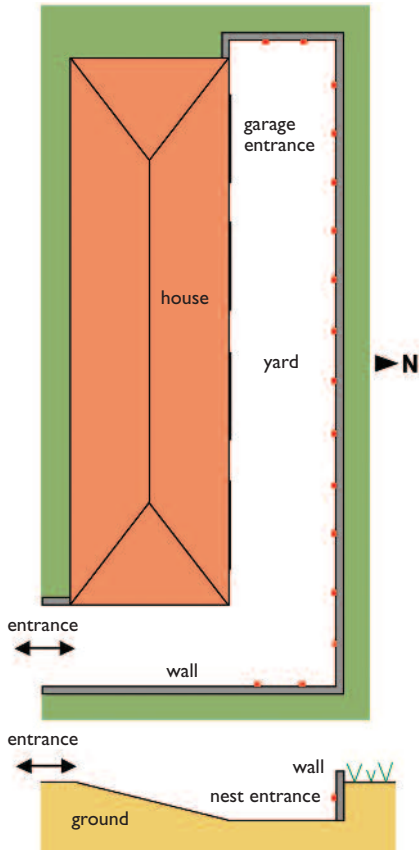


Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of the nesting area.

Pierandrea Brichetti, Via Vittorio Veneto 30, 25029 Verolavecchia (BS), Italy;
e-mail pbrichetti@alice.it

been started but not completed.

I am not aware that the use of artificial nest sites by Bee-eaters in this way has previously been reported in Europe (see Fry 1984, Cramp 1985, del Hoyo *et al.* 2001). Choosing such an artificial site could be related to a significant increase in the local breeding population and/or the availability of natural nesting sites. In the longer term, if such sites continue to be used by Bee-eaters, it will be interesting to see whether their reproductive success is higher within them, since the holes are less accessible to predators such as rats and snakes.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Eugenio Zanotti for information and Laura Bricchi for help with my English.

References

Brichetti, P., & Fracasso, G. 2007. *Ornitologia Italiana* 4. Alberto Perdisa Editore, Bologna.
 Cramp, S. (ed.) 1985. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. 4. OUP, Oxford.
 del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A., & Sargatal, J. (eds.) 2001. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol. 6. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
 Fraissinet, M., & Mastronardi, D. 1997. Evoluzione dell'areale del Gruccione, *Merops apiaster*, in Italia nel corso del ventesimo secolo. *Riv. Ital. Orn.* 66: 155–169.
 Fry, C. H. 1984. *The Bee-eaters*. Poyser, London.

Reed Warbler singing from mist-net

At 06.45 hrs on 17th May 2014, I saw a small bird (which subsequently proved to be a Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) fly into a mist-net set in my garden. As I went to retrieve the bird, I realised that it was singing from the mist-net. I noticed the song when about 5 m from the net, and the bird continued to sing until I arrived at the net to extract it. The nearest breeding site (and suitable breeding habitat) for Reed Warblers is probably the RSPB Conwy reserve, about 8 km from my garden, and it seems most likely that the bird was still on migration.

Spencer (1971) also reported a Reed

Warbler singing from a mist-net, although on that occasion the netted bird was close to a reedbed and, presumably, its territory. As Bob Spencer noted, it is not uncommon for ringers to record birds singing in the hand or in a bird-bag, which is generally considered to be a form of displacement activity. However, song from a bird in a mist-net appears to be much less commonly recorded, certainly away from a breeding site.

Reference

Spencer, R. 1971. Reed Warbler singing in mist-net. *Brit. Birds* 64: 34–35.

Stuart Thomas, Dursley, 9A Whitehall Road, Rhos-on-Sea, Colwyn Bay, Conwy LL28 4HW