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The Magnificent Bee-eaters

A short story with photographs featuring two overland journeys, in 1968, from Ibadan to the new Kainji Hydro-electric Dam area in western Nigeria. These visits were just before and soon after the closing of the new Kainji Dam followed by the creation of Kainji Lake on the River Niger. Photos include images of the final breeding season of the northern carmine bee-eater on Foge Island. Then there is the very first live exhibit of this species at London Zoo...

by Bob Golding

Bee-eaters are some of the most beautiful birds on the planet and have been described as the supermodels of the bird world. There are around 27 species of bee-eater, most of them found in Africa and Asia with a few also in Europe, Australia and New Guinea. They are known for their richly coloured plumage with colours that catch the human eye as they flutter and glide around, sometimes in very large colonies. Some species are so wondrously multi-coloured, with hues and patterns so difficult to describe successfully using mere words, they deserve simply to be gazed at and savoured as feasts for the eye. There are red-throated bee-eaters, white-fronted, purple-bearded, swallow-tailed bee-eaters; and of course there are carmine bee-eaters. Following are a few random photographs of different species that may help to demonstrate the striking colours of these birds as a group.

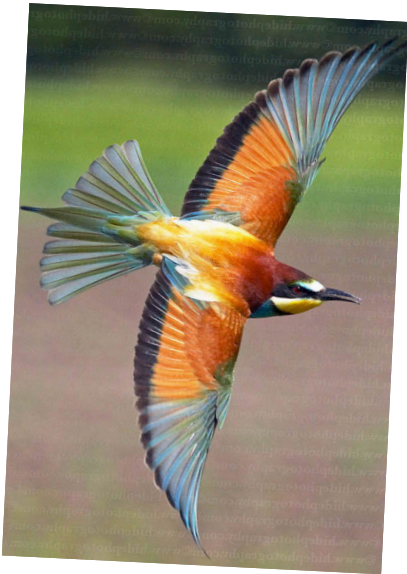


Little bee-eaters (*Merops pusillus*)



Bohm's Bee-eater (*Merops boehmi*)

Superficially, bee-eaters have a somewhat elongated, streamlined appearance. This is due to the long, downward-pointing bill at one end, the slender body, and the long tail with elongated central tail feathers at the other end; they also tend to have longish, pointed wings which add to the somewhat delicate appearance so many of them have when in flight.



European bee-eater



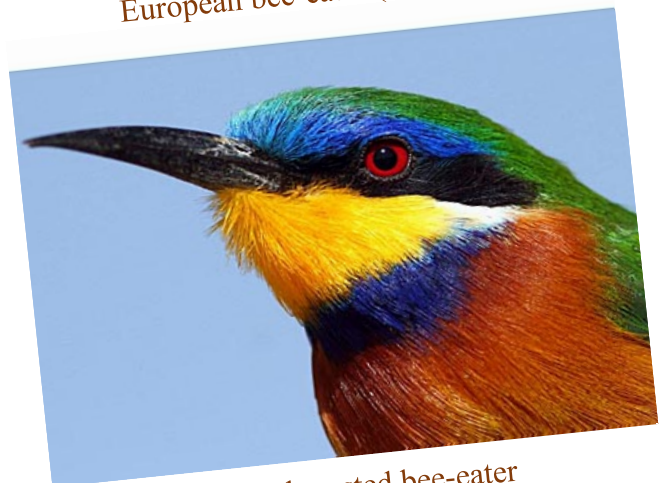
Northern carmine bee-eater (*Merops nubicus*)



Southern carmine bee-eater (*Merops nubicoides*)



European bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)



Blue breasted bee-eater (*Merops variegatus*)

The above photos of bee-eaters were taken by others. All other photos in this short story were taken by Bob Golding.

Although they eat many forms of flying invertebrate, bee-eaters do seem to prefer bees and wasps, particularly honeybees. They can see small flying prey from a considerable distance and, when hunting, often use an open perch from where they are able to see clearly around them and take off quickly and easily toward their prey. When they catch a bee, nearly always when in flight, they carry it back to the perch and smack it repeatedly against a hard surface; they may also press it and rub it until it starts to break up. During this process the bird will often close its eyes as a protection against tiny droplets of venom that may splash around. It is only after the bee's venom sac has been disposed of, or the venom itself dispersed by the bird's actions, that the battered remains of the bee are swallowed.

Most species of bee-eater are gregarious and breed in colonies. They excavate burrows for their nests, often arranged closely together in a vertical cliff or a steep river bank.

* * *



The little mosaic of bee-eaters above is a personal mini-celebration of these beautiful creatures, in particular the northern carmine bee-eater (*Merops nubicus*), a species that first interested me during the two journeys I made in Nigeria from Ibadan to Foge Island and Kainji Lake in 1968. The background was this. In early 1968 a major new Nigerian

Government development project, generally referred to as the Kainji Hydroelectric Dam project, was already underway on the River Niger, near Wawa in western Nigeria. At the completion of this huge project the following year, the new Kainji Lake would be 397,000 hectares (981,000 acres) in area; it would extend about 136 km upstream from the new dam and would be around 24 km across at its widest point. Foge Island, an original, natural island lying between the two separate channels of the River Niger south of Agwarra (see maps page 4), would be submerged although at the time of my May 1968 visit the dam had not been closed. The Borgu Game Reserve, bordered on the east by the new lake, would be

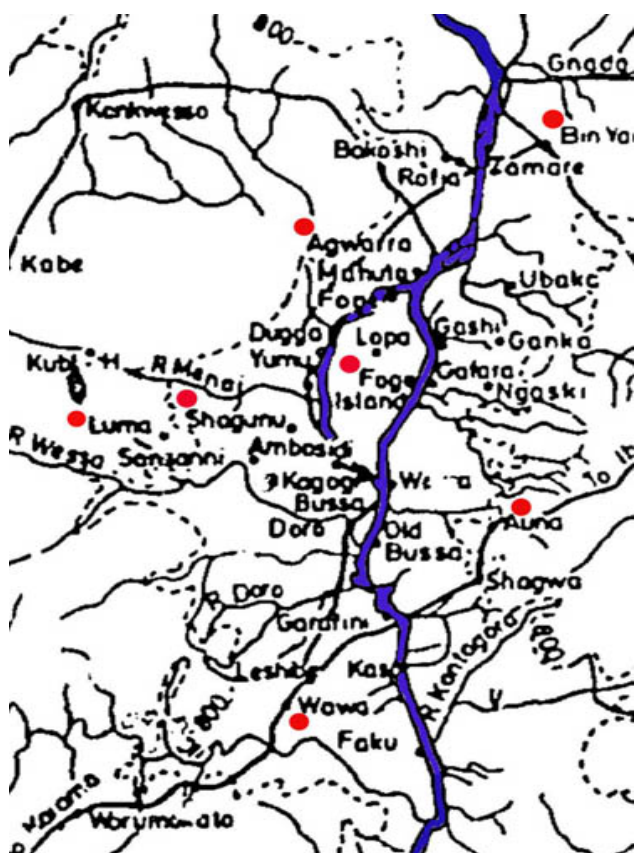


Showing the main road route (red dots) between Ibadan and Kainji Lake. Also Abuja, the Nigerian capital, and major towns and cities.

open to tourists. The vegetation of the area is described as Guinean forest-savanna mosaic, a band of interlaced forest, savanna and grassland running east to west and dividing the tropical forests near the coast from the West Sudanian savanna of the interior (see maps pages 3 and 4).

The Kainji Hydroelectric Dam project involved the dispersal of around 50,000 people who had been living within the area about to be submerged. Most were being moved to newly constructed government resettlement villages near the new Kainji Lake, including the new town named New Bussa (see map page 4). Wildlife within the Reserve was projected to be 'abundant' and mammals would include hippos, baboons, roan antelope, duikers, kob, hyaenas and warthogs. I learned later, however, that human activity including deforestation, burning, illegal grazing and fishing had created problems following the completion of the project in 1969. The project was being implemented over a period of five years by a consortium of three Italian firms, involving 20,000 men of nine different nationalities.

The reason for my visit in May 1968 was that I had been asked by a wildlife magazine to obtain some photographs of the Foge Island area before and after the closure of the new Kainji Dam. If possible the images were to feature the northern carmine bee-eater and the effects of the new Kainji Lake



This older map shows the original Foge Island, south of Agwarra, and the original course (in blue) of the River Niger. Foge Island was submerged by the new Kainji Lake in 1968.

Kainji Lake today. Some of the original names shown on map left, eg. Shagunnu, Auna, Luma, are also shown above. The apparent duplications of some names, also location differences, are noted.

on the many breeding colonies of this bird in the area. I was pleased to take on this interesting photographic task and was curious to experience what it would be like to be there and observe, even briefly, an ancient ecosystem of plants and animals in the process of dying, changing fundamentally or doing whatever would be attributed to it. Of course there would be a huge new 'hi-tech' freshwater dam and lake for the generation of electricity that would improve the lives of countless numbers of people, water for the the irrigation of crops, a major new fishing resource and a wonderful new National Park and Game Reserve for residents and foreign tourists. But would it all work out as we were being told it would? Reservations about aspects of the project had already been expressed in some quarters. In making such far-reaching changes to a mind-bogglingly complex system of organisms, materials and processes, did we really know what we were doing and what the effects on the area would be a hundred years from now?

Before I set off from Ibadan early that May morning in 1968 I had decided to visit the Borgu Game Reserve on my way to Foge Island. The roads were an unpredictable mixture of recent and good, old and challenging, and included some difficult stretches. After a hard day's drive I arrived at New Bussa in the late afternoon, met up with some colleagues and also, by arrangement, met the Game Warden from Borgu Game Reserve.

I spent some of the following day in the Reserve with the Game Warden and saw several rather nervous hippos and an impressive range of other mammals. I confirmed to the Game Warden that my main objective was to gain access to, and photograph, a colony of carmine bee-eaters further north on Foge Island. He was most helpful and arranged for a canoe and two assistants to be available for my use for the next two days.

The next morning I drove up to the agreed location and found the canoe and two canoeist helpers waiting for me. I soon found myself sitting in the canoe



Man in canoe on River Niger, evening, from Foge Island. May 1968.



Showing entrance holes to the nest burrows of the northern carmine bee-eater in part of a breeding colony in the bank of the River Niger on Foge Island. May 1968.

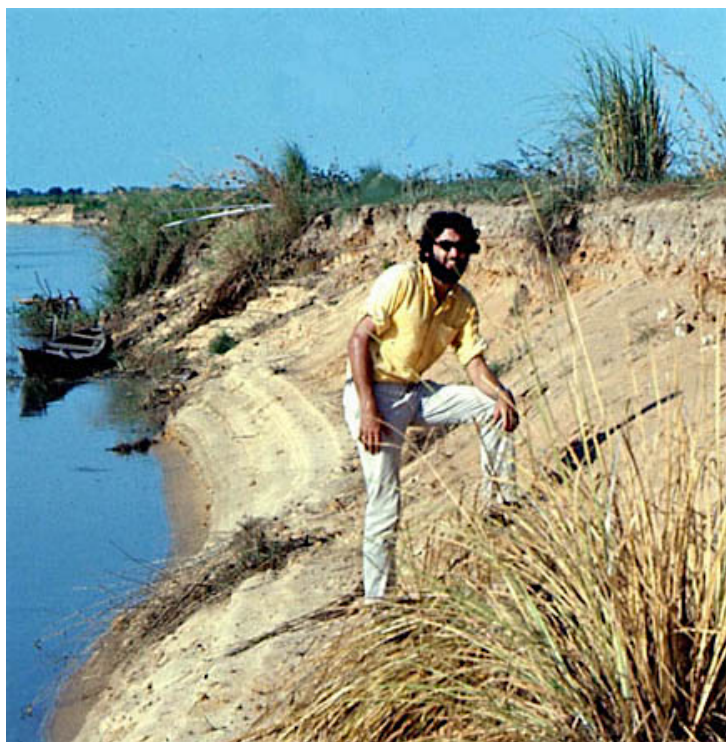
and being paddled effortlessly up and down the River Niger, a memorable experience. From the canoe I had a much improved view of Foge Island's river banks which, in many places, were perforated by numerous entrance holes to the breeding burrows of the carmine bee-eater (*see photo above*). The adult bee-eaters were carrying a variety of invertebrates as they alighted, one by one, on the steep river banks. Each then waited before entering its burrow and being quickly engulfed by the little pool of darkness at the entrance. Soon they would reappear and fly off again for more food. At suitable points I



Bank of River Niger on Foge Island showing the adult northern carmine bee-eaters returning with food for their chicks. May 1968.

asked the man paddling me around to set me ashore. I then stepped out and found somewhere to sit alone for a while among the rough grasses that grew on Foge Island's flat meadows and scrubland.

It can be a memorable, even moving, experience to be alone in a physically remote place, away from all or most other human beings and their works, especially when that place is a wild place like Foge Island and especially when it is doomed to being totally submerged within months. During my two short days there I felt increasingly immersed in the place somehow,



I am taking a look at the bee-eater burrows in the bank of the River Niger on Foge Island. The entrance holes were usually in the top two metres or so of soil. May 1968.

increasingly close to it, a reluctant member of the audience in a theatre of the natural world where one could just sit quietly and watch the last show. It was disconcerting to remember that the small patch of the earth's surface I was sitting on would, in a few weeks or months, be gone for ever, at least in its present form.

I shall always remember that first and last visit to Foge Island in May 1968. The many hundreds of nesting bee-eaters, their throaty calls and flutterings everywhere around me, the bright sunshine and swirling heat and dust, the River Niger on its amazing journey south from Timbuktu and the Sahara Desert



down to the Atlantic Ocean, and those long evening shadows across the flatness of the island as the sun went down.

During the two days or so that I spent at Foge Island I met only two other groups of people. On the first occasion I noticed two men, each with a long stick, walking through the grass nearby (*see photo page 8*). They approached me when they saw me and the three of us stood there, uncertain, smiling, wanting to communicate but not knowing how to. We had no common spoken language and could only smile and nod and gesticulate at each other. They eventually walked away, back across the island. Who they were, where they had come from and where they were going I knew not. After they left, though, I realised that we had in fact communicated a few basic concepts to each other, and positive ones at that - welcome, nice to see you, have a nice



These two men were also walking across Foge Island.
May 1968.

On the third morning of my visit to Foge Island, that May 1968, I packed up my car, thanked the Game Warden's two men who had helped me move around by canoe and set out on my return journey to Ibadan and my work at the Zoological Garden. I had been able to take all the photographs I needed, including some of the bee-eaters and their nesting sites. Little did I know at that point that there was more to come and that I was to return there before the year was out. I shall explain shortly.

* * *

I shall now move the clock forward two months, to July 1968 and my annual leave. July was the month that marked the start of my two months' leave each year from my job at the University of Ibadan. I shall digress briefly here and describe this more fully, as people in the UK often asked me about

day - by using our facial expressions, like all good primates. At least our exchanges were good-natured and they did brighten my day.

There was also the occasion when a small group of women with young children, some being carried on their mothers' backs, stopped and chattered at me incomprehensibly and then walked off into the horizon (see photo below).



A small group of women appeared, two or three of them with babies like this one (see it?). Soon they all walked away across Foge Island. The half calabash, or gourd, on her head probably contained milk.



These hippos in the Borgu Game Reserve were rather nervous when people were near, presumably because they had been little exposed to tourists to date. May 1968.

my annual leave - what was it all about, where did you go and what did you get up to? It was like this.

My contract as an employee of the University of Ibadan entitled me to two months' paid leave each year from my post of Zoo Director. The same general terms and conditions applied to most of the expatriate employees of the University of Ibadan. However, we spent our leave periods in many different ways. Leave could be a holiday, a hoot, a desperately needed break, a welcome reunion with a loved one, a period of study or a prelude to a divorce. For many of us our periods of leave somehow became very special, a period when exceptional things happened, usually good but sometimes bad. I spent much of each leave in the UK, specifically in Bristol, my home town, where I had an apartment in the leafy and well-behaved suburb of Henleaze. For me it was simple – I went on leave for a break, a rest and something completely different.

I started my leave in July each year when I flew from Lagos to London Heathrow. I then hired a car and drove west along the M4 motorway to Bristol. When I arrived at the front door of my apartment, laden with suitcases and clutching yet another piece of Nigerian night-flowering cactus plant to propagate in my Bristol living room, I was usually feeling very tired. I stood outside the front door of my apartment for a few moments, drew breath, found the door key, thanked the Good Lord for absolutely everything, opened the door and entered what was to me a miniature paradise. I switched on my colour TV (yes colour – unbelievable), watched the Test Match cricket, ate delicious fish and chips from a shop just around the corner, went shopping in a local supermarket that seemed permanently submerged beneath a tsunami of amazing foods I hadn't even heard of, lay down on the sofa and went to sleep. I eventually woke up and repeated the whole thing over again, regardless of the time of day or night. It was a wonderful relief, a



delightful, rejuvenating break, a two-month opportunity to relax and recuperate in my personal, stress-free rehabilitation zone.

After a few weeks there, rejoicing in a world where everything worked, I felt re-charged and absolutely ready to go again. Leave was great!



This female ground hornbill (*Bucorvos abyssinicus*) took a child's toy doll from a visitor's push chair in the zoo and ran off with it. Apart from being an occasional thief, this bird was normally tame and harmless and mixed effortlessly with visitors, despite it standing a little over 3 feet (1 metre) high. May 1968.



During my absence on leave every year many of the zoo staff back in Ibadan wrote to me to say hello, to update me on any notable events in the Zoo or to ask me to take back the odd item or two for them from the UK. After a few days back in Bristol the steady trickle of blue air mail letters from Nigeria started to appear through my letterbox. Those letters embraced a lot of miles and a lot of cultures. Some of the news about every-day events back in Nigeria sometimes seemed bizarre and was often amusing when I read through those letters in my quiet apartment in suburban Bristol, surrounded by my

neighbours' neat gardens full of roses, perfect green lawns and garden ponds full of gently meandering goldfish.

For example: (*in my own words*) A large - around 3 feet high - but tame and harmless African ground hornbill that for years had roamed freely around the zoo among the visitors, one day reached out quietly and un-noticed with its very large bill and removed a young child's toy doll from a zoo visitor's push chair. The child had apparently been asleep. The hornbill immediately ran off with the toy doll to the other side of the Zoo and hid somewhere. The baby's mother was very upset and was left shouting and distraught. The doll could not be found, but the hornbill soon reappeared, apparently fluttering its long eyelashes and looking totally innocent. I could just picture the scene as I read the letter... (*see photo above*). Or this: One night, driver ants managed to bridge the protective, water-filled channel that encircled a building containing cages of white laboratory rats that we bred as food for some of the snakes. These ferocious insects were discovered in the building in the morning, had fortunately not been able to gain access to the rat cages, but had dismembered, sliced up and carried away to their underground nests hundreds of caged grasshoppers that were being kept there as food for

various zoo animals the next morning. And this: One morning the zoo's camel, having been taken as usual by a keeper to browse for half an hour on its favourite green leaves just outside the Zoo, suddenly, for no apparent reason, broke away, took off at speed towards a nearby residential area and disappeared. The keeper called for help, other keepers rushed from all directions and there followed temporary chaos in that part of Africa. The camel was eventually recaptured on someone's small farm where it had consumed a bucket of corn cobs and some freshly picked mangos.

I valued these letters and news from my staff in Nigeria but, for the first couple of weeks of my leave, I refused to be distracted by letters of any kind from my single-minded pursuit of happiness. I would reply as soon as I felt sufficiently rested. And, for the record, I always did.



Every year during my leave I made a point of visiting a number of good zoos in the UK or Europe or perhaps the US; I thus maintained relationships with particular zoo staff, be they animal keepers, gardeners, veterinarians, curators or directors. I always enjoyed our discussions as they enabled me to keep in touch with the latest thinking or experiences on this subject or that. I visited London Zoo in Regent's Park that year, 1968, just two months or so after my visit to Foge Island in Nigeria, and found myself having a conversation with one of the bird staff. I described to him the breeding colonies of carmine bee-eaters I had seen and the breeding sites about to be submerged beneath the new Kainji Lake. He expressed interest in acquiring a small number of these birds for a possible new exhibit in the zoo's bird house. He pointed out that London Zoo had never before exhibited this species and said he would discuss the matter with his colleagues and contact me with further comments after my return to Nigeria from leave. I promised to give the matter some thought and drove back to Bristol.

I returned to Nigeria from Bristol in September that year as usual. There was much going on in Ibadan at that time. Among other things, I was working on the design of a new moated ape house for the zoo's gorillas and chimpanzees and this task was still in active and detailed progress. However, having given London Zoo's continuing interest in a carmine bee-eater exhibit further thought, I decided to try to help them acquire some birds for this. I was in any case due to return to the Wawa / Kainji Lake area in October to take further photographs of the rising lake and its effects. At that time I would try to make contact with the various Nigerian officials whose job it was to process documents requesting approval for the capture and/or export of Nigerian wild animals and plants found in that area.



This was what awaited me when I returned to the Foge Island / Shagunnu area in October 1968 - a large, still-rising lake was in the process of transforming the landscape. Kainji Lake was taking shape - was being born - as I watched. The dam gates had been closed on 2nd August, about two and a half months earlier. These wading birds had abandoned their tree top nests and eggs and were fluttering around in the remaining branches, their disorientation obvious. October 1968.

I thus returned to Wawa and New Bussa - the new towns at the southern end of Lake Kainji – the following month, October. I was fortunate to be able to

travel there with two colleagues who also had interests involving the wild life of the area. Because of their links with certain authorities there, we were able to borrow a fast motor boat and could move easily and quickly across and around parts of the new lake and visit...[to page 13](#)



Above: nests of long-tailed shags (*Phalacrocorax africanus*) in the rising Kainji Lake. The nests were constructed and eggs laid earlier that season but had since been abandoned to the rising waters. Right: shag nest and eggs, abandoned. October 1968.





Above: this tree top was also just above the still-rising lake. From left long-tailed shag (*Phalacrocorax africanus*), next right African darter (*Anhinga anhinga*), next right great white heron (*Casmerodius albus*). These birds had also abandoned their newly constructed nests and eggs.

Right: great white heron nest and eggs, abandoned. October 1968.



from page 12 some of the tree top nesting sites used until recently by various species of wading bird but now abandoned (see photos). By then Foge Island was largely submerged. Some carmine bee-eaters seemed to have retreated to certain locations around the perimeter of the new lake which, at that time, was still expanding. I only had time to observe a few of those locations. The birds appeared to be reorganising into separate groups of varying size, possibly on a transient basis as part of a restructuring process of some kind. I left with the clear impression that, using mist nets, it would be relatively straightforward to capture a small number of bee-eaters at one of those locations provided that the birds were still there when I returned!



Above: these long-tailed shags (*Phalacrocorax africanus*) and African darters (*Anhinga anhinga*) had also abandoned their nests and eggs and were crowded onto this submerging tree top.
Right: Darter nest and eggs, abandoned.
October 1968.



I trust that the photographs on these pages, taken by me in October 1968, provide at least an indication of the huge changes to the appearance and ecosystem of the area brought about by the creation of Kainji Lake. There are, of course, many sources that can supply further information on the Kainji Dam project.

During this October 1968 visit to the Kainji area I was able to make useful contacts and work out a practical plan for a future exercise to capture a small number of carmine bee-eaters and quickly transport them by road to the Zoological Garden in Ibadan, prior to sending them by air to London Zoo.

It was not until the following year, however, that I managed to put a few days aside from my work in the University of Ibadan Zoo to return to Kainji. A friend and colleague came with me and our aim was to find a location as quickly as possible where there was a congregation of carmine bee-eaters of some form. I wasn't sure if we might find a long-established breeding site or if we might discover a potential new breeding site, perhaps being established

subsequent to the new lake having reached its final level/s. With some help from the contacts I had made on my previous visit, we very soon found an acceptable established site. Although the bee-eater breeding season hadn't yet commenced, many birds were circling around a river bank containing old burrows and often flew very low over the ground at that point.



Very early the next morning we erected three large mist nets and captured around ten birds well before midday. We placed the birds in a number of specially made containers, packed everything into our overland vehicle and drove back to Ibadan as quickly as we could. I wanted to get back there so that we could deal quickly with what would probably be the difficult matter of feeding the birds, or rather of persuading them to feed, and possibly involving a variety of foods and feeding methods. The basis of my approach was that the bee-eaters, being insectivorous and feeding only on winged invertebrates which in the wild they catch while in flight, would be very unlikely to pick up inanimate food of any form lying in a feeding dish or on the ground. I had no doubt that some trial and error would be involved in getting the birds onto substitute foods.

The bee-eaters took several days to adjust to a new feeding regime, but by then were taking a mixture of freshly netted flying invertebrates released into their aviary, together with chopped up invertebrates mixed with foodstuffs manufactured especially for insectivorous birds.

On the late evening of 6th of June 1969, by arrangement with London Zoo, we gently netted five of the bee-eaters in their aviary and placed them in a travelling box. They were then driven overnight to Lagos airport, their travel documents processed, and placed on an airliner destined for London the following day, the 7th of June (thanks to London Zoo for confirming this date). At London Heathrow they were collected by staff of London Zoo.

During my annual leave a few weeks later I visited the bird house at the Zoo and saw the five bee-eaters in the new indoor aviary constructed for them. The birds looked in good condition and made a most attractive and educational public exhibit. I reminded myself that this was the first time that *Merops nubicus* had ever been exhibited at London Zoo.

During recent communications with London Zoo (March 2017), they kindly sent me a copy of their records for the five bee-eaters as well as information on their longevity. What I had not known previously was that the bee-eaters had done so well there (*see next page*). Three of them lived at London Zoo for over five years, one of them for nearly six years! I feel that the zoo did really well to keep the birds alive and healthy for so long.

London Zoo's records of their five carmine bee-eaters from Nigeria:-



Having spoken to our animal registrar she has

Species	Sex	Date in	Date out	Reason	Length in collection
Carmine bee eater <i>Merops nubicus</i>	1.0	07/06/1969	08/03/1970	Died	8m 30d
Carmine bee eater <i>Merops nubicus</i>	1.0	07/06/1969	06/05/1975	Died	5y 10m 28d
Carmine bee eater <i>Merops nubicus</i>	0.1	07/06/1969	25/05/1971	Died	1y 11m 17d
Carmine bee eater <i>Merops nubicus</i>	0.1	07/06/1969	19/11/1974	Died	5y 5m 13d
Carmine bee eater <i>Merops nubicus</i>	0.1	07/06/1969	07/12/1974	Died	5y 6m 1d

I hope this helps

Kind regards
Luke Sharp

Supporter Services Coordinator
ZSL Whipsnade Zoo



Recent reports on the northern carmine bee-eater (*Merops nubicus*) point out that this species has a very large range and that, despite the probability that the population is declining, the rate of decline is slow. Although the population has not been quantified, the species is designated by IUCN as Least Concern (April 2017).

Although my visits to the Kainji Dam area in 1986 arose originally because of a request to me to take photographs of the area 'before' and 'after' Foge Island had been submerged by Kainji Lake, I found what was happening there of enormous interest. I learned recently that a new and massive plan to upgrade the Kainji Dam complex is being considered. I am told that the prime reasons for this are to increase its hydroelectric energy-generating capacity for a much increased human population and that there is also a need to increase water supplies for farmers needing to irrigate more farmland and keep more livestock.

I strongly suspect that, unlike National Parks in many countries, including East African countries, tourists visiting Kainji Lake National Park will come largely from within Nigeria rather than from outside it. I do hope that the aspirations of the Kainji Lake National Park authorities include the provision of an education facility for Park visitors, tourists and school parties. I urge those authorities to seize the opportunity and include such a facility, thus enabling the Park to present the natural world to Nigerian visitors and school children and help them understand the vital importance of conserving their native animals and plants and ecosystems. A qualified teacher, one or two well equipped classrooms, professionally produced sets of wildlife-related, museum-type displays as well as a vehicle capable of taking groups of visitors to particular places of interest within the Park or elsewhere would be

very valuable. It is important that young Nigerians, in particular, have a basic understanding of the natural world and how it works so that later on they can participate effectively in, for example, public discussions arising from climate change and related matters

I recommend to the authorities at the Kainji Dam and Lake complex, and indeed to all those involved in practical wildlife or field work in Nigeria, that they contact, among others, the Director of the Zoological Garden at the University of Ibadan. There they have much experience of presenting the natural world to the general public, for example by way of talks and films for



zoo visitors, particularly to school parties. After I left my post there, and after setting up a website, I was contacted regularly by Nigerians in several countries who, when they were young and going to secondary schools in Nigeria, also visited the University Zoo in Ibadan and became so

interested in animals that they went on to qualify at University and now hold various senior wildlife-related posts. My website www.bobgolding.co.uk (then click the top button 'Short Stories', then 'Voices from the Past') displays emails that provide more information on this. Several emails are displayed from Nigerians who clearly care about the natural world, often because of their early experiences at the Zoo in Ibadan.

So, I wish you well, Nigeria, including all the decision makers at Kainji Lake National Park, Borgu Game Reserve, the University of Ibadan Zoological Garden, Yankari National Park and the many other parks, reserves, zoos and wildlife centres throughout the country involved in (or with the potential to be involved in) teaching the Nigerian public about the natural world, its wild animals and plants and its importance for a stable planet and the future of mankind.

The End

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