

FIRST RECORD OF BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATER (*MEROPS PERSICUS* PALLAS, 1773) (AVES: MEROPIDAE) FROM THE SOUTHERN TIP OF INDIA

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The Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* is a local resident found in small numbers in the more arid north-western parts of the subcontinent. Resident populations are vastly augmented in summer by extralimital breeding visitors in the west, especially Pakistan (Baluchistan, Sind, north eastern Punjab) and North Western India (Western Rajasthan, Saurashtra, Delhi) (Ali & Ripley, 1987).

It is known to migrate across the Arabian Sea during spring (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). The Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* is considered as a vagrant or rare passage migrant to South India and was first reported from Goa (Holt, 2009). *M. persicus* was first recorded from Kerala at Uppungal, Kole wetlands in Central Kerala (Sreenivasan, 2013). It was again reported from Kerala at Changaram wetlands, Alappuzha District (George, 2014). Mannar & Sumesh (2015) reported that the species attempted nesting at

Changaram wetlands, Alappuzha District of Kerala during 2014.

An avian study was conducted by Warblers and Waders, Birdwatchers and Nature Lovers Forum, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala on 16 June 2018 at Punchakari wetlands adjoining the Vellayani lake (8°26'44"N; 76°59'33"E) Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. It is 8 km from Thiruvanthapuram city. It was an overcast and drizzling from 07.00 am to 10.00 am. A flock of 8 *Merops* species were perching on the electric cables, at a height of four meters, near the canal bund road. The birds were very similar in appearance to *Merops philippinus* but had blue cheeks and white throats as their distinguishing field characters. Field photographs were taken using Canon 550 D mounted with Canon 300 mm Usm zoom lens. This species was identified as *Merops persicus* based on field observation and photographs following description given by Ali & Ripley (1987).

The flock of *M. persicus* was found feeding along with resident *Merops* species, Green Bee-eater (*M. orientalis*). *M. persicus* was observed in full breeding plumage. This was the first authentic sighting of *M. persicus* from extreme southern India. This flock was observed at the wetlands for a week before disappearing. The occurrence of *M. persicus* at Punchakari-Vellayani wetlands during the month of June is noteworthy given its habit of preferring the north and north east Subcontinent during the time (Grimmett, Inskipp & Inskipp, 2013)

Acknowledgment

We are grateful to Ms. Arya Meher B.S. daughter of first author for comments on the earlier draft of the manuscript. We are grateful to Mr. Anooj S.S, Scientist, Department of Entomology, ICAR, Delhi for reviewing the final manuscript. We are thankful to Dr. Abhiram Chandran, K. Vinodkumar and Sangeeth, members of Warblers and Waders survey team, for field support and encouragement.

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