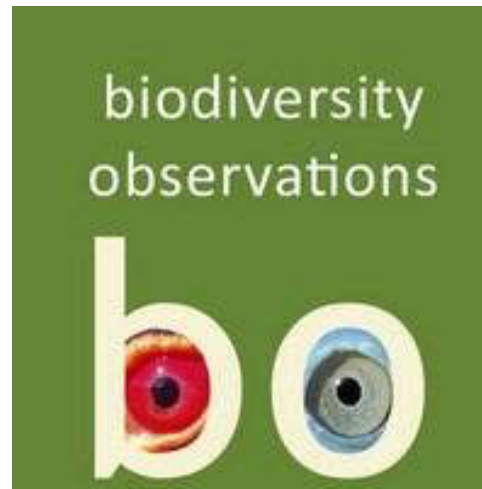


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Peter Cunningham & Mark Paxton



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Continued persecution threatens Southern Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicoides* breeding colonies along the Okavango River in northeastern Namibia

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Abstract

At colonies of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters *Merops nubicoides*, large numbers were trapped and left to die in northeastern Namibia. Fishing nets were placed over the nesting tunnels by both local adults and children to trap adult birds entering/exiting the nesting sites. The birds were not killed for food nor captured for trade since the nets were never checked or emptied of trapped birds which were merely left to die but rather viewed as senseless mischievous entertainment. Young birds and eggs were destroyed by digging into the breeding banks and using long sticks.

Observation

Globally, Southern Carmine Bee-eaters *Merops nubicoides* are classified as least concern by the IUCN (2025), albeit with a decreasing population trend due to habitat destruction, and with no known threats. However, in Namibia they are viewed as rare and peripheral (Simmons et al. 2015) with their colonies often under threat from humans (Barnes & Herremans 1997, Simmons 2003). Typically, fishing nets are hung over the breeding tunnels in sand banks at colonies along the Okavango River with captured birds then killed. Known breeding colonies in Namibia are limited to the Okavango (Simmons et al. 2015, Tarboton 2001) and perennial rivers in the Zambezi Region (Kopij 2018, Simmons 2003, Tarboton 2001). Breeding mainly occurs between September and October (August to November) (Tarboton 2001) with a peak during September to November in Namibia (Hockey et al. 2005) with the same breeding sites typically used for many years (Fry 1984).

Capture and killing of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters along the Okavango River in the Shamvura Camp area (c. 12 km downstream, eastwards of the confluence of the Cuito and Okavango Rivers, was first observed at a colony of approximately 1,000 birds on the southern bank of the river in 2005. This colony was at the time, and still is, the only breeding colony along the Okavango River in Namibia, although there are a few smaller colonies in the Mahango Game Park (Nakashole 2024) and the Divundu area. This colony has changed locations on several occasions and almost every year due to human persecution and disturbance, even going back and forth to and from the Angolan (northern) bank over the years and has also been forced to split up as well.

Fishing nets are placed over the nesting tunnels by local adults and children alike to capture and kill adult birds entering/exiting the nesting sites. The captured birds were often left to die and not even retrieved from the nets to eat or otherwise utilise. In addition, long sticks are also used to extract the young birds from the nests to be used as bait for fishing. Initially it was thought that the birds were captured to retrieve feathers for sale to illicit buyers, leaving birds without tail feathers and wings broken off. This persecution of the birds has persisted annually; despite regular reports to both the

Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) and the Namibian Police (Nampol), no help has been forthcoming, while constant visits from the Shamvura Camp staff has been the only preventative measure.

Despite these constant disturbances and due to the constant vigilance of the private tourism sector, the Carmine Bee-eater colony gradually increased to about 3,000 birds in 2020. Thereafter the colony relocated closer to Shamvura Camp where more regular control visits kept the disturbance levels to a minimum. The help of the neighbouring Okacuito Camp was also enlisted, and a full-time guard was placed at the colony for the duration of the breeding season. However, despite these efforts, the netting of the nests became more persistent and more regular with time. This is due to the local community members involved not seeing any tangible repercussions or even the presence of any law enforcement authorities and therefore becoming more confident and emboldened. In desperation the Namibian media was alerted including several WhatsApp conservation and birding groups were approached. This was also reported to the MEFT officials located in Rundu who merely responded with fruitless promises. The local headman of the Shamvura/Shinyungwe area was also informed in writing with similar futile results.

However, on 23 September 2025 with the colony now split in two and with a decreased total of barely 1,000 birds, nets were once again seen placed over nesting tunnels during a routine boat trip (Figures 1–3). Birds were also caught in homemade snap-traps (Figure 4). Furthermore, large sections of the riverbank had also been excavated by children forming castle like structures over the nests and extracting the chicks and eggs (Figure 5) with long sticks for no reason whatsoever. On this occasion at least 80 adult birds were extracted from the nets and those few that were still alive were released, while the nets were removed and destroyed.

Evidently the birds were not captured and killed for food or trade since the nets were never checked or emptied of trapped birds which were merely left to die but rather viewed as senseless mischievous entertainment (pers. obs). Donald et al. (2024) confirmed the low prevalence of trade in the species. However, in Zimbabwe some colonies along the Zambezi River (outside of national parks) had



Figure 1: Southern Carmine Bee-eaters *Merops nubicoides* entangled in fishing net placed over the nesting holes (© M. Paxton).



Figure 2: Entangled Southern Carmine Bee-eaters being collected (© M. Paxton).



Figure 4: Homemade snap-traps were also used to capture Southern Carmine Bee-eaters (© M. Paxton).

Figure 3 (left): Entangled Southern Carmine Bee-eaters waiting to be extracted and released (© M. Paxton).



Figure 5: Excavated river bank at nesting colony of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters. Compare this to the bank with intact nest tunnels in Figures 1 & 2 (© M. Paxton).

been exploited for food to the point of extinction (Barnes & Herremans 1997) indicating the severity of such direct persecution by humans of the species. As Southern Carmine Bee-eaters show site fidelity (Fry 1984) it would be easy to eradicate a known breeding population, especially if the sandy river banks are purposefully destroyed or the breeding process disturbed. Simmons et al. (2025) recommends that monitoring and protection of known breeding colonies takes place to ensure that the conservation status is not downgraded in future.

Although these incidents were reported to the local authorities, with no tangible results, it is recommended that tertiary institutions and/or conservation organisations be approached to study these persecution

incidents; monitor known breeding colonies; conduct extension services to change perceptions to the local communities and determine the extent of the problem and suggest mitigations to ensure that these birds are adequately protected at their breeding colonies. Bird guards are used to protect a breeding colony in the Sikunga Communal Conservancy in the Zambezi Region (Anon. 2024), which is another way to involve the local communities and protect important breeding sites.

Efforts have been made by Shamvura Camp to link up with an influential member of the community and the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Shinyungwe Secondary School to establish and coordinate a group of learners to report any destructive activities at the colony. Without active intervention this important Carmine Bee-eater breeding colony along the Okavango River is in dire straits.

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