BEAK FULL OF BEES

NATURAL TREASURES OF UGANDA
BEAK FULL OF BEES

by

Dennis Lubega

Illustrated by Nicholas Kagongo Arinaitwe
“Make it egg-shaped, not round. How many times do I have to remind you that the entrance to a nest must be small?” yelled Monica, our eldest sister. “We are white-throated bee-eaters after all!” She was so bossy it was unbearable at times!

“I know what I’m doing,” I replied stubbornly. “Who made you the boss?”

“It does not seem that way. You should just do as I say!” she yelled again. “I’m the one looking at the big picture while you are lost in your details. You must trust me and follow my directions if you want it to be beautiful, durable, and comfortable.”
“Why don’t you mind your own business, or should I say ‘beak-ness’, once in a while,” I snapped. “I mean, seriously. Buzz off!”

I disliked working on anything when Monica was around. She was so focused on the ‘big picture’ that she could become borderline rude without realizing it. But worse still, she always pretended to know more than everyone else. What she was not aware of, however, was that mother had told all of her brothers and sisters at an early age to just ignore her and do what we thought was best. Mummy would tell us that we would all be great bee-eaters someday, able to build nests naturally, fly naturally, and even find delicious food from nature. Nature would teach us whatever we needed to know as bee-eaters.

Whenever mother flew away on safari, like today, Monica assumed control of the family. The rest of us did not like this as it often resulted in disagreements that sometimes turned into quarrels. I must say that Monica was really bothering me this time. After all, it was not really her business how I prepared the nest that I would eventually live in. What did it matter to her? This time she was the expert contractor. Last week she was the expert nutritionist, and the week before that, the expert match-maker. She actually believes that she brought me and my fiancée
together. She thinks she created the love, but she really had nothing to do with it!

But this time around, just to avoid a quarrel, I acted as if I would do whatever she wanted. Now, I don’t want anyone to think that I am a coward or that I cannot tell the difference between an egg shape and a round shape! All I want is a little peace in my day. If that means ignoring my elder sister, I’ll just have to give in.

I was more concerned with ending early rather than making sure no twig was out of place. The evening before, Sam, my younger brother, and I had sighted
an active beehive and we made hunting plans into the early morning hours. He is my younger brother and we are the best of hunting friends. This discovery had excited us so much! Insects are our staple diet and most white-throated bee-eaters like us think honeybees make the best meal. It is indeed our favorite delicacy.

The beehive we had spotted had thousands of bees buzzing nearby. How we love that buzzing sound especially when it is far away from the hive. It makes our mouths water and our eyes tear up with anticipation. We had decided last night to return today to enjoy our discovery.

“Are you through with your work?” Sam asked, not really caring about the answer. His only concern was that I could leave immediately. “I hear a beehive buzzing for our attention! We have to get moving if we’re to reach the bees in their most active time of the day. We are sure to feast for hours this afternoon!”

“Monica has been bothering me again about building a new nest, so I have been delayed.” I responded as if he would allow me some sympathy for not finishing on time. “But I’m now done. We can go.” I was dying to get to the hive, and finishing the nest would simply have to wait. Within minutes we
were in mid-flight, boasting about who would catch the most bees and return to our family tree with the fullest belly.

“"I’m going for seventy-five bees today. I can’t wait to start on those crunchy, tasty bees. I love the little legs and the furry bottoms!” Sam shouted through the clouds, even when he could not see if I was listening or not.

I always responded though, usually in an attempt to out-do him. “I’m going for 100 myself, and maybe I’ll carry a dozen home in my mouth for my fiancée.” He had to remember that I was the older brother and superior in every way. When he stopped understanding this, trouble would begin, at least I thought so.

Sam and I understood each other very well. We enjoyed hanging out together whenever we could, especially in feasting adventures like this one. We never helped each other out when hunting bees as it was always a competition. But I always knew, however, that I would catch more by being challenged by such a competitive companion. Without a second thought, we would welcome undertaking any adventure together, as long as Monica was not with us.
In little time, we had arrived. But as we approached, we realized that other white-throated bee-eaters had discovered our beehive and were fluttering around the tree housing the large hive. There was intense activity everywhere, as the other birds feasted on the plump bees. I had never known that there were so many white-throated bee-eaters in Queen Elizabeth National Park.

There were always great bee hunts from August to April, the period during which white-throated bee-eaters can be found in Queen Elizabeth National Park. But this was extraordinary.
“Can you believe this scene? This is heavenly,” I proclaimed to Sam. “I think I have died and landed in a bee-eater’s paradise!”

This, however, was no time for conversation and so, quickening our pace we joined in the action. Sam and I were quite surprised that we were quickly catching bees in spite of the hunting crowd. This hive was enormous and we all were having our fill.

Although the bees were in large supply, we had to scramble for them and apply some strategy to our hunt. Competing with so many others called upon the application of our best skills. Sam and I soon began demonstrating just how skilled the boys from the Ishasha tree-climbing lion neighborhood really were. We filled our bellies sooner than I had thought possible.

Many of the other bee-eaters were compelled to put their appetites on hold in order to watch us perform. Some of them cheered from the sidelines as if it were a football match.

Sam and I enjoyed the afternoon. Not once did we have to get closer than ten meters from the hive. This was a lesson our mother had taught us. She told us we should never get too close to the beehive
itself to catch the bees because those little critters can sting like the devil when they release their panic pheromones. It’s always best to stay as far away as possible from the queen bee, who almost never leaves the hive. But the further away you stay, the fewer bees you can catch.

Catching them in mid-flight thrilled us to no end. While it was true that other white-throated bee-eaters swerved and dived expertly to catch the bees too, our own swerves and dives added extra fun to the action. Indeed, like some of our friends always claimed, we resembled old fighter planes like those involved in dogfights in the North African desert during World War I.
After an hour of hunting, I caught all I could eat. My stomach would not hold another single bee. Not even the furry right front leg of one. I began to collect a few more in my beak for transporting back to Susan, my future wife. She would be so thrilled. I always bring her the best treats and, since our engagement to be married, she has become the envy of all the young female bee-eaters of Ishasha.

Worried about holding too many stingers for too long in my mouth, I signaled to Sam that I wanted to head home. To my surprise, he had already started collecting bees in his beak. Actually he was even
trying to hold them in his mouth. This was obvious by the way his cheeks were bloated as if he were carrying a pack of marbles. He could not even chirp a sound, let alone try to boast about the number of bees he’d eaten.

It was going to be a quiet trip home! I always welcomed a bit of solitude as it was not common in my large noisy family. This was the perfect way to end a perfect afternoon. If only we could convince Monica to store all of our catch in her mouth until I finished my new nest. She would have to buzz off then! That would really be paradise on earth for this white-throated bee-eater.

I laughed out loud at the thought and almost lost all of my bees.

It was a nice dream, I thought, as I flew between the clouds, watching the silent elegant elephants graze in the savanna on my way home to Ishahsa. Ah, solitude and nature. A perfect day.

THE END
1. True or False. White-throated bee-eater birds do NOT make their own nests.  
*FALSE, the white throated bee-eaters make egg-shaped nests with small entrances.*

2. During which months can white-throated bee-eater birds be found in Queen Elizabeth National Park?  
*From August to April. They are usually not seen there during May, June or July.*

3. Do white-throated bee-eater birds disturb beehives when hunting?  
*No. They are not known to disturb beehives, as they’d rather catch bees flying in the air.*

4. Why are white-throated bee-eater birds compared to old fighter planes?  
*They are able to swerve and dive to catch bees and insects mid-air like fighter planes.*

5. Do white-throated bee-eater birds help each other out when hunting bees?  
*No, they compete with each other.*
Learning more about nature allows us to understand our environment, respect our wildlife friends, and share our experiences with others.

Be a friend of the natural treasures of Uganda and act responsibly when interacting with your environment.

About the Author

Dennis Patrick Musisi Lubega began his interest in stories at the age of two. Then it was mostly children’s stories on TV and folktales told by his mother. Dennis has never lost this passion. Although he trained in business studies, the forty year-old recently decided to begin a new career as a writer for children and young adults. As a result of this decision, he has written several stories--The First Claim, The Laughing Lion, The Short Giraffe that Wanted a Little Respect, The Monkey Christmas Dinner, and Late on PLE Day, among others. The Natural Treasures of Uganda series of environmental education books is his first set of books to be published. Mr. Lubega lives in Kampala, Uganda, and is married with one child.

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