

SOUTHERLY BREEDING OF LITTLE WOOD-SWALLOWS

BRIAN W. FINCH

Received February, 1974

On December 31, 1973, D. H. Close, J. B. Cox and myself found a group of Little Wood-Swallows *Artamus minor* in a gorge at about the northern margin of Eyre Peninsula (between 32° 30' and 33° 00' South). Because we climbed to the top of the gorge, the birds were viewed from all angles, and perched at distances down to 20 yards. As Dusky Wood-Swallows *Artamus cyanopterus* were nearby, we were able to compare the appearance of the two species. The following description was written down shortly after the observations and agreed to by all observers.

Head, crown, mantle and underparts, chocolate brown, richer and darker than on the Dusky Wood-Swallow *Artamus cyanopterus*. The face mask was darker than the rest of the head, as in that species. The wings were a dark grey, with pronounced bluish sheen, and this contrasted markedly with the dark brown mantle. The wings also lacked a white leading edge; and it was this that first drew our attention to these birds. The undersides of the wings lacked the silvery flashes so prominent on those of the Dusky Wood-Swallow, and were very light grey.

The Little Wood-Swallows were obviously considerably smaller than *A. cyanopterus* and seemed more compact in outline, and more agile in flight. The voice was different from that of the latter species in being more high-pitched, and lacking the metallic "zwnk zwnk" calls, so characteristic of that bird.

There were at least five adults. One pair was seen to feed a weakly flying young bird, which had much the same plumage as the juvenile Dusky Wood-Swallow, while lacking the white leading edge to the wing. On January 11, Dr. J. H. Hatch visited the same gorge and found four adults and three juveniles. One of the latter still showed much down, and could not have been bred far away.

The gorge was at least 200 ft. deep. The rock sides were sheer in places, with *Calitris* sp. and shrubs growing on the lower slopes. The bottom of the gorge was overgrown with *Calitris*, mallee, and shrubs. The birds frequented the cliffs, flying around the sheer faces and taking full advantage of the updrafts. Consequently they flew much higher than the Dusky Wood-Swallows. They perched freely on the rocky ledges as well as on prominent dead branches. The Dusky Wood-Swallows confined themselves to tree-top level at the bottom of the gorge.

This record seems to extend the known range of the Little Wood-Swallow in S.A. quite considerably, as the nearest previous record known to me (per Condon's *Handlist*) was 20 miles north-east of Beltana, in the northern Flinders Ranges. Mine seems to be the first published breeding record for South Australia. Birds of this species have been recorded further south, at Lake Merreti (Condon, *Handlist*) and Edenhope, western Victoria (Wheeler, *Victorian Handlist*) but only it seems as lone strays.

It is very unfortunate in this age that it should be necessary to suppress the breeding locality of these birds; but the observers feel that to disclose the whereabouts of this apparently small colony might threaten the existence of the birds in this area.