

A BARN SWALLOW IN SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA

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At 11:00 on 17 March, 1977, while I was working in a shed at my home 7 km east of Koolunga and 160 km north of Adelaide, several swallows flew in and perched on the rafters. This is not unusual, as groups of Welcome Swallows *Hirundo neoxena* often perch there; however I noticed that one of the swallows had a dark band across the lower portion of its rich chestnut throat patch, and that its undersides were much paler than those of the Welcome Swallows near it. I later identified this bird as a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. Klapste (1977) has summarised previous Australian records of this species, giving Fraser Island as the southern-most record at that time.

Using binoculars, my mother Mrs. R. J. Pedler and myself observed these swallows during the next half hour, and approached as close as four metres. Weather was warm and sunny, and swallows in the shed were in shade; but several perches which they used near the doorway were well lit with soft light. The Barn Swallow perched several times within 20 to 30 cm of a Welcome on a thin rail just inside the doorway, and so a close comparison was possible. The following description is based on detailed notes taken at the first sighting, with additional notes from later observations.

The band across the bird's chest was 5 to 6 mm broad, narrowest in the centre, fairly dark blackish-brown, distinct from the throat patch and divided sharply from the near-white breast. This contrasted to the much less distinct separation of pale greyish breasts from chestnut throats of the Welcome Swallows. The size of

the bird's forehead patch, and throat and forehead colour, did not differ noticeably from those of the Welcomes (although later observations in sunlight showed that the colour was slightly richer and the forehead patch was possibly a little smaller). The deeply forked tail was comparable in length to the longest Welcome Swallows' tails. Undersides of tail feathers were grey and showed white sub-terminal spots when the tail was spread. Undertail coverts were off-white with several indistinct marks, whereas Welcomes had larger blackish markings on each greyish undertail feather. The Barn Swallow appeared to have a slightly more slender, tapering body than the Welcomes. This character, together with the long tail feathers being held almost parallel, is shown in photos of both species. Both characters were discernible as the bird flew. In sunlight it had shiny uppersides, distinctly more blue than the Welcome Swallows, which have an oily-blue sheen. In flight the bird's actions, size and general outline resembled those of Welcome Swallows; but it could be distinguished by its whiter undersides abruptly divided from the dark throat area, at times the chest band being seen. White underwing coverts and a thin whitish line under the leading edge of the wing were both seen as the bird flew close and showed as white flashes when it was further away. Caution was necessary in identifying the bird in flight from a distance, as some Welcomes in poor light appeared white underneath, only to show when they came closer that they had grey underwings and flanks, and slightly paler grey in the middle of their undersides.

When first seen the Barn was much more restless than the Welcome Swallows, frequently changing perches and often fluttering near a perch before alighting or moving away; and at least twice a Welcome chased it.

Despite searches, I did not see the Barn Swallow again until 13 April, when I was able to photograph it during five hours observation in and near the same shed. On this and later occasions when it perched among Welcomes, it appeared much less restless than at first. Further sightings, all at or near the original locality, mostly of the bird flying, and in a wide range of light conditions, were on six dates in April and 11 dates in May. Often excellent views were had as the bird flew within several metres. The Barn Swallow was seen on 19 and



Barn Swallow perched with Welcome Swallow.

27 April respectively, by Julian Reid and Gordon Ragless; and the last sighting was late on 26 May when I saw it perched on power lines with eight Welcome Swallows. Usually the bird could be found by searching among groups of Welcome Swallows, which at times numbered more than 50, about the farm buildings and nearby paddocks.

Several pairs of Welcome Swallows showed interest in breeding during sunny days in late April and early May, singing near nests and on the wing, and even carrying feathers to reline old nests. The Barn Swallow also became interested in an old Welcome Swallow's nest at this time, often perching in it briefly, and when approached repeatedly by a pair of Welcomes it gave alarm calls and attempted to drive them away or sang strongly from the nest. When feeding over nearby paddocks, the Barn Swallow was often seen chasing Welcomes, and it also sang on the wing and when perched on power lines, as Welcomes did. The Barn Swal-

low's song and calls were almost identical to those of Welcomes, being just slightly deeper in tone when both species were heard together. Breeding activity did not continue during cold weather. At no time was the Barn Swallow associated with any particular Welcome, although it was always closely associated with Welcome Swallows generally, whether feeding or at rest. Thus when the numbers of Welcome Swallows decreased markedly at the end of May in this locality it seems that the Barn Swallow was among those that left.

Speculation about the bird's arrival is more difficult. I can only suggest that it might have been affected in some way by cyclones off north-western and north-eastern Australia in early March, at a time when that species normally returns to its northern hemisphere breeding grounds.

REFERENCE

- Klapste, J. 1977. The Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) in Australia. *Australian Bird Watcher*, 7:25-34.

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