
◆

Micropus pacificus, Fork-tailed (White-rumped)
Swifts.

Professor J. B. Cleland:—On 11th January, 1928, a sultry morning with a change approaching, many Swifts were seen at Encounter Bay from 7.45 to 9 a.m., coming from the direction of Rosetta Head (The Bluff), i.e. a little west of south, in groups of perhaps 30 or 40 at a time (the individuals perhaps 50 yards from each other) separated by intervals which made one think the birds had all passed over. Scattered birds were seen until 10 a.m. Many had been seen hawking round The Bluff just before 8 o'clock, but had not been seen on a fishing-yacht a little way out at the crayfish-pots—only when the yacht had returned to its moorings. The birds were flying slowly, flapping their wings and hawking. Most were easily within gunshot, and two were secured: ♀, iris dark brown, bill black, pharynx fleshy-white, legs black, total length to end of tail 6.9 in., to end of wings 8.1 in., span of wings 15.6 in. ♂, colours the same, total length to end of tail 6.6 in., to end of wings 8.4 in., span of wings 8.4 in. No entozoa or ectozoa on either. The eyes were very deeply set under the frontal arch, and protected in front by an oblique row of stiff bristles—devices suggesting protection of the eyes during rapid flight or gales. The nostrils pointed upwards. The mouth was very wide, the legs feathery. The humerus was very short. Stomach contents (identified by Mr. A. M. Lea, F.E.S.): (1) Honey-bee and heads of two others, heads of seven small bees, very small bee, bits of longicorn beetle, many other fragments, mostly of bees; (2) bit of a moth, chironomid fly, two very small bees and bits of another, braconid wasp, small jassid bug, weevil (*Haplonyx*), head of honey-bee, many other fragments, mostly of small bees and other small *Hymenoptera*.

Mr. Alfred Crompton:—Aldinga Bay, 10th January, 1928, at north end of Sellick's Beach a flight of Swifts working over cliffs, seashore, and a little out to sea, between 7.30 and 8 p.m.

Port Willunga, 11th January, 1928, between 7.30 and 9 a.m., a very large flight working as far as the eye could reach out to sea to some 600 yards inland, flying at various heights nearly all east and west, coming in from the sea, flying inland, to the above limit and then returning, with a general movement tending northward. No birds were visible soon after 10 a.m. when looked for again.

Mr. H. H. Newell, Hindmarsh Island:—10th January, 1928, about two or three hundred Swifts hawking after flying ants, which were in thousands. The birds flew low, and some came within a range of seven yards; the white rump was distinctly noticed. The birds travelled northwards at about 5.30 p.m., and had all disappeared within an hour.

Captain S. A. White noted the Swifts at Fulham on 10th January, 1928.

Dr. A. M. Morgan states that the species was seen off the Outer Harbour before the change on 15th January, 1928.

Mr. C. F. Rischbeith saw the Fork-tailed Swifts at Hawthorn towards the end of December, 1927.

The late Mr. Edgar R. Waite stated that he had seen one at North Kensington at 6.30 p.m. on 14th December, 1927, flying south-eastwards.

J. Sutton:—The shade temperatures at Adelaide about those dates were as follows:—12th December, 92.2°; 13th, 99.3°; 14th, 99.0°; 15th, 96.0°; 16th, 97.6°; 17th, 95.9°; 18th, 74.0°. 8th January, 91.8°; 9th, 102.0°; 10th, 105.4°; 11th, 90.0°; 12th, 79.2°; 13th, 89.3°; 14th, 98.2°; 15th, 107.7°; 16th, 78.3°.

As not much information is available on this species, the following extracts, although conflicting, may be of interest to members:—

Gould, "Handbook to the Birds of Australia" (1865), vol. i, pp. 105-6:—*Cypselus australis*.—"As I had never seen or heard of a true Swift in Australia, I was no less surprised than gratified when I discovered this species to be tolerably numerous on the Upper Hunter during my first visit to the district in 1838. Those I then observed were flying high in the air, and performing immense sweeps and circles, while engaged in the capture of insects. I succeeded in killing six or eight individuals, among which were adult examples of both sexes; but I was unable to obtain any particulars as to their habits and economy. It would be highly interesting to know whether this bird, like the Swallow,

returns annually to spend the months of summer in Australia. I think it likely that this may be the case, and that it may have been frequently confounded with the *Acanthylis caudacuta* (Spine-tailed Swift—J.S.), as I have more than once seen the two species united in flocks, hawking together in the cloudless skies, like the Martins and Swallows of England. Throat and rump white, upper and under surface of the body brown, the back tinged with a bronzy metallic lustre, each feather of the under surface margined with white, wings and tail dark brown; irides, bill, and feet black. It is considered by some ornithologists that this bird and the Swift with crescentic markings of white on the breast, which inhabits China and Amoorland, are the same. If this supposition be correct, this species ranges very widely over the surface of the globe."

Campbell, "Nest and Eggs of Australian Birds" (1900), pp. 530-531:—"The Australian or White-rumped Swift may sometimes be seen united in flocks with the Spine-tailed, the two species hawking together in our cloudless southern skies. The Australian Swift has been once recorded for Tasmania. It comes to Australia from Eastern Siberia, over Japan, China, Burmah, etc., returning thither about February. I have noted them in Riverina up to the first week in March. I possess a rarity in the shape of the egg of an Australian Swift, which was presented to me by the late Dr. Kutter, of Germany, and was taken by Dr. Dybowski in Eastern Siberia. I have since received a proper clutch from Mr. Alan Owston, Japan, who tells me that when on a yachting cruise to an island called Ukishimā, which is about half a mile long, 200 feet high, covered with evergreens and bamboo scrub, with cliffs all round, and about 20 miles south of Yokohama, he examined some caves on the south side, where he roughly estimated there must have been not less than 2,000 White-rumped Swifts breeding. The White-rumped Swift also breeds in company with the Spine-tailed Swift on the ledges of rock under the Kegon Waterfall (near Nikko, Japan). Two seasons in succession Mr. Owston first noticed the return of the White-rumped Swifts on the 15th of May—springtime in the north. But one midwinter—26th December, 1897—he saw more than a dozen of these birds when he thought they should have been away down south, perchance enjoying an Australian summer. By a somewhat strange coincidence, that was about the time of great bushfires, particularly in Tasmania and also on parts of the mainland, the smoke of which covered the face of the land and sea for thousands of miles. Could these Swifts have possibly lost their way and returned to the land of their nativity?"

Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum, vol. xvi (1892), pp. 448-450 (Ernst Hartert):—*Micropus pacificus*.—"Habitat Mongolia, Baikal, and the Amoor in the north, Assam, Cachar, and Burmah in the west, and extending over China and Japan to Australia, where it is probably only a winter visitor." There were specimens then in the Museum from Siberia, June; Salair, North-West Altai Mountains, July 30; North-West Mongolia, July; Cheefoo, China, June; Taku, China, March 22; Amoy, November; Canton; Formosa, Japan, May; Nagasaki, Japan, March 18 and 30; Cape York, December (voyage of H.M.S. 'Rattlesnake'); Moreton Bay, Queensland; Penang, Malay States; Thayetmyo, Burma, February 25; Amherst, Burma, July; Bankasoon, Annam, December 22; Sadiya, Assam, June 20; Dilkooah, Cachar, Assam, September; Bhutan, North India."

Catalogue of the Birds' Eggs in the British Museum, vol. 3 (1903), p. 81:—*Cypselus pacificus*.—The eggs of the White-rumped Large Swift measure from 1.04 to 1.12 inches in length, and from .65 to .69 inches in breadth. The specimens then held were two from Siberia, one from Darasun, Dauria (Trans-Baikalia, Siberia), five Formosa, three Ningpo, China.

From "The Ibis," 1904, p. 428:—"Dr. E. Hartert on Birds from the Banks of the Lena River; Field Notes by R. Hall (the 'Australian Ornithologist'). *Apus pacificus* = *Hirundo pacifica* (*Micropus pacificus*).—♂, ♀, adult, two young (full grown), from nest, Yakutsk (East Siberia), 25, 27/6/1903, 2/8/1903, 'bill black; iris blackish; foot reddish-brown in the young, blackish in the old birds.' In Yakutsk (27/6/1903) these Swifts were nesting upon beams under the market-place verandas as well as amongst them. They congregate in large numbers, but do not breed in close company. They fly quickly, soar well, and have a single shrill note. The bird has a strong grasp (with its four toes in the same plane), which is enough to pierce the fingers and draw blood. The nest consists of a few straws and feathers cemented by saliva. The eggs were two or three to a clutch. There was much difficulty in securing specimens of Swifts and Swallows. The people have a superstitious fear about disturbing them. The Chief of Police in Yakutsk, to whom I am indebted, arranged for a youth to accompany me at dusk to the quietest part of the market-place to obtain specimens. In the same place, on 1st August, the young were just leaving the nest. One fully-fledged bird was miserably thin. There was scarcely any fatty tissue about its body, and the sternum was but covered with dwarfed muscles. A second young bird was particularly fat. The parents

occasionally worry the Feather-toed Swallows which associate with them in nesting. This species was not met with further down the river than Yakutsk."

From Newton, "A Dictionary of Birds (1896), p. 936:—"The genus *Cypselus*, as noted by Willughby, with its American ally *Panyptila*, exhibits a structure of the foot not otherwise observed among birds. Not only is the hind toe consistently directed forwards, but the other three toes depart from the rule which ordinarily governs the number of phalanges in the bird's foot—a rule which applies to even so ancient a form as *Archaeopteryx*—and in the two *Cypseline* genera just named the series of digital phalanges is 2, 3, 3, 3, instead of 2, 3, 4, 5, which generally obtains in the class *Aves*. Other Swifts, however, do not depart from the normal arrangement, and the exception, remarkable as it is, must not be taken as of more value than is needed for the recognition of two sections or subfamilies, admitted by Mr. Selater in his monographical essay on the Family (P.Z.S. 1865, pp. 593-617)."

From Littler's *Birds of Tasmania* (1910), p. 76:—"The records concerning the visits of this Australian Swift, as it is sometimes called, are but few. The reason is not far to seek, for it is usually in company with the Spine-tailed species, whose powers of flight are well known. It is almost, if not quite, a matter of impossibility to distinguish one species from another, unless they are flying low and passing and repassing in front of the observer. The first record I made of the White-rumped Swift was during the autumn of 1902, when a number was seen in company with a large flock of Spinetails, the whole flying low down. This was late one afternoon. In February, 1896, Colonel Legge observed several examples among a large flock of Swifts 'dashing' about the homestead at Cullenswood."

From Mathews's "Birds of Australia," vol. 7 (1918-1919), p. 276-281:—"Mr. Frank Littler wrote me:—'Some half a dozen birds were seen on February 13, 1902, in company with a number of Spine-tailed Swifts, just at dusk, about South Launceston. They flew so low that I had no difficulty in distinguishing the two species, but this bird is a rare visitor to Tasmania.'"

Captain S. A. White has written me:—"These wonderful birds always visit us during thundery conditions with northerly winds, which always come before a change in the weather. During the summer they attract one's attention by their whistling call, something like the sound produced by forcing the breath through closed teeth, only much louder. Upon looking up they will be seen at times very high, describing circles in the

air and flying at a great speed. Many are of the opinion that these birds do not roost at night, but keep up their flight. One night, just at dusk, I saw a large party swoop down in a dense mass and enter the flags and reeds growing in a swamp, where they took up their quarters for the night. Upon one occasion specimens taken were found to be infested with vermin (flying lice).”

Mr. J. W. Mellor's notes read:—“At times these large Swifts pay visits to South Australia, and I have often seen them flying about the Adelaide Plains at the Reedbeds, but have not known them to settle even to rest, although sometimes they stay several days before departing again for more northern climes. Their visits here are generally in the summer-time, and are the fore-runners of stormy weather, their flight seeming to be forced in front of the wind and rain, and after hot sultry conditions; they come a few at first and high up in the air out of gunshot reach. They utter a peculiarly weird and loud whistle or wheezy screech as they dart about, and thus their presence is at once made known. They can be seen ‘hawking’ about after the insects, which are always plentiful just at the time and conditions of the weather when the Swifts arrive. When departing they circle up to a great height, and eventually are lost to view when they make away. Their large size and long narrow ‘rakish’ cut of wing make them very conspicuous in the air, and they can be easily distinguished from our common Swallows and Tree-Martins, with which they mingle during their aerial visitations to these parts.”

MacGillivray recorded (“Emu,” Vol. 13, p. 161, 1914):—“White-rumped Swifts.—Mr. McLennan made notes at Sedan (N.Q.) on 11th February, 1910, that probably applied to this bird: ‘Saw a large flight of Swifts passing over the tent at 7 p.m., flying north. Could not identify them, as it was too dark. 14th February, 1910.—Another flight of Swifts passed over, going north, at dusk. 8th April, 1910.—Saw some Swifts flying south-west this afternoon—Australian Swifts I think they were, as I distinctly saw the white rump. One of the men on the station told me that they usually put in an appearance after a steady fall of rain. At Cape York the earliest note is 5th November, 1911, Australian Swifts noted flying south. 16th November, 1911.—Locherbie (Cape York).—Australian Swifts flying south to-day. 26th December, 1911.—Saw a great flock of Swifts circling over the house a little before sundown. 4th March, 1912, Paira (Somerset, Cape York).—A large flock of Australian Swifts

noted flying in a southerly direction. 31st March, 1912, Lockerbie.—A large flock of Australian Swifts hawking over the forest country all day. 17th April, 1912, Lockerbie.—A few Australian Swifts hawking over open forest country near the house at sunset.’”

Berney wrote (“*Emu*,” Vol. 4, p. 45, 1904):—“Always more numerous (in N.Q.) than their Spine-tailed relative. In 1902 they did not show up till 2nd January, while in 1903 they made their first appearance on 5th November. In both years they left again during the first week in April.” In the sixth volume, p. 42, 1906, he added:—“A summer visitor, arriving about the end of September, when circumstances are very favourable, but as likely as not the first representatives will not be seen till November; the early part of April sees them off again. Verily, they are birds of passage—they never seem to have time to stop. Attracted by their screaming, you look up to see them racing high up overhead; they are in sight for 30 seconds, and then gone again. It is not often they come down low to feed, and I never saw them settle.

“Mr. Tom Carter has given me the following account:—“These birds were occasional visitors to Point Cloates (N.W.A.) in the summer months. They were usually observed when strong hot winds from the north-east were blowing, and their appearance was almost invariably a sign of unsettled weather. Sometimes they were seen in immense numbers, notably on 1st and 2nd April in 1898. Cossack and Roebourne (towns of considerable size, situated 250 miles north-east of Point Cloates) were partially destroyed by a hurricane on 2nd April, 1898. On 6th March, 1900, great numbers of these birds were also seen at Point Cloates, and a hurricane raged there that night. These birds were never observed by me in the South-West.’”

Mr. J. P. Rogers’s notes read:—“Parry’s Creek, N.W.A., October 24, 1908.—Some of these birds were flying fairly high, but just within gunshot, and one specimen was secured. There was only a small flock. A large flock of these birds had been noted on 24th September, but I could not be sure of their identity until I secured the present specimen. November 7.—A large flock passed by my camp at 5 p.m., flying high, and next morning another flock passed at 8 a.m. Point Torment, N.W.A., 22nd March, 1911.—These birds were here in hundreds to-day. A fall of two inches of rain the night before had brought out many flying ants, and these birds were hawking for them within a few feet of the ground. It is unusual to find them flying so low, as they are a difficult bird to collect under ordinary circumstances. March 30, 1911.—Since the 22nd these birds have been

very numerous, but fly very high. Melville Island, October 15, 1911.—A few birds passed the camp to-day flying very high, and on November 7, 1911, a small flock was seen late in the evening, and none were afterwards noted."

M'Lennan's notes read ("Emu," Vol. 16, p. 221, 1917):—"King River (Arnhem Land, N.T.), November 24, 1915.—Bird seen flying southwards. December 11, 1915.—Large flock of Swifts passed over camp after the rain, but not sure of identity. December 12, 1915.—Another flock passed after a heavy shower. December 25, 1915.—A number of *C. pacificus* seen circling high over sandstone ridges."

Mathews says that the nest and eggs are not authenticated. The exact breeding-place of the Australian visitor is at present unknown, as the range, given in the Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum, is now known to cover subspecific forms, and the breeding plumages are not exactly determined!

Notes on this species appear in the "S.A. Ornithologist," Vol. IX, Part 2, p. 68, and Part 3, p. 93.
