# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SWIFTS IN THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT

The following is an extract from my diary, under the date November 8, 1905:

> "About midday, a strong N-E wind blowing, several sparrows came on board. They must have been blown from the neighborhood of Cape Otway, a distance of about 200 miles . . . This wind had probably been blowing for several days."

This occurrence of birds over the seas south of Australia is always thought-provoking.

During January, 1969, my daughter, Joan Paton, noted about 20 Forktailed Swifts *(Apus pacificus)* hawking over the southern-most island of the Pearson group. These islands are situated in the Great Australian Bight about 40 miles from the mainland and about 20 miles from the intervening Flinders Island. They can consequently just be seen from the mainland. Several days previously there had been very strong NE winds blowing. What is the significance of the presence of swifts temporarily over a group of small islands, only about 600 acres in extent, with no other land between them and the Antarctic? Did the swifts get there by misadventure or deliberately? Several explanations for their presence must be considered. The most likely one is that they were caught in the strong wind and carried down it, hawking for insects, unable to regain a land mass until the Pearson Islands, where they were able to obtain some food supply hove in sight. Any such food supply was likely soon to have been exhausted, and one assumes their powers of flight and sight

Continued on page 142.

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Continued from page 125

would then have enabled them to regain the mainland. I think it quite unlikely, in spite of strong winds, that they deliberately followed a food trail so far from the mainland. It is also unlikely that the migratory impulse, which had brought the swifts from the Northern Hemisphere earlier in the season, was still operating in January.

We are thus left with the inference that, in spite of their powers of flight, strong winds of 30 miles (or more) per hour may be difficult for Fork-tailed Swifts to fight against unless they are able to secure some shelter from trees and hillslopes.

J. B. CLELAND.

1 Dashwood Road, Beaumont, S.A.

Received 2-12-69.