

House Swift – Broome, Western Australia

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Summary

This submission relates to sightings of House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*) during Tropical Cyclone Joyce, passing Broome in January 2018. House Swifts were initially observed with Pacific Swifts (*Apus pacificus*) at Cable Beach on the 11th of January, and later at Entrance Point, Broome South Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Broome Bird Observatory on the 12th of January. Photographs showing the distinctive features of House Swifts were obtained and additionally, a deceased specimen was collected and submitted to the Western Australian Museum (registered number A40252), identified as a House Swift (*Apus nipalensis subfurcatus*).



House Swift at Cable Beach on 11th January 2018.

Species: House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*)

Location: Broome, Western Australia

Dates: The swifts were first observed along the Cable Beach foredunes just north of the esplanade on the 11th of January 2018. They were subsequently seen the following day (12th of January) at Entrance Point, the Broome South Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Broome Bird Observatory. This period coincided with the passing of Tropical Cyclone Joyce.

Circumstances of sighting: On the 11th of January 2018, NJ and BG visited the Cable Beach esplanade during the rainy and gusty approach of Tropical Cyclone Joyce. A small flock of swifts were observed to the north, foraging over coastal dunes. NJ and BG contacted GS, as well as Clare & Grant Morton, who soon arrived to also observe the swifts. All observers noticed at least three swift species, with the majority concluded in the field to be [vagrant] House Swifts.

House Swifts were the most abundant swift species observed in Broome during Tropical Cyclone Joyce, with Pacific Swift being surprisingly low in number. A summary of high counts is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of House Swift counts by the authors at various Broome locations (11-13 January 2018).

Location	Date	Count
Cable Beach	11 January 2018	Initially 5—7, later 20—25
Entrance Point & Broome Port	12 January 2018	Minimum 30, but likely 40+
Broome South Wastewater Treatment Plant	12 January 2018	1
Broome Bird Observatory	12 January 2018	3
Cable Beach	13 January 2018	1 deceased*; WAM A40252

*refer to Johnstone and Greatwich (2018).

Physical description:

The below points illustrate features of the swifts visible [primarily] from photographs, with supplementary field observations. For a detailed description of the specimen, see Johnstone and Greatwich (2018). Note that Figures 1-6 are highly likely to depict several individuals, as the weather conditions at the time made tracking individuals slightly tricky.

General:

The swifts were generally in the company of the more familiar Pacific Swift, allowing direct comparisons. Generally, they were similar to a Pacific Swift, but showed subtle differences in the wing shape, body shape and tail shape.

Size: The swifts were directly comparable in size to Pacific Swifts and [unidentified] swiftlets (Edible nest/Black nest/Himalayan). They appeared slightly smaller than the Pacific Swifts, with a more robust body, relatively shorter tail, and broader base to relatively shorter wings. However, they appeared larger than the swiftlets, being longer-winged and having more robust bodies.

Wings: The wings were generally black on the both the upper and lower sides (e.g. Fig 1, Fig 2). The wing shape varied depending on the flight of the bird, but overall was broad at the base (closest to the body) and formed a 'sickle shape' towards the primary tips (e.g. Fig 2, Fig 3). There appeared to be very little wear of the flight feathers (e.g. Fig 1, Fig 6).

Tail and rump: When closed, the tail showed a distinct fork (e.g. Fig 2, Fig. 5, Fig 6). Similarly to the flight feathers, there appeared to be very little wear, or active moult of the tail feathers (Fig 1). The upper and lower sides of the tail were essentially black (Fig. 4, Fig 6). This contrasted dramatically with a very white and broad rump patch (e.g. Fig 1, Fig 6), which appeared clean white in the field.

Underparts: The underparts of the swifts were dark, except for a lighter brownish-grey throat (Fig 1, Fig 3), and white 'saddles' formed by the rump wrapping onto the flanks (Fig 4). The throat colour contrasted with most images of House Swifts in field guides, which tend to depict clean white throats. Perhaps the non-white throat colour was also indicative of age class (i.e. juvenile).

Upperparts: The mantle and back appeared uniformly black (Fig 1, Fig 6), extending as a dark wedge onto the upper [white] rump (Fig 1).

Head: The head (particularly the cap) was generally dark, with a slightly lighter collar connecting to the paler throat (e.g. Fig. 2, Fig. 5).

Age: The specimen vouchered with the Western Australian Museum was determined to be a juvenile. Available photos are also suggestive of juveniles, with pale edging noticeable on some remiges (e.g. Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Upperparts of an observed swift. Note the spread tail and lack of wear. Also note the pale edging to the greater primary coverts, and outer retrices lighter than the inner. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.



Figure 2. Underparts of an observed swift. Note the notched tail when closed, and brownish throat. Also note the 'sickle-winged' appearance when wings held at this angle. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.



Figure 3. Underparts of an observed swift. Note the pale, greyish throat. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.



Figure 4. Underparts of an observed swift. Note the pale edging to the underwing coverts, and white 'saddles'. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.



Figure 5. Underparts of an observed swift. Note relative tail to body length and relatively short wings with broad base. Also note the compact body. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.



Figure 6. Upperparts of an observed swift at Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: NJ.

Behaviour:

The swifts were generally observed foraging low over coastal dunes vegetated with small shrubs, generally in the company of the less-abundant Pacific Swifts and swiftlets.

Some swifts [and some Pacific Swifts] were observed clinging almost upside-down to the outer leaf-teeth of *Casuarina* at the Cable Beach site during heavy rain on the 11 January 2018 (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Example of swift roosting in *Casuarina* during cyclone. Cable Beach. 11 January 2018. Photo: BG [Both House and Pacific Swift were observed flying into the *Casuarina* to roost, but it was not determined if the individual in the above figure was a House or Pacific]

Elimination of confusion species

The distinctive plumage (striking white rump, dark body, and pale throat), as well as shape (sickle winged with short, forked tail) quickly ruled out most other confusion species. However, the below taxa were deemed necessary to rule out further.

Pacific Swift (and Fork-tailed Swift complex) (*Apus pacificus*): The observed swifts were directly comparable to Pacific Swifts, and although their plumage was very similar, they showed three clear structural differences:

- Overall smaller in size with more compact body;
- Relatively broader-based and shorter wings; and
- Relatively shorter tail.

Photographs of the tail revealed what appeared to be relatively fresh tail feathers, which assisted in ruling out a Pacific Swift with a worn (or in active moult) tail.

Little Swift (*Apus affinis*): The Little Swift was formerly treated as conspecific with House Swift, and is not surprisingly similar in appearance. However, the collected specimen (Johnstone and Greatwich 2018) showed dark shaft streaks on the rump, which is contra Little Swift, as all races of Little Swift show clean white rumps (Chantler and Driessens 2000). Little Swift also tends to show a squarer tail (when closed), whereas the House Swift typically shows a distinct fork (which is visible in most figures above) (Chantler and Driessens 2000).

Conclusion:

The observed swifts were concluded to be House Swifts (*Apus affinis*), with the specimen collected identified by the Western Australia Museum as race *subfurcatus*. The authors believe it is reasonable to conclude that all the House Swifts observed during Tropical Cyclone Joyce were also of this race.

Previous occurrences: House Swifts have previously been recorded in Broome, generally associated with tropical cyclones. Five previous Broome records have been accepted by BARC, with two additional records (Mar 2004, Jan 2012) not (yet?!) submitted.

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References

Chantler, P. and Driessens, G. (2000) *Swifts – A guide to the Swifts and Treeswifts of the World*. Second Edition. Yale University Press.

Johnstone, R. E. and Greatwich, B. (2018) First Western Australian specimen of House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*) with notes on its distribution and migration. *Western Australian Naturalist* **31**(2): 105-112.