House Swift – Broome, Western Australia

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Summary

This submission relates to sightings of House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*) during Tropical Cyclone Kelvin, passing Broome in February 2018. House Swifts were initially observed with Pacific Swifts (*Apus pacificus*) at Entrance Point on the 16th of February. A Broome local rescued an individual allowing close examination of its features. Images of flying birds were also obtained. The authors conclude that the observed swifts were House Swifts (*Apus nipalensis subfurcatus*).

House Swift at Entrance Point on 18th February 2018.

Species: House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*)

Location: Broome, Western Australia

Dates: The swifts were first observed at Entrance Point and Broome Port on the 16th of February 2018. They were subsequently seen the following day (17th of January) at Entrance Point, Streeter's Jetty, and a residential address in Broome. The last observation was at Entrance Point on the 18th of February. This period coincided with the passing of Tropical Cyclone Kelvin.

Circumstances of sighting: On the 16th of February 2018, GS and BG visited Entrance Point independently during the rainy and gusty approach of Tropical Cyclone Kelvin. Numerous Pacific Swifts were present, but among them were at least four swifts thought to be [vagrant] House Swifts. NJ arrived shortly after to also observe the swifts.

House Swifts were observed in small numbers (two – four individuals) across several days during Tropical Cyclone Kelvin. A summary of counts is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of House Swift counts at various Broome locations (16 – 18 February 2018).

Location	Date	Count
Entrance Point and Broome Port	16 February 2018	4+ (GS, BG, NJ)
Entrance Point and Broome Port	17 February 2018	2 (CJH *et al.)*
Streeter's Jetty	17 Februrary 2018	4+ (CJH *et al.*)
Broome	17 Februrary 2018	1 rescued (BG collected)
Entrance Point and Broome Port	18 February 2018	3 (BG)

Physical description:

The descriptions below illustrate features of the swifts visible [primarily] from photographs of a rescued individual in the hand, with supplementary observations of free-flying individual(s). Note that Figures 7 – 10 are highly likely to depict several individuals, as the weather conditions at the time made tracking individuals difficult.

General:

The swifts were generally in the company of Pacific Swifts, 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 dark grey on the upperside (Fig 5), but slightly paler on the underside (Fig 6). The wing shape varied depending on the flight of the bird, but overall was broad at the base (closest to the body) and very slightly 'sickle shaped' towards the primary tips (e.g. Fig 7, Fig 9). There appeared to be very little wear of the flight feathers (e.g. Fig 5, Fig 10).

Tail and rump: When closed, the tail showed a distinct fork (e.g. Fig 3, Fig. 9). The retrices showed minor wear, but were still in relatively good condition (Fig. 4). The upper and lower sides of the tail were generally dark, with outer retrices generally paler than inners (Fig. 3, Fig 4). The dark tail contrasted with a very white and broad rump patch (Fig 2), which appeared clean white in the field (Fig. 8), but showed fine dark shaft streaks in the hand (Fig 2).

Underparts: The underparts of the swifts were dark, except for a clean white throat (Fig 1). Due to the lighting, it could not be determined whether other individuals seen in the field had white throats, or the brownish-grey throats indicative of a juvenile.

Upperparts: The mantle and back appeared uniformly black (Fig 8), although the bird in hand showed slightly pale edging on the back feathers (Fig 2).

Head: The head (particularly the cap) was generally dark (Fig 1).

Age: Despite the white throat, the pale-fringed remiges are suggestive of a juvenile.

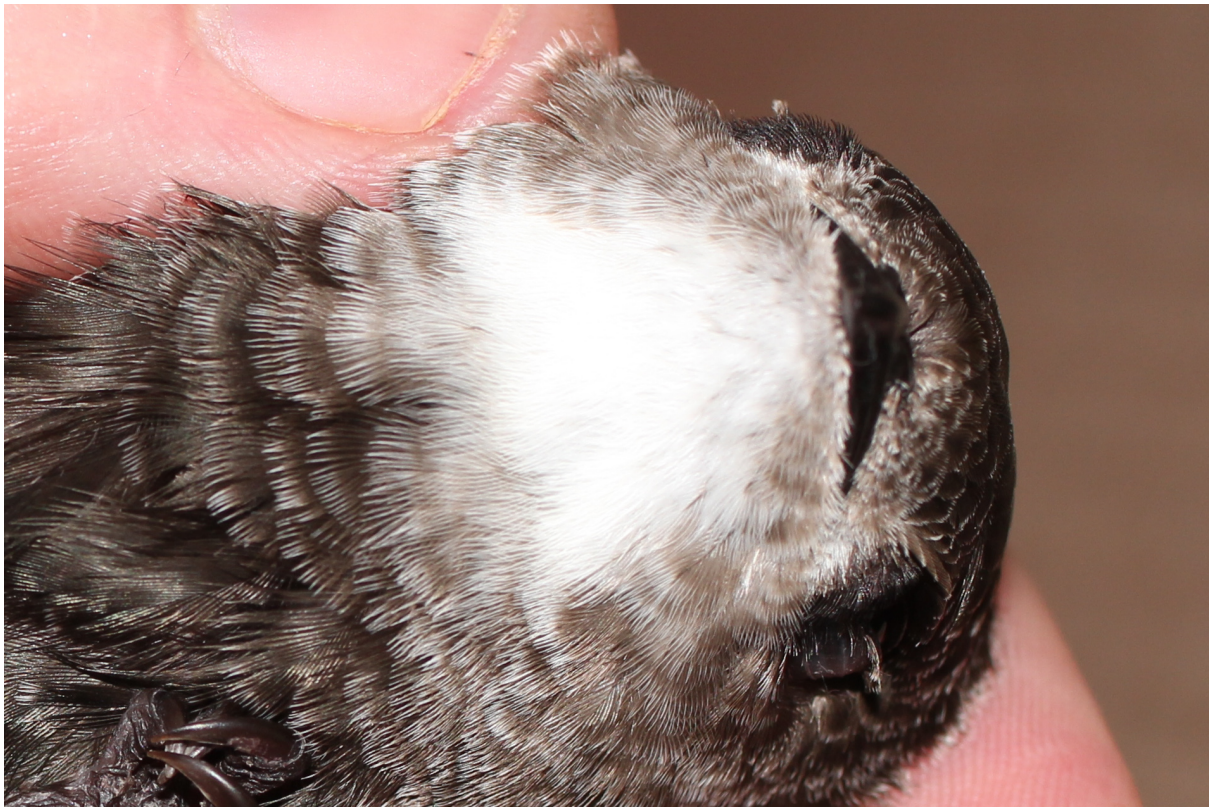

Figure 1. Throat region of rescued swift. Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 2. Rump region of rescued swift. Of note here are the fine, dark shaft streaks of the white rump feathers. Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 3. Undertail of the rescued swift. Note minor wear to the retrices, but the outer retrices appear fully grown (c.f. Pacific Swift in tail moult). Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 4. Uppertail of the rescued swift. Note central retrices subtlety darker than outers. Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 5. Upperwing of rescued swift. Note that no obvious primary moult is taking place. Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 6. Underwing of rescued swift. Note the underwing is considerably paler than the upperwing. Broome. 17 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 7. Observed swift in flight. Note the relatively compact appearance, white 'saddles', and relatively broad, but slightly sickle-shaped wings. Entrance Point. 18 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 8. Observed swift in flight. Note the relatively short tail and obvious white rump. Entrance Point. 18 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 9. Underparts of observed swift in flight. Note the slightly forked tail, pale throat, and general compact appearance. Entrance Point. 18 February 2018. Photo: BG

Figure 10. Underparts of observed swift in flight. Note the spread tail, showing what we consider to be fully-grown outer retrices. Entrance Point. 18 February 2018. Photo: BG

Behaviour:

The swifts were generally observed foraging low to high over coastal dunes vegetated with small shrubs, generally in the company of the more abundant Pacific Swifts.

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 (i.e. Fig 11).

Figure 11. Pacific Swift showing ragged moult – typical of most individuals of this species at the time. Entrance Point. 18 February 2018. Photo: BG

Little Swift (*Apus affinis*): The Little Swift was formerly treated as conspecific with House Swift, and is not surprisingly similar in appearance. However, the rescued individual 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 nipalensis*), with the dark shaft streaks present on the rump of the rescued individual suggestive of race *subfurcatus*. This conclusion agrees with a House Swift specimen collected at Cable Beach (Broome) in January 2018, identified by the Western Australian Museum as race *subfurcatus* (Johnstone and Greatwich 2018).

Previous occurrences: House Swifts have previously been recorded in Broome on eight occasions, generally associated with tropical cyclones. Five previous Broome records have been accepted by BARC, with two records (Mar 2004, Jan 2012) not (yet?!) submitted, and one record (Jan 2018) currently under review.

Submitter contact details:

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.