

House Swift – Broome, Western Australia

Submitted by: Nigel Jackett, George Swann and Bruce Greatwich

Summary

This submission relates to sighting of a House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*) following the passing of Tropical Cyclone Riley. The House Swift was observed with an unidentified swiftlet (*Aerodramus* sp.) at Entrance Point, Broome on the 25th of January. Photographs showing distinctive features of House Swifts were obtained.



House Swift at Entrance Point, Broome on 25th January 2019

SUBMISSION

Species: House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*)

Location: Entrance Point, Broome, Western Australia

Date: The swift was observed on the 25th January 2019, a day after Tropical Cyclone Riley passed to the west of Broome.

Circumstances of sighting: On the 25th of January 2019, NJ visited Entrance Point to check for swifts following the passing of Tropical Cyclone Riley. Upon arrival, an unidentified dark swiftlet (*Aerodramus* sp.) was noticed over the dunes to the north. NJ relocated closer to the swiftlet, when a House Swift was noticed in its company. NJ contacted GS and BG, who both arrived shortly thereafter. All observers agreed with the identification of House Swift while in the field. Interestingly, no Pacific Swifts (*Apus pacificus*) were recorded on that day (but at least two were seen the previous morning). The House Swift (and swiftlet) was not re-sighted following this day.

Weather conditions: Sunshine with rainy squalls. Moderate easterly, 10-15 knots.

Physical description:

The below points illustrate features of the swifts visible [primarily] from photographs, with supplementary field observations.

Size: The swift was in the company of an *Aerodramus* sp. swiftlet (Fig. 7, 8), allowing direct comparisons. The swift was larger (noticeably larger with good views, but still relatively close in size) than the swiftlet, with a more robust build and longer-winged appearance.

Wings: The wings were generally black on both the upper and lower sides (e.g. Fig 1, 6). The wing shape varied depending on the flight of the bird, but overall was broad at the base (closest to the body) and formed an arc (e.g. 'sickle shaped') towards the pointed primary tips (e.g. Fig. 1, 5). There did not appear to be any active moult of the remiges.

Tail and rump: When held closed, the tail showed a small, but distinct fork (Fig. 2), becoming a more obvious fork as the retrices expand (Fig. 1, 5). Similarly to the flight feathers, there appeared to be no active moult of the retrices when the tail was fully spread (Fig 3). The upper tail appeared concolourous with the rest of the body (Fig. 6), while the underside of the tail was perhaps slightly

paler (Fig. 3), and similar to the underside of the remiges. This contrasted dramatically with a very white and broad rump patch (Fig. 4, 6), which appeared clean white in the field.

Underparts: The underparts of the swifts were dark, except for a lighter, off-white throat (e.g. Fig. 2, 5), and white 'saddles' formed by the rump wrapping onto the flanks (Fig. 4). The throat colour differed to most plates of House Swifts in field guides, which tend to depict clean white throats. However, this feature has been noted on other House Swifts seen in Broome in recent years (e.g. Johnstone & Greatwich 2018), and is suspected of being linked to age (i.e. juvenile).

Upperparts: The mantle and back appeared uniformly black/dark brown (Fig. 4, 6), contrasting with a clean white rump band (Fig. 4, 6).

Head: Similar in colour to the rest of the body (i.e. dark brown), with a large, off-white throat patch (e.g. Fig. 2).

Age: Based on the lack of a *clean* white throat patch, the observed swift was thought to be a juvenile. However, the images of the flight feathers were of too low quality to support this.



Figure 1. Underparts of the observed swift. Note the forked, slightly spread tail, sickle-shaped wings and light throat patch.



Figure 2. Underparts of the observed swift. Note the light throat patch, and small notch present when tail closed.



Figure 3. Underparts of observed swift. Note the spread tail showing complete set of retrices, and thereby ruling out a Pacific Swift with moulted outer retrices. Also note contrasting darker underwing coverts with paler remiges.



Figure 4. Rear view of observed swift. Note the bold white side of rump patch.



Figure 5. Underparts of the observed swift. Note the distinct fork and sickle-shaped wings.



Figure 6. Upperparts of observed swift. Despite the poor quality, note the complete white rump band.



Figure 7. Profile view of the *Aerodramus* sp. swiftlet in company.



Figure 8. Underparts of the *Aerodramus* sp. swiftlet in company.

Behaviour:

The swift was observed foraging low over coastal dunes vegetated with small shrubs, generally in the company of the *Aerodramus* sp. swiftlet.

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 swift was not seen alongside Pacific Swifts, inhibiting helpful comparisons. Structurally, the observed swift had a more compact appearance than Pacific Swift, with relatively shorter wings (broad at the base), and importantly, short, and what appeared to fully grown outer retrices, that were not longer than the inner retrices. Relative to the *Aerodramus* sp. swiftlet, a Pacific Swift would have appeared significantly larger, whereas the observed swift was only slightly larger.

Little Swift (*Apus affinis*): The Little Swift (found west of South Asia) was formerly treated as conspecific with House Swift, and is not surprisingly similar in appearance. Little Swift typically show a squarish tail when closed (Chantler and Driessens 2000, Svensson *et al.* 2009), whereas House Swift typically show a distinct fork (which is visible in most figures above) (Chantler and Driessens 2000). However, the presence of important features such as dark shaft-streaks on the white rump (contra Little Swift), which was apparent on House Swifts recorded in Broome in 2018, could not be observed in the available images.

For a collection of Little Swift reference images, see:

https://ebird.org/media/catalog?taxonCode=litswi1&sort=rating_rank_desc&q=Little%20Swift%20-%20Apus%20affinis

Previous occurrences: House Swifts have previously been recorded in Broome on nine occasions, and have generally associated with tropical cyclones in the region. Four previous Broome records have been accepted by BARC (Cases 235, 302, 496, 686) with three additional records (Mar 2004, Jan 2012, Mar 2018) not submitted, and two records (Cases 1032, 1034) currently under review.

Submitter contact details:

Nigel Jackett nigel.jackett@gmail.com 0472 529 904	George Swann info@kimberleybirdwatching.com.au 0429 706 800	Bruce Greatwich pezocc@gmail.com 0407 292 676
--	---	---

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.

Svensson, L., Mullarney, K. And Zetterstrom, D. (2009) *Collins Bird Guide*. Second Edition. HarperCollins Publishers, London.