

Submission to Birdlife Australia Rarities Committee

Species: House Swift *Apus nipalensis*
Location: West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Indian Ocean
Observation Date: 19 March 2017
Submission No. 1139
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Circumstances

On 19 March 2017 GC found a House Swift *Apus nipalensis* at North Park on West Island in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and photographed it with a Nikon D7200 camera and 600 mm zoom lens.

Description

See Figures 1 and 2. This was an *Apus*-type swift with long narrow wings, a chunky cigar-shaped body, and a short tail that was shallowly forked (Figure 1). It appeared much less attenuated in the wings, tail and body than a typical Fork-tailed Swift *Apus pacificus*. The tail was broader than the body. The tail was shallowly forked when it was tightly folded and square-tipped when it was widely spread (Figure 2).

The plumage was generally very dark grey to blackish, but not jet black. There was an off-white throat patch that was blurry and not sharply demarcated. The narrow white rump band was brighter than the throat patch. It wrapped slightly onto the flanks behind and below the trailing edge of the wing (thus including some flank feathers). The photos do not reveal any streaking on the rump. There was fine whitish scaling on the underbody. The secondaries, greater secondary coverts of the upperwing and underwing, and all the primary coverts of the underwing had fine white tips. Browner feathers on the face, the upper flanks and the lower belly are apparently old worn feathers contrasting with the majority of fresh feathers.

Identification

Pacific Swift *A. pacificus* and allies

While the shape of this bird fits House Swift *Apus pacificus*, some plumage aspects resemble Pacific Swift. House and Pacific swifts can usually be distinguished by shape, with Pacific having longer, narrower and more pointed (sickle-shaped) wings and a longer, more deeply forked tail (Higgins 1999; Chantler & Driessens 2000; Menkhorst et al. 2017). However, when Pacific is moulting its wing can appear shorter and blunter and its tail can appear shorter and less deeply forked than normal. In these circumstances Pacific can resemble the shape of House, although it is rare that both wings and both sides of the tail are perfectly symmetrical and neat (DJ pers. obs).

Adult Pacific Swifts typically undergo a complete (pre-basic) moult in the Austral summer that is completed around March (Rogers in Higgins 1999), although some (perhaps second cycle birds and failed breeders) finish earlier in December and January (Rogers in Higgins 1999; DJ pers. obs). In House Swift the situation may be more complicated because some (sedentary) populations breed twice a year whereas migratory populations would not (Higgins 1999).

It is therefore important to be certain that this is not a larger swift in moult. Figure 3 shows that all 10 primaries are present in both wings and all five rectrices are present on both sides of the tail.

There are some worn head and body feathers, so the moult is not complete and it is possible that both P10s and T5s are still growing-in. However, there is no sign of asymmetry, and both P10s are no more than a few millimetres short of P9. Therefore the feathers are fully grown or very close to it (i.e. primary moult score of 50 or 49) and moult is not influencing the shape of the wings and tail to any significant degree.

Figure 4 compares the North Park swift with illustrations of House Swift and Fork-tailed Swift from *The Australian Bird Guide* (Menkhorst et al. 2017). Most aspects of the shape of the North Park swift (chunky body, notched tail that is square when fanned, and tail that is broader than the body) match House Swift and eliminate Fork-tailed Swift (Higgins 1999; Chantler & Driessens 2000; Menkhorst et al. 2017) (and the very similar Cook's, Blyth's and Salim Ali's Swifts that recently have been split from Fork-tailed, e.g. Gill et al. 2020). The tail structure is compelling. House typically has a fork of about 10 mm and no more than 5 mm difference between adjacent feathers, while Fork-tailed has a fork of over 30 mm and differences of over 20 mm between adjacent inner rectrices (Higgins 1999). Figures 2 and 4 indicate that the North Park swift had a shallow fork and differences of only a few millimetres in length between adjacent rectrices, matching House Swift. The wings do appear narrower and more pointed than expected for House Swift, being intermediate between the illustrations of House and Fork-tailed from the *ABG* (Figure 4). This does not preclude House Swift, as the wing shape can vary somewhat depending on how the wings are held. Figure 5 compares a different photo of the North Park swift compared with the *ABG* illustration of House Swift, and provides a better (but still not perfect) match. These comparisons indicate that wing-shape may not be as distinctive as sometimes implied and should be used with care.

House Swift is consistently described as having black underparts without obvious signs of scaling. (e.g. Wells 1999; Higgins 1999; Chantler & Driessens 2000; Robson 2000; Brazil 2009; Eaton et al. 2016). Menkhorst et al. (2017) stated that "Diagnostically, dark underparts of House lack scaling, but close views required to confirm this." Here, the excellent photograph by GC in Figure 1 provides close views to confirm that this House Swift has clear scaling on the fresh contour feathers of the under body and underwing. This scaling is certainly not as bold as it would be on a fresh Fork-tailed Swift, but is still clear and not uniformly black. The retained, browner feathers on the under body lack pale fringes (Figure 1), evidently due to wear.

The throat patch of the North Park swift is not as white or as neatly defined as expected for House Swift (Figure 1). However, although it is sullied, it is not scaly like the throat of Fork-tailed (cf. Chantler & Driessens 2000). Evidently there is more variation in House Swift than is usually recognised.

The extremely fanned tail (as captured in Figure 3) appears to be an aspect typical of House Swift and inconsistent with Fork-tailed Swift. The three most recent submissions to BARC from Broome in 2018 and 2019 (cases 1032, 1034 and 1052) all included photos of their subject House Swifts with a fanned tail like this. It has potential as a useful field character, but needs testing.

Little Swift *A. affinis*

Little Swift is sometimes split and sometimes included with House Swift. Chantler and Driessens (2000) and Gill et al. (2020) recognised six subspecies in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. All are paler and browner than the typically more blackish House Swift (although it is not entirely helpful in this case). Five of these have square tails that have no notch when folded, and are well-

rounded when spread. The exception is *sinagalensis* of South Asia that has blacker plumage and a “slight” tail fork (Chantler and Driessens 2000; Higgins 1999).



Figure 1. The North Park swift on West Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 19 March 2017, showing salient features that identify it as a House Swift. Photo by Geoff Christie.



Figure 2. The changing tail shape of the North Park swift. Photos by Geoff Christie.



Figure 3. Count of primaries and rectrices on the North Park swift. Photo by Geoff Christie.

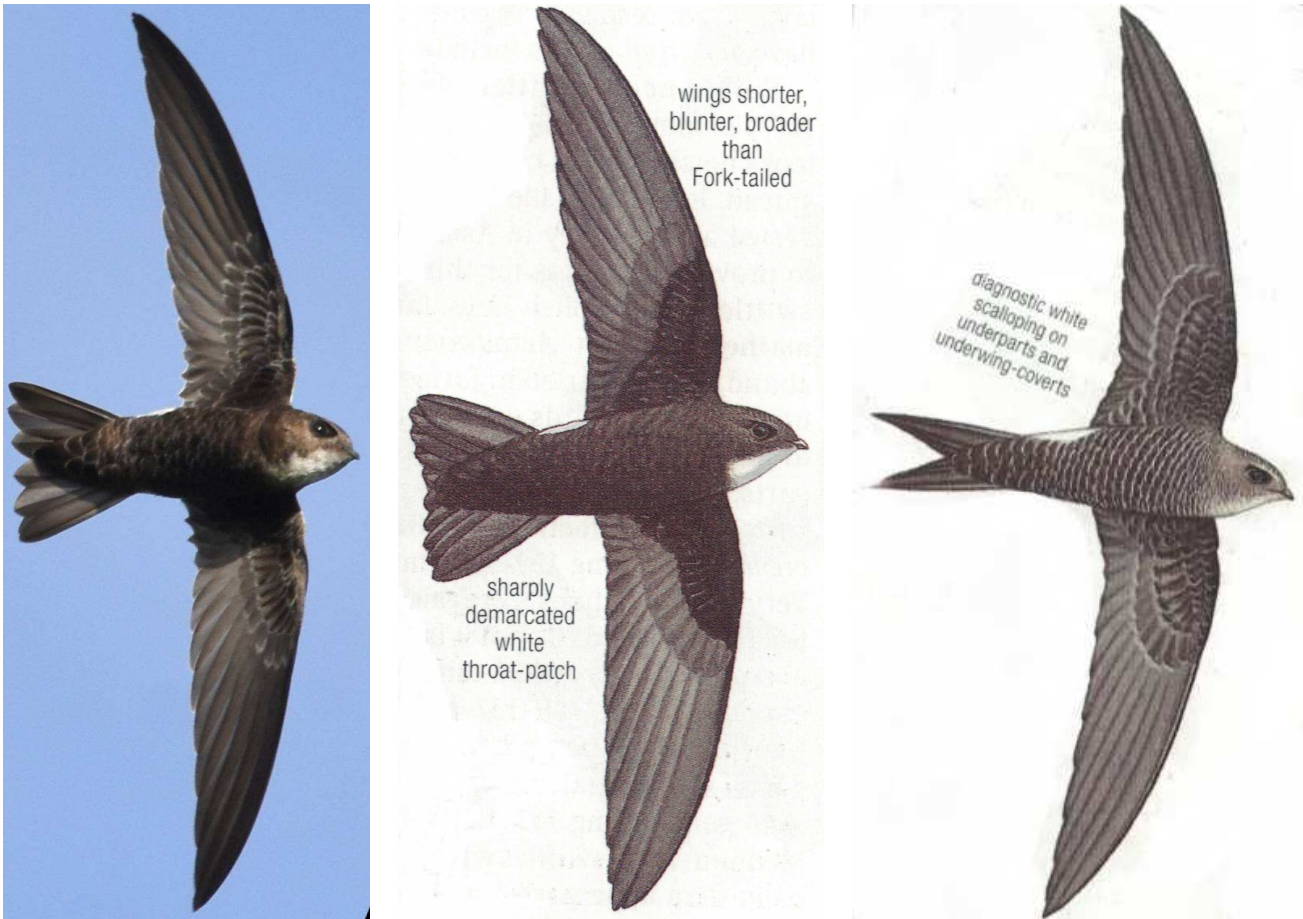


Figure 4. The North Park swift compared with illustrations of House Swift (centre) and Fork-tailed Swift from Menkhorst et al. (2017). Photo by Geoff Christie and Illustrations by Jeff Davies.



Figure 5. The North Park swift compared again with illustrations of House Swift. Photo by Geoff Christie and Illustration by Jeff Davies.



Figure 6. Further views of the North Park swift. Photos by Geoff Christie.

Ageing

Swifts typically have a simple moult strategy with a single complete moult each cycle and usually no inserted or formative moults in the first cycle (Higgins 1999; Howell 2010). The second pre-basic (post juvenile) moult occurs nearly a year after fledging. The North Park bird has mostly fresh plumage, including all fresh remiges and rectrices (Figure 3), but a few old retained feathers in the head and underparts. Thus it was in its second cycle or older.

Subspecies

According to Chantler & Driessens (2000) and Gill et al. (2020) there are four subspecies of House Swift. So far, *A.n. subfurcatus* is the only one identified in Australia, with one specimen from Point Stuart NT in March 1979 (Higgins 1999) and one specimen from Broome WA in January 2018 (Johnstone & Greatwitch 2018).

Two subspecies are safely eliminated. *A. n. kuntzi* is resident in Taiwan and has a strongly streaked rump. *A.n. furcatus* of Java and Bali is considered a resident and has staggered outer rectrices (i.e. T5 is a few millimetres longer than T4) (Chantler & Driessens 2000; Higgins 1999).

A.n. subfurcatus is mostly resident in South East Asia (Wells 1999; Chantler & Driessens 2000) and has the most glossy upperparts. *A.n. nipalensis* ranges from Japan through South East Asia to South Asia, and some northern populations are migratory (Wells 1999), so it might be expected in Australia. Chantler & Driessens (2000) and Higgins (1999) noted only that it is not as blue-black as *subfurcatus*. Johnstone & Greatwitch (2018, p. 108) gave long but vague reasons for identifying the Broome specimen as *subfurcatus*: “coloration and size, including the rounded, greyish throat patch, blackish upperparts with slight bluish gloss; white rump with most feathers having a dark shaft line; having the outer two rectrices of roughly equal length and depth of tail fork”. It is not clear how this set of characters eliminates *nipalensis* other than 1 mm of tail length and the relative assessment of

how glossy black the upperparts are. They suggested that the greyish throat on the Broome swift was consistent with *subfurcatus* rather than *nipalensis*, but did not cite a source to support that.

The brownish head of the North Park swift matches descriptions of *furcatus*, although that form is eliminated by tail structure. The photos did not capture whether the upperparts are sufficiently glossy deep blue-back or not to distinguish between *subfurcatus* and *nipalensis*. Perhaps the brownish throat is indicative of *subfurcatus*, as implied by Johnstone & Greatwich (2018). However, there seems to be no firm way to distinguish between *subfurcatus* and *nipalensis* in this instance.

Status

BARC has reviewed 23 claims of House Swift and accepted 13 of them, but there have also been many other unsubstantiated reports. All accepted cases have been from tropical locations except for Case 177, which was from Caboolture in South-east Queensland. This would be the first confirmed record from The Cocos (Keeling) Islands. However, Johnstone & Darnell (2017) listed it without explanation, which might relate to this report or another unsubstantiated record.

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Contributions and Acknowledgements

GC saw and photographed the bird, and GC and PJ documented it in their monthly bird report newsletter for CKI. The submission was compiled by DJ. Thanks to Ian McAllan for providing information on the status of birds on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

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