

## White-collared Swift: New to Ontario and Canada

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On 10 June 2002, a White-collared Swift (*Streptoprocne zonaris*) was seen briefly from the Marsh Trail at Rondeau Provincial Park. The record, which has been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Crins 2003), becomes the first for Ontario and Canada.

### Circumstances

On the afternoon of 9 June 2002, I arrived in Toronto from the UK at the start of a week-long birding trip. It was my first visit to Canada since 1987 and my first to North America since 1993. Although I knew that spring migration would be more or less over, there were several species of breeding warblers that I hoped to add to my life list. One of these, Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*), was the reason I decided to make Rondeau my first destination. I spent the evening of 9 June birding around the Tulip Tree Trail, renewing my acquaintance with birds I used to know very well, having lived in Quebec from 1982 to 1985. I was pleased to discover that many field characters, and quite a few calls and songs, were still stored in my memory.

On 10 June, I was up well before dawn, and I started walking the Marsh Trail at around 0500h. The sky was clear and there was very little breeze, if any. Once the

sun rose, it soon warmed up and became a bright, though somewhat hazy, morning. I spent three very pleasant hours pottering along the first part of the trail, enjoying the sight of old friends such as Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*), Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) and Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*). I was enjoying myself immensely and, for once, rarities were the last thing on my mind.

At 0800h, as I stood listening to the birdsong and debating whether or not to attempt a photograph of a superbly lit male Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) perched on a nearby branch, I noticed what appeared to be a swift flying directly towards me from the direction of the lake. As I thought "swift", I simultaneously thought "impossible" because this was clearly a very large bird. I was well aware that the only common swift species in eastern North America is the Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*), although I had not yet seen any on my trip.

Various other unlikely possibilities flashed through my mind, including Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) and Eurasian Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*). But despite these stray thoughts, I knew that it was a swift,

even in an almost head-on view, and its appearance as it came closer confirmed my initial instinctive identification. It also clearly was *not* a Chimney Swift. With the sun more or less behind me and the bird approaching from the west, the light conditions were excellent. The bird continued to fly straight towards me and passed directly overhead at a height of perhaps 10 metres, before continuing inland. Its plumage was amazing: entirely dark with a gleaming white band across the upper breast. I had an excellent view of the underparts but I did not see the upperparts at all.

My first reaction was to reach for my copy of Sibley (2000), the only field guide I had with me. I remembered that there was a

species of swift in the West that had white as well as black in the plumage. I had seen that species in California in 1993, and although I could not remember its name or its exact appearance, I imagined that it might turn up as a vagrant in the East from time to time. However, when I opened the book and looked at the paintings of White-throated Swift (*Aeronautes saxatalis*), I realized that it did not match the appearance of my bird at all. Nor did Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) or Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*).

At this point, I tried to convince myself that I was imagining things. But I knew that, however brief the view, I had seen this bird very well indeed. It seemed that I had finally succumbed to the "it isn't in the book" syndrome that I myself had derided on several occasions in the past. Given that it certainly wasn't in the book, what could I do? I contented myself with drawing a quick sketch in my field notebook (Figure 1) and adding some notes as I returned to the car. By this time I had unearthed a vague memory of a swift I saw in Venezuela in 1999. I even thought I could remember its name—White-collared Swift—but I had no reason to suppose that it ever occurred in North America. As I walked back towards my car, I had plenty of opportunity to study Chimney Swifts, several of which appeared very soon after the large swift and may well have arrived with it. Also present were Purple



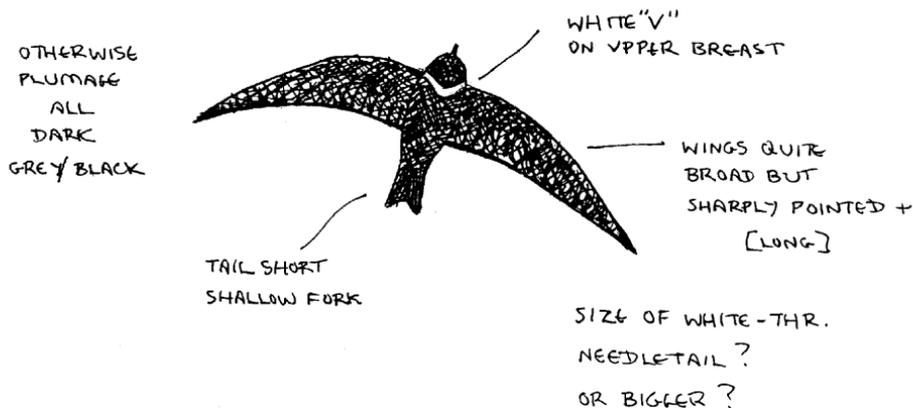
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**Figure 1: Field sketch of White-collared Swift at Marsh Trail, Rondeau Provincial Park, on 10 June 2002. Drawing by *Tristan ap Rheinallt*.**

Martins (*Progne subis*), Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*), Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) and Bank Swallows (*Riparia riparia*). Needless to say, none of them bore any resemblance to the bird I had seen.

The experience left me feeling unsettled. Although in the normal course of events I am a keen rarity-hunter, I knew that having been in the country for less than 24 hours, I was out of my element. Had I had the opportunity to study the bird for a lengthy period, I might have felt driven to report it to someone. As it was, I knew that although I had clearly seen something very unusual, no local birder would be impressed by an unknown observer reporting something he couldn't

identify, seen for only about a minute. Nevertheless, I did stop at the park visitor centre, only to find that it was closed for the day. At this point I decided that I would try to forget the whole event.

Later that afternoon, having arrived at Point Pelee, I visited the Pelee Wings bookshop. On impulse, I picked up a copy of the National Geographic field guide (Dickinson 1999) and found the swifts page. Staring out at me was the bird I had seen. When I read the notes on its status, I was stunned. At the same time, I felt obliged to report the sighting just in case the bird might still be around. I therefore approached the people who ran the shop. They put me in touch with Alan Wormington, whom I met the

next day and who encouraged me to submit the record to the Ontario Bird Records Committee.

### Description

*General impression:* A very large swift with an exceptionally striking plumage pattern: all dark except for a narrow pure white “V” on the upper breast.

*Size and structure:* Unfortunately, I was unable to compare the bird directly with any others. However, my initial reaction was that it was enormous for a swift: the Common Swift (*Apus apus*) found in the UK (itself considerably larger than the Chimney Swift) was my instinctive yardstick for this comparison. I thought the bird was comparable in wingspan to an Alpine Swift (*Apus melba*) or White-throated Needletail (*Hirundapus caudacutus*), both of which I am familiar with from visits to continental Europe and Australia, respectively. Like an Alpine Swift, it appeared bulky, with relatively broad-based wings. However, the wings were also long, sharply pointed and characteristically crescent- or scimitar-shaped. The tail, on the other hand, was short and had a shallow fork.

*Plumage:* In head-on view, the bird looked completely black. As it flew over me, its underside—with the exception of the “collar”—appeared uniformly greyish-black. I was able to see the individual primaries and secondaries but had little time to

register anything else. In retrospect, I cannot be certain whether the greyish-black colour was the true colour (as opposed to pure black) or merely an effect of the strong light coming from behind me.

A pure white neck band stood out from the rest of the plumage—indeed, it positively “shone” in the light. This band was narrow and largely uniform in width but came to a point in the centre of the breast, where it may have been slightly broader. It reached the edge of the body on either side just in front of the base of the wing. I could see no other pale areas whatsoever, not even on the throat.

*Flight:* The bird flew directly towards me in a straight line. Its wing beats were stiff and shallow, with the wingtips well below the body on the downstroke. This, I believe, is why I immediately decided it was a swift based on an initial head-on view, before I could see the shape of the wings and tail. I cannot remember whether it changed the angle of its body relative to the ground as it flew. However, it did not give the “flickering” impression of Chimney Swift or a swiftlet such as Australian Swiftlet (*Aerodramus terraereginae*). Instead, it appeared powerful and purposeful.

### Analysis

Over the following few days, as I toured southern Ontario and northern Ohio in search of birds, I had plenty of opportunity to reflect on

this brief sighting and consider whether the identification was beyond doubt.

Although I was well aware that it is difficult to estimate the size of a lone bird accurately, especially in an unfamiliar environment, I was confident that this had indeed been a very large swift. Before seeing it, I had plenty of opportunity that morning to study Purple Martins, Tree Swallows, Barn Swallows and Bank Swallows—the last two being familiar species at home. Indeed, because I was seeing some of them for the first time for several years, I spent quite a lot of time looking at them, paying particular attention to the Barn Swallows because of the differences from the European race. There were also many other birds flying around in the general area, and although I did not have any of them in the same field of view as the White-collared Swift, I have no recollection of misjudging the size of any of these birds. When I saw my first Chimney Swifts of the trip immediately after seeing the White-collared Swift, they looked exactly as I expected them to. They seemed tiny by comparison with the bird I had just seen.

As far as the plumage pattern was concerned, the excellent viewing conditions made me sure that I had seen everything there was to see on the bird's underside, and that no additional pale or white areas had escaped my notice. However, I had to admit that the brevity of the view made it difficult to be 100 per-

cent sure of the *exact* shape and position of the white band or collar.

Finally, there was no doubt in my mind that the bird I had seen was indeed a swift. The only other realistic possibilities, given the long wings and the shallow fork to the tail, might be a hirundine or a tern. Over the next few days, I spent some time looking at common hirundine species from this perspective. Only fleetingly did any of them (Purple Martin and Tree Swallow) give a swift-like impression as they occasionally glided on stiff wings. This impression lasted no more than an instant. The proportions of these birds were also clearly different, with relatively shorter wings and more body

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behind the wings. I cannot imagine that even an aberrant male Purple Martin with a white collar (if such a thing is possible) would ever trick me into thinking it was a swift under the same circumstances as the bird I saw at Rondeau. Being familiar with terns in the genera *Chlidonias*, *Sterna* and *Anous*, I am equally confident that the possibility of the bird being a tern can be ruled out by structure and flight action, let alone plumage.

### Discussion

With nine recognized subspecies, the White-collared Swift breeds across a wide area from Mexico and the Caribbean south to Argentina. Within its large range it is often montane or submontane, although it does occur over a variety of lowland and highland habitats, both coastal and interior. It is partly migratory, with differing kinds of dispersal in different populations. Altitudinal migration is known, as are movements to exploit seasonal savanna fires, while some parts of the range are apparently occupied only outside the breeding season. However, the White-collared Swift does not appear to be a long-distance migrant. Thus, although it breeds within some 500 km of the Texas border, it is only an accidental vagrant to North America, with eight accepted records for the ABA area prior to my sighting. These eight records involved a total of nine birds (del Hoyo et al. 1999, Semo and Booher 2002).

Six of the North American records come from Florida and Texas, where birds have been seen or found dead in the months of September, December, January, March and May (Semo and Booher 2002). More directly relevant to the Ontario record are sightings in extreme northwestern California on 21 May 1982 (Semo and Booher 2002) and in Michigan on 19 May 1996 (Dunn 1996, Semo and Booher 2002). The location of the latter record, Tawas Point, is only some 250 km from Rondeau.

Both the Michigan and Ontario records involve birds seen from a peninsula projecting into one of the Great Lakes. The former was associated with a strong passage of Chimney Swifts and many swallows (Dunn 1996), while the latter may have been associated with the arrival of a group of Chimney Swifts. Both birds were seen to fly in from the lake, but the weather conditions were very different on the two occasions: howling southerly winds at Tawas Point (Dunn 1996), and near-calm conditions at Rondeau, though a strong easterly breeze did pick up later in the day.

The California record involved an individual seen on the seacoast at Point St. George, where it was foraging with a mixed-species group of swallows (Semo and Booher 2002). This bird was tentatively identified as belonging to the race *mexicana*, which breeds from Mexico to Belize. Judging by geographical distribution, *mexicana* is

one of the two subspecies most likely to turn up in the USA or Canada. It is thought to account for several other North American records, including a specimen from Texas. The other candidate, *pallidifrons*, nests in the Caribbean and its occurrence in Florida is confirmed by a specimen record (Semo and Booher 2002). No attempt was made to assign the Michigan bird to either of these two subspecies. In the case of the Ontario sighting, the absence of any pale markings on the face or throat would appear to rule out *pallidifrons*, leaving *mexicana* as the most likely possibility.

Although the Ontario bird was seen some three weeks later in the year than the California and Michigan individuals, the concentration of these extralimital sightings in May and June is nonetheless interesting. Semo and Booher (2002) suggested that the California and Michigan records, together

with records from Texas in March and May, represent lost individuals trying to return to their breeding grounds. They imply that the birds may have dispersed from their Mexican wintering grounds earlier in the year, perhaps driven north by low prey availability. However, swifts are known to undertake major movements to escape adverse weather at any time of the year, and it has been suggested that this habit may be common within the family (del Hoyo et al. 1999). It is therefore entirely possible that the California, Michigan and Ontario birds were all recent arrivals. Whether or not this is the case, the pattern of occurrences suggests that flocks of swifts or hirundines in late spring, at the margin of land and water, provide the best chance of finding this spectacular species in Canada or the northern USA.

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