

## NOTES

### CHIMNEY SWIFTS IN COASTAL SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

On 22 June 1968, around 16:00, I noticed a dark, uniformly colored swift – that eventually proved to be a Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica* – flying over the streets of La Jolla, a suburb in northwestern San Diego. A second individual was found a little later by Xenia Devillers and me; one or both of the swifts were seen again briefly later that evening and observed for two hours on the 23rd (with Clifford R. Lyons) and the 24th. All three days were overcast with sunny periods in the afternoon during which the birds usually appeared. None could be found on the 25th and 26th, two drizzly, rainy days. Finally, on the 27th, one of the two individuals was watched for about four hours and seen by Virginia P. Coughran, Alan M. Craig and Guy McCaskie in addition to CRL, XD and PD. The swifts were always seen in a very restricted area, cruising along the escarpment of a former sea terrace about ½ mile inland from the beach, and always in the company of Cliff Swallows *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*. The landward edge of the coastal clouds often coincided with the escarpment. The swifts were mostly flying rather high, or were not very near the observers, but on the 27th the lone bird was seen at very close range, and the following description recorded:

*Size:* length of body equal to that of Cliff Swallow but wings longer (direct comparison when chasing each other).

*Flight silhouette:* wings long and curved, body relatively short, appearing “tailless” when the tail is folded. Glides a lot, with wings bowed far backwards and very drooping, the glides rather slow and lazy (slower than those of White-throated Swift); flapping flight rather fast, with wings raised far above horizontal at the upstroke, wingbeats rapid and stiff. Wing very much curved, with wrist very close to body; the secondaries are very short, the primaries are of normal length but seem worn, with perhaps some missing; the wing has thus a peculiar “pinched” aspect at the secondaries, and seems ragged. The tail generally folded, but often fanned; when folded, the terminal edge of the tail appears irregular when seen at close range, sometimes notched; at very close range the irregularities can be resolved into very fine spines.

*Coloration:* against the sky, seems all black, with the chin, throat, lower cheeks and breast lighter. Against a dark background different shades can be distinguished, as follows: Top and sides of the head, nape, back, rump, wing coverts, lower breast, belly, flanks, under tail coverts, wing linings, uniformly sooty black, the rump with a slight brownish cast. Lower cheeks, chin, throat, upper breast, slaty, still very dark, but a little less black (does not seem as light under those conditions as when the bird is seen against the sky when the contrast is very strong). Remiges and tail browner, rather dark brown (brown cast, or brown edges to black feathers). Dark eye; dark, very small bill.

*Voice:* pwi – pwi – pwi – pwi, clearly detached, sometimes very rapid as when the bird is chased by Cliff Swallows, sometimes much slower as when two birds are gliding together.

The second individual was similar except for secondaries of normal length and unworn primaries.

The spines at the end of the tail, the large size, the flight, the rump almost concolor with the back, the slaty throat, and the voice permit positive identification as a Chimney Swift. A description was independently recorded by GMcC and does not differ materially from this.

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Since other observers will undoubtedly be confronted with the problem of identifying the species, and since the determination of swifts is notoriously delicate, I will discuss the identification in some detail. The following remarks are all based on personal field notes except when indicated otherwise. There are only three species of swifts on the North American continent (excluding the West Indies) that could be confused with the Chimney Swift: Vaux's Swift *Chaetura vauxi*, the Black Swift *Cypseloides niger* and the Chestnut-collared Swift *Cypseloides rutilus*. The large size, slower flight with frequent prolonged glides, and the very dark coloration of the La Jolla birds appeared very different from Vaux's Swift, and that species was never considered by the observers, who were all very familiar with *Chaetura vauxi*. The only hesitation during the first few days was between Chimney and Black Swifts, but this was the result of the unfamiliarity of PD and CRL with the Black Swift. Anyone who has seen *Cypseloides niger* in the field should never confuse it with one of the *Chaetura* as I have since learned. The Black Swift is a much larger bird, with a more deliberate powerful flight, a longer tail, and a different color pattern. The tail is also said to be deeply forked, but, in my experience, on some Black Swifts the tail appears square when folded, and it almost always appears rounded when opened, while the La Jolla birds gave the impression at times of having a forked tail. The Chestnut-collared Swift of Mexico and Central America is more similar in flight silhouette to the Chimney Swift, but it glides perhaps a little more, has a slightly longer tail, and appears uniformly dark (dark brown or blackish) without any lighter areas on rump or throat; males of course are easily distinguished by their bright rufous collar. The species most likely to be confused with the Chimney Swift is, naturally, the very closely related Vaux's Swift. It is worth remembering that Lack (1956) once treated them as conspecific, although he subsequently accepted a suggestion of Wetmore (1957) and reversed his decision (Lack, 1957). Vaux's Swift is a much smaller bird, and the size difference is fairly obvious in the field; the flight is more hurried, with faster wingbeats and less gliding, and the wings appear stiffer. The voice of Vaux's is a faster, more run-together high pitched trill. In addition, the northwestern race *C. v. vauxi* normally has very pale, sometimes whitish, chin, throat and lower cheeks sharply contrasting with a dark brown cap; the rump and upper tail coverts are light brown, clearly contrasting with back and tail. Those plumage characters alone are sufficient to distinguish the species from all except possibly some extremely pale *C. pelagica*. I doubt that the latter species ever shows contrasts between cap and throat, and back and rump, comparable to those of *C. v. vauxi*. There is a distinct possibility that some Vaux's Swifts would become sooted in chimneys, but I have not yet seen an individual that showed as little contrast as Chimney Swifts. Phillips (1954) has drawn attention to the possible presence in the southwestern United States of the other northern race of Vaux's Swift, *C. v. tamaulipensis*. This form, described by Sutton in 1941, breeds in northeastern Mexico (Sutton, 1941), and probably in the Sierra Madre Occidental (Phillips and Webster, 1957). A specimen taken by Phillips in southeastern Arizona on 14 May 1950 was referred by him and Sutton to *tamaulipensis* (Phillips, 1954). This Mexican race is generally darker than *C. v. vauxi* and thus perhaps more likely to cause confusion with the Chimney Swift. However, both from Sutton's original description, and from his remarks quoted by Phillips, it appears that the differences between *tamaulipensis* and *vauxi* mostly concern the crown, back, and dark portions of the underparts, hence the contrast between throat and crown, or the

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capped effect so characteristic of *vauxi*, should be retained, or even possibly enhanced, in *tamaulipensis*. Unfortunately, I have seen birds presumably of this form only in Nayarit, and at too long a range for critical examination, so cannot further comment on their appearance in the field. I have however seen large number of the southern Mexican form *C. v. richmondi* at close range, and noticed the typical Vaux's Swift pattern. Sutton (op. cit.) indicates that *tamaulipensis* is intermediate between *vauxi* and *richmondi*. At any rate even if plumage characters were to fail, *tamaulipensis* has the same measurements as *vauxi* (Sutton, 1941) so identification by size, silhouette, and flight should not be affected. This was verified in the field in Nayarit.

Prior to the La Jolla observation the Chimney Swift had been recorded only once in California. An individual was collected by Samuel G. Harter, one mile north of Potholes, along the Lower Colorado, on 6 May 1930 (Huey, 1960). I have examined the specimen, #13055 in the San Diego Natural History Museum Collection; it is rather pale throated, but still within the variation of *C. pelagica*, and its measurements agree perfectly with that species.

In the summer of 1968, in addition to the two birds at La Jolla, a minimum of 6 were present at Solana Beach, approximately twelve miles north of La Jolla, between at least 29 June and 22 August. Two individuals were found there on 29 June by G. Shumway Suffel and Ralph Mancke. The same number was seen by several observers, including GMcC and me, between 30 June and 12 July; on 30 June GMcC took a description. Although GMcC collected one individual on 12 July (SDNHM Collection, male in non-breeding condition), on subsequent observations he was able to evaluate that at least five birds (three with "normal" flight feathers and two with "ragged" appearance) were still present with a maximum of four seen on 21 July. The last sighting was on 22 August when GMcC and CRL saw a single individual. It is impossible to determine whether the two individuals observed earlier in La Jolla were among the Solana Beach birds, but I feel it is likely. Throughout their stay the swifts were observed cruising along a cliff face, where San Elijo Lagoon indents the coastal mesa. The situation was very similar to that in La Jolla, and the birds were likewise associated with Cliff Swallows, present here in large numbers.

In 1969 there was a single observation. GMcC saw four birds on 19 June in Mission Valley, on the east side of San Diego, about ten miles from the shoreline. He noted the size, larger than Vaux's Swift; the longer wings and the less rapid wing beat; the silhouette, with wings strongly curved backwards and bent downwards; the general blackish appearance at a distance, with, at close range, a slightly paler rump, and a paler grayish throat and upper breast contrasting with the rest of the underparts; he noticed the spines on the tail once. He described the call as an excited twitter, louder and clearer than that of Vaux's, with all the notes clearly separated. Again the birds were with Cliff Swallows, and near the steep bank of Mission Valley; the fog front was nearby.

In 1970, no Chimney Swifts could be found in San Diego, despite frequent coverage of the areas of occurrence of 1968 and 1969, but one individual was recorded in Santa Barbara. The bird was found in the home of Mr. Alden Johnson, "in the early part" of June, photographed and released. It was identified from color transparencies by Mr. Waldo G. Abbott (slides deposited in Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History). One slide was very kindly forwarded by Mr. Abbott (copy deposited in San Diego Natural History Museum) and is reproduced here.

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Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica* photographed in Santa Barbara, June 1970.  
*Photo by Alden Johnson.*

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Although the bird unfortunately was not measured, I think that the color pattern clearly indicates *C. pelagica*. Note the upper tail coverts concolor with the tail, the dark throat, as well as the spines of the tail. The possibility of a sooted *C. vauxi* can, I believe, be discarded because on the color transparency the plumage seems clean, showing for instance pale brown edges to certain flight feathers, fine brown scalloping on the top of the head, and a greenish gloss on the shoulder.

In addition to these records, there are, scattered in Audubon Field Notes, a number of summer records of "Vaux's Swifts" or "swifts" in southern California, which could pertain to this species. Because of the lack of detailed description they cannot, at present, be specifically allocated. Vaux's Swifts in southern California during the summer are unlikely but at least one *Chaetura* record seems to correspond positively to that species: South Pasadena, 31 July to 22 September 1943 (Cogswell, 1944; identification on the basis of moulted feathers found in a chimney where the swifts were roosting).

The Chimney Swift breeds in southeastern Canada, northwest to east central Saskatchewan (Godfrey, 1966), and in the eastern United States east to Texas (A.O.U., 1957), migrating through eastern Mexico and Central America to north-eastern South America (Lincoln, 1944). The species was restricted as a breeder by the limit of the eastern forest, but it has become adapted to man made structures (chimneys), and is now expanding its range westwards with the increase in the size of towns in the plains (Sutton, 1967). The western limit of the range includes Nebraska, the eastern half of Colorado (Bailey and Niedrach, 1965), most of Kansas, the Oklahoma panhandle (Sutton, 1967). In the Southwest outside California, two records are mentioned for New Mexico by Florence M. Bailey (1928) (Rinconada, 1 May 1904; Mimbres River, 30 miles south-east of Silver City, 22 May 1921), and one for Arizona by Phillips, Marshall and Monson (1964) (non-breeding pair at Tucson, 30 May to mid June 1952). There are also unidentified swift records for Arizona. The fact that Chimney Swifts were observed in coastal southern California in three consecutive summers is certainly interesting, and further observation may prove that a few non-breeders regularly spend the summer in the region.

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