

The following article is the fourth in a series on California rarities edited by Morlan and Roberson. It is based on materials submitted to the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC). The description and circumstances were drawn from the accounts of the observer and have been reviewed by him. Roberson prepared the distributional summary; Morlan prepared the identification summary. In this way we hope much important information accumulated in CBRC files will become widely available.



TM - 83

White-collared Swift

Sketch by Tim Manolis

## FIRST RECORD OF THE WHITE-COLLARED SWIFT IN CALIFORNIA

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At midmorning on 21 May 1982, Erickson and his birding companions Lynn C. Berner, Gary S. Lester, Gary J. Strachan, and Richard S. Tryon were near the spruce grove at Point St. George, Del Norte County, extreme northwestern California, when a swift caught their attention. Erickson's first impression was of Black Swift *Cypseloides niger*, but Strachan noted white on its neck; soon the whole group focused on the bird. It was a large swift with tattered primaries that fed with a flock of swallows, including Barn *Hirundo rustica*, Cliff *H. pyrrhonota*, Tree *Tachycineta bicolor*, and Violet-green *T. thalassina* swallows, over the grassy headland northeast of the spruce grove. The morning fog was breaking up and lighting conditions were good. The observers watched the bird with binoculars and a 20× telescope, as it approached them sometimes to within 15 m, for 20 to 40 minutes. The swift fed from a height of 100 m to within 8 m of the ground. The following description is paraphrased from Erickson's field notes:

A swift of typical shape (slim body with extremely long wings and apparently no "wrists") with a tiny bill and a slightly forked tail of moderate length. It absolutely dwarfed every swallow in association, even at great distances. It was substantially longer than a Cliff Swallow seen in direct comparison. Gary Lester felt the wingspan was double that of a Barn Swallow; I thought it was maybe not quite twice as much. The plumage was entirely blackish except for a conspicuous complete white collar, narrowest and cleanest across the nape but broader and less distinct and descending posteriorly somewhat across the breast. This collar, especially on the nape, was visible

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at great distances. A speckling of whitish on the forehead was visible only at close range.

The bird flew rather like other large swifts, with much gliding and occasional bouts of rapid flapping. Once or twice the bird seemed to stall out and fold up for a considerable drop in elevation. On at least one occasion, the wings were held arched below the level of the body as the bird flew parallel to the ground.

Although the bird resembled White-collared Swifts *Streptoprocne zonaris* that Erickson had seen previously in Belize, the whitish speckling to the forehead seemed anomalous, so the observers considered the possibility of a partially albino Black Swift. Erickson telephoned Morlan, who then checked the nine specimens of *S. zonaris* at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley. None had a whitish forehead, although a brief literature search suggested that the Caribbean race might be so marked. Morlan noted that the White-collared is a blackish species, whereas the Black Swift is decidedly sooty brown.

Erickson next telephoned J. V. Remsen, Jr., Curator of Birds at the Museum of Zoology, Louisiana State University (L.S.U.). Remsen compared the verbal description to a collection of about 60 *S. zonaris*, of which 43 were of the northern, mainland race *mexicana*. Twelve of these had scaly or mottled breast bands, evidently a sign of immaturity. This variation did not appear to be related to sex or season. Adult females had narrower breast bands than had males. Many birds had pale dusky feathers on the forehead which, when viewed head-on, gave the forehead an almost whitish appearance (less obvious from the side). Remsen eventually reviewed written descriptions and concluded that the bird was a White-collared Swift, and because the collar was less well marked on the breast, probably an immature of the subspecies *mexicana*.

Nine days after the sighting, Erickson and Lester visited Burney Falls, Shasta County, to study Black Swifts, five of which they watched at length and compared to a nearby Vaux's Swift *Chaetura vauxi*. Of the Black Swifts Erickson wrote

Although these were clearly large swifts, they somehow didn't seem quite as massive to me as the Pt. St. George bird. More significant, though, was the brownish tinge to these birds, primarily on the throat and breast, and their manner of flight. The extremely rapid, almost "twinkly" wingbeats of these birds were much more like those of a Vaux's Swift than I had recalled. In no way did I ever compare the flight of the Pt. St. George bird to that of a Vaux's Swift. The amount of tail forking and the extent of the whitish on the foreheads of these birds varied from rounded and blackish, respectively, to forked and whitish, comparable to the Pt. St. George bird.

This record of the White-collared Swift was accepted as a first for California by the California Bird Records Committee by a 9-1 vote after two circulations (Morlan 1985). The Committee reviewed descriptions from all five observers, Erickson's sketch (Figure 1), and the analysis of J. V. Remsen. All but one agreed that the size, flight, blackish color, whitish-tinged forehead, and collar pattern (clean and narrow on the nape, broader and more diffuse on the breast) ruled out an aberrant Black Swift. Obvious albinism is unknown in the Black Swift (Ross 1963, Gross 1965, C. T. Collins pers. comm.) but is known in other swifts, in which it usually involves only a few

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scattered feathers (Collins 1967, Catley 1978, Sharrock 1978; see also the discussion of the White-chested Swift under "Identification" below). The lone dissenter objected that the large size should have been more obvious, and noted how huge the White-naped Swift *S. semicollaris* of western Mexico appears in the field. Other members pointed out that the White-collared is a species much smaller than the White-naped and that the size estimates (about twice the wingspan of the Barn Swallow) fit the White-collared better than the Black Swift.

The issue of the worn remiges was discussed and the possibility of an escape was discounted. J. V. Remsen wrote (to L. C. Binford) that "we have at least one specimen of half a dozen species with extremely worn primaries (not shot damaged), including one White-collared from Peru. These individuals are bedraggled enough that it would be apparent in the field." K. L. Garrett noted (in CBRC comments) similar tattered primaries on the Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica* in summer in southern California. In most swifts, the post-juvinal molt in fall does not include the remiges (Dickey and van Rossen 1938), and this accounts for worn remiges not being shed until the second autumn.

SOFT PARTS - tiny black bill, dark eyes, legs & feet not seen

PLUMAGE - entirely blackish except for a conspicuous complete white collar (narrowest and clearest across the nape, broader and less clear cut or distinct and descending posteriorly somewhat across the breast) visible even at great distances (especially the nape) and a speckling of whitish on the forehead visible only at very close range

FLIGHT - rather typical of large

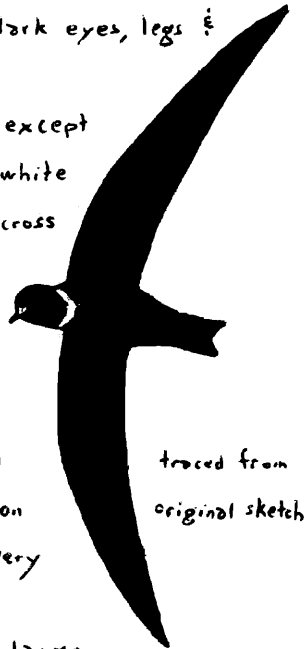


Figure 1. White-collared Swift, Pt. St. George, 21 May 1982.

Sketch by R. A. Erickson

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### DISTRIBUTIONAL SUMMARY

The White-collared Swift ranges from north-central Mexico (Guerrero, San Luis Potosi, and Tamaulipas) south through Central America to north-western Argentina and southeastern Brazil and in the Greater Antilles (A.O.U. 1983; Figure 2). Little has been published about its movements, although wandering to Trinidad (especially July-October; Snow 1962, French 1973) and the Lesser Antilles (especially May-October; Bond 1979) has been noted. In the northwestern portion of its range, individuals have been seen in winter north to southern Sinaloa (Morlan 1985, R. W. Stallcup pers. comm., B. E. Daniels pers. comm.).

There are four other records for the White-collared Swift in the United States: two reported on 4 December 1974 at Rockport, Aransas County, Texas (Webster 1975; currently under review by the Texas Bird Records Committee, G. W. Lasley pers. comm.); one found recently dead on 25 January 1981, clinging to a screen door on Perdido Key, Escambia County, Florida (4 miles east of Alabama, Hardy and Clench 1982, specimen at the University of Florida); a young male found dead on 8 March 1983, washed



Figure 2. Approximate breeding range of the White-collared Swift (shaded), locations of other North American records (asterisks), and this record (star).

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up on a beach on Padre Island, Kleberg County, Texas (Lasley 1984, specimen Texas A & M Univ.); and one seen flying north on 20 December 1987 near Freeport, Brazoria County, Texas (Lasley and Sexton 1988, Arnold 1988; under review by the Texas Bird Records Committee). Both specimens appear to be *S. z. mexicana* (Hardy and Clench 1982, Lasley 1984).

The Florida and Texas specimens were linked to unusual weather or a favorable jet stream (Hardy and Clench 1982, Lasley 1984), but the California record was not associated with any unusual conditions. The Sinaloa, Florida, and Texas records are for winter, when the species may disperse from breeding colonies. The California bird might have been a spring migration "overshoot," but records are insufficient to explain its occurrence so far north.

### SUBSPECIES

Peters (1940) recognized five subspecies of the White-collared Swift. Populations from Honduras to Peru, *S. z. albicincta*, and those from southeast South America, *S. z. zonalis*, have the "forehead sooty black, scarcely if at all different from the color of the crown." *S. z. mexicana* from Mexico to El Salvador and *S. z. pallidifrons* from Cuba, Hispaniola, and Jamaica have the forehead sooty gray or grayish brown, "distinctly different from black of crown." *S. z. pallidifrons* has a white superciliary line on the side of the forehead, lacking in *mexicana* (Ridgway 1911). A highland form from northwestern South America, *S. z. altissima*, is said to have a broader breast band and greener overall coloration (Cory 1918); however, the difference in breast band width between subspecies discussed by Hardy and Clench (1982) is not supported by specimens in the L.S.U. collection (Remsen in litt.), and greenness or blueness of swift feathers is a function of wear and not a useful subspecific character (C. T. Collins in litt.).

### IDENTIFICATION SUMMARY

The adult White-collared Swift is distinctive and unlikely to be confused with other species of swifts. The Biscutate Swift *S. biscutata* of southeastern Brazil is the most similar species, but its white collar is not connected at the sides and its tail is square (Hilty and Brown 1986) or only slightly forked (Lack 1956). The Great and Lesser swallow-tailed swifts, *Panyptila sanctihieronymi* and *P. cayennensis*, of Middle and South America, have white throats, white tips to their secondaries, and much more deeply forked tails, which usually appear long and pointed in the field. The White-chested Swift *Cypseloides lemosi*, endemic to Colombia, resembles the Black Swift except for a conspicuous white patch tapering to a point on its chest. It has no white on its nape (Hilty and Brown 1986). The juvenal White-chested Swift usually has some white feathering on its chest but is occasionally all dark like the Black Swift. Eisenmann and Lehmann (1962) noted that a few Black Swifts have one to three partially concealed white chest feathers and originally speculated that the White-chested Swift types might have been partial albino Black Swifts.

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The immature White-collared Swift has a reduced white collar, more or less obscured or scaly (Bond 1979, Peterson and Chalif 1973) or interrupted on the sides (Hilty and Brown 1986), and thereby resembles the Biscutate Swift. In some individuals the white collar may be entirely lacking (Ridgely 1976), making them easier to confuse with the Black Swift. Morlan suspects that one unseasonal report of the Black Swift from California (2 November 1974 at Furnace Creek Ranch, Death Valley, Inyo County; Garrett and Dunn 1981) may pertain to this or other similar species, since it had exposed rectrix shafts (disputed by other observers). The White-collared Swift has slightly exposed tips to the rectrix shafts, which the Black Swift never shows even when the rectrices are heavily worn because of its uniquely soft rectrix shafts (Orr 1963). Some immature White-collared Swifts may show a white nape combined with a nearly black breast (Peterson and Chalif 1973), as in the White-naped Swift. If possible, careful size comparisons to adjacent birds, along with a precise description of the tail and rectrix tip shape, may be crucial for field identification of non-adult swifts. However, swifts seldom allow close scrutiny and many potential rarities are best left unidentified.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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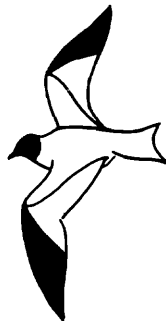
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## **Western Field Ornithologists/ Western Bird Banding Association Joint Annual Meeting**

**October 13, 14, and 15, 1989  
University of Nevada, Reno**

WFO's 14th annual meeting will be held jointly with the Western Bird Banding Association 13-15 October 1989 at the University of Nevada, Reno. Northwestern Nevada is a land of many contrasts, ranging from sagebrush desert to high mountain peaks. The city of Reno sits at the western edge of the Great Basin desert, near the foothills of the eastern Sierra Nevada. The Truckee River runs through the city, from Lake Tahoe east to Pyramid Lake. The area offers desert shrublands, alkali flats and sinks, piñon-juniper woodlands, pine and fir forests, high mountain meadows, riparian areas, desert lakes, grasslands, marshes and wetlands, agricultural habitat and more. Sage Grouse, Sage Thrashers, and Sage Sparrows make their homes here, as do Brewer's Sparrows, Burrowing Owls, Piñon Jays, Red Crossbills, Clark's Nutcrackers, Mountain Bluebirds, Mountain Quail, waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and many more. Come join us in Reno for an exciting weekend of birding, demonstrations, and research reports.

The activities begin with an outdoor barbecue Friday evening at Rancho San Rafael Park, near the University of Nevada campus. The Wilbur D. May Museum and Arboretum will be open for tours. A WFO panel of experts will tackle tricky identification problems later in the evening. Saturday's activities include demonstrations of banding and field techniques in the morning, a deli luncheon at noon, oral research reports in the afternoon, and a banquet in the evening. Field trips will be available Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; destinations include Mt. Rose, Pyramid and Honey lakes, and Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge. Registration forms have been sent to members of WFO and WBBA; if you still need a registration form or would like further information, call Alan Gubanich, 702-851-4092.