

'Eastern' Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis* in the Lakshadweep Archipelago, with identification notes on juvenile birds

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A large, dark swift (Apodidae) was observed multiple times at Chetlat Island, Lakshadweep, in September 2019. It was identified as a juvenile 'Eastern' Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, which is an addition to the avifauna of the archipelago. We present a comprehensive discussion on its morphological characteristics, and its similarities and differences with the closely related Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*.

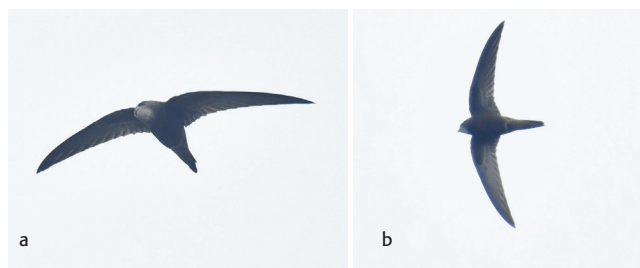
Observation

Chetlat Island (11.70°N, 72.71°E) is a sparsely populated atoll in the northern part of the Lakshadweep Archipelago. As part of a research tour, AKR reached the Island on 24 September 2019. On the same evening, he went birding along the eastern shore of the island and spotted a swift amongst a group of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and Sand Martins *Riparia sp.*, on the northern end of the island. Despite being on the lookout for more, only a single individual of the swift was noted in this flock. It was 1730 h and in the cloudy twilight, the bird appeared dark overall, resembling a Common Swift. He took some photographs [198a,b], not an easy task, as the bird flew at great speed, frequently disappearing behind the palms and a group of pines, and reappearing for a short while over the beach and the lagoon.

In the next few days he tried to take additional photographs of the swift under more favourable light. Finally, on the morning of 26 September, he was able to take some decent photographs in appropriate light. On this day the bird, assuming it was the same one first photographed, looked differently coloured, with a paler brown body and wings [199a,b]. At the same time, some photographs [199c,d], taken against the light, looked similar to the dark-coloured pictures taken on the first day. When the photographs were studied with the help of a few standard field guides, we could find features matching both, the Common Swift, and the closely related Pallid Swift, with supportive characters such as a white throat patch and a pale forehead and underwings. From the field guides, it was found that both are found on the nearby Maldives Islands.

Identification

To clarify the identity of the bird, the pictures were posted in the Kerala Bird Monitoring WhatsApp group. Members identified it, though with some skepticism, as a Common Swift. Later the



198a,b. Photographs taken in the evening, 24 September, 2019 (5.30 PM)



199a,b,c,d. Photographs taken in the morning 26 September 2019 (8.30 AM)

All: Aju KR

pictures were sent to Hans Larsson, Dick Newell, Richard Porter, and Lyndon Kearsley, as the existing literature was insufficient to reach a conclusion regarding the exact identity of the bird. It was initially suggested as a bird in its first-year, undergoing migration or dispersal. The chances of it being an adult 'Eastern' Common Swift were dropped based on the absence of a darker back between the scapulars (Lyndon Kearsley, *in litt.*, e-mail dated

15 October 2019). Larsson identified it as juvenile Common Swift, possibly of the race *pekinensis*. He noted the contrasting head pattern with a clear whitish forehead and throat, visible in multiple pictures and angles, as the clinching characters for a juvenile Common Swift, as Pallid should show less contrast, especially between ear-coverts and lores. Supporting features include the evident, pale leading edge of the inner wing as well as what seems a rather narrow hand (Hans Larsson, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 15 October 2019). Newell suggested we consider Forbes-Watson's Swift *A. berliozii* also as a possible candidate—a species that breeds on the coastal regions in the north-western parts of the Arabian Sea (Dick Newell, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 14 October 2019). However, Porter, having years of experience in observing Forbes-Watson's Swift confirmed this individual was not one, and agreed that it fit best with 'Eastern' Common Swift (Richard Porter, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 18 October 2019).

Juvenile 'Eastern' Common Swift – Identification pitfalls

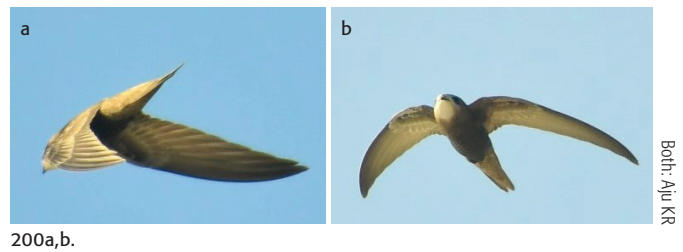
Field identification of Pallid Swift and 'Eastern' Common Swift have been considered difficult and tricky in the past (Roberts & Campbell 2015). The field identification of a juvenile Pallid Swift, and a juvenile of the nominate Common Swift has also been covered recently (Larsson 2018). However, the degree to which a juvenile 'Eastern' Common Swift can resemble a Pallid Swift, though suspected, has not been previously elaborated.

A juvenile *A. pekinensis* tends to resemble a Pallid Swift more than the nominate *A. apus*, with pale fringes on the body and wing feathers [199c,d]. The well-defined white patch on the throat [198b], and the paleness of the forehead [199a], distinguish it from the adult nominate (Roberts & Campbell, 2015). *A. pallidus* has a poorly defined throat area and a uniformly pale forehead which contrasts with the black upper margin of the eye. But this character is similar to the juvenile *pekinensis* as can be seen from 199a. However, note that the white throat clearly demarcates from the dark head in a juvenile *pekinensis*. The lower edges of the secondaries in the 199a,b show a blackish shade which is clearly absent in the primaries. Also note the uniform dark shades on the upper primary coverts in 200a while the sharply contrasting inner median secondary covert is notable in 200b.

The differences in the lengths of the tenth and ninth primaries are a substantially distinguishing character for *A. apus* and *A. pallidus* if they are fully grown. The last primary is slightly smaller in length than the ninth in *A. apus* [199a], while both these primaries are of almost equal length in *A. pallidus* (Roberts & Campbell 2015). Other characters that help identify a juvenile *pekinensis* are the paler median and greater coverts that contrast with the dark outer primaries [199a], the saddle effect due to the dark mantle which differentiates it from the paler and fringed primaries [199d], and the more prominent scaling of the undertail, compared to that on the belly (Larsson 2018) [199b]. A juvenile/immature 'Eastern' Common Swift can, thus be differentiated by the distinctly white-edged feathers of the wings, tail, and body; the white forehead and throat in sharp contrast with head and chest [200b], the pale underwing primaries and secondaries.

Status of Common Swift in southern India

There are fourteen previous records of Common Swift sightings from southern India (Five from Goa, three from Kerala, and two each from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu; www.ebird.org). All



200a,b.

Both: Anu KR

the records, except one from Karnataka, were sighted along the coasts from September to February (Fig. 1).

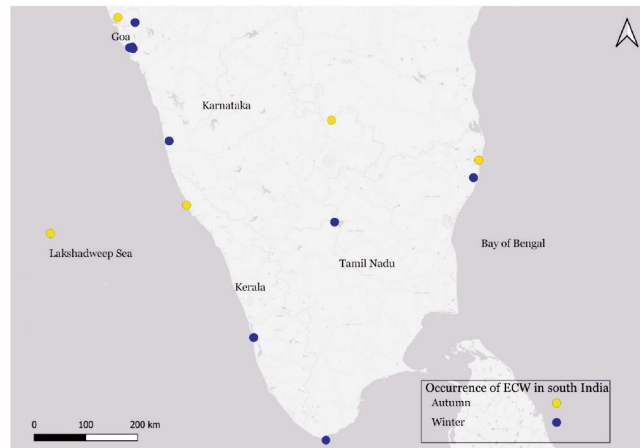


Fig. 1. Observations of Eastern Common Swift In southern India

Two records in September were from Chennai (TN) and Kasaragod (Kerala), an October record was from Kancheeperum (TN), and two November sightings from Kannur (Kerala) and Goa. The remaining records include two each in December and January, and three in February.

Common Swifts breed almost all across the northern hemisphere except North America and they migrate to the African continent. Some of the earlier observations of this species in southern India (Karuthedathu et al. 2014) could be during their migration to the wintering grounds. As *A. pekinensis* breed in regions like Central Asia, China, and Mongolia their sightings as passage migrants across India and the Arabian Sea is a possibility. They have been reported regularly from Maldives (Ash & Shafeeg 1994) as well as annually from Chagos (Carr 2015).

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