

The first records of Common Swift *Apus apus* in Singapore, with notes on their identification

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There might be a slight aversion to using the word ‘common’ when identifying a bird in South-East Asia, as many of these species (while common in Europe) do not live up to their names in our region. One example is Common Swift *Apus apus*, a ubiquitous breeder across Europe to eastern China and a known long-distance migrant to sub-Saharan Africa (Chantler *et al.* 2020). Since the first record of this species in South-East Asia during Thailand’s annual raptor watch in Khao Dinsor (10.633°N 99.283°E) in 2014, there have been multiple records from the same site (Pierce *et al.* 2015, TFFCRC 2015, 2016, 2017) and this species has long been on the radar of birdwatchers further south.

Observations

On 9 October 2020, the first record of Common Swift in Singapore—1,100 km south of Khao Dinsor—was documented from Jelutong Tower (1.351°N 103.806°E). The lone bird was seen shortly after a group of three Pacific Swifts *A. pacificus*, a very common passage migrant, and the absence of white on the rump was observed and photographed (eBird: S74590198). On 27 October 2020, at Henderson Waves Bridge, Singapore (1.276°N 103.815°E), a second bird was observed mixing with a flock of no fewer than 10 Pacific Swifts. The bird drifted out of view after circling and preening in flight for approximately two minutes (eBird: S75925036). Both records have been accepted by the Nature Society (Singapore) Bird Group Records Committee (Lim 2021).

These sightings occurred as part of a surge in records of typically high-flying migrants previously thought to be very rare. For example, the first record of White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* in Singapore was as recently as 2008 (Cockayne 2008) but there were at least 17 verifiable records between 2017–2020, primarily from the recently discovered migration hotspot, Henderson Waves (the same site as the second Common Swift record). Given that these birds have been consistently recorded during the Thailand raptor counts (TFFCRC 2015, 2016, 2017), and that many of the sightings are by the same observers, it is quite likely that the recent rise in records is a result of greater survey effort. Improved photography equipment has no doubt contributed to this trend too and it is hoped that an increase in awareness in the local and regional community will follow suit.

Just like pelagic species, shorebirds and raptors, the identification of swifts might at first seem daunting. However, with practice the differences become more apparent, and we hope that the notes herein will encourage observers to look for Common Swifts among commoner species and help identify them.

Identification of *Apus* swifts

Most *Apus* swifts can be easily distinguished from the smaller (and resident) *Aerodramus* and *Collocalia* swiftlets by their blackish plumage, elongated shape, and typically more

directional and less erratic flight patterns. The House Swift *Apus nipalensis* is approximately the same size as the other resident species but has a comparatively square-cut tail. Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis* (Plate 1) is similar to the ‘long’ *Apus* swifts in shape but is smaller and has a brownish plumage, looking almost like an elongated *Aerodramus* swiftlet. The treeswifts *Hemiprocne* spp., although resembling an *Apus* in their long shape, can be distinguished by their obvious plumage features, especially on the face. The treeswifts also have a more languid flight and emit distinct nasal calls, which is not the case for the migratory *Apus* swifts.

Identifying Common Swift

A combination of features is required to distinguish the Common Swift from its congeners in South-East Asia, the most obvious of which is the lack of a white rump. The broad white rump in Pacific Swift often extends to the lower flanks, making it visible even from the side or underside (Plate 2). However, a lack of white seen from these angles does not immediately distinguish Common Swift due to individual variation. Moreover, the similar-looking Cook’s Swift *A. cooki* (a fairly common winter visitor to the Thai-Malay Peninsula, but not yet reported in Singapore or further south) has a very narrow white rump that is not always prominent in the field (Plate 3). A clear view of the upperparts is therefore desirable.

From below, the scaling on the underparts is typically less pronounced in Common Swift (Plates 4 & 5) than in Pacific or Cook’s (especially the latter). In addition, the borders of the white throat are more clearly demarcated in the Common. Subtle differences in shape also exist (compare Plates 4 & 6): the attention of the observers of both Singaporean records was drawn to the Common Swift partly by its marginally less pointed shape compared to the similar-sized Pacific Swifts, with this difference being apparent in the photographs too. However, shape and general impression can be misleading, and we therefore urge observers not to rely on structural features alone.

Finally, of the two subspecies of Common Swift, the bold pale forehead, defined large white throat-patch and contrasting dark saddle all point to the more expected eastern subspecies, *pekinensis* (Kannan & Saranga 2020, Marais *et al.* 2021).

The less expected Blyth’s Swift *A. leuconyx* (breeds in the Himalaya and winters across the Indian Subcontinent) and Salim Ali’s Swift *A. salimalii* (breeds on the Tibet plateau and western China, non-breeding range unknown) both have white rumps (Kirwan *et al.* 2020a,b), while the poorly known and similarly unexpected Dark-rumped Swift *A. acuticauda* has a black rump, indistinct throat patch and clear white scaling on the underparts. Identification of the Common Swift from the equally unlikely Pallid Swift *A. pallidus* is discussed in detail by Ahmed & Adriaens (2010).

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Plate 1. Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*, Singapore, December 2017.



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Plate 2. Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* showing the white rump extending to the lower flank. Japan, May 2017.

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Plate 3. Cook's Swift *Apus cooki* showing, very inconspicuously, its narrow white rump. Doi Lang, Thailand, December 2017.



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Plate 4. Common Swift *Apus apus*, showing the slightly less pointed shape, clearly demarcated throat and white forehead. Jelutong Tower, Singapore, 9 October 2020.

Plate 5: Common Swift, showing the lack of white on the rump. Henderson Waves, Singapore, 27 October 2020.

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Plate 6: Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* with a 'misleading shape' and inconspicuous underpart scaling. Singapore, November 2020.



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In the Thailand raptor counts, Common Swifts have been observed from as early as mid-September to the first week of November, albeit in small numbers. Birdwatchers hoping to find them further south should diligently scan migrating flocks of Pacific Swifts, especially between October and late November. Although there are still no records in Malaysia, raptor watchers during the annual spring count at Tanjung Tuan should keep watch for this species. It might potentially undertake similar flight paths as other diurnal migrants, including bee-eaters *Merops* spp. (DeCandido *et al.* 2004).

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