

Sighting of Common Swift *Apus apus* from southern India

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The distribution of the Common Swift *Apus apus* in South Asia is given in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) as, "Summer visitor N, C and E Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Himalayas of N Pakistan through Kashmir and east to C Nepal; widespread migrant through Afghanistan and Maldives. Reported as vagrant Gujarat and Andamans." This species was reported from Saurashtra (Gujarat) in the late fifties (Lavkumar 1958; Ali & Ripley 1983), and more recently there have been a few unconfirmed reports from Goa (Lainer 2004), and Maharashtra (Prasad 2006).

This note describes three separate records of Common Swift from southern India: two sight records, one from Mettur, Tamil Nadu (11°54'N, 77°43'E), and the other from Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu (08°05'N, 77°33'E), made during bird watching trips; and the third, a specimen recovered from the Arabian Sea near Thaikadappuram, Kasaragod district, Kerala (12°14'N, 76°06'E).

While on a regular bird watching trip to Gopinatham (Chamarajinagar district, Karnataka) on 29 August 2009, DK and VND had stopped along the Mettur Reservoir to observe the waterbirds in the shallow backwaters. There was also a big flock (100+) of Asian Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis* in the sky at that time. While scanning this flock, a relatively bigger and darker swift caught our attention. In the next few seconds, while the bird was around, we could clearly note that this bird was bigger, bulkier, and darker compared to Asian Palm Swifts; had an all-dark rump area with no visible contrast with the dark back, had a well forked tail, and a slightly paler throat compared to the rest of its body. Though we scanned further, we could not locate any more such birds. Since the documented distribution ranges did not include South India (other than provisional records from Goa) and we saw just a single bird (no photographs were taken), we decided to keep the identification of this bird as provisional and to keep a look out for this in future trips before publishing. Though we searched, the bird was never seen again in the further trips to the same area. And then on 07 September 2013, it happened again! DK and VD were part of a group of bird watchers waiting to board the boat for a single day pelagic trip from Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu. A flock of Asian Palm Swifts and a few Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* were flying above and amongst these, we noticed a big dark swift. Though the bird did not come close, it stayed in the area for a few minutes, during which its relatively bigger size, all dark rump, and well-forked tail were noted. Balaji Rayadurgam also managed to take few pictures of the swift before it disappeared. The images showed the overall shape, well forked tail, and pale throat, which matched a Common Swift [95].

As we were about to prepare a note based on the above two sightings, about the possible occurrence of Common Swifts in southern India, we got some unexpected supporting evidence! On



Photo: B. Rayadurgam

95. Three images of Common Swift in flight from Kanyakumari.

24 September 2013, K. Praveen Kumar of Nileshwaram brought an exhausted swift, recovered from a fishing boat approximately 20–25 km off the coast of Thaikadappuram, to MJP. It had no apparent external injuries but was exhausted and couldn't fly. The bird died the next day and the specimen was photographed, and deposited in the collections of Zoological Survey of India, Kozhikode (specimen number ZSI/WGRC/IR/V.2474) [96-97]. The images of the bird clearly showed all features of a juvenile Common Swift: uniform dark plumage including dark rump, scaling on crown, white throat patch, well forked tail, and pointed wings. The bird weighed about 8.5 g (other biometric data are given in the Table 1).

For completeness, the other species considered during our identification process were, Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*, and Dark-rumped Swift *A. acuticauda*. The former was ruled out based on colour, very pointed wings, lack of pale fringes on under parts,



96. Under parts of recovered Common Swift juvenile from Thaikadappuram, Kasaragod district, Kerala.

Photo: K. P. Kumar



97. Upper parts of recovered Common Swift juvenile from Thaikadappuram, Kasaragod district, Kerala.

Table 1. Biometrics of the specimen recovered from Thaikadappuram, Kasaragod district, Kerala

	Thaikadappuram Bird	Handbook (Ali & Ripley 1983)
Wing	165 mm	160–180 mm
Wingspan	370 mm	–
Tail	70.5 mm	66–77 mm
Culmen	07.9 mm	–
Bill	09.5 mm (tip to skull)	8 mm (tip to feathering)
Tarsus	10.17 mm	10 mm
Claws	5.8 mm	–

and eye patch, and the latter on its uniform dark underside.

The habits of Common Swift are mentioned as, "Highly gregarious, often in mixed flocks" (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). This latter part matches our observations as on both occasions, the bird was found amidst a flock of Asian Palm Swifts. Since all the three records mentioned here occurred during the known period of passage migration, during late August and September, and from different years, they may suggest that Common Swifts do pass over southern India during their migration to Africa, and it may be worthwhile to scan the resident swift flocks during this season to find an odd Common Swift.

During our analysis of previous records from the Indian plains, we came across a single record in Grimmett *et al.* (2011), from Chhattisgarh, which possibly could have been based on Bharos *et al.* (2010), who mention Common Swift in their checklist and give it the status, "Resident Common," but the list does not mention Little Swift *A. affinis*, which is indeed a common resident. Since the nearest breeding location of Common Swift in India is the Himalaya (Pfister 2004; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), we suspect that this is an error and recommend that the bird recorded by Bharos *et al.* (2010) be considered a House Swift.

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