

The Birds of North America

Life Histories for the 21st Century

472-01-1996

6 Sep. 1996

Dear Frank,

Enclosed is a copy, long overdue, of my description of the swift that Bob and Peg Ridgely and I saw. I had promised Nick that something would be submitted to the records committee — so here it is.

I am still not committed to an identification, although my hunch is that the bird was a Common Swift. Recently, the question of West Indian Black Swift has been brought to the fore by a report on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Bob and I have studied specimens of those, including males which have long outer rectrices, and concluded that our bird clearly was not that taxon — still best fits Agus.
Good luck to the committee!

Lucy Beres

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**Unidentified *Apus* swift seen
near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
10 May 1996**

A large, long-winged and deeply fork-tailed swift was seen with Chimney Swifts flying low over the residence of Robert and Peg Ridgely in Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania. A drawing and some descriptive notes of the bird were made shortly after the sighting (see attached). This detailed account is based on those original notes, consultation with references, specimens, and other experienced birders familiar with the various species mentioned here.

Species: *Apus* sp., probably *Apus apus* (Common Swift)
Locality: Lafayette Hill, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania
Date: 10 May 1996
Time: about 1030 (EDT), duration of observation approximately 10 seconds
Observers: Louis R. Bevier, Robert S. Ridgely, Peg Ridgely
Conditions: Low overcast with occasional light drizzle in patches, though not at the time the swift flew overhead. The weather in the preceding few days had been rainy and foggy as a stalled front wavered north and south of the Philadelphia region. On this morning, our region was on the warm front (southern) side of this front and many migrant birds were present over a wide area from Cape May to northwestern Delaware (based on conversations with other birders).

Circumstances:

We had been casually walking through the Ridgely's yard looking at flowers in the garden and warblers in the trees when LRB looked up to see a larger swift among a small group of Chimney Swifts flying overhead. Because this swift was obviously different, our initial reactions are worth noting. In the first moments when presented with an unusual bird, one sometimes reverts to old birding habits, just for an instant. Thus, for LRB who began watching birds in California, the initial reaction was that a White-throated Swift had joined the Vaux's Swifts! Likewise, RSR's initial reaction was that a White-collared Swift had just dropped out of the sky. This illustrates the clearly larger size and different flight profile compared with the accompanying Chimney Swifts. In the next few moments we had our binoculars on the bird. LRB had seen the bird make one quick turn over the Ridgely's yard, but by the time everyone had leveled their binoculars on the swift, it was moving more or less in a straight line overhead and then away over the trees. Nevertheless, we all had good opportunity to reconfirm that this was a large swift with long wings and a long tail. We saw the bird spread its deeply forked tail two or three times, leaving us astonished each time.

The mystery swift was seen with a group of 6-10 Chimney Swifts, all birds flying low, only 100' or so above us. Against the bright gray sky, the swift was harshly backlit. Despite these conditions, however, the slightly paler throat and breast of Chimney Swift was just discernible. Since Chimney Swifts often appear entirely dark against a bright sky, this indicated that we should have noticed any lighter pattern on the underparts of our mystery swift.

The swift disappeared to the south with Chimney Swifts. We attempted to relocate the bird over the next half-hour, searching from higher vantage points and at a nearby church where a small group of Chimney Swifts nest. We were unable to find the bird again. Shortly after the sighting, LRB made a sketch and jotted down basic notes on the observation.

Description:

Size & shape: A large swift, clearly larger than accompanying Chimney Swifts. Long wings, clearly longer than Chimney Swift and proportionately longer as well. Long extension of body behind wings, including fairly long tail; this being quite different from the Chimney Swifts. When held closed, the tail showed a slight notch at the tip, but when spread, the tail showed a deep fork with a shallow rounded apex (see drawing). We compared the tail to the similar shape seen on Barn Swallow, except that our bird was proportionately not as deeply forked and possessed wider outer rectrices; the outer tail feathers were not thin and needle-shaped but tapered to an acute point. The wings were long and sickle-shaped, being narrow against the body and tapering to an attenuated outer wing and tip that was narrowly pointed. The head and neck were wide and short; quite typical of a swift.

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Underparts: Body and wings very dark, appearing essentially black. We saw a slightly paler, grizzled, grayish white throat. The body appeared to be uniform in color, no pattern other than the throat being seen.

Flight: In the single turn, a few quick shallow beats of its wings then a glide on set wings. Straight-line flight involved a few quick beats interspersed with glides. The wing beats were languid by comparison with the flickering wings of the Chimney Swifts. When the tail was clamped and the bird had just accelerated, its wings were held more swept back. In the moments it paused during glides and spread its tail, the wings were held more straight out from the body (see drawing). The wings were held more or less level with the body during glides, definitely not bowed down.

Vocalizations: none heard.

Identification:

Two commonly seen fork-tailed species easily dismissed are Barn Swallow and Purple Martin. The long, slender wings and large size compared to the accompanying Chimney Swifts eliminate these two swallows. It was helpful to have the objective eye of Peg Ridgely there to reassert the true size and shape of our bird. Thus, based on the long, tapered wings, deeply forked tail, and overall size, we are certain that the bird was a species of *Apus*.

Both RSR and LRB are familiar with Common Swift (*A. apus*) and felt that the bird closely resembled that species. This conclusion is tempered by the brevity of the sighting and our state of shock that *whatever* the bird was, it was definitely far out-of-range for its species.

Initially, LRB felt that the tail was perhaps too long and deeply forked for Common Swift, but RSR's immediate impression was Common Swift. After studying photographs of Common Swift that LRB had taken in Italy in 1992, the shape of the tail on the mystery swift seemed a close match. Looking back at the sketch, we feel that the tail is illustrated a bit too deeply forked. (I'm not an artist; we're lucky it looks like a bird!)

Identification to species within the genus *Apus* for our bird is probably not advisable for the following reasons. Other species of large, plain *Apus* swifts within the superspecies complexes of both *apus* and *pallidus* are very similar—this includes the species *alexandri*, *apus*, *unicolor*, *niansae*, *pallidus*, *barbatus*, *berliozii*, and *bradfieldi*. Most of these species, except *apus* and *pallidus*, have restricted ranges in Africa. Identification to species within this group under the conditions we experienced is probably not possible. Nevertheless, one can infer Common Swift as the most probable among the group based on these facts:

(1) Common Swift is the only *known* long-distance migrant among the group. This coupled with the vast number of Common Swifts compared to the other species puts the odds well in favor of Common Swift as a vagrant. The next most likely contender, Pallid Swift, is a medium distance migrant with a far smaller total population. Nearctic records of Common Swift include: specimen, St. Paul I., Alaska, 28 Jun 1950 (Kenyon and Phillips 1965); Bermuda, 16 Nov 1986 (Amos 1991). A questionable sight report for Barbados published in the AOU Check-list (1983) is apparently without any merit (fide Allan Keith).

(2) Common Swift has the longest relative outer tail feather projections (measurement of outermost tail feather minus tail feather next inward) and thus has one of the most deeply forked tails of the group.

(3) Other characters we noted that most closely match Common Swift are its uniform dark underparts with a small, dull grayish throat patch and relatively uniform dark inner wing (not noticeably paler). Further, our examination of specimens showed that the underparts pattern, including throat, best matched the nominate race of Common Swift.

Taking all this into consideration leads to a fairly credible conclusion that the bird we saw was a Common Swift.

Other swifts considered *at the time* of the sighting and rejected were:

Streptoprocne—White-collared Swift (*S. zonaris*) a species with records from Texas and as far north as northern California (also Tawas Pt., Mich. 19 May 1996) and as far east as Florida. This species is larger than our bird, has broader wings, a differently shaped tail, and flies with deeper, more powerful wing strokes. In addition, the rather obvious white collar of this species would have been seen under the conditions. Both LRB and RSR are very familiar with this species. The other two species of this genus do not show even a shallow fork to the tail.

Cypseloides—Black Swift (*C. niger*) should be considered a potential vagrant to the East because of its long distance migration (western populations) and proximity to the eastern U.S. (Greater Antilles

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populations). Although Black Swift has the most forked tail within the *Cypseloides*, its tail fork is shallow (if seen at all) and unlike our bird's tail; also, Black Swift's tail would appear wider (bulkier tailed). The flight action of Black Swift is slower and its glides are usually on bowed down wings. Lastly, it is felt that the wings of Black Swift are not as attenuated as our bird. Other *Cypseloides* can be eliminated by tail shape. Both LRB and RSR are very familiar with this genus, including recent experience with *C. niger* (summer 1995) and other *Cypseloides* (also 1995).

Allan Keith provided much information on identification and movements of Black Swifts found in the Caribbean.

Panyptila—specifically Great Swallow-tailed Swift (*P. sanctihieronymi*) shows obvious white markings below and has a different wing shape. We are not so familiar with this species but do know the smaller *Panyptila*, which is much smaller than our bird, flies with quick wing flicks, and typically holds the tail closed in a point.

Other species considered after the sighting and rejected:

Apus melba—Alpine Swift has been recorded in the Caribbean and thus is a potential vagrant to the East. This species has an obvious white belly, broader wings, and larger head. Both RSR and LRB have seen several individuals of this species.

A. pacificus—Pacific Swift is larger, longer-winged, and has a more deeply forked tail than Common Swift, the latter character fitting LRB's initial impression of tail length. Because Pacific Swift has been found several times in the Aleutians and in England, it must be considered a potential vagrant to the East. We do not have experience with this species.

The characteristics of this species in the field were discussed with Paul Lehman, Kenn Kaufman, and Curtis Marantz, all of whom have experience with this species in Asia. Lehman and Kaufman expressed the opinion that Pacific Swift's white rump is easily seen and that the pale scaling on the belly might be noticeable; Marantz was quite skeptical that these features could be seen from below except at very close range in good light. Our opinion after examination of Pacific Swift specimens is that the underparts on our bird were much darker and uniform. Additionally, specimens show white patches along the sides of the flanks *as seen from below*; this is where the white rump patch wraps around the sides of the body. This character also was noted on the released, free flying, vagrant Pacific Swift that had landed on an oil rig in the North Sea off Norfolk, Great Britain (Parker 1990). The observer in that case stated that "in dull light and without binoculars...the only obvious difference in the field [from Common Swift] was the patch of white on the rump, which also wrapped around towards the undertail coverts, so that it was clearly visible when the bird was viewed side on."

Species not safely eliminated:

Pallid Swift (*P. pallidus*) is paler, chocolate brown and typically shows blunter wing tips and a paler inner wing (paler secondaries). These features either could not be seen or are not diagnostic—the more pointed wing tip does not eliminate Pallid Swift, whereas a blunter wing tip is indicative of Pallid. Proper assessment of this character requires direct comparison with Common Swift, based on LRB's experience with Pallid Swift. The paler forehead and throat accenting a dark mask on Pallid Swift might presumably have been noticeable. Pallid Swift has a less deeply forked tail, but, again, comparison would be necessary.

Although this cannot be used to eliminate Pallid Swift, that species has a limited range, much smaller total population, and shorter migration, making it far less likely as a vagrant to eastern North America. Nevertheless, its potential as a vagrant cannot be dismissed.

Dark-rumped Swift (*A. acuticauda*) is similar to Pacific Swift but lacks the rump patch and is darker below. This species would presumably be impossible to eliminate from Common Swift based on our observation.

This is a rare and little known species of southeastern Asia. It is unlikely as a vagrant to eastern North America based on its limited range, small population size, and its apparently limited movements.

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Apus swift, 10 May 1996, near Philadelphia 4
L. R. Bevier, R. S. & P. Ridgely

References, photographs, illustrations, and specimens examined include:

Specimens of *A. apus apus* & *A. a. pekinensis*, *A. pallidus*, and *A. pacificus* at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

Amos, E. J. R. 1991. *The birds of Bermuda*. Amos, Warwick, Bermuda.

Brooke, R. K. 1969. Notes on the identification of swifts in southern Africa. *Bokmakierie* 21:39-40.

Brooke, R. K. 1972. Swift migrations in southern Africa. *Bokmakierie* 24:31-32.

Chantler, P. J. 1990. Identification of Pallid Swift. *Birding World* 3:168-171.

Chantler, P. J. 1993. Identification of Western Palearctic swifts. *Dutch Birding* 15 (3):97-135.

[this reference contains many excellent photographs of swifts in flight, including photos of Common Swift that virtually match what we saw.]

Chantler, P. J., and G. Driessens. 1995. *Swifts: a guide to the swifts and treeswifts of the world*. Pica Press, Sussex, U.K.

Kenyon, K. W., and R. E. Phillips. 1965. Birds from the Pribilof Islands and vicinity. *Auk* 82:624-635.

Parker, M. 1990. Pacific Swift: new to the Western Palearctic. *British Birds* 83:43-46.

Louis R. Bevier
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Robert S. and Peg Ridgely
851 Andorra Rd.
Lafayette Hill, PA 19444

23 May 1996

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10 May 1996

Bevier, Louis R.

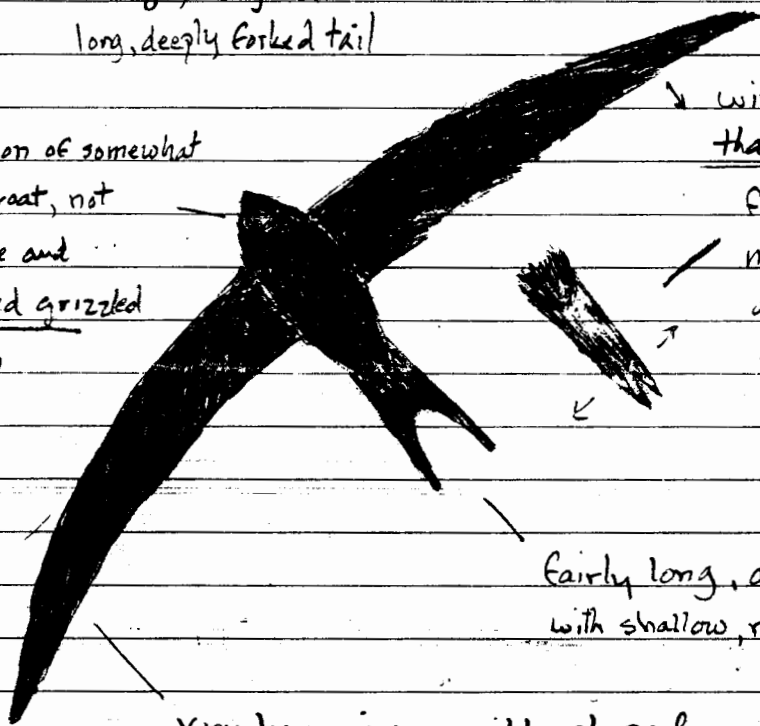
Lafayette Hill, Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania

~1030 EDT with Robert and Peg Ridgely at Ridgely's home on Andorra Rd.

Apus sp. - large, very dark swift with long sickle-shaped wings
long, deeply forked tail

(both Bob & Peg did not see this feature) Impression of somewhat paler throat, not extensive and appeared grizzled

- No white markings on underparts
- No vocalization



Wings more swept back than illustrated.

flew with tail clamped much of time, but opened and spread tail to extent shown at left at least two times

Fairly long, deeply forked tail with shallow, rounded apex

Very long wings, sickle-shaped quite attenuated at tip - narrowly pointed base of wings relatively narrow - not broad

Bird seen up to 10 seconds (~5-8s) w/ Chimney Swifts; low overhead ~100' high

• Description: large swift, clearly larger than accompanying Chimney Swifts; long wings, also clearly longer than the Chimney Swifts; obvious long tail similar to Barn Swallow but outer rectrices wider and, comparatively, not so long. Body and wings very dark - essentially black. I thought I saw a somewhat paler, grizzled throat, but this was not seen by Bob or Peg.

• Flight: somewhat languid flight action interspersed with glides. Wing stroke deeper than Chimney Swift and noticed flickering as they flew. Wings seemed to be held more or less level with body during glides. To me, the flight was not as deep and heavy as Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*), however, and the glides were more languid not on bowed-down set wings.

• Conditions: low overcast w/ occasional light drizzle (but not at time of observation). Bird seen against the bright gray sky.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Common Swift ()

Date of Sighting: 10 May 1996 to 10 May 1996

Location: LAFAYETTE HILL

County: MONTGOMERY

Observer(s): Louis Bevier; Robert Ridgely; Peg Ridgely

Date of Submission: 1996

Submitted by: Louis Bevier; Robert Ridgely; Peg Ridgely

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas								
N. Pulcinella			X					
E. Kwater		X						
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
S. Feldstein				X				
TOTALS			X					
DECISION								

Comments:

Accepted as *Apus sp.*

Signature (Secretary):

F. C Haas

Date:

8-16-97