

# PENNSYLVANIA RARE BIRD REPORT FORM

This form is presented as a convenience and guide. It can be used if desired, but is not necessary for submitting a report. Species requiring documentation are those on the Review List or not on the Official List of Birds of Pennsylvania. Send documentation to:

Nick Pulcinella, Secretary  
Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee  
613 Howard Ave.  
West Chester, PA 19380  
nickpulcinella@comcast.net  
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SPECIES (common and scientific name) Violet-green Swallow / Tachycineta thalassina  
Subspecies, if known \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS 3 SEX(ES) female

AGE(S) AND PLUMAGE(S) (e.g. immature; adult in breeding plumage; year for gulls; basic or alternate if you prefer those terms; state of molt if applicable): 1<sup>st</sup> and/or 2<sup>nd</sup> year drab adult [Sibley]

DATE OF OBSERVATION Wednesday April 6, 2005 TIME 3:18 PM

LOCATION (city, borough, township) Marietta Borough

EXACT SITE (e.g. name of park, lake, road) Marietta Boat Club / Susquehanna River

### OBSERVER REPORTING:

Name Lou Carpenter  
Address 623 Hayley Road  
City York State PA ZIP 17404  
e-mail (optional) loulcar@att.net phone (optional) (717) 764-4105

OTHER OBSERVERS (only those who saw and identified the bird with you): none

HABITAT (e.g. mowed field, woodland edge, any other details) over the water near the shoreline and over the land along the wooded river shoreline

DISTANCE TO BIRD closest approach approximately 20 - 25 feet

VIEWING CONDITIONS (sky, weather, position of sun relative to you) sunny, warm, upper 60's; high sun slightly in my eyes; river was high, muddy, fairly fast moving, having just receded from flooding the area a few days earlier.

OPTICAL EQUIPMENT USED Brunton Eterna 7 x 42 binoculars

DESCRIPTION (Include as much detail as you observed – size relative to other species present; “jizz”= e.g. posture, body shape, and proportions; colors and patterns of plumage; bill, eye, and leg characteristics; other features relevant to this individual):

swallow-like bird; unable to determine exact size, but seemed comparable in size to Tree Swallow (TRES); all dark/black upperparts except for a striking white rump with a black bar dissecting it vertically; no gloss or sheen; dirty/dingy (with a buffy tinge) chin and throat, with a diffuse dirty/buffy wash concentrated mostly around the breast

area (no sharply defined breast band or border); underside all white (other than previously mentioned dirty/buffy tinge) with no distinct markings; underside of tail was black and squared-off.

(Please use an additional page if necessary.)

**BEHAVIOR** (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

birds were first seen from above as they were circling a few inches over the water in a relatively tight circle; once in a while, an individual would break out of the group and go into a climb; entire group moved about 20 yards downstream where they lingered awhile in the same circling/skimming pattern; one individual then broke away and flew back towards my location, flying directly overhead at relatively low altitude, turned in a circle towards the park, then headed back out over the water; entire flock (3) then moved out of sight further downstream.

**VOCALIZATIONS** none heard

**SUPPORTING EVIDENCE IF ANY:**

Photograph  Video recording  Audio recording  Drawing

Photographer/recorder/illustrator:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail (optional) \_\_\_\_\_ phone (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Please include a copy of the photograph or recording with your report, and accompany it with a complete written documentation if the identification is obvious to you. If you made a drawing, please include it.

**IF THIS IS A DEAD BIRD:**

General condition \_\_\_\_\_

If collected (by permit), location of specimen if known \_\_\_\_\_

**SEPARATION FROM SIMILAR SPECIES** (how you eliminated others)

eliminated White-throated Swift by presence of all-plain underside lacking any black or other distinctive markings; eliminated Tree Swallow by lack of pure white chin/throat and presence of a distinctive white rump dissected by a black vertical bar.

**DISCUSSION** – Anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

Birds were first picked up at relatively close range (~20 feet) close to shore. Dirty/buffy chin and a lot of white near the tail area lead me initially to think they might be unusually plumaged Cliff (or possibly Cave) Swallows. I was still thinking along those lines when one turned its back directly towards me in a climb, still at close range. At that point I was stunned by the rump pattern which became abundantly clear as my angle of view was practically near perfect from straight on, 180 degrees behind, and still at close range. It showed a white rump with a black bar dissecting it vertically. Confusion then set in as I wasn't sure what I had, so I just continued to watch them closely for any further field marks.

They were only nearby for about a minute or so before they moved about 20 yards further downstream. At that point, one of the birds broke away and flew low directly towards me, eventually passing low directly overhead, giving me excellent views of the plain-white underside with black squared-off tail. I lost sight of the flock shortly after that. Total time I had them was probably only 3-to-5 minutes.

Back in my car, I opened my field guides (I had three with me; National Geographic; Sibley East, and Golden [Robbins/Bruun/Zim]). The striking rump pattern was dominant, quickly steering me towards the Tree, Violet-green or White-throated Swift as the likely candidates. The plain white underside eliminated the Swift right away.

The dirty/buffy wash concentrated in the breast area steered me away from the TRES as the birds I saw most closely matched the juvenile Violet-green illustration on p. 323 of National Geographic. The only difference was that I saw no distinct border on the breast band and the color I saw was light/blander than in the illustration. The fact that the wash leaned more towards the brown spectrum than the gray spectrum also led me away from TRES, as all my guides showed any coloration on TRES to be on the grayish side of the spectrum, though in subsequent research, the Cornell Labs website [[http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bird\\_bios/speciesaccounts/vigswa.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bird_bios/speciesaccounts/vigswa.html)] states that TRES juvs can have a "brownish wash on the chest," though all my other sources do not mention any brown on TRES.

I subsequently learned that swallows typically lose their juv plumage by first autumn, though one source admits that little is known about the molting of VGSWs, and that if they are like TRES, as is widely assumed (but not proven), then the females would retain the juv upperside plumage through the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, though any breast bands or other markings on the undersides would be lost, leaving them with a plain white underside by first autumn.

But if research were to subsequently show that juv VGSWs for some reason hold some of their underside coloration longer than TRES, then the presence of the dingy/buffy chin/throat would rule out a TRES, as the chin/throat of TRES is widely held to be pure white in all plumages and ages, and I clearly saw enough color on the area to cause me to initially think Cliff or Cave, while Philip Unitt writes in the winter 1997 issue of WRENDERINGS (with drawings by Philip Unitt) [<http://www.sdnhm.org/research/birdatlas/focus/violet.html>] that the chin/throat of juv VGSWs is "dusky".

I did not see any white over the eye, nor on the face sides, as would easily point to an adult male VGSW. But I saw in Sibley that "drab adult/female" illustration shows substantially less white around the eye. Unitt writes "the cheeks of the female Violet-green are variably mottled with gray, making the two species' difference in face pattern far less obvious." And "The difference in pattern on the [adult] face -- eye surrounded by dark on the Tree Swallow, largely by white on the Violet-green -- is best seen when the birds are perched." I did not see the birds while perched, so it is not unreasonable that I would not have noted this field mark, as it may have been obscure at this time of year in female VGSWs.

But even if I discard the "dusky" throat and the lack of white above the eye, that still leaves the striking white rump pattern on not just one, but on all three birds, making it problematic to assert that they are variant TRES. I have sent out inquiries and have heard several respond that they have seen such rumps on TRES, but no one claims to have ever seen 3 such plumaged TRES at one time, let alone in the same field of view.

Some whom I have consulted afterwards have asserted that plumage can vary greatly depending on systemic factors, the primary example given usually being weather conditions, such as high wind, humidity, etc. My rejoinder is that TRES are so common that unless this systemic phenomenon were restricted to the Marietta Boat Club area, white-rumped TRES would have been sighted throughout the region and I imagine there would have been dozens of "odd looking bird" reports posted on PABIRDS, as the rump I saw is nothing like the TRES rumps illustrated in any of the commercial guide books [I even went to Borders to look through every guide I could find and found nothing]. I didn't see any such reports, and to say the phenomenon happened only around Marietta also seems highly unlikely. The systemic altered plumage explanation for what I saw is, therefore, problematic and raises other unanswered questions.

But if the rump plumage variation were not systemic, but rather is similar to lucistic variations, or albinism, -- viz, randomly distributed throughout the population -- then it becomes problematic to explain why 3 lucistic TRES would be hanging around together. In the case of albinism, I don't recall ever hearing of one albino individual associating with another albino of the same species. It would be an exciting day indeed to see, say, 3 albino Red-tailed Hawks sitting in the same tree, or flying in the same kettle. So non-systemic plumage variation is a problematic explanation as well.

Most birders I talked to are surprised to learn that even if a non-systemic random plumage variation is as common as 1 in 100 individuals, the odds of seeing 3 together is a million to one. As I have certainly observed more than 100 TRES in my 31 years as a birder, 1 in a 100 seems absurdly low. I doubt it is as low as 1 in 1000, which would yield

astronomical odds of catching 3 together – I.e., a billion to 1. This is far more unlikely than coming across out-of-range VGSWs who are together because they are of the same species.

(Please use an additional page if necessary)

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND/OR SIMILAR SPECIES I have never seen a VGSW before, but as a birder with 31 years experience, I have seen thousands of Tree Swallows.

ARE YOU POSITIVE OF YOUR IDENTIFICATION ? (why or why not) Fairly positive, but as I lack VGSW experience, I am awaiting the opinion of VGSW experts.

REFERENCES CONSULTED:

During observation none

After observation:

1. National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America
2. The Sibley Field Guide To Birds of Eastern North America
3. North American Birds/Peterson Multimedia Guides (with Roger Tory Peterson)[CD]
4. Birds of Eastern and Central North America/Peterson Field Guides
5. A Guide to Field Identification/Birds of North America/Robbins, Bruun, and Zim

the following web sites:

<http://www.sdnhm.org/research/birdatlas/focus/violet.html>

Philip Unitt, from the winter 1997 issue of WRENDERINGS, drawings by Philip Unitt

[http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bird\\_bios/speciesaccounts/vigswa.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bird_bios/speciesaccounts/vigswa.html)

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<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/BOW/TRESWA/>

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[http://www.enature.com/flashcard/show\\_flash\\_card.asp?recordNumber=BD0255](http://www.enature.com/flashcard/show_flash_card.asp?recordNumber=BD0255)

[http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com/site/backyard\\_birds/bird\\_id/violetgreen\\_swallow.aspx](http://www.birdwatchersdigest.com/site/backyard_birds/bird_id/violetgreen_swallow.aspx)

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[http://www.elwas.org/highlights/data/20021013\\_211844833](http://www.elwas.org/highlights/data/20021013_211844833)

East Lake Washington Audubon Society

<http://www.paulnoll.com/Oregon/Birds/arrival-Swallow-Violet-green.html>

Paul and Bernice Noll's Window on the World

<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/i6150id.html>

Gough, G.A., Sauer, J.R., Iliff, M.

Patuxent Bird Identification Infocenter.

1998. Version 97.1.

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD

<http://www.stanfordalumni.org/birdsite/text/species/swallowss.html>

Peter LaTourrette 1989

DATE OF THIS REPORT: April 11, 2005

SIGNATURE OF OBSERVER Jim Carpenter

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation – Round One**

Species: Violet-green Swallow (Tachycineta thalassina)

Date of Sighting: 6 April 2005 to 6 April 2005

Location: MARIETTA BOAT CLUB

County : LANCASTER

Observer(s): Lou Carpenter

Date of Submission: 2005

Submitted by: Lou Carpenter

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
<del>R. Wiltraut</del> <i>C. Malach</i>					X			
<del>D. Heathcote</del> <i>Greene</i>			X					
P. Guris			X					
J. Stanley			X					
E. Witmer	<del>4/4</del>			X				
<del>R. Leberman</del> <i>Heller</i>						X		
M. Sharp						X		
TOTALS			3	1	1	2		
DECISION						X		

Comments: 3/4

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

9/5/05