



Horus Swift

Horuswindswael

Apus horus

The Horus Swift is patchily distributed throughout eastern Africa from the Cape to the Sudan. In southern Africa it is found chiefly in the more humid eastern and southern regions. It probably normally forages high in the sky where, if it is seen at all, it is likely to be mistaken for the Little Swift *A. affinis*. Both species have rectangular patches of white on their rumps which wrap around the flanks, and the slight fork in the tail of the Horus Swift is visible only at close quarters. Birds seen at close quarters are usually at a breeding site; thus the species is almost certainly under-reported in the atlas data. The atlas nevertheless indicates a marked population concentration on the highlands of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg and Lesotho massif.

There is a rare morph from Zimbabwe in which the blue-black and white of normal birds is replaced by shades of brown. This morph, the race *A. h. fuscobrunneus* (Brooke 1971c), is the usual form in the coastal areas of southwestern Angola and has been recorded on the Kunene River (C.J. Brown pers. comm.).

Habitat: Like all swifts, it forages on aerial invertebrates and may be found flying anywhere. However, it is only regular in the more humid areas of the south and east, and often associated with high-altitude grasslands. This is probably because its most usual nest sites are holes made in vertical sandbanks by waterside birds such as bee-eaters, kingfishers, starlings and martins (Brooke 1971g), though it occasionally excavates a tunnel and nest chamber for itself (Hopcroft 1974).

Movements: Its migratory movements are not well understood, though the atlas data clarify our understanding. It appears to be largely resident in low-lying tropical areas, south to the northeastern Transvaal, although it is reported to be a dry-season breeding visitor to the Zambezi

Valley (A.J. Tree pers. comm.). Elsewhere, it is largely a summer-breeding visitor to cooler and higher-altitude areas in October–April.

Breeding: Egg-laying has been recorded January–April in the Transvaal (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and in all months with a November–February peak in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981), but it is a winter breeder in the low-lying areas (Brooke 1971g) which may account for the bimodal data in Zone 5. In Namibia it was recorded breeding near Windhoek (2217CA) in March 1986 and in every year since (Brown 1989b). The single record from Botswana is for July (Skinner 1996a).

Interspecific relationships: It appears to replace the Little Swift at high altitude in the Drakensberg. Unlike the Whiterumped Swift *A. caffer*, it is not known to usurp the nests of other nesting birds, but rather to wait until the holes are vacated. In any case, it seems unlikely that it could usurp the holes of the much larger and longer-billed Southern Carmine *Merops nubicoides* and Whitefronted *M. bullockoides* Bee-eaters and Pied Starlings *Spreo bicolor* in whose abandoned holes nests are often placed. In Namibia it has been observed taking over the holes of Anteater Chats *Myrmecocichla formicivora* (C.J. Brown pers. comm.).

Historical distribution and conservation: There is no known change in the overall distribution of this easily overlooked species, but locally it has taken to breeding in holes in mine dumps, road cuttings and other man-made disturbances. This may have led to increases in population, but it is noticeable how few nests are occupied by Horus Swifts in large bee-eater colonies with many holes. There may be increased dispersion of breeding birds rather than increasing numbers of breeding pairs.

Vertical sandbanks in which it breeds, whether banks of rivers, mine dumps, road or rail cuttings, are essentially ephemeral, and the Horus Swift is clearly adapted to deal with this situation.

R.K. Brooke

Recorded in 720 grid cells, 15.9%
Total number of records: 3075
Mean reporting rate for range: 4.0%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



