

## Palm Swift

### Palmwindswael

*Cypsiurus parvus*

The Palm Swift occurs almost throughout tropical Africa, on Madagascar and the Comoro Islands. It is largely resident and has expanded its southern African and Zambian range through using planted flabelliform palm trees and some man-made structures. Reporting rates indicate that the *Hyphaene* palm belt, in parts of the Okavango and Makgadikgadi–Nxai Pan National Park in northern Botswana, and in Owambo, is a major stronghold for the subspecies *C. p. hyphaenes*. Elsewhere the patterns of relative abundance, particularly for the other two subspecies in the region, are less distinct, probably as a result of colonization of patchily distributed alien palms.

This is one of the easier swifts to identify because of its small size and greatly attenuated appearance. The atlas data are regarded as reliable.

**Habitat:** Its distribution is substantially governed by the distribution of flabelliform palms, in which it nests on the undersides of dead leaves. The widespread planting of the alien palm *Washingtonia robusta* (and other flabelliform palms) has increased its local range and numbers because this palm provides better nest sites than do the indigenous *Borassus* and *Hyphaene* palms. Breeding in pinnate palm leaves such as those of *Phoenix* spp., which includes the Date Palm and *Raphia*, is rare (Brooke 1971g). A variety of bridges and houses are also used as nest sites, particularly the box-girder superstructures of some railway bridges (Brooke 1963b, 1971g, 1974f; Whyte 1982).

**Movements:** Many areas south of the historic range have been colonized during the 20th century. The most southerly breeding records are from Somerset East (3225DA) and Steytlerville (3324AD) (Ward *et al.* 1984; Hofmeyr 1994), but it is present at the latter only in summer. It may be that, as areas with colder winters are colonized, shortage of food may stimulate the development of migratory behaviour not currently present in most populations. Steyn & Brooke (1971) showed that it was subject to mortality in Zimbabwe during unseasonably cold spells in summer, and winter mortality has

been documented from Zimbabwe and the Okavango (Donnelly 1982b; Herremans *et al.* 1994b).

**Breeding:** Breeding takes place throughout the year in the warmer parts of its range, but with spring/summer peaks in the Transvaal, Zimbabwe and Namibia (Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b; Brown & Clinning in press). In cooler areas breeding may be more confined to the summer months.

**Interspecific relationships:** It joins mixed foraging flocks of swifts and swallows. The exact usage of dead fronds on *W. robusta* palms also occupied by Bradfield's Swift *Apus bradfieldi* in Windhoek (2217CA) and the Kunene and Orongo regions of Namibia, and by Black Swifts *A. barbatus* in Kimberley (2824DB), has not been investigated. It is possible that the smaller Palm Swift loses breeding sites to the two larger species. It is the most crepuscular of the southern African swifts and its late foraging overlaps that of microchiropteran bats.

**Historical distribution and conservation:** In southern Africa it was originally confined to the palmveld of northern Namibia, northern Botswana, western Zimbabwe (Brooke 1972b), and the Zambezi, Save and Limpopo valleys. Use of alien palms and man-made structures has permitted expansions (Brooke 1963b; 1971g). The first southward expansion may have taken place in the 1930s into extreme southern Mozambique (Gill 1936). Eastward expansion onto the Zimbabwean plateau apparently started in the 1940s (Brooke 1971g); similar westward expansion at that time took place in the northern Transvaal (Anon. 1950). In KwaZulu-Natal, a southward expansion took place early in the 1950s (Frances 1953; Clancey 1964b), and in the Transvaal in the late 1950s (Markus 1963b). Further expansion in all directions, particularly into the northern and eastern Cape Province, and into central and southern Namibia, has occurred and is continuing (e.g. Brown & Riekert 1984; Ward *et al.* 1984; Berruti *et al.* 1985; Brown 1985a; Brooke & Avery 1992).

Protection of natural palmveld is required for the Palm Swift. The westward spread of elephants into the Okavango, and the frequent occurrence of fires, seriously reduce the number of palms and may affect it locally (M. Herremans pers. comm.). The planting of alien palms encourages it to flourish in suburbia.

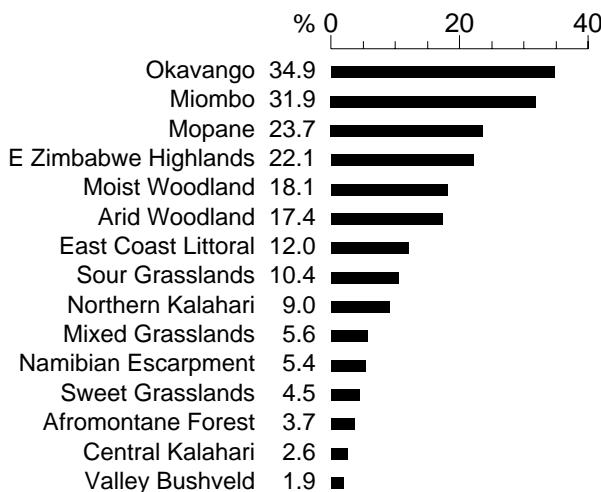
R.K. Brooke

Recorded in 1151 grid cells, 25.4%

Total number of records: 14 052

Mean reporting rate for range: 18.6%

#### Reporting rates for vegetation types



Also marginally in Southern Kalahari, Nama Karoo, Namib and Grassy Karoo.

