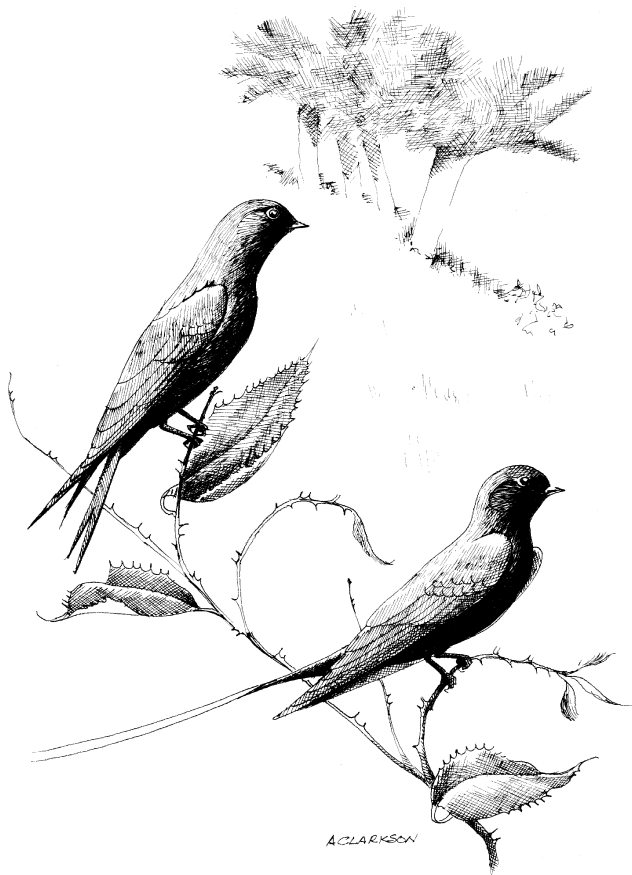




Blue Swallow

Blouswael

Hirundo atrocaerulea

This intra-African migrant is rare and very localized around its breeding sites in the Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands, along the Transvaal and Swaziland escarpments, and in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands. Other breeding populations occur in Africa on montane plateaus in parts of Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania and Zaire. The nonbreeding grounds are in the Lake Victoria basin in Central Africa. The southern African populations are small, particularly those in South Africa and Swaziland. In 1987, there were 29 pairs in the Transvaal, 12 pairs in Swaziland, and 22 pairs were found in KwaZulu-Natal (Allan 1988b). In 1992, 27–28 pairs were counted in the Transvaal and 26 pairs were found in KwaZulu-Natal (Tarboton 1994). The size of the Zimbabwean population is unknown; three to four pairs per km² occupy prime habitat (Snell 1969). The species is conspicuous in its open habitat but can be confused with the Black Sawwing Swallow *Psalidoprocne holomelas*.

Habitat: It is restricted to montane grassland with high rainfall where there are sink-holes, Aardvark *Orycteropus afer* burrows or, especially in the Transvaal, old mining and prospecting shafts where the birds nest.

Movements: The models show that these swallows arrive earlier and depart later in the more northerly parts of their southern African range, compared with the more southerly

regions. The timing of departure is probably also influenced by the outcome of late breeding attempts.

Breeding: Breeding was recorded October–March. Earlé (1987b) reported an egg-laying season of September–February over the whole range, Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) recorded egg-laying in the Transvaal November–March, and Irwin (1981) gave September–February as the egg-laying period in Zimbabwe. The species can be enticed to nest in artificial nest cavities (Maclean 1993a) and will breed in buildings in Zimbabwe (Snell 1969). Breeding success at man-made sites may be higher than in natural cavities, owing to the frequent collapse of the latter (Parker 1994).

Historical distribution and conservation: Allan (1988d) found that the species had disappeared from 21 of 29 known localities in South Africa and Swaziland over the past hundred years. It heads the list of endangered South African birds (Brooke 1984b). The species is also considered threatened in Zimbabwe (DNPWM 1991), where it has also disappeared from some areas (Snell 1988). The species is considered globally threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994). The loss of suitable breeding and feeding habitat is the most important reason for this decrease. Montane grasslands are prime areas for the establishment of plantations of alien trees, and other habitat has been lost to sugar-cane farming, overgrazing, dense human settlement, and too frequent burning. In addition, suitable grassland patches amongst commercial plantations are protected from fire and this leads to nest sites becoming cluttered with vegetation and thus unsuitable. Also, montane grassland that remains unburned for long periods appears to become moribund and unsuitable for foraging. A reserve of 470 ha near Nelspruit (2530BD) in the Transvaal has been set aside for a small breeding population of about 10 pairs (Allan 1988d) and several smaller populations have received protection elsewhere in South Africa. Malolotja Nature Reserve in Swaziland supports 3–4 pairs (Allan 1988d). Similar conservation action is needed for all known breeding sites in southern Africa.

The comparatively large populations in Malawi have also come under pressure from commercial afforestation (Turner & Rose 1989). This renders the conservation of the southern African populations even more imperative. This swallow moults in a relatively small area near the equator in Uganda, western Kenya and northeastern Zaire (Earlé 1987b), and developments in this area could also be important for the conservation of the species.

D.G. Allan and R.A. Earlé

Recorded in 42 grid cells, 0.9%
Total number of records: 398
Mean reporting rate for range: 8.4%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



