

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture May 6th, 2009.

Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

It is an art to prepare bird specimens and it often is possible to recognize who prepared them. This helped Pamela Rasmussen to expose some of the frauds committed by Richard Meinertzhagen who was a great ornithologist and bird collector but who also stole many specimens and gave them false labels, claiming he had collected them. An article from The New Yorker about this is here:

<http://special.news.msu.edu/rasmussen/documents/Rasmussen%20New%20Yorker%20article.pdf>

The bird specimens on public display in the Oakland Museum are not mounted but freeze dried. They are set up in various habitat communities for CA. Most of them are not labeled. The philosophy behind it being that otherwise you get focused on the labels, this way you have to work it out yourself and learn more. The museum will close in August for remodeling.

Swifts

Very difficult birds to study.

Fly really fast, as the name swift implies.

Swifts are the most aerial of all birds. They gather all of their food in the air, likewise their nesting material, they bathe in the air, take a little shower in a water fall or zip along through shallow water. They are capable of mating in flight.

Sometimes confused with swallows. Swallows and swifts forage in similar ways, by sweeping through the air and catching flying insects one after the other without returning to a perch. In the case of the swifts, they cannot return to a perch because their feet are so small and poorly formed that they are incapable of perching. They can sit on a nest or lodge themselves in a rock crevice or hang vertically, using their tail feathers on the inside of a hollow tree or a chimney. But they cannot walk and they cannot perch. Their Latin family name Apodidae means "no feet".

Swifts are not related to swallows and their flight style is a bit different. The wings are held out from the body and are not flapped close to the body ever. The wing beats tend to be very stiff and rapid. A swallow is much more graceful and the wings will fold back and you see a rowing type of flight as the wings close in on the body and then open up again. Swifts do fly faster than swallows on average, especially if they are chasing something, but they are not as fast as a lot of people think they are. Typical swift speeds are 20 – 60 miles/hour. One of the differences between swifts and swallows is where the wrist joint, the bend of the wing, is placed. On swifts the joint is very close to the body. Almost the entire wing that you see is the hand, the area beyond the bend. This is one of the things that makes swifts appear to be stiff winged.

Most swifts use a sticky saliva to build their nest, with the exception of the Black Swift and its cohorts. The saliva hardens upon exposure to the air and they use it to glue together nests that include bits of twigs and grasses. There are some that build their nest with almost no nesting material at all except the amber colored glue that they secrete from their salivary glands. A species found in southeast Asia called the Edible-nest Swiftlet nests in caves and produces nests

just made out of glue. They are harvested annually, and that's what bird's nest soup is made of. It is very expensive. The bird's nest soup that they sell in Chinatown is mostly bogus.

Swifts are highly migratory birds and some of them are capable of long distance vagrancy, which means that man show up way outside their normal range in places where they would not be expected to be seen. When we think about potential new birds for NA, swifts should probably be very high on our radar.

Black Swift

A CLOUD SWIFT

A member of the genus *Cypseloides*, which is sometimes referred to as cloud swifts. There are several other species, mostly found in Middle and South America, most of them very poorly known. They are impossible to study. The reason they are called cloud swifts is because they typically fly and forage above the clouds. Samples of collected Black Swifts stomach contents show that they live largely on balloon spiders which spin a string of silk that carries them into the stratosphere. Cloud swifts do not carry food for their young in an extendable throat pouch the way Sibley says all swifts do.

THE NEST

Nest made out of bits of moss and plant fibers. It is built on a ledge in a cave or behind a waterfall.

The Black Swift is one of our least known birds. In the Bay Area it is a very local breeder and migrant. They have bred historically in the area from Año Nuevo south to the Santa Cruz lighthouse, basically in coastal Santa Cruz County. The first nest was discovered in 1901 in that area. In those days oology was a recognized scientific endeavor and museums paid money for egg sets and nests, especially of rare species. That activity resulted in the decline of a number of very rare species, because there was a premium for rarer species. The practice was basically outlawed some time around the late 1920s. One particular egg collector (A. G. Vrooman) made quite a living collecting the nests and eggs of the Black Swifts and selling them to museums around the country, because he was the only one who know where the nests were and the only one who was crazy enough to rappel down to the nest ledges with ropes. He first met a lot of resistance because museums did not believe that he had identified the bird associated with the nest correctly. This nest does not look like a swift nest. It is almost all plant fiber and does not have any glue. The other thing unswiftlike about it is that there is only one egg. All other swifts at that time were known to have a clutch of two eggs. Museum ornithologists were convinced that he had made a mistake and that this was some kind of Storm-Petrel. Those are dark birds with notched tails that might be flying around the cliffs. They lay a single egg, although they don't produce a nest like this, Storm-petrels normally just nest in borrows. Vrooman eventually was able to document that these were Black Swift nests and made a pretty good living until he fell off the rope one time and was killed.

OCCURRENCE

In NA the Black Swift breeds mostly in the Pacific Northwest in Canada.

Also some other islated populations, in CA in the Sierra Nevada.

We basically do not know where it winters. It is thought to winter in South America. One of the problems in confirming that is that there are many other species of black swifts in South America that look almost identical to it.

The best chance of seeing them is where they are breeding in August after the babies have fledged, they seem to be flying around if the weather is appropriate, making themselves visible.

There used to be a small population nesting in the sea caves on the south side of Año Nuevo point, but in recent years they have been very hard to find and evidence of nesting has been lacking. It was thought that they had disappeared completely, but there have been additional sightings.

They are regular in Yosemite National Park. Go to Bridalveil Falls in the summer months. If you go in towards the valley, there is a parking lot where you can view Bridalveil Falls from the bottom. You take a paved trail out to a viewing area, the falls are right there, you are getting spray on you. You look up to the right hand side of those falls, there are great numbers of swifts flying high against the sky and against the cliff face out there. Those are almost all White-throated Swifts, but there are Black Swifts there also. You can pick them out, but the views are not very satisfying. To get satisfying views, go to MacArthur-Burney Falls State Park in Shasta County. There is a huge gorge behind the waterfall. You just park and stand on the edge of this gorge and the swifts are flying below you, back and forth into the waterfall. They nest behind the waterfall and they fly right through the waterfall to get to and from their nests.

FIELD MARKS

One of our larger swifts.

All black with a white forehead.

Tail square or (in males) slightly notched, longer and more substantial than Vaux's or Chimney

Wings quite a bit broader at the base than especially White-throated

Juvenile white tips to the body feathers and even the primaries. Some of these white bars will continue to persist in the adult females. But the white portions of the feathers are weaker than the black ones and therefore subject to differential wear.

Glide more than the White-throated Swift.

VOCALIZATIONS

Sharp chirping call, but most of the time they are silent. They utter this vocalization in flight only around their nests and on breeding territories. During migration they are completely silent.

Vaux's Swift

Named in honor of William S. Vaux, pronounced "Vawks", who first described the species.

SPINE-TAILED SWIFTS

The swifts can be divided into two groups, those that are spine-tailed and those that are not. The spine-tailed ones include the Vaux's Swift and the Chimney Swift. The tips of their tail feathers have stiff projections of the feather shaft that the birds use to prop themselves up on the insides of chimneys or hollow trees or crevices.

OCCURRENCE

A bird of the Pacific Northwest that mostly nests and roosts in hollow trees in forested areas. In CA they breed along the coast south to the Santa Cruz Mountains and less commonly on the west slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

There are winter records, even in northern CA. The reason for that is unclear and the birds never seem to stick around.

It is actually very common in the Bay Area but seldom seen, because it is mostly a migrant and it flies too high for us to see it. They are quite common, particularly in the fall, at the hawk lookout in the Marin headlands. They are just little teeny birds and they go zinging rapidly overhead. If you are on mountain peaks you are more likely to encounter them.

In periods of migration, if there is a low fog or cloud layer that is keeping them low you may be able to see them flying very low. There have been a lot of Vaux's Swifts seen in the Bay Area in recent days because of the unsettled weather and because they are migrating now. It's sometimes called "swift weather" when you have these low clouds and unstable conditions, especially when it is kind of warm, muggy and windless.

Their status as a breeding bird in the Bay Area is a little unclear.

Nest not typically in chimneys, but sometimes they do.

Mostly they are seen in the evening, they usually forage too high up to be seen during the middle of the day. During the evening they usually forage lower and they come and go to their nest sites.

In "California Bird Species of Special Concern" I found that they need quite large hollow trees for nesting, which are most abundant in old-growth forest, and a strong association between the presence of Vaux's Swifts and old-growth forest has been found. They sometimes nest in manmade structures, mostly where no suitable hollow trees are available.

<http://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentVersionID=19837>

FIELD MARKS

Cigar with wings.

Wings rather bow and arrow shaped, slightly curved along the leading edge.

Flap in a very twinkling type of flight.

Relatively short-tailed, has even slightly shorter wings and tail compared to Chimney Swift.

Hard to see the spines sticking out of the tail.

Plain gray.

Paler throat, slightly dark cap, paler gray rump and upper tail coverts. You have to see them against a dark background to see this, against the sky they look dark.

Chimney Swift looks identical except slightly larger and darker on the throat and on the rump.

White-throated Swift has a long, pointed tail, is a bigger bird and glides more.

VOCALIZATIONS

Usually silent. Around their nest they have an insectlike trill which is almost buzzy and much higher pitched than that of the Chimney Swift.

Chimney Swift

OCCURRENCE

Throughout the eastern US.
No US winter records.

Has been found as a rare vagrant in CA, mostly in the late spring in places like Farallon Islands, Bolinas Lagoon, Pt Reyes.

Also in downtown LA. Several years ago there was a roost site during the summer months in downtown LA, basically you had to be there at dusk.

Many years ago some nested in a chimney in Davis. The swifts would come flying in from nowhere at dusk, twitter as they made several circles and then dive straight down into the chimney. The Central Valley is outside the normal breeding range of the Vaux's Swift.

When you have a potential Chimney Swift consider the date and where you are. The default here is that it is a Vaux's Swift. You would not want to call it a Chimney Swift unless it was out of range, out of date and you saw it really well or heard it call.

Famous for using chimneys as nest sites and roost sites. The nest is glued onto the vertical surface on the inside of the chimney.

Beware, Vaux's Swifts sometimes use chimneys and they get sooty there and look darker. The throat is much more likely to become dark when they hang vertically on the walls of the chimney.

FLIGHT DISPLAY

There is a flight display given on the breeding grounds in which the wings are tilted upward and the bird rocks back and forth. For a long time this was thought to be a reliable character for the Chimney Swift, but it is not, apparently Vaux's Swift also can do a rocking display.

FIELD MARKS

Shape very similar to Vaux's Swift, very slightly longer tail and wings.
Uniformly dark without contrast between the cap and the throat.

VOCALIZATIONS

A twittering type of call in which the notes are clearly separated from each other. They call loudly.

White-collared Swift

Middle and South American bird.

Has occurred as a vagrant to Texas and Florida. There are records elsewhere including one record from Pt St George, close to Crescent City, CA. One of only two birds that are accepted for the state list even though documented as sight records only without any other physical documentation. (The other one is the White-winged Crossbill.) It was seen with good scope views for several hours. Many states will not accept a new bird for the state list without a specimen or some other kind of tangible evidence.

One of the larger swifts that have occurred in NA, a little bit larger than the Black Swift. White collar, thick around the front of the neck and narrow around the back of the neck.

White-throated Swift

OCCURRENCE

Western US. Permanent resident in the southwestern part of their range.

The species that we are most likely to see.

Are reasonably common permanent residents in the Bay Area. The only swift you are likely to encounter anywhere in CA in the wintertime.

Nest in rock crevices.

Have also adapted to using terracotta roof tiles as nesting and roosting sites.

FIELD MARKS

A fairly well patterned bird.

White on the throat extending down on the belly and separate white flank patches. Seen from above the flank patches are similar to those of a Violet-green Swallow.

Against the sky it frequently looks all dark.

The bird is actually brown, not really black.

Very narrow wings, especially at the base.

Long tail relative to the wings, may show a notch at the tip.

VOCLAIZATIONS

High, piercing, twittering vocalizations which sound almost like laughter.

A few other species on this page that are Asiatic strays. They are in the book because they are vagrants to the outer Aleutian islands.