

Proving the occurrence of Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis* in the United Arab Emirates

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Contrary to its name, the Common Swift *Apus apus* is a rather scarce passage migrant in the eastern Arabian peninsula, mainly occurring from late February to early May and to a lesser extent in autumn, mainly September and October (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010, Eriksen & Victor 2013). Its tendency to pass through the region in low numbers, usually rapidly and at high altitude, means this species is presumably regularly overlooked, and, being frequently poorly observed, often dismissed as the much commoner Pallid Swift *A. pallidus* which is a breeding winter visitor to the eastern Arabian peninsula, being present and often conspicuous (including in urban centres in the UAE) from late October until May (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010, Jennings 2010).

The nominate race of Common Swift *A. a. apus* is a summer breeder to most of Europe, occurring as far south as Turkey and east to lake Baikal and wintering in central Africa and southeast to Tanzania and Mozambique. A second race, *A. a. pekinensis*, breeds from Iran eastwards to Mongolia and northern China, generally at lower latitudes than the nominate form. *A. a. pekinensis* (hereafter *pekinensis*) again migrates to Africa, wintering primarily in the arid southwest, although has also been recorded as far north as Uganda and Sudan (Cramp 1985, Ayé *et al* 2012, Chantler & Boesman 2013). The respective breeding and wintering ranges of *pekinensis* suggest that it is virtually certain to pass through the UAE on migration (indeed, it may even prove to be the default subspecies across eastern Arabia) yet definite field observations from the UAE are non-existent and there is no reference to this subspecies in Pedersen & Aspinall (2010). Eriksen & Victor (2013) state that sub-specifically identified Common Swifts in Oman are referable to *pekinensis* whilst in Israel, Shirihai (1996) classified this subspecies as a quite common migrant, mainly in eastern and southern Israel and mainly March–April when it may constitute some 10% of the Common Swift passage. One possibly complicating issue is the alleged existence of a third subspecies of Common Swift, *A. a. marwizi*, described from African wintering grounds and supposedly breeding in Cyprus, Turkey, Transcaucasia and perhaps elsewhere in the Middle East, although breeding birds examined from these areas are within the colour range exhibited by typical nominate birds (Cramp 1985). This form as described is in some respects intermediate between the nominate and *pekinensis* but is not recognized either by Cramp (1985) or Chantler & Boesman (2013) and is not considered further, although it may account for the fact that many birds breeding in Israel are intermediate in appearance between nominate and *pekinensis* (Shirihai 1996).

The present paper documents some recent observations made by the authors on apparent *pekinensis* in the UAE, with images from an autumn bird from Oman also presented. It is hoped that the images and comments presented herein will encourage observers in the UAE and elsewhere to examine passage swifts more closely and attempt to assign the best-observed individuals to subspecies. Identification of *pekinensis* requires a prolonged examination of specific plumage features in appropriate lighting conditions but, with increasing knowledge of the relevant field characters and increasingly available high quality digital images, it is certainly possible.

The generally fleeting nature of swift sightings, coupled with the frequently very harsh ambient light in the region, makes definitive separation of Common from Pallid

Swift in the UAE (other than Pallid Swifts attending breeding locations) a challenge. Recent detailed information on the separation of Common from Pallid Swifts (albeit from a predominately north European perspective) has been covered by Larsson & Wallin (2012) and Ahmed & Adriaens (2010). Many features quoted in popular field guides, *eg* structure and general plumage coloration and shade, are often very hard to accurately evaluate in practice unless more than one species is present to allow direct comparison and the varying effects of ambient lighting on an individual's appearance are considered over a prolonged period. Somewhat less subjective features that will greatly assist the separation of Common Swift (of either subspecies) from Pallid Swift include the extent of paleness on the forehead and throat, the degree of demarcation between the latter and the breast, the precise shade of the ear coverts relative to the lores, the shade of the median coverts in relation to the lesser and greater coverts on the underwing and the relative strength of pale scaling on the flanks and belly compared to that on the undertail. All of these features can be used in the field, but require close and prolonged views to be evaluated precisely. Further, certain of these features are age-related and so must be interpreted with caution; *eg* juvenile Common Swifts have a much paler forehead than nominate adults and, in fresh plumage in autumn, body and wing feathers have fine pale fringes, so more resembling Pallid Swift.

As *pekinensis* is, in many respects, intermediate between nominate Common and Pallid Swifts, prolonged and careful observation, ideally supported by good quality photographs is required to make an identification. Lewington (1999), from a study of specimens, found that the majority of *pekinensis* are very close to nominate and would require very detailed observation to be differentiated, although a few *pekinensis* are much paler and therefore closer to Pallid Swift. However, the breeding Pallid Swift in the eastern Arabian peninsula, *A. p. pallidus*, is the palest of the three (rather poorly defined) subspecies of Pallid Swift (McGowan 2002, Cramp 1985) so therefore in the Middle East the majority of individuals of *pekinensis* should be discernible, with care, from Pallid Swifts.

For several years, the occurrence of swifts in the UAE in January and February that appear generally darker than the local Pallid Swifts have provoked debate amongst local birdwatchers, with opinion divided between those believing them to be within the acceptable range of colour and shade for Pallid Swift and others considering them a closer match to Common Swift, either nominate or *pekinensis*. In mid February 2011, the UAE was bathed in brilliant sunshine and strong winds, perfect for photographing swifts forced to fly low to forage and a large flock was observed over the lake at Al Ain wastewater treatment plant, northeast Abu Dhabi emirate, by HR. Of the 200 or so swifts present on 15 February 2011, c170 were typical Pallid Swifts, as illustrated in Plates 1 and 2. These birds exhibited a suite of characters consistent with Pallid. The most significant plumage features, visible in Plates 1 and 2, include the rather pale median coverts, causing the shade of the lesser coverts to merge gradually into the greater coverts, prominent and obvious 'fish-scaling' on the flanks and belly (more prominent than on the undertail coverts) and a conspicuously pale head compared to the body, with ear coverts and lores virtually uniform and a strikingly contrasting dark eye. The rather large head, broad abdomen and blunt wingtip are also supportive of the identification as Pallid Swift. About 15% of birds present matched the individual depicted in Plate 2, being especially pale on the head and with particularly broad pale fringing on the flank and belly. These features, coupled with the immaculate, fresh state of the plumage (most obvious on the remiges) indicate that these are juveniles. The appearance of juveniles in February in the UAE is quite early compared to information presented in Jennings (2010), who noted that nestlings have been recorded March–May (occasionally June) in Arabia.



Plate 1. Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*, Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts



Plate 2. Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* juvenile, Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts



Plate 3. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts



Plate 4. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts.

Associated with these Pallid Swifts of 15 February 2011 were about 30 birds which, in direct comparison, appeared noticeably darker, with smaller and more clearly defined throat patches and, whilst the flanks and belly were scaled, this was less distinct than the scaling on the undertail and vent. These characters, and the fact that the median coverts appear clearly darker than the greater coverts indicate Common Swift. Examples of such birds are featured in Plates 3 and 4. The Common Swifts featured in Plates 3 and 4 fit better with *A. a. pekinensis* than with nominate *apus*. Features that support this contention include the rather extensive pale throat patch, paler forehead (giving a paler head than on nominate, although not so contrastingly pale as on Pallid Swift), and prominent 'saddle' effect due to the very dark mantle and scapulars compared to the rather paler inner wing and greater primary coverts.

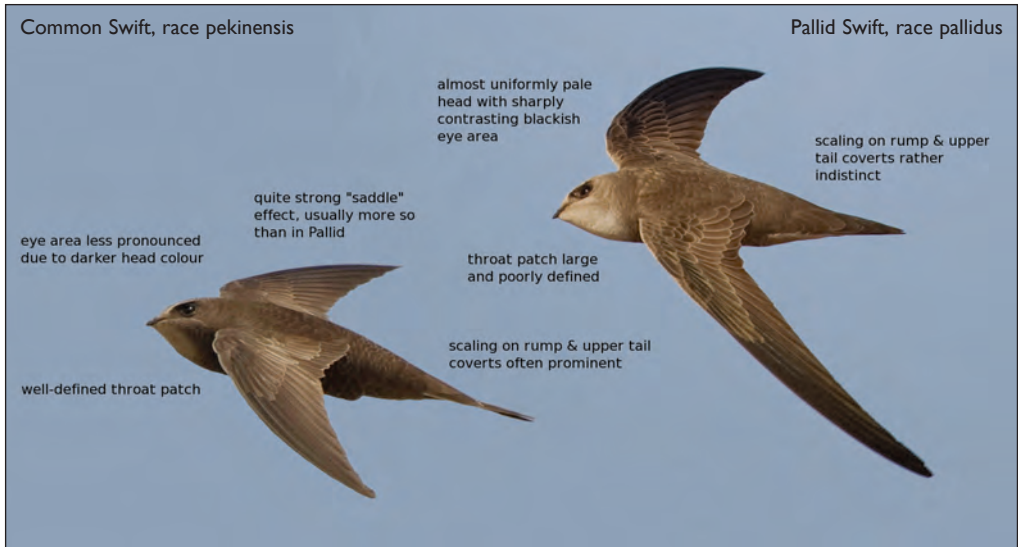


Plate 5. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis* compared with Pallid Swift *A. p. pallidus*, dorsal surface. Montage prepared with images taken at Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts & Hans Larsson

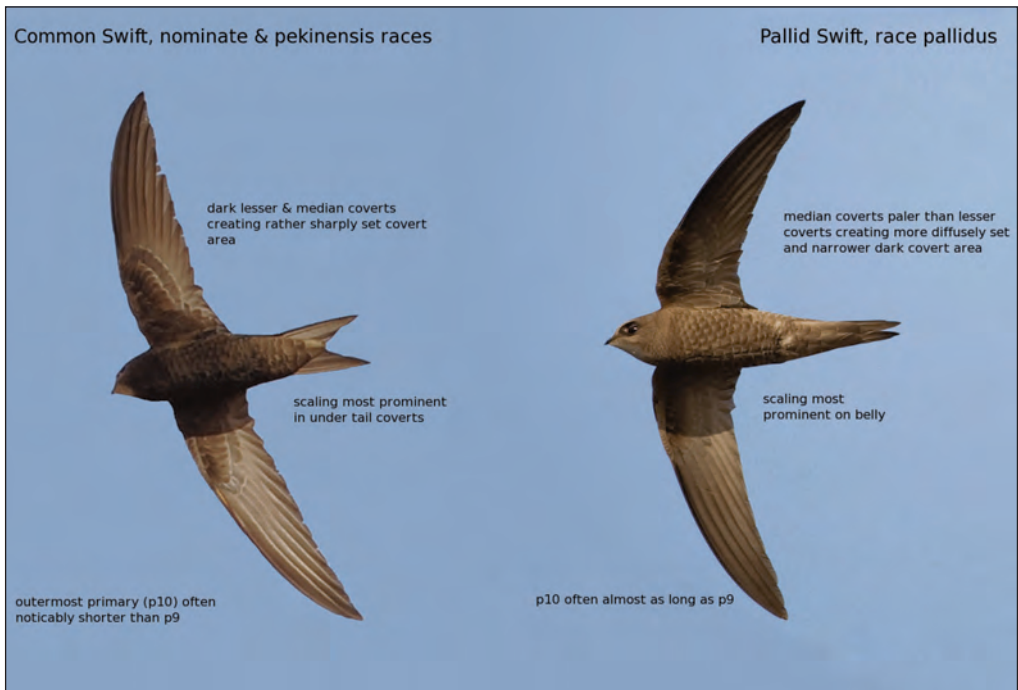


Plate 6. Common Swift *Apus apus* (presumably *pekinensis* on basis of upperside characters – see text) compared with Pallid Swift *A. p. pallidus*, ventral surface. Montage prepared with images taken at Al Ain, UAE, 15 February 2011. © Huw Roberts & Hans Larsson.

Comparative illustrations with annotated notes, prepared by Hans Larsson and built from images taken by HR on 15 February 2011, amplify some of these points and are presented as Plates 5 and 6. It is very difficult (if not impossible) to differentiate *pekinensis*



Plate 7. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Ajban, Abu Dhabi emirate, UAE, 13 February 2011. © Mohammed Al Mazrouei



Plate 8. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Ajban, Abu Dhabi emirate, UAE, 13 February 2011. © Mohammed Al Mazrouei



Plate 9. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Al Ain, UAE, 7 March 2008. © Huw Roberts



Plate 10. Common Swift, *Apus apus* possibly *pekinensis* (see text), Sila, UAE, 24 September 2010. © Oscar Campbell

from nominate based on views of the underside only but Plate 6 compares the underside of a bird that matched *pekinensis* on the upperside against a Pallid Swift. Coincidentally, just two days before HR obtained these images, and during the same weather conditions, Mohammed Al Mazrouie was photographing low-flying swifts at Ajban, a district 150 km west-northwest of Al Ain and 15 km inland from the Gulf coast, to the north of Abu Dhabi island. He noted several obviously darker birds amongst a large flock of Pallid Swifts and was able to obtain high quality photographs, two of which are produced as Plates 7 and 8. The very dark greater median coverts, sharply defined pale throat and rather dark head safely eliminate Pallid Swift whilst the rather pale forehead and obviously paler, browner inner wing indicate *pekinensis* rather than the nominate subspecies.



Plate 11. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Masirah island, Oman, 5 October 2014. © Oscar Campbell



Plate 12. Common Swift *Apus apus pekinensis*, Masirah island, Oman, 5 October 2014. © Oscar Campbell

In the light of this, examination of images taken prior to 2011 indicates that Common Swifts matching the appearance of *A. a. pekinensis* have occurred in the UAE before. Plate 9 illustrates one such bird. In this image, the saddle effect is very strong due to the markedly paler, browner greater coverts and the throat patch, although large, is well-defined. These features, and the apparently pale forehead, are all indicative of *pekinensis* rather than nominate *apus*.

In September, Pallid Swifts are rare in the UAE, as all breeders and fledged young have long departed and local breeding birds generally do not return until mid October. For that reason, any swift seen in early autumn is likely to demand a closer look from perceptive observers. Plate 10 illustrates one of the few autumn images of Common Swift so far obtained in the UAE. It is clearly a juvenile bird and Pallid Swift is easily excluded by the darkness of the median coverts (which also have sharp, pale fringes) and rather dark head with a clearly demarcated white throat, amongst other features. Juvenile *pekinensis* is somewhat of an unknown quantity (Larsson & Wallin 2012) and this bird cannot be conclusively referred to this form on the basis of this image. However a near-identical bird was observed on Abu Dhabi island by OC 6 September 2013. Although images were not obtained, recorded field notes include reference to a very large, extensive and clearly demarcated white throat, diffuse but obvious pale forehead and, on the upperside, the inner wing paler and contrasting compared to dark body and primaries; these features collectively are suggestive of *pekinensis*. An autumn bird recently photographed in Oman also shows characters of *pekinensis* and is featured in Plates 11 and 12. This bird is also probably a juvenile (based on fresh, evenly aged remiges). Note the rather pale forehead and extensive pale throat, as well as the quite obvious saddle effect due to darker mantle and scapulars contrasting with paler, fringed greater and primary coverts.

A corollary of the establishment of the apparently regular occurrence of *pekinensis* during late winter/early spring through the UAE may be some clues regarding the migration route of this subspecies. The average arrival date in the UAE of birds believed to be *pekinensis* is mid February. These dates are comparable to those from Oman where Common Swift has been recorded from February onwards (although there are rather few records in that month compared to March; Eriksen & Victor 2013). These arrival dates from

the UAE and Oman are about one month earlier than the mid March average arrival dates of Common Swifts (apparently nominate) in central and northern Iran over fifteen separate years (Khaleghizadeh 2005). Data therein suggests that Common Swifts arrived earlier in Tehran in the 2000s compared to the 1970s (mean date 11 March 2001–2004) compared to a mean date of 21 March over eight years 1968–1977). That author, citing the difficulty of separating Common from Pallid Swifts, notes only one record of *pekinensis* from the south of Iran, an informal observation in Bandar Abbas on 26 February 2000.

Given that there are breeding populations of *pekinensis* in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Chantler & Boseman 2013, Ayé *et al* 2012), *pekinensis* may be expected to migrate regularly through Iran and the lack of reports can be attributed to identification difficulties (and, perhaps, limited observer coverage in much of the country). Åkesson *et al* (2012) using small light-level geolocators to monitor movements of Common Swifts in western Africa and Europe recorded an average migration speed of 336 km/day in spring. Such speeds imply that birds transiting the UAE or Oman could easily reach Iran by late February or early March, in essence much earlier than the mean date 2001–2004. However, the near total absence of Common Swift records (of any subspecies) from central and northern Iran during this period may imply that birds migrating through the UAE and Oman do not migrate through this part of Iran. Instead, their route though the UAE and Oman may continue in a northeasterly direction, taking them over southern or southeastern parts of Iran only and presumably through Pakistan en route to breeding areas in countries to the east and northeast of Iran. Whilst this contention is speculative, more concrete evidence on the movements of *pekinensis* should be forthcoming in the near future as results of a recently instigated tracking programme for this subspecies are realized (Townshend 2014).

In conclusion, high quality photographs of mixed flocks of swifts by two independent observers have confirmed the presence of Common Swift amongst Pallid Swifts in late winter and early spring in the UAE at least in some years and it seems very probable that at least some (and possibly the majority of) individuals are *pekinensis*. It also seems likely that at least some individuals on autumn passage are also referable to *pekinensis*. It is hoped that continued observations, coupled with procurement and analysis of good quality photographs, will further confirm this subspecies as a transient visitor, possibly regularly, to the UAE and elsewhere in Arabia and that comparative data on timing between countries may shed further light on its migration pattern.

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