Threatened Birds of Asia:
The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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DARK-RUMPED SWIFT

Apus acuticauda

Critical □ —
Endangered □ —
Vulnerable ■ D1

This poorly known swift qualifies as Vulnerable owing to its very small population. Discovery of new breeding colonies or identification of possible threats would necessitate a reassessment of its threatened status.

DISTRIBUTION The Dark-rumped Swift (see Remarks 1) breeds in a few colonies in the eastern Himalayas of Bhutan, possibly Nepal, and the hills of Meghalaya, north-east India, apparently dispersing southward during the winter. There are no certain records from Myanmar, but swifts observed in the Myitkyina valley, winter 1938–1939, were thought to be either this species or the Common Swift *Apus apus* (Stanford and Ticehurst 1940–1941). Several records by Scully (1876) from China all presumably refer to Common Swift *Apus apus* (see Remarks 2). The only record of the species's occurrence in Nepal involves the type described by Jerdon (1862–1864) from a B. H. Hodgson specimen taken at an unspecified locality. Inskipp and Inskipp (1991) commented that "it is possible that this specimen originated in India". Brooke (1969), however, also questioned "whether there was an error in the original labelling" but thought it "unwise to excise Nepal from the range of the species, as swifts are notoriously difficult to collect away from their breeding sites and there may well be one or two colonies in the cliffs of that country". In the thirty years since this was written, however, no evidence has emerged to retain the species on the Nepal list. There have also been no confirmed reports from Bangladesh, despite the proximity of the Khasia hills colony and the fact that the species must occasionally fly over the country (hence the hypothetical listing for various regions by Rashid 1967).

■ ***INDIA*** The Dark-rumped Swift has been recorded breeding in the Khasia and Mizoram hills, but a record from the Andaman islands (Hume 1874a) was a misidentification (Ripley 1982, Chantler 2000). Records are as follows:

■ ***Meghalaya*** near **Cherrapunji**, at Lyethinsaw (Lyetkynsew), Khasia hills, 1,350 m, September 1886 (specimen in AMNH), April 1906 (four specimens in AMNH), May 1906 (female in BMNH), April, May 1952 (10 specimens in FMNH and UMMZ), c.100, around the cliffs, December 1975 (D. A. Scott *in litt*. 2000), late February 1979 (R. F. A. Grimmett verbally 1999), c.100, February 1996 (K. Kazmierczak *in litt*. 1999), c.200, February 1998 (Hornbuckle *et al*. 1998a), c.40, March 1998 (H. Hendriks *in litt*. 1999), and at Nohkallikai waterfall (c.4 km away), c.100, February 1998 (Hornbuckle *et al*. 1998a);

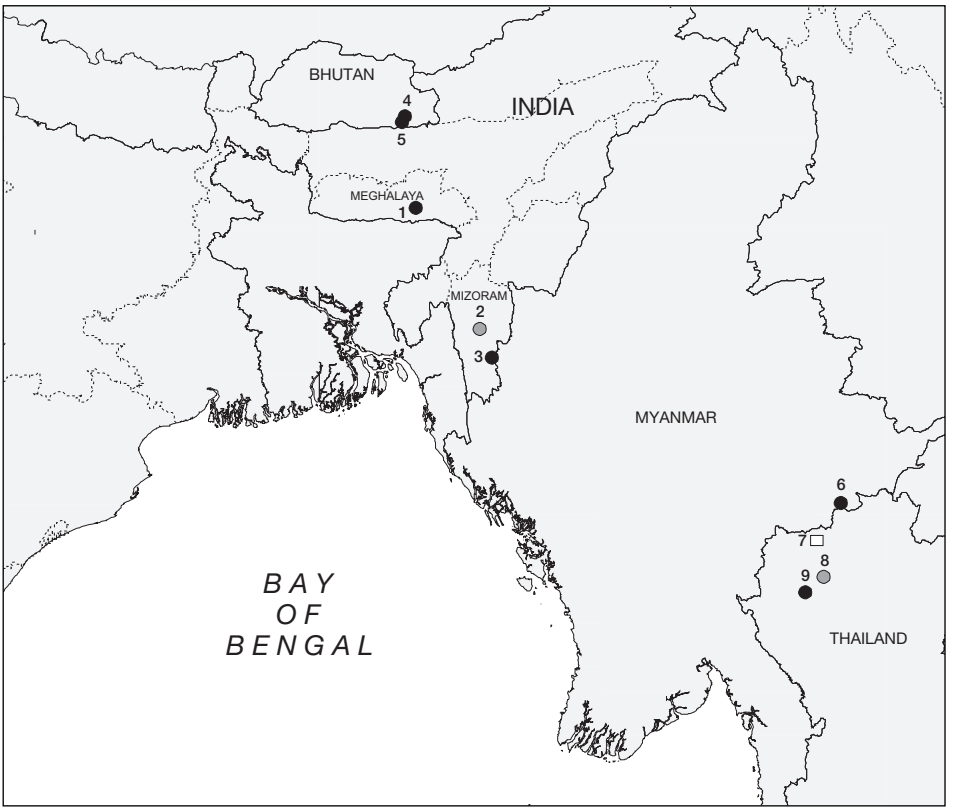
■ ***Mizoram*** **Chlinchlip** (Chhinchhip), Lushai hills, April 1951 (male in UMMZ); **Blue Mountain National Park** (Phwangpui National Park), Lushai hills, March, April, May 1953 (six specimens in UMMZ; also Koelz 1954a), four individuals, March 1998 (K. Kazmierczak verbally 1998).

■ ***BHUTAN*** Although only recently reported from the country, this species apparently breeds at one colony; confirmed records are from two sites (c.16 km apart) in the south-east (Inskipp *et al*. 1999a): near Arong, 10–20 km above **Deothang** (probably wanderers from the "colony" below Deothang), one, May 1996 (King 1996), one, April 1997 (King 1997), 4–7, April 1998 (Bishop 1999a, P. Holt *in litt*. 1999), 2–8, April 1998 (Farrow 1998, Holt 1998), 8–14, May 1999 (Bishop 1999b); between Deothang (950 m) and **Samdrup Jongkhar** (200 m) (7 km north of the latter at 26°48′N 91°28′E), apparently breeding with many recent records,

including eight, April–May 1996 (King 1996), 10, April 1998 (Holt 1998, Bishop 1999a), and two, April 1999 (Holt 1999).

There are unconfirmed records from the lower "Lingmethang road" (i.e. Namling–Yonkhala), where c.10 swifts possibly of this species were observed in April 1995 (Bishop 1995), and from the Mo Chu (see Population).

■ ***THAILAND*** The species occurs sporadically as an apparent winter visitor in mountains in the extreme north of the country. Records are from: **Doi Pha Hom Pok**, at least seven flying south, March 1993 (J. Chance and E. Vercruysse *per* P. D. Round *in litt*. 1998); Doi Chiang Dao, presumably in **Doi Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary**, undated (Chantler 2000), with two individuals "thought possibly" to be this species, March 1999 (*Bird Conserv. Soc. Thailand Bull.* 17,5 [2000]:14); **Doi Pui**, Chiang Mai, one female, February 1965 (B. F. King *per* P. D. Round *in litt*. 1998); **Doi Inthanon National Park**, a report of 20–25 in February 1995 (P. Schiermacker-Hansen *in litt*. 1999), up to six reported with Pacific Swifts *Apus pacificus* and Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*, February 1997 (M. Flack, F. Hearn, I. Merrill *per* P. D. Round *in litt*. 1998), with one over the Mae Chem road, January 1999 (J. N. Dymond *in litt*. 1999, *Bird Conserv. Soc. Thailand Bull.* 17,4 [2000]: 15).



The distribution of Dark-rumped Swift *Apus acuticauda*: (1) Cherrapunji; (2) Chlinchlip; (3) Blue Mountain National Park; (4) Deothang; (5) Samdrup Jongkhar; (6) Doi Pha Hom Pok; (7) Doi Chiang Dao Wildlife Sanctuary; (8) Doi Pui; (9) Doi Inthanon National Park.

○ Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present) □ Undated

POPULATION ***India*** Collection of the birds at Cherrapunji and Blue Mountains over a span of many years (e.g. Baker 1922–1930, UMMZ label data) indicates that the species was common at these sites early in the twentieth century. Baker (1922–1930) stated that they bred "in colonies of some size". Strangely, however, another early report is of "very small colonies of from three to a dozen pairs, but the former more often than the latter", and locals apparently described the species as "very rare" (Baker 1907b). Although flocks of between 100 and 200 birds have recently been seen around Cherrapunji (Hornbuckle *et al.* 1998a, K. Kazmierczak verbally 1998), no further evidence of breeding has been reported. There is no evidence that any decline has taken place in this small overall population.

Bhutan While confirmed records indicate the presence of one small colony in south-eastern Bhutan, there are many valleys in the region and in adjoining Arunachal Pradesh that have yet to be surveyed, and it seems likely that more colonies exist (K. D. Bishop *in litt*. 1999). Alternatively, the small number of birds seen away from the Samdrup Jonkhar colony might be dispersing from that site. Although up to 2,000 all-dark swifts passing through a gorge on the Mo Chu, March 1994, might have been this species (K. D. Bishop *in litt*. 1999), as might 200 swifts initially reported as Common Swifts seen c.5 km east of Deothang, April 1996 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull*. 24 [1996]: 59–65), on the basis of confirmed records the breeding population might not exceed 50 individuals.

Thailand The species appears to occur only as an occasional visitor, but it has been postulated that birds recorded there might be resident (Brooke 1969).

ECOLOGY ***Habitat*** In the breeding season the Dark-rumped Swift appears to be restricted to rocky cliffs and deep gorges generally in the vicinity of forest. The cliffs at Cherrapunji face the Sylhet plains and are very close to the world's heaviest rainfall area (Cherrapunji once suffered 26.46 m rainfall in a year!) (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, K. Kazmierczak *in litt*. 1999). The site selected for breeding is "rugged and precipitous" (Baker 1907b), "invariably a perpendicular sheet of rock broken into crevices" (Baker 1922–1930). The presumed breeding colony in Bhutan is situated in crevices in a tall cliff (B. F. King verbally 1998). According to Baker (1922–1930, 1932–1935), Dark-rumped Swifts keep in close proximity of their nesting cliff while breeding, and unlike other species of swift they apparently do not make wide-ranging feeding forays. There is, however, little evidence to support this statement. The flight and habits of the species are similar to that of Pacific Swift (Baker 1922–1930), a species with which it has been seen to associate (K. Kazmierczak verbally 1998).

Food No details of diet are available, but the species is clearly an aerial insectivore in common with all other members of its family.

Breeding Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) stated that in India it breeds colonially from March to the end of April, although Baker (1907b) found it breeding in May. Traditional colonies are occupied for many decades, although in some years these sites are apparently avoided altogether, while in other years only a few pairs arrive to breed (Baker 1922–1930). The nest is a shallow cup made of any wind-blown material (grass, straw, seed-down, feathers, etc.) agglutinated with earth and saliva and covered with a thick mat of feathers (Baker 1922–1930). These nests are fixed onto the ledges of rocks within fissures in cliffs (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), often close together, sometimes with six in one crevice and two or more actually touching one another (Baker 1922–1930). They are also apparently "indescribably dirty and verminous and, judging from their appearance, must be used year after year" (Baker 1922–1930). Clutches contain 2–4 eggs, indistinguishable from those of the Pacific Swift (Baker 1922–1930). Both sexes share domestic duties (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), females laying replacement clutches when the eggs were taken out of their nests (Baker 1922–1930). Although in some years no birds are visible around the breeding site from June onwards (Baker 1907b), young birds from late broods sometimes remain until August or even later (Baker 1922–1930).

Migration Baker (1922–1930) suggested that individuals may undertake purely local movements, as specimens were collected in the Khasia hills in September and flocks, possibly of this species, were observed as late as December and January; he found the birds arriving at the breeding site early in February or in early March and dispersing again after the young fledged (Baker 1907b), at which time individuals could be seen on higher plateaus and hills in the region for a few days, but not subsequently (Baker 1922–1930). Whether they move to Thailand and are the birds that have been recorded in January–February, or whether the latter records reflect a local population (perhaps in southern Myanmar), remains to be investigated.

THREATS The Dark-rumped Swift is one of nine threatened members of the suite of 19 bird species that are entirely restricted to the "Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Area", threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). No specific threats are known, although, if the species forages over forest, it may be (or run the future risk of being) constrained by habitat loss in the region.

MEASURES TAKEN None is known. Its intermittent occurrence over protected areas in Thailand seems unlikely to be of great importance.

MEASURES PROPOSED Research is needed into the size and stability of known or suspected colonies in Bhutan and India, with concomitant studies on feeding ecology, to determine, as far as possible, any factors (particularly forest loss) which might adversely influence the species. Protection for these colonies should be instigated if any disturbance occurs. Vigilance is also needed in Thailand (and also Myanmar) to discover more about the birds that are to be found there. There has been a proposal to adopt this species as the "state bird" of Meghalaya, or as an emblem for the local Air Force battalion, and thereby raise awareness of its existence and threatened status; there are, however, no Meghalayan conservation organisations to support this initiative (K. Kazmierczak *in litt*. 1999).

REMARKS (1) Lack (1956) treated this form as a subspecies of Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* since the latter's Myanmar race *cookii* is closer in all except rump colour to *acuticauda* than it is to the nominate, and is therefore a bridge between the two, and since darkening of plumage (i.e. loss of a white rump) is predictable with increasing humidity. However, recent authors have elected to resist this arrangement. (2) Identification between *A. acuticauda* and *A. apus* is problematic given normal views. Many records are left unresolved as "dark-rumped" swifts of one of these two species. Records published by Scully (1876) from China presumably refer to the Himalayan subspecies of Common Swift *A. apus pekinensis.* From below, the species is more similar to Pacific Swift, which likewise has scaled underparts (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998).