

Notes on Swifts

By E. A. R. LORD, Murphy's Creek, Queensland

Murphy's Creek is a small but old settlement situated on the main Brisbane-Toowoomba railway, and is on a creek bearing the same name as the district. It is in a valley surrounded by the main dividing range on the western and northern sides. A large spur of the range is on the southern side and a wide mountainous belt, which is the watershed dividing the Brisbane River waters from those of the Lockyer, is on the eastern side. The main range and its southern spur, which are capped with basalt, have few cliffs of rock suitable for roosting places for Swifts, but the eastern ranges, which are also a great spur from the main range, have numerous high sandstone cliffs along the many creeks and gullies which are ideal roosting places for Swifts to camp in at night. Although I have not seen the birds using these cliffs, it seems probable that they do use them as all Swifts observed late in the evenings pass over in an eastern direction. The Murphy's Creek, when joined by the creeks coming from the east, forms the Lockyer, which passes through a gap in the ranges to the south-east.

We often think of the occurrence of Swifts being associated with rains. In some cases this may be so. At all times, however, their movements are influenced by food supply. The food supply may be governed by any conditions which may induce or force insects to rise and take to the air. For instance, flocks of Swifts have been seen feeding for hours above bush fires in drought years when the temperature is exceedingly high. I saw an example of this in 1926, a bad drought year, when fires, driven by scorching north-west winds, swept the country. By instinct insects took to the air before the fires reached them. The Swifts were immediately attracted by the rising smoke clouds and arrived there in huge numbers in search of food. The Swifts followed the fires for several days from early morning until late in the evening.

When Swifts appear during rainy conditions it is not always before the rains arrive that they are seen, but more often after the rains have passed. Occasionally Swifts may be seen at some time of the day travelling in a certain direction—under such circumstances rains often occur, coming from the direction in which the Swifts were seen to depart. On such occasions it could certainly be claimed that the birds knew of the approach of storms hours before arrival.

Frequently storms may pass over Lockyer, three miles distant, and Swifts are reported from there in numbers after the rains have passed. At other times we may have the storms and Swifts while neither have occurred at Lockyer. So it is with other parts of the district.

The arrival of Swifts in the spring varies a good deal one year from others. The same can be said of their departures in the autumn.

Records taken over a number of years are as follow:—

Arrivals.	Departures
1930—October 15	1931—March 28
1931—November 21	1932—March 27
1932—October 25	1933—March 16
1933—October 22	1934—April 4
1934—October 20	1935—April 11

It would take too much space to give a detailed report of the behaviour of Swifts over the full period quoted above, so I will confine my notes to the appearance of the birds when there is something out of the ordinary to report.

Mention having already been made of the 1926 records, I will next deal with the years 1929-30, which were heavy rainfall years and were responsible for the appearance of many very large flights of Swifts throughout the summer months. During December, 1929, and January, 1930, heavy rain storms were very frequent and the weather was humid. On December 18, many thousands of Spine-tailed Swifts were seen feeding from 5 a.m. until 8 a.m. They were attracted by swarms of small flying ants which appeared at the top of every tree. The rising and falling movements of the ants gave them the appearance of smoke issuing from the tree-tops. Heavy rains had fallen during the previous night. On January 23, a huge flock of Swifts was observed from 12 mid-day until 6 p.m. On this occasion 110 points of rain had fallen during the night, and beetles and ants were rising in great numbers.

After 1930 the seasons and Swifts were normal until 1934-35. Then Swifts were seen on more occasions than in previous years. From October 20, 1934, which was the first appearance of the Swifts for that year, until April 11, 1935, the date of their disappearance, the birds were recorded on no less than eighty-two days.

It is well to mention that 1934 and 1935 (to date) were low rainfall years in the coastal and semi-coastal parts of Queensland and severe drought conditions prevailed inland. The greater number of records were made during March-April, 1935, when Swifts of both species, with "Spine-tails" predominating, were seen on thirty-four days out of the forty-two days between March 1 and April 11. It is interesting to note that during this period it was usually small parties or solitary birds which were seen. The birds usually came from the east or north-east and returned in that direction after hawking from ten to thirty minutes. Day after day a bird appeared at sunset, sometimes followed a little later by from two to three other birds.

Possibly the main flock of birds was working a feeding ground in an easterly direction, probably over the Ravensbourne scrubs, returning each evening to roost on some of the numerous sandstone cliffs, and these "scouts" were sent out daily in search of new feeding grounds. It is my opinion that certain birds have their regular scouting duties to perform and each bird or small party have certain sections which they work fairly regularly.

The solitary bird mentioned above always behaved in the same manner, which left little doubt in my mind that it was the same bird which appeared each sunset.

White-browed Wood-Swallow and Sky-Lark.—On August 3, 1935, a large flock of White-browed Wood-Swallows (*Artamus superciliosus*) arrived here, appearing to come from the south-west, and disappearing in a north-westerly direction before the end of the day. As the species has not been recorded as wintering in this district it would be interesting to know the winter quarters of this particular flock.

The spread of the Sky-Lark (*Alauda arvensis*) has been very rapid in the west of New South Wales. Two years ago the first birds were noticed in this district, but were not definitely identified until recently. How far west they have spread in the interim from this point we cannot say, but they are plentiful at Maryvale, seven miles west of Wellington. With us they appear to winter, keeping to grass paddocks and stubble or standing crop. Keen disappointment was felt on hearing the song of this bird for the first time. Compared with the song of our own Rufous Song-Lark that of the imported bird seemed weak and colourless.—GEO. and PETER ALTHOFER, Dripstone, N.S.W.

Harriers and Plover.—When out for an early walk a few mornings ago I witnessed one of those humorous little incidents which occasionally reward the early riser. Over a grass paddock two Swamp-Harriers (*Circus approximans*) were sailing serenely on broad wings at a height of sixty feet or more. Suddenly, from swampy ground adjoining the grass, a flock of about twenty Spur-winged Plover (*Lobibyx novæ-hollandiæ*) rose and came at the Harriers in a compact body, "squawking" away in a fearful temper. The birds of prey seemed to think discretion the better part of valour, and stayed not on the order of their going, but went, one making to the eastward, the mate to the westward, whereupon the Plover, after a little more squawking, went down to their swamp, still in a compact mass. No doubt some of them are nesting just now, which renders them the more aggressive towards a potential enemy.—H. STUART DOVE, West Devonport, Tasmania, 6/11/35.