

COMMON AND PALLID SWIFTS PHOTO GUIDE



DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

1 Juvenile Common Swift (Aylesbury, Bucks, mid-July 2002). Perched, Common Swift looks black and sooty with a restricted pale area on the forehead and throat. The plumage otherwise is uniform overall, lacking obvious areas of contrast, but juveniles like this show a distinctive head pattern and have narrow but clear-cut pale edges to the wing feathers.



Andy Stoddart

Birdwatch

Spring into summer, and again in late autumn, are times in which the familiar Common Swift has to be separated from Pallid Swift, its rarer southern congener, which probably occurs here more often than is currently known. Close not only in plumage but genetics as well, the species pair is one of the trickiest in British birding, but with good views, close comparison and experience, the two are identifiable in the field by the conscientious birder. **Andy Stoddart takes a fresh look to establish the definitive identification criteria.**

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Of the many 'species pair' problems to confront a British observer, this duo has to be one of the most troublesome. Common Swift is, of course, a well-known bird, widespread and common throughout most of Britain and a familiar sight in our summer skies. However, familiarity should not breed contempt. Only those intimately acquainted with Common Swift will stand much chance of nailing a Pallid, and while we might think we know our spring birds well, what about the browner, scaly juveniles of late summer and autumn? Do we really pay them that much attention?

Pallid Swift is, by contrast, a real rarity, with only around 75 records in Britain to date, almost all since 1999. Most turn up in late October and November, and their appearance is now somewhat predictable.

They occur in the warm sectors of Atlantic low-pressure areas, arriving in Britain in the strong mild south-westerly winds which follow the passage of a warm front.

Their origin is presumably Iberian or North African – meaning they are of the form *brehmorum* – but they are not generally found on south-west-facing coasts. Moving rapidly across the country, they are located when they reach the east coast.

Increasingly, however, Pallid Swifts are being found in spring as well, especially in the South and South-West, and this is a bird which could now turn up almost anywhere. Interestingly, spring birds have recently been found as early as late March, although records continue through into June.

The identification context is therefore very different depending on the date. In early spring and late autumn,

no swift can be identified, even provisionally, on the basis of probability. Common Swifts occur in the same weather conditions which bring Pallids, so each bird has to be examined closely on its own merits. Conversely, between early May and September the overwhelming majority of swifts will be Commons and picking out a Pallid will then be a matter of real persistence, skill and luck.

Field characters

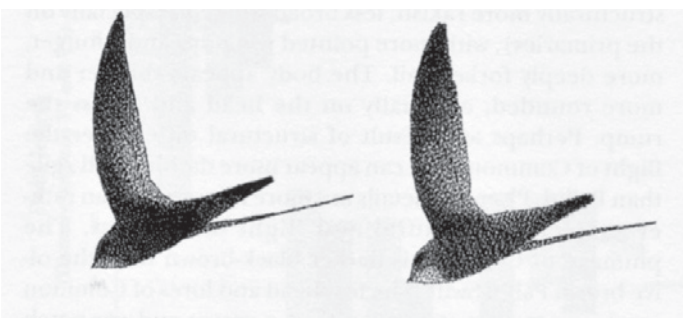
Common and Pallid Swifts are very similar in both plumage and structure and, of course, both are famously fast and mobile. We may see them only as a brief fly-by or as a pinprick in the sky, and they can range rapidly over large distances.

Identification comes down to the evaluation of subtle structural characters and plumage hues which are slight and change with the flight mode and angle of light, and are therefore hard to interpret. Low down, in flat light and against a dark background, plumage hues can be easier to evaluate, but high in a bright sky or on a drab March or November day such subtleties can disappear, and any swift will just look dark.

Nor are photographs a 'magic bullet'. A series of images might present a whole variety of confusing impressions, rendering the same bird sometimes dark and sharp winged, at other times paler and more blunt winged, while a single image can be even less helpful. Photographs are even more likely than the human eye to record partial, and therefore potentially misleading, impressions.

Needless to say, Pallid Swift is a nightmare for record assessors! After a brief 'free-for-all' period when pretty much any late autumn swift was hailed as a

GERALD DRIESENS/CHRISTOPHER HELM



Adult nominate Common Swift (left) and adult *brehmorum* Pallid Swift (right). Note the broader area of dark underwing coverts in Common and the generally more broken appearance of the wing pattern in Pallid.

Pallid, common sense has returned and the Rarities Committee is now taking a commendably tough line with the species. Nevertheless, although some swifts must be left unidentified due to inadequate views, with patience, experience and a clear head, many should prove identifiable.

So, what are the key identification features? Structurally, Pallid Swift is a slightly chunkier bird, most obviously so in the breadth of its body and its head. Head on, it can appear rather wide faced, while the body is stocky, including the rear body behind the wings. The tail fork is also relatively shallow and blunt. Pallid Swift also appears slightly broader in the hand and more blunt winged, with a slightly slower, heavier and more mechanical wing action.

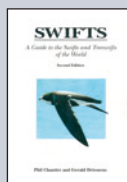
In terms of plumage, Pallid Swift is a paler, more milky brown. The white throat patch is large and blurry at the edges and the forehead patch is also large, both features accentuating

the dark eye shading. The underbody of adults is very lightly scaled in spring, but of course juveniles of both species are scaled below. Pallid Swift should also show something of a contrast between a darker mantle and wing coverts, paler secondaries and inner primaries and dark outer primaries.

Other forms

A final fly in the ointment is the potential occurrence of other swift forms. Other forms of Pallid Swift such as the darker *illyricus* from the Adriatic and the paler more southerly and easterly *pallidus* could occur. And what of *pekinensis* Common Swift? Although unrecorded in Britain, it has a huge northern Asian range from Iran eastwards and, given the vagrancy history of other swifts, it must surely have occurred already. The chances of nailing one in the field must be slim, but perhaps any slightly pale-looking swift trapped or found dead should be examined with great care. ■

Further reading



Swifts: a Guide to the Swifts and Treeswifts of the World by Phil Chantler and Gerald Driessens (£35) This highly acclaimed work provides an excellent overview of swift identification and distribution. The second edition has been extensively revised to take account of recent information. Available for just £29.99, or £27.99 to subscribers (inc UK p&p). See page 65.



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2



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.PBASE.COM/RANSCHOLS)

2 Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 15 June 2008). This image is a good example of how light can affect a bird's appearance. In warm sunshine, it looks more brown than black, but the overall plumage is uniform and the forehead and throat patches are small and lack prominence. In terms of structure, the rear body looks typically narrow and the tail fork is also slim, while the outer wing looks slim and very pointed.

3



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

3 Adult Pallid Swift (Seaforth, Lancs, 6 May 2009). This looks like a subtly but genuinely paler bird than above, even though viewed against the light. The forehead and throat patches are hard to see at this angle but the underbody is clearly very scaled. As for structure, this bird looks convincingly broad bodied and solid, with a broad rear body behind the wings, while the outer wing looks subtly broader than on Common Swift.

4



BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

4 Adult Common Swift (Lower Layham, Suffolk, 15 July 2005). The camera has caught this bird while banking, thereby giving a misleading impression of a somewhat broad-bodied and broad-winged structure. In terms of plumage, the bird is uniformly dark and sooty with no hint of milky brown hues, and the throat patch is both tiny and lacking in contrast.

6



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

6 Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 23 August 2008). This beautiful portrait shows off the features of Pallid Swift to perfection. The outer wing can be seen to be rather broad and the wing-tip somewhat blunt. The throat patch is very extensive and diffuse, while the underparts are strongly scaled. Overall it is a beautiful pale milk chocolate colour. If only all Pallid Swifts could be seen this well!

5



RAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

5 Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 9 June 2008). This bird appears broad headed and therefore Pallid Swift-like, but merely has inflated its throat feathers, exaggerating their prominence. It is also scaled below, again inviting confusion with Pallid Swift, but it is a dark blackish bird with a slim rear body and a very slim, pointed outer wing. With relaxed throat feathers it will look just like the Common Swift it is.

7



GEORGE RESZETER

7 Pallid Swift (Ronda, Spain, 15 June 2008). Though superficially similar to the bird in photo 5, this individual looks chunkier in the body, especially behind the wing, and the tail fork looks broad. The outer wing is also suitably broad and blunt ended. To add to our confidence that it is a Pallid Swift, it is very strongly scaled below and its throat patch is massively white and diffuse.

8



FRAN SCHOLS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

8 Adult Common Swift (Meers, The Netherlands, 15 June 2008).

With a small-headed appearance and blackish plumage, this is a clear-cut Common Swift. The white throat is prominent but is neither very extensive nor diffuse. Note that the apparent contrasts above are caused by light reflecting as the bird turns. The outer wing here looks convincingly narrow and pointed, as does the rear body and tail.

10



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

10 Adult Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 21 August 2008). In a similar pose, this Pallid Swift looks genuinely broader headed (even allowing for its inflated throat). It is also broader in the outer wing, rear body and tail, while the lighting is sufficiently good for us to be confident that the subtly darker mantle, wing coverts and outer primaries are genuine features.

9



GEORGE RESZETER

9 Adult Common Swift (Farmoor Reservoir, Oxon, 16 June 2008).

With a pointed wing-tip, dark, ashy plumage and minimal throat patch, this bird looks immediately like a Common Swift, and the slim rear body and tail reinforce this impression. The contrasts in the upperparts, including an apparently dark saddle, are light-induced artefacts. The wing should also look uniform, but light and wear have created an illusion of contrast.

11



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

11 Adult Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 23 August 2008). This bird's pale milky brown plumage tones immediately catch the eye – no Common Swift should look as pale as this. The throat patch is large and diffuse, the outer wing is blunt and broad and there is an indication of a contrast between the outer primaries and the inner wing; further observation of this bird should reveal its true upperpart contrasts.

12

MENNO VAN DUJIN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



12 Adult Common Swift (Oegstgeest, The Netherlands, 18 May 2009). This individual is an easy identification – small headed, slim winged and slim bodied, especially behind the wing. The throat patch is also small and discrete, not large and diffuse. The underparts are plain and show little scaling. A bird looking like this and seen this well should present no identification problems at all.

13

DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



13 Pallid Swift (Amato, Italy, 21 August 2008). The plumage hues are shown perfectly, the outer wing, rear body and tail fork structure are shown beautifully and it has lovely underpart scaling and a large and diffuse throat patch. There is also a good suggestion of the species' broad-headed appearance, though this is best appreciated when head on.

FINDING COMMON AND PALLID SWIFTS

Common Swift is, of course, one of our commonest summer migrants and can be seen almost anywhere in Britain and Ireland. Though most built-up areas will have a colony of the species, particularly in the suburbs, there are notable breeding aggregations around the country; a small colony uses woodpecker holes and nestboxes at Loch Garten RSPB, Highland, and a long-term study colony is at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History tower (**SP 153068**), having been surveyed since 1947. The species often forms large, screaming congregations numbering in their thousands at the end of the breeding season and on migration, and any of these should be checked for rarer species, as should any lone swift seen late in the year.

Pallid Swift has been recorded in all months between March and November, but the peak occurrences are in October, with smaller peaks in May and November. Since the first British record in May 1978 at Stodmarsh, Kent, the species has been increasingly frequently recorded, but there have been notable influx years in 1999, 2001, 2004 and 2005. Reflecting the peak occurrences, two thirds of records were of juveniles/first-winters, where the age was known.

The vast majority of Pallid Swift sightings are from the south and east coasts of England, from Scilly to Northumberland; in addition to these two counties, Kent, Suffolk, Norfolk and East Yorkshire have a healthy number of records, mostly from established migration hot-spots.

Spurn (**TA 399108**), East Yorkshire, has an enviable reputation for turning up rare swifts, including multiple Pacific Swift records, and heavy movements of Common Swift in late summer should be scanned for Alpine, Pallid or Little. In fact, most Pallid records are from coastal watchpoints, but that doesn't mean that inland gatherings should be ignored. Portland (**SY 680687**), Dorset, also has large flocks heading south in autumn, and many reservoirs will hold swarms of swifts and hirundines in late summer and early autumn.

14

JOHN CARTER



14 Pallid Swift (Kessingland, Suffolk, 2 April 2010). This single image gives conflicting impressions. The camera has captured a broad-bodied look, an extensive and diffuse white throat and a contrasting dark mantle but the rest of the bird looks a dark ashy grey, the wing-tip looks quite pointed and the tail rather slim. It is always necessary to consider the whole range of structural and plumage characters from prolonged field views. In this case the grey hues are a photographic artefact, while the true structural characters are not shown to best effect.