



South African Cliff Swallow

Familieswael

Hirundo spilodera

The South African Cliff Swallow is a southern African breeding endemic with its breeding distribution centred on the southern Transvaal, northwestern KwaZulu-Natal, the Free State and the eastern Cape Province. There are scattered records from Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Regular breeding occurs at a few localities in Zimbabwe (Vernon 1962; Hustler 1989a) and Namibia (Keith *et al.* 1992; Bridgeford 1993), and has been suggested for southeastern Botswana (Penry 1986; Herremans 1994d). While breeding, these birds are often abundant where they concentrate around nesting colonies. Even within the core of the breeding range, they may be scarce or absent in areas where no suitable nesting structures exist. The wintering range is in western Zaire.

Large numbers of birds are usually present close to breeding colonies, and the square tail of this swallow makes it difficult to mistake for any other species.

Habitat: It is found in fairly dry grasslands, including lightly wooded savanna, Grassy Karoo, and Nama Karoo where rainfall has resulted in substantial grass growth. Because of their habit of foraging close to the ground (Earlé 1985), they avoid nesting near dense riparian growth. They forage over disturbed areas close to their breeding colonies, which are usually situated under road bridges over rivers. Reporting rates are highest in Sweet and Mixed Grasslands, and Grassy Karoo. In Botswana, most birds on passage are observed near water (M. Herremans pers. comm.).

Movements: It is a breeding intra-Africa migrant; although there are a few records of individuals overwintering (Earlé & Brooke 1988), it is essentially absent in the winter months. The first birds usually arrive in August and departure is in April. Arrival and departure periods are both spread over about four weeks. Some of the scattered records for Botswana and Namibia are of birds on passage to and from their wintering grounds in Zaire (Penry 1986;

Herremans 1994d). Despite being on the migratory route, there are surprisingly few records from these countries. Four birds ringed in the Transvaal have been recovered in Zaire (Ashton 1957; Elliott & Jarvis 1970; Earlé 1987a). **Breeding:** Most breeding records were from September–April with no apparent geographical differences in the timing of breeding.

Interspecific relationships: House *Passer domesticus* and Cape *P. melanurus* Sparrows expropriate the nests of this swallow, as do Whiterumped *Apus caffer* and Little *A. affinis* Swifts (Keith *et al.* 1992). The Pied Barbet *Tricholaema leucomelas* occasionally usurps nests for roosting. It is possible that the massed colonies of this species dissuade other solitary nesting Hirundinidae from breeding close to them.

Historical distribution and conservation: The South African Cliff Swallow has expanded its range owing to its ability to nest on man-made structures. The first records of range expansion come from 1939, and Rowan (1963a) traced the history of its expansion in parts of the Cape Province. There was a substantial northward extension of the breeding range to just north of Bulawayo (2028BA) (Vernon 1962). These colonies were abandoned after a few seasons (Irwin 1981) but new breeding colonies were active further to the northeast in the Headlands district (1832AC) in 1987 (Hustler 1989a). An apparent range expansion in a westerly direction in the Cape Province during the summer of 1961–62 was attributed to exceptionally good rains in the western Karoo (Rowan 1963a). The species has subsequently been found breeding in these parts of the Karoo (Brooke & Ryan 1988; Brooke 1991); it is possible that breeding occurs there annually and that the sporadic nature of records is due to sporadic observations, rather than range expansions and contractions due to rainfall patterns.

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Recorded in 683 grid cells, 15.1%
Total number of records: 6519
Mean reporting rate for range: 13.3%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



