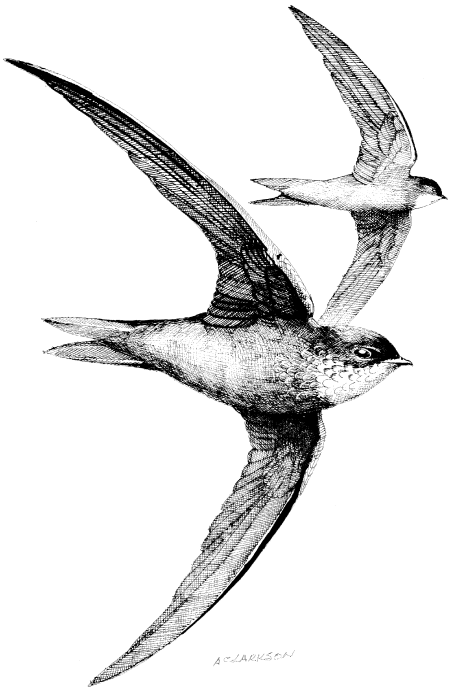


# European Swift

## Europese Windswael

*Apus apus*

The European Swift breeds widely in the Palearctic from Ireland to eastern China and in the nonbreeding season occurs essentially anywhere in southern Africa (Brooke 1975b, 1989a), though it is commonest over the plains of the semi-arid interior.

There are four plain dark swifts of the same size in southern Africa: this species, the Black Swift *A. barbatus*, Bradfield's Swift *A. bradfieldi*, and Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*. Few people can be sure of separating them in the field save under the most favourable circumstances. Atlas data were carefully vetted but it is probable that, because of identification problems, the atlas information may not be entirely reliable except for the principal patterns. Appreciation of the ranges and movements of dark swifts must draw from what is known from collected specimens, although even these are not always correctly identified (e.g. Muller & Herremans 1995). The fact that the Black Swift is still considered to be a rarity in Botswana, records away from known breeding sites requiring convincing evidence before being admitted (Borello 1992b), has resulted in distribution maps for European and Black Swifts which are clearly inaccurate with respect to their limits along the South Africa–Botswana border. The effect is compounded by the fact that the European Swift is not well known to the average observer in South Africa. This is probably the worst of a small number of cases where local preconceptions generated artefacts in the atlas data which could not be corrected satisfactorily by data vetting (see methods).

It is common and widespread from November–March, but is prone to under-recording because it flies mostly at altitudes above the visibility limit. In most years numbers fall off south of the Orange River; exceptions include 1990 and 1993 (Martin *et al.* 1990a; Parker 1993).

**Habitat:** It is gregarious and forages aerially over open, often semi-arid, country. Open country is probably preferred since it sleeps on the wing in airspace uncluttered by steep mountains into which it might crash (Lockley 1971). It is particularly abundant over the Kalahari and the Okavango where emergences of alate termites provide food gluts correlated with the fall of rain. At times it can be seen in flocks several thousand strong flying at relatively low altitudes towards storm clouds on the horizon.

**Movements:** It starts arriving in October in the northern Zones, November in the southern Zones, and leaves mainly February–March. The models indicate later arrival and earlier departure with increasing latitude. In contrast to most Palearctic migrants, arrival is more concentrated than departure (Herremans 1994d), which is clearly seen in the steepness of the models in Zones 1 and 5. Within southern Africa, local movements in response to weather and food availability (often related to rain) occur regularly, occasionally resulting in large concentrations (e.g. Herremans & Herremans-Tonnoeyr 1994b), and sudden appearance at food sources. Some birds may stay during the austral winter – they are common at that time of year in equatorial Zaire (De Roo 1966) – but there is no unequivocal evidence for southern Africa.

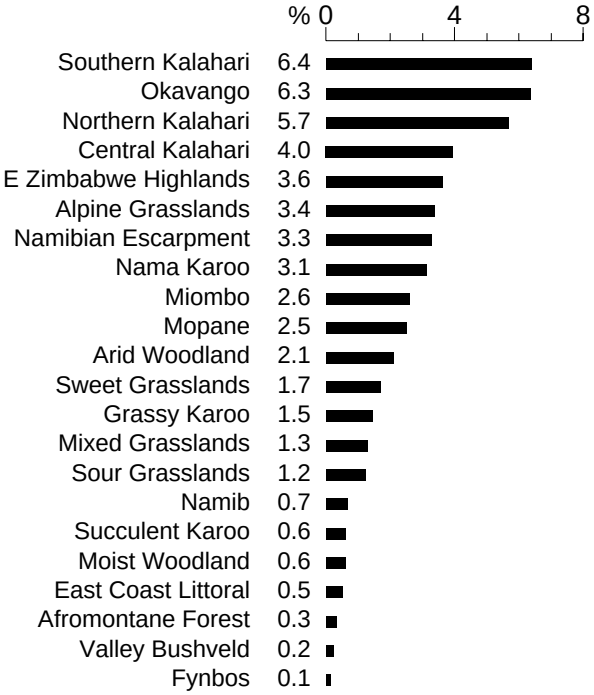
**Interspecific relationships:** Nearly all species of swift are liable to occur in mixed foraging flocks without apparent aggression. Closely related species are usually segregated by breeding range and nest site requirements; less closely related species also by the heights at which they most often forage (Donnelly 1974b). However, and notwithstanding the caveats above, there is an apparent complementarity with the Black Swift since the European Swift is abundant over the Kalahari and Okavango where Black Swift is absent.

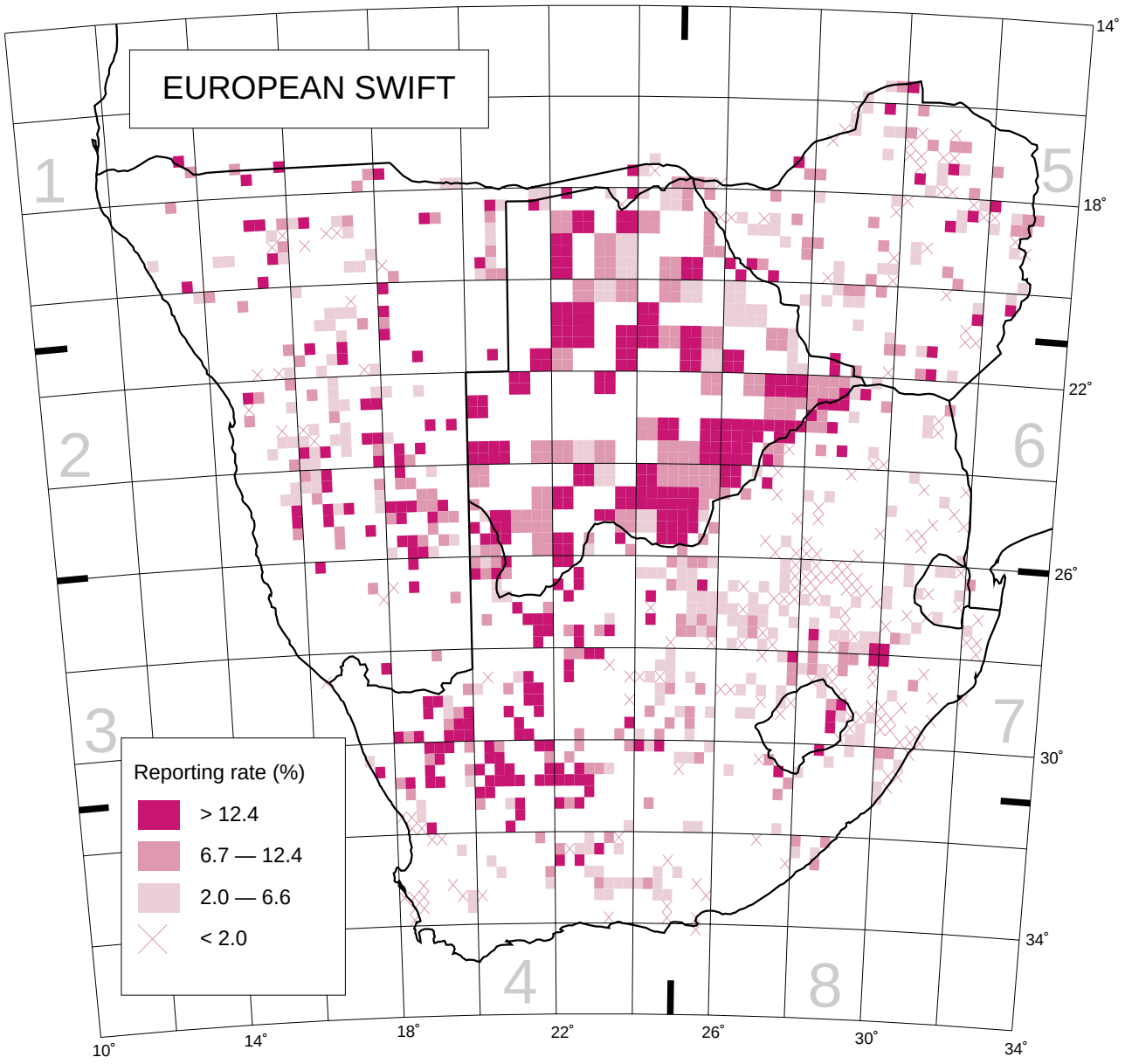
**Historical distribution and conservation:** This is not known to have differed from the present distribution. Among the localized threats in the breeding range is the destruction of old buildings in which they often breed. There are no known threats to the European Swift in southern Africa.

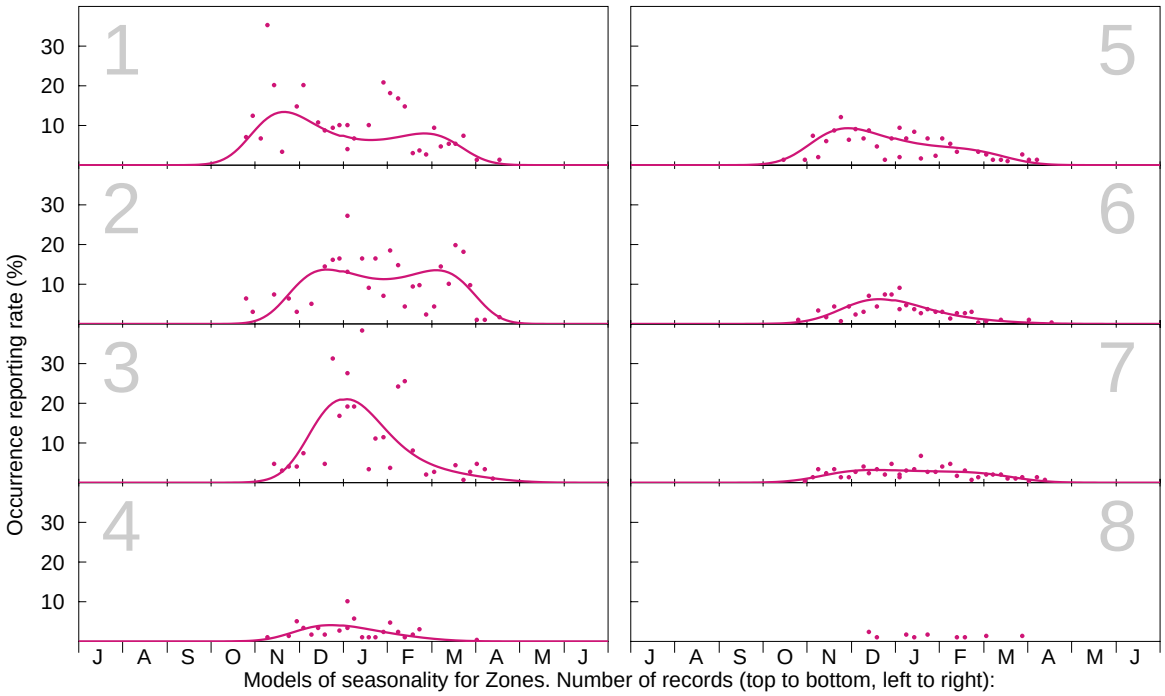
*R.K. Brooke*

Recorded in 1231 grid cells, 27.1%
Total number of records: 2381
Mean reporting rate for range: 3.6%

Reporting rates for vegetation types






Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 93, 165, 178, 63, 202, 152, 220, 9.