



Redbreasted Swallow

Rooiborsswael

Hirundo semirufa

This swallow is widespread in more mesic woodlands of South Africa and adjacent Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and across northern Botswana to northcentral Namibia. It also extends into the central and western highveld grasslands of South Africa, but avoids the higher-rainfall eastern grasslands. It is scarce or absent from the escarpment region of the Transvaal and Swaziland, the Kalahari woodlands, and also from the lower-lying woodlands of the Zambezi Valley and southeastern regions in Zimbabwe, although it occurs at sea-level in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

This distinctive species can only be confused with the Mosque Swallow *H. senegalensis* in the field, but the two have different habitat preferences.

Habitat: It is primarily a bird of open savanna and, secondarily, of sweet grassveld, and the availability of suitable nesting sites probably dictates its abundance in many regions (Earlé & Brooke 1989). It does not occur, except as a vagrant, in the high-rainfall sour grasslands or in low-rainfall areas with well-drained soils. In Zimbabwe its absence from the perennial river valleys and the southeastern lowveld has not been accounted for. Similarly, its relative scarcity in the Okavango is striking.

Movements: This swallow is an intra-African breeding migrant with unusually early times of arrival and departure. It arrives early in spring (August–September) and departs mostly March–April. Birds arrive somewhat later in the southernmost parts of their distribution. There have been no recoveries of individuals ringed in southern Africa from the nonbreeding part of their range (Earlé 1987c). As all moulting birds were found between 10°S and 10°N (Earlé & Brooke 1989), it appears that the southern breeding populations migrate to the equatorial region.

Breeding: Breeding was recorded August–April with peaks November–December in the southern parts of its distribution (Zones 6 and 7) and October–November in Zimbabwe (Zone 5). Egg-laying in the Transvaal has been reported to span October–March, with a November–January peak (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). Egg-laying in Zimbabwe spans August–April, with an October–January peak (Irwin 1981).

Interspecific relationships: It occurs together with the Greater *H. cucullata* and Lesser *H. abyssinica* Striped Swallows in parts of southern Africa and all three use man-made structures such as culverts for nest building. Redbreasted Swallows nest in very low and narrow culverts, with nests often only 0.3 m above the substratum, while the two striped swallows nest in situations with greater clearance below their nests. Redbreasted Swallow nests are usurped by Whiterumped Swifts *Apus caffer* (Fry *et al.* 1988). This swallow is largely replaced in the woodlands of the northern Transvaal lowveld, southeastern Zimbabwe, and extreme northern Namibia by the similar Mosque Swallow.

Historical distribution and conservation: The Redbreasted Swallow has benefited from the construction of man-made culverts in which it nests. This habit has allowed it to expand its distribution into areas that previously lacked suitable breeding sites and to increase in density in other regions (e.g. Irwin 1981). Its range expansion has probably been most dramatic in the central and western grasslands of the Transvaal and Free State. In the latter area a specimen collected in 1901 in the Heilbron (2727BD) district in the northern Free State was probably the first record for this province (Earlé & Brooke 1989). It was not recorded there again for the next 50 years (Stark & Sclater 1901; Roberts 1940; Vincent 1952). The next reports of its presence in the northern parts of the province come from McLachlan & Liversidge (1957), and it was subsequently reported as far south as Reddersburg (2926CA) and Barkly West (2824DA) (McLachlan & Liversidge 1970). This species is now common in areas of the Free State where it was formerly rare (Maclean 1957; Earlé & Grobler 1987). An eastward expansion has also taken place in the northern KwaZulu-Natal littoral plain (Cooper 1963) and it is now common in the area.

R.A. Earlé

Recorded in 1184 grid cells, 26.1%
Total number of records: 10 212
Mean reporting rate for range: 15.5%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



