First record of Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* in Denmark and of ssp. *illyricus* in northern Europe

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(Med et dansk resumé: Første danske fund af Gråsejler Apus pallidus illyricus*)*

Examining skins of Common Swifts *Apus apus* and Pallid Swifts *Apus pallidus* at the Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen (ZMUC), I discovered an aberrant swift in the series of Danish specimens that appeared identical to two specimens of the Pallid Swift subspecies *illyricus* from Croatia in the same collection. Subsequent measuring confirmed the identification. According to the label the specimen was from Kirke Helsinge, West Zealand 11 March 1993 and had been collected by Keld Bennike. The collection manager, Jan Bolding Kristensen (who prepared the specimen), confirmed that the data were correctly copied from the original label, and that the bird could not have been mixed up with birds from other countries. The collector could, without remembering the specific circumstances, confirm the Danish origin. This specimen constitutes the first Danish record of Pallid Swift and the first North European record of the subspecies *illyricus*, and the earliest North European record of Pallid Swift.

Description and identification

The Danish specimen of Pallid Swift ssp. *illyricus* (ZMUC, Cat. # 91.402) is compared with other specimens in Figs 1 and 2. The flight feathers do not show the pale fringes typical of juv. swifts and the primaries and rectrices are shaped as in adults.

Measurements

- The difference between the longest and the second longest rectrix (t5-t4 = 6 mm) falls into the range of Pallid Swift only (Pallid Swift 3-8 mm, mean 5 mm; ad. Common Swift 7.5-11.5 mm, mean 9.5 mm; Baker 1993). However, juv. Common Swifts in autumn have a range similar to Pallid Swift.
- The difference between the longest and the shortest rectrix (t5-t1 = 23 mm) falls into the range of Pallid Swift only (when considering ad. birds; Pallid Swift 21-30 mm, slightly shorter in *illyricus* than in the other two subspecies; Common Swift longer than 25 mm (ad.) or 22-32 mm (juv.); Chantler & Driessens 1995).
- The longest primary is p10. Pallid Swift is often noted as having a blunter, less pointed wing than Common Swift. According to Lewington (1999) this is because in Common Swift the outermost primary (p10) is the longest while in Pallid Swift p9 is longest. However, specimens of both Pallid and Common Swift have a highly variable wing formula, with most having the second outermost primary longest (p9 longest 86%, p10 longest 14%, $N = 35$; own measurements, ZMUC). Of the two Croatian specimens of Pallid Swift, one had the outermost primary longest, the other having the second outermost longest.
- The wing length is 166 mm and the tail length 63 mm, both falling within the range of both Common Swift and Pallid Swift (Chantler & Driessens 1995).

Plumage

- General colouration exactly matches that of the two specimens of *illyricus* from Croatia. It is only slightly paler than that of ad. *A. a. apus*, closer in tone to (though still paler than) *A. a. pekinensis*, and generally somewhat darker than juv. Common Swifts, thus being significantly darker than Pallid Swifts ssp. *brehmorum* and *pallidus*.
- The throat patch is bigger than in Common Swift (both *apus* and *pekinensis*) extending further down the throat, with a gradual transition into the dark on the upper belly.
- The head shows a dark eye-surrounding typical of Pallid Swifts, but the generally darker colour on the head makes this character much less conspicuous than in other subspecies of Pallid Swift.
- The breast and belly feathers are blackish with very distinct white distal fringes. This is a character typical for Pallid Swift. However, juv. Common Swifts may show a similar pattern, though the fringes are less distinct and not as white as in *A. p. illyricus*. In the actual specimen the basal colour (blackish) is much darker and the fringes not as broad as in the other subspecies of Pallid Swift, but they closely match the pattern in the Croatian *illyricus* specimens.
- Dorsally the darker outer wing contrasts to the paler inner wing (coverts and secondaries), and

Fig. 1. Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus illyricus*, Kirke Helsinge, West Zealand, 11 March 1993. Cat. # 91.402, ZMUC.
Gråsejler, Kirke Helsinge 11 marts 1993.

the dark back creates a saddle effect typical of Pallid Swift. However, the contrast is not as obvious as in other subspecies of Pallid Swift, and a less pronounced contrast can also be seen in most Common Swifts.

- Below, very pale wing coverts contrast markedly to the darker underside of body and the remiges. This is typical of *A. p. illyricus*, whereas in other subspecies of Pallid Swift the body is much paler and in Common Swifts the wing coverts are darker, in both cases creating less contrast.

Breeding distribution

The Pallid Swift has a predominantly Western Palearctic distribution (Cramp 1985, Chantler & Driessens 1995), breeding in the Mediterranean countries, but also around the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. It winters mainly in Africa south of Sahara (Cramp 1985, Chantler & Driessens 1995).

Three subspecies are described (Peters 1940; excluding *somalicus* which is now included in Nyanza Swift *Apus niansae*, Chantler & Driessens 1995), with *brehmorum* being the widespread European and North African form, except on the coast of the former Yugoslavia and east coast of Italy, where *illyricus* occurs. Nominate *pallidus* occurs patchily in the Sahara from the west coast of Africa to Egypt and from the Middle East east to Pakistan (Cramp 1985, Chantler & Driessens 1995).

Occurrence in northern Europe

The Pallid Swift is a vagrant in northern Europe, with a total of 39 records between late April and late November (Dierschke in press). Additional records outside the breeding area are 9 January 1993 France and 1 April 1994 Slovenia. Most records are from Britain (25, 1979-1999), the remaining being from Ireland, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Norway and Sweden. No less than 11 were recorded in late October 1999 in Britain, during a period of strong southerly airflow. From Scandinavia there are 6 previous records, 4 from southern Norway (2 October 1984, 24 May 1986, 19 June 1989, 3 June 1995) and 2 from Sweden (3 July 1991 Falsterbo, 24 July 1999 Öland).

Fig. 2. Specimens of Swifts and Pallid Swifts at ZMUC. From left to right: (1) *Apus apus pekinensis*, ad., April, Afghanistan (Cat. # 49.660), (2) *A. a. apus*, ad., June, Denmark (Cat. # 40.716), (3) *A. a. apus*, juv., September, Denmark (Cat. # 40.713), (4) *A. pallidus illyricus*, ad., March, Denmark (Cat. # 91.402), (5) *A. p. illyricus*, ad., June, Croatia (Cat. # 92.682), (6) *A. p. pallidus*, ad., April, Iran (Cat. # 57.916) and (7) *A. p. brehmorum*, ad., March, Tunisia (Cat. # 49.664).
Skind af forskellige underarter af Mursejler og Gråsejler (jf. den engelske billedtekst; numre refererer til rækkefølgen fra venstre mod højre).

Discussion

The collector was able to confirm the Danish origin of the specimen but was less sure of the date (11 March). However, since plumage (slightly worn) matches the expectation for a spring bird it seems reasonable to accept the date, although it is the earliest for any North European record (Dierschke in press). Rarities often turn up out of season, and swifts generally arrive at their Mediterranean breeding grounds already from March (Pallid Swift often earlier than Common Swift), and winter records of Pallid Swift are not rare (Cramp 1985). At Eilat in Israel, spring passage of Pallid Swift peaks in the first half of March (Cramp 1985), but very little is known about the phenology and migratory routes of the different subspecies.

According to Danmarks Meteorologiske Institut (1994) the temperature in March 1993 was 0.5° above normal, despite frequent nights with frost, and the precipitation was less than half of the normal. Generally winds were weak. The winter 1992/93 had been unusually mild, with an average temperature of 2°C (1.5° above normal).

Identification of Pallid Swift in the field is generally regarded as possible (and not too difficult) under favourable conditions. This, however, only applies to the subspecies *brehmorum* and *pallidus*. The subspecies *illyricus* is generally very difficult to identify even in the breeding areas (Corso 2000), and thus is very easily overlooked. Furthermore, contrary to some descriptions (e.g., Jonsson 1992), the ground colour of juv. Common Swift generally is not sooty-black, but paler and brownish. The jizz of juv. Common Swift is also more like that of Pallid Swift, making identification particularly difficult in late summer/autumn. It should also be noted that Common Swifts of the subspecies *pekinensis* show rather Pallid Swift-like contrasts on the upperparts and a large throat patch (Lewington 1999). Any claims of *A. p. illyricus* outside the breeding area will require extremely good description, and even careful observations can hardly stand alone.

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Summary. A specimen of Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus illyricus* from 11 March 1993, Kirke Helsinge, West Zealand, which had originally been labelled as Common Swift *Apus apus*, was discovered in the collection of the Zoological Museum, University of Copenhagen (Cat. # 91.402). This is the first Danish record of Pallid Swift and the first North European record of ssp. *illyricus*. This subspecies is much more similar to Common Swift than the other two subspecies of Pallid Swift, and identification requires extreme caution.

Resumé

Første danske fund af Gråsejler *Apus pallidus illyricus* Et skind af Gråsejler *Apus pallidus*, ssp. *illyricus*, fra 11.3 1993, Kirke Helsinge, Vestsjælland, befinder sig i skindsamlingen på Zoologisk Museum, Københavns Universitet (Cat. # 91.402). Fuglen blev oprindeligt bestemt til Mursejler *Apus apus*. Skindet udgør det første danske fund af Gråsejler og det første nordeuropæiske fund af underarten *illyricus*. Denne underart er mere lig Mursejler end de to andre underarter af Gråsejler, og feltbestemmelse er ekstremt vanskelig.

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