

Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena* Gould) in New Caledonia

by

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The only Swallow known from the French Territory of New Caledonia and its Dependencies was the dark-bellied *Hirundo tahitica subfusca* Gould, whose range extends from Moala and the Fidji Islands (*H. t. tahitica* being the form that occupies the Society Archipelago) westwards to the New Hebrides and the Solomons.

This bird had been seen in the three Loyalty Islands, and had been found breeding on the island Ouvéa (Macmillan, unpublished Notes, in the A. M. N. H. New York; and Warner 1947). It had been noted, only once to my knowledge, in New Caledonia itself by E. L. L. Layard (1882, P. 503), who wrote (under the head-line *Hirundo tahitica*): "On the 26th November 1879 we saw a young bird flying round the office of the mailsteamer in ... Nouméa ... After assuring ourselves the identity ... (we) returned next day with our collecting gun ... in vain ..." (1882 p. 503).

I saw *H. tahitica subfusca* at St. Joseph, Ouvéa, circling around the village and above the lagoons, everytime I stayed there from 1975 to 1978; and I examined a few nests under eaves in buildings, not occupied at the times of my visits which took place from August to November.

Later I was intrigued, when doing field work in the Northern part of New Caledonia proper (Grande Terre) by some ten white-bellied, long-tailed Swallows flying for an hour or two, 1 to 3 meters high above the surface of a large lagoon, in the extensive Diahot Basin. The water at this place is rather muddy and just a little brackish. The Swallows would go down and touch the water level for a leap. They also used to perch for one minute, each every 10 or 15 minutes, on wooden poles less than 1 meter high above the water that had been planted there by fishermen. There were no Swifts above the lake on that day. One specimen was obtained and proved to be *Hirundo neoxena*. This was on July 17, 1976.

The same species was identified again on the west coast of N.C., south of La Foa in the early morning of January 28 1978: a pair circling in double loops 1 or 2 meters high above shallow waters between mangrove and sandy beaches. An other observation was made in February the same year, at Koné, West coast: 4 or 5 birds flying 10 meters high above the houses before sunset.

It will be of interest to see whether this species is only a casual visitor coming

from the West or South West (Australia ...) or whether it is, or will soon be, breeding in New Caledonia. There are a handful of New Caledonian birds whose origin is evidently Australian, like *Myzomela sanguinolenta caledonica* and *Accipiter fasciatus vigilax*, this last one reaching the Loyalty Islands and even the Southern New-Hebrides. Quite recently (1978) *Gallinula tenebrosa* has been discovered in New Caledonia by Mr. Hannecart. If *Hirundo neoxena* becomes established in the country it will fill there the same ecological niche that is occupied by *Hirundo tahitica* a hundred kilometers to the East on Ouvea Island.

References

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