

## SHORT NOTE

Bradfield's swift *Apus bradfieldi*  
feeding on bees

by

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Bradfield's swift ranges through southern Angola, South West Africa and across to Kuruman and Kimberley in the Republic of South Africa. The nominate race occurs in South West Africa and Angola while the southern population is regarded as a separate race *A. b. deserticolus* (Brooke 1970). The species occurs regularly within the Skeleton Coast Park and is known to breed there.

During January 1979 a party of these swifts was observed feeding above reed-beds 3 km inland of the Uchab River Mouth 21°11'S, 13°45'E. Closer observation showed that the birds were catching honey bees *Apis mellifera* in flight near a hive. Up to eight swifts at a time were noted taking bees apparently returning to the hive after foraging flights.

Three points of interest emerge from these observations:

- 1 McLachlan and Liversidge (1978) state that swifts are unable to perch but rather cling to rough perpendicular surfaces. Following periods of feeding Bradfield's swifts were frequently noted resting on the ground near the hive. Although the birds were confident and could be closely approached they experienced no difficulty in taking off when disturbed.
- 2 Observations showed that swifts arrived from up-river and returned eastwards after feeding. A colony of Bradfield's swifts was located some 24 km inland in the Uchab River in late January. Adult birds were seen entering inaccessible crevices in basalt cliffs 30 m above the river-bed. The birds were thought to be feeding nestlings. No other swift colonies were found closer to the Uchab Mouth. It is likely that the birds feeding on bees at the river-mouth undertook a return flight of some 40 km to utilise the food source.
- 3 While it is well documented that long-billed birds e.g. Meropidae are equipped to deal with venomous insects (Fry 1969) swifts being short-billed and wide-gaped are not. It is unlikely that swifts are able to rid bees of their stings while in flight.

The possibility exists that Bradfield's and other swifts are immune to bee venom. Fry (1969) suggests partial immunity for some bee eaters and cites Koenig (1951) who reported that pulli of *Merops apiaster* were immune to the poison of bees and wasps.

## REFERENCES

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