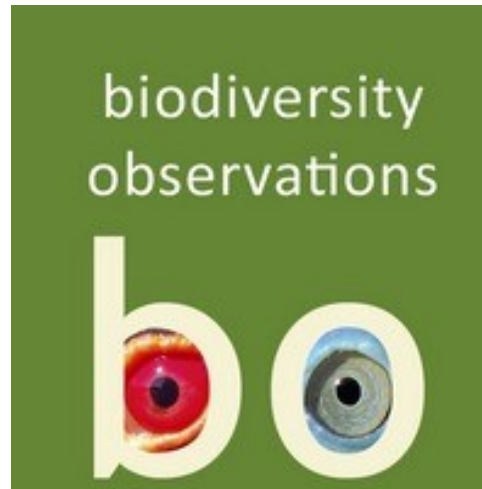


Impact of cold and wet weather on Common Swifts *Apus apus* (with comments)

Eddie Rabie, Christa Rabie, H Dieter Oschadleus



Rabie E, Rabie C 2023. Impact of cold and wet weather on Common Swifts *Apus apus*. Biodiversity Observations 13: 140

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Ornithology

Impact of cold and wet weather on Common Swifts *Apus apus*

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During the first week of December 2019 most of South Africa experienced an unseasonable cold and wet period. During this week we visited Mabalingwe Nature Reserve, west of Bela Bela in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

One day, while having lunch in the restaurant (24°55.16'S,28°3.84'E), we observed a large amount of activity of Common Swifts *Apus apus* on the deck area outside the restaurant. Because it was raining we went outside for a short time to observe what was happening. The swifts were flying in and out of the overhang of the roof. Most were not sheltering under the overhang but hanging onto the vertical wall for a moment before flying off again.

We returned the following day at 07h00 to take some photos. As we stepped onto the deck, we were surprised to find that there were some alive (Figure 1A) and dead (Figure 1B) swifts on the deck. There were also swifts clinging on the vertical wall (Figure 1C). It was very cold, and the swifts were inactive. There were none in flight.

We discussed this observation with Dr Warwick Tarboton, who told us that this is unusual behaviour, because Common Swifts are normally capable of escaping bad weather by flying high or away from it.

What could have happened here?

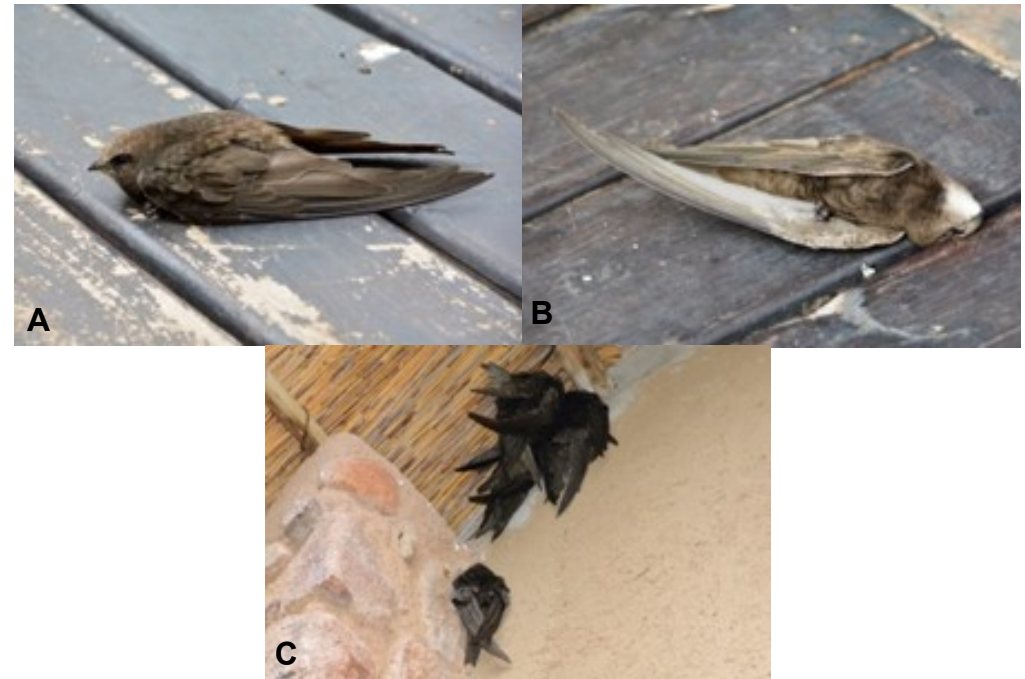


Figure 1: Common Swifts, alive and dead, on the deck of the restaurant after the rainstorm.

Comments on “Impact of cold and wet weather on Common Swifts”

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Common Swifts *Apus apus* are strong fliers and can usually evade storms, but certainly not always. Bowen (1977) described injured and dying Common Swifts after severe thunderstorms at night in Zambia. Bowen (1977) even suggested that storms may cause more mortality for this species than any other factor.

The Common Swift usually flies at speeds of around 36 to 43 km/h but with the fastest flight estimated at 31.1 m/s (ie. 112 km/h) (Henningsson et al. 2010). During severe storms wind speed can easily exceed the fastest flying swift, so swifts may not always be able to escape adverse weather.

Common Swifts normally roost in the air at high altitude while in Africa (Hedenström et al. 2016). The weak and dead swifts found in the morning reported by Rabie & Rabie (2023) indicate that these swifts were not able to fly to an area with better weather. Possibly these swifts did not feed enough during the wet spell, and may have had insufficient energy reserves to stay airborne or escape the wet weather. Although the swifts did not cling from the wall when first observed, they were probably investigating the site as a suitable roosting site for that night. Recent research in Europe shows that Common Swifts do

roost on buildings or trees during adverse weather more often than previously thought (Holmgren 2004). This most likely happens in Africa too, but has been overlooked.

These observations are very interesting as they provide another example of mortality due to weather in the Common Swift, and also show that in extreme cases this species can roost on buildings at night in Africa.

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