In east Kent, 13th May 1978 began cold and damp with a light north-westerly wind and intermittent rain. At dawn, D. Raine and I embarked on a Kent Ornithological Society sponsored bird count through the Stour Valley east of Canterbury. When we reached Stodmarsh at mid morning, there was a perceptible rise in temperature and signs of a break in the clouds which encouraged us to put aside earlier doubts and continue. As we walked along the Lampen Wall across reedbeds and lagoons of the National Nature Reserve, it was obvious that there was a substantial passage of Swifts *Apus* *apus* moving low WNW up the Stour Valley.

Shortly after passing three other birdwatchers (M. Marsh, M. Morley and P. Murphy) at about 10.30 GMT, we noticed a decidedly paler swift with a more deliberate flight. As we watched, it began feeding up and down the Wall, along a flight path of about 200m, regularly passing us within 2m. We watched it for about 15 minutes, made field notes and then walked back to the others who had been joined by C. Clark. They had also been watching the bird and we all agreed that it was probably a Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*. We watched it together for the next 40 minutes down to 2m and from all angles, in dull light using a variety of binoculars. It was in company with up to 30 Swifts throughout.

The main features were the milky brown plumage, with dark brown primaries contrasting with paler secondaries and wing-coverts, the extensive pale face and throat, and the more deliberate flight, with shallower wing beats, more gliding and less agility than shown by its commoner companions. We were all conscious of the difficulties of field identification in view of the warnings given in current field guides and the fate of earlier, claimed British records. When we felt we had sufficient details to make identification certain, DR and I walked on to Grove Ferry to telephone the news as widely as possible. As the bird was easily watched from a footpath with no risk of disturbance, we were anxious that as many people as possible should see it. In the event, over the next nine days many hundreds saw it, and several photographs were taken (plates 99-104 and *Brit. Birds* 71: plate 135). It regularly appeared with Swifts at about 07.30
hours and moved off, generally westwards, at about 16.30 hours, although on some days it was absent (or high out of sight) for long intervals. It was apparently never seen away from Stodmarsh. The last documented sighting was by Dr P. M. North on 21st May, although there were unsubstantiated reports up to 24th May.

**Description**

Although this was known to be probably the first acceptable record in Britain and Ireland of a notoriously difficult species, only four descriptions were submitted to the Rarities Committee or the KOS apart from those of the original six observers. These came from R. E. E. Collins, Dr P. M. North, D. W. Taylor and R. E. Youngman, and the following summary of the identification features draws on their notes as well as those of the original observers. My drawings are based on field sketches made on 13th May.

**GENERAL APPEARANCE** Appeared about size of Swift, though rather bulkier, with larger head, blunter wing-tips, broader wings and blunter tail fork. Generally paler, milkier brown, similar to Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*, but looking rather patchy, almost ‘moth-eaten’ compared with matt velvet, sooty brown of Swifts (impression well shown in photographs).

**WINGS** Outer primaries dark brown, contrasting with paler brown secondaries and coverts; contrast apparent from above and from below. Swifts showed contrary contrast, with primaries appearing lighter than rest of wing. Feathers of wing-coverts with distinct pale edges, giving mottled or scaly appearance in best views. Pale wing-bars apparent in some photographs not noted in field.
MANTLE, RUMP AND TAIL Mantle darker brown than wing-coverts, rump and crown, but still paler than those of Swift: not striking in field, but consistent in most lights and noted by Robert Hudson (in litt.) on skins (in plate 104, and in Brit. Birds 71: plate 135, shows as saddle effect). In close views, some mottling discernible. Rump and uppertail-coverts also mottled and paler brown than dark tail. Some observers thought tail points blunter and fork shallower than on Swifts.

HEAD Head pale, milky brown, with extensive paler area over forecrown, forehead and throat: not white and not so well demarcated as on Swifts, but very obvious since it extended further around neck and down onto upper breast. In contrast, shadowed area around eyes appeared very dark: striking feature in most lights. Paleness of
Pallid Swift: new to Britain and Ireland

105 & 106. Swifts *Apus apus*: above, Lanarkshire (Strathclyde), June 1949 (C. Eric Palmer); left, Worcestershire, July 1976 (M. C. Wilkes)

107 & 108. Swift *Apus apus*, Netherlands, July 1974 (Hans Schouten)
head particularly noticeable in head-on views and probably contributed to impression of larger head than that of Swift.

**Underparts** Breast and belly appeared dark brown in most lights and contrasted with underwing-coverts, secondaries and throat: seemed as dark as mantle, although more often in shadow (perhaps not real plumage characteristics, since Hudson did not notice it on skins). Showed scaling in close views, particularly on flanks (I gained impression this created by dark borders to feathers, although others noted pale borders similar to those on wing-coverts and mantle).

**Bare parts** Eyes and bill dark, probably black. M. Marsh noted orange gape. Feet not seen.

**General characters** Almost all observers commented on striking flight: steadier, more deliberate, heavier and less manoeuvrable than that of Swift. Wings appeared broader, blunter and more blade-shaped, giving impression of shallower wing beats from the shoulder (reminding me of the larger swifts, Alpine *A. melba* and Mottled *A. aequatorialis*). Method of feeding while beating up and down dyke or embankment was more systematic than that employed by the numerous Swifts always present. After initial contact at close range, it could be picked up with naked eye at 100m, on flight style alone, even when among many Swifts. No call heard.

All observers with whom I discussed the bird were struck by its distinctive 'jizz' (indeed, it was a matter of concern that it was so distinctive!) and this was clearly a particularly striking individual in exceptional circumstances which allowed very close views in a variety of light conditions over quite a long period.

**Local circumstances**
In Kent, the first half of May 1978 was relatively cool and wet with frequent northerly winds, inhibiting migration by Swifts. The first major influx
occurred on 13th May, after winds had moved from light northerly on 9th and 10th to fresh ENE on 11th and light northwesterly on 13th. The passage of a cold front on the morning of 13th encouraged Swifts to move quickly through Kent. Over the following week, the winds were variable and light, moving to northeast on 20th and 21st, when the Pallid Swift was last reliably recorded. At Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory (15km ESE of Stodmarsh) Swift passage peaked on 13th-14th and 20th-23rd May, with only small numbers on 24th-26th (Martin Sutherland in litt.). Thus, the Pallid Swift arrived with the first peak and left with the second. If it was of the west Mediterranean race *brehmorum*, it seems likely that it joined a build-up of northward-bound Swifts in the Mediterranean. Its striking paleness, however, at least admits the possibility that it was from farther south, and of the Saharan/Middle-Eastern race *pallidus*. With supremely aerial birds such as swifts, the possibility of distant origins for vagrants is greater than for most species, and the full range of subspecific characters must be borne in mind when attempting to identify a vagrant.

**Distribution**

Vaurie (1965) gave the range as ‘Madeira, Canaries, north western Africa, coastal regions of the Mediterranean and some of its islands and the Sahara westwards (*sic*: presumably eastwards is meant) through Egypt and the Near East to Iraq, southern Iran and southern Baluchistan’. He described three Palearctic races: *brehmorum* in the western Mediterranean, the darker *illyricus* in the eastern Mediterranean, and the paler *pallidus* in the Sahara and the Middle East. He considered that two further races, *niansae* of East Africa and *somalicus* of Somalia, may be conspecific, but White (1970) and Brooke (1978) considered these to be races of the Nyanza Swift *A. niansae*, forming a superspecies with *A. pallidus*.

The Pallid Swift is both migratory and resident, and there are single records from Uganda, Zambia and Cape Province. Unfortunately, the high flying of migrant and wintering swifts and the difficulties of field identi-
In Europe, the northern limit of breeding is Piedmont, Italy (Boano 1979), while in France Pallid Swifts were first found in Corsica in 1932 and breeding proved there in 1936. Breeding was first confirmed on the mainland in 1950, and all breeding records are from the Mediterranean littoral except for a population in the Toulouse area discovered in 1966 (Yeatman 1976). This French evidence suggests a slow extension of range northwards, although R. Cruon (in litt.) knows of no more northerly French records. Further, P. Goriup (in litt.) and Robert Hudson (in litt.) have been unable to trace any published records from elsewhere north of the breeding area, presumably because the difficulty of field identification precludes most claimed sightings from acceptance. A Pallid Swift at Bath, Zeeland, Netherlands, on 8th August 1979 was the first Dutch record (G. J. Oreel in litt. to Dr J. T. R. Sharrock). Interestingly, Bath is on almost exactly the same latitude as Stodmarsh (about 51° 20’ north).

Throughout most of its range, the Pallid Swift is no more than locally common. Its habitat corresponds to that of Swifts, similarly nesting in cliffs and buildings. It usually favours more open locations in buildings and never utilises holes in trees as the Swift does in eastern Europe and Siberia. Many, but not all, breeding colonies are in coastal towns and cliffs. The western Mediterranean subspecies brehmorum returns to its breeding area in March and leaves in November. Its season is thus at least two months longer than that of the Swifts in the same area, which suggests a much shorter migration for most individuals.

**Identification problems**

Since 1960 there have been at least nine other reports of Pallid Swifts in seven counties of southern and eastern England, west to Avon and north to Humberside, but none has afforded such conclusive views as the Stodmarsh individual. To date, this remains the first and only accepted record for Britain and Ireland. The unusually favourable circumstances of this
sighting should not obscure the difficulty of separating Pallid Swifts from Swifts in the field. Light conditions have a variable effect on the apparent coloration, since the differences are largely matters of degrees of shade. Wind conditions affect the mode of flight. Young Swifts are often paler than adults, show a more extensive pale throat patch and some mottling or scaling. There is also the possibility of unusual plumage variants and leucistic Swifts may be particularly misleading (e.g. Vinicombe 1978).

The Central Asian race of the Swift *A. a. pekinensis* is intermediate in coloration between the nominate race and the darker races of the Pallid Swift. It has a larger throat patch than the nominate race and may show pale tips to the breast and belly feathers. Its primaries are darker than its secondaries. In an examination of skins at Tring, Robert Hudson could find no single plumage character which consistently separated all *pekinensis* from all Pallid Swifts. Since this subspecies ranges west to Turkey and the Levant, its occurrence in western Europe is possible, and it is necessary to exclude it in the field identification of suspected vagrant Pallid Swifts. This may not always be possible, particularly with distant views of single birds. Lack (1956) discussed the differences between Swifts and Pallid Swifts, and also noted that most features are a matter of degree, with some overlap between the two species in most characters. He found that on most Pallid Swifts the first and second primaries were equal or almost so, while on Swifts the second was usually longer. P. R. Colston (*in litt.*), however, in a more recent examination, found that the overlap is considerable, although there is a tendency for *Apus apus* to have longer second primaries (table 1). Lack (1956) confirmed Hartert’s findings that the tails of Pallid Swifts are generally less forked than those of Swifts, and this was further confirmed by Colston (table 2).

On the basis of the comments of Lack (1956) and Robert Hudson (*in litt.*), and the available descriptions of the Stodmarsh individual, I suggest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swift</th>
<th>Pallid Swift</th>
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<tr>
<td>Totals of 40 of each species in British Museum (Natural History), Tring collection, measured by P. R. Colston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELATION OF 1ST PRIMARY TO 2ND PRIMARY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3-4mm</td>
<td>+1-2mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swift</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pallid Swift</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Differences in depth of tail fork of Swift *Apus apus* and Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*

Totals of ten of each species in British Museum (Natural History), Tring collection, measured (in mm) by P. R. Colston. S.D. = standard deviation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LONGEST TAIL FEATHER</th>
<th>SHORTEST TAIL FEATHER</th>
<th>DIFFERENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swift</td>
<td>72-78</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pallid Swift</td>
<td>65-72</td>
<td>69.2</td>
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that the following are the main identification features of Pallid Swifts when compared with Swifts in the field:

1. **Paler, milkier brown plumage**

2. **Dark brown outer primaries contrasting with paler secondaries and wing-coverts (compare with the contrary effect on Swifts)**

3. **Breast, belly and especially mantle appear darker than wing-coverts, head and rump. The darker mantle can create a saddle effect and seems to be a consistent feature independent of light conditions, whereas the dark underparts may only be a factor of shadow**

4. **Pale, whitish throat extending farther down breast, to sides of neck and onto forehead**

5. **Distinct mottingling or scaliness on contour feathers, most noticeable on wing-coverts and flanks**

6. **Dark eye shadow mark often showing clearly on pale head. Although a factor of light conditions, this can be a striking field mark**

7. **More blade-shaped wings, broader based and, usually, with blunter wingtips. Less obviously, the tail points look blunter and the fork shallower**

8. **Less agile, more deliberate flight, with more gliding**

It is likely that most, if not all, of these characters need to be clearly seen in good light conditions and at close range, preferably in direct comparison with Swifts, if certain identification of vagrants is to be established.

**Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to those who submitted descriptions of the Stodmarsh Pallid Swift, but, although I have made use of their notes, the responsibility for what goes before is entirely mine. I am also very grateful for the considerable help and constructive criticism of P. Britton, Dr N. Collar, P. R. Colston, R. Cruon, P. Goriup, R. Hudson, M. J. Rogers, Dr J. T. R. Sharrock, M. Sutherland and D. W. Taylor. I also thank Jeff Pick and David M. Cottridge, who took the photographs, and Mrs Sylvia Bastian, for typing the drafts.

**Summary**

The first accepted Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* in Britain and Ireland was seen at Stodmarsh, Kent, during 13th to 21st May 1978. Details of the species' world range are given and the identification problems are discussed.

**References**


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