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# First records for Seychelles of Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*, Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* and the genus *Ficedula*

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**Premières mentions pour les Seychelles du Martinet à ventre blanc *Tachymarptis melba*, du Traquet du désert *Oenanthe deserti* et du genre *Ficedula*.** En 2009, un Martinet à ventre blanc *Tachymarptis melba* a été observé à Bird Island, Seychelles, le 20–21 novembre et un Traquet du désert *Oenanthe deserti* mâle immature le 16–18 novembre. Probablement le même mâle immature était à Cousine le 23–24 novembre. Ces observations ont été acceptées par le Comité d'Homologation Seychellois comme les premières données pour le pays. De plus, un gobemouche du genre *Ficedula* a été observé à Bird Island le 13 et 17 novembre. Il n'y a pas de données précédentes de ce genre pour les Seychelles.

**Summary.** In 2009, an Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* was present on Bird Island, Seychelles, on 20–21 November and an immature male Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* on 16–18 November. Probably the same individual of the latter was on Cousine on 23–24 November. These observations have been accepted by the Seychelles Bird Records Committee as the first records for the country. In addition, a flycatcher of the genus *Ficedula* was seen on Bird Island on 13 and 17 November. There have been no previous records of this genus in Seychelles.

From 9 to 21 November 2009 we stayed on Bird Island, the northernmost of the Seychelles (03°43'S 55°13'E), which has long been known as a significant locality in the archipelago for migrants (Feare 1979, Phillips & Phillips 2005). During this period we observed more than 20 species of Palearctic-breeding landbirds, a remarkable total for this remote oceanic island. Particularly noteworthy were Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*, Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*, Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*, Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* and Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, for which there are fewer than five accepted Seychelles records of each species.

## Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*

On the morning of 20 November, VP had brief views of a large swift with mostly white underparts, feeding high over the centre of Bird Island. It quickly disappeared from view, but we re-found the bird shortly afterwards and acquired prolonged views down to *c.*25 m, permitting its identification as an Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*. There are no other large swifts with mainly white underparts apart from the dark undertail-coverts and breast-band. The bird remained on

the island until the next day, when it was also seen by A. P. Skerrett. Once, on 21 November, we observed it being pursued by several Greater Frigatebird *Fregata minor* and Lesser Frigatebirds *F. ariel* at an altitude of *c.*50 m several hundred metres offshore. At one point a Greater Frigatebird succeeded in seizing the swift's wingtip in its bill for several seconds, before the swift managed to escape or the frigatebird tired of the chase and released it.

Alpine Swift has an extensive Old World range, breeding from southern Europe and North Africa to Turkestan, the western Himalayas (probably) and Sri Lanka, as well as in eastern and southern Africa, Madagascar, and in Mali (Chantler & Driessens 2000). Those breeding in the Western Palearctic are considered to probably winter across the northern Afrotropics, including northern Uganda, but there is no evidence of their wintering south of the equator (Chantler & Driessens 2000). All Afrotropical populations are to some extent dispersive and some are partially migratory (Chantler 1999, Chantler & Driessens 2000, Hockey *et al.* 2005, Ash & Atkins 2009). The fact that the Seychelles individual arrived at the same time as unusually large numbers of Palearctic migrants may also indicate that it originated in the Palearctic rather than Africa.

### Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

On 16 November JP discovered an immature male Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* in open scrub immediately adjacent to the coast. It remained until 18 November, feeding from low perches near the beach and permitting excellent views. Identification was straightforward, with the all-black tail in particular being diagnostic among white-rumped wheatears. The bird was also seen by R. Bresson.

On 23 November an immature male Desert Wheatear was found by K. Jolliffe on Cousine Island, Seychelles, c.85 km south-east of Bird Island. It remained until the next day and was mist-netted and ringed (Figs. 1–2). It appeared very similar to the Bird Island individual and SBRC accepted the record as ‘probably the same individual as on Bird Island’. From measurements taken in the hand and the large amount of white on the inner webs of the primaries (Fig. 2), the bird was considered to be *O. d. oreophila*, which subspecies breeds from the Pamirs and Himalayas through Xinjiang and Tibet east to Inner Mongolia (Cramp & Simmons 2004). Desert Wheatear is rare in East Africa at the latitude of Seychelles, with, for instance, just two records in Kenya (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002).

### *Ficedula* flycatcher

On 13 November we obtained good views of a *Ficedula* flycatcher in an area of open grassland and sparse scrub; what was probably the same individual was observed by VP and R. Bresson on 17 November. It was in first-year plumage and it could not be identified to species; however, on balance the observers considered the bird more likely to have been a Pied Flycatcher *F. hypoleuca* than either Semi-collared Flycatcher *F. semitorquata* or Collared Flycatcher *F. albicollis*. This conclusion was based mainly on the following: (1) quite conspicuous white in the outer tail (Collared has less white); (2) upperparts lacking any grey tones, and appearing quite dark brown; (3) breast smudged buffish and not very clear white (Collared, at least, tends to appear ‘cleaner’); (4) no indication of any pale collar on hindneck; (5) no suggestion of any pale rump patch; (6) very narrow, vertical white line on the folded wing formed by the white bases to the primaries (broader and more conspicuous in Semi-collared and especially Collared); and (7) tiny white tips



Figures 1–2. Desert Wheatear / Traquet du désert *Oenanthe deserti oreophila*, Cousine Island, Seychelles, 23–24 November 2010 (K. Jolliffe)

to some median coverts, forming a broken line or series of dots near the wing bend (better marked in typical Collared and Semi-collared, tending to form a distinct upper wingbar). However there is a considerable overlap between the three species in respect of these features (Svensson 1992, Cramp & Simmons 2004, Svensson *et al.* 2009).

All of these three *Ficedula* species migrate from their Palearctic breeding areas to the Afrotropics. The precise distributions of Semi-collared and Collared Flycatchers in East Africa are uncertain, but either or both occur in Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Uganda and Tanzania (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2002, Taylor 2006). The non-breeding distribution of Pied Flycatcher lies further west and north (Dowsett 2010), and only one record (in Kenya) is mentioned by Stevenson & Fanshawe (2002). For this reason, Pied Flycatcher might appear the least likely of the three to occur in Seychelles. However, the collective breeding distribution of Collared and Semi-collared Flycatchers extends east only to c.50–55°E, whereas Pied breeds east to c.90°E

(Moreau 1972, Cramp & Simmons 2004). Although Pied Flycatchers en route to Africa from the eastern breeding range tend to migrate west before moving south, some individuals perhaps take a more direct route and could therefore reach Seychelles during north-west winds.

The observations of Desert Wheatear and Alpine Swift have been accepted by the Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC) as the species' first records for Seychelles, and there have been no previous claims of either. The flycatcher record has been accepted by SBRC only to genus level; there have been no previous sightings of any *Ficedula* in Seychelles.

The period from October to December 2009 was clearly rather exceptional in terms of the number of Palearctic migrants in Seychelles (Demey 2010). It appears that an unusually early onset of the north-west monsoon winds may have caused migrants to 'drift' to Seychelles in larger numbers than usual. However, much remains to be learned concerning migration in this region. The ongoing steady rate of additions to the Seychelles bird list is equally reflective of the paucity of observers and lack of systematic recording until recently, as of the genuine novelty of such occurrences, and the year 2009 may yet prove to have been less unusual than it appears at present.

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