
First records for Seychelles of Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*, Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* and Plain Martin *Riparia paludicola*

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Premières mentions pour les Seychelles de la Bécassine sourde *Lymnocryptes minimus*, du Fuligule morillon *Aythya fuligula* et de l'Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola*. Une Bécassine sourde *Lymnocryptes minimus* a été observée dans la zone de la colonie de sternes, Bird Island, le 25 mars 2005, où une bécassine non identifiée (supposée être le même individu) avait été vu régulièrement depuis le 25 octobre 2004. Une femelle juvénile du Fuligule morillon *Aythya fuligula* était à la station d'épandage d'Alphonse, les 23–25 décembre 2006. Une Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola*, probablement *R. p. chinensis*, se trouvait à Anse Étoile, Mahé et l'Île Aurore le 9 décembre 2008. Ces mentions ont été acceptées par le Comité d'Homologation Seychellois comme les premières pour ces espèces pour le pays.

Jack Snipe

On 25 March 2005, while crossing the open area used by the colony of Sooty Terns *Sterna fuscata* (not breeding at this season) on Bird Island, I flushed a bird from almost underfoot. It flew c.1 m above the grass in a straight line for c.100 m before dipping to the ground on the west side of the colony area. It was evidently a snipe from the cryptic coloration and jizz, but as I had been taken by surprise no diagnostic features were noted. When I tried to locate the bird on the ground, I flushed it again, but being better prepared I obtained reasonable views as it again flew low in a straight line for about another 100 m. During my two-day stay on Bird Island, I saw the bird several times but I was never able to observe it on the ground.

Description and identification

A small snipe, smaller than Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, with a straight, relatively short bill. Dark upperparts and wings with narrow white trailing edge and very obvious yellow mantle stripes, and all-dark pointed tail. Streaked, not barred, on breast and flanks. Rounded wingtips. I could not discern any central crown-stripe when the bird flew away from me. Flight low, quite slow and weak, in a straight line, except on landing. Silent except once on take-off, when it gave a barely audibly wheeze. I concluded it was a Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*.

The assistant manager at the local hotel, Margaret Norah, informed me that an unidentified snipe (presumably the same individual) had been seen by herself and Robbie Bresson at the tern colony on a regular basis since 25 October 2004. She described hearing it give a similar soft, quiet call on take-off.

First accepted record

An earlier published report of this species from Seychelles, also on Bird Island, on 3 September 1973 (Feare & High 1973, Feare 1979) was rejected by Seychelles Bird Records Committee due to insufficient detail. However, it was retained on record as 'snipe sp.'. The observation reported here has been accepted by SBRC as the first record for Seychelles.

Jack Snipe breeds mainly subarctic Scandinavia to Siberia, wintering at scattered localities across Europe, the Indian subcontinent, south-east Asia and tropical Africa north of the equator (van Gils & Wiersma 1996). It is a vagrant south to Tanzania, where there have been a few records at latitudes similar to Bird Island.

Tufted Duck

On 23 December 2006, I located a small, brown duck on one of the sewage ponds on Alphonse Island (Figs. 1–2). The bird remained present until at least 25 December (I left the island the following morning).

Description and identification

A small, compact duck with a rounded head. Mainly drab brown above, with buffish fringes to feathers of upperparts, richer dull reddish-brown neck and head, and much paler whitish brown below. In flight and when stretching wings, a broad white wingbar, fading towards the outer primaries, in an otherwise dark upperwing was visible. The bill was dull blue-grey with a black tip; the legs were dark grey. The irides appeared pale brown in overcast conditions, but yellowish in bright light. Identified and sexed as a female Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* on its brown coloration and aged as a juvenile based on the absence of any discernible crest, only a trace of a pale area at the base of the bill, compared to the obvious white patch of an adult female, and the rather scruffy, scalloped appearance.

First accepted record

The record has been accepted by SBRC as the first confirmed record of Tufted Duck for Seychelles. There is an earlier published reference to this species in Seychelles, listed in an addendum as a second-hand report (Feare & Watson 1984). SBRC attempted without success to trace the observer for supporting details, making it impossible to consider the authenticity of the report. The only other *Aythya* recorded in Seychelles is Ferruginous Duck *A. nyroca*, with five records confirmed by SBRC.

Tufted Duck breeds across the northern Palearctic from Iceland east to Kamchatka and south to central Europe, northern Mongolia and northern Japan; it is mainly migratory, although resident in some areas including much of north-west Europe, wintering south to the Mediterranean basin, southern Asia and Africa mainly north of the equator; it is a vagrant south to Tanzania and Malaŵi (Carboneras 1992).

Plain Martin

Driving north from Victoria, Mahé, along the east coast around 17.30 hrs on 9 December 2008, I stopped at Anse Etoile to observe Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus*, which had been present on several Seychelles islands since late November. Numbers in north-east Mahé had increased from six during the preceding week to 30 on this date. Several bee-eaters were perched on wires and I noticed a martin perched close by and watched it through binoculars. My first impression was that it was similar to a Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*, but more grey-brown and it lacked a breast-band. I took a single photograph (Fig. 3) before the bird flew away, quite low (3–5 m) over the water, apparently hawking for insects, to Île Aurore, a reclaimed island c.100 m distant that cannot be reached on foot, where it appeared to land in some *Casuarina* trees. I continued around the corner to count bee-eaters and when I returned the martin was back perched on the wires. After a few minutes it took off once more, hawking for insects low over the water to Île Aurore. The following day it could not be found (all of the bee-eaters had also departed).

Description and identification

Size and general appearance similar to Sand Martin, but duller and darker, lacking a white throat and a dark breast-band. Grey-brown head, cheeks and throat, with dark brown lores and faint pale supercilium. Uniform dull dark brown on back, upperwings and uppertail with darker brown flight feathers. Belly and undertail-coverts off-white. Some indistinct greyish streaking

on flanks. Flight rather slow for a hirundine, stiff-winged and fluttering with twists and turns recalling Seychelles Swiftlet *Aerodramus elaphrus*. In flight, long pointed wings, shallow tail fork and a grey-brown underwing.

First accepted record

The record was accepted as the first Plain Martin *R. paludicola* for Seychelles by SBRC. To identify the subspecies, members of SBRC checked the photograph and description against specimens at The Natural History Museum, Tring. Nine subspecies of Plain Martin are recognised, six of which breed in mainland Africa, one in Madagascar and two in southern Asia (Turner 2004). Of the African subspecies, only the partial migrant *R. p. paludicola* of eastern and southern Africa might be considered likely to reach Seychelles. The Madagascar subspecies *R. p. cowani* is a potential vagrant to Seychelles. *R. p. chinensis*, breeding from Afghanistan east to Indochina and Taiwan is a migrant in the north of its range and also a potential vagrant to Seychelles.

The Seychelles bird closely resembled the Asian race *R. p. chinensis*, which has extensive white underparts. *R. p. cowani* with all-dark underparts was easily eliminated. *R. p. paludicola* has white underparts, but less extensive than shown in the photograph, even in the most extreme examples held at Tring. However, given the degree of variability, it was considered that it could not be ruled out entirely. SBRC noted that an Asian origin was probable given the influx of Eurasian migrants to Seychelles at this same time, including unusually large numbers of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, with which the Plain Martin was associated. The Seychelles bird was therefore considered to be probably *R. p. chinensis*, but with the proviso that other races, notably *R. p. paludicola*, could not be ruled out. There are no other reports of this subspecies in the African region, nor any south of the equator.

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Figures 1–2. Juvenile female Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*, Alphonse Island, Seychelles, 23 December 2006 (Adrian Skerrett)

Fuligule morillon *Aythya fuligula*, femelle juvénile, Alphonse, Seychelles, 23 décembre 2006 (Adrian Skerrett)

Figure 3. Plain Martin / Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola*, Anse Étoile, Mahé, Seychelles, 9 December 2008 (Adrian Skerrett)