Aldabra atoll, Seychelles, is situated at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, c400 km north-west of Madagascar and 600 km east of southern Tanzania, the nearest point of the African mainland. Apart from its unique native landbird fauna and internationally important seabird populations, Palearctic migrants occur, probably annually (although records are incomplete), particularly in March, but are few in number.

On 22 March 1999 a violent storm passed over the atoll in the late afternoon from the north-west, an event repeated the following afternoon with greater ferocity and heavy rain. On both occasions the high winds lasted no more than 90 minutes, although poor visibility and rough seas persisted beyond nightfall. Both systems could be seen advancing and had very narrow fronts. Wind speeds were probably c40–50 knots on the second occasion (personal estimate).

On the morning of 24 March, with the weather still unsettled but much calmer, a few Barn Swallows Hirundo rustica and a Spotted Flycatcher Muscicapa striata were present around the Research Station on the north-west coast. A Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava lutea was then found, followed by more Barn Swallows and Spotted Flycatchers, a Red-backed Shrike Lanius collurio and a European Golden Oriole Oriolus oriolus. Over the next week, scheduled monitoring visits to other parts of the atoll produced a complete tally of: at least 50 Barn Swallow, 13 Spotted Flycatcher, five Red-backed Shrike, five European Golden Oriole, one Yellow Wagtail, two European Roller Coracias garrulus and four Blue-cheeked Bee-eater Merops persicus. A swift Apus sp., was also seen, but views were only sufficient to indicate that it lacked a white rump and was too pale for the most likely candidate, A. apus. The flycatchers, shrikes and most swallows disappeared within a few days as skies cleared and the wind became a steady southeasterly. At least one of the rollers and the bee-eaters remained for a week or so. Large numbers of unidentified dragonflies and the butterflies Danaus chrysippus and Hypolimnas misippus (both widespread African species) also appeared during this period.

All six bird species have been recorded previously on Aldabra. Although Barn Swallow is a near-annual migrant to Seychelles (particularly Aldabra) the maximum number of birds noted previously was eight. None of the previous 19 records of Spotted Flycatcher in Seychelles involved more than two birds, and the same applies to the previous 18 records of European Roller. There have been 18 previous records of Yellow Wagtail. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater has been recorded 10 times in parties of up to four birds. Red-backed Shrike and European Golden Oriole are real rarities, with only two records of the former (both in March, singles on Aldabra and the neighbouring atoll of Cosmoledo) and five of the latter—again all singles, two of which were on Aldabra (A Skerrett pers comm).

The migrants were well scattered, with for instance four European Golden Oriole in the extreme south-east of the atoll. Searching was unsystematic due to the large land area: less than 5% of the atoll's 15,500 ha, which is for the most part scrub covered, was visited during the period, making it impossible to guess at the true number of individuals and species involved. There is no other known instance of such a fall of migrants in Seychelles (A Skerrett pers comm). Pressure is generally high during the South-east monsoon (May–October), bringing the strongest winds in September but abnormally high winds have occurred before during the North-west monsoon, in February–March. It seems likely, assuming one of these narrow-track, fast-moving systems has hit the atoll when migrants are moving northward along the East African coast, that similar events have previously gone undocumented.  

References

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