

# First record of African Plain Martin *Riparia paludicola* for Seychelles and the Malagasy Region

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**Première mention de l'Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola* pour les Seychelles et la région malgache.** Le 15 mars 2020, une Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola* de la sous-espèce nominale ou *ducis* a été photographiée sur l'île Picard, Aldabra, un atoll situé à 1.100 km au sud-ouest de Mahé, Seychelles. Cette mention a été acceptée par le Comité d'Homologation Seychellois comme la première pour le pays et la région malgache.

**A**ldabra Atoll lies 640 km east of the Tanzania–Mozambique border, 420 km north-west of Madagascar, and 1,100 km south-west of Mahé, Seychelles. It comprises four main islands encircling a central lagoon. One of these, Picard, is the site of a Research Station manned by Seychelles Islands Foundation personnel. On 15 March 2020, MvR observed a martin *Riparia* sp. hawking for insects from a bare tree branch in a fairly open area near Basin Cabris, Picard (09°23'S 46°13'E; Fig. 1). The bird was mobbed by an Aldabra Drongo *Dicrurus aldabranus*, which ultimately chased it away.

## Description

The bird was mainly brown, with a white vent and a short, shallow-forked tail. No white was visible on the throat, eliminating the most likely vagrant, Common Sand Martin *R. riparia*, with 46 records accepted by the Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC), including three at Aldabra. MvR identified it as a Plain Martin *R. paludicola*, a species with which he was very familiar, having birded in southern Africa for many years.

## Taxonomy and distribution

Plain Martin is treated as a single species with nine races by Dickinson & Christidis (2014), but split into two species by Gill *et al.* (2020) and Clements *et al.* (2019): African Plain (or Brown-throated) Martin *R. paludicola* (seven races) and Asian Plain (or Grey-throated) Martin *R. chinensis* (two races). Del Hoyo & Collar (2016), followed hereafter, recognise a third species, separating monotypic Madagascar Plain Martin *R. cowani* from mainland African races.

African Plain Martin is mainly sedentary. Post-breeding dispersal, particularly away from water-logged breeding sites, appears to be the

norm, rather than regular migrations (Turner & Rose 1989). The races are separated by size and shade of brown, but differences are slight, with much individual variation: on average, *R. p. mauritanica* (Morocco) is small and pale; *R. p. minor* (Senegambia to Sudan and north-east Ethiopia) is small, with dark upperparts; *R. p. schoensis* (of the Ethiopian highlands) is larger and dark; *R. p. newtoni* (south-east Nigeria and west Cameroon) is also dark, with a greyer throat and breast, and extensive white on the abdomen; *R. p. ducis* (western DR Congo to Kenya and central Tanzania) is dark, with a blackish crown and little white on the abdomen; and *R. p. paludicola* (Angola to southern Tanzania and South Africa) is dark with a dull white abdomen (Fry *et al.* 1992, del Hoyo *et al.* 2020a). The also mainly sedentary Madagascar Plain Martin is small, with greyer underparts and a paler, more contrasting grey-white throat (Safford 2013, del Hoyo *et al.* 2020a).

Nominate Asian Plain Martin is mainly resident, from Afghanistan through Pakistan and northern India and southern China to Indochina and Taiwan, with *R. c. tantilla* in the northern Philippines. Some populations make local movements, and it is migratory in south-central Asia, where it is reportedly absent in September–May, and a vagrant to the Arabian Peninsula and possibly the Maldives (del Hoyo *et al.* 2020b).

Seychelles lies at a location where African, Madagascar and Asian Plain Martins could all occur as vagrants. The Seychelles Bird Record Committee (SBRC) has accepted one previous record of *R. chinensis*, at Anse Étoile, Mahé, on 9 December 2008 (Skerrett 2009). However, Aldabra lies closer to both Africa and Madagascar than to Mahé. Furthermore, several species and subspecies endemic to Madagascar have been



**Figure 1.** African Plain Martin *Riparia paludicola*, with Aldabra Drongo *Dicrurus aldabranus*, Picard, Aldabra, Seychelles, 15 March 2020 (Martin van Rooyen)

Hirondelle paludicole *Riparia paludicola*, avec Drongo d'Aldabra *Dicrurus aldabranus*, Picard, Aldabra, Seychelles, 15 mars 2020 (Martin van Rooyen)

recorded at Aldabra but nowhere else in Seychelles, including Rufous Vanga *Schetba rufa*, Madagascar Kingfisher *Alcedo vintsioides* and the Madagascar race of African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus gracilis* (Skerrett *et al.* 2017).

### Analysis by SBRC

Asian Plain Martin was ruled out, as this species has pale grey-brown upperparts and more extensively pale underparts than the Aldabra bird, which was mainly dark brown and had a very restricted pale lower abdomen. However, the dark brown underparts are an unreliable, highly variable, feature to separate *R. paludicola* from *R. cowani*. On first circulation of SBRC the record was pended to seek expert advice. The original description of *cowani* (Sharpe 1883) notes that the throat is 'light ashy, contrasting with the dark colour of the rest of the under surface' compared to the uniform brown tint from the chin to breast of South African birds of the nominate race. Frank Hawkins confirmed that the pale throat of Madagascar birds is very noticeable in the field, which was not the case for the bird at Aldabra.

Roger Safford supplied photographs of specimens of all three taxa held at the Natural History Museum, Tring (UK). These confirm

the much paler, grey plumage of *R. chinensis* and the paler throat of *R. cowani* compared to *R. paludicola*. The latter tends to be less dark, with less brown on the underparts, than the bird photographed at Aldabra, but there is significant variation, and some specimens of *R. p. paludicola* are very similar, or even entirely dark on the belly. Hockey *et al.* (2005) state that 2–20% of nominate race birds have a brownish abdomen. However, SBRC could not rule out *R. p. ducis* which has a dark blackish-brown crown and little or no white on the belly. Based on their distribution, *R. p. paludicola* and *R. p. ducis* also are the most likely vagrants to Seychelles.

SBRC concluded that the absence of a pale throat eliminated Madagascar Plain Martin and indicated the bird was an African Plain Martin, with the dark plumage suggesting either *R. p. paludicola* or *R. p. ducis*. This is the first record of African Plain Martin for Seychelles and the Malagasy Region.

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