

Unusual late mass occurrence of the Common Swift (*Apus apus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) (Aves: Apodidae) in Sofia (Bulgaria)

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Abstract. An observation of about 120 Common Swifts over the central part of the Sofia City on 15 October is reported.

Key words: Common swift, avian phenology, autumn migration, urban avifauna, swifts in Bulgaria

The Common swift (*Apus apus* (Linnaeus, 1758)) is a long-distance migrant. Its breeding range covers almost all Europe and most of temperate zone of Asia. It winters in Africa, south of Equator (except Southern Africa) (Chandler 1999).

Status in Bulgaria. The Common swift is a common regular breeder and migrant species in the recent avifauna of Bulgaria (Bunarco 2009).

Former distribution. The fossil record proved its distribution throughout the country in the last 1.6 million years (Boev 1999). The seven known fossil localities lie within the recent species' breeding range (Hagemeier & Blaire 1997).

Observation. On 15 October 2011 in 17:30 h. EET (UTC+02:00 time zone) a flock of about 120 Common Swifts hunted intensively and noisy in the air over the central part of the centre of the Sofia City (Square "Alexander Battenberg", Russian Church "St. Nikolay", and the building of the Central Military Club), i.e. over the region of the boulevards "Tsar Osvoboditel" and "Georgi Rakovski". They were flying in wide circles in the air, keeping an average height of about 50-80 m above the ground. We observed the flock for 10 minutes, when left it, but the birds continued to fly at the same place, making typical loud sounds.

Weather. The maximum temperature in Sofia that day was about 14° C. The weather was sunny, windless and calm. The same day during the night and on the next day (16 October 2011) the weather rapidly changed harshly, becoming cloudy, rainy, and started to snow. The morning temperatures on 16 October 2011 in Sofia dropped down to 1-2° C.

Autumn migration terms. Cramp (1985) states that "Only minority [of the Common Swifts in the Western Palearctic] ... left in Europe in September, though stragglers remain until November and (very exceptionally) later. ... Movements around depressions (to avoid rainfall) [are] reported in many parts of Europe". Summarizing data of that author show that autumn migration lasts to the end of September and in very few occasions it may last to the end of 2nd decade of October (present observation). Data for a neighboring region (W Turkey) point autumn migration in mid-late August (Chandler 1999).

Discussion. Obviously, the observation of numerous common swifts on 15 October 2011 falls within these namely extremely rare in the country occasions of unusual late autumn migration of the species. It has not been recorded so far on the territory of Bulgaria. It is notable, that in Sofia during the last 30 years the Alpine Swift (*Tachymarptis melba* (Linnaeus 1758)) dominates and its population density is much higher than that of *Apus apus*. The third species, the Pallid Swift (*Apus pallidus* (Shelley 1870)) is a relatively rare breeder in Sofia and all the country (BUNARCO 2009). Sometimes it makes joint flocks with the Common Swift, but usually it is in lower number (Simeonov 1997). Probably the species appeared in the country about 1980 (Iankov 1990). It is worthy to mention, that Nankinov (1982) observed late single migratory individuals up to 15-20 November, however numerous late flocks are not recorded so far. Simeonov (1997) states that the mass autumn migration of *A. apus* in Bulgaria ends to mid September, and of *A. pallidus* – in September. In Stara Zagora for *A. apus* it ends mid October (Dilyan Georgiev, unpubl. data). According to him, the latest record of *Tachymarptis melba* is on 22 September. Nankinov & Mintchev (1999) observed a Common Swift on 09 January 1999, while Stoyanov & Shurulinkov (2003) report on the late breeding of *A. apus* and *A. pallidus* even in October (*A. apus*, 04 October 2002, and *A. pallidus*, 03 November 2002). Thus, nevertheless available data on rare occurrence and breeding, our record postdates all cited terms for the autumn mass migration with a month – a phenomenon which probably could be explained by the unusually longer autumn period of warm weather in Bulgaria in 2011. Late mass occurrences are relatively more common in the Thracian Plane, but in the higher Sofia Valley of more continental climate they were not known so far.

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