

Dusting, Sunning and Albinism in Welcome Swallows *Hirundo neoxena*

The following notes describe three albinistic Welcome Swallows *Hirundo neoxena* with some general observations on dusting and sunning behaviour in this species.

On the morning of 11 February 1984 we were at the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Farm near Werribee, Victoria. The weather was warm, sunny and dry. At about 0900 h we saw one almost pure albino Welcome Swallow hawking for insects over the sewage treatment lagoons north-east from the estuary of the Little River. About an hour later we saw this albino Swallow more than 2 km away as it perched on a wire fence on the bank of the same river, near the sewage-polluted Lake Borrie. There were many other Swallows in the air and some were perching on any suitable elevated objects, including a road sign and safety barriers. Some were also sitting on the ground in the middle of the road.

As we observed the Swallows we noticed that three different albinistic birds were present. The first of them was almost pure albino with only a very light rufous-red wash on the throat (Plate 25). The second case was very decorative, being white with symmetrically distributed small patches of normally coloured feathers (Plate 26). The third case had white only on the upper parts - mantle, back and rump - with greyish edges to the feathers. One of the albinistic Swallows was always perching, and sometimes two perched simultaneously, while the other(s) hawked for insects with the normal Swallows. Altogether there were about 70 normally coloured Swallows either in the air or resting. Some of them landed on the dusty edge of the narrow farm road.

One of the normal Swallows performed an action which was clearly dusting behaviour, and was possibly connected with feather maintenance. It sank down on its belly and then shuffled its body in the dust. This took only a few seconds, then the bird stood and shook itself before flying off. It did not land soon after and did not preen itself. Many bird species are known to indulge in dusting in fine, dry earth and sand, but for aerial species such as swallows, dusting - even in its simple form - must be regarded as exceptional.

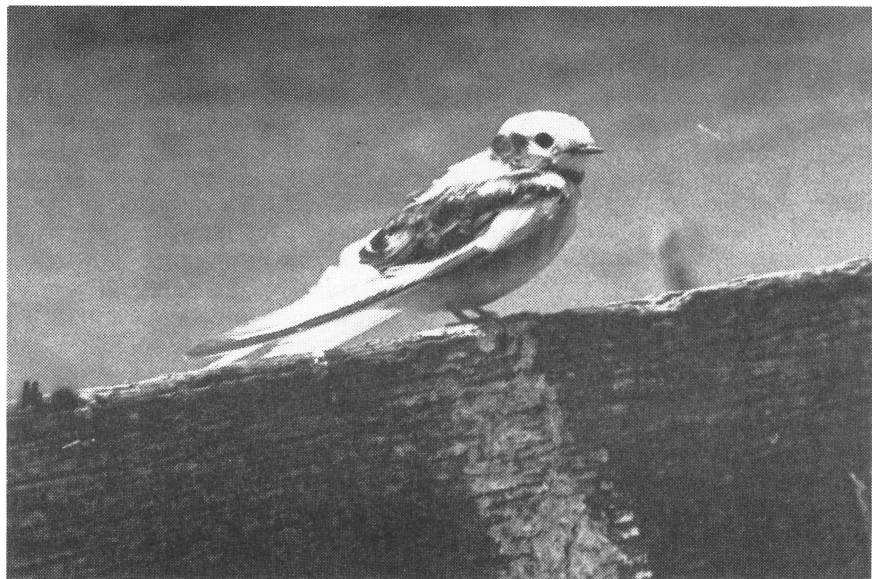
Shortly after the Swallow finished dusting, several other Swallows were noticed sitting on the edge of the road in small groups, sunning themselves. They exposed their sides to the sun in a special posture, with the wing on the sun side spread and lifted to various elevations in different birds. The body was inclined so that the side exposed to the sun was uppermost. Some birds also spread their tails. There were up to about 20 Welcome Swallows sunning in this manner at the same time.



Albino Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena*, Werribee, 11 February 1984

Plate 25

Photo: Peter Klapste



Part-albino Welcome Swallow, Werribee, 11 February 1984

Plate 26

Photo: Peter Klapste