

White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*: A New Bird for Christmas Island

PETER D. BARRAND

15 Stone Street, Heywood, Victoria 3304 (Email: shrikethrush@hotmail.com)

Summary

This is an account of the first record of the White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* on Christmas Island, the Australian external territory off Western Australia. Up to six White-throated Needletails were observed on three occasions by four birders on 14 and 15 November 2003. Previous needletail sightings on the island are summarised.

Sightings

At 0845 h on 14 November Des and Pam Agnew, Rhonda Barrand and the author observed two large swifts over forest east of our position near the sports oval on Christmas Island, 2300 km north-west of Perth (10°30'S, 105°40'E). They appeared to be hawking insects low over the trees, occasionally soaring above the tree-line, but were often lost from view.

We identified them as needletails *Hirundapus* sp. from their heavy-bodied appearance, with broad, backswept, pointed wings and square-tipped tapering tails. As they soared upwards above the trees we could clearly distinguish a white u-shaped mark around the vent and a pale-brown patch on the back.

The birds were viewed from a distance of 100–150 m against a background of heavy dark cloud. The diffuse sunlight made viewing uncomfortable, and we went to the main road so that the sun, although hidden, was behind us and the birds were closer. From here and with the birds approaching to within 50 m we were able to distinguish a pale throat-patch, which appeared whitish with black streaks. Soon after, the birds gained height and moved off in a north-easterly direction where another two birds of similar size joined them. Just before all birds were lost from view two more birds joined them.

At 0645 h the next morning, 15 November, we observed three needletails feeding in the same location. We remained on the main road with the sun at our backs. The light was much brighter than the previous day; the heavy cloud had broken up. The birds at times flew almost directly overhead at a height of 10 m or less. From this distance and angle the chin and throat-patch were obviously as white as the undertail and there was no black streaking visible. At least twice, as the birds flew low over the trees toward our position, we could see that they had white foreheads. The birds were viewed for 10–15 minutes.

At 1425 h that afternoon we located a single needletail over the forest to the west of the sports oval. The sighting was brief (c. 2 min.), and the bird was observed against an almost cloudless sky in sunny conditions. As the bird soared upwards the white u-shaped area around the vent and the large white throat-patch were clearly visible in the bright sunlight, even from a distance approaching 300 m.

Identification and discussion

After the first sightings, on 14 November, we consulted Robson (2000) and discussed the four species of needletail in the genus *Hirundapus*, all of which occur in South-East Asia. The Purple Needletail *H. celebensis* (a dark-backed needletail that never shows any paleness on the throat) and Brown-backed

Needletail *H. giganteus* (which also lacks a pale-brown saddle and has a pale, but not white, throat) were both readily eliminated.

Based on our initial observations, we suspected that the birds were White-throated Needletail *H. caudacutus* because of the pale-brown saddle and white throat, though we felt that we could not completely rule out the possibility of Silver-backed Needletail *H. cochinchinensis*, a bird unfamiliar to all observers. This uncertainty arose because the throat may appear whitish in the Silver-backed Needletail (Robson 2000), we had not observed white foreheads and lores on the birds, and the White-throated Needletail is rare in neighbouring areas of Indonesia (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993).

Our views of both the large white throat-patch and the diagnostic white forehead on the birds on 15 November confirmed the identification as White-throated Needletail. The brief view that afternoon of a needletail with a large white throat-patch is also sufficient to determine identity. The White-throated Needletail is not listed by Carter (1994), and no sightings of it have been reported since then, so this is a new species for Christmas Island.

Within Australia, the White-throated Needletail is a common summer migrant to the eastern seaboard and south-eastern corner of the continent (Ingram 1994), but in the Northern Territory and Western Australia it is so rarely observed that it is considered a vagrant (Higgins 1999). It apparently enters Australia via Torres Strait, well to the east of Christmas Island, from the breeding grounds in northern Asia. In Java, the nearest landmass to Christmas Island, it is regarded as a rare passage migrant (MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993).

There are two previous reports of needletails from Christmas Island. The first, Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) Case No. 344, related to the report of two Brown-backed Needletails seen on 14 and 15 November 2001. The submission fell just short of enough data to warrant acceptance beyond reasonable doubt (Tony Palliser *in litt.* 2003). The second, BARC Case No. 385, involved the brief observation of a single bird on 11 February 2002, identification of which was not made beyond either Silver-backed or Brown-backed Needletail, and was accepted as such by the Committee (Tony Palliser *in litt.* 2004).

Observers should be mindful that several species of swift have been observed on Christmas Island in recent years and, given the identification difficulties of the genus and the potential for previously unrecorded species to occur here, careful scrutiny of all swifts, especially needletails, on the island is required before identification can be reached.

Acknowledgements

I thank my companions in the field for their input, Max Orchard and the staff at Environment Australia for their assistance during our stay on Christmas Island and Mike Carter for his encouragement, advice and supply of reference material.

References

- Carter, M.J. (1994), 'Birds of Australia's Christmas Island', *Wingspan* **13**, 18–21.
- Higgins, P.J. (1999), *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, vol. 4, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Ingram, G.J. (1994), 'Swifts', pp. 115–125 in Strahan, R. (Ed.), *Cuckoos, Nightbirds & Kingfishers of Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- MacKinnon, J. & Phillipps K. (1993), *A Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Robson, C. (2000), *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*, New Holland, London.