

New Pallid Swift (*Apus pallidus*) COLONY IN UM SUQUEIM, DUBAI.

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The Pallid Swift is a 16-17 cm long species very similar to the Common Swift (*Apus apus*), it has a short forked tail and very long swept-back wings in crescent or boomerang shape. Distinction between the two species can be challenging at distance, although when observed in good conditions, the following criteria of the Pallid Swift are visible: browner colour, a large white throat patch, and slightly paler flight feathers, underparts and rump giving more contrast.

The species nests in caves and cliffs but colonises buildings and man-made structures all over its distribution range. The Pallid Swift is found from Madeira, Mauritania to the Mediterranean region, Egypt and Pakistan (BirdLife International 2009). It is a common migrant and breeding visitor in the UAE. Uncommon to rare from late August to mid-September, the Pallid Swift nests from November to April in colonies on buildings of the UAE cities. At dusk, hundreds of individuals can be seen chasing each other with high-pitched "shreee" calls, around the colony of the Dubai Museum (Old Fort) in Bur Dubai (25°15'48.64"N, 55°17'50.02"E). During the day, it is commonly seen and heard flying and catching insects over the entire city.

On 25 January 2011, we were alerted by "excited" high-pitched Pallid Swift calls and noticed numerous active individuals circling and chasing each other just before sunset above a compound in Um Suqueim, Dubai, UAE, (25° 8'37.13"N/55°12'5.78"E; Fig.1). A closer look revealed that individuals were flying mostly in pairs. A rough estimation indicated 40-50 pairs present. All birds disappeared under the tiles at dusk.

To our knowledge, it is the first mention of a Pallid Swift colony in this part of Dubai, away from the classical Bur Dubai and Deira areas. As swifts usually return to the same nesting site year after year, either this colony went under the local birdwatchers' network radar, or it is the start of a new colony in Dubai. This observation illustrates well that the Pallid Swift, commonly seen as a coloniser of old or tall buildings, is able to use low rise buildings (Fig.2). In our opinion, it also advocates the need for more efforts and attention in surveying and monitoring UAE urban biodiversity.

Fig 1. Location of the Pallid Swift colony (PSW2) discovered in Um Suqueim, Dubai, with the well known colony of the Dubai Museum (PSW1)



Fig 2. Overview of the Pallid Swift colony in Um Suqueim, Dubai. Swifts were seen swirling under the tiles at the lower edges of roofs of the two buildings in forefront.

Common species are usually excluded from the interest of naturalists worldwide. Recent studies have shown that common forest, farmland and even urban bird species, like the so familiar House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), have undergone drastic population declines in Europe during the past decade. However, the lack of data prior to the observed decline makes scientific investigations on the reasons of this decline difficult.

The Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD) has been monitoring seabirds colonies in Abu Dhabi emirates for a decade now. A Wild Bird Monitoring scheme was specifically initiated by EAD across the UAE under the National Avian Influenza Action Plan.

In 2010, a major global monitoring system coordinated by Wetlands International (www.wetlands.org), the International Waterbird Census (IWC) was re-started successfully in the UAE after an absence of 10 years, through an efficient collaboration between governmental agencies (EAD, Dubai Municipality, Fujairah Municipality), NGOs (EWS-WWF, Emirates Birds Record Committee) and volunteers. These afore-mentioned bird monitoring schemes are necessary to provide estimates of mostly waterbird population sizes, numbers and distribution, and give up-date information on the health of their habitats, mostly wetlands, to improve their conservation.

Birds are bio-indicators of the state of nature and health of ecosystems. Using a similar effort and network of observers than the IWC, a regular systematic monitoring of UAE "forgotten" common desert and urban species could be initiated and provide necessary quantitative information on global and local factors impacting the UAE biodiversity such as invasive species, pollution, and climate change.