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Some perplexing pale-rumped *Aerodramus* swiftlets from Sri Lanka

Until recently the Indian Swiftlet *Aerodramus unicolor* was considered the only *Aerodramus* swiftlet recorded in Sri Lanka (Henry 1998; Warakagoda 2012). It is a resident species, distributed throughout the country, and breeds mainly in rocky caves and tunnels in the hills (Henry 1998; Warakagoda 2012; eBird 2020). In addition to Sri Lanka, the Indian Swiftlet is recorded from southern India, and possible records exist from Maldives too (Ali & Ripley 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Steibl 2019; Anderson & Shimal 2020). The Himalayan Swiftlet *A. brevirostris* was the next *Aerodramus* swiftlet reported from Sri Lanka (Senanayake 2019: 280; Jagath Gunawardana, *verbally*, 21 January 2020), but these records are still pending acceptance from the Ceylon Bird Club Rarities and Records Committee (Ceylon Bird Club 2020).

On 21 January 2020, MK observed a flock of swiftlets, which had been regularly seen around at Attidiya, Colombo. This flock generally consisted of 15–20 swiftlets but on rare occasions about 200 birds aggregated to feed. MK noted that all these swiftlets had pale grey-brown underparts, a shallow forked tail with dark undertail coverts, and a pale rump band [97–99]. They were slightly smaller than the Indian House Swift *Apus affinis*. The upper parts were brown, becoming darker, with a bluish sheen, towards the upper wings, and remiges were dark brown with a sheen. The underwing was greyish-brown. They had a pale brownish-grey rump band, grey-brown face, dark iris, a pale supra-loral spot, and pale grey brown throat, breast, belly, and vent. Undertail coverts were dark greyish brown, with outer-most being the darkest. Some birds had pale fringes to dark centered feathers around the vent. Rectrices were dark brown. Tarsi were pale and unfeathered [100]. Bill appeared black.



97. Unidentified 'pale-rumped' swiftlet, showing prominent pale rump and pale underparts. Attidiya, Sri Lanka.



98. Unidentified 'pale-rumped' swiftlet, showing pale underparts and contrasting dark undertail coverts. Nawala, Sri Lanka.



99. Unidentified 'pale-rumped' swiftlet, showing pale underparts and contrasting dark undertail coverts. Note pale supra-loral spot. Attidiya, Sri Lanka.



100. Unidentified 'pale-rumped' swiftlet, showing exposed, pale, unfeathered tarsi. Also note the dark undertail coverts. Beddegana, Sri Lanka.

The prominently contrasting pale rump band and pale underparts drew MK's attention towards the birds. Upon further careful observations, he realized that these swiftlets could be different from the regularly seen Indian Swiftlet in Sri Lanka. Indian House Swifts, Asian Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus balasienis* and Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* also flew in association with these swiftlets. Occasionally, Brown-backed Needletails *Hirundapus giganteus* and Alpine Swifts *Tachymarpis melba* were also seen together with them. This flock was carefully observed for many days in order to identify any swiftlet with a different plumage, but interestingly, Indian Swiftlets or any swiftlet differing drastically from the observed plumage characteristics were not observed. Even at times when hundreds of swiftlets aggregated for feeding, all the observed birds (35–40% of the total flock) showed consistent plumage characteristics. This swiftlet flock of 15–20 birds was present almost daily until the first week of April 2020 and thereafter they became irregular. But they did show up sporadically, and some were observed even in December 2020.

Since that initial encounter, we paid particular attention to all swiftlets, especially to their rump and colour of underparts. On 01 February 2020, MK observed several 'pale-rumped' swiftlets in Kalametiya, southern Sri Lanka. Again, on 01 March 2020, MK saw a flock of over 50 of these enigmatic swiftlets at Beddagana Wetland in Colombo. In addition, MK saw a few birds at Thalawathugoda, Nawala, Mt. Lavinia, Ragama, and Kirala-kele, Matara too (Table 1). RD was able to observe another two flocks, one with about 50 birds on 18 March 2020 at Homagama, east of Colombo and the other with about 200 birds at Kollupitiya, central Colombo (Fig. 1). At Homagama (which is a more inland location), these swiftlets were seen together with birds that were unambiguously identified as Indian Swiftlets, thereby giving us a good opportunity to compare them together in the field. We noted that these "pale-rumped" swiftlets were more or less similar in size to Indian Swiftlets, but had paler underparts and most importantly, a prominent pale rump band, which was conspicuously absent on the Indian Swiftlets. Also, on two occasions MK photographed these "pale-rumped" swiftlets, with their feet extended, exposing pale, un-feathered tarsi (Plate. 4). During field work, we only noticed Indian Swiftlets in more inland locations (Pallekele, Haragama, Kamburupitiya,

Kithulgala, Dediyaigala, Ella and Wellawaya) and no swiftlets with prominent pale rumps or underparts were noted in any of these locations. Considering the fact that we observed several flocks of these "pale-rumped" swiftlets with consistent plumage characteristics in different locations, for several months, we excluded the possibility of them being possible juveniles, which are noted to be paler than adult Indian Swiftlets (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Also with prolong observations of the flock at Attidiya we noted primary molt in progress and even some birds were seen with two molt fronts, implying them to be adults. Considering the above observations we turned in to possible other explanations to describe the identity of the "pale-rumped" swiftlets observed.

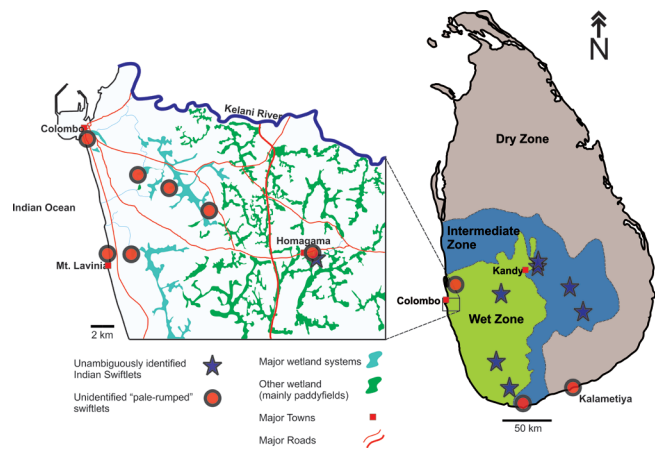


Fig. 1. Locations where unidentified "pale-rumped" swiftlets and unambiguously identified Indian Swiftlets were observed during this study.

Most of the *Aerodramus* swiftlets in the South and South-east Asian regions are quite similar in plumage and some can be very difficult, or even impossible, to differentiate in flight (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In addition to the Indian Swiftlet (of both Sri Lankan and Indian populations), here we have considered the Himalayan Swiftlet *Aerodramus brevirostris*, and three South-east Asian "pale-rumped" swiftlets, namely, the Edible-nest Swiftlet *A. fuciphagus*, Germain's Swiftlet *A. germani*, Black-nest Swiftlet *A. maximus*, to try and identify

Table 1. Details of 'pale-rumped' swiftlet observations until first week of December 2020

| | Location | GPS Coordinates | Date/Time period observed | Approx. no. of birds in flock | Remarks |
|----|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Attidiya | 6.840°N 79.879°E | January 2020 to December 2020 | 15–20 | Flock regularly seen almost daily till Aug 2020. Less regular since. Occasionally c.200 birds gather to feed. |
| 2 | Kalametiya | 6.090°N 80.935°E | 02 February 2020 | 12 | |
| 3 | Beddagana | 6.890°N 79.906°E | 01 March 2020 | 32 | |
| 4 | Homagama | 6.841°N 80.010°E | March–August 2020 | 30–50 | Indian Swiftlets also seen together in some days |
| 5 | Kollupitiya | 6.911°N 79.849°E | 18 March 2020 | 200 | |
| 6 | Thalawathugoda | 6.878°N 79.927°E | 19 July 2020 | 02 | |
| 7 | Mt. Lavinia | 6.831°N 79.860°E | 20 July 2020 | 01 | |
| 8 | Kirala-kele, Matara | 5.977°N 80.530°E | 30 October 2020 | 08 | |
| 9 | Nawala | 6.898°N 79.884°E | 29 November 2020 | 25 | |
| 10 | Ragama | 7.020°N 79.916°E | 05 December 2020 | 01 | |

of our unknown swiftlets. Based on plumage characteristics and geography of occurrence, these are the best candidates for the identity of the “pale-rumped” swiftlets that we observed. We have not considered such other Indian Ocean swiftlets with similar plumage, such as the Seychelles Swiftlet *A. elaphrus* and Mascarene Swiftlet *A. francicus*, as these occur extremely far away from Sri Lanka (over 3,000 km) and are considered geographically isolated (Chantler & Driessens 1995; eBird 2020). For ease of reference, we will hereinafter refer to the three aforementioned South-east Asian “pale-rumped” swiftlets, as SAPS; the Indian Swiftlet refers to the birds of the Sri Lankan population, unless specifically stated otherwise.

The Himalayan Swiftlet and SAPS are known to have pale rump bands, which are greyish to brownish-grey in colouration, and contrast with the rest of the darker upperparts. Also, all have pale grey brown underparts, much paler and greyer than that of the Indian Swiftlet (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). During our observations we indeed noted very few Indian Swiftlets with a diffused pale rump [101], but it was very indistinct and never as prominent as on our “pale-rumped” swiftlets, or on Himalayan Swiftlet and SAPS. This feature of some Indian Swiftlets is visible because birds reveal the paler basal



101. Indian Swiftlet showing a relatively more uniform brown upperparts. This individual shows a very indistinct paleness over the rump. Kandy, Sri Lanka.



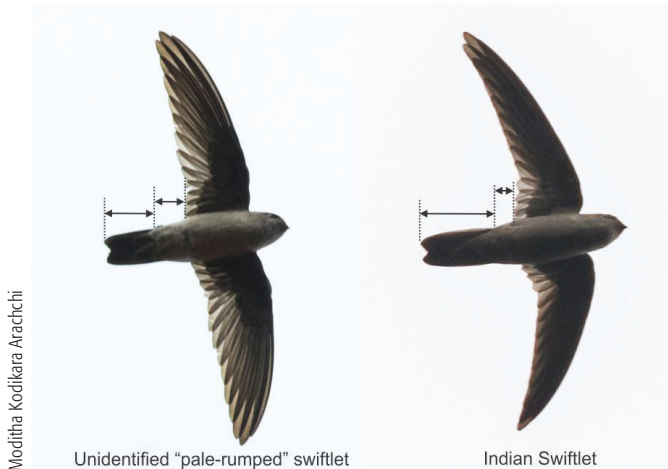
102. Indian Swiftlet showing darker brown underparts with less contrasting undertail coverts. Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Both: Moditha Kodikara Arachchi

tufts of the rump (Chantler & Driessens 1995). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) described the pale rump and overall paleness as a general feature of the southern Indian population of Indian Swiftlets. Indian Swiftlets therefore, especially birds of the Sri Lankan population, can be told apart with relative ease (especially if they are together) from Himalayan Swiftlets and SAPS based on the overall dark grey-brown plumage, dark rump, which is almost all the time similar in colour to the rest of the upperparts, therefore lacking any contrast [102], and more uniform dark grey-brown underparts. But even so, paler, Indian Swiftlets of the southern Indian population could be difficult to separate from Himalayan Swiftlets and SAPS.

Differentiating SAPS from a Himalayan Swiftlet in flight can be more challenging. Although the Himalayan Swiftlet is slightly larger and longer-winged (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), this size difference may not be apparent unless we compare birds that are flying together, and even then, comparison can be difficult due to their erratic flight and varying height patterns. One useful feature that can be used is the undertail coverts. SAPS have dark undertail coverts, especially the outer most coverts, which contrast well with the rest of the pale underparts, whereas a Himalayan Swiftlet has pale greyish scaled undertail coverts, paler than on the former three species (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). But this feature is hard to observe even with good optical aids, unless under good light and the bird is flying slowly or when photographed in bright light and from a good angle. Another feature that distinguishes Himalayan from SAPS with the exception of Black-nest Swiftlet, is the extent of feathering on tarsi, as Himalayan Swiftlet has relatively heavier feathered tarsi, than both Edible-nest and Germain's Swiftlets (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Choi et al. 2009; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

We used a combination of the above mentioned characteristics while attempting to identify ‘our’ birds. The pale greyish underparts and prominent, contrasting pale rump band can be used to exclude Indian Swiftlet. But even so, when considering Indian Swiftlets of the southern Indian population, there could be a possible confusion and separating the two may not be straightforward owing to the paleness of their plumage, including the rump, as described by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). Although, in comparison with the Indian Swiftlets of the Sri Lankan population, which are overall much darker, separation is more straightforward. Also, when we juxtaposed images, taken directly from below, of the pale-rumped swiftlet that we observed, and an Indian Swiftlet, for a side-by-side comparison, we noted that the rear end of the Indian Swiftlet appears to be more elongated than in our pale-rumped swiftlet, and also the body seems slimmer [103]. Note that the ratio of, length of rear edge of wing to tail end, and rear edge of wing to visible rectrices, is higher in the Indian Swiftlet than in the pale-rumped swiftlet, as highlighted in 103. This has not been reported in extant literature (Ali & Ripley 1983; Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and we adopted it as a crude method to identify possible structural differences. But to establish it as a feature for field identification we suggest further comparisons and measurements, especially with museum specimens and birds in hand.



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103. Comparison of unidentified “pale-rumped” swiftlet, and Indian Swiftlet. Note the structural differences of rear body and tail. Also note the darker undertail coverts contrasting with the paler underparts on the unidentified “pale-rumped” swiftlet and much darker underparts of the Indian Swiftlet. Attidiya and Dediyaigala, Sri Lanka.

The dark undertail coverts contrasting with the rest of the underparts [98, 99] and un-feathered tarsi [100] were used to differentiate our “pale-rumped” swiftlets from the Himalayan Swiftlet. In addition, our swiftlets appear shorter winged and more compactly built, with a size more similar to Indian Swiftlet, whereas Himalayan Swiftlet is larger and longer winged with a deeper tail fork (Ali & Ripley 1983; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Therefore, we infer our “pale-rumped” swiftlets could belong to any one of the three SAPS or the southern Indian population of Indian Swiftlets. Of the three SAPS, the Black-nest Swiftlet is the least likely candidate because it is also noticeably longer winged (128–135 mm vs 113–117 mm) than an Indian Swiftlet (Medway 1961; Ali & Ripley 1983; Chantler & Driessens 1995), and therefore should stand out in comparison. This narrows the possibility of our “pale-rumped” swiftlets being either an Edible-nest Swiftlet, Germain’s Swiftlet, or an Indian Swiftlet from southern India.

Of the widely distributed SAPS, the Edible-nest Swiftlet occurs from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (India) to Timor, over Sumatra, Borneo, southern Malay Peninsula, and Java. Germain’s Swiftlet occurs over Burma, Thailand, Cambodia to the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, and further eastwards to Philippines. The Black-nest Swiftlet occurs in Timor, Java and Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula up to southern Myanmar (Chantler & Driessens 1995; eBird 2020). All these three species are very similar in plumage and are almost impossible to identify (separate) conclusively in the field unless examined in the hand, or by a comparison of nest characteristics (Chantler & Driessens 1995; eBird 2020). Of the three SAPS, the most plausible candidate for our “pale-rumped” swiftlets is the Edible-nest Swiftlet, at least due to its geographic proximity to Sri Lanka. However, it is equally possible that these are the paler Indian Swiftlets of the southern Indian population. Considering the very similar and confusing plumage characteristics of *Aerodramus* swiftlets, we keep the identification our “pale-rumped” swiftlets unconfirmed till established either genetically or by examinations of birds at hand. Nevertheless, we wanted to get the word out of the possible occurrence of these perplexing “pale-rumped” swiftlets in Sri Lanka so that birders can keep a look out for them. We feel

that many of these birds may be overlooked as Indian Swiftlets and hence remain unreported.

So far the temporal extent of stay of “pale-rumped” swiftlets here in Sri Lanka is unclear and requires further scrutiny. Even though the Indian Swiftlet is considered a common resident of, and found throughout Sri Lanka, we believe that their numbers might include these “pale-rumped” swiftlets, due to the similar plumage. In the short period of time after we started to observe these intriguing swiftlets, we found them to be much more common than we had thought, especially in the lowlands. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions we were unable to carry out surveys covering the entire country, but this study will be continued to assess the true status of all swiftlets throughout Sri Lanka.

In the Indian Subcontinent, the Edible-nest Swiftlet has been recorded only from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and not from the mainland (Grimmett et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Short-distant migration of Indian Swiftlets from the Indian mainland to Sri Lanka has not been documented earlier. SAPS are also not known to migrate long distances (Chantler & Driessens 1995; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; eBird 2020). But if the “pale-rumped” swiftlets we have been observing turn out to be either, it would be the first incidence of migration in any of these species. As a final note, we urge birders to pay particular attention to plumage details, such as underparts and rump colouration, when observing *Aerodramus* swiftlets, to pick up any “pale-rumped” swiftlets.

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Presumed courtship or territorial behaviour of the White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*

We report observations on presumed courtship or territorial displays of the White-capped Redstart *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus* from the banks of the Rongkhon River on 22 October 2020 at Rongkhon (25.54°N, 90.23°E), West Garo Hills District, Meghalaya. We use the word ‘presumed’ as we were unable to observe pair formation or copulation. As the sexes are similar, we named the individuals as WCR1 and WCR2.

From 0500 h we observed one individual (WCR1), presumably a male, flying from rock to rock from the banks to boulders jutting out of the river, emitting its characteristic whistled call, *tseeit*. We recorded the whistle when the bird was on our side of the river, but when it flew farther away, it could not be heard above the gushing sounds of water. It would perch only for a few seconds and call, sometimes arching its neck and raising its beak.

This behaviour continued for almost an hour, observed on and off from our homestay window that overlooked the river. The appearance of a second White-capped Redstart (WCR2), presumably a female, caught our attention and we moved to the river bank. Over the next 36 min we observed, and captured on camera, three dance displays. We describe the dances as they were observed and captured on camera.

About an hour after the first sighting WCR1 was joined by WCR2. The two faced each other about a foot apart, both birds in a similar pose of puffed out chest, head and beak raised, and tail fanned out and raised. WCR1 made several up and down movements, tilting its head to one side, opening its beak, perhaps in song (?), which we could not hear above the rushing water. WCR2 sometimes synchronised those movements. These motions were repeated for over a minute [104–107], after which the birds flew away in the same direction, WCR2 leaving first.

WCR1 returned to the rock about a minute later, with WCR2 joining him about half a minute later. They faced each other a few inches apart. WCR1 struck up a pose, standing erect, one foot forward, beak aloft, chest puffed out, tail upraised and flared into a fan. It made several up and down movements, crouching to the rock surface, with beak and tail still upraised to the sky. In between the crouching movements, it would spread its wings with a little flap, tilt its body to one side, lower the flared tail, and open and close its beak, sometimes stretching the neck to one side. Then it would swish its tail from side to side. The dance was continuous, the overall effect was a continuous series of side-to-side gyrations. These motions were repeated about 30 times. During the dance, WCR1 appeared to be continuously singing, with its beak opening and closing. WCR2 occasionally responded with a brief reply every few seconds. Unfortunately, the singing was not audible because of the roar of gushing water. A few seconds before the end WCR2

turned sideways, occasionally flicking its tail, and sometimes taking a step backwards. It flew away first, followed a few moments later by WCR1 in the same direction. This dance of the pair, lasting 31 seconds, is shown in a video uploaded at <https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/351144971>.

The third dance, lasting 26 seconds, was similar to the first two, except that towards the end, WCR2 turned around several times, showing its back to WCR1 with its tail raised high. WCR2 then flew away, with WCR1 following a few seconds later in the same direction.

