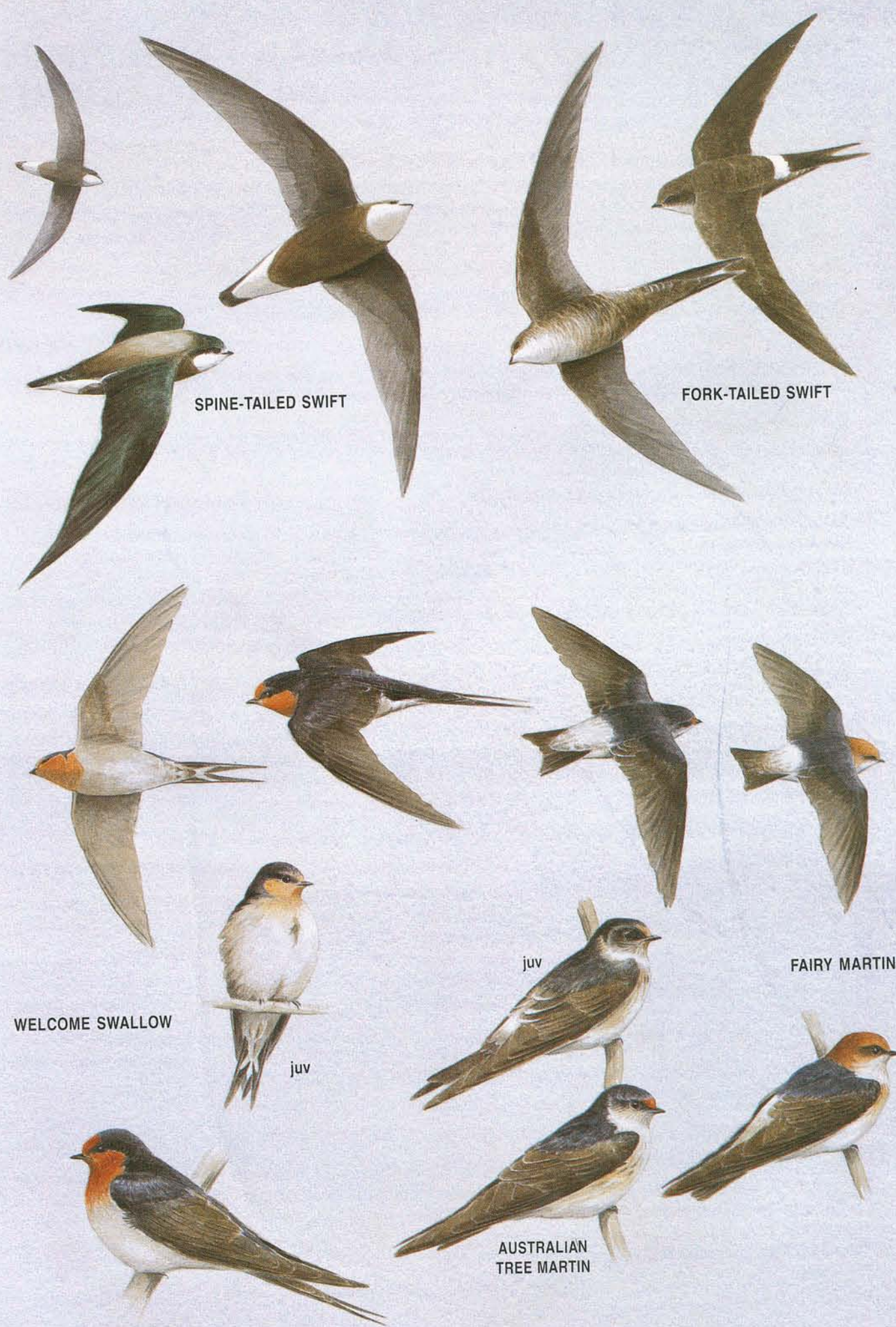


Swifts are reminiscent of swallows but designed for aerial feeding and speed, with wide flattened bill and very long thin swept-back wings. Generally black, with white patches and distinctive tail shape. Sexes alike. They fly high, with bursts of rapid wingbeats alternating with long swift glides, dives and banking turns; at dusk and in bad weather, they fly low over water or circle headlands, hilltops and stands of tall trees. Rarely land (clinging to side of tree or building) except when breeding. Voice an excited twittering.

SPINE-TAILED SWIFT *Hirundapus caudacutus*

Rare tropical straggler

20 cm. Large swift with *short square tail*. All dark except for *white patches on throat and undertail*. In the hand, each tail feather has a short projecting spine. **Habitat:** Breeds E Asia. Migrates to Australia. Most stragglers to NZ seen over open country, mainly Nov–Mar. [Sp 278]



SWIFTS

Apodidae

71 species; 2 are stragglers to New Zealand.

The swifts are somewhat swallow-like in appearance and behaviour, but are larger and have very long narrow scythe-like wings and short tails. They are the most aerial of all birds, some only landing at their nest sites. They fly rapidly and wheel in broad arcs. In fine weather, they fly high and so easily escape

notice, but at dusk and in poor weather they often fly low over open water or around headlands, hilltops or stands of tall trees. They have short, broad bills that open extremely wide for catching aerial insects. Their feet are tiny and their toes point forward, so swifts rest by clinging to the sides of trees, rocks or walls, not on branches or the ground.

278. SPINE-TAILED SWIFT *Hirundapus caudacutus*

Plate 64

Other names: White-throated Needletail (Australia), Needle-tailed Swift

Size: 20 cm, 90 g

Geographical variation: Three subspecies, of which *caudacutus* of northeastern Asia and Japan is a straggler to New Zealand.

Distribution: Breed in eastern Asia from Siberia to Korea and Japan, and south to Taiwan, Burma and the Himalayas. The subspecies *caudacutus* migrates south through China and the Philippines to winter in New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania from October to April. In most years, a few overshoot their normal wintering grounds or are carried ahead of storm-fronts to reach New Zealand. There are over 60 records dating back to 1888, mainly from the North Island, but as far south

as The Snares. Most records are from mid-November to March, but a few have been seen as late as May. From time to time, invasions are considerable, the most notable being in 1942–43, when birds were reported from Northland to Stewart Island and flocks appeared in Westland, in 1968–69, and in February 1979, when a flock of 60+ birds was seen in southern Otago.

Behaviour: Usually gregarious; small flocks circle hilltops, cliff tops or stands of trees. Swifts fly rapidly and wheel around in sweeping glides as they catch insects in mid-air. They feed high in fine, calm weather, but in windy or stormy weather, or at dusk, they feed close to the ground and so are more easily seen.

Reading: McCaskill, L.W. 1943. *Notornis* 1: 38–40.