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PREUSS'S CLIFF SWALLOW *HIRUNDO PREUSSI* BREEDING IN SIERRA LEONE

by Alan Tye

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Preuss's Cliff Swallow *Hirundo (Petrochelidon) preussi* has a broad range, extending from Guinea-Bissau and Mali to western Cameroon, but it is known to be of local occurrence within that area. Indeed, the record from Guinea-Bissau is separated from the next nearest by c. 500 km; there is another isolated record from north-east Zaire (Chapin 1953). The species breeds under a broad range of climatic conditions (Hall & Moreau 1970), and appears to be partially migratory in Mali (Lamarque 1983). Hence it may be expected to occur from time to time as a non-breeding visitor in localities outside its normal range, as is the case with other species of swallow. It has not been recorded hitherto from Sierra Leone, but I report here the discovery of several groups of *Hirundo preussi*, including two breeding colonies, in the Guinea savanna zone of north-east Sierra Leone c. 400 km from Guinea-Bissau and 500 km from breeding areas in Mali.

On 6 April 1984, two colonies of Preuss's Cliff Swallow were found less than 15 km apart on the road between Falaba and Cberia Timbako at approximately 09°48'N, 11°15'W (altitude c. 400 m). The birds were building nests in culverts under the road; one culvert was small and difficult of access but birds could be seen collecting mud from pools along a near-dry watercourse 20 m away. The other was accessible and contained the foundations of at least 50 nests, some nearly complete with downward-pointing funnels. About 50 pairs of Preuss's Swallow attended this site, along with two or three pairs of Lesser Striped Swallow *Hirundo abyssinica*.

They were seen clearly in flight and while collecting mud from the ground, at distances of less than 20 m. The following diagnostic identification features were noted: upperparts, including crown, glossy black, chestnut-red streak behind eye; rump sandy-brown, tail dark brown or black with white 'mirrors' (visible in birds on a photograph of the nest site); tail forked but without long streamers; underside pale dingy brownish. More were seen a few days later, further south in Sierra Leone, as follows:

7 April 1984, road bridge over Seli River at Badala (09°20'N, 11°32'W), 10-20 birds feeding over the river with Lesser Striped Swallows and Fanti Roughwings *Psalidoprocne obscura*. No evidence of breeding was seen at this site.

10 April 1984, at elevation 1660 m on Mt Bintumani, Loma Mountains (09°15'N, 11°07'W), at least 50 birds in a mixed foraging flock over montane grassland with House Martins *Delichon urbica*, European Sand Martins *Riparia riparia*, Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, Lesser Striped Swallows and Mottled Swifts *Apus aequatorialis*. Again, no evidence of breeding was seen here although suitable sites are present in the area.

Preuss's Cliff Swallow nests in a variety of sites, including cliffs, rock walls under waterfalls and on river banks, rocks overhanging water, bridges, buildings, culverts and large pipes (Bannerman 1930-1951),

Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1970-1973, Ashford 1968). It breeds mainly in the West African dry season, with records in February-June in Nigeria (Ashford 1968, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1970-1973), June in Togo (Cheke 1982) and November-July in Mali (Lamarche 1981). Hence the Sierra Leone records are not unusual in terms of site and season. The records from Badala and Mt Bintumani may also concern breeding birds although nesting sites were not located during the brief visits to each of these places. Despite the absence of previous records Preuss's Cliff Swallow appears to be widely established in north-eastern Sierra Leone. It is uncertain whether these records represent a recent colonisation, or whether the species was merely overlooked by the very few ornithologists to have visited the area previously.

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