

## The Swift Parrot in Tasmania

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The subject of this paper is the Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*), one of our many beautiful birds of the Parrot tribe, *Psittaciformes*. It does not seem to have become appreciably diminished in numbers, so far as its appearances in Tasmania are concerned. It has been a favourite with the writer ever since his school days, when as a boy in Hobart he used to look forward each year to its advent in that city, where it used to frequent the tall Bluegums (*Eucalyptus globulus*), feeding greedily upon the nectar-laden blossoms of these trees around the old barrack quarters. I remember some fine specimens being added to my late father's collection through the medium of both my brother's and my own catapults, of which we used to be somewhat skilled exponents. It was quite a feat to bring a "keet" down from out the topmost branches with a single BB shot.

However, it is in relation to the visits of this lovely bird to the valley of the Break o'Day River, Tasmania, that I desire to offer a few remarks about its habits. Up to some ten or twelve years ago the Swift Parrot was a rare visitor to this locality, but during one particular season when the Swamp Gums on the property were in heavy blossom, I was delighted to find my old friend disporting itself in considerable numbers amidst the beds of these trees occurring on certain parts of the "run." It was as early as July that they appeared, having evidently scented the blossom from some distant locality, probably that known as "Rocky Hills," between the properties of "Kelvedon" and "Mayfield," some 10 to 14 miles south of Swansea, where there is a fine bed of Bluegums (*E. globulus*) right on the coast line, and where I have often noticed numbers of them flashing in and out of the timber, on various occasions when I have been motoring and collecting along this part of our eastern coast.

Every season, now, as soon as the swamp gums come into blossom these birds appear on Cullenswood, and I have noticed them breeding on their feeding grounds, and also out towards the Mt. Nicholas Tier, high up in dry trees.

The great charm these birds possess for the writer, apart from their beauty of form and coloration, is their wonderful powers of absolutely unerring flight, flashing, as they do, in and out of all kinds of timber, and it so happens that our homestead seems to be right on the line of their daily flights across the valley. Cullenswood was heavily planted with *Pinus insignis* and other trees by my late father, and

I have often seen flocks of Swift Parrots, flying at lightning speed, thread their way through apertures and openings in these trees, as though they scorned to lift in their flight to avoid them. I have on one occasion been standing at the woolshed door, during shearing, when suddenly, with perhaps one quiet "pipe," a flock of a dozen or so has flashed within ten feet of my head, through a narrow opening between the old shed and a quick hedge.

Often when at work in the garden, I have heard the well known fighting pipes, heralding the express approach of a flock, and on looking up, a flight would be seen cleaving the air in their characteristic weaving manner of flight, as though trying the atmosphere for its easiest lanes and lines of least resistance. Never once have I seen a hawk or other diurnal bird of prey attack a flight of these birds, but I have come across a pitiful little fellow wounded by striking the telegraph wires by the road-side, just able to climb up into a small oak, not long, I fear, to survive its injuries.

Last summer, when in Hobart, I was paying a visit to Mr. W. A. Roberts' beautiful home, "Beaumaris," in the grounds of which there is a flowering red gum, about 25 feet high. The branches were full of Swift Parrots, busily engaged in feeding on the sweet contents of the blossom-cups, and not in the least afraid of our close scrutiny, though now and again, with their customary restlessness, one or more would depart, with that clear, keen signal they invariably give, to some other not far distant banqueting tree within the city's radius.

Not twenty yards distance from this tree is one of Hobart's busiest thoroughfares, Montpelier Road, with its frequent electric tram service and constant motor traffic, the noise from which does not seem to keep the parrots from their chosen tree or disturb them in any way.

I have also found this species feeding in a most unlikely spot, namely the thinly timbered downs on that part of what was, up to last year, the southern confines of Mona Vale. It is strange that when the lowland forms of the White Gum, generally known as "Cabbage Gum," burst into blossom in this locality, about midsummer, I have never seen the Swift Parrot feeding on it; it has evidently departed long before this tree has begun to flower. I cannot remember ever having seen the Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) attacking fruit in Tasmania, and it would be interesting if any readers of this account would state whether this bird has been noticed feeding on fruit, such as apples or pears, which the Musk-Lorikeet (*Glossopsitta concinna*) will not hesitate to do at times.

I had always thought that this bird could not be kept in captivity, until about four years ago I paid a visit, one

of many, to the "Eaumaris" Zoological Gardens in Hobart, and there Mr. Read, the curator, showed me quite a number which he had taken with a lined cross-bar on the end of a long bamboo, from out of the flowering Red Gums within the zoo gardens, and which he had had no difficulty in keeping in good condition in one of the many fine aviaries he has established there. One really could not help feeling sorry for the poor little chaps taken from their element, for if there is one bird which loves to disport itself upon the wing more than others, it is *Lathamus discolor*. I remember one observer somewhere (I think it was the late Mr. Dudley Le Soeuf) telling me that he had noticed these parrots hanging head down from the branches of their feeding trees, with the nectar they had absorbed running out of their bills, as though having taken too much, partly intoxicated, as it were, by the food.

One particularly characteristic habit these birds have is suddenly to dart out of the tree in which they have been feeding, with their musical piping, make an erratic, purposeless and short flight, and return to the same tree.

Finally, the variation in the plumage of these parrots is not the least interesting feature of the species, some having much more of the crimson blood-like streaks on the side of the body than others; probably this is in the case of adult males.

Whether this bird is in the habit of crossing Bass Straits every season or not, I am quite unable to say, though it is of course influenced in its migrations entirely by the food supply. Long may it survive to gladden the hearts of its many lovers!

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Skylark at Devonport.—Mr. H. Stuart Dove writes:—While out walking on Sunday afternoon, between the main road and the sea, with friends from Hobart, a lady of the party drew my attention to a continuous song which seemed to come from overhead, and which much resembled that of the lark. We were not able to see the bird at the time, but half an hour later, when in Percy Street, on the western boundary of the town, the song was heard again, and this time we "spotted" the singer up aloft, soaring in spirals, "pouring his full heart, in profuse strains of unpremeditated art," as Shelley has it. We watched him for some time, until eventually he descended, and when about 60 feet from the ground, volplaned gracefully to a landing in a paddock off Best Street. About three years ago I saw the first British skylarks in the district, flying near the ground, but this is the first time on the coast that I have seen the bird in his celebrated aerial act, soaring and singing.