

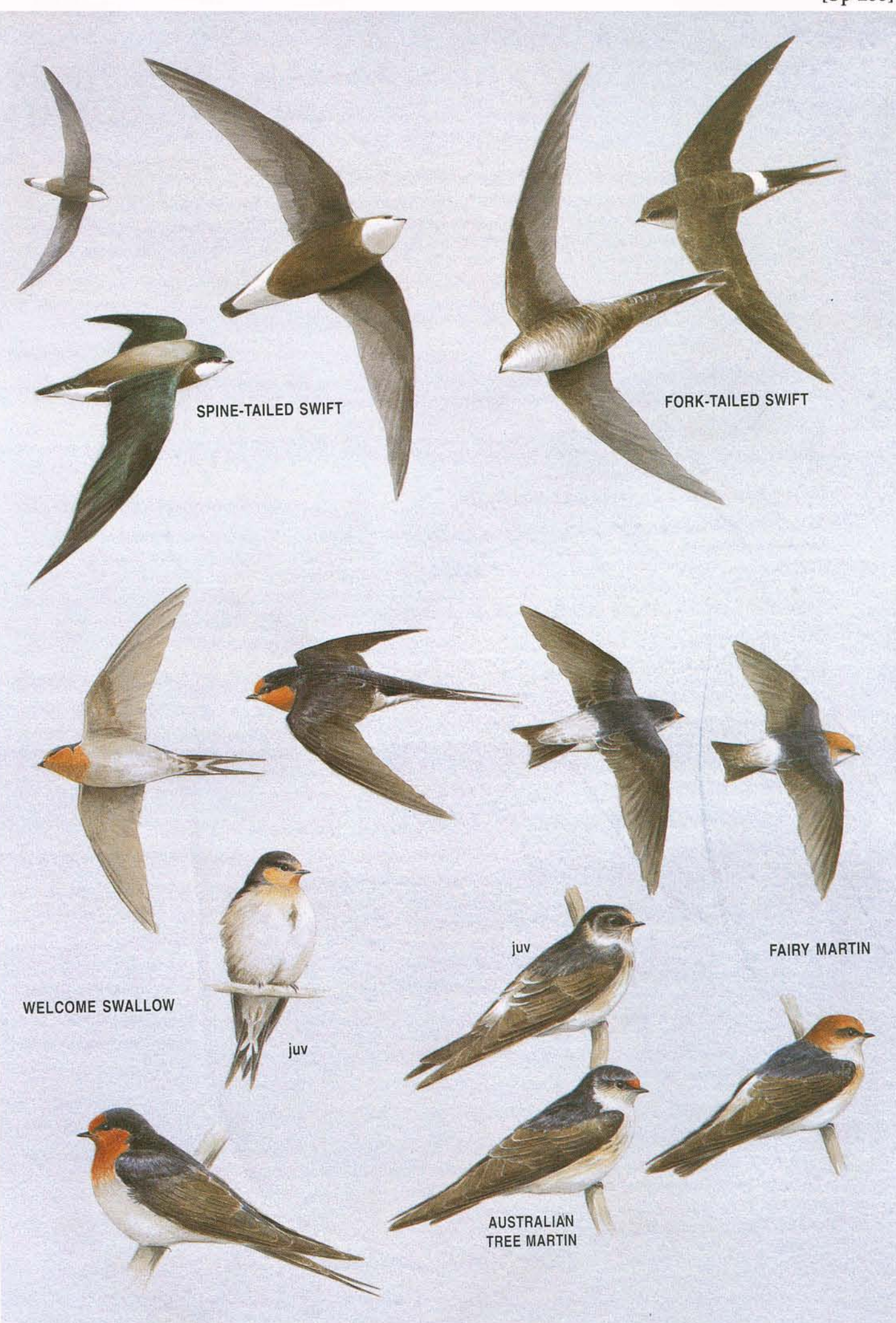
Swallows and martins are small birds with rapid erratic darting and gliding flight in pursuit of flying insects or snatching them from the surface of water or the ground. NZ species mostly blue above, pale below; each species has distinctive combination of pattern of red on head, colour of rump, and shape of tail. Sexes alike. Juveniles duller. Perch and come to ground readily; often seen gathered on powerlines, fences, shed roofs and riverbed shingle. Build distinctive mud nests under bridges, in caves or rock outcrops, trees or around buildings. Lay 3-5 pale pink eggs, speckled brown.

AUSTRALIAN TREE MARTIN *Hirundo nigricans*

Rare Australian vagrant

13 cm. Smaller and stockier than Welcome Swallow. Head and back blue-black; forehead of adult rufous, juvenile pale rufous; underparts and rump dull white; tail short, almost square. **Habitat:** Vagrants regularly reach NZ in autumn and early winter, mainly in open country in company with Welcome Swallows.

[Sp 288]



SWALLOWS and MARTINS

Hirundinidae

74 species worldwide; 1 is a recently self-introduced native, and 2 are vagrants to New Zealand.

Swallows are usually larger than martins, but the two terms are interchangeable and follow no taxonomic differences. They are generally small, graceful, dark blue and white birds, with variable amounts of rusty red on their head and breast. They have a streamlined body with short neck and long, pointed wings with 9 primaries. Most have a deeply forked tail, but some have a square tail. Their flight is graceful and rapid as they wheel and dart

to catch aerial insects in their short, wide bill. They are birds of open country, especially hunting over lakes, rivers and grassland; on warm, calm days they often fly high, but in poor weather they hunt close to the ground or water surface where flying insects are concentrated. Their feet are very small, and they shuffle about when they rarely land on the ground; they usually perch between feeding bouts on posts and on powerlines. Swallows and martins build distinctive mud nests, formerly mainly in trees or in cliff overhangs, but now often under bridges or culverts or under the eaves of buildings.

288. AUSTRALIAN TREE MARTIN *Hirundo nigricans*

Plate 64

Size: 13 cm

Geographical variation: Three subspecies, of which *nigricans*, which breeds in eastern Australia and migrates north to northern Queensland, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in winter, visits New Zealand.

Distribution: Breeds in Australasia; southern populations migrate northwards in winter and regularly reach the Solomons. A few vagrants reach New Zealand, with more than 25 records of single birds or flocks of up to 30-35 birds (East Cape, April 1974) since 1851. They have been reported from Miranda to The Snares (1968-69) and Chatham Island

(November 1988). Some of the early records, including newspaper reports of their breeding in a mill near Oamaru in 1892-93, may have referred to Welcome Swallows. Tree Martins have been recorded in New Zealand in all months, but usually in autumn and early winter when birds are migrating northwards in eastern Australia. Some birds have stayed in one locality for several years or regularly returned to one site over several years, but breeding has not yet been confirmed.

Behaviour: In Australia, Tree Martins nest in mud-lined holes in trees or cliffs, but sometimes nest in buildings. They form large

flocks in open country in late summer to winter, often resting on powerlines by day. When migrating, they wheel high as a large flock and then head off. They hawk insects

on the wing as Welcome Swallows do, but their flight appears slower and more direct.

Reading: Henley, J.C. 1974. *Notornis* 21: 266-267. Nevill, A. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 173-175.