

## 8. NOMENCLATURE OF THE ASIAN PALM SWIFT

(With a plate)

Brooke (1972) has given reasons for separating the African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus* (Lichtenstein) from the Asian, which he designated by the name *Cypsiurus batasiensis*. Although aware that the original spelling of the species-name was *balasiensis*, Brooke (op. cit., p. 219) considered that "sound nomenclature is best served" by retaining this emendation, which was originally proposed by Baker (1927, p. 336).

The name *balasiensis* was first published by J. E. Gray in Griffith & Pidgeon (1829, p. 60), as the following brief entry:

Balasian Swift. Lath. Cyp. *Balasiensis*

Dull brown, with the outer toe versatile. India.

The indicated authority for the English name is John Latham, who described the bird in greater detail under the title 'Balassian Swift' (Latham 1823, pp. 329-330). Because of its general interest and relevance to the argument that follows, Latham's entry is reproduced in facsimile (see plate).

The first named of Latham's two sources is certainly Francis Buchanan (who adopted the name Hamilton in later life), a medical officer in the service of the East India Company from 1794-1815 (Stephen & Lee 1908). Dr Buchanan (Hamilton) was a naturalist of wide interests. His published works included reports of travels in parts of India and Nepal, and a treatise on the fish of the Brahmaputra. It is apparent that he also wrote an unpublished manuscript on Indian birds. Such a manuscript was undoubtedly available to Horsfield & Moore, in whose catalogue (1854, p. 108), Dr. F. (B.) Hamilton is cited as the source of the vernacular names for the Palm Swift ('*Putta-Deuli*, Hind., *Batassia*, Beng., and *Ababil*, of the Mussulmans'), and also as the author of 'MS. I, p. 82', quoted as follows:

This bird inhabits Bengal at all seasons, and is a nocturnal bird, appearing at sunset and going to rest at sunrise. It builds its nest in the fronds of the TAL (*Borassus flabelliformes* Linn.). The Bengalese name signifies a bird resembling wind, and is bestowed on account of its swift flight.

The similarity between the phraseology of this passage and the sentences in Latham's (1823) account is sufficiently marked to establish that the author was indeed the same man, and to suggest very strongly that the compilers in both cases had before them the same document.

'There can be little doubt that the common source consulted by these authors was an untitled manuscript describing animals and birds at Barrackpore, now in the India Office Library, registered no. MSS Eur. D. 541. The second volume of this work (reg. no. MSS Eur. D. 94) forms part of the Buchanan-Hamilton Collections, and it is reason-



able to assume that the Doctor was the author of both. Pages 82-83 of the first volume are devoted to the palm swift. Since this description is evidently an important primary source, it is transcribed in full below:

Hirundo Apus Batassia B  
 Abavir of the Musulmans.  
 Batassia of the Bengalese.  
 Putta deuli of Hindustan proper.

The Bengalese name signifies a Bird resembling wind, and is bestowed on this species, on account of its swift flying. It inhabits Bengal at all seasons, and is a nocturnal bird, appearing at sun set, and going to rest at sun rise. It builds in the folds of the leaves of the Tal, or *Borassus flabelliformis* Linn.: The length from the point of the bill to the end of the tail is four inches and six tenths. The wings, when shut, are two tenths of an inch longer than the tail; and, when opened, extend ten inches. The tail is two inches and three quarters in length. The toes reach very little beyond its root. The bill is very short, and much depressed, sharp, and rather incurved at the point. The nostrils are oblong, and naked. The feathers of the frontlet are reversed. The irides are brown. The crown, neck, and back are brownish. All the under parts, sides, rump, upper tail coverts, and the wing coverts next the body are ash-coloured. The wing coverts most remote from the body, and the under wing coverts are dusky. The wings are very much acuminate, the secondary quills being very short. The quills are sharp pointed, black on the upper side, and dusky beneath. The tail is much bifurcated, and consists of ten acuminate feathers, dusky above, and tsh coloured beneath. The legs above are feathered to the toes, and behind are naked. The toes are black and four in number, two turned to one side, and two to another. The claws are as long as the toes, and are much hooked.

The history of these has been discussed in detail by Dawson (1946). On the General's death, his collection passed to the British Museum, and the illustrations of biological interest, sorted into systematic order, mounted and bound, are now divided between the Botanical and Zoological libraries of the British Museum (Natural History). The pictures numbered 114-116 in Volume VI (catalogue no. 10979) show adult and juvenile palm swifts, and a nest, attached to a palm frond, containing three young. These drawings are the originals (copied carefully, but appearing as mirror images in the publication) of the representations grouped in Plate 35 of Gray & Hardwicke's *Illustrations of Indian zoology*, part 2, where they are named 'Balassian Swift *Cypselus palmarum* n.'. In the original drawings, the adult male is localised and dated 'Cawnpore June 1800'.

Griffith & Pidgeon's translation of Cuvier, in which Gray's name *balasiensis* appeared, is dated 1829 on the title page. The plates are also individually inscribed with the dates on which each was made. The latest plates are dated October 1829, showing that the completed book must have appeared at the very end of that year. Part 2 of the 'ILLUSTRATIONS OF INDIAN ZOOLOGY, containing the name *Cypselus palmarum*,



### 66.—BALASSIAN SWIFT.

**LENGTH** between four and five inches, breadth ten. Bill short, incurved at the point, and much depressed; nostrils oblong, dusky; iridès brown; plumage above ash-coloured, not unlike that of the Sand Martin; beneath paler; quills sharp-pointed, black above, dusky beneath; the wings much acuminate, the second quills being very short, and for the most part dusky; tail much bifurcated, consisting of ten feathers, in colour like the quills; in length two inches and three quarters; the latter, when closed, are a trifle longer than the tail; legs feathered before to the toes, which are four in number, two turned on one side, and two on the other, claws long, and the toes much hooked, and reach very little beyond the root of the tail.

Inhabits India: is the Abavir of the Mussulmans; Balassia of the Bengalese; and Putta deuli of Hindustan Proper. The Bengalese name signifies a bird resembling wind, and is bestowed on this species, on account of its swift flight. Found at Bengal at all seasons; is a nocturnal bird, appearing at sun-set, and going to rest at sun-rise. It builds in the folds of the leaves of the Tol, or Borassus flabelliformis of Linnæus.—Dr. Buchanan.

This is figured in General Hardwicke's drawings, dated Cawnpore, June, 1800; length five inches.—A male.







was published in March 1830 (Kinnear 1925). Gray thus published, within a few months, two names for the same species, both based (in the one case directly, and in the other case indirectly through reference to Latham's work) on the same set of drawings of specimens from Cawnpore (i.e., Kanpur) made in 1800.

T. C. Jerdon (1840), following Gray (1830), referred to the species as the Balassian Swift *Cypselus palmarum*. Shortly thereafter, the priority of *balasiensis* was recognised. G. R. Gray (youngest brother of J. E. Gray) in 1844 (p. 54) gave *Cypselus balasiensis* as the valid name, with *Cypselus palmarum* as a synonym. Blyth (1849, p. 86) also used the name *Cypselus balasiensis* for this swift, listing *C. palmarum* in synonymy.

The first emendation of the spelling was introduced by Horsfield & Moore (1854, p. 108) who called this bird *Cypselus batassiensis*, adding a footnote: *Balassiensis*, *Auct. corrigend*. The 'corrected' name *batassiensis* was subsequently in general use in ornithological literature for several decades; see, for instance, Jerdon (1862), Sclater (1865), Blyth (1866), Holdsworth (1872) Blanford (1895).

A second modification was proposed by Baker (1927, p. 336), who evidently made only superficial research of the problem, writing:

The name of this little swift was first written *balasiensis* but the name is derived from the Bengali name *batassia* and is obviously a misprint and the amended name *batasiensis* must be accepted.

Gray, in using the Bengali name, may be inferred to have applied it to the Bengali bird and the type-locality can therefore be restricted to Calcutta, thus leaving the name *palmarum* free for the paler Western form depicted in Hardwicke's Illustr. of Ind. Zool.

Peters (1940, p. 256) reverted to Gray's original spelling, listing the Indian population of palm swift as *Cypsiurus parvus balasiensis*. Despite this lead from a careful taxonomist, Baker's emendation has continued to be used in various combinations by most authors including recently, Ripley (1961) and Ali & Ripley (1970).

### CONCLUSION

J. E. Gray's original description, although brief, satisfies provisions (a), (b), (c) and (g) of Article 11, and Article 12 of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature. Moreover, the consistency of English and Latin names is evidence that Gray's spelling of *balasiensis* was deliberate, and not a copyist's or printer's error. By Article 32 (a) (ii), this spelling is therefore to be retained. Emendation is not justified because Gray chose to use a single 's', nor because his indicated source (Latham 1823) apparently misread or wrongly or carelessly transcribed the Bengali name according to Buchanan.





Cranbrook, Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy. 1976. "Nomenclature of the Asian Palm Swift." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 72, 539–543.

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