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WEATHER CONDITIONS IN TEMPERATE LATITUDES AND THE
OCCURRENCE OF ALPINE AND MOTTLED SWIFTS AT ACCRA, GHANA

by

L.Grimes

During the first few days of March 1973 there were three localized anticyclones in temperate latitudes; one (1032 mb) over France, another (1033 mb) over the western Mediterranean and a third (1034 mb) over the Azores. The latter moved in towards France and by 1200 hrs on 3rd March an intense anticyclone (1036 mb) extended over much of France, Switzerland and Spain. During the same period low pressure areas a little north of the equator developed into a moderate cyclone (1002 mb) centred over the Central African Republic and southern Sudan. These pressure distributions brought cold air from temperate latitudes over the Sahara into West Africa and northwest winds predominated over the northern Sahara becoming northeast winds by the time they reached southern Ghana.

The effect of this cold air mass was to move the inter tropical convergence zone southwards from an average latitude of 7°N on 3rd March to 5°N or less by the 5th March. Harmattan conditions were experienced at Accra for several days beginning 5th March which is most unusual for this month of the year. The first indications of a change in the weather pattern were local rainstorms on 1st and 3rd March which resulted in excellent visibility. In contrast, the air over southern Ghana was dust laden on 4th March and this is the usual harbinger of harmattan conditions. On 4th March, the day before the harmattan reached Accra, thousands of swifts were present over the western area of the Accra Plains. They were first noticed at 0900 hrs at Legon and numbers persisted throughout the day. The majority were European Swifts Apus apus, but Alpine Swifts A. alba and Mottled Swifts A. aequatorialis were also present. The influx was

quite widespread as Dr.M.Lock also located them 15 miles east of Legon. During late afternoon a small flock of 30 to 40 birds was wheeling high over the Botanical Gardens of the University; they attracted attention through their flight calls which to my ear sounded like those of Common Sandpipers Tringa hypoleucos.

As the general weather pattern over much of West Africa was similar to that at Accra vagrants may have turned up in other areas and it would be of interest to hear of these through the pages of the Bulletin. At Ibadan Roy Parker (in litt.) and others noticed nothing unusual over the weekend of 3rd and 4th March.

One point of interest is that such unusual influxes have not been noticed during the usual period of harmattan in January and early February. It is possible, therefore, that the cool air mass caused the birds to seek warmer air masses and in doing so the birds were drifted to the southwest. Another speculative point of interest is their place of origin. This possibly could be the Sudan for (a) the Mottled Swifts were noticeably paler and the mottling more distinct than the local resident race found 40 miles east of Legon, and (b) the Alpine Swift is known to occur in the Sudan (Mackworth-Praed & Grant, 1970, White, 1965).

References:

- Mackworth-Praed, C.W. & Grant, C.H.B. 1970. African Handbook of Birds. Series 3, Vol.1. London : Longmans.
- White, C.M.N. 1965. A revised check list of African Non-passerine birds. Government Press, Lusaka.