

## Violet-green Swallow: New to Ontario

by  
Peter Burke

A white-bellied swallow being blown south by cold northerly winds flew high over the heads of Dawn Brenner, Mark Dugdale, and Peter Burke at about 0945h on 28 October 1992, at the tip of the Sleeping Giant (Thunder Bay District, Ontario) on Lake Superior. Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) are normally gone by early August from Northern Ontario, therefore suspicions were immediately raised about the identity of this bird. Alas, we could only speculate (sadly) as it quickly continued south. After the fourth member of our party, Dave Shepherd, joined us, we watched the swallow descend and disappear over the chop of the lake. Having enjoyed Ontario's first Black-throated Sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*) just weeks before at nearby Silver Islet (Henshaw and Kerr 1992), we felt that a second rarity had likely just eluded us.

Not five minutes later, and with our attention directed back to the north, Dawn announced that the swallow had returned, and was flying right above our heads! This time we could see much more of the bird as it quickly turned and dove at treetop level, allowing brief glimpses of its back and head. Due to overcast skies, iridescence was absent from the bird's plumage. However, we could all see the extensive white patches on the sides of the rump (reminding Mark, a visiting British birder, of a House Martin (*Delichon urbica*) which has an entirely white rump), and the

beady eye on a white face. Suddenly we realized that we were indeed hosting a stray Violet-green Swallow (*T. thalassina*)!

The bird stayed around the tip for the rest of the day, flying low over the shoreline and grassy clearing. It favoured the lee side of the point, presumably finding more shelter and food. Several attempts were made to net the bird, but all failed. It maintained a steady, powerful flight involving very little soaring, and made low sweeps which were repeated over one particular area at a time. It seemed very trusting and would fly within one metre of an observer. Standing at the forest's edge, we could enjoy the beautiful golden and purple flashes of the bird's mantle as it passed over the shoreline rocks. It was so fast that viewing with binoculars was difficult.

On 29 October, the day dawned at a temperature of minus 7°C, raising doubts that the swallow had survived the night. But at 0900h, I found it again cruising the east shore. Then it settled on a serviceberry (*Amelanchier* sp.) branch, appearing weakened by the cold. This was the first opportunity to observe its brilliant plumage in detail. In dull light, it was nearly identical to a Tree Swallow except for the very prominent white edgings to the tertials. This is a feature of freshly moulted birds; the white has mostly or entirely worn off by spring (Bent 1942, Oberholser 1973). The face was very gentle looking, due to near



Figure 1: Violet-green Swallow in flight. Photo by *Peter Burke*.



Figure 2: Violet-green Swallow perched on mist net. Photo by *Peter Burke*.

isolation of the dark eyes against white feathering. When in full sunlight, the stunning iridescence of greens, blues, purples, and bronze treated the eye. Most of the nape was reddish purple, bordered by greenish-bronze of the back and forehead. In certain lights the back also appeared extensively purple. The secondary coverts were bright forest green, the colour of wet Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*). The tertiaries, secondaries, primaries and tail showed deep green or navy blue depending on the angle of light. Such coloration indicated the bird was a male. Furthermore, because of the presence of old, greyish, worn flight feathers, and subtle smudges to the facial area, we felt confident that this individual was an immature moulting into its first winter plumage.

Later the swallow sluggishly flew to our furled mist nets, where it spent the morning huddled and tolerant of our close approach. When a Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) perched nearby, the swallow immediately flew, giving a sharp, double-noted call. Also, when perched in the sun, it gave a softer call, much like a Common Redpoll's (*Carduelis flammea*) "chiff-chiff". At midday, the swallow sprang to life with the sun's warmth, and fed actively on numerous insects. We last saw it later that day, still feeding. But after another cold night, it did not reappear on 30 October. The only other observer to make the long 13 km haul by foot and bike to the tip to see the swallow was Nick Escott of Thunder Bay.

The Violet-green Swallow is normally distributed in breeding season in western North America,

from Alaska to California, south into the Mexican highlands of Oaxaca and Veracruz. It breeds as far east as southwestern Saskatchewan, western South Dakota and western Nebraska (AOU 1983). Three races are recognized, with *lepida* being the most widespread, and breeding from Alaska to northern Mexico. The other two subspecies breed in Mexico only (Turner and Rose 1989). Our individual appeared to fall under the nominate *lepida* due to the extensive violet colour of the mantle, a feature not shared by the other two subspecies (Turner and Rose 1989). Violet-green Swallows are early spring migrants and nesters, ready to move south by mid- to late July in the northern parts of their range (Bent 1942). The main winter range extends from southern Baja California and central Mexico to El Salvador and Honduras (Turner and Rose 1989).

For a bird which migrates and spends so much time on the wing, it has been recorded as a stray surprisingly few times. It is a casual visitor to the Aleutians, east to Manitoba (four records) (Godfrey 1986, Gollop 1988, A. Wormington pers. comm.), North Dakota, Missouri and central Texas (Turner and Rose 1989). In the East, it has been recorded only a handful of times (Table 1). Despite this fact, many Ontario birders have predicted its occurrence in this province, likely because so many other species of the Canadian Rockies have turned up at one time or another, and some are now regular, such as Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*). Indeed, Bruce DiLabio of Ottawa correctly predicted this record in 1982 by stating that

Table 1: Violet-green Swallow Records in the East.

State/Province	Status	Source
Nova Scotia	One record; 30 October 1965, Crescent Beach, Lunenburg County. Generally accepted, but undocumented.	Tufts 1986
New Hampshire	One record; mid- September 1965. Also undocumented.	Tufts 1986
Florida	Extremely rare vagrant.	Desante and Pyle 1986
Illinois	One record; 4 May 1897, Calumet region. Specimen.	Bent 1942
Ohio	One record; 16 May 1990, Holmes County. Photograph.	Peterjohn 1990
New Jersey	One record; 8 November 1992, Cape May.	Anonymous 1992
Minnesota	Extremely rare vagrant.	Desante and Pyle 1986

Violet-green Swallow would turn up on the shore of Lake Superior in October (Wormington 1982)!

### Summary

We recorded a first fall male Violet-green Swallow at the tip of the Sleeping Giant on 28 and 29 October 1992. This is the second record in Canada east of Manitoba, where it is casual, and the first to be fully documented. The sighting has been accepted as the first for the province by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Margaret Bain, pers. comm. 1993). This species is extremely rare east of the Mississippi, with only five states having recorded it, and most of these only once. This record also fits the pattern of Lake Superior's fantastic reputation for late fall western vagrants. One can't help but wonder what will occur next!

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## Publication Notice

### Field Checklist of Birds for the Southern James Bay Region. 1992.

By *Doug McRae*. Available from Moose River Naturalists, Box 699, Moosonee, Ontario P0L 1Y0. \$1.00 + 0.50 (postage & handling).

This checklist provides a compilation of data on the 292 extant species of birds known to have occurred in the vicinity of Moosonee and Moose Factory. It provides a general indication of the status of each species in the region, and further indicates the regularity of breeding of each species. The checklist does not utilize the bar graph format that has become regular fare in regional checklists, perhaps because there are not yet sufficient data to do so for all species. This checklist provides columns for five days (or locations) of observations, a welcome feature.

Another publication on the birds of southern James Bay has appeared recently (Kubisz, M. *Birders Journal* 1: 343-347, 349-350. 1992). The area covered by this second publication is much larger than that covered by the *Checklist* (extending all the way north to the Attawapiskat River, and inland, presumably to the edge of the Hudson Bay Lowlands biophysiological region), which accounts for differences between the two publications in status and species included.

Both lists provide useful summaries of avifaunal information. However, readers should be aware of the differences in area covered between these two publications. For those visiting the Moosonee/Moose Factory area, the *Checklist* is more likely to provide accurate estimates of status. However, birders visiting other portions of southern James Bay, north of Moosonee, will want to refer to Kubisz's article, as well.