

MIST-NETTING NEOTROPICAL SWIFTS

By Charles T. Collins

Although the Chimney Swift has been banded in great numbers, particularly during its fall migration, other New World species have received relatively little attention and only the casual one or two individuals appear to have been banded. For several years now as part of my studies of Neotropical swifts I have been capturing and banding many individuals of several species in Trinidad, West Indies. Many of the birds were captured at the nocturnal roosting sites.

For the Short-tailed Swift, Chaetura brachyura, this entailed trapping post-breeding flocks of from 20 to 200 birds in one of the several subterranean cement man-holes in which they nested and roosted. In the case of the Chestnut-collared Swift, Cypseloides rutilus, I used a combination of a large butterfly net and some extension poles to scoop them off the vertical rock walls of a river gorge where they nested and also roosted at night. For most species however, I used the much more conventional mist nets. In this way I caught a good many individuals of five of the seven resident species of Trinidad swifts. Even though it seems improbable to most of us that these high-flying birds can be caught in ground level nets, if you pick the right place it is actually easy.

The main prerequisite is a suitable site as, needless to say, just anywhere won't do. The sort of place I have found to be most productive is along the crests of hills or mountains, preferably where the ground slopes off rapidly on one or both sides. The hardest part is simply setting up from one to several nets along the crest and waiting for results. As it turns out, many birds, swifts in particular, tend to swoop low over the crest when passing from one side of the hills to the other, or from valley to valley. It is not at all unusual for them to come over only waist-high or less. Cutting any low brush back so that the ground approaching the crest is relatively clear, helps a great deal. If there is much high vegetation along the crest a 20 to 30 foot lane can be cut through it at right angles to the nets which will often funnel the birds right into the nets.

There are some technical difficulties that do come up in this sort of netting. First and foremost, ridges are usually windy and this tends to push all the slack in the nets to one end and stretch the rest too tight to hold any birds striking it. It is discouraging to say the least to see the bird you have been waiting for, rebound off a wind-tightened net. Using nets which have the webbing tied to the shelf strings would avoid much of this. Not having this sort of net myself I continually have to adjust my regular ones and pull the slack back to the other end from time to time.

Also, with nets set almost on the skyline a lot of birds see them and go over, under, or around them. This cannot be avoided and you have



Net lane at Portachuelo Pass,
Venezuela, looking south.



View to north
from Porta-
chuelo Pass;
a net is in
foreground.

be content with that fraction of the total number of birds going by which actually end up in the nets. In my work I was particularly interested in getting weight and molt data from a few birds at frequent intervals during the year and had no real difficulty catching a sufficient number with my nets.

In the Northern Range of Trinidad I have found several places to set nets right along the shoulder of roads where they cross ridges or go through passes. In each case I have been able to catch up to 20 or 30 individuals of three or four species in a given afternoon. Needless to say, all sorts of other interesting birds can also be caught in nets placed in this fashion.

During the last year I have expanded my studies to include Venezuela. There I have made good use of perhaps the perfect example of a place to net swifts. As shown in the accompanying photographs (indicated by an arrow in the photograph below) there is a narrow gap, Portachuelo Pass,



in the high coastal mountains of Venezuela, very near the Rancho Grande Biological Station maintained by the Venezuelan government. Hundreds of swifts of several species pass through this gap daily. At the lowest point in the pass a narrow lane has been cut through the trees and the lower vegetation has been trimmed back a bit on the approach to the crest on both sides. The end result is a narrow slot just at the lowest point of the pass which can be completely bridged by a single 12 meter net. The many swifts using this pass often cut through this slot near ground level and are easily caught in the net. The most abundant swift caught was a local subspecies of the Vaux's Swift, *Chaetura vauxi aphanes*. At times I was catching them at the rate of 20 birds per hour. Species caught far less frequently were the White-tipped Swift, *Aeronautes montivagus* - the South American equivalent of our western White-throated Swift - and the very large White-collared Swift, *Cypseloides zonaris*. The great numbers of swifts caught in this manner more than make up for the occasional squalling, biting parrot which also ends up in your net to threaten your patience and fingers.

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