

THE FAIRY MARTIN (*Petrochelidon ariel*) IN NEW ZEALAND

In December 1978, D. Sim found two unusual nests, one in each of the two compartments of a pumping station at Te Hopai, southern Wairarapa. As the construction of the station was begun in 1977 and finished in mid-November 1978, the nests had presumably been built during a slack period in construction work. No birds were present but the nests had been used by House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and so were badly damaged. The station was commissioned in March 1979 and since then, the noise of the pumps and the turbulence of the water have made the station unsuitable as a nesting site.

At first, D. Sim assumed the nests to be unusual nests of Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo tahitica neoxena*), but he took some slides, which he showed to B. D. Heather in mid-1980. BDH visited the site and measured the less damaged of the nests in August 1980. It was made of mud pellets with a wall thickness of c. 1 cm. The entrance tunnel was c. 3 cm deep, and the distance from the entrance to the back of the nest chamber was 16 cm. The external dimensions of the nest chamber were 7 cm deep by 14 cm from side to side and 10 cm from front to back. The general shape of both nests had been that of a bottle on its side glued to the roof from mouth to base and with the base glued to the wall, quite unlike the open cup of a swallow. The photographs were submitted to several people familiar with the nests of Australian martins and swallows, and they agreed that the nests were almost certainly those of Fairy Martin. However, as the Fairy Martin had not been recorded in New Zealand and none has yet been seen in the Wairarapa, the record was held in suspense.

On 18 November 1982, at 1900 h summertime, J. M. Hawkins, B. D. Bell, and I. Flux saw a martin over the fields of the Puponga Farm Park at the base of Farewell Spit. BDB had seen many martins in Australia some years previously. Although expecting the bird to be a Tree Martin (*P. nigricans*), which often occurs in New Zealand as a vagrant, the party took a description.

The martin was flying near some Welcome Swallows. It tended to glide more, had a very noticeable white rump, was slightly smaller, and had a much more shallow fork in the tail. The white underside was a positive white rather than the greyish white of the swallows, and the black upper surface lacked the bluish sheen of the swallows. The head and nape were orange. The colour extended down the side of the head but not underneath. When this description was compared with that in an Australian field guide, the bird was clearly a Fairy Martin, and this identification has been accepted by the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee. The bird could not be found on the following two days. The wind at the time, as it had been beforehand, was strong westerly.

In late February 1983, at Totaranui, Abel Tasman National Park, Linley Robertson saw three small young 'swallows' sitting

quietly on a fence near the shore. When two older birds appeared, the three became very excited and fidgety, and so she thought that the two may have been the parents. She noted a broad white band across the base of the tail, which was very short compared with a swallow's. Doubting that they were swallows, she asked an Australian visitor, who without hesitation said that they were a family group of Fairy Martins. As the young were flying, they could have been some hundreds of metres away from a nest site; and several likely sites are in the rocky banks at the mouth of the nearby estuary. These birds were seen only once.

Although much of the above observations is uncertain, the positive sighting of one bird makes the others more credible, especially now that two more have been positively identified in Otago in February-March 1983 (Neville, this issue). The possibility of both Fairy and Tree Martins having bred in New Zealand cannot be completely discounted.

According to Australian authorities, the Fairy Martin is widely distributed in Australia except in Tasmania (and Papua New Guinea), where it is a vagrant. In south-eastern Australia, it is present only during the summer months. Around Canberra, for example (Frith 1969, *Birds in the Australian high country*), normally it first appears in September and most leave by February with some remaining to April. According to Pizzey (1980, *A field guide to the birds of Australia*), the nest is "bottle-shaped; of mud-pellets; swollen nest-chamber c. 150 mm in diameter; neck or spout from 50 to 300 mm long. . . . It is the only Australian bird that builds a bottle-shaped mud nest." It nests in colonies and constructs its nest "against the wall or ceiling of a cave, building or culvert, the side of a hollow tree, a cliff-face or creek bank" (Frith 1969). The nests are often used by House Sparrows.

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#### FAIRY AND TREE MARTINS IN OTAGO

Lake Holm Farm lies at the southern end of the Taieri Plain and slopes from exotic forest down to wetland near Lakes Waiholā and Waipori. Near the buildings are a line of old macrocarpa trees and a small orchard and woodlot area. The woolshed roof has been a favourite sunning place for Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo tahitica neoxena*), which have also congregated on the various power lines in increasing numbers over the last 10 years. A favourite spot for families of young swallows is our rotary clothesline, which is in a fairly sheltered position close to the old house.

On 3 December 1981 we first glimpsed a white-rump flash in a group of swallows. For two days we watched this bird in flight