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REPORT ON THE BIRDS' NEST INDUSTRY IN THE BARAM DISTRICT AND AT NIAH, SARAWAK

Earl of Cranbrook

In October, 1978,1was invited by the Curator of the Sarawak Museum (ref, MU/588/(245a) dated 6th October) to "investigate the current situation of the birds'-nest industry, paying special attention to the present procedures of harvesting, marketing and conservation practices, in the Baram and atNiah".

2. In the course of my investigation, I visited Miri, Marudi, Long Lama, Niah and Kuching, between 12 October and 8 Novermber, 1978. I am very grateful for the hospitality and assistance warmly offered by many persons concerned, in particular the District Officer, Marudi, Mr. Patrick Chaong; the U.R.A. Long Lama, Mr. Ding Ibau; the National Parks & Wildlife Officer, Forest Department, Miri, Mr. Wit Treygo; the Wildlife Officer, National Parks and Wildlife Officer, Kuching, Mr. David Labang @ Raban Bala; and the Curator, Sarawak Museum, Mr. Lucas Chin.

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The Cave Swiftlets

3. The birds responsible for building the edible nests of commerce belong to a group of swifts (generally of small size, and hence known colloquially by the diminutive name, 'Swiftlets') widely distributed in the tropical Indo-Pacific region, particularly on islands. All habitually (but not invariably) nest in rock shelters, caves or cave-like situations including artificial equivalents such as buildings, culverts or tunnels. The limits of the swiftlets' world range lie to the west on the Seychelles Islands (approx. 55°30'E, 4°30'S) in the Indian Ocean, and to the east on the Marquesas Is. (approx. 140°E, 10°S) in the Pacific. Northwards they extend to 33°N in Himachal Pradesh, India, and 32°N in Szechwan, China, and southwards to about 20°S on Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, and in Queensland, Australia, and about 22°30'S on New Caledonia in the southwestern Pacific.

4. Swiftlets are characterised by predominantly dull dark grey-brown to black plumage, relieved only by variable areas of grey to white on the underparts (one species) or at the base of the tail (four species). They also vary rather little in size. As a consequence, several species with overlapping measurements are difficult to tell apart, even when held in the hand. There can in addition be uncertainties concerning the interrelationships of populations on different, remote oceanic islands. For these reasons, there is no concensus

among ornithologists on the exact number of species that exist. Estimates of the world total vary from a conservative minimum of nine, up to eighteen different species.

5. Formerly all swiftlets were placed in the one genus, *Collocalia.* Modern opinion, however, suggests that three genera should be recognised, indicating that not all swiftlets are in fact equally closely related one to the other. Under this system, members of one genus (*Aerodramus*) are characterised by the capacity to orientate in darkness by means of echolocation. The two other genera (*Hydrochous* and *Collocalia)* lack this faculty.

6. All swiftlets (like most swifts) utilise in the construction of their nests a glutinous substance ('nest-cement'), produced by a pair of large, lobed salivary glands situated under the tongue ('sublingual salivary glands'). It is this nest-cement that is the raw material of 'birds'-nest soup', and renders of commercial importance the nests of those species in which it forms a particularly large proportion.

7. Five species of swiftlets occur in Borneo, all of them recorded in Sarawak. In the accounts which follow, descriptions and measurements apply to Sarawak populations; the same species may differ in appearance in other parts of their total world range.

a. Giant Swiftlet, *Hydrochous gigas.*

The largest swiftlet, with wing-length in the range 143–162 mm, tail (closed) 58–66 mm, weights 35–39 g. The entire upperparts are sooty black, with a slight greenish gloss. The underparts are dark, dusky grey-brown with perceptible dark shafts only on the abdomen and under tail-coverts.

The world range of this swiftlet consists of Malaysia, Java, Sumatra and Borneo. Specimens have not been collected in any part of Borneo; all records are based on sight identifications. It is possible (but unlikely) that this swiftlet merely visits Sarawak on migration.

The two nest sites known (in Java and Malaya) were on mountain cliffs, hidden behind waterfalls. Nests are solid shallow cups, constructed of plant material (chiefly leafy liverworts, fibrous mosses, filmy ferns and other epiphytic non-flowering plants), glued together with a sparse secretion of permanently soft salivary cement. A single, white egg is laid; egg measurements fall in the range 26–32 x 17–19 mm.

Giant Swiftlets cannot echolocate but evidently have acute eyesight and seem to be able to hunt in very dim light.

b. White-bellied Swiftlet, *Collocalia esculenta.*

The smallest swiftlet in Sarawak, with wing only 98–110 mm, tail 38–45, weights 8–11 g. The upperparts are shining black with pronounced blue-green sheen; the throat; breast and flanks are grey, the abdomen white and the under tail-coverts black with white margins.

This swiftlet has the greatest range of all, extending from the Bay of Bengal to the south west Pacific. It is resident, and widespread in Sarawak. All known nest-sites are in rock shelters or cave mouths; elsewhere in the