

Welcome Swallow

Hirundo neoxena

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



A male Welcome Swallow, with broad white areas on the outer feathers of the undertail (photo: Alwyn Simple)

This is the common swallow in Australia, and it has a widespread distribution. Its deeply forked tail and mostly black upperparts eliminate the main three potential confusion species: White-backed Swallows are more obviously black and white, while the two resident martin species (Tree Martin, Fairy Martin) have squarish tails and whitish rumps. Some care is needed to differentiate Welcome Swallows from vagrant swallows but of those, only the Barn Swallow has ever been seen in the Hunter Region (it was recorded in 1986 and 1988).

The breast and belly of the Welcome Swallow are white, and there is a rufous patch on the throat and forehead. Barn Swallows look similar but they have a black band across their breast, compared with rufous in the Welcome Swallow. In flight, small white spots on the Welcome Swallow's dark tail stand out, as does the white sub-terminal band on the undertail when the bird banks in flight.

Both sexes incubate. Males and females look alike, but the white undertail band in males is broader than in females. Juveniles have less glossy upper parts and a generally duller appearance, and their tails are less deeply forked. They moult directly to adult plumage and cannot be separated from adults by late autumn.

Welcome Swallows are gregarious. They often are seen foraging as small flocks, sometimes also with other insectivores, and generally they roost communally (often as larger flocks, potentially hundreds of birds). They also nest colonially (although single nests do occur), building mud nests on near-vertical surfaces where there is overhead cover.

Regional Status

The Welcome Swallow is a common bird of the Hunter Region, regularly seen in substantial numbers throughout the year and with numerous breeding records every year. There is a distinct autumn influx (see the section on Migration below). It's uncertain whether we have a local population that stays all year, with an autumn influx of southern birds passing through, or whether the birds that were present here in summer migrate and become replaced by southern birds – or it might even be a mixture of those two scenarios.

Legend

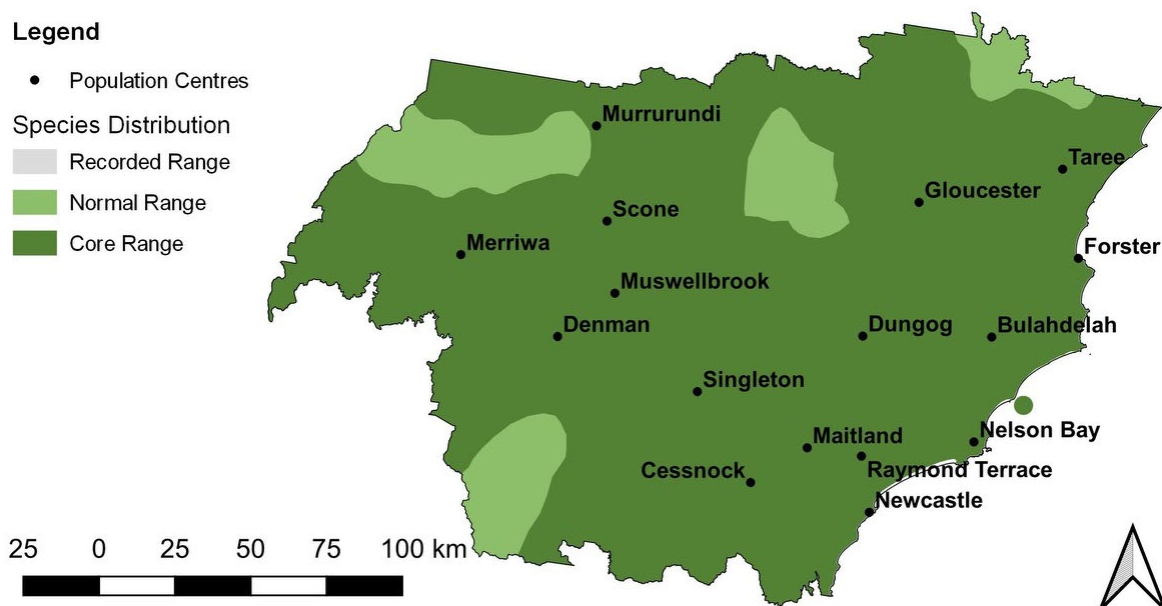
- Population Centres

Species Distribution

Recorded Range

Normal Range

Core Range



Distribution of the Welcome Swallow in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams)

Sub-species

Two sub-species occur: *carteri* (Western Welcome Swallow) which occurs

across much of Western Australia, and the nominate sub-species *neoxena* (Eastern Welcome Swallow) which is found in much of the rest of Australia. Until relatively recently, Welcome Swallow and Pacific Swallow were considered conspecific. The latter has a far shorter tail-fork. It occurs in PNG (and further to the north) and probably turns up from time to time on the Torres Strait islands.

Migration

Most of the Welcome Swallows in southern Australia depart in autumn and return in spring. The *carteri* birds in WA head northwards or northeast, and the *neoxena* birds head northwards or northwest – towards Queensland and the southern parts of the Northern Territory but with not all of them getting that far. Griffieon and Clarke (*The Emu*, 2002) described it as a purely northern movement. In the Hunter Region we see an obvious influx in autumn, with hundreds or even thousands of birds present for a while at many local wetlands and other places where there are lots of small insects.



A female Welcome Swallow in flight, with narrow white areas on the outer feathers of the undertail (photo: Jim Thomson)

About the name

Welcome Swallow

“Swallow” derives from an Old English name, thought by some to mean “cleft stick” in recognition of the tail shape, but others consider that idea to be unsupported speculation. John Gould, who named the bird, considered it to be a harbinger of spring in southern Australia and thus, a welcome sight.

Hirundo neoxena

“Hirundo” is the Latin word for “swallow”. The species name comes from the Greek words *neos*, new, and *xenos*, a guest or a stranger. Thus, it was a “new visiting swallow” (from Gould’s perspective).



A juvenile Welcome Swallow (photo: Leslie Wilson)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC’s Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines) • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT,

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