

# Separation of *Streptoprocne* swifts in the Atlantic forest region

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Assisted by some instructive photographs by Hadoram Shirihai, Guy Kirwan takes us through how to separate White-collared Swift from Biscutate, two of the aerial speedsters in the notoriously tricky *Streptoprocne* genus.

Two species of the genus *Streptoprocne* occur in Brazil, the more familiar White-collared Swift *S. zonaris*, which is a widespread if sometimes regionally localised species in the Neotropics, and the more range-restricted Biscutate Swift *S. biscutata*, which is mapped by Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup> as occurring in north-east Brazil (race *seridoensis*) and from Minas Gerais to Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil (nominate), with a few sight records from north-eastern Argentina<sup>3</sup> and Paraguay<sup>2</sup>.

The single best-known feature separating these two lookalike species is the broken collar of Biscutate Swift, vs. the complete white neckband in White-collared. However, this difference is not easily appreciated on a flying bird, except at close range and given an individual at eye level. Basic resources available to those visiting south-east Brazil, for example, such as Souza<sup>5</sup>, would not assist birders in differentiating these two species given typical views, i.e. from below and usually at some height/distance. Sick<sup>4</sup> mentioned that in Biscutate the white mark on the foreneck, i.e. the front part of the broken ring, is more diamond-shaped, whereas Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup>, in what is perhaps the most detailed text discussing this species' identification, stated that it is the white on the nape that is so shaped. In comparison of specimen material from the Atlantic Forest region (elsewhere the shape of the collar in White-collared can be quite different), I find the white to be of more-or-less even width across the nape in both species, but the nape patch of Biscutate to be much broader than the white on the back of the neck of White-collared. Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup> also pointed to a marginal difference in tail shape between the two species, with that of Biscutate being square-ended and that of White-collared slightly notched. Unfortunately, both species typically fly with the tail closed, often negating any such difference, whilst, furthermore, White-

collared in moult or when very worn also shows a basically squared-off tail.

This short note seeks to provide an illustrated resource to the identification of the two species, clarifying existing knowledge of features useful for their separation. It should be remarked at the outset that successful use of the features proposed here depends on good to optimal viewing conditions and some prior experience, at least of White-collared Swift. My own experience of these two species is reasonably comprehensive. I have observed White-collared on numerous occasions during the last 17 years, virtually throughout its range in Neotropics, from Mexico and Cuba to southern Brazil, and involving many thousands of individuals. My experience of Biscutate has been annual since 1995 and again probably involves thousands of birds. Specimens in The Natural History Museum (Tring, U.K.) and Museu Nacional (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) were checked in order to confirm some features. The photographs on which this article is based were taken in November 2006 in the Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, Brazil, where in the valley of the rio Cipó below the plateau large numbers of both species frequently feed together at low levels in the evening, permitting excellent comparative views. Thus, *contra* Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup>, it is possible to find White-collared and Biscutate mixed together in ostensibly the same flock (something that Belton<sup>1</sup> noticed in Rio Grande do Sul).

Given perfect views, most observers (especially those unfamiliar with Biscutate) will find it preferable to concentrate on the neck

Figure 1, 5–6. White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris*, Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, Brazil, November 2006

Figure 2–4. Biscutate Swift *Streptoprocne biscutata*, Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, Brazil, November 2006



(Figures 1-6. all Hadoram Shirihai / The photographic handbook to taxonomy of birds of the world)

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pattern. The break in the white neckband of Biscutate is frequently difficult to see though with patience can usually be discerned (Figs. 2 and 4). What is easier to appreciate is that the white on the foreneck is overall distinctly broader than on White-collared and, rather than forming a distinctly ragged (or wavy) line which points downwards and away from the bill (as in White-collared), is slightly rhomboid (diamond-shaped) or triangular and points upwards towards the chin (Figs. 1–2). At its most extreme, the foreneck of Biscutate can appear as if bedecked in a cowboy's neckerchief (see Fig. 3). Furthermore, at least at some angles, it can appear as if White-collared is longer necked, because the collar is set forward of the wings (Fig. 6), whereas in Biscutate the lower edge of the white always seems to fall level with the leading edge of the wings. In my experience, it is not the patch of white on the hindneck therefore that appears differently shaped in comparison with White-collared, *contra* Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup>.

Given particularly good views, especially of birds head-on, one can also note the uniformly coloured head of White-collared, whereas Biscutate shows an obviously paler (greyer) forehead, chin and lores (see Fig. 4), which is mentioned by Sick<sup>4</sup> and Chantler & Driessens<sup>2</sup>, but is not explicitly suggested as a means of distinguishing the two species. As can be seen in

“Given perfect views, most observers will find it preferable to concentrate on the neck pattern”

the photographs here (Figs. 4–5), tail-shape can be used to confirm identification, provided the bird opens the tail!

Finally, although measurements do not suggest the following to be strictly true, I often (but not always) find that Biscutate appears slightly shorter and blunter winged than White-collared, with the result that the wings can appear slightly less rakish and therefore somewhat squarer shaped than in White-collared. These, however, are subjective impressions which are unlikely to appear true under all circumstances or conditions, or to all observers, require comparative views, and should never be used without first considering the main features highlighted here.

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