

RED-RUMPED SWALLOW: THE HOST WHO DISAPPEARS WITHOUT A TRACE

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The barn swallow is the guest who takes over the home, becoming the fulcrum of chatter (even heart-to-hearts) and every activity. The red-rumped swallow is the little boy at home, sidling up to the mother at the hazy sight of visitor, and staying on the sidelines. When a crowd troops into the living room, he would disappear without a trace.

The analogy encapsulates barn swallow and red-rumped swallow sightings in Chennai. The barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) is a veritable army of many thousands taking over the waterbodies, marshes and any wet locations in the metro and its outskirts. Though a resident in Chennai and also much of the country, the red-rumped swallow (*Cecropis daurica*) remains in the shadows, and may not be easily noticed even while it is close behind the barn swallow.

Ornithologist V Santharam can speak about the red-rumped swallow from two perspectives, having observed the species in Chennai and also at Rishi Valley near Madanapalle.

“In Chennai, the migratory barn swallows are found in massive numbers, but the resident red-rumped swallows are seen only at certain times of the year, mostly during summer,” notes Santharam. In Rishi Valley, the red-rumped swallow is a commoner, more easily sighted, and there, it may feel emboldened to bare its soul. At Rishi Valley, there is the greater possibility of watching how these two swallow species respond to each other’s presence.

Santharam continues: “Generally, when I look out for red-rumped swallows, I see them flying at least 50 to 60 feet above the ground. Barn swallows would be flying at lower heights compared to red-rumped swallows. Barn swallows can actually be seen on the road, and over the water surface. Due to competition, they segregate themselves into their own niches.”

The ornithologist notes that in the absence of competitors, the red-rumped swallow might actually exercise the option of dropping altitude.

“Sometimes, you do find some kind of mixing (of barn and red-rumped swallows) happening, probably when food is extremely abundant.”

In Chennai, the barn swallows are known as mosquito slayers, gobbling them up as they rocket over waterbodies and random collections of water. At the height in which they fly, what can the red-rumped swallows have for dinner?

“In Rishi Valley, as the sun is coming up over the forest that we have, many small insets rise up, and they are food for the red-rumped swallows. Barn swallows also go up, and that is when food is in abundance and there is no need for segregation.”

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