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the edible

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In a letter appearing in the correspondence section of The China Journal of February Mr. F. N. Chasen, Curator of Raffles Museum, Singapore, asks for information regarding the occurrence in Chinese literature of references to the famous delicacy edible birds' nests. Since subject has been brought up a brief account of the birds themselves prove of interest.

While the species which produce the edible nests so beloved by the Chinese epicure have been known to science for some considerable time, it is surprising how little literature upon them is in existence and how little seems really to be known about them. This must be attributed mainly to the inaccessible and out of the way places they inhabit, possibly on account of the persecution they have suffered at the hands of man.

They belong to a genus of small swifts known as *Collocalia*, which in turn belongs to the sub-family *Chaeturinae* of the swift family *Micropodidae*.

Some thirteen or so species and subspecies of *Collocalia* are now recognized, only some of which can be classed as true edible swifts. As up they are scattered throughout the Malayan region, extending westwards to Ceylon and northwards to India, Assam, Indo-China and South South-east China as far as Formosa. Some forms even range as far as Central China, while others extend southwards to Australia. While those that build edible nests do so in more or less inaccessible caves, usually in cliffs at no great distance from the sea, their favourite haunts the high, rocky cliffs of the smaller islands off the larger islands or mainland, there are a number of species whose nests for various ns are useless for food, and, like martins and swallows, build in sheltered cliffs or under the eaves or roofs of human habitations. They are all small birds, about the size of swallows, for which they might easily be mistaken were it not for the characteristic flight of the swifts the more or less uniformly dull plumage they display.

The most important species appears to be *Collocalia fuciphaga* (Thunb.), the true edible swift, whose white nests, made from the birds' own saliva which hardens in the air, are free from foreign materials, such as feathers, hairs or grass stems, and fetch the highest price in the Chinese market, namely, from \$10 to \$20 per catty (1¼ to 1 1/3 lbs.). This bird is found in Sumatra, Java and Borneo, a subspecies, *C. f. capnitis*, Thayer and Bangs, having been recorded from Wan-tao Shan in Hupeh Province, Central China. The commoner species *C. esculenta* (L.) is found all over the Malay Archipelago and on into Formosa, a subspecies *C. e. linchi*, Horsf. & Mr. being found only in Java.

The forms that do not yield edible nests are *C. francica* (Gm.) and its subspecies, *C. f. brevirostris*, (Mc.Clell.), and *C. gigas*, Hart & Butl., from various parts of the Malay region. *C. inopina inopina*, and *C. i. pellos*, both of Thayer and Bangs, have been recorded from China, the former from Hupeh in June, and the latter as breeding in the mountains of Szechuan.

Some confusion appears to exist regarding the identity of the makers of the different qualities of nests. By some it has been held that the yellow or brown nests are made by a different species from that which makes the pure white nests, but the best authorities appear to agree that the darker colour of the yellow and brown nests is due to age. The test would seem to be the purity of the nests from material other than the bird's own saliva, and it is the purity of the composition of its nest, which is made of nothing but saliva, that singles out *Collocalia fuciphaga* as the edible nest swift *par excellence*.

The other species all have a greater or lesser extent of foreign material entering into the composition of their nests. Nevertheless, the nests of all the swifts of this group have as their basis hardened saliva, which is produced from glands under the tongues of these birds during the breeding season. It is characteristic of the genus that the birds build in great colonies, frequently the nests adhering to each other in masses. There appears also to be a mixing of certain species in the colonies, which has probably led to the confusion as to the identity of the builders of the different types of nest.

Generally two white eggs are laid in each nest. While the members of the genus *Collocalia* are said not to be migratory, the recording of the three forms in Central China in summer indicates that at least these do not adhere to the general rule.

The nests obtained by professional birds' nests hunters, usually Chinese, or Malays associated with Chinese, vary in quality, the inferior qualities being those containing foreign matter and not consisting of pure hardened saliva. These run in price from \$80 to \$100 per hundred catties (125 to 133 lbs.). It has been estimated that the trade in edible birds' nests in the Malay region runs to £250,000 a year, but if the nests gathered along the China coasts and in Formosa be taken into consideration the total trade in this commodity must be nearly double this figure.

The value of birds' nests imported into China during each of the years 1923 to 1925 exceeded a million taels, and since then has fluctuated about the same figure. Of this more than half came into the port of

Shanghai, while most of it came from Singapore, Java and Hongkong. Some came from India, and French Indo-China, while a certain amount came from such distant places as Egypt, Turkey and Persia. With our present knowledge of the distribution of the genus *Collocalia* it seems extremely improbable that birds' nests are produced in any of the last three countries, and one naturally wonders how they come to be sending any of this commodity to China.

The Chinese name for the first quality of birds' nest, that is, the pure article without admixture of hair, feathers or grass stems, is kuan yen (官燕), while the poorer quality is known as mao yen (毛燕). The bird that produces the nests is called simply yen tze (燕子), a swift or swallow.