

a call on balance of probability, and for admission to the list, the balance of probability must be judged to be overwhelmingly in favour of natural occurrence in a wild state’.

In the case of the Variable Sunbird, we do not even have adequate data to even judge if the species is capable of long distance migration. Thus, a policy, even if formulated, may leave a lot to be desired. Many countries keep such species in a separate list, which is again problematic as the origin of many such birds is almost impossible to determine. Thus, there is a difference of opinion on how to treat such records. If or when a policy is formulated in Gujarat on how to treat probable ship-assisted vagrants, such records can be re-evaluated.

Though we have added the Variable Sunbird to the Gujarat checklist, we urge bird watchers here to make inquiries regarding the smuggling or trade of exotic bird species in Gujarat. If more information is available about the pet trade or ship-assisted vagrants, we will have a relook at these records in the future and decide whether this species should be retained in the state checklist. We keep the Variable Sunbird in the Gujarat checklist with the understanding that these records will be reviewed if more information is available. It is also possible that information regarding its migration could be obtained in the future, confirming these records as of genuine vagrants. Thus, while adding this species to the Gujarat checklist at present, we will review it after a few years subject to more data being available.

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## A ‘putative’ Eastern Yellow Wagtail from Gondal, Rajkot District

**Hemanya Radadia:** 31/C, “Shivkunj”, Shardanagar Society Main Road, Kalawad Road, Rajkot. [radadiahemanya@gmail.com](mailto:radadiahemanya@gmail.com)



The Yellow Wagtail is now split into two separate species; Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) and Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) (Banks *et al.* 2004, Dickinson & Christidis 2014, del Hoyo & Collar 2018, Tyler & Christie 2018). The taxonomy of Eastern Yellow Wagtail is still not resolved but Alström & Mild (2003) and Dickinson & Christidis (2014) recognise three subspecies: the nominate *tschutschensis*, *taivana* and *macronyx*. The occurrence of the Eastern Yellow Wagtail in India was disputed and it was treated as ‘hypothetical’ in the region by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), who, for this species, stated that confirmation was needed regarding its presence here, but gave its probable occurrence in the Andaman Islands and India. However, recent sightings of Eastern Yellow Wagtails, in the winter, of the subspecies *tschutschensis* and *taivana* from Assam and the Andaman Islands proved that the Eastern Yellow Wagtail does occur in India (Vishwanathan *et al.* 2017).

### Introduction

The Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) is a polytypic species, with several recognised subspecies. Many of these subspecies like *M. f. beema*, *M. f. lutea*, *M. f. feldegg*, *M. f. thunbergi* etc. winter in India and the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). The taxonomy is complex and many of the subspecies are known to hybridize fairly regularly, thereby confusing distributional limits (Tyler & Christie 2018).

## Yellow Wagtail....

### Observation

On 21 January 2018, I was participating in a waterbird count on the outskirts of Gondal city in Rajkot district with Rajesh Radadia. On the banks of Veri Lake (22° 01' 06" N, 70° 48' 23" E), we saw several Yellow Wagtails of *thunbergi* and *beema* subspecies, along with a Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*).

Here, I observed a very unusual Yellow Wagtail. A photograph is given here. It was observed at the edge of the lake in an area which was barren and salty, with some scattered, dried vegetation. I did not note the call of this unusual plumaged individual as it did not call while we observed it. Since we were involved in the bird count, we then went to another area. I could take only one photo of this individual.

After coming home, I studied the photograph in detail. The bird looked very different from the usual Yellow Wagtail taxa seen here. It did not match with any illustrations given for Yellow Wagtail in Grimmett *et al.* (2011). The bird had prominent yellowish and white supercilium, blackish ear coverts and lores, and olive coloured crown which contrasted with the ear coverts. The throat, breast and vent were yellow, and looked freshly moulted, while the nape and mantle were greyish, with worn edges to greater coverts, indicating retained juvenile feathers. The freshly moulted head and some underparts were strongly contrasting with the juvenile, unmoulted upperparts, indicating that this was a first-winter bird moulting into first-summer plumage. I tentatively identified it as an Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the *taivana* subspecies.

### Discussion

It was apparent to me that identification of any individual of a probable Eastern Yellow Wagtail, seen here in the winter, was quite complicated as it is well known that there are many hybrids of *M. flava* like '*superciliaris*' and '*xanthophrys*', which are similar to Eastern Yellow Wagtail and difficult to separate. I decided to contact several experts for their opinions on this bird. Their opinions are given here.

Mike Prince (*in litt*, email dated 25 February 2018), Dipu K. (*in litt*, email dated 6 March 2018), and Arend Wassink (*in litt*, email dated 25 February 2018) opined that it was not possible to safely identify this individual to any particular subspecies as the plumage did not match with known typical plumages; it looked like an intergrade, similar to a '*xanthophrys*' type individual. However, both '*superciliaris*' and '*xanthophrys*' usually have a dark crown, which was lacking here. But, it was possible that this individual was a result of crossing and backcrossing of genes of different subspecies (Arend Wassink, *in litt*). Thus, a few experts thought that while *taivana* could not be ruled out completely, it was not possible to conclusively identify this individual.

Nils Van Duivendijk (*in litt*, email dated 25 February 2018) opined that 'to me, this looks good for a first-winter *taivana* which is often just grey-and-white in autumn, and perhaps with some yellow developed in the winter range. For a first-winter *taivana*, it is not strange to have grey upperparts and no complete yellow supercilium yet. The solid dark ear-coverts and lore, just a little white below the eye and very prominent supercilium is of course just okay. Furthermore, the mainly (or even all?) wing-feathers are worn juvenile-type, and it could perhaps be a late hatched bird from anywhere, which has not moulted wing-coverts yet?' However, he suggested the image be sent to Per Alström or Paul Leader for their opinion as they were more experienced and experts in this.

I sent the image to Per Alström, and he replied (*in litt*, email dated 21 March 2018) that it was a first-winter male *taivana* moulting into first-summer plumage.

Thus, after obtaining many expert opinions, I identified this individual as a 'putative' Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the *taivana* subspecies. There is only one other recent record of Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the *taivana* subspecies from Gujarat, which was of an individual seen in Chhari-Dhand, in Kachchh (Varu 2016). This record was also treated as a 'probable' Eastern Yellow Wagtail.

These two records indicate the possible presence of the species in the state and Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the *taivana* subspecies could be a probable addition to the state checklist.

[The identification of the Eastern Yellow Wagtail is very difficult, which is further complicated by the occurrence of similar looking Western Yellow Wagtail intergrades/hybrids like '*superciliaris*' and '*xanthophrys*'. There are lot of intermediate plumages and some individuals are very difficult to assign to any subspecies; see discussions in Garner (2015) and Perlman (2016) for more details of 'odd looking' Yellow Wagtails seen in the Middle East and Israel. There is a record of a hybrid, possibly a '*xanthophrys*' Yellow Wagtail from Little Rann of Kachchh (Pawar 2011). This individual shows black crown and ear coverts, and a yellow supercilium, which is typical. Thus, such hybrids have been noted in Gujarat earlier.

While typical or classic plumaged Eastern Yellow Wagtails are easy to identify, odd looking individuals, seen in the winter as vagrants in non-breeding plumage are difficult and the only way to identify such individuals is by DNA and vocal analysis. The call of Eastern Yellow Wagtail is harsher than the call of *M. flava* and is more similar to Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) (Alström & Mild 2003, Bot *et al.* 2014).

In first winter plumage, Eastern Yellow Wagtails can have a 'grey and white' rather than the usual 'brown and yellow' plumage, but there is considerable overlap and identification is not easy; Eastern Yellow Wagtails are best identified by their flight calls (Bot *et al.*

2014). In Alström & Mild (2003), Photo 152, taken in December in Hong Kong, a first-winter male taivana, with moulted adult-type head and some feathers of the underparts (with yellow) is shown. This individual is somewhat similar to the bird seen here, though the individual from Gondal shows a more advanced moult with much of the underparts looking more yellowish.

Regarding records of Eastern Yellow Wagtails from Gujarat, the individual seen by Varu (2016) in Kachchh was treated as a probable taivana. When this record was published, the occurrence of Eastern Yellow Wagtail in India was not confirmed and all the records from the country were under review. Hence, the identity of this individual could not be confirmed at that time. There is another record of a probable *tschutschensis* from Jamnagar (Agarwal 2016). The record given here of a probable taivana is now the third possible sighting from Gujarat. For the Jamnagar individual, *tschutschensis* is very similar to the 'dombrowskii' Western Yellow Wagtail. Expert opinion was sought for that individual, and though it was thought to be similar to a *tschutschensis*, the identification could not be confirmed beyond any doubt.

For the Kachchh bird by Varu (2016), the crown is of the same colour as the mantle (both olive-greenish coloured), and a broad yellow supercilium is present. The ear coverts are dark and contrast with the crown, and the throat is yellow. But, only one photo was available and so other features could not be studied in detail. Also, the supercilium curves slightly near the ear coverts (as seen from this angle) and this was a cause for concern as this feature is usually seen in intergrades. But, other features do match well with taivana and it lacks a darker crown usually seen in hybrids; expert opinion indicated that it could be a taivana but more images were needed for confirmation. For the individual seen in Gondal, the identification is even more difficult and experts were divided. But Per Alström, who has vast experience of wagtails, opined that it was a first-winter taivana moulting into first summer plumage.

Further molecular and vocal studies from Gujarat and India are required for this species. However, the Eastern Yellow Wagtail has now been accepted in the India checklist (Vishwanathan et al. 2017) and so its occurrence in the country is now confirmed. The identification of the individual seen in Kachchh and this bird seen in Gondal can be confirmed beyond any doubt only by DNA and vocal analysis. But till this issue is resolved by such studies, we can treat these photographic records as evidence of their occurrence in Gujarat. We feel that for the Eastern Yellow Wagtail, as a special case, a practical and pragmatic approach needs to be taken. So, we have decided to accept the species to the Gujarat checklist based on the records from Kachchh and this record from Gondal. This can be revised in the future if more data (both molecular and vocal) is available. Till that time, we accept these photo records. Hence, the Eastern Yellow Wagtail is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat – Eds]

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