

Book Review

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Title: 'Birds of Banni Grassland' - 302 pages

Authors: Mukesh H. Koladiya, Nikunj B. Gajera, A. K. Roy Mahato, V. Vijay Kumar & R. V. Asari : Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology (GUIDE), Bhuj.

Publisher: Ravi Sankaran Foundation 2016.

The book is a compilation of information and images about the birds of Banni Grassland in Kachchh. The Banni region has always been a hotspot among birdwatchers. Hence, the publication of a book on the birds of this region is obviously fascinating. The book has a good printing quality and an impressive layout, but we are rather disappointed with the status and remarks given for many species, as well as the fact that the photographs given for many species are not correct.

Many birds mentioned in the book have, in fact, never been reported from the Banni area, like Black-crowned Sparrow Lark, Jungle Crow, Sand Lark, Common Raven, Oriental Magpie Robin, Ashy Prinia, and Spot-billed Pelican. Surprisingly, a few species given in the book have never been reported or properly documented from entire Kachchh, like Spotted Dove, Large Grey Babbler, Jungle Babbler and Hen Harrier.

There are many identification errors in the photographs given with the species descriptions. Some examples are given below:

- Green Sandpiper: the image is of a Wood Sandpiper
- Terek Sandpiper: the image is of a Common Greenshank
- Jack Snipe: the image is of a Common Snipe
- Eurasian Hobby: the image is of a Common Kestrel
- Booted Eagle: the image is of an Oriental Honey Buzzard
- Lesser Spotted Eagle: the image is of a Steppe Eagle
- White-rumped Vulture: the image is of an Eurasian Griffon
- Red-collared Dove: the image is of an Eurasian Collared Dove
- Savanna Nightjar: the image is of an Indian Nightjar
- Alpine Swift: the image is of a juvenile Wire-tailed Swallow
- Brown Shrike : the image is of an Isabelline Shrike
- Blyth's Reed Warbler: the image is of a Paddyfield Warbler
- Streak-throated Swallow: the image is of a Red-rumped Swallow
- Marshall's lora: the image is of a Common lora
- Paddyfield pipit: the image is of a Tawny Pipit
- Tawny Pipit: the image is of a Paddyfield Pipit
- Whiskered Tern: the image is out focus and/but it is definitely not a Whiskered Tern.

It seems that the authors did not search the literature thoroughly as they have missed many species that have been

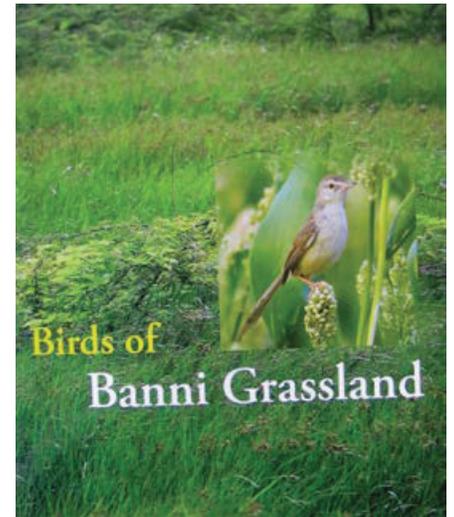
reported from the Banni region, and which are seen here. A list of such species is given below:

Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Sykes's Warbler, Red-naped Shaheen, Greater Short-toed Lark, Bimaculated Lark, Blue Rock Thrush, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Pallid Scops Owl, Broad-billed

Sandpiper, Common Shelduck, Pacific Golden Plover, Oriental Pratincole, Collared Pratincole, Lesser Kestrel, Pale Rock Sparrow, Caspian Plover, Water Pipit, Tree Pipit, Common Rose-finch, Lesser Crested Tern, Greater Sandplover, Sanderling, Sykes's Nightjar, Himalayan Griffon, Red-necked Phalarope, Heuglin's Gull, Common Buzzard, Common Starling, Trumpeter Finch, Sand Martin, Ruddy Turnstone, White-winged Tern, Common Woodshrike, Steppe Grey Shrike, Greenish Warbler, Brown Rock Chat, Ferruginous Duck, White-browed Wagtail and Water Rail.

The authors have mentioned many species to be common in Banni, but in fact, they are very rare or uncommon, like Brahminy Kite, Bonelli's Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle (now Indian Spotted Eagle), Osprey, Watercock, Black-necked Grebe, Singing Bushlark etc. Some specific examples are given below:

- Yellow-wattled Lapwing is mentioned as common but it is in fact rare in Banni. It is a bird of stony gravel area and fallow fields, otherwise common in mainland of Kachchh.
- Red-necked Falcon is mentioned as fairly common in Banni. This bird is getting rare in entire Kachchh and its sightings are very few.
- Black Francolin is mentioned by the authors as a fairly common bird in Banni. It is an uncommon species. It can be seen in the agriculture fields on the fringes of Banni, and that too not commonly.
- Demoiselle Crane is described by the authors as common in Banni, but there are hardly a few records of this species in Banni. However, they are seen commonly in Khadir, Rapar and Mandvi in Kachchh.



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- Indian Bushlark is mentioned as common and seen in flocks in *Suaeda* habitat. It is an uncommon bird in Banni and seen in pairs or in small flocks in the scrub area and stony gravel habitat like Kiro hill, and on the fringe of Banni.
- Greylag Goose is mentioned as fairly common and in the remarks it is written 'Recorded in all water bodies in groups of 15–30 individuals'. This is not correct. This species is no more wintering in Kachchh now. Maharao Vijayrajaji had recorded good numbers of this species at Chhari-Dhandh in 1912-13 and there is a single sight record from Chhari-Dhandh by the first author along with a BNHS team in 1991. After that, there is no record of this species from Banni.
- Sykes's Crested Lark is mentioned as common in Banni, which is again not correct. It is a bird found in main land of Kachchh and seen near the villages, exploring the cowdung and cattle shed areas in stony and gravel habitat. There are hardly few records on the fringes of Banni; in the main Banni they are absent.

The authors have mentioned the status of many species as rare, but in fact are commonly seen in Banni, like White Stork, Barn Swallow, Whiskered Tern, Bluethroat, Clamorous Reed Warbler, Chestnut-shouldered Petronia etc. Some specific examples are given below:

- White-tailed Lapwing is mentioned as rare but it can be seen in flocks of 20-45 in Chhari-Dhand, Servo-Dhand, Vakeria-Dhand and other water bodies of Banni in the winter season.
- Black-headed Bunting is given as rare and seen from November to February. The fact is, it is a gregarious species and passes through Kachchh in late March to April when the wheat is harvested. It is not a rare bird in Banni and Kachchh.

The periods of occurrence of many passage migrant species are not described correctly. For Red-backed Shrike, the book states that this species is seen from July to February, which is incorrect. It is a passage migrant in Kachchh from August till October. Similar mistakes are seen in descriptions for other passage migrants, like Eurasian Nightjar, Cuckoo, and also for Spotted Flycatcher.

As per the book, Common Hoopoe, Paddyfield Warbler, Black Redstart, Pied Bushchat, Common Stonechat, Desert Wheatear, Variable Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, and Long-billed Pipit are seen throughout the year in Banni, which is not correct. It is well known fact that they all are winter visitors here. Also Red Collared-Dove is not a resident as mentioned

in the book, but a monsoon breeding visitor to Banni. Some specific examples are given below:

- Alpine Swift is mentioned to occur in Banni throughout the year. This information is incorrect. Alpine swifts are seen from December to February, as a gregarious passage migrant, through the Banni grasslands.
- Black Kite is given as resident and seen round the year. Actually, *Milvus migrans lineatus* (Black-eared Kite), is seen from December to February in Banni. The resident *Milvus migrans govinda* does not occur in Banni.
- Steppe Eagle is mentioned as migratory from November to February and breeding here from December to March. Steppe Eagle is not known to breed in India and no nest has been recorded so far.
- Grey Hypocolius occurring from July to February is incorrect. It is seen from early November till April end based on our study of this species here.
- Stoliczka's Bushchat or White-browed Bushchat is given as a resident. But it is a wintering species in Banni. How can the authors know the clutch size of this species when nobody so far has found a nest and studied it? Further, we do not know where this species breeds.
- Rufous-tailed Wheatear is given as 'from July to February' and its status is given as 'common'. It is seen from October till March end and is a rare winter visitor, seen in rocky and stony areas like 'Pakhi bheet' near Kiro hill.

Sight records of some species are questionable, as there is no photographic proof. These include Long-eared Owl and Habshi Flamingo. There is no confirmed record of Long-eared Owl from Banni. Also, there is no species called 'Habshi Flamingo' – this is a juvenile of Flamingo, which is dark brownish / blackish in colour.

In conclusion, the authors' efforts in bringing out 'Birds of Banni Grassland' are laudable, but it would have been a better publication if attention was given on species identification, status, distribution, selection of photographs and proper referencing of available literature. The main aim of this review is to avoid a possible misunderstanding about the ornithology of Kachchh among birders, researchers, academicians and general readers. □

Erratum

Flamingo 8 (3) - 12 (4) : 5 - under Persian Shearwater, the sentence 'Recent sighting during a pelagic trip in January 2016 (E Munshi, eBird)' should read 'A sighting in RNBWS database in Arabian Sea, about 125 NM west of Kachchh (Observation ID: 1778)'.