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European Nightjar: a passage migrant in Kachchh

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- *europaeus* – N & C Europe, east through NC Asia (mainly South of c. 60° N) to Lake Baikal region.
- *meridionalis* – NW Africa and Iberia, east through S Europe, Crimea, Caucasus and Ukraine to NW Iran and Caspian Sea.
- *sarudnyi* – Kazakhstan from Caspian Sea, east to Kyrgyzstan, Tarbagatai and Altai Mountains.
- *unwini* – Iraq and Iran, east to W Tien Shan and Kashgar region, north to S Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and south to W & N Pakistan.
- *plumipes* – E Tien Shan (NW China and W & S Mongolia).
- *dementievi* – S Transbaikalia and NE Mongolia.

The European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*), also known as Eurasian Nightjar, is a nightjar that breeds throughout Northern and Central Europe; from South Scandinavia, western and eastern Europe, NW Africa, to Central Asia, NW China and NE Mongolia; it is highly migratory and winters in sub-Saharan Africa (Cleere & Christie 2017). Despite decreasing population trends, due to its large numbers and huge breeding range, it is classified by the IUCN as 'Least Concern' (BirdLife International 2016). The main threats to the species are habitat loss, disturbance and a reduction of its insect prey through pesticide use.

The preferred habitat of the European Nightjar is dry, open country with some trees and small bushes, such as forest clearings or woodlands. There are six recognised subspecies, although the differences are mainly clinal; birds become smaller and paler in the east of the range and the males have larger white wing spots. Birds of intermediate appearance occur where the subspecies' ranges overlap. The subspecies and their ranges, taken from Cleere & Christie (2017), are as follows:

However, there is some variation in the descriptions of the subspecies. Cleere (2010) describes the subspecies *unwini* as being greyish, while Ayé *et al.* (2012) describe this as paler, plainer and more greyish with more sparsely marked undertail-coverts.

For the Indian Subcontinent, It is said to be widely distributed and a common breeding bird and passage migrant in Pakistan, with a few birds possibly over-wintering occasionally (Cleere & Christie 2017). For India, it is an autumn passage migrant in north-western India, mainly in Kachchh, with stragglers recorded from Jodhpur (Rajasthan), Mumbai city (Maharashtra) and Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh) (Ali & Ripley 2001). Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show it as a passage migrant in Kachchh, and give isolated records from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

For Gujarat, it has been recorded only in Kachchh as an autumn passage migrant. Lester (1904) does not mention sighting the European Nightjar in Kachchh. Ali (1945) noted the European Nightjar in Kachchh, from 17 September to

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24 September, and stated that it was fairly abundant in the third week of September, with the subspecies given as *unwini* (= *unwini*). However, from a study of specimens by Abdulali (1972), both *unwini* and *sarudnyi* are given for Gujarat; specimens from Kachchh are mainly *unwini*, with only one specimen of *sarudnyi* from Jalandar Bet (Kachchh). Ali (1954) noted that most birds were gone by the third week of October, and were not observed on return (spring) migration. However, Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) states that, 'it is a post monsoon migrant departing in March' and 'it migrates to Saurashtra in the winter season', which is rather surprising, as the European Nightjar is not known to be a winter visitor here, and is only an autumn passage migrant. It is further stated by the author that the birds were seen roosting under *Acacia* sp. trees, and were also flushed from salty reed marshes.



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Observations

I have been observing the European Nightjars during autumn passage in Kachchh. Sightings of the species collected from Kachchh are given below in the table. Inferring from the sightings listed in the table, the European Nightjar arrives in Kachchh, mainly in September, but few birds may arrive as early as August. The majority of sightings have been in September, with most of the birds departing by October.

There is only one recent sighting of the European Nightjar from outside Gujarat; an individual was photographed in August 2011, in Jodhpur, Rajasthan (Devasar 2011, photo by Pradip Krishen, posted on the OBI website). All the other recent records of the species are only from Kachchh. A total of 50 European Nightjars were seen in the Banni region of Kachchh from 25 September 2015 to 4 October 2015 (Tiwari 2016). Hence, it is a fairly common autumn passage migrant in Kachchh.

Roosting: The birds roost in tropical thorn forests, with sparse shrubs and usually in rocky terrain. They roost on boulders and rocks, surrounded by shrubs and *Acacia* sp. trees, relying on their sublime camouflage and surrounding vegetation for safety.

Feeding Habits: Some European Nightjars feeding in the Banni region were observed to perch on *Salvadora persica* branches in the night. The stomach contents of a road kill specimen found on 12 September 2008 contained large brown beetles, which had been partly digested. The stomach contents of specimens collected by Ali (1954) in Kachchh contained Dung Beetles and Crickets.

Sightings of European Nightjar in Kachchh

Sighting By	Date	Place	Remarks
Satheesan <i>et.al.</i> (1994)	26 September 1987	Bhuj, Kachchh	Aircraft – hit bird (probable)
Jugal Tiwari	12 September 2008	Kachchh	Road kill, male, stomach content - beetles
Jugal Tiwari	19 September 2008	Kachchh	Road kill, male
Jugal Tiwari	24 September 2008	Kachchh	Road kill, female
Jugal Tiwari & Atul Jain	October 2008	Gachdo, Kachchh	Roosting in stony and hilly area
Jugal Tiwari	29 September 2015	Near Jatavira, Kachchh	Resting on the ground at sunset
Veer Vaibhav Mishra	29 September 2015	Near Jatavira, Kachchh	Road kill, female
Veer Vaibhav Mishra	30 September 2015	Near Jatavira, Kachchh	
Author's sighting	11 September 2016	Dhinodhar hill, Kachchh	Male roosting on rocky slope among <i>Acacia</i> sp. trees and shrubs
Author's sighting & Jugal Tiwari	12 September 2016	Near Dhinodhar, Aral village, Kachchh	Male roosting, <i>unwini</i> subspecies

Vocalisation: At 11:00 hrs on 29 September 2015, in the Banni Grassland near Chhari-Dhand, a single bird was heard calling; the call was a territorial 'churr', similar to the calls described by Cleere (2010). But generally, European Nightjars are silent during migration. Ali (1954) noted that the birds were silent except for an occasional quick repeated 'chuck-chuck-chuck' call.

The European Nightjar is a regular passage migrant through north-west India. The subspecies that passes through the region is *unwini*, and the passage of *sarudnyi/plumipes* subspecies is also probable. Birders in north-western India should keep a watch for the movements of European Nightjars during the autumn passage migration season from August till October. Though it has not been noted outside Kachchh, it is very probable that it could occur in suitable habitat in Saurashtra too. We need to conduct surveys in other areas of the state for this species in the autumn migration season.

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Ruff in almost full breeding plumage in Jamnagar

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Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax* or *Calidris pugnax*), is a common winter migrant to Gujarat (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). It is commonly seen in Jamnagar in the salt pans and the coastal areas of the city.

On 16 June 2017, I was watching and photographing birds in a marshy wetland near the Gandhinagar area of Jamnagar. There, I saw that three Ruffs flew in and started feeding. I was surprised to see that two of the birds were males in almost full breeding plumage. I took a few pictures of the two birds. The third individual was in non-breeding plumage and so could not be sexed. It can be seen from the photos that the birds were not in their full breeding plumage, as the head tufts were missing. However, the extensive white coloured 'ruff', black breast and the black scapulars were clearly seen in one bird while the other bird had a fully developed black 'ruff' and blackish upper parts.

The presence of these birds in mid-June in Jamnagar is unusual and rare but it has been reported earlier. An individual with a blackish, extensive 'ruff' was photographed in Jamnagar earlier (Patel 2009), and according to senior birdwatchers here, individuals have been reported in similar, near full breeding plumage in Jamnagar area a few times before. A sighting of a Ruff in active moult, starting to acquire breeding plumage, seen by Rajdeepsinh Jadeja in Bedi area, Jamnagar, on 10 May 2017 (*pers. comm.*), confirms that some birds start to acquire breeding plumage in their wintering areas.

