

Field notes on Sociable Lapwing in Kachchh

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Sociable Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarius*), also known as Sociable Plover, is a critically endangered species (Birdlife International 2015). A few wintering sites were known in India. For ex. Little Rann of Kachchh, Tal Chappar (Rajasthan) and a few other non-reliable locations like Bharatpur, Rajasthan. For Kachchh, Ali (1945) stated that 'Lester notes it as a common cold weather visitor' but failed to find any during his surveys of Kachchh in 1943-1944. However in recent years, there are many records from various locations in Gujarat. Kachchh is a favoured area for this bird (Tiwari 2010). I present here my field notes regarding observations of Sociable Lapwings from winter of 2008 onwards in Kachchh:



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Winter of 2008-2009

30 Sociable Lapwings were seen in Great Rann of Kachchh on 17 November 2008, at 13.00 hrs. The habitat was a fallow field, near the salt-encrusted areas, with much *Cressa cretica* vegetation. The birds were quite bold and remained undisturbed, as they were seen close to areas where some labourers were working.

Winter of 2009-2010

On 16 December 2009, a total of 57 Sociable Lapwings were seen in Banni area and on the same day about 6 km away near Chhari-Dhandh, 3 more individuals were seen. So a total of 60 Sociable Lapwings were seen by me on that day. This was probably the single largest flock from India in recent times. These birds stayed till 15 February 2010. RSPB Scientist Peter Ekers visited the site with me and observed the flock. Some observations made during this period are given below:

Sociable Lapwings feed in open grassland with *Cressa cretica* dominated short halophyte vegetation. They roost on the ground during the day. They may venture for feeding in *Suaeda fruticosa* bushes or scanty *Prosopis juliflora* areas with *Suaeda* and *Cressa* growing nearby. Roosting at night is in open areas of Banni and the Great Rann of Kachchh, similar to roosting grounds of Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella brachydactyla*). Feeding was at a maximum in the evening, just before sunset at 18.30 hrs, when a flock of over 30 birds was seen actively chasing insects in the *Suaeda*, *Cressa*, and *Prosopis* mixed area of Banni on the edge of the Great Rann of Kachchh. On 16 January 2010, 50 Sociable Lapwings were seen over an area of some 2 acres, feeding in loose groups of 4-8 birds. First seen on 16 December 2009 and last seen on 15 February 2010.

Winter of 2010-2011

On 11 November 2010, I saw 20 Sociable Lapwings. This was the third consecutive year that I saw Sociable Lapwings in Kachchh. This year the birds were in a different and remote location. When I went in search of the site where I saw them last year, I could not locate any. But while searching for the birds, I lost my orientation in the Banni desert (3847 km² area!!) and reached an unknown location where I saw 20 individuals.

My feeling is that the vast expanses of Banni offer the right habitat for wintering Sociable Lapwings, and it is very possible that there may be some unknown populations of this critically endangered bird wintering in Kachchh. On 13 January 2011, the Sociable Lapwings were seen in two flocks. Unlike last year, the distance between the two flocks' feeding ranges was 20 km. There were 20 individuals in one flock and 18 in the other.

Winter of 2012-2013

On 20 November 2012, Six Sociable Lapwings were seen in Banni area. I checked for colour tags and PTTs on the birds, but none of the six birds had any.

Winter of 2013-2014

On 3 December 2013, 11 Sociable Lapwings were seen. None of them had any tags, flags or PTTs attached. A total of 19 Sociable Lapwings were seen in Banni this winter from November till January. The 19 Sociable Lapwings were first seen in Banni area on 2 January 2014. They were showing strong site fidelity to their foraging grounds, and were generally seen in one area for 20 days or so and then moving on to habitats which were 3-4 km away or just few hundred meters away. They forage on insects and can scrape the ground, by rubbing the ground with one foot, and moving their body like a see-saw. They were seen with a mixed flock of Pacific Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*) and Kentish Plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus*).

Winter of 2014-2015

No Sociable Lapwings were seen in 2014-2015 season i.e. from January till March 2015.

Winter of 2015-2016

I saw 6 Sociable Lapwings on 27 December 2015.

Data collected over the past few years shows that the Banni area in Great Rann of Kachchh is an important wintering ground for this critically endangered bird. Further surveys are needed in this vast area to see if there are more individuals wintering here.

References:

- Ali, S. 1945. *Birds of Kutch*. Oxford University Press. Bombay.
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