

## Letter to the Editor

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This letter was due for some time but other matters got me preoccupied. It gave me great pleasure to read through the special interim issue of *Flamingo* that carried the 'Status and Distribution of Gujarat Birds' (Ganpule 2016). Having been associated with a couple of similar projects, I can appreciate the time and energy expended to get it right – and I must admit, it has come off very well. My congratulations to Prasad Ganpule and his colleagues in BCSG who made this happen. The photographs used in the inside covers are apt and includes most of the rarities that were photographed recently from the state. I am told that this will be followed up with a field guide and this paper is a precursor for the same. I look forward to see this checklist get used in the field guide.

Checklist creation of this kind comes with its joys and pains. Historical records are full of surprises and the remarkable discoveries one can make while tracking those records are bountiful. One has pick a tiny cross from a field guide and track to its source and evaluate its authenticity, there by learning a lot more than just birds. For example, the details of the sole record of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (*Pterocles alchata*) from Gujarat is hidden in a small note (Nurse 1902) in the JBNHS by Colonel Charles George Nurse and we soon get to learn about his giant contributions to entomology.

As you would probably know, we recently published an 'India Checklist' (Praveen *et al.* 2016) in *Indian BIRDS* and as Prasad would agree – there are three species which are accepted in Gujarat paper that were not accepted in the 'India Checklist'. Acceptance criteria of any checklist is peculiar to that work and hence, there is probably no necessity to align such a criteria as long as the associated documentation is well-aligned. E.g. Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*) may be treated differently in Gujarat and India checklist – but both are congruent in its status that its origins are unknown. Whether to include birds of unknown origin in one's checklist is a decision of the compiler and they may differ. However, I recount an experience where such a decision can impact the future documentation status of species in that region and this experience is quite relevant for another species which Gujarat checklist has accepted - the Rock Martin (*Ptyonoprogne fuligula obsoleta*).

While reviewing species for India checklist, two contentious species that consumed a lot of our time were Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*) and Nordmann's Greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*). Our review of Black Tern is already published (Praveen *et al.* 2014) while Nordmann's Greenshank is underway. Both species share several characteristics:

- a) Listed for India for a fairly long time (Black Tern since 1950, Nordmann's Greenshank since 1881) without specimens of known provenance.
- b) Long distance migrants that may occur anywhere in winter or during passage.

Identification not straight forward and both species have one or two confusion species; White-winged Tern (*C. leucopterus*) & Whiskered Terns (*C. hybrida*) for Black Tern and Common Greenshank (*T. nebularia*) for Nordmann's Greenshank; there by many of the field reports had suspect identification or sometimes wrong identification.

- c) Presence of similar sounding names that create transcription mistakes. Nordmann's Greenshank used to be more popular by the name 'Spotted Greenshank' and is similar sounding to Spotted Redshank (*T. erythropus*). Similarly, 'White-winged Black Tern' was the more popular name for White-winged Tern there by evoking a nomenclature overlap with Black Tern. During our reviews, we found that observers had confused names while reporting formally.

Our understanding of Indian avifaunal distribution has big gaps and hence it is not always possible to challenge an unusual report based on well-known patterns. As these were listed in country checklists, bird-watchers & ornithologists reported them freely in their own lists, mostly without any supporting evidence which has been the norm in the country for a long time. Black Tern has been reported from Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha (Praveen *et al.* 2014). Nordmann's Greenshank reports came from Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand (Praveen *et al.* in prep). Until Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) challenged all records for want to material evidence, both species had a defacto entry into many checklists, papers and books. The situation was not restricted to India but also included Sri Lanka and for the Greenshank, Nepal too. During our reviews, we always made an earnest attempt to prove Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) wrong by sticking to the same high standards but attempting to collect information that they have missed. We succeeded in many cases (e.g. see Delany *et al.* 2014); however we failed for these two cases. Luckily while closing our reviews, Nirav Bhatt & Prasad got an exceptional documentation of Black Tern (Bhatt *et al.* 2014) and hence the species got into the national checklist – however, we are yet to find such an evidence for the Greenshank.

## Letter to the Editor...

Back to the context, situation of Rock Martin from Gujarat is very similar. The species entered the Gujarat checklist in the 19<sup>th</sup>C when Butler (1879) and later Murray (1890) and Ali (1945) listed it for Kachchh/Gujarat and finally Ali & Ripley (1987) included a record citing Ferdinand Stoliczka. Though Stoliczka did indeed visit Gujarat (in 1871-72), neither his writings (Stoliczka 1872a, 1872b) nor any subsequent compilations before Ali & Ripley (1987) included any reference to this record. In fact, Stoliczka reported both Eurasian Crag Martin (*P. rupestris*) and Dusky Crag Martin (*P. concolor*) from Gujarat – all this sounds strange if he did collect it after all. The latest field guides, Kazmierczak (2000) and Grimmett *et al.* (2011), also show an isolated record for Kachchh, with no other record from India. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005, 2012) mention an ‘old record’ from Kachchh, with a comment that it requires substantiation. Neither Butler nor Stoliczka has produced any material evidence in this regard; through preserved specimens in museum or notes on a handled specimen. Now, if this species is listed in a state checklist, it opens up the possibility for resident and visiting birders to ‘tick’ the species without realizing the importance of their record and hence missing on collecting supporting documentation. The species can potentially occur anywhere in Gujarat as it occurs in adjacent Sindh – as a rare winter visitor, on passage or as mere straggler. Hence, it is impossible to refute a sighting purely on range. Identification is not straight forward – it can be confused with both Eurasian Crag Martin and even Dusky Crag Martin in certain plumages and hence mere statements like “I saw it well” or and “I am confident” unfortunately cannot stand an independent assessment. Lastly, there will be nomenclature confusion in the future with Pale Martin [Pale Sand Martin] (*Riparia diluta*) – a completely different genus – just because both species are present in the default state checklist.

I must mention that I am not challenging any particular record of this species, I am only trying to impress upon checklist compilers the greater role they play in bringing clarity (or confusion) to the bird-watchers of a region. It may sound unwieldy that Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) used a golden sword to slash a certain amount of ornithological information from the country; and we as checklist compilers for the country decided to follow the same rigor. However, the thought process for doing that had a strong background rationale and undeniably brought in greater clarity. It enabled future field workers to take a fresh look and then take efforts to provide exemplary documentation for novelties as did Nirav & Prasad for the Black Tern (Bhatt *et al.* 2014).

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