

Malabar Lark in south Gujarat

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Malabar Lark (*Galerida malabarica*) is a medium sized, fairly sturdy lark with prominent spiky crest, rufous upperparts with strong blackish streaking and heavily spotted breast and buffish underparts, especially on the breast and flanks (Alström 2017). It is endemic to India and is resident in the Western Ghats, from southern Gujarat till Kerala (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Nalavade 2013).

Distribution in Gujarat

Ali (1954) did not come across this species in Gujarat except on the summit of Salher Fort of Navsari district (which is now in Nashik district of Maharashtra, but very near Gujarat) during field work in the state from 1942 to 1946. Monga & Naoraji (1984) reported seeing a solitary lark around Chandod (on the banks of Narmada River) and remarked that it was uncommon in this area, and they failed to come across the species around Rajpipla. Narve *et al.* (1997) have recorded it from Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary.

For Saurashtra, Dharmkumarsinhji (1955) has not mentioned the species from Kathiawar, but Khacher (1996) saw a pair of Malabar Larks on Pirotan Island, near Jamnagar, with the remark that the species was recorded up to south Gujarat, in Western Ghats type country, and that Dharmkumarsinhji extended the range further north, to the edges of the salt pans of Bhavnagar, but was noted to be totally absent in interior Saurashtra and other areas of Gujarat, including Kachchh.

Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show it is as a resident in the Western Ghats, with its range up to south & central Gujarat, with two

isolated records from Bhavnagar and near Jamnagar, in the distribution map. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) describe it as a resident in SE Gujarat (i.e. south Gujarat) and the Western Ghats, and stated it as also reported from Kathiawar Peninsula. This was probably based on Khacher (1996). Ganpule (2016) includes it in the checklist of Gujarat, with reference from Ali (1954) and Monga & Naoraji (1983), giving it as 'rare/uncommon resident in south Gujarat; status in Saurashtra uncertain, probably absent'.

Notwithstanding its inclusion in the recent Gujarat checklist based on the above historical records, there are no recent sightings reported from Gujarat. Recent publications, websites like Oriental Bird Images, eBird, INW (indianaturewatch.net) (Accessed on 25 September 2016), or social media sites do not have any photos of this species from the state.

This note describes recent sightings of the Malabar Lark, mainly in Ankleshwar and Hansot Taluka of Bharuch District in south Gujarat, and confirms the occurrence of the species here. Further, an attempt is made to understand the status of Malabar Lark in Gujarat.

Sightings

The second author (MB) saw two Malabar Larks with Anil Bhardwaj behind the pond of Untiyadra village of Ankleshwar Taluka on 1 June 2016. The area around the sighting place is open and somewhat saline, with scattered grassland and paddy fields. The second author informed the details of the sighting to the first author (JP) and asked him to look out for the species as it is not recorded recently, and since Untiyadra is the native village of JP, he could search for the bird there easily.

After this information was received from MB, JP carefully started observing all *Galerida* larks in the area. When JP was going to Ankleshwar on 25 September 2016 for a social gathering, a lark looking slightly different than Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*) was seen at Sarthan village of Ankleshwar Taluka, about 15 km away from Untiyadra. However, since JP did not have time, he had to leave the area. On the next day, he visited the place again to search for the lark. It was found there, in the same area. This time, JP took a few photographs and identified it as a Malabar Lark. It was smaller and had strongly streaked rufous upperparts, boldly streaked underparts, a prominent supercilium and when the spread tail was seen, the outer tail feathers were pale rufous. In Crested Lark, the upperparts are paler, and the streaking on upperparts and underparts is less bold. Hence, it could be identified as a Malabar Lark. Malabar Lark can be separated from the Sykes's Lark (*Galerida deva*) by its longer bill, larger size, and

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more prominent streaking on the underparts. However, to confirm the identification, JP sent the photographs to Prasad Ganpule, who confirmed that it was a Malabar Lark, with the advice to give attention to its call for distinguishing it from the similar looking Crested Lark. The call was duly recorded and was typical of Malabar Lark and thus the identification was confirmed beyond any doubt.

Following this sighting, JP saw the Malabar Lark at the following places of Ankleshwar – Hansot area during the past two years, the details of which are given in Table 1:

Sightings of Malabar Lark in Ankleshwar – Hansot area

No.	Date	Place	No. of birds
1	25 September 2016	Sarthan	1
2	28 September 2016	Adol	1
3	2 October 2016	Ghodadra	6
4	5 October 2016	Hajat	3
5	10 October 2016	Untiyadra	2
6	3 November 2016	Kantasayan	4
7	4 November 2016	Aaliya Bet	5
8	14 January 2017	Ilav	2
9	14 January 2017	Dhamarad	2
10	24 January 2017	Kantiyajal	5
11	30 July 2017	Adadara	1

Outside of these areas, Malabar Lark was recorded by MB at Suvali beach, Hazira, on 7 February 2017. MB saw it again and also recorded its call at Navsari. Another sighting by Dr. Nainesh Parikh has been reported from Sultanpur village of Navsari District in late August 2016.

Discussion

Although there are past records, the Malabar Lark has not been reported recently by birdwatchers, may be due to its similarity to Crested Lark. Malabar Lark and Crested Lark have a sympatric distribution in Gujarat, especially in south Gujarat. Ranges of these *Galerida* sp. overlap in this area and both the species are found together here. Both the species are very similar looking, with a prominent crest. Crested Lark is reported from the whole state and hence it is possible that the Malabar Lark is probably overlooked as Crested Lark by birdwatchers.

JP has found that all sightings of Malabar Lark in Ankleshwar-Hansot area were in somewhat reddish or yellowish-brown saline soil, with scattered short grass and paddy fields, which matches with Malabar Lark habitat described in Nalavade (2013); general range of the Malabar Lark in Maharashtra

coincides with the red lateritic and reddish/yellowish-brown soil in Konkan and the Ghats, and the species prefers this kind of habitat. Similar potential habitat exists in other areas of Gujarat, including Saurashtra, and Khachar (1996) has noted this species in Saurashtra. Hence, it is quite probable that it could occur there.

May be, it could be common in south Gujarat and presumably uncommon in Saurashtra, with probable distribution along the coastline. However, this is just speculation and birdwatchers should look at all *Galerida* larks closely as there is possibility of the Malabar Lark occurring here. Its sightings should be reported so that the actual range and distribution of this species in Gujarat can be understood. However, it can be confirmed that the Malabar Lark occurs in south Gujarat and is fairly easily seen in the Ankleshwar-Hansot area of Bharuch.

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