

## Notes on Watercock in Dist. Bharuch (South Gujarat)

Jugal H. Patel : At Untiyadra, Ta. Ankleshwar, Dist. Bharuch-394125. jugalkishorhpatel@gmail.com

**Introduction:** Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*), locally known as 'Kora', is a widespread resident and a summer migrant in India. Usually skulking, there are a few records of Watercock from Gujarat. In this article, I present my observations on Watercock from Bharuch district of Gujarat.

**Status and Distribution in Gujarat:** In the distribution map of the species for Gujarat, Kazmierczak (2000) has shown only one isolated record; Grimmett *et al* (2011) give three isolated records and it is shown as a winter migrant to Gir area. Grewal *et al* (2002) have shown its range from coastal areas of Jamnagar to Valsad, and its status as an uncommon and scarce local migrant (The distribution map is designed looking at the possibility of its presence, with less than 50% likelihood of its encounter and not actual records.). Ali & Ripley (1980) have described its distribution range from Himalayas to Sri Lanka and from West Pakistan (Sindh and Punjab) to Assam but have not specifically mentioned its status in Gujarat. Raol (1998) has mentioned it as 'uncommon to scarce' but is not sure whether it is migratory or resident in Gujarat. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show it as a summer visitor to an isolated area in Saurashtra, noting that it is a 'scarce but widespread'. Thus, various authorities have noted it as vagrant, scarce, uncommon or with isolated/individual records in Gujarat. Further, all have described it as crepuscular and shy, secretive during daytime.

**Observations:** My observations are a little different from the observations given in the above mentioned references. I have observed it for at least three to four days a week in the last four

monsoon seasons. As per my observations, Watercock is a regular and common summer visitor in the command area of Ukai Dam in Surat & Bharuch Districts of South Gujarat. One can see it frequently late in the morning and early in the evening i.e. during day time also after 08-00 hrs and 16-00 hrs. It is not secretive and shy as generally believed, at least in comparison to other Rails & Crakes (*Rallidae*).



I have continuously watched and monitored this bird in the years '12, '13, '14 & '15 in Ankleshwar & Hansot Talukas of Bharuch District. From all my notes, I give here my major sightings for the year 2012 in Table 1. Though I did monitor the species in the subsequent years, had not maintained observation notes during this period. I give only my reflections on its presence and populations for the last three years in the year-wise comments.

**2012** - All the sightings from 10 June '12 to 1 July '12, except on 15 June '12, were made in 6 sq. km area beside my village Untiyadra (21° 30' N 72° 57' E). After 15 June, it became very difficult to visit these points due to peak rainy season and hence I had to continue with my search in another area on motorbike, exploring the road side fields.

**Table : Watercock sightings in '12**

Date	Time	No. birds	Location	Remarks
10.06.12	17.30	1	Untiyadra	First record of the season
15.06.12	19.00	1	Hajat	
24.06.12	16.30	3	Untiyadra	
26.06.12	7.00 to 9.00	4	Untiyadra	
	16.00 to 18.00	5	Untiyadra	
28.06.12	7.00 to 9.30	14	Untiyadra	
30.06.12	7.00 to 9.00	11	Untiyadra	
01.07.12	8.00 to 11.00	16	Untiyadra	
04.07.12	7.00 to 8.30	23	Untiyadra to Piludra Road -9 km	
07.07.12	7.00 to 8.00	14	Untiyadra-Piludra-Telva Road- 14 km	Observed mating at one place and at another place, a fight between two males for territory
08.07.12	7.00 to 11.00	21	Untiyadra-Karmali-Pardi Road- km?	Observed a female being chased by two males.
09.07.12	6.00 to 8.00	12	Pandvai to Parvat -5 Km	
12.07.12	8.00 to 9.00	4	Untiyadra	
14.07.12	15.00 to 20.00	4	Kalam	
18.07.12		9	Untiyadra	Two males fighting beside a female
16.09.12	17.00	1	Motvan	Last sighting of the season

Photo : Anil Bharadwaj



Photo : Anil Bharadwaj



95% of Watercocks observed were males in breeding plumage. Females were rarely seen and so very less in number in my counts. Perhaps, this may be due to its dull and camouflaged appearance and less tendency to come out in the open for feeding. Most of my observations were made in and around the fields along the sides of roads and tracks. Time constraints as well as rains, seldom allowed me to explore distant and interior parts, away from the pathways. Certainly, it was quite possible that the Watercock population was much higher than what was estimated in my notes. If the Watercock population in the distant farmlands (including camouflaged females) in the entire region is to be taken into consideration, then as per my estimate, there should be 50+ Watercocks around my

village Untiyadra alone, during 2012. They started to disappear by the end of August, and the last bird was spotted on 16 September 2012.

I had spotted Watercocks in Untiyadra, Ravidra-Karmali, Piludra, Telva, Adol, Hajat, Sisodra, Adadra, Pardi, Motvan and Umarwada villages of Ankleshwar Taluka and Parvat, Pandvai, Kudadra, Kalam, Ghodadra, Kathodra, Bolav, Ankalava, Sunevkalla villages of Hansot Taluka.

**2013** – The canals of Ukai remained closed for five months in this year due to maintenance work and damage in the main canal. Hence, major fraction of rice-crop and reeds, mainly *Typha angustata* were destroyed. This badly affected the population of Watercock in the early stage of monsoon. I took



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stock of the entire area which I sampled in '12 and found that, though its number increased as soon as monsoon started to peak-up, overall population of the bird was less compared to the previous year.

**2014** – In this year, population increased as compared to 2013. In comparison to the study area of 2012, which was restricted to surroundings of my village Untiyadara, this year I scanned a much larger area. It was spotted in 25 villages, from the outskirts of Ankleshwar to coastal villages (Katpor, Ankalva) on the Arabian Sea (Ta. Hansot). As per my assumption, their number should be around 200 in the whole region. However, its population is continuously on decline since last two years. In and around my village Untiyadra, farmers have given up harvesting summer rice (*Oryza sativa*). This has affected its population adversely. Its population around my village, which was more than 50 in 2012, has declined to 10-15 now.

**2015** – This year too seems to be disappointing. Though I have already spotted 15 birds including 5 females only at one place along Hansot-Kosamba road in the early June. The place is surrounded by paddy fields, a village pond (Sisodra), inundated wasteland covered with dense *Typha angustata*, and patches of grassland with nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*), hence ideal for Rallidae. In mid July, its population has not shown any rise. It will all depend on the rains for the habitat to anticipate more influx of the individuals.

**Habitat:** All the villages of Hansot and western villages of Ankleshwar Taluka are a part of the land covered under the irrigation infrastructure of Ukai Dam and its canals. The villages of both Talukas have, besides the main village pond/tank, natural and man-made streams and small tanks in the fields (locally called as 'Talavadi'). The roads also have in-built drainages on both sides. All these ponds, streams, and at some places even the drainages remain full of water throughout the year on account of constant water supply from the dam. Average annual rainfall of the area is 40 inches. Main crops of the area are sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) and rice (*Oryza sativa*). These crops are water intensive, and scarcity of water supply is never felt due to the irrigation facilities provided by Ukai Dam. On account of easy availability of water, farmers tend to irrigate their crops excessively. As a result, huge volume of run-off waters gets accumulated in the adjoining uncultivated or barren lands or flows through streams, lakes and drainages. Because of this water supply, a wide variety of plants and herbs like; Lesser Indian Reed Mace (*Typha angustata*), Yellow Nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*), *Echinochloa colonum*, *Echinochloa crus-galli*, Marsh Glory (*Ipomoea aquatica*) and other local grasses, shrubs and creepers, keep on growing

throughout the year in these areas, creating a good habitat for Watercock, with abundant food supply in the nearby paddy fields. This is the reason why high population of Watercock is found in this region.

Same geographical, agricultural and marshy conditions exist in many parts of other Districts of South Gujarat. For my job, I commute daily by train between Kosamba and Surat. Many times during this daily transit, I have spotted Watercocks beside the railway track near Kim, Kudsad, Kosad and Sayan of Olpad Taluka. The population of Watercocks would turn out to be much higher than is believed, if detailed surveys are conducted by bird watchers in the entire sugarcane belt, especially of Surat and Navsari districts.

**Habits/Behaviour:** Observations during the past four years:

Unlike other *Rallidae*, Watercocks come out late in the morning and return to their shelters early in the evening. They were visible at all times of the day, except at noon.

Males were generally spotted in cropped paddy-fields and green grasslands in the summer, while females were seen in uncultivated land, having little grass and isolated shrubs.

They are not normally seen far from their established territories. Hence, there is hardly any chance of individuals being repeated in the counts cited in the above table.

They are not very shy as commonly believed. They were frequently spotted in open land during daytime also. Several times, they were found in the fields beside the road. On 8 July 2012, I spotted four males on the boundary of a rice field, just 40 ft away from the spot where some labourers were busy implanting rice.

Fights between males were seen frequently after the first week of July. They jump like domestic cocks during the fight. The defeated male used to surrender and run away with its head bowed and wings spread.

Males call continuously during the day, rolling their head up and down, and puffing out their necks and raising their feathers; Female were never seen calling.

**Food:** It was observed that, Watercocks eat rice-grains fallen on the ground at the time of sowing; seeds and shoots of Yellow Nutsedge (*Cyperus esculentus*) and *Echinochloa colonum* and also flying termite (*Alate termite*).

**Breeding:** Watercocks usually arrive in the first week of May and are already in breeding plumage. Many times, males and females are seen together, but courtship display was never observed. Once a male was seen aggressively chasing the female before mating. They stay here till mid- September;

Photo : Bakul Trivedi



Photo : Jugal Patel

Watercock habitat

Photo : Jugal Patel



Photo : Jugal Patel

hence it is very much possible that they are nesting here. However, I have neither seen nor attempted to search for the nests as an ethical birdwatcher.

**Threats:** Summer harvesting of rice is in continuous decline since last two years due to crop failure as well as unrewarding market rates. Farmers have started clearing unfertile and unused land for selling. They have also started to wipe out the reed beds along roadsides and also in the fields by fire and using machinery, considering them a nuisance. For the purpose of supply to paper mills, farming of Eucalyptus (*E. hybrid*) in uncultivated and less fertile land has increased in the past two years. Water level in the dam and irregularity in schedule of water supply through canal, also affect the concerned area adversely, as happened in 2013. These are major threats to their habitat.

**Conclusion:** On the basis of continuous observations for the last four years, my opinion is that Watercock is a regular and common summer visitor in the irrigated areas of Bharuch and Surat districts. They arrive in the middle of May and stay till about the first week of September, every year. I request birdwatchers of South Gujarat to search for Watercocks in

areas of suitable habitat to ascertain its correct distribution and abundance. This should in long run help us study in detail, the threats faced by this and other allied bird species, and subsequently design our conservation strategies.

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The bird is powered by its own life and by its motivation. - A. P. J. Abdul Kalam