

Short Birding Notes



Black-bellied Terns *Sterna acuticauda* near Gandhinagar

On 26 October 2019, we (Rahul Rathore, Mihir Mishra, Rakesh Singh and I) were wandering near Sabarmati River, around Karai Village, Gandhinagar District. Flocks of egrets (*Egretta* sp.), Little Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*), and a few waders were seen along the edge of the water. We saw some River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) diving to catch fish. We realized that there were at least three species of terns there; River Terns with a deep forked tail, black cap and yellow-orange beaks, Whiskered Terns (*Chlidonias hybrida*), which had a black belly and were much smaller in size with shorter tail and the third species is what caught our eye as it had a black belly with a very deeply forked tail, orange beak and it was smaller in size compared to the River Terns. We referred to field guides and immediately confirmed these terns as Black-bellied Terns (*Sterna acuticauda*). There were 6 individuals there and we took several photographs. The Black-bellied Tern is now rare in our state and there is only one recent record of the species from Bharuch (Andharia 2018). Thus, this is an important sighting of Black-bellied Terns from Gandhinagar District.

Ayaz Mansuri: Ahmedabad. ayaz@sybertech.in



Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* on Adalaj-Koba Road, near Gandhinagar

On 9 October 2019, early in the morning while I was exploring the area around Ambapur Village, on Koba-Adalaj main road, I saw a small water body near a *gaushala*. I thought it would be a good place for birding and soon saw a few species of warblers like Booted Warbler (*Iduna caligata*), Sykes's Warbler (*Iduna rama*) and Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*). After a while, I saw a small bird flying towards a pool of water. As it landed just in front of me, I noted that it was heavily streaked on the back, had a short tail, which seemed to be growing, and was olive-brown in colour. I could not identify it in the field and so took a few pictures and later posted these on 'Ask ID' Facebook page. Many experts confirmed this individual as a Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*). There have been many recent records of Grasshopper Warbler in Gujarat but this seems to be a first record for Gandhinagar.

Tushar Tripathi: Ahmedabad. tushartripathi2@yahoo.com



Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus* near Bhavnagar

On 6 October 2019, in the evening at around 16:00 hrs, we went for the birding at Malnath Hills, near Bhavnagar. We saw many common birds there and at around 17:15 hrs, we noticed two cuckoos (*Cuculus* sp.) perched on a nearby tree. We observed these birds for a few minutes and took record photographs, and noted that the birds were chasing each other and flew away. After coming home, we studied the photographs and concluded that the photographed bird was a hepatic morph Lesser Cuckoo (*Cuculus poliocephalus*), based on the bright rufous head and nape (which was unmarked), broader dark barring on the underparts and vent, rufous barred upperparts and small size. The Lesser Cuckoo is thought to be a rare passage migrant in Gujarat, with a recent sighting from Mahuva, near Bhavnagar (Bhil 2018). This is another sighting of the species from Bhavnagar and suggests that it could be a rare but regular passage migrant through this region.

Prashant Andharia & Vivek Upadhyaya: Bhavnagar.



Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca* near Junagadh

On 20 January 2019, while bird watching in a lake besides Vadla Village, which is approximately 8 kms from Junagadh, I saw and photographed a Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Porzana fusca*). It was easily identified by its plumage and the red legs. I could take some good photographs. The area is full of reeds and the habitat is suitable for crakes and other waterbirds. The Ruddy-breasted Crake is widely distributed in central and south Gujarat and records are shown up to Nal Sarovar area by Parasharya *et al.* (2016). There are recent records from Rajkot too (Moteria 2018). Hence, this sighting from Junagadh is not unexpected but this is probably the first confirmed winter sighting from this district.

Nirav Raval: Rajkot. ninad.niravraval@gmail.com



Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* in Rajkot

On 18 October 2019, I was on a visit to the outskirts of Rajkot with Neel Sureja, during the night, in search of nocturnal wildlife activity around city. I live in Gandhidham, but was on official work to Rajkot and so thought of exploring areas outside the city, in the night, for birds. On the way from Vagudad to Khirasara *vidi*, we saw a small-sized owl (*Otus* sp.) perched on the fence. Using a torch, I identified it as a Pallid Scops Owl (*Otus brucei*) based on its plumage and took some photographs, which further confirmed the identification. After sometime, it went towards a neem tree and then flew away. The Pallid Scops Owl is a rare or uncommon winter migrant to Gujarat, with many sightings from Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). It has been noted in Rajkot earlier, but it is generally rare here.

Pratik Joshi: Gandhidham. pratikjoshi123@gmail.com



Unusual feeding behaviour of Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* in Rajkot

On 20 June 2019, at around 18:30 hrs in the evening, I was with my nephew Harshvardhansinh and we visited the lake outside Pradyumna Park Zoo, Rajkot. We saw a few birds feeding at the edge of the lake and took photographs. After coming home and checking the photos, I was surprised to see that the few Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) were feeding on *gathiya*, a deep fried snack made from chickpea flour, which is very commonly fed to birds here. Since this was the first time I had seen this, I shared the photos with Bhavesh Trivedi and others, and confirmed that the flamingos were indeed feeding on this snack. Dr. Bakul Trivedi further confirmed with Dhaval Vargiya that the flamingos feed on this snack in Gujarat. Flamingos are filter feeders, feeding on brine shrimp, small insects, crustaceans and algae. Thus, seeing the flamingos feeding on *gathiya* in Rajkot was quite amazing and also distressing. The effects, if any, of these birds feeding on *gathiya* are not known but this is not their natural food. People should be made aware that *gathiya* is not the natural food of birds and the feeding of *gathiya* to birds should not be encouraged.

Namrata Jadeja: Rajkot.



Blue-capped Rock Thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus* near Rajkot

On 8 October 2019, we were birding around Bhootnath, Halanda Village, near Rajkot. At around 09:30 hrs, I saw some bird movement in the bushes from a distance. As I got closer and took photographs, I realised that it was a male Blue-capped Rock Thrush (*Monticola cinclorhynchus*). It perched in the tree for a few seconds and then flew away but we could get a good look and also take some record photographs. This species is an uncommon winter migrant to Gujarat, with sightings from well forested areas of the state; in Saurashtra, it is seen regularly in Gir NP area (Vaghashiya & Bagda 2017). However, this may be one of the first photographic records from Rajkot area as we could not find any earlier record of this species for Rajkot.

Jignesh Rathod & Pilu Sitapara: Rajkot. surfer13jignesh@gmail.com



Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* near Surat

On September 2019, a Sunday, we (Gajendra Mandora and I) were on our routine birding near Tena Village, which is one of the hot spots for birders around Surat. On the edge of Tena Lake, we spotted some waders with binoculars. On a closer look, we found some birds with different plumage, which were looking brownish from far. With curiosity, we moved forward towards these birds and found that these were Pacific Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*). We took some good photographs and saw that these birds were moulting out of breeding plumage. This species is rare around Surat and this was the first time that we had noted the Pacific Golden Plovers here.

Bhavesh Shah: Surat. bhaveshshah101075@gmail.com



Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* at Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary

On 9 November 2019, we (Sejal Shah Daniel, Tushar Tripathi and I) visited Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary to photograph the Small Pratincole (*Glareola lactea*) and Pacific Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*), which were seen there. While photographing the Small Pratincole, I observed two Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) close by. I took a few images of one bird immediately, while the other was searching for food in the green grass. After returning home and while discussing the sighting with my fellow birders, I realized that this species was not so common at Nal Sarovar. In general, the Ruddy Turnstone is a coastal species and there are very few inland records. It was recently seen in Dhari, near Amreli (Joshi 2018). This is another inland sighting of the Ruddy Turnstone for our state.

Rajendra Kasi: Ahmedabad. raaz80@gmail.com



Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* in Vadodara

On 6 November 2018, we were birding at the Timbi Lake, situated in the outskirts of Vadodara. At around 08:30 hrs in the morning, we were passing by a large bed of reeds and suddenly, our attention was caught by a large heron-like bird flying towards us. As it was coming from the direction of sun we could not identify it at first but when sunlight fell on it, we finally identified it as a Great Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*). I took a few photographs of it in flight and so re-confirmed the identification. It then landed in a reed bed and it was impossible to see it in the dense reeds. The Great Bittern is a rare winter migrant to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), with sightings from many parts of the state. This record from Timbi Lake is important and adds to the sightings of this species in Gujarat.

Vikrant Vyas & Smita Vyas: Vadodara. vyasvikrant698@gmail.com



Flock of Sulphur-bellied Warblers *Phylloscopus griseolus* in Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary

On 21 September 2015, I was in Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. Near the entrance gate of the sanctuary, I saw and photographed a small flock of Sulphur-bellied Warblers (*Phylloscopus griseolus*) at around 10:00 hrs. A total of five birds were perched and seen feeding nearby each other in trees and scrub, and also on the ground. The identification was confirmed by taking a few photographs and noting the brownish-grey upperparts, yellow supercilium in front of eye and whitish edges to wing feathers. It was surprising to see this species in a flock as mostly, only single individuals are noted. The Sulphur-bellied Warbler is given as a common winter visitor in Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). This sighting was in September, which is a little early for this winter migrant. Thus, this sighting of Sulphur-bellied Warbler in a flock, and that too in September, is quite surprising.

Rajnikant Trivedi: Ahmedabad. rajnitivedi1950@gmail.com



Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* near Bhuj, Kachchh

On 9 December 2018, we went for morning birding to a hilly and rocky area on Bhuj - Mundra Road, near Bharapar Village. There, we found a little water pool by the roadside, where we saw a few Striolated Buntings (*Emberiza striolata*) and Grey-necked Buntings (*Emberiza buchanani*). When we were photographing the buntings, a bird came and perched near the buntings. We immediately identified it as a Trumpeter Finch (*Bucanetes githagineus*). We took a few photographs but the Trumpeter Finch got disturbed by a few goats and flew away. We waited for some time but did not see it again. A second visit in the afternoon was unsuccessful. While the Trumpeter Finch is seen in Kachchh, this was a new location in which it was noted. It is uncommon here in Kachchh, but was seen good numbers in the winter of 2018-2019 in Banni.

Ullash K. Rathod & Sharvil J. Vora: Bhuj. sharvilvora96@gmail.com



Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* in Kachchh

On 26 November 2018, we visited Jakhau Salt Pans, near Naliya, Kachchh. Due to less rain in the monsoon of 2018, most of the lakes and ponds were dry and so water birds were attracted to these salt pans and we saw a good number of birds here. While birding in the area, we saw 35 Common Shelducks (*Tadorna tadorna*) in two flocks. We managed to photograph 27 birds in one frame. It was difficult to locate and count these birds as the area is very large. The birds stayed here till 15 January 2019, after which we could not visit the area. The Common Shelduck is a rare winter migrant to Gujarat, with scattered sightings from Kachchh and other parts of the state (Ganpule 2016). The first author had seen 20 Common Shelducks in *Shervo-Dhand*, in Kachchh, in January 2017. There have been reports of even larger flocks from salt pans in Kachchh (posted on the social media). Thus, these sightings of Common Shelduck are noteworthy as this species is not usually seen in large flocks here.

Jaysukh Parekh 'Suman' & Nirav Parekh: Bhuj. nisusuman@gmail.com



Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* near Junagadh

On 20 January 2019, a Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) was seen and photographed in a lake besides Vadla Village, about 8 kms from Junagadh. All its characteristic features like the long down-curved red bill, olive-brown underparts, black and white barred flanks and pinkish legs were seen and photographed. The Water Rail is winter migrant in Saurashtra and there are records from many districts like Rajkot, Bhavnagar, and Gir-Somnath (Mashru 2018, Patel 2018). However, as far as I am aware, there are no records from Junagadh and this is probably a first photographic record from this area. It is likely that it is overlooked and could be occurring in other similar habitats around Junagadh and needs to be looked out for.

Nirav Raval: Rajkot. ninad.niravraval@gmail.com

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