

## Short Birding Notes



### Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* at Ranagadh, Nal Sarovar

On 2 November 2019 we were birding around Ranagadh area of Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. At about 08:30 hrs, while scanning the area with binoculars, we saw a few stints, plovers and other waders from a distance. As we approached closer we realised that there was a small plover (*Charadrius* sp.) which appeared a little different from the regularly seen Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*). On closer observation we could identify it as a Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) from its prominent breast-band, white hind collar, orange legs and the missing yellow eye-ring. The second author visited the place several times after the initial sighting and recorded a small flock in the same patch, up to March 2020. This sighting is unusual for two aspects: The Common Ringed Plover is an uncommon to rare winter visitor in Gujarat with only scattered sightings from Porbandar, Bhavnagar, Kachchh, and a few sightings from Nal Sarovar and South Gujarat (Ganpule 2016) and so a small flock seen here is noteworthy. Further, these sightings, for more than four months in the same area, suggest that these birds remain at the same site in the winter if the habitat is suitable. This is an important inland sighting of this species from Gujarat.

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### Unusual interaction between a Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* and Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*

On 4 November 2018, we observed a Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) perched on the topmost branch of a tree in Velavadar National Park. It was surrounded by few Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*). At first, we thought that the drongos were mobbing the eagle, as they were visibly pecking on its head. But, we noticed that the behaviour here appeared to be something different. The drongos were not aggressive and the eagle sat quietly and was unusually calm, unlike in a situation where it was being mobbed. It seemed like the Black Drongos were picking something turn by turn from the Short-toed Snake Eagle's head and we assumed that the drongos were removing parasites. The situation was more like a symbiosis between predator and prey! The Black Drongo is known to mob birds of prey and we frequently see it mobbing raptors in Little Rann of Kachchh. Since we had seen mobbing behaviour earlier, we could recognize that this was something unusual. However, such a symbiotic relationship between a Short-toed Snake Eagle and Black Drongo has not been documented earlier. It could be that this was an opportunistic alliance between the eagle and the drongo where the drongos got food and the eagle was rid of parasites. [We request birders to report more such unusual interactions or instances of symbiotic relationships in birds – Eds]

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### Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnia malabarica* in Kachchh

On 28 November 2019, in the afternoon, I saw and photographed a Chestnut-tailed Starling (*Sturnia malabarica*) near Dhunai, on Bhuj-Mandvi Road, Kachchh. The bird was perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* and the identification was confirmed by senior birder Shantibhai Varu. This species is vagrant to Kachchh and there are only a few earlier records – at Vijay Vilas Palace in 1969 (Himmatsinhji 1970), at Naliya in 2000 by Kavi Tej and R. D. Jadeja and at Loriya in 2002 by Shantibhai Varu (Shantibhai Varu, *pers comm.*). This is another sighting of this species from Kachchh. This sighting, in the early winter, may be indicative of this species being scarce winter visitor to Kachchh. More sightings will help in knowing about its status in Kachchh.

I thank Shantibhai Varu for confirming the identification and giving details of the past records of Chestnut-tailed Starling in Kachchh.

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### A winter sighting of Yellow-legged Buttonquail *Turnix tanki* in Rajkot City

On 24 January 2020, at about 17:00 hrs, my mother called me up to see a new bird at my home, situated at Jagnath Plot, in the middle of Rajkot City. I went there and saw that a tiny bird was sitting on the first landing of the staircase. I immediately took a photo from my mobile phone and thought about taking a video but the bird suddenly flew vertically and vanished. It stayed there for hardly five minutes. I could not identify this bird. Then, I sent the photo to my brother Rupesh Ravani, and he sent it to senior birder Ashok Mashru for identification; it was identified as a Yellow-legged Buttonquail (*Turnix tanki*), and he further informed that this was a grassland bird and had possibly landed at my home due to some movement during its local migration. He stated that the plumage looked washed out, lacking rufous, and bare parts were not bright yellow, rather unlike what is seen in the breeding season. The Yellow-legged Buttonquail is a monsoon migrant to Gujarat and there are very few records from the winter months. This is a rare winter sighting of this species.

**Urvashi Ravani:** Rajkot.



### Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* near Navsari

On 23 September 2018, Nikunj Vedak sent me an unclear photograph of a bird for identification. To my surprise, it was Blue Rock-thrush (*Monticola solitarius*.) This bird, as per my knowledge, was seen in this area for the first time in the past few years. On the next day, I went to the location where it was seen, in the AB school Campus, Partapore, near Navsari. I could observe the bird and photograph it for two days, in the morning and evening. It was seen in a very small area. On 26 September 2018, it disappeared. It was probably on passage and stayed here for a few days. This bird was fairly fearless and was observed accompanying a Pied Bushchat (*Saxicola caprata*) and seen hunting an insect. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show the distribution of Blue Rock Thrush all over the state but it is quite uncommon in our area.

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### A winter sighting of Grey-bellied Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus* in Little Rann of Kachchh

On 4 February 2020, I was in Little Rann of Kachchh for a nature education camp. I was accompanied by a friend and as soon as we got some free time, we visited the Rann for birding. We saw a different bird perched in a *Prosopis juliflora* and on a closer look, identified it as a Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*), took several photographs and confirmed the identification. The cuckoo did not call while we observed it. This sighting in the winter, from an area like the Little Rann, is quite surprising. In and around Savarkundla, where I live, this species is quite common and vocal in the monsoon season and it is also seen in Gir NP and in the *vidis* of Saurashtra. But, after the monsoon, it is not seen at all near my home! There are sightings from Saurashtra and from other parts of the state (Bagda *et al.* 2015) but this record, in the winter, from the Little Rann of Kachchh is very interesting.

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### Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra* in Rajkot

On 14 July 2020, at 16:00 hrs in the evening, a big bird was found injured near our residence; the area is located at Chandan Park Main Road, Indian Park, Jamnagar Road, Rajkot. Later, it was identified as a juvenile Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*) by posting its photograph in the 'Ask ID of Indian Birds' Facebook group. The bird was rescued by the local animal welfare organisation 'Karuna Foundation' for treatment but it did not survive. The Masked Booby is seen, quite rarely, during the monsoon season along the coast of Saurashtra. These sightings are usually of windblown birds due to bad weather; this species is mainly pelagic and does not normally venture near the coast. Recently, another Masked Booby was rescued at Jamnagar coast by Jagat Raval in June 2015 and taken for treatment (sighting posted in Facebook group.) As Rajkot is quite far from the coast, this is a surprising sighting of a Masked Booby from the middle of the city.

**Ashish Khakharia:** Rajkot.



### Sighting of Little Crake *Porzana parva* near Surat

On 28 February 2019, I went to wetland near Palanpore Village, just on the outskirts of Surat city. At around 08:15 hrs, I was passing on Palanpore Canal side road, when I saw a crake (*Porzana* sp.) basking in the reeds. Slowly, I moved closer and took 10-12 photographs. After observing carefully, I could detect a red patch at the base of the bill. Along with this, I noted the long primary projection, less extensively barred underparts and yellowish-green bill with reddish base, confirming it to be a Little Crake (*Porzana parva*). I found that this bird was very shy. Many bird-watchers from Surat visited this place but could not take any photographs. My friend Anil Bhatt could take a record shot. The Little Crake was seen in this area for a week. Though there are recent records of Little Crake from different parts of the state (photos posted on the OBI website), this is probably the first photographic record of Little Crake for South Gujarat.

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### Slaty-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus* near Vadodara

On 16 June 2020, at about 07:30 hrs in the morning, I was birding at Timbi Lake, near Vadodara. While birding, a Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) took flight some feet ahead on my path. The sudden flight of the bird caught my attention and I noticed a crake (*Rallidae*) cross over the path I was on and go into the bush nearby. I stopped to see if the crake would come out again. And it did take a quick peep back on the path. But, since I was very near to it, it darted off again under the bush. This time, I knew it would not come back again. So, I quickened my pace to have a better look or may be take a good photograph. I saw a trail leading away from the lake towards a small water hole nearby with a few bushes. I saw the crake go into it. I waited for a while for it to come out and to my surprise, when the bird did appear, it was not a Brown Crake (*Amauornis akool*) but something similar in size but with different plumage. The most prominent feature of the bird was its red beak. I managed to take a few photographs before it disappeared in the bush. I waited for 30 minutes but it did not appear again. I immediately sent the photos to Mrs. Deepti S. Mehta, who, with the help of Dr. Gaurang Bagda, identified it as a Slaty Breasted Rail (*Gallirallus striatus*). The next day, I went again at the same spot to get a better look at the bird but got just a glimpse of it. I have been observing the bird for four days now. It seems to have made itself comfortable at this spot.

**Jenny Solomon:** Vadodara.



### Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* at Valda Dam, near Nal Sarovar

On 9 December 2018, we were birding around Vadla Dam area near Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. At about 10:30 hrs, while scanning the area with my binoculars, we saw three unusual looking ducks in a large group of Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) & other commonly seen migratory ducks. As we took record images & zoomed in, we realised that that these were Common Shelducks (*Tadorna tadorna*), which is very uncommon for this area. We approached slowly and managed to get some good images of one of the three birds. We later learnt that the last sighting of Common Shelduck in Nal Sarovar area was many years back and that this species is not a regular visitor there. An important thing to note was that in spite of the location being favourable for them in the winter, these three birds were only seen here for a short period of 5-7 days, post which they probably migrated to other areas with suitable habitats.

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### Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* near Rajkot

Dr. Rajesh Bhalodia and I visited Khirasara Vidi, near Rajkot, on 3 September 2019 for birding, especially to look out for passage migrants which occur in our area. There, I saw a small warbler (*Sylvia* sp.) in the scrub which we could not identify in the field. However, we were able to take a few record shots. The bird had a white throat, brownish wings and pinkish legs. It was identified as a Common Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) by Shivam Bhatt on the social media. This was later confirmed by Ashok Mashru and Prasad Ganpule. Normally, this species is an autumn passage migrant and is regularly seen in Kachchh and is known to occur in other areas of Saurashtra. But, there are few documented records. This sighting near Rajkot is thus of interest and confirms its occurrence in the district.

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### Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* in Rajkot

On 14 February 2020, in the evening at around 17:00 hrs, near Randarda Lake, Rajkot, I observed a bird perched on a tree branch. I took some pictures but it was perched for only about five seconds. On seeing its plumage, I found it to be different than the common wagtails (*Motacilla* sp.) here and I identified it as a Forest Wagtail (*Dendronanthus indicus*). As this bird was shy and sitting far away, I could take only a few images before the bird flew away. I tried to follow it but it had disappeared. Later, I confirmed the identification with senior birder Ashok Mashru, and as per his opinion, this was probably a first photographic record of Forest Wagtail for Rajkot District. This species is generally uncommon for Saurashtra, but sightings from Gir NP, Jamnagar & few other areas are known. During this short birding trip, my friends Pinkesh Tanna, Jaymin Panchasara, Jayson Dholariya & Parth Bhatt were with me.

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### Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura* in Sabarkantha District

On 20 June 2020, I was birding near Ranasan Village, located in Sabarkantha District, which is about 65 kms from Gandhinagar. In the morning, roughly at around 09:00 hrs, after photographing a Striated Heron (*Butorides striata*), I went to a different place and saw a Marshall's lora (*Aegithina nigrolutea*). After 1-2 minutes, I heard a *wheet-tieu* call and then the trademark triple note, *hhwit-wiyu*, of Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyuran*). The bird came out and I observed it for almost two hours, and enjoyed by taking a series of behavioral photographs of this Indian Pitta. I was surprised to observe many other species at this location and discovered that it was very rich for birding and the area was undisturbed. There are multiple nesting and sighting records of the India Pitta from the Aravalli Range i.e. from Polo, Jessore, Bakor and Panchmahal, but this record, in this patch of Sabarkantha, was something new for me.

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