

Short Birding Notes



White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* near Nalsarovar

On 28 November 2020, near Vithalgadh, on the periphery of Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary, I observed an eagle sitting in an agricultural field and stopped to identify it. I was rewarded when the bird flew overhead, allowing me to capture some photos that could help with the identification. The eagle looked much larger and bulkier than a Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*). It had a dark beak, mottled chest (with white feathers), and showed white feathers on back and wings. The tail feathers were whitish, with dark brown edges. I checked my photographs with the field guides and noted that it was a White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*). It was an immature/juvenile bird. This was the first time I had observed this eagle here. There is a recent record from Velavadar NP (Bhatt 2018) but the White-tailed Eagle is a vagrant to Gujarat and thus, this is an important sighting for the state.

Dakshina Magiawala: Ahmedabad. aara.ahd@gmail.com



Orange-headed Thrush *Geokichla citrina* in Kachchh

On 16 February 2020, I visited Chadva Rakhal, in Taluka: Bhuj, with my friend Lalit Tank. The area is quite small but well wooded and includes a fresh water lake. There, we saw and photographed an Orange-headed Thrush (*Geokichla citrina*). The bird was easily identified by its distinct plumage. We saw it for some time and took good photographs. As per senior birders, there is no previous record of this species from Kachchh. Hence, we were very much excited after finding this rarity. Though apart from forests of S. Gujarat, there are records of this species from well wooded areas of Saurashtra and northern Gujarat, the sighting of the Orange-headed Thrush in Kachchh is quite unusual and is probably the first photographic record for Kachchh.

Parin S. Thacker: Bhuj. parinthacker699@gmail.com



Blyth's Starling *Sturnia blythii* in South Gujarat

On 27 September 2020, at around 08:00 hrs, we were on the way to the wetland area at Sultanpur, Navasari, for bird photography. Unfortunately, sudden heavy rain started when we reached at the destination. We waited for 30 minutes but the rain did not stop and finally, we decided to do a round of the area. We saw a group of starlings moving ahead of the car, and identified these as a small flock of Chestnut-tailed Starlings (*Sturnia malabarica*). They were in three groups, consisting of 15-20 birds in each group. Out of all birds, 4-5 starlings looked quite different, with bright white head and deep orange-red underparts. We took photos and uploaded them on Facebook, where these birds were identified as Blyth's Starlings (*Sturnia blythii*), also known as Malabar Starling. We were seeing it here for the first time and later came to know that it could be the first photographic record from Gujarat. Ganpule (2016) has given it as a rare resident in South Gujarat forests, with isolated records from other parts of the state but as far as we are aware, there are no recent records from Gujarat.

Mehul Patel & Dipak Patel: Bilimora. mehul_01ee@yahoo.com



Sighting of Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* at Kadod Village, Surat District

On 7 October 2017, I visited Kadod Village outskirts area (on Kosadi Road), in Bardoli Taluka, Surat. I reached there at around 18:00 hrs and started bird watching. I saw a small falcon perched on an electric pole. I took some pictures but I could not identify the bird in the field. I asked my friend Saswat Mishra and he informed me that this was a Eurasian Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*). The Eurasian Hobby is a widespread autumn passage migrant in Gujarat. There are records from South Gujarat but this was the first time I had seen this bird here. The timing of the sighting suggests that it was an autumn passage migrant here. I did not see the bird again in the area. I am grateful to Saswat Mishra for his help in the identification of this bird.

Nikhil Gamit: At Post – Kadod, Surat District. nik.ng81@gmail.com



First record of White-capped Bunting *Emberiza stewarti* from Kachchh

On 16 December 2020, I visited Tapkeshwari area, about 7 kms from Bhuj, with Bhanubhai Adhvaryu. The area has hilly terrain with scattered scrub and rocks. There, we saw White-naped Tit (*Machlolophus nuchalis*) and White-bellied Minivet (*Pericrocotus erythropygius*), and took good photos. At a small pond, a few birds were busy drinking water. Among them, one bird was looking slightly different. So I took a few record photos. I sent the photos to Prasad Ganpule. He replied that this was a male White-capped Bunting (*Emberiza stewarti*). We revisited the same location on 19 December 2020. After a wait of one and half hours, a female White-capped Bunting came and perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* tree. I got a chance to take a few photos before it went away in two minutes. I came to know from senior birders Shantilal Varu and Jugal Kishore Tiwari that there is no previous record of this species from Kachchh. Hence, this is the first record of this species from Kachchh.

Ashish Gohil: Bhuj. rahee.gohil@gmail.com



Sighting of Brown Fish-Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* in Malnath Hills, Bhavnagar

On 10 November 2020, while birding in the Malnath Hills area, Bhavnagar, at around 10:45 hrs, a large bird flew out from a mango tree. I was approaching near the tree and saw that it settled in another tree close by. Alarm calls were raised by smaller birds and on locating the large bird, I were thrilled to see that it was a Brown Fish-Owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*). I observed and photographed the owl for some time and it seemed quite comfortable with my presence after the initial disturbance. After 13:00 hrs, Kandarp Andharia and Prashant Andharia joined me and took some good photographs of the owl. I followed up the next day to check on its presence but it was not seen there. The Brown Fish Owl has been recorded frequently from Gir Forest and Junagadh area but this is the first photographic record from Bhavnagar District. It seems that this owl could be a vagrant to other nearby districts and needs to be looked out for well wooded areas outside Gir-Girnar/Junagadh.

Vivek Upadhyay: Bhavnagar. viveku39@gmail.com



Colour aberrant Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* in Little Rann of Kachchh

On 23 December 2020, I was with Vaneet Daniel, C. Modhwadia and guide Becharbhai Rabari and we went for bird watching at Little Rann of Kachchh, near Dasada. After finishing our morning birding session, we were coming out from near the last patch of a water body of the sanctuary. We spotted a few Crested Larks (*Galerida cristata*) in which one bird was a colour aberrant bird. As per our guide Becharbhai, last year also it was sighted by another guide Gopalbhai around the same place. We took some photos. The lark looked entirely white but on a closer look, a few brownish patches could be seen on the head and around the wings. We identified the colour mutation as either progressive greying or dilution, but it was difficult to be sure of the correct colour mutation. This is another record of a colour aberrant bird from Gujarat.

Sejal Daniel: Ahmedabad. sejalvaneet@hotmail.com



Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* at Vasna Barrage, Ahmedabad

On 23 February 2020, a Sunday, at around 18:00 hrs, I was bird watching at Vasna Barrage on the Riverfront side, Ahmedabad, when I saw a group of around seven Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*) on a large electric pole. The group included mainly adult birds. There are records of this vulture near Panjarpol dumping site (at Sanand) (see 'birds of Gujarat' website: http://birdsofgujarat.co.in/bird_detail.php?id=12660) but there are no recent records from the city area. The Egyptian Vulture is resident in Gujarat and it is now a threatened species. This is the first time I had seen this rare species in the middle of a large city like Ahmedabad. It is possible that small groups may still be visiting Ahmedabad area. Bird watchers are requested to be on the lookout for this species in Ahmedabad area.

Deep Shah: Ahmedabad. shahdeep34@gmail.com



Forest Owlet *Heteroglaux blewitti* in Dadra & Nagar Haveli

On 7 January 2021, a Thursday, we decided to explore the jungles of Dadra & Nagar Haveli. We were with Bhoya Divyesh and Aniket Patel. At around 14:30 hrs, we were exploring a new area and hence, the second author was not carrying a camera. We went almost seven km inside the forest and we saw one Rufous Woodpecker (*Micropternus brachyurus*) in flight and then we began tracking it. The second author stopped and listened to a call and informed me that it was the call of a Forest Owlet (*Heteroglaux blewitti*). We waited for more than two hours. We saw the Forest Owlet and got good photographs. While the Forest Owlet has been reported from the Dang Forest area, it was our dream to find it here in Dadra & Nagar Haveli and we were very happy that we could get it here. The habitat here is not different from other habitats seen in Dangs and its occurrence here is not unusual, but, this is the first confirmed record from this area.

Dr. Pragnesh R. Patel: Dadra and Nagar Haveli. uniquepathcare@gmail.com

Saswat Mishra: Dadra and Nagar Haveli. paulmshr@gmail.com



Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* at Bhavnagar coastal area

On 25 December 2020, at 14:30 hrs, I was with my friend Raj Vala and we went for birding at Hathab coastal area, Bhavnagar. After watching many common waders, I saw one different bird in a group of Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) and Common Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*). I photographed it and identified it as a Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*). We saw two individuals in this area. Earlier, I had seen two individuals at Gopnath Beach, near Bhavnagar, in 2019, with my parents. Though seen in Gulf of Kachchh area fairly regularly, the Great Knot is not very common around Bhavnagar area.

Kandarp Andharia: Bhavnagar. kandarpandharia053@gmail.com



Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* in Nalsarovar

On 16 December 2020, we were birding in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. At around 12:05 hrs, we were watching flocks of Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) and other ducks. In this flock, we saw two different geese, which were in the middle of the flock. We took some photographs and noted that they had orange legs, lacked pale grey forewing of Greylag Goose and had dark markings on underparts. Based on these features, we identified these birds as Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*). Over the next one to two months, more than six to seven birds were seen in the area. The Greater White-fronted Goose is a vagrant to Gujarat, with sightings from Little Rann of Kachchh and Thol Bird Sanctuary (Ganpule 2016). It was the first time we had seen this species here in Nalsarovar.

Latif Alvani & Kamruddin: Nalsarovar.



Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* in Navsari

On 1 December 2020, in the morning at 08:00 hrs, I was at Sultanpur Wetland, Navsari, for bird photography. I saw a few River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*), perched just 20 ft nearby. In this flock of River Terns, one bird was looking quite different, with black plumage. But, its head was tucked in its body and it was difficult to identify it. After ten minutes, it changed its position and I was surprised and elated to see that it was an Indian Skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*). After that, I took some photos and called my friend Dipak Patel. We spent more than three hours with the skimmer, taking good photos. We saw a total of three Indian Skimmers here over the next three or four days. According to Ganpule (2016), the Indian Skimmer is an uncommon to rare migrant, seen in the late monsoon and winter months – it is more frequently seen in Jamnagar and Nalsarovar, with scattered records from other parts of Saurashtra. It is rare in South Gujarat and hence, this is an important sighting for our area.

Mehul Patel: Bilimora. mehul_01ee@yahoo.com



White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* preying on Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus*

On 16 January 2021, I went to Nalsarovar outskirts area along with my photographer friends Chirag Palkar, Dhananjay Joshi and local guide Shabbir Belim. At around 10:00 hrs, we noticed a White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) with kill, and decided to have a closer look. With surprise, we observed that the kill was a Common Stonechat (*Saxicola torquatus*), which is not the usual food of a White-breasted Kingfisher. Though this species is known to prey on chicks and adults of different birds, this observation of the Common Stonechat being the prey of the White-throated Kingfisher is unusual.

Dr. Vishnu Sagar: drvrsagar74@gmail.com



Lutino Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* near Nalsarovar

While birding near Ranagadh Village, in the Nalsarovar area, on 13 January 2021, we were observing birds in a *Salvadora persica* tree, locally known as *piludi* or *pilu* tree. We observed a colour aberrant Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*). The bird was lemon-yellow in colour. The beak appeared lighter red and some green was visible on primary coverts. In flight, we saw that there was some green present in the wings. We identified it as a lutino Rose-ringed Parakeet. Birds with this aberration are popular in the pet trade and it is possible that this was an escapee. However, the behaviour of this bird was like that of a wild bird, its plumage was good, it did not have any lost feathers and it was feeding on a *Salvadora persica*. Further, this sighting was far from a city area. This led us to believe that it could be a colour aberrant wild bird. There is a recent sighting of a lutino Plum-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula cynocephala*) from Corbett National Park (Shroff 2016). This was the first time we had seen such a bird here.

Urmilus Gameti & Vishal Chavda: urmilus@gmail.com



A male Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* at Nalsarovar

On 15 January 2021, it was the second day of *Uttarayan* and instead of flying kites, my friend Nandini Mehta and I headed to Nalsarovar to get a glimpse of the Red-breasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*) which was seen there. We reached Nalsarovar just before sunrise. We waited for flocks of geese and cranes to settle down in the fields. But that day, we could hardly see any flocks of geese flying around. Thinking it was a bit early, we headed to the other side in Ranchhodpura. We took an unknown road, with our eyes on the field. Just a few meters onto a lane, a grey, slender bird with a long, pointed tail caught my attention. It looked like a dove and had black feathers on its face, throat and breast. I identified it as a male Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*). It was perched on a bush just about one foot above the ground. It was sitting calmly and was lethargic as the sun was just coming up and it was quite cold. I took a few photos from the car itself. There are recent records of Namaqua Dove from Nalsarovar and near Bhavnagar (Belim & Multani 2020, Bhil & Bhil 2020). The earlier sighting from Nalsarovar was of a female/juvenile and this was the first time a male had been seen here.

Dr. Nahid Ansari: Ahmedabad. muskanhosp@gmail.com



Sighting of Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* at Nyari-I Dam, Rajkot

On 19 May 2020, we visited Nyari-I Dam in the evening just to relax from the lockdown. We heard some different call and presumed it to be of some different wader since we had heard the call before in our coastal birding trips. The first author was trying to record the call with his mobile phone when the wader appeared in flight. We managed to see it well and took photos. It was a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). We were surprised to see this coastal bird in an inland fresh water reservoir and that too this late (in May). We assumed that it may have landed while in return migration. The second author had observed two Eurasian Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*) years back, at same place, on 29 March 1998. It seems this large freshwater reservoir attracts waders during migration.

Raju Karia & Ashok Mashru: Rajkot. dealwiserajkot@gmail.com, mashruashok@gmail.com



Sighting of Western Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus occipitalis* in Rajpipla

On 18 October 2020, I, along with my father Ketan Shah, went to a birding trip to Sagai range of Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary. On reaching Sagai, we found a small stream. Along the stream, there was a hunting party which consisted of birds such as Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*), Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*), Indian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Sulphur-bellied Warbler (*Phylloscopus griseolus*) etc. We saw a *Phylloscopus* warbler there, having a large beak with an orange-yellow colored lower mandible. The sides of the crown were dusky-olive colored, contrasting with the supercilium and it had a dark eye-stripe. The plumage was quite worn out as the double wing bars were not prominent. Based on the large bill, the head pattern and the plumage, we identified it as a Western Crowned Warbler (*Phylloscopus occipitalis*). The Western Crowned Warbler is uncommon here and this sighting adds to the sightings of this species from Gujarat.

Dhyey Shah: Vadodara. dhyevian@gmail.com



Sykes's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella dukhunensis* in Greater Rann of Kachchh

On 15 February 2019, I visited the eastern part of Banni in Greater Rann of Kachchh, near Lodai, with Manoj Finava, Subhash Das and Kapilsinh Zala. At about 08:30 hrs, we came across a flock of about 15-20 Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) feeding in the dry grass. One bird in this flock looked very different, with rufous tinged face, nape and breast sides, heavily streaked upperparts, black streaking on breast sides and a prominent black lateral crown stripe. The bill was horn coloured with black culmen and tip. The crown was not strongly streaked. The bird was photographed by us and we observed that though it associated with Greater Short-toed Larks, it was often chased away when it approached closer to the birds. It was identified as a Sykes's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella dukhunensis*), also known as Mongolian Short-toed Lark, by its rufous-tinged face and breast side, bill with dark culmen and tip and strongly streaked upperparts. The black lateral crown stripe was an unusual feature seen in this individual. The Sykes's Short-toed Lark is believed to be a rare winter migrant or winter vagrant to Gujarat; there are few records from South Gujarat and Little Rann of Kachchh (Ganpule 2018). This is another record of the species from our state.

Prasad Ganpule: Morbi. prasadganpule@gmail.com

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