

## Short Birding Notes



### Eurasian Scops-Owl *Otus scops* in Bhavnagar

On 23 October, 2020, I was birding in the Malnath Hills, Bhavnagar. Around 09:45 hrs, while observing and photographing a Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*) in a Banyan tree, I saw a small owl fly away and settle in a Mango tree close by. The smaller birds nearby raised the alarm immediately on spotting the tiny predator and I identified the owl as a Eurasian Scops Owl (*Otus scops*). I took photographs and the owl did not seem to be disturbed either by the mobbing birds or by my close presence. I observed it closely for around 90 minutes in the same location, and observed a variety of birds heckling the owl. It flew away when disturbed by cattle and was not seen again. It was identified as a Eurasian Scops Owl by rufous markings above the eyes and on the scapulars, underparts with prominent cross-barring and the overall plumage. The photos were also shown to experts who confirmed the identification. This species has been recently reported from different locations in Gujarat, like Little-, and Greater Rann of Kachchh, Mahuva, Amreli, etc. This sighting makes it the second record near Bhavnagar.

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### Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* in Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary near Junagadh

On 27 November 2020, I was bird watching at Bordevi, in the Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary near Junagadh. I observed a small bird, which was moving about on the ground. It was olive-brownish in colour, with streaked upperparts. The crown was also streaked blackish and the undertail coverts were distinctly marked. Based on these features, I identified it as a Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*). This was the first time I had seen this bird here and it was a surprise sighting since the Grasshopper Warbler has not been documented in Junagadh area so far. It is possible that it is overlooked. It has been reported from Amreli (see photo on the website Oriental Bird Images), which is not far from here and there are recent sightings from other parts of the state. This sighting confirms its occurrence in the Junagadh area.

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### Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary

On 18 January 2020, at around 08:00 hrs, I was at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. While I was observing a Common Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*) inside the reeds, I heard a different call. I searched for the bird and found two Moustached Warblers (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*) in the reeds. I identified these warblers as Moustached Warblers based on the typical plumage (streaked upperparts, long and broad white supercilium, thin bill and blackish sides of crown) and structure. I went closer and took some record photographs of one bird while the other bird went into the reeds. There have been recent sightings of Moustached Warbler in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016) but it is uncommon to rare here in Nalsarovar. Further sightings will help in understanding its status in this area.

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### Sighting of Painted Sandgrouse *Pterocles indicus* near Rajkot

On 2 August 2020, in the morning, I was with a few friends and we decided to go for bird watching and photography near Vagudal and Khirasara *vidi* near Rajkot. On the way, near Balasar Village, I saw a bird sitting on a rocks, which I could identify as a sandgrouse but on looking through my camera, I was delighted and surprised to see that it was a beautiful male Painted Sandgrouse (*Pterocles indicus*). It was alone and there was no sign of the female. It was my first sighting of Painted Sandgrouse near Rajkot. Though this species is widely distributed in the state, there are very few records from near Rajkot and this is probably the first photographic record in the past few years for this area.

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### **Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* near Dwarka**

On 19 December 2019, while going from Dwarka to Mithapur, we saw a small falcon perched on a wire. We turned the vehicle and went back to the spot. It was an Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*). We realised that probably the same bird was perched here a day before but, as we were in a hurry, it was ignored. Fortunately, we were carrying a small point and shoot camera, along with binoculars, so the first author was able to click few photos, which further confirmed the identification. The bird was lethargic and had primaries, especially of the right wing, in poor shape. It was also continuously mobbed by House Crows (*Corvus splendens*) and so it had to change its position every few minutes. The Amur Falcon is an uncommon / rare passage migrant (both spring and autumn passage migrant), in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). There are 13 observations of Amur Falcon from Gujarat on 'eBird' website, and it is reported from November to January and April-May (eBird 2020). This sighting is an addition to the sightings of this species in Gujarat.

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### **Flock of Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* in Jakhau, Kachchh**

On 18 November 2018, my son Nirav and I went to the Jakhau Salt Pans for photography. Due to drought-like situation in the winter of 2018-2019, the birds, especially winter visitors, were absent everywhere except on the sea coast and in salt pans. We saw a few grebes from some distance, which I initially identified as Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) but Nirav corrected me and on a closer look, were indeed Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*). A group of 5 individuals was seen in one section. These birds were seen regularly over 5-6 visits but on 8 December 2018, we saw 35 individuals in this area. We took photographs and the birds approached to about 10-12 mts from us. This species is common in Charakhla Salt Pans near Dwarka, where large flocks have been noted and there are sporadic sightings from other parts of Saurashtra and Kachchh. The Black-necked Grebe has been noted in Kachchh earlier, including Jakhau, but it is generally uncommon here (Akhtar & Tiwari 1992, Varu 2007, 2009).

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### **Tawny Eagle *Aquila Rapax* in Ahmedabad**

On 9 July 2020, I was birding in a field near my home in Chandkheda, Ahmedabad, in the morning. I noticed a huge flock of Black Kites (*Milvus migrans*) circling at a distance. When the flock moved closer to my location, I noticed an unusual looking, whitish-coloured raptor, which was bigger in size than the kites it was flying with. I took a few photographs but could not identify the bird in the field. On posting the image on 'Raptor Identification' Facebook page, it was confirmed by many experts as a Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax*). With the Tawny Eagle being an uncommon resident and local winter migrant, and that too recorded mostly from desert areas and arid scrub, this is certainly an unusual record, and could possibly be the first record for Ahmedabad in the past few years. It would be worthwhile to be on the lookout for this raptor in and around the city.

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### **Sighting of Jungle Nightjar *Caprimulgus indicus* at Khirasara vidi, Rajkot**

On 26 July 2020, a Sunday, I was with Dr. Sandeep Nandani, Dr. Chetan Hansalia and Pilubhai Sitapara in the morning and we were on our weekly bird watching trip in Khirasara vidi area, during which we saw slight movement on an *Acacia* sp. tree. On close observation and looking through the camera, we identified some bird camouflaged on the branch of the tree and so we silently approached towards it. A nightjar (*Caprimulgus* sp.), totally camouflaged, was present on the branch. We took some photographs and identified it as a Jungle Nightjar (*Caprimulgus indicus*). We confirmed the identification with Ashokbhai Mashru. The Jungle Nightjar is known to occur in Hingolghadh Sanctuary but this is probably the first confirmed record of this species in Khirasara vidi and hence a significant sighting for Rajkot.

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### Western-crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus occipitalis* in Kachchh

There had been good rains in Kachchh since the last two years and so the birdlife is good. We were on a birding trip on 25 October 2020 near and around Mandvi area. This area was very rich in *khair* and *desi babul* trees and so there was lot of activity of small birds. We stopped near one *khair* tree where activity of warblers was good. We spotted a warbler which we thought was a Greenish Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides*) and took photographs of it. Later, on seeing the photographs on the computer, we saw that this warbler had whitish crown stripe and darker sides of crown. The supercilium was whitish and the upperparts had greyish tinge. We identified it as a Western-crowned Warbler (*Phylloscopus occipitalis*), which was later confirmed by experts. In Kachchh, the first sighting of this warbler was by Veer Vaibhav Mishra in September 2019. This is a second record of the species from this region.

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### Ashy Prinia *Prinia socialis* in eastern Banni, Kachchh

In October 2020, during part of nocturnal field work and survey in Banni region in Kachchh, we went to south-eastern part of Banni, near Lonthia town, in the morning. We saw a prinia perched on a *Prosopis juliflora*. It was moving very quickly from one perch to another. I was unable to identify it at that time. We were looking for European Nightjars (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) which were seen in flight the previous night in this area. After coming back, I shared the photographs of the prinia with senior birders Maulik Varu and Shantilal Varu; they identified it as an Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*) and informed that this was the first record of Ashy Prinia from mainland Kachchh. The Ashy Prinia was seen in a patch with vegetation, nearby a seasonal river. I was accompanied in the field by my friends Vatsal Chedda and Pratik Shah during this trip to Banni.

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### Removal of dead chick from nest by Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum*

A pair of Brahminy Starling (*Sturnia pagodarum*) had started nesting in a hole above an electric meter, situated in the building just opposite my home, in month of April 2020. It had started feeding insects to the chicks. In the morning on 30 June 2020, I saw a Brahminy Starling coming out from the nest with something big in its beak. I came out of my house and on searching, I found the Brahminy Starling sitting on a wire above my house but without any thing in its bill. I found a well grown dead chick, on the street exactly below the wire where the bird was perched. I understood that the Brahminy Starling had removed the dead chick from its nest. The chick was without any sign of injury but there were some threads wrapped on one leg. Earlier, I observed a similar incident during the study of breeding Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*), wherein dead chicks were removed from the nest by the adult barbet (Mashru 2018). It is likely that if the chick dies, then the parent birds remove it to keep the nest clean.

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### Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca* in Kachchh

While birding at Anjar Taluka on 8 December 2019, we saw one Black-headed Munia (*Lonchura malacca*) with a flock of Black-headed Buntings (*Emberiza melanocephala*) and Red-headed Buntings (*Emberiza bruniceps*). The birds had flocked together to feed on *Jowar* grain in a nearby field. We took some photographs and confirmed the identification. The Black-headed Munia is rare in Kachchh. It was not reported to occur in Kachchh by Ali (1945). I had seen this bird for the first time at Khari River, near Bhuj, in September 1980. Subsequently, I had again seen this species at Chhataradi Tank with Navin Bapat. Thereafter, it was not recorded in Kachchh and this sighting in December 2019 was another record of the Black-headed Munia for Kachchh. I was accompanied by fellow bird watchers Jaysinh Parmar, Mahesh Parmar, Ibrahim Darvadiya, Manoj Tank and Mahendra Tank during my visit to Anjar Taluka.

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### Colour aberrant Black-breasted Weaver *Ploceus benghalensis* near Kheda

On 15 August 2020, we were birding in the outskirts of Kheda, which is very rich in avifauna. It is around 40 km from Ahmedabad. Early in the morning, we were looking for Red Munia (*Amandava amandava*) in the reeds, and so we were checking the whole patch of reeds. The second author saw a white bird perched in the lush green background and we identified it as a weaver species (*Ploceus* sp.). It was difficult but we managed to take a good photo of this colour aberrant weaver. This individual had normal coloured wings and some feathers on the mantle were blackish. The crown showed a few yellow feathers. But other than this, the entire plumage was white. The bill and legs were normal coloured. We identified it as a Black-breasted Weaver (*Ploceus benghalensis*) based on the large greyish bill and referring to van Grouw (2013), we thought that the mutation was likely to be 'progressive greying' but we were not sure. This was an unusual sighting of a colour aberrant Black-breasted Weaver from Gujarat. [The photo was referred to Hein van Grouw, who confirmed the colour mutation in this Black-breasted Weaver as 'progressive greying'. We are thankful to Hein Van Grouw for his help in the identification of the exact colour mutation –Eds]

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### Colour aberrant Brahminy Starling *Sturnia pagodarum* near Mandvi, Surat

On 14 January 2020, I was bird watching with my friends Jayant Bhojwala (from Mandvi) and Rajesh Jadav (from Surat). Since it was a holiday, we had planned on birding for the whole day. Early in the morning, after picking up Jayant, we proceeded towards the forest area. As we were approaching a water body after taking a detour from a small village, I spotted three birds flying into a tree. From the flight, I could immediately guess that they were starlings but was confused as one of the birds was creamier white. I stopped my car and we took some photos and saw the birds with binoculars. We could confirm that the three birds were Brahminy Starlings (*Sturnia pagodarum*). Cautiously, we approached nearer and were able to take good photos of the colour aberrant Brahminy Starling. It was interesting to note that the colour aberrant bird was enticing its partner for mating. They kept flying from the tree to the electric wires and back. This bird had whitish head and wings but the underparts were pale rufous.

[The mutation in this individual was identified as 'progressive greying' by Hein van Grouw. We are thankful to Hein van Grouw for helping with the identification of the colour mutation – Eds]

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