

Short Birding Notes



Red-naped Shaheen *Falco pelegrinoides babylonicus* in Dhari, near Amreli

We went for birding to Galdhara dam, Dhari, near Amreli, on 9 December 2018 in the evening. It is a good place for seeing waterfowl, wagtails (*Motacilla* sp.), pipits (*Anthus* sp.) and birds of prey. This year, wagtails and pipits were seen in very good numbers. At around 17:00 hrs, we saw a small falcon (*Falco* sp.) perched on a rock. We initially identified it as a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) of the *calidus* subspecies. It then flew away for hunting. At home, we saw our photographs and noted that this bird had pale grey-blue upperparts, rufous on crown and nape, almost unmarked underparts with faint pink wash and dark moustachial stripe. We confirmed it as a Red-naped Shaheen (*Falco pelegrinoides babylonicus*). We went there on the next day and saw it again. On 16 December 2018, we saw this bird in the evening at the same place with two other Peregrine Falcons. It was seen roosting during the daytime and at night on a telephone tower for 20 days. The Red-naped Shaheen is now quite rare in Saurashtra and this sighting from Dhari is important.

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Colour aberrant dove *Stigmatopelia* sp. in Vadodara

In November 2018, I saw and photographed a colour aberrant dove (*Stigmatopelia* sp.) in Vadodara. This individual was completely white, with pink bill and feet. The eyes were normal coloured. Since this individual was completely white, I could not identify it with certainty but it was, as per my opinion, either a Laughing Dove (*Stigmatopelia senegalensis*) or a Spotted Dove (*Stigmatopelia chinensis*) based on the longer tail and beak. As per criteria given in van Grouw (2013), the mutation in this case might be either Ino or Leucism. The identification of the correct mutation in the field is quite difficult. This individual shows how challenging it is to identify the mutation and even the species when the bird is all white and no distinguishing features are visible. [We sent the photo to Hein van Grouw, who opined that 'based on the length of the tail in comparison to the length of the primaries, I reckon it is *S. senegalensis*, but from the photo, we cannot be sure. Regarding the mutation, he said 'I reckon it is Leucism, and totally white *senegalensis* due to leucism are known in captivity. Also, if it was Ino, the eye colour would have been lighter in *senegalensis*. If the bird is *S. chinensis* and Ino, then the eye colour would have been totally different from that of the bird photographed, and so, a Leucistic *senegalensis* is the most likely identification'. We thank Hein van Grouw for all his help – Eds]

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Colour aberrant White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis* near Nal Sarovar

On 28 December 2018, I was birding around Aniyari village near Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. At about 09:30 hrs, I saw a very unusual looking, white bird, in the bushes from a distance. As I got closer and took a few images, I realised that it was an aberrant coloured White-eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*). The identification was confirmed by its more bulky body, short crest, stouter bill and importantly, the prominent yellow vent was visible. This individual was seen moving around and foraging in a small group with three other White-eared Bulebuls. I also happened to see this bird again in the mid-January 2019 and again in early February 2019 at the same place. It was probably a resident in that area. I could not identify the correct mutation. [We sent the photos to Hein van Grouw, who opined that 'the bird clearly has pure white feathers next to completely normal coloured feathers! This bird is, in my opinion, a typical case of Progressive Greying. It may be inheritable Leucism, but certainly not Dilution. Progressive greying, however, is the most likely cause of this bird's aberrant white feathers'. We thank Hein van Grouw for helping with the identification of the correct mutation – Eds]

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Winter sighting of Grey-bellied Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus* at Khijadiya, near Jamnagar

On 8 February 2019, we were birding at Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, near Jamnagar, early in the morning. We saw two species of cuckoos; a Eurasian Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) and the other was a different cuckoo. We took a few photographs and it was identified as a male Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*) with grey underparts, darkish upperparts and white vent and undertail-coverts. The Grey-bellied Cuckoo is mainly a monsoon visitor to the well forested areas of Saurashtra and it was surprising to see it in the winter in this area. Bagda *et al.* (2015) show records of this species from Gir National Park and surrounding areas and a winter record from Positra, near Dwarka, in January 2014, is mentioned. This record from Khijadiya in the winter is interesting and suggests that the species may wander to suitable habitats in Saurashtra in the non-breeding season.

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Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar* in Gosabara, near Porbandar

I visited Gosabara wetland, also known as Mokarsagar, with Manoj Finava, Ashwin Trivedi and Prasad Ganpule on 29 December 2018. In the evening at around 17:30 hrs, we saw and photographed 3-4 Streaked Weavers (*Ploceus manyar*) in the reeds near one of the ponds. The birds were identified by their heavily streaked breast and flanks, and were in non-breeding plumage, with a yellow supercilium and blackish streaked head. For Gujarat, the Streaked Weaver is known to be resident in Kachchh and northern Gujarat only (Ganpule 2016). There are no records known from Saurashtra. However, Dhaval Vargiya, who has extensively birded in this area, informed that he had seen the Streaked Weaver earlier in this area but could not photograph it. This sighting of the Streaked Weaver near Porbandar is interesting and it is possible that this species is overlooked and could be occurring in other parts of the state.

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Further sightings of Slaty-legged Crake *Rallina eurizonoides* in Dadra & Nagar Haveli

A first sighting of the Slaty-legged Crake (*Rallina eurizonoides*) from the forest near Madhuban dam, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, was reported in August 2017, when an adult with a juvenile were seen and photographed (Mishra 2017). This was the first sighting of the species for Gujarat. A second sighting was in December 2017, when a juvenile Slaty-legged Crake was observed again in a different area of the Madhuban dam forest. Further observations in the monsoon season of 2018 confirmed that the Slaty-legged Crake was seen regularly and breeding in this area. Hence, this species is probably resident here in Dadra & Nagar Haveli and is highly active in the breeding season.

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Little Crake *Porzana parva* in Kheda District

In the month of December 2018, we were on a visit to Limbasi, in Dist: Kheda. At around 17:00 hrs in the evening, there was a continuous call of a Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) from the road-side reeds. Hence, we stopped to try and photograph it. We waited for an hour but did not see the bird. We saw some movement in the reeds at around 18:00 hrs, almost at sunset. To our surprise, we saw an adult male Little Crake (*Porzana parva*), walking on the edge of the water and feeding. The bird was very bold and it kept on walking towards us, without any hesitation. We could take good photographs and confirmed the identification by the red base to bill and the longer primary projection. The Little Crake is thought to be a vagrant to Gujarat but there have been recent records from Jamnagar, Nal Sarovar and also near Kheda (photos on the 'Oriental Bird Images' website). Thus, this is another sighting of the Little Crake from Gujarat.

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Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris* at Sundarvan, Ahmedabad

On 2 May 2019, a Thursday, at around 10:00 hrs, I was doing routine bird watching at Sundarvan Nature Discovery Centre, Satellite Road within Ahmedabad city, when a pair of Indian Grey Hornbill (*Ocyrceros birostris*) was seen on a *gunda* tree (*Cordia dichotoma*). I took some photographs of the pair perched in the tree. This was a rare sighting here at Sundarvan as well as in Ahmedabad. Earlier, it was recorded by Bhavik Bhatt on 18 April 2019 in Sundarvan (*pers. comm.*). The species was last recorded in 2008 in this area. The sighting of a pair in Sundarvan is encouraging and indicates that it could breed here.

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Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus* in Vadodara

On 10 December 2017, at around 10.30 hrs while returning from birding, I saw a medium-sized bird of prey perched on a dead tree in a common plot situated in Gotri area, in the middle of Vadodara. First, I assumed it to be a Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*). I took a few photographs before it flew away due to the disturbance caused by heavy traffic. After coming back, I shared the photos with other senior birdwatchers and it was identified as a Steppe Buzzard (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*). The Steppe Buzzard is a winter visitor to Gujarat, with records from Greater and Little Rann of Kachchh, Saurashtra and isolated records are known from other parts of the state (Ganpule 2016). This is the first time I had seen it in the middle of a large city like Vadodara.

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Hybrid Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* in Jamnagar

It was on 1 April 2018 in the morning, when I started for INS Valsura Salt Pans, near Jamnagar, to look at waders in breeding plumage in the coastal parts of Jamnagar. As I was driving my car slowly in the area, a bright olive-yellow coloured bird perched on a branch of small Acacia drew my attention. It was a Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) in breeding plumage, but with a yellow supercilium behind the eye on its dark black head. I had seen the subspecies *feldegg* in Jamnagar earlier, which has a complete black head. So I researched this and it was interesting to find out that it could be 'xanthophrys' morph bird; a rare hybrid between *feldegg* and *lutea*. However, such birds usually have a supercilium in front of eye also but here, the supercilium was seen only behind the eye. The various subspecies of Yellow Wagtails hybridize fairly regularly and this individual seemed to be a result of such hybridization. Detailed DNA study is required to identify such individuals as this did not fit a 'xanthophrys' due to the incomplete supercilium nor was it a pure *feldegg*.

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Watercock *Gallixrex cinerea* at Pariej, Kheda

On 16 July 2018, I was at Pariej Lake, Kheda, with C. B. Modhwadia. It was a cloudy evening and we were photographing a Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*) when I heard a loud call, which was not known to me. I saw a large, blackish bird outside the reeds. I noticed its striking red crest and yellow-tipped bill and I identified it as a male Watercock (*Gallixrex cinerea*). We took some photographs and confirmed the identification but since we were quite far, we were unable to get good photos. In a few seconds, it again vanished into the reeds. We waited and kept looking for it. The Watercock came out after a few minutes. It was quite shy and flew away after a short time. Mashru (2017), in a comprehensive compilation of records of Watercock from Gujarat, lists records of the species by Uday Vora from Viroja, behind Pariej Lake, in monsoon of 2004. Though this sighting is not unexpected, the Watercock is quite uncommon in this area.

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Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* in Bhavnagar

On 9 December 2018, I went for birding at Akwada Lake near Bhavnagar, with my uncle, at about 07:00 hrs in the morning. There, we observed a Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*). I took a few photographs and confirmed the identification. The Red-crested Pochard is now an uncommon or rare winter migrant to Saurashtra, with sightings mainly from large lakes in our region (Ganpule 2016). A recent record from Gir-Somnath District is known (Patel 2019) but I am not aware of sightings reported from Bhavnagar area recently. Senior birders confirmed that the species is now rare in Bhavnagar.

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Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* in Rajkot

While visiting Chibhada Village near Khirasara *vidi*, we saw five Indian Coursers (*Cursorius coromandelicus*) on the evening of 13 October 2018. The first author had seen the species earlier in 2002 at Khirasara *vidi*. On enquiring about previous sightings from other birdwatchers, Ashok Mashru informed that he had seen 10 birds on the evening of 28 September 1986 at Lalpari Lake and Rajdeepsinh Zala had recorded it near Christ College and at Khirasara *vidi* in August 2003. Recently, this year, Raju Karia had photographed a pair on 21 April 2019 at Chibhada pond. After that sighting, he had photographed an adult with a chick. It seems that the Indian Courser is mostly a monsoon migrant to Rajkot but the recent record by Raju Karia in the month of April, with a chick, confirms its breeding in Rajkot area.

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Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* in Chhari-Dhand, Kachchh

I was visiting Chhari-Dhand Lake, in Kachchh, with my friends Vikramsinh, Nirav and Ashish. A Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) was seen and photographed by us on 25 November 2018, in the dried lake. The lake had dried entirely since there was very less rainfall in the monsoon. When we saw this bird, it was seen perched beside a Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*). We took some good photographs of this vulture. The Cinereous Vulture is a rare winter visitor to Kachchh, with only sporadic sightings in the last few years. It is now increasingly rare in our region and there have been very few sightings reported from this area.

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