

## Sighting of Great Snipe *Gallinago media* at Nal Sarovar - a first record for Gujarat

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On 3 February 2019, a Sunday, we were birding at Vekariya Village, around Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. We reached a marshy spot at around 09:00 hrs and were checking all the birds around that area. We noticed a snipe (*Gallinago* sp.) foraging in this area and decided to get close to photograph it. As we observed and photographed the bird, we could not identify it, as this snipe appeared a bit different from the widespread Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), which is regularly seen here. Realizing this, we decided to photograph it well so as to get the identification confirmed later. After coming back home, the first author again got quite confused and sent the photographs to his friend Devvratsinh Mori for an opinion on the identification. He, after seeing the images of the bird, was also not sure, but doubted that this snipe could be a Great Snipe (*Gallinago media*). To further clarify our doubts, we referred the images to Prasad Ganpule for his expert opinion and requested him to help us with proper identification of the bird. He replied that this looked like a Great Snipe but looking at the rarity of this species in India, it was better to take opinions of experts who were familiar with this species.

The bird was very interesting and for a conclusive identification, it was first referred to Nils Van Duivendijk, who is familiar with the Great Snipe in Europe. Nils, after seeing the photographs, opined that this individual was indeed a Great Snipe and also gave his detailed opinion on the same, which is given here. Knowing this, the bird was searched for and seen again and photographed well by the first author on 10 February 2019 and subsequently, was seen in the field by Prasad Ganpule, Ashok Mashru, and others on 13 February 2019. With enough photographs and good views in the field, it was tentatively identified as a juvenile/immature Great Snipe

while Common Snipe was immediately excluded based on the short bill and more barred underparts. It was a moulting individual. However, some doubts remained as the separation of Great Snipe from Pin-tailed Snipe (*Gallinago stenura*) and Swinhoe's Snipe (*Gallinago megala*) is very difficult and a complex identification issue.

### Discussion

The field identification and separation of Pin-tailed Snipe from Swinhoe's Snipe is very difficult and both species combined are known colloquially as 'Swintail' Snipe. Both these snipes are henceforth referred to as 'Swintail' Snipe in this note.

Identification of snipes is difficult under field conditions. The diagnostic features of an adult Great Snipe are as follows: adults have bold white tips to wing coverts, bold dark markings on white underparts, and unbarred white corners to tail. Juvenile Great Snipe is less marked and obscure, belly is fully and regularly barred, it has brown bands on white tail corners, and white on wing coverts is obscure (Van Gils *et al.* 2019).

Even though the Nal Savorar bird seemed to be a juvenile and was in moult, the pattern of the wing coverts which were visible matched well with Great Snipe and did not match with a Common Snipe. While some Swinhoe's Snipe may show prominent white fringes to the coverts, the pattern of wing covert feathers shown by the Nal Sarovar bird was different from Swinhoe's Snipe. The underpart barring seen in this individual was typical of a Great Snipe. Extensive barring was seen on the belly, with barring extending on to the thighs. The thighs were boldly barred and this was seen well in the field and also in the photographs.

On checking almost 150 images of 'Swintail' Snipe on the internet (on Oriental Bird Images website and other birding websites), it was noted that the underpart barring is not as extensive in 'Swintail' Snipe when compared with Great Snipe. Only one or two birds showed more barring than normal but here also, the barring did not extend to the belly and on to the thighs. Some birds may show faint thigh barring but this is never as extensive or as bold as in Great Snipe. See Ghate (2017) wherein a Pin-tailed Snipe with very faint barring on the thighs is seen, but overall, the thighs look unbarred. But here too, there is no barring on the belly and the thigh barring is very faint and not bold like what was seen in the Nal Sarovar bird. This is the only individual of Pin-tailed Snipe which we could find on the internet, which showed a hint of thigh

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barring. The 'Swintail' Snipe shows more flank barring than a Common Snipe but the barring on the belly is usually not present. This is another feature which matched with a Great Snipe in the Nal Sarovar bird.



Sumil Kini

The Great Snipe shows white in outer tail. The spread tail is very difficult to see under field conditions. Unfortunately, the photos obtained of the tail pattern in this individual were not conclusive enough for identification. Further, from a close observation of the images, it was noted that the tail was also in moult, thus making it difficult to judge the details and it could not be confirmed if the outer tail feathers were present or were shed/growing. However, from what was seen from the photos, the tail pattern did not rule out Great Snipe. In the field, the bird looked 'dumpier', a word used in Peacock (2016); the author gives many photographs of a Great Snipe and explains the identification features of the Great Snipe in the field. We would agree to this description of Great Snipe being 'dumpier' though it is difficult to describe it precisely. The 'jizz' of the Nal Sarovar bird is different from a 'Swintail' Snipe, since it looked larger in size. When compared directly with a Common Snipe which was near to this snipe, it was seen that this individual was distinctly larger. In flight, it was seen that the Nal Sarovar bird had a densely barred underwing, which looked uniformly grey. This conclusively ruled out Common Snipe but 'Swintail' Snipe has a similar underwing pattern. The bill was short, with yellow at base, and a slight droop towards the distal end.

Since the identification was tricky, we sent the images to a few experts and their opinions are given below with their permission.

**Nils Van Duivendijk:** I totally agree with you that it looks like a Great Snipe. Unfortunately, the bird lacks a great number of coverts, but still the remaining lesser coverts show straight clear-cut bright white tips. The white tips at the rear greater

coverts are likely worn away. Best of all are the typical head pattern with very narrow loreal stripe but very broad and clean whitish supercilium, extensive barred underparts, including the leg-feathering! What is visible of the tail (upperside of central tail feathers) are, in my opinion, enough for a certain ID. Also, the rather short bill and rather pale (bright) greenish legs add to the overall picture for Great Snipe. Most Great Snipes show more V-shaped markings (especially juveniles) on their underparts, but the shape of the markings in this bird fall clearly within the normal variation.

**Bill Harvey:** On balance, I would agree with juvenile Great Snipe although it should show some white in the outer tail. The dense barring on the underparts, with a narrow white belly centre and the dark underwing are the main factors. The location is also supportive as Gujarat does pick up vagrants (of various species) to and fro wintering quarters in Africa.

**Andrea Corso:** So, I had a very good looking at the photos and need to explain some things here. Distinguishing Pintail Snipe (or *G. megalala* too but less so) from Great Snipe its way way more difficult than indicated in all field guides, as I first pointed out in my papers. The pattern on upperwing coverts is not too odd for *G. stenura* and is not helpful. It could be like this in many *G. stenura*. In 'Swintail' it is rather variable, with birds showing narrower tips but others showing tips almost as in Great Snipe. Not too odd for me. Rather, the tips look like really too small and limited for Great Snipe, even a juvenile moulting bird.

The tail: it is hard for me to see here a tail which recalls Great Snipe!! Not even in juvenile. I mean, there is almost no white at all in the visible tail feathers, the only pale/white you see at the corner, may actually be formed by the pale pin-like, short and paler outer tail feathers of *G. stenura*. In the half open tail visible, in the photo showing your bird preening, I might probably count 4 (or 5) feathers. THIS IS VERY CONFUSING. In fact there should be more than that in Great Snipe. It could well be that the narrower outer tail (1 or 2) are hidden by the T4-T5 rectrices, but I wonder if it is not easier to explain with the fact that in *G. stenura*, it is very easy and common to see only the 4 bigger/wider/longer rectrices while the shorter/narrower/smaller outer ones are often hidden below. (Here, we would like to point out that in one other photo, 7-8 bigger tail feathers are visible. Unfortunately, this photo was not included in the photos we had sent to Andrea Corso – authors).

In flight: Great Snipe, even a juvenile, would have shown much wider and better visible tips and corners. So, it is very hard for me to see a Great Snipe tail here. The pale corner could well be actually the shorter and paler small pin-tail like rectrices of a *G. stenura*, where very often, all the outer tail feathers do look



like 2 or 3 pale feathers, being bunched together and being in fact paler. So, up to now, I could not see anything contra a 'Swintail' Snipe (possibly better for a *G. stenura*) and pro Great Snipe. But here we are then: I have NEVER seen a 'Swintail' Snipe with barred "thighs", the legs feathers are always clean white in any *G. stenura* / *G. megala*. I have seen and studied in the hands, while this is truly a character of Great Snipe, and a very relevant one. While I have actually seen *G. stenura* with VERY barred flanks and belly, sometimes all the way into the lower belly, I never have seen one with barred "thighs". So, my final answer would be that I am very confused and if I should be very honest and very strict, based on the leg feathering I would say Great Snipe but if I should give a firm identification for a – let us say for example – a national first of a major rarity, I would go more carefully. Particularly, the tail pattern, with such a limited amount of white is confusing. Sure, if we have here to consider a single clinching character that is UNIQUE, that is the "thigh" pattern in this bird.

**Yoav Perlman:** This is a challenging bird. It does not look like a Great Snipe, in my opinion.

Importantly, it is small-bodied and does not appear heavy, long-billed, woodcock-like as a Great Snipe should. It lacks prominent white tips to greater coverts. I would expect even a 1cy to show more white on the tail corners. Wingtips are diagnostically (for 'Swintail' Snipe) rounded. Mantle and scapulars pattern also fits 'Swintail' Snipe better. This amount of underparts barring is OK for 'Swintail' Snipe.

**Rob van Bemmelen:** Although I indeed work in an area where we have several leks of Great Snipe, most sightings are still brief and of course, of birds that are not moulting. Regarding the option of Great Snipe, I would say that the amount of white in the tail is too small for a Great Snipe. Could the outer tail feathers be missing since it is in moult? The photos seem to suggest so. The amount of barring on the belly as well as the underwing definitely fits well to Great Snipe. But, I do not have experience with moulting Great Snipe or 'Swintail' Snipes. So, I cannot be of much help at this moment.

Thus, there was no unanimity among the experts regarding the identification. Yoav Perlman suggested that this was a 'Swintail' Snipe while the other experts suggested that this was a Great Snipe or a probable Great Snipe. The photos were also sent to Paul Leader, who has extensive experience of 'Swintail' Snipes. But, he replied that he had no experience of Great Snipe and so was unable to comment in this matter. A few other experts did not offer any opinion on this.

After discussion with other bird watchers from Gujarat, we identified this very interesting snipe from Nal Sarovar as a Great Snipe. This sighting of Great Snipe from Nal Sarovar is

an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat as it has not been listed in the Gujarat checklist or in the first update to the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016, 2017). This individual seen in Nal Sarovar was a juvenile/immature bird and was in moult. It was seen in Nal Sarovar area for more than two weeks. Looking at the difficulties in identifying snipes, bird watchers are urged to look at all snipes in Gujarat very closely as there is a possibility of the occurrence of Great Snipe here in the future.

*[The Great Snipe is a 'Near Threatened' species, thought to be experiencing a moderately rapid population decline, owing primarily to habitat loss and degradation, as well as hunting pressure (BirdLife International 2019). It breeds in Europe and winters in Sub-Saharan Africa, and occasionally in the Middle East (Van Gils et al. 2019). For India, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) give it as a rare winter vagrant to South India and Sri Lanka, with some birds perhaps occurring on passage during its migration from Europe to Africa and back. In the recent India Checklist (v3.0), the Great Snipe is classified as a national rarity (less than 10 records in the country) and also as a historical species, meaning that there has been no documented record of the Great Snipe in India since 1 January 1950 (Praveen et al. 2019). Thus, the Great Snipe is a rare winter vagrant to India.]*

*Regarding the bird seen here in Nal Sarovar, it can be seen that expert opinion is divided. This individual was probably a juvenile/immature bird and except for the barred thighs, did not show any other diagnostic features seen in the Great Snipe. But, with such difficult moulting birds, it can be expected that identification will be challenging. An interesting thing to be noted is that one of the features that is different between the sexes in Great Snipes is the amount of white in the outer tail feathers, with males having more white than females; the amount of white also increases with age (Höglund et al. 1990). Thus, lack of white on outer tail feathers is not unusual in Great Snipes and depends on the age and sex of the bird. We decided to send the images to Jacob Höglund, who has studied the Great Snipe extensively in Scandinavian countries, for his opinion. He opined that this individual looked like a female Great Snipe. He further consulted his two other colleagues, Dr. Frank Johansson and Dr. Anssi Laurila, who both have experience of Great Snipe, and they all agreed that it was a female Great Snipe (Jacob Höglund, in litt., email dated 20 May 2019).*

*Based on the opinions of experts, field observations by bird watchers here and also the numerous photographs available for study, BCSG has decided to accept this sighting from Nal Sarovar as a Great Snipe. Though we understand that some doubts could remain, we think that the features seen in this individual fit better to a Great Snipe rather than a 'Swintail' Snipe. The thigh barring seen in this bird is one of the main reasons why we accept this as a Great Snipe. Further, the unequivocal opinion by experts from Sweden like Jacob Höglund and his colleagues, who have extensively studied the Great*

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Snipe for many years and identified this individual as a female Great Snipe, helped us in arriving at our decision. If further research indicates that identification features in Great Snipe and 'Swintail' Snipe are overlapping, especially with respect to thigh barring, then we will have a relook at this record and take more expert opinions / re-check with experts again if required. At present, we accept this record as a first record of the Great Snipe for Gujarat.

We are very thankful to Nils Van Duivendijk, Bill Harvey, Yoav Perlman, Andrea Corso, Rob Van Bemmelen, Paul Leader, and many other experts for their help. We are grateful to Praveen J. for his inputs. We specially thank Jacob Höglund and his colleagues for their help in the identification of this bird – Eds]

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## Sighting of Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis* in Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat

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On 4 June 2019, I was in Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary, near Rajpipla, with Hardik Singh and Ashish Chaudhary. We went to meet my friend Mittal Chaudhary, who is a beat guard in the sanctuary. It was around 19:00 hrs, when RFO Pravinbhai Prajapati also came there and suggested that we visit the forest areas. We then went on to the forest trails and started observing the wildlife. After some time, we heard some noises and on inquiring found that some villagers were passing through the area. We then moved ahead and after about one and a half kms, Hardik remarked that there was a large owl (*Bubo* sp.) perched on a tree. It was about 20:00 hrs and due to the darkness, the owl was not clearly seen. Ashish then took a torch, focussed it on the owl and we could see it clearly in the light. The owl was looking towards us for a few moments and then was searching for prey. None of us had seen this owl before and so I informed RFO Pravinbhai that this owl was something different. We took some photographs and observed that it had long ear-tufts, chevron-shaped markings on white underparts, dark brown upperparts with pale buff edges to feathers, white facial disk and large eyes. It was easily identified as a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl (*Bubo nipalensis*). I informed Pravinbhai that this was a rare owl which is usually seen in Northeast India and in the Western Ghats.