

Sighting of Large-billed Reed Warbler in Nal sarovar

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On 7 September 2014, I visited Nal sarovar Bird Sanctuary (22° 45' N, 72° 00' E), near Ahmedabad. Nal sarovar, spread over 120 sq. km., is a natural shallow lake, with lagoons and numerous small islands. The open water, marshy areas and other diverse micro-habitats attract a wide variety of birds and it is one of the best areas for bird watching in Gujarat. It was declared as a 'Ramsar' site recently.

On one of the roads in the area, I saw a small bird being hit by a motorcycle. As I was following the motorcycle rider, I noticed this incident and stopped to investigate. I found a small sized *Acrocephalus* warbler lying on the road. It was slightly injured but otherwise looked normal. I picked it up and put it in a nearby tree. I took some images of the bird and tried to identify it. The bird looked uninjured and flew away after a few minutes. It was probably stunned by the impact; hence it has the bill open in all the photos.

It was small in size, similar to a Blyth's Reed Warbler (*A. dumetorum*), but rather long billed. Its smaller size and different shape ruled out possibility of Clamorous Reed Warbler (*A. stentoreus brunnescens*). I tentatively identified it as either a Blyth's Reed warbler or a Large-billed Reed Warbler (*A. orinus*).

[The images show a rather long-billed *Acrocephalus* warbler, with a broader bill base, and a completely pale lower mandible. It is in moult, with some new feathers still growing. The rather long claws, long and strong bill with entire pale lower mandible, indistinct supercilium, brownish upperparts, creamish white throat with brownish tinged flanks and the long tail were suggestive of Large-billed Reed Warbler, based on Svensson et al. (2010), Timmins et al. (2010) and Drycz et al. (2016).

The enigmatic Large-billed Reed Warbler was known only from a single specimen collected in Himachal Pradesh (Hume 1869). It remained unknown till it was re-discovered wintering in Thailand (Round et al. 2007). Since then, many specimens have been discovered in museum collections, misidentified as Blyth's Reed Warblers (Svensson et al. 2008, Koblik et al. 2011, Kvartalnov et al. 2011) including a specimen from Mussoorie, Uttarakhand (Pearson et al. 2008) and two more specimens from Kangra, Himachal Pradesh (Svensson et al. 2008). It is now known that it breeds in north-eastern Afghanistan (Timmins et al. 2010) and Tajikistan (Ayé et al. 2010, Kvartalnov et al. 2013) and is believed to winter in south-east Asia. It is listed as 'Data Deficient' by BirdLife International (2016).



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Its status in India is unclear. Except for the specimens collected more than a century ago, there are no confirmed records. The recent photographs of purported Large-billed Reed Warblers taken in the wild in India have been controversial. A photograph from Kolkata (Sen 2007) was treated as unconfirmed (Svensson et al. 2010). Raju et al. (2009a) reported a sighting from Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh, but subsequent mist-netting of some individuals next year at the same place proved that they were Blyth's Reed Warblers (Raju et al. 2009b). The tail-fanning behaviour supposed to be distinctive of Large-billed Reed Warbler was shown by these mist-netted Blyth's Reed Warblers and hence is not useful for identification. Das (2009) and Ray (2009) photographed a bird at Koikhali in West Bengal (images on the website <http://orientalbirdimages.org>), which is posted by editors of the website with the remark 'appears to be this species'. Thus there are no confirmed photographic records of the Large-billed Reed Warbler from India. Whether it is genuinely rare or overlooked is not known.

The identification of Large-billed Reed Warbler from photographs is very difficult and generally biometric data is required to conclusively separate Large-billed Reed Warbler from Blyth's Reed Warbler. In view of this being such a difficult species to identify, our editorial board decided to send the images to Lars Svensson, the acknowledged expert on the Large-billed Reed Warbler, for his opinion. His detailed reply is given below, with his permission:

"Interesting bird indeed! As you know, the Large-billed Reed Warbler holds a special place in my heart. And this is what it surely looks like!

I assume your reporting observers have managed to firmly exclude the considerably larger Clamorous Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*) from the discussion. They should be familiar with this quite regular bird in Gujarat, but it is best to put this question. On the other hand, even without a certain evaluation of the size of the bird, I must say I am not aware of any *brunnescens* with such completely pale pinkish-yellow lower mandible, they seem to always have a rather dark outer part of the lower mandible. So already this

fact should exclude such a mistake. And such a pale lower mandible is typical of *orinus*. If you are aware of a larger bill colour variation within Clamorous Reed Warbler than I here anticipate, please tell me.

These two, *brunnescens* and *orinus*, are the only really long-billed 'Acros' occurring in India, so it is a matter of one of them. Blyth's Reed Warbler can be excluded on the too long bill (*dumetorum* has a long bill, but not this long), and also on the long and thin claws typical of *orinus*. In collections, I often have first spotted a misidentified *orinus* in the *dumetorum* trays on the long and thin claws.

This being an adult, as complete wing moult and pale brown iris colour show, I am still a little surprised that it has advanced so far with moult. One secondary is clearly growing, and when secondaries are moulted, primary moult has usually reached at least halfway. So it is reasonable to assume that the moult of flight-feathers started at least two weeks earlier. Which I find surprisingly early. It could be a bird which failed to breed and started autumn migration early.

The other thing which is surprising, and which makes this record both controversial and exciting is the locality. To find a moulting adult Large-billed Reed Warbler in Gujarat is totally at odds with previous records and expected migration routes and wintering areas. I had assumed that this species migrated eastward along the southern side of the Himalayas to winter in Burma and Thailand and adjacent areas. But maybe there is also a small wintering area in SW India previously overlooked?"

Looking at the very detailed reply and the explanation given above, and since the observer was very confident that the bird was much smaller than the Clamorous Reed Warbler and he had experience of seeing Clamorous Reed Warblers in Gujarat, our editorial board decided to accept this sighting as a Large-billed Reed Warbler. Also looking at the images, and as stated above, the bird does look different from a Clamorous Reed Warbler. This is very significant as other than this record, the previous specimen records are the only known records for India.

This is the first record for Gujarat and is very interesting. Birdwatchers should look at all Blyth's Reed Warblers and Clamorous Reed Warblers here closely and take as many images as possible as there is a possibility of the occurrence of Large-billed Reed Warbler. In this case, since the observer was not aware of the significance of the sighting, he did not take morphometric measurements and photos with the bird in hand and thus lost a golden opportunity. It is recommended that whenever it is possible to obtain such data, observers should take photos and measurements.

We are very thankful to Lars Svensson for all his help and support in identification of this difficult species – Prasad Ganpule]

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