

Hen Harrier...

a closer examination of the images, I realized that the bird clearly showed a prominent dark trailing edge to the wings, along with five barred visible primary fingers, a much broader but less pointed hand, and pale underparts with streaking on breast. These are some of the key features which were helpful in identifying this individual as a Hen Harrier (Forsman 2006, 2016).

To confirm the identification, I later wrote to Dick Forsman, who has done extensive field research on harriers and is considered to be an authority on birds of prey. Dick Forsman, after seeing all the three images, confirmed that the bird was indeed a juvenile Hen Harrier. I was overjoyed when I saw his email and later, was very happy to learn that this is probably the first photographic record of this species from Gujarat. I feel that this juvenile bird was probably a vagrant, which might have lost track during its return migration in April and turned up in Nal Sarovar.

[A study of the three photographs and the identification features mentioned here, along with the confirmation by Dick Forsman, leave no doubt that this is indeed a Hen Harrier. As stated, it appears to be a juvenile, and the plumage points to that.

Regarding its status in Gujarat, Naoroji (2006) gives a sight record from Velavadar National Park (NP) and shows a question mark for coastal Bhavnagar area. Since identification is difficult, it is likely to be overlooked though its presence in Velavadar NP has long been suspected by senior bird watchers here, who think it is a rare winter migrant to this area. There is another reliable sighting from Velavadar NP in January 2008 when a male Hen Harrier was seen by Frank Rheindt, James Eaton and Rob Hutchinson (of birdtour Asia) and the same was confirmed by James Eaton (in litt, by email). Ganpule (2016) gives it as a vagrant or rare winter visitor in

Gujarat, with most reports from Velavadar NP and isolated records from the Little and Greater Rann of Kachchh, and mentions a photographic record from near Rajkot. However, this photo record is of doubtful provenance and could not be verified. Thus, the present photographic record from Nal Sarovar is the first photographic record of the species from Gujarat – Eds]

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Sighting of Large-billed Reed Warbler in Vansada National Park

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Pankaj Maheria

On 14 April 2017, we went to Vansada National Park (henceforth VNP), in Dangs, for birding with our friends Pragnesh Patel and Viren Desai, as it was a holiday. At that time, the deciduous forest of VNP is dry, almost brown-looking. The water level is too low and natural streams are almost dried out; so birds have to drink water from artificial waterholes made by the Forest Department. We chose to wait under the bushes



besides such a waterhole. In the afternoon, the movement of birds was less and only a few birds visited the waterhole. But, in the evening time (after around 16:30 hrs), the movement gradually increased and many birds visited the waterhole. We observed Black-naped Monarch (*Hypothymis azurea*), Orange-headed Thrush (*Zoothera citrina*), Ashy Drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Brown-cheeked Fulvetta (*Alcippe poioicephala*), Tawny-bellied Babbler (*Dumetia hyperythra*), Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*), Vigor's Sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja vigorsii*), White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) etc. in this area. These birds came repeatedly, for four to five times, at the waterhole for drinking.

Here, we saw and photographed an *Acrocephalus* sp. warbler, which also came to drink from the waterhole. We took many photographs and initially identified it as a Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*). We uploaded these images on our website www.birdsofgujarat.co.in as a Blyth's Reed Warbler. Later, Prasad Ganpule saw these images and suspected that this individual could be a possible Large-billed Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus orinus*). He asked for higher resolution images for confirming the identification. Finally, it was confirmed as a Large-billed Reed Warbler. This is another photographic record from Gujarat; the earlier record was from Nalsarovar (Trivedi & Ganpule 2016). This is the first sighting for south Gujarat and VNP.

Large-billed Reed Warbler. Since the Large-billed Reed Warbler had been noted earlier in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary (Trivedi & Ganpule 2016), I was aware of the possibility of this being noted again in Gujarat.

However, the identification of Large-billed Reed Warbler is quite difficult and as explained in Trivedi & Ganpule (2016), it can be confused with Blyth's Reed Warbler as well as Clamorous Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus*). Here, Clamorous Reed Warbler could be eliminated based on the structure, face pattern and general plumage of this bird. For confirmation of the identification, I forwarded the images to Lars Svensson, who has considerable experience of the Large-billed Reed Warbler. He replied (in litt., email dated 19 July 2018) that 'I agree that it really looks like another Large-billed Reed Warbler. I have calculated that it had a bill length to skull of 18.8 mm, which exceeds what can be found in Blyth's Reed Warbler. Also, the tarsus seems to be 24.4 mm, clearly longer than in any Blyth's Reed Warbler. On top of these differences, one can note a fairly pale iris, also a sign of Large-billed Reed Warbler. On one of the images, we can see a long and rather straight middle claw, a final indication of Large-billed Reed Warbler. I think you can safely book it as *A. orinus*'. Thus, the identification was confirmed as a Large-billed Reed Warbler.



As stated by the authors, the earlier record of this species from Gujarat was from Nalsarovar. This sighting in April from VNP is quite interesting since it is from early summer. This record from VNP is indicative of the bird being either in late passage migration or a wintering bird which is late in going back to its breeding area. Not much is known about the migration route of the Large-billed Reed Warbler or of its wintering areas. Here, the main challenge is in the correct identification of the species since it can be easily confused with other *Acrocephalus* sp. Good photographs, from different angles, are required to confirm the identification. Many times, it is not possible to safely identify it in the field and unless measurements are taken, identification is difficult based on photographs. Only

[Many good images were taken by the observers, from different angles, of this individual. When I first saw these photos, I thought that though this bird was similar to a Blyth's Reed Warbler, it had a much longer and stronger bill than usually seen in a typical Blyth's Reed Warbler. The lower mandible was quite pale (looking orange-yellow in strong light) and had only a faint dark smudge near the tip when seen from other angles. Also, when observed closely, the claws on the middle toe and the hind toe were quite long. In addition, the tarsus looked longer than seen in a Blyth's Reed Warbler. Based on the above details, I suspected that this bird could be a possible

if the main features are visible and noted in photographs, can it be separated from Blyth's Reed Warbler. Fortunately, here, the observers took many good photographs of this individual and so the identification could be confirmed.

This is a significant record of the Large-billed Reed Warbler from VNP. It shows that the species could be occurring in other areas of Gujarat but is probably overlooked due to identification difficulties. More sightings will help in understanding the status and distribution of the Large-billed Reed Warbler in Gujarat.

I am very grateful to Lars Svensson for helping with the identification – Prasad Ganpule]

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Sighting of Barn Swallow of subspecies *tytleri* - a noteworthy record from Gujarat

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The Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), breeds in the Pakistan hills, Himalayas and Northeast India; it is a widespread winter visitor to most parts of the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In the Indian Subcontinent, the most widespread and common subspecies of Barn Swallow are *H. r. rustica* and *H. r. gutturalis* (Ali & Ripley 2001). Adults have bright red forehead and throat, blue-black breast band and upperparts, and long tail streamers; underparts vary from white in *rustica* to pale creamy or white in *gutturalis*, whereas the subspecies *tytleri* has uniform rufous-chestnut underparts and narrow broken breast-band (Turner 2006). The subspecies *tytleri* breeds in south-central Siberia (River Yenisey, east to Yakutskaya), south to northern-inner Mongolia; it winters to eastern India and southeast Asia (Turner & Christie 2016). For India, winter records of this subspecies are limited to the northeastern states. The subspecies *saturata* also has rufous underparts, described as 'rusty-ochre', but it winters in southeast Asia and is not known to occur in India (Turner & Christie 2016). The situation is further complicated by the occurrence of intergrades, as there are areas of overlap in breeding territories wherein individuals with characteristics of two subspecies are known to occur. Hence, taxonomy is complicated.

We saw flocks of Barn Swallows at several places in north Gujarat during one of our field surveys in September 2010. Amongst the Barn Swallows perching on the roadside electric wires, we saw one swallow with dark rufous underparts on

24 September 2010, near Prantij town (23° 27' 0.17" N, 72° 49' 31.63" E), in Sabarkantha District. This bird, along with other swallows, was photographed, and based on the rufous underparts, was identified as a Barn Swallow, possibly of the subspecies *tytleri*. After six years, while examining our old photographs, we realized that it is important to get the identification confirmed from experts. Dr. Rebecca Safran and Dr. Elizabeth Scordato (*pers.comm.*, email dated 18 May 2016) opined that this individual was similar to a *tytleri*, but the possibility of a dark *gutturalis* (which sometimes includes *saturata*, which is rusty-ochre below) could not be ruled out. The phenotypically variable *gutturalis* has sometimes been divided into as many as four different subspecies throughout its range (Scordato & Safran 2014). Also, there is quite a bit of overlap in the color distributions between *gutturalis* and *tytleri*, with darker *gutturalis* the same color as paler *tytleri* (Dr. Elizabeth Scordato, *pers.comm.*, email dated 19 May 2016). Thus, without morphometric measurements, it is difficult to be sure. However, the darker forms of *gutturalis* breed in the Russian far-east, and are not known to winter in the Indian Subcontinent, and thus, this individual can be identified as a Barn Swallow of the *tytleri* subspecies.

Ali (1955) recorded two subspecies of Barn Swallow from Gujarat; *rustica* and *gutturalis*, and both were listed in the checklist of birds of Gujarat (Parasharya *et al.* 2004). The subspecies *tytleri* is known to occur only in north-eastern states of India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Turner & Christie 2016). It has not been reported west of West Bengal (Ali & Ripley 2001). Hence, this is an important record for western India as well as for Gujarat. Moreover, the first date of sighting of Barn Swallow during winter is also very important as Ali (1955) records its earliest arrival date as 27 October in Gujarat. The fact is that wintering birds arrive much earlier in Gujarat, and one of us (BMP, the second author) have seen them as early as the second week of July (in 1993) near Tarapur (22° 28' N, 72° 37' E), in Anand District, Gujarat.