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Sighting of Little Bittern near Surat

Vijay S Bendre: 52, Ankurpark Row House, Jahangirpura, Surat. bendrevs@gmail.com



[The Little Bittern is thought to be a vagrant to Gujarat, with only one photographic record from Nalsarovar (Ganpule 2016). The record from Nalsarovar was in April 2009 when an adult was seen and photographed near Kathechi village (Trivedi 2015), which was the first confirmed record of the species from Gujarat; Little Bittern is not shown in either Grimmett et al. (2011) or in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) for the state. An earlier record from Gavier Lake, Surat, in September 2002 by Mukesh Bhatt (Bhatt 2003) was considered to be inadequately documented; the editor's note given in the article states that this is a species which had not been noted in Gujarat before and hence, detailed documentation was required to confirm the identification.

This sighting from Surat in early September is surprising. The species is given as a scarce winter visitor (occasionally) and passage migrant in Indus Valley, Pakistan, and vagrant elsewhere in India; it winters mainly in Africa (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The earlier record was in April while this sighting was in September. The unconfirmed sighting from Surat was also in early September. While these only two records are insufficient to make any comments on its status here, it is possible that this species could be a passage migrant in Gujarat. Birdwatchers should look for the Little Bittern in suitable habitats here in September and October. This photographic record is important and as stated by the observer, only the second record from Gujarat, and the first photographic record for south Gujarat – Eds]

On 5 September 2017, at around 07:30 hrs, I was on the Jahangirpura-Sayan Highway, on the outskirts of Surat for birding when I saw a bird similar to a bittern (*Ixobrychus* sp.) perched on a tree. So I stopped my car and took a few photos. I noticed that it had pale creamish underparts with whitish streaks, white wings and black mantle and crown. I could not identify this bird but knew that it was a bittern, and different from Yellow Bittern (*Ixobrychus sinensis*) and Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*). I shared the images with a few friends and it was identified as an adult Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*).

The Little Bittern was perched near a Baya Weaver (*Ploceus philippinus*) nest and sometimes, it was showing aggressive behaviour towards the Baya Weavers. Unlike other bitterns, this individual was not shy and skulking. I was able to photograph it from hardly ten feet, possibly since I was in my car. After two to three minutes, it noticed me and hid in the grass, after which I was not able to see it. After waiting for about five minutes, the bird was found near a small tree, 15 feet away from me. Again, I took a few photos. After this, it flew away into the grass and was not seen again. The bird was found near a canal alongside the road, with lots of grass. In the canal, a large number of fish were present. Hence, it is possible that this area was a suitable habitat for this individual. This is the first time I had noted a Little Bittern here and as per my talk with senior bird watchers here, it is only the second photographic record for Gujarat.

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