

Little Crane...

For Gujarat, there have been claims of Little Crane sightings previously. Sightings have been reported from Nal Sarovar, in south Gujarat (Mukesh Bhatt, pers. comm.) and from Saladi, Amreli (Viral Joshi, pers. comm.). However, there is no photographic proof and it can be said that it was not adequately documented before. Ganpule (2016) included it in the checklist of birds of Gujarat based on a sight report from the Little Rann of Kachchh, where it was noted alongside Baillon's Crane and presumed to have been correctly identified. Here again, there is no photographic evidence. Though it is probable that some of the earlier reports could have been correct, it is a fact that even though there are a large number of bird photographers now in India, the Little Crane remained elusive so far and also, the identification of the species is quite difficult unless the diagnostic features are seen well. Hence, this photographic record of one individual seen in Jamnagar is very important and is the first properly documented and confirmed sighting of the Little Crane from Gujarat, proving that its inclusion in the Gujarat checklist is justified. It is also pertinent to note that it was seen for more than two months in the same area, indicating that it is a winter visitor here and not a passage migrant.

Now that many bird watchers have seen this species here and noted the habitat in which it was seen in Jamnagar, they are urged to search for the Little Crane in other areas in Gujarat and report any sightings – Eds]

Sighting of Namaqua Dove near Jamnagar: a first record for India

Akshay Trivedi & Krunal Trivedi: "Gauri-nivas", Shubhash Nagar-1, B/h. Amrapali Cinema, Raiya Road, Rajkot 360007. krunaltrivedi2811@gmail.com

On 17 December 2017, a Sunday, we visited Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary (22° 31' 18" N, 70° 08' 40" E), near Jamnagar, early in the morning. After a few hours of fruitful birding during which we saw more than 50 species like Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), many Ducks (*Anas* sp.), Orphean Warbler (*Sylvia hortensis*), etc. we were returning back. At around 09:30 hrs, we saw a dove foraging on ground in the short grass along the road. It looked different from the other common doves (*Streptopelia* sp.) that are seen here. So, we stopped for a while. We saw that this dove had a long and pointed tail with some barring on the rump, black spots on the wing coverts, thin greyish bill, blackish primaries and darkish lores. We observed that it was much smaller than other species of doves and similar in size to a White-eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*), which came and perched beside it. When we approached closer, it flew away. Its flight was quick and it flew close to the ground and then perched on a tree. We took some photos and tried to identify this dove but failed to do so.

On coming back, we saw the photos on our computer but could not identify it. Though superficially similar to the doves seen here, we were sure that this was not one of the species

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seen here as none has such a long and pointed tail. We then sent the images to senior bird watchers Jaipalsinh Jadeja, S. N. Varu and Prasad Ganpule. It was identified as a female Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*). We were happy because it was a lifer for us and this species has not been noted in India before and this was the first record of the Namaqua Dove from India.



Akshay Trivedi

[On the same day in the morning, we were in Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary. We were observing a Paddyfield Pipit (*Anthus*



Akshay Trivedi

rufulus) when we saw that an unidentified dove came and perched near the pipit. It started foraging on the road. It was small in size and had a long pointed tail.

We took some photos but could not identify it. After about a minute, it flew away and when it flew, we noticed that the wings were reddish-brown in colour and the tail looked longer as compared to other doves. We came to know that this was a Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*) when it was identified later by other senior birders. This sighting was at about the same time it was seen by Akshay & Krunal Trivedi there.

Shivani Patel: "Shree", Ambavijay Society, Near Milan Ground, Jamnagar. shivani.shivani9420@gmail.com

Aditiba Raol: 16 Natvarpark (Dabar Society), Near Muni Babu Ashram, 80 feet Road, Surendranagar. raoladiti30@gmail.com]

[The observers took some good images of this dove. As can be seen from the photos, it is somewhat similar to a Eurasian Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) and Laughing Dove (*Stigmatopelia senegalensis*), both of which are common in Gujarat. However, it differs from these species in having a long pointed tail, is smaller in size, and has different plumage with black spots on the wing coverts. Further, as noted by the other observers, the wings were reddish-brown in colour, which was seen when it flew. Hence, there remains no doubt that this is indeed a Namaqua Dove. It is a female based on its plumage. And the fact that it was seen independently by others at around the same time establishes that it was present in that area for some time in the morning.

The Namaqua Dove is resident in S Israel and SW Jordan, sub-Saharan Africa, Arabia and Socotra, with seasonal and nomadic movements through Africa and Middle East; there has been a recent spate of vagrant records further north of its range, in the Middle East, Caucasus and even Central Asia, which are suggestive of range expansion (Baptista et al. 2017). Northward range expansion occurred in the wake of the extension of agricultural fields and water sources, especially after 1975; apparently as a result of these changes, the first individuals reached Israel (Shirihai & Gellert 1989). In the UAE and Arabia, it is now a regular breeding bird and it is stated to be dispersive and is seen offshore also on the Das Island, which is about 150 kms from the mainland, in the Arabian Gulf (Jennings 2000). Hence, a change in habitats has resulted in this species moving into newer areas.

For the Indian Subcontinent, there is a recent record offshore near Karachi, in October 2016, when a fisherman noted a male Namaqua Dove on his boat about 3 kms from the Karachi harbour (WWF-Pakistan 2016). However, it has not been noted in India before and has not been included in the recent India Checklist (Praveen et al. 2016) or the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016). It is also not included in the list of species not recorded from India, but recorded in the Indian Subcontinent (Praveen et al. 2017).

Regarding this individual seen in Khijadiya, its behaviour was like a wild bird and it did not allow close approach. It did not show any unusual plumage features which are commonly seen in caged birds. Here, it is pertinent to point out that the Namaqua Dove is a popular cage bird. It is also known as Cape Dove. However, an

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online search for this species from Gujarat proved to be negative and also, it is not kept in zoos here. Reliance Industries Ltd., near Jamnagar, has a large private collection of exotic birds. But, they usually clip the wings of birds in their collection, while this individual was flying normally. Also, it is unlikely that this was an escapee from their collection since the birds there are kept under watch. Some individuals are known to be kept as pets in large cities of Gujarat like Ahmedabad, etc. but, the behaviour of this individual was like a wild type bird. This species is said to be difficult to breed in cages, with pairs taking several years before they breed (Vriends 1994); the sighting from Khijadiya was of probably a young female (though ageing is difficult), reducing the possibility that this was an escapee. In principle, the Namaqua Dove cannot be aged after completion of post juvenile moult; but lack of pale base to the lower mandible, which is seen in older females but was not seen here, could indicate that this is a young female (Hadoram Shirihai, in litt., email dated 4 January 2018). Another aspect which has to be considered is that this could have been a ship-assisted individual; Jamnagar is a port city. But, this possibility seems less as the species is migratory (with seasonal movements) and prone to vagrancy. The individual recorded near Karachi was also seen just 3 kms from the shore and it came and perched on a fisherman's boat, which could indicate ship assistance. Vagrancy by ship-assistance is a complicated subject and we can speculate that this could be one of the reasons for it being here in Jamnagar, but it seems unlikely in this case, as the species has spread north to newer areas in Caucasus and Central Asia, probably due to finding of suitable habitats.

Though known to breed all round the year, the breeding season in Arabia is from Mar-May, with young in June. So, winter (December) would be the non-breeding season for this species. It is reported that these can rarely be kept in cages without their feathers getting thrashed (White 2008), while this individual was in fine plumage. So, it can be inferred that this was probably a wild bird. Another interesting aspect about this sighting is that it is a well known fact that this species has a tendency for vagrancy (or colonising new areas if favourable habitat is available) and so this also supports the genuine vagrant possibility. This species tends to spread naturally, first as vagrants, and in the later years for breeding, as it happened in Israel in the 1980s (Hadoram Shirihai, in litt., email dated 4 January 2018). Doves (*Streptopelia* sp.) are known to colonize new areas. It is very well known that the Eurasian Collared Dove colonized Europe and North America in the last century (Rocha & Hidalgo 2000, Romagosa & McEneaney 1999).

That there have been records of Namaqua Dove outside its normal range is beyond any doubt. After its first and second sighting in Iran in 2007 (Osaei & Jamadi 2008), there have been many records of the species from the country and it is seen in Iran now. It can also be noted that there is a record from Pakistan too. All these records cannot be attributed to escaped or ship-assisted birds and it is

very likely that on finding suitable habitat, the Namaqua Dove is increasingly seen beyond its normal range, even in Iran and now in the Indian Subcontinent. For Gujarat, the change in agrarian practises due to extensive canal network has resulted in habitat changes. Such changes could be beneficial for this species and it remains to be seen if this is sighted in the future regularly. Hence, the current sighting can be considered to be of a genuine vagrant rather than that of an escapee since it is certain that the species is moving into new areas where it was not seen before. In any case, the origin of such individuals would always be open to questions, but a logical analysis is presented for the above record showing that it is most probably a wild vagrant.

In view of the details given here, we consider that this individual seen in Khijadiya was a genuine wild vagrant and accept it into the Gujarat checklist. This is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat and also India.

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