

Sightings of Besra in Polo forest and Shoolpaneshwar WLS

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Introduction:

The Besra (*Accipiter virgatus*) is a forest dwelling raptor, which is not very visible due to its shy/retiring nature and the dense habitat it usually prefers (Naoroji 2006). It is a polytypic species, of which

A. v. kashmirensis (western Himalayas), *A. v. affinis* (eastern Himalayas), *A. v. besra* (Western Ghats and Sri Lanka) and *A. v. abdulalii* (Andaman & Nicobar Islands) occur in India and it is a resident, with altitudinal movements, from Uttarakhand to Assam, Western Ghats (south of Mumbai), Eastern Ghats, Sri Lanka and Andamans (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The southern race *besra* is resident along the Western Ghats from Mumbai south to Kerala between 600 and 1800 mts (Naoroji 2006).

There are two historical records of the Besra from or near Gujarat; one from near Mt. Abu and another from Kachchh (Butler 1875). Dharmakumarsinhji (1956) reported an individual which had straggled to Bhavnagar, Saurashtra and commented on seeing it in Gujarat (presumably south Gujarat) but not in Saurashtra. Shull (1962) collected a specimen from the Dangs, noting it as very rare in Gujarat. Naoroji (2006) shows isolated records for Gujarat, with the comment 'Straggler recorded from Bhavnagar, Saurashtra indicating occasional northward local migration'.

We report here sightings of the Besra from Polo forest and Shoolpaneshwar WLS, made over a period of three years, from 2014 to 2016.

Study Area:

Polo forest is situated in North Gujarat and forms part of the southern Aravalli range. It is located in Ta: Vijaynagar of Dist: Sabarkantha. The forest is of 400 sq. km. and spans across North Gujarat and Rajasthan. It is a dry deciduous forest, consisting of broad leaved trees. The Harnav River flows between the rocky hills throughout the forest, and is the main source of water. The streams cause dense vegetation in the foothills, where maximum wild life occurs. The Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in Narmada district and is one of the best forests in Gujarat.

Observations:

The first sighting of a Besra was on 17 August 2014 by the first author. Based on its plumage, it was identified as a very fresh

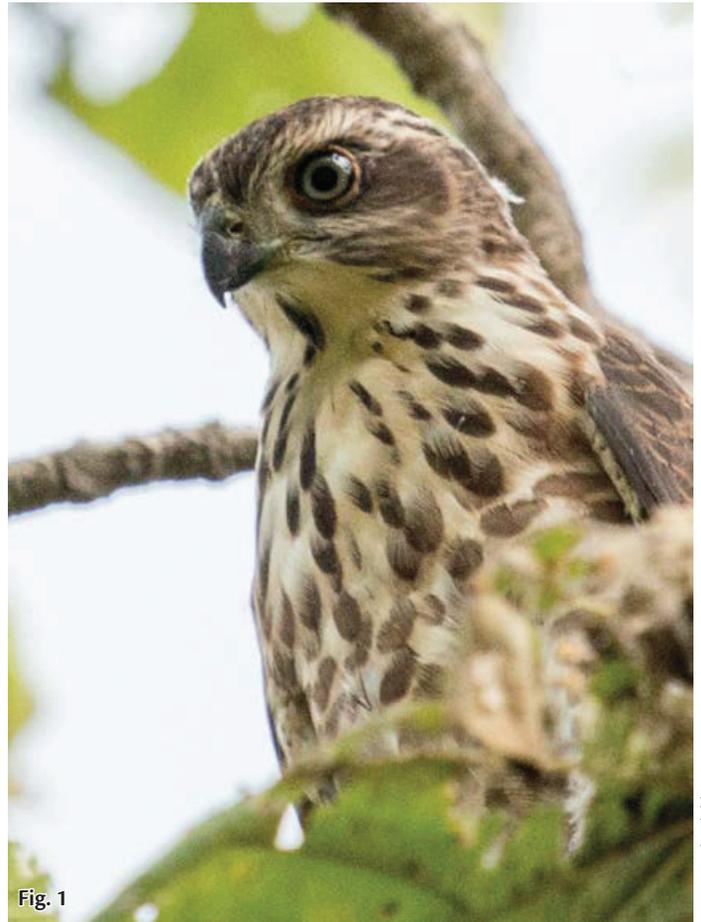


Fig. 1

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juvenile (Fig 1). It was calling repeatedly, which attracted our attention to it. The call was a high pitched squeal. The bird was not flying long distances, and it flew only in short spurts from one tree to another. It kept itself confined to the same area. It was identified as a juvenile Besra based on the very thin legs, short primary projection and broad tail bands. The tail in a Besra is usually square-ended, which was not seen here. But the other features were indicative of a juvenile Besra. This type of behaviour is typical of fledged juvenile *Accipiters*, who vocalize to call their food-bearing parents.

On 26 August 2014, one fresh juvenile of a Besra was seen perched on a tree by the first author (Fig 2A, 2B). Similar to the earlier observation, we were drawn towards its call. When we came at the same spot as the earlier observation, we saw a perched juvenile. It showed a nice Besra profile, with abruptly decurving beak, good superciliary, and, importantly, few and broad dark tail bands, plus short primary projection. It was identified as a juvenile Besra. Its tail tip was clearly rounded, and not square; but other features matched very well with a Besra. It was probably the same bird seen earlier. This time, it was



Fig. 2A



Fig. 2B

more co-operative and stayed at the same perch, preening and calling. After some time, while this bird was calling, we heard a second call from deeper inside the forest. We found another bird with an unidentified bird kill, with more pronounced plumage markings. This bird ate a little from its kill and went to rendezvous with the other juvenile.

On 7 March 2015, a Besra was spotted in Shoolpaneshwar forest, Narmada District. The bird gave very little chance to photograph since it was constantly changing its perch and was very wary. We could take only one image, showing the dorsal side. We could confirm it as a Besra based on the long thin legs, and three broad tail bands.

On 5 June 2016, one juvenile and one adult bird were observed by all of us in Polo forest. It was a very hot and humid day. We saw five Shikra (*Accipiter badius*), seven Oriental Honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*), one White-eyed Buzzard (*Butastur teesa*), one Crested Hawk Eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus*), and one Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*) at the same water hole throughout the day from 09:00 hrs to 18:00 hrs. At this place, we saw one juvenile Besra (Fig 3A, 3B). It was calling frequently with a single pitch note. It perched in a densely covered branch for a few seconds before coming down to drink some water. This juvenile had started moulting its body feathers. It could be identified as a Besra based on the tail bands, fairly square tail tip, prominent supercilium and profile. We also saw an adult (male?) Besra in flight. It was a very compact looking bird, smaller in size compared to Shikra and the wing beats were very rapid, indicating a slightly different flight pattern than Shikra or Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

The presence of the Besra in Shoolpaneshwar forest was further confirmed by the sighting of an adult bird

on 13 November 2016 by Rajendra Patel, Bharat Raval and Ramesh Sarvani. One individual was photographed in the forest, and it was identified as a Besra, based on the typical thin tarsi, and the plumage. (Fig 4)

Identification:

Since identification of the Besra is difficult, we observed all birds in great detail before confirming them as Besra. The Besra can be confused with Shikra and very good views are required to separate them. It can also be confused with Crested Goshawk (*A. trivirgatus*), but Crested Goshawk has not been documented in Gujarat. Confusion with Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*A. nisus*) is also possible. However, Eurasian Sparrowhawk can be separated by its larger size, prominent

supercilium, absence of gular stripe and contrasting dark eye mask. Some general identification pointers are given below based on Grimmett *et al.* (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012):

Legs – The Besra has very thin and fine legs and weak tarsi compared to Shikra and Crested Goshawk.

Beak – The Besra has smaller / less powerful beak compared to Shikra and Crested Goshawk.

Primary Projection– primary projection of a Besra is very short. However, this is difficult to confirm from photos and good views, from different angles, would be required to confirm this.

Tail – The Besra has 3 broad, dark tail bands. The tail is evenly barred, unlike Shikra. Besra usually has a square ended tail.

Size – Both in flight and when perched, a Besra looks more compact and is smaller than a Shikra or a Crested Goshawk.

Structure – The Besra has slim body and a smaller head compared to a Shikra and Crested Goshawk.

Supercilium – A juvenile Besra has fine but prominent supercilium.

The following features are indicative, but not very reliable for identification:

Orbital ring – The orbital ring is very prominent in a Besra. This is because a Besra usually has a darker head. On a closer look, one can see that in Shikra too.

Gular stripe – gular stripe can be there in Shikra juveniles and must not be considered as a primary identification pointer. However, the gular stripe usually extends on to the upper



Fig. 3A



Fig. 3B

Dhairya Dixit

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breast in a Besra and is broader and more prominent.

Even with the details given above, field identification of a Besra can be very difficult. An example is given below:

The individual in Fig 5 looks similar to a juvenile Besra and has thin legs. But it is not a Besra because of the following identification features described here: it has a larger beak, heavier built, fine bands on under tail coverts, yellow orbital ring is missing, and absence of a fine yet prominent supercilium; which all point to this individual being a juvenile Shikra. Hence, it is always advisable to get detailed views of any individual (like dorsal, ventral, flight view etc.) for a correct identification.

Conclusion:

The presence of Besra is confirmed in Polo forest and Shoolpaneshwar WLS by these sightings. The sightings of fresh juveniles indicate a possibility of nesting of the Besra in Polo forest. More studies are required to confirm nesting in this area. There is also a possibility of its occurrence in other similar forests in Gujarat. Presence of forest dwelling raptors indicates healthiness of forests; hence similar observations in different forests can help us understand the raptor’s ecology and estimate its population.

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Fig. 4

Rajendra Patel



Fig. 5

Jay Solanki