

## Sightings of Grasshopper Warbler in Amreli, Gujarat

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Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*) is a small streaked warbler of the genus *Locustella*. It breeds across central and western Palearctic and winters in S Asia and N Africa (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is a winter migrant in India, wintering mainly in the Western Ghats and C India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), with isolated records from other parts of India.

For Gujarat, a few isolated records are given in Grimmett *et al.* (2011); it is shown as a passage migrant also (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Ali (1955) collected specimen from Golana, Cambay (Ta. Khambhat, Dist. Anand at present) and also noted it around Baroda (Vadodara), with the remark that it was not common or abundant, but was likely to occur in suitable habitat. Due to the generally skulking nature of this warbler, it is very rarely seen and it has not been reported recently from Gujarat. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) give its status as 'scarce or overlooked'.

On 15 December 2010, I was searching for a Spotted Crake (*Porzana porzana*) which is seen in an area near my village, Saladi, Dist. Amreli (21° 34' N, 71° 20' E). This marshy area at the edge of the village pond is covered with reeds, and interspersed with Gando Baval (*Prosopis juliflora*). Usually water is present in the area till March. While waiting for Spotted Crake, my attention was drawn towards a small, streaked warbler moving near the base of a Gando Baval shrub. Its call was a "chat-chat-chat" repeated a few times. I got good views of the bird and was able to see the streaked upperparts and crown and buffy underparts, with faint streaking. The streaking was prominent on the flanks. I identified the warbler as a Grasshopper Warbler, ruling out the similar looking Lanceolated Warbler (*L. lanceolata*) and Rusty-rumped Warbler (*L. certhiola*), based on the call and other features seen on the bird. The calls of Lanceolated and Rusty-rumped warblers are quite different

from the calls heard here. Though differences in plumage are not very apparent; plumage of this individual was matching with the description given in the reference texts (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Pearson & Kirwan 2015) for



Grasshopper Warbler, and was different from Lanceolated and Rusty-rumped Warblers. Its "chat-chat-chat" call is typical of a Grasshopper Warbler and thus it could be identified conclusively.

Thereafter I kept on visiting the area during following winters and observed the warbler many more times. I have been keeping detailed records of my sightings over the last four winters.

### Sightings of Grasshopper Warbler at Saladi, Gujarat

Year	First record	Last record	No. birds	Dates of record
2010-2011	15 Dec. 2010	13 Jan. 2011	2	17, 18, 31 Dec. 2010 4 Jan. 2011
2011-2012	9 Dec. 2011	4 Jan. 2012	1	----
2013-2014	6 Dec. 2013	6 Dec. 2013	1	-----
2014-2015	12 Nov. 2014	30 Dec. 2014	5	Twice or thrice a week in the given period

As can be seen from the table, Grasshopper Warbler is a regular winter migrant to this area. Though I could not go to the area frequently, it was apparent that the birds remained in the area for at least two to three months during winter (from November up to January).

Since the area in which the birds were seen is not very large, I was able to observe the birds well. In the winter of 2014-2015 the number of birds noted was more. Again, the same year

I could visit the area regularly till December end. The bird is crepuscular and was more easily seen early (around 06-30 hrs) in the morning and late (after 17-30 hrs) in the evening. Many birdwatchers visited this place and took



Photo : Manoj Finava



Photo : Prasad Ganpule

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photographs of the species. It is possible that more than five birds were wintering regularly in this area during the period of 4 years, as I could hear its calls from different locations while remaining seated at one place. The count of five was based on birds observed by me personally.

Here, the Grasshopper Warblers had two types of plumages:

Yellow throat and breast with no streaking at all. The upperparts streaked, with prominent streaking on the mantle and head. (Img. 1)

Buffy throat and underparts, faint streaking on the breast, and more prominent streaking on the flanks. (Img. 2)

Photographs of both types of birds are given in Image 1 [photo by Manoj Finava] and Image 2 [photo by Prasad Ganpule].

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that, "it may have bright yellow wash below" and that, "the adult may show distinct streaking across the lower throat/upper breast and on the rear flanks". The subspecies wintering in India is *L. n. straminea*, and at Saladi the birds showed both types of plumages described above. This is also illustrated in Kazmierczak (2000), where both types of individuals – with whitish as well as yellowish underparts – are shown.

The above sightings show that the Grasshopper Warbler is a regular winter migrant to the area. It is possible that it may have been overlooked due to its secretive habits and skulking behaviour. It could be wintering in areas with suitable habitat in other parts of Gujarat. A detailed survey would be helpful in understanding its distribution in Gujarat.

## Acknowledgements:

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[Ali (1960) reported its occurrence in Kachchh. The species was also recorded from Hingolghadh Nature Education Sanctuary in central Saurashtra (Naik *et al.* 1990). - Eds.

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*Bird watching, in its essence, is the fine art of becoming invisible: of merging into the surroundings in such a manner that the breath which Nature has held back upon your entry into Her parlour, is joyfully exhaled, and normal respiration restored; in such a way that the frozen statues of animate wildlife, interrupted by your brashness, are coaxed into resuming their activities; in such a way that your aural and visual senses are drenched with the buoyancy of life; in such a way that you get outside yourself and become a part of the pageant around you. This does require the cultivation of a patience that slows down your pace to that of the elemental cycles dominating the flow of life in an immaculate world run entirely without human help. It requires the marshalling and re-aligning of vision, and a new focus of hearing so that you absorb every single sound and identify its source, and gradually its nuances, its cadenzas. It demands the preoccupation with stillness.*

*What are the rewards of this exercise? I can think of at least two that will last you a lifetime. One, you would have begun to notice things about your surroundings that you never knew existed, bringing you immediate, immeasurable joy. Two, you would have wound down your restless inner dynamo to such an extent that you would discover a quietude, a stiffness within you: a fount for a fresh view of your surroundings, a new approach to life, based on re-energised sensitivities. But first you must do this.*

- Aasheesh Pittie

Photo: Saurabh Dave