

## Sightings of Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachyactyla* in Little Rann of Kachchh and near Rajkot

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Prasad Ganpule



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The first author [PG] visited the western end of Little Rann of Kachchh, near Tikkar, on 6 October 2019 for routine bird watching with Jignesh Miyatra and K. J. Dave. Due to very heavy rains this year, the Rann was full of water and only the areas on the periphery of the Rann could be accessed. At about 09:00 hrs, PG was moving on a newly made road, which was elevated and surrounded by scrub and fallow fields. A flock of 10-12 small-sized birds flew from the road side and settled about 50 mts behind the car. PG was intrigued by these birds and went back to observe them.

The birds were quite shy and were hidden behind the stones on the road-side. PG waited patiently and soon, the birds came out and started feeding. The first author took some photographs and noticed the overall non-descript plumage, the large and conical pink bill, very long primary projection and faint wing-bars. He immediately recognised these birds as Pale Rock Sparrows (*Carpospiza brachyactyla*). Three more individuals were photographed before the flock flew away. Two other individuals seemed to be in moult, with missing primaries and tertiaries, and the plumage was quite worn. These birds were observed for more than five minutes. The flock was disturbed by some sheep grazing in the area and flew away. This area was visited again in October and early November but the birds were not located. A few of the photos of the Pale Rock Sparrows taken by PG are posted on the 'Oriental Bird Images' (OBI) website.

The second author [RK] was on routine birding on 9 January 2019, at around 17:15 hrs, at Khirasara *vidi*, near Rajkot, where he saw a group of birds on the ground. These birds were identified as Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella*

*brachyactyla*). Along with these larks was a different looking bird, which was quite inconspicuous, without any noticeable features. RK took some photographs and this individual had a long primary projection extending halfway to the tail, large and heavy bill, faint moustachial stripe, and pale brownish wash on breast. It was identified as a Pale Rock Sparrow.

The flock had 15 to 20 birds but it was hard to differentiate between the Greater Short-toed Larks and the Pale Rock Sparrows as both species were feeding and constantly moving in this area. But, there were more than 2-3 Pale Rock Sparrows in this flock. This area consists of grassland interspersed with scrub. In winter, the grass is dried out and many birds, especially wintering larks, are seen feeding on the seeds of these grasses. However, it was quite surprising to find the Pale Rock Sparrow here as it is not known to occur here.

The Pale Rock Sparrow was first seen in Kachchh in January 2012 by Jugal Tiwari, when it was a new species for India (Tiwari 2012); a flock of more than 250 birds was seen and it remained in the Banni area for almost 3-4 weeks. Subsequently, the species has been recorded from Rajasthan, Karnataka and more recently, from Kerala (see photographs posted on the OBI website). For Gujarat, there have been no further records since 2012 and these records of the Pale Rock Sparrow are the second and third records respectively for the state. Due to its very common-looking plumage, it is quite possible that it is overlooked. Further, it is quite similar to the Chestnut-shouldered Petronia (*Gymnoris xanthocollis*), which is very common here and separation and identification from petronia requires close scrutiny. Birders are urged to look for the Pale Rock Sparrow in Gujarat.

### References

Tiwari, J. K. 2012. Pale Rock Sparrow *Carpospiza brachyactyla*: a new species for India. *Birding ASIA* 17: 117–118 □