

Slaty-breasted Rail in Gujarat

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Introduction:

Slaty-breasted Rail (*Gallirallus striata*) is a member of *Rallidae* family. Earlier it was known as Blue-banded Rail. It is sometimes treated as *Lewinia striata* (Taylor 1996), but taxonomy adopted by Grimmett *et al.* (2011) is followed here.

Range and Status in Gujarat:

Ali (1954) and Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) have mentioned two old records from Kachchh, with Ali (1954) stating that "I can trace no record for Gujarat but it must doubtless occur". There seems some confusion amongst various authors about its status in Gujarat. Latest reference texts like Grimmett *et al.* (2011) and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) do not show any record for Gujarat in the distribution maps while Kazmierczak (2000) shows it as an uncommon resident in whole of Gujarat.

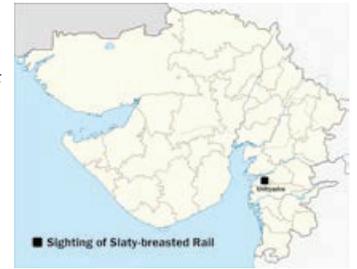
Taylor & van Perlo (1998) have shown its probable range from south Gujarat to peninsular India with the remarks that, the range shown is hypothetical and it may occur in northern parts of its range only in summer. Grewal *et al.* (2002) have shown its possible range from Gujarat to north-east India and southwards to peninsular India, and have described it as scarce but overlooked. Ali & Ripley (1980) have described its status as resident, but with local movements, in Kachchh, Madhya Pradesh, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, north-east India and southward through Bangladesh and peninsular India to Kerala.

There is only one recent record of Slaty-breasted Rail from Gujarat. An individual was photographed near Barda Hills, Porbandar on 25 June 2010 by Subhash Das (Das 2010).

This note describes sightings of Slaty-breasted Rail over four years at three different locations in Ankleshwar Tehsil, Bharuch district, with photographic evidence.

Observations:

On 24 June 2012, Sunday, my son Aarsh and myself visited an agricultural pond (locally called 'sim talavadi') behind my village Untiyadra (21°29'48" N, 72°56'40"E), Bharuch district, for bird watching, especially to search for Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*) which is seen here in good numbers during monsoon (Patel, 2015). A stream passes near this pond. Both the pond and the stream are always covered with thick vegetation of Lesser Indian Reed Mace (*Typha angustata*) and Marsh Glory (*Ipomoea aquatica*). Surrounding these water bodies are Sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) and Rice (*Oryza sativa*) fields as well as uncultivated land with shrubs, couch grass and other grasses. All the reeds in the stream were flattened due to heavy rains and winds in the previous week. Due to this, all nests of Black-breasted Weaver (*Ploceus benghalensis*) had been destroyed. While returning in the evening at around 19-00 hrs, we saw a crane-like bird beside the stream. The bird immediately ran away towards the reeds, but it was clearly visible due to the flattened reeds. Its beak was bright red; head and nape were chestnut, with grey breast and white spotted upperparts. Later, it was identified as Slaty-breasted Rail with the help of field guides (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Thereafter, it was seen again on 26 June 2012 and 28 June 2012 with Mukesh Bhatt; on 1 July 2012 with Anil Bhatt, Yogesh C. Patel and on the same day at another place with Aarsh. It was last seen on 18 July. From then onward it became very difficult to visit the area because of rain. After monsoon, I regularly visited the area, but did not see the bird again.



Next year, it was spotted in the evening at 19-00 hrs on 25 April 2013 in an open patch of a drying farm pond (locally called as 'khet talavadi'), which was sparsely covered with *Typha angustata*. The bird was bathing and preening in a wet area of the pond. We observed it for 10 minutes and took some record shots in poor light. It was seen once in this place again. After two months, on 7 July 2013, one individual was spotted for a few moments beside the road one km away at around 18-00 hrs in the evening.

In 2014, it was spotted from 6 September to 30 September in grassland surrounded by flooded *Typha angustata* at Sisodra village of Ankleshwar Tehsil on Hansot-Kosamba road. This place is near the village tank of Sisodra and is 8 km away from Untiyadra. Photographs were taken on 28 September 2014. In 2015, it was seen again by Mukesh Bhatt and Anil Bhardwaj on 7 July at the same place where it was first sighted in 2012.

Slaty-breasted Rail....

Discussion:

Marshes with reeds, mangroves, edges of village tanks or flooded paddy-fields are habitats of the Slaty-breasted Rail (Ali & Ripley 1980).

Western part of south Gujarat has good irrigation facilities throughout the year due to Ukai, Madhuvan and other small/medium sized dams. Moreover, average rainfall is 40 to 80 inches in this area. Rice and Sugarcane are the dominant crops. Marshy areas with reeds are very common. All my sightings of the species were in or besides flooded *Typha angustata* near agricultural ponds or tanks. Thus all sightings were in typical habitat described in the reference texts for Slaty-breasted Rail which is common in south Gujarat.

The species is frequently recorded in Thane/Vasai creek, Mumbai, which is near South Gujarat, and images from this area can be seen on the website <http://orientalbirdimages.org>. The birds were seen here between April and September i.e. in Summer/Monsoon for last four years. Taylor & van Perlo (1998) state that it may occur in the northern most parts of its range only in the summer and Gujarat lies in the extreme northern part of the range of this species. It is possible that Slaty-breasted Rail is a summer/monsoon migrant to Gujarat.

Conclusion:

It is quite likely that the Slaty-breasted Rail might be a regular summer/monsoon visitor to South Gujarat, especially between Narmada and Tapi river area, but is overlooked due to its shy and skulking habits, and difficulty in accessing its habitat. These records show that the species does occur here and is fairly regularly seen in South Gujarat.

[Birdwatchers are requested to send their sightings of Slaty-breasted Rail from Gujarat so that its status and distribution can be better known – Eds]

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From 22-7-43 to 24-9-43, 100 male Floricans were banded, out of which two were recovered the next year. One of these was caught in the same district as it was formerly ringed in. A bird banded on 25-8-43, with number BF 68, was found dead three days later in the same area. From 27-7-44 to 8-9-44, 99 male Floricans were caught and banded. In 1945, from 20-7-45 to 1-10-45, 111 males and one female were banded, but none have been recovered. In 1946, 100 Floricans were banded, all of which were males. In this season, four birds were recovered of which two were in the same locality as banded. In 1947, 67 male birds were banded between 25-7-47 to 24-9-47. Nine birds were recovered of which seven were of the previous year, one was of 1944, and one of 1945. Of these, five birds were recovered from the same respective 'vids' where they were first caught. In 1948, there was a famine and no birds were caught although some were seen as passing migrants. In 1949, I managed to catch 11 males out of which two proved to be birds banded in 1945 and 1947. One of these was caught from the same area where it was first ringed two years earlier. Altogether 489 birds were ringed in seven years of which 18 were recovered, giving an average recovery of 3.6 per cent. It is quite possible that some of the banded birds were caught by poachers and useful information thus lost.

Source: Dharmakumarsinhji, R. S. Undated (=1955) *Birds of Saurashtra, India*. Published by the Author, Bhavnagar, Saurashtra.