

Status and distribution of the Black Shaheen in Gujarat

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Introduction

The Black Shaheen (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*), is a subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). The adult Black Shaheen usually has a deep rufous wash on the underparts, a more 'hooded' appearance with very small cheek patch, and is dorsally dark gray or blackish. Juveniles are hooded, with dark rufous wash to the streaked underparts and with blackish upperparts. Typical birds are fairly easy to identify in the field. But, there is great variation in the Black Shaheen in the Indian Subcontinent, with birds from Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats generally darker and with dark rufous, unbarred underparts, while northwards, into the Himalayas, individuals are less ashen, bluer and more barred on the back and breast, and less chestnut on the breast (White *et al.* 2013).

The name Shaheen (sometimes spelled 'shahin') is derived from Persian, *Shah* for 'king' and *een* for 'birds', thus meaning the 'king of birds' (White *et al.* 2013). It is referred to as the Black Shaheen, the Indian Peregrine, the Shaheen Falcon or just Shaheen (Naoroji 2006). We prefer the name Black Shaheen, and it is henceforth referred to as the Black Shaheen in this note, as we follow the nomenclature given in White *et al.* (2013), since it is the latest comprehensive reference. This subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon is resident in the Indian Subcontinent, from the Himalayas (usually up to 2400 mts) to the entire Peninsular India, with the exception of the desert and semi-desert areas of western Rajasthan and northern and western Gujarat (Ali & Ripley 2001). The Black Shaheen is normally solitary or seen in pairs, and its habitat is usually steep, rugged hills and rocky pinnacles.

For Gujarat, the status and distribution of the Black Shaheen is uncertain and there is very less data regarding this subspecies. Naoroji (2006) shows it as a resident in the hilly and forest areas from south to northern Gujarat, with one isolated record from Kachchh and one record from Saurashtra, and it is shown as a resident in Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, which is adjoining Gujarat. It is well known that it is resident in Mt. Abu, with many recent sightings and also historical records, and the first author has observed a Black Shaheen hunting a Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) at Nakki Lake, Mt Abu, in the winter.

Historically, the Black Shaheen has been recorded in Bhuj, Kachchh (Radcliffe 1905). Ali (1954) does not mention recording the Black Shaheen during surveys in Gujarat. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) gave it as a resident in Gujarat and Mt. Abu, but stated that it was a rare winter migrant in Saurashtra, and Girnar was the only area where it was seen from time to time, but it straggled to Barda hills (near Porbandar), to the sea coast, and over the Gir hills as a winter migrant, with no evidence of it being a resident in Saurashtra. It is important to note that there are very few published records of the Black Shaheen from Gujarat since the publication of Dharmakumarsinhji (1955). A recent record of a pair from Khadir, Kachchh (Samant *et al.* 1995) is unusual, as it is a desert area, and there are no recent sightings from Kachchh. It is listed as 'resident (breeding) and local migrant, with few sight records from Gujarat' in the latest checklist of the birds of Gujarat (Ganpule 2016).

Here, we present sightings of the Black Shaheen from Gujarat, from 2005 till 2017, and attempt to describe its current status and distribution in the state.

Sightings

Sightings have been collected from 2005 to 2017 from many areas in Gujarat; mainly Girnar hills, Pavagadh hills, and Jessore hills, to name the main places where there have been multiple sightings. Reports from other areas in Saurashtra and Gujarat are also frequent, with images posted on various birding websites from almost all parts of the state, except Kachchh. We also asked birdwatchers from Gujarat regarding the sightings of Black Shaheen in Gujarat and collected information from all over the state, including sightings posted on the social media. Sightings of Black Shaheen from different locations of Gujarat in last few years are given in Table 1. Also, we have collected records of Black Shaheen rescued (injured or sick birds) from a few places. The locations of rescued birds are also included in the table and all sightings and locations are shown in the accompanying map.

Records of Black Shaheen in Gujarat (2005 to 2017)

Sr. No.	Location	Date	No. of Individuals	Observer(s)	Remarks	Source
1	Morbi	22 October 2005	1	Prasad Ganpule	juvenile	Ganpule 2013
2	Bhaskarpara, Dist. Surendranagar	25 September 2009	1	Gulamahmad Vora	-	<i>pers comm.</i>
3	Wadhwan, Dist. Surendranagar	12 December 2009	1	Devvratsinh Mori	rescue	authors sighting
4	Dasada, Little Rann of Kachchh	04 March 2010	1	Gulamahmad Vora	-	<i>pers comm.</i>
5	Jambugoda, Dist. Vadodara	24 May 2012	1	Rahul Bhatt	calling	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
6	Girnar hills, Dist. Junagadh	First sighting on 01 October 2012, then 2/10/12, 04/01/13, 15/01/13, 06/12/14, 01/02/15, 11/04/15, 30/08/15, 06/12/15 [many times in 2016 and 2017]	1 or 2 (a pair)	Ankit Shukla	in flight, chasing vultures (<i>Gyps</i> sp.), hunting, mating (adult pair)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		27 May 2012	1	Anuj Raina	chasing an OHB*	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		14 December 2014	1	Gaurang Bagda	in flight (adult)	eBird, Bagda 2014
		18 February 2017	2	Nirav Bhatt, Ankit Shukla, Meet Vala	a pair mating (adults)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
7	Deesa, Dist. Banaskantha	2013		Dipesh Rakshit	rescue (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
8	Palanpur City, Dist. Banaskantha	December 2012	1	Krutarth Chauhan	adult, perched on electric pole with prey	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
9	Pavagadh hills, Dist. Vadodara	04 June 2013	2	Devvratsinh Mori	in flight (adults)	authors sighting
		07 July 2013	2	Anuj Raina	continuously calling from rock top roost (adult and juvenile)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		20 March 2017	1	Anil Gohil	calling	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
10	Junaraj, Dist. Narmada	17 December 2014	1	Arif Theba	rescue	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
11	Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary, Dist. Banaskantha	24 January 2015	1	Anuj Raina	roosting and flying	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		20 August 2016, 09 October 2016, 26 November 2016	1	Anuj Raina	roosting, preying on insects (cicadas), chasing IV*	<i>pers comm.</i>

Sr. No.	Location	Date	No. of Individuals	Observer(s)	Remarks	Source
		21 May 2017	3	Nirav Bhatt, Kailash Jani, Dhairya Dixit		<i>pers comm.</i>
12	Shetrunji hills, Dist. Bhavnagar	30 November 2015	2	Viral Joshi	chasing vultures	authors sighting
13	Girimal, Dist. Dang	06 January 2016	1	Mukesh Bhatt	in flight	<i>pers comm.</i>
		23 January 2016	1	Mohan Ram Legha	adult	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
14	Ratanmahal, Dist. Dahod	27 May 2016	1	Kartik Upadhyay	chasing vultures	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		25 September 2016	2	Viral Joshi	in flight	authors sighting
15	Vadodara City	07 July 2016	1	Kartik Upadhyay	perched on a water tank (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
		17 July 2016	1	Parul Patel	perched on wire	Patel 2016 (same bird as above)
		14 January 2017	1	Kartik Upadhaya	rescue (juvenile)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
16	Madhuban Dam, Vapi, Dist. Valsad	28 July 2016	1	Pragnesh Patel	in flight	<i>pers comm.</i>
17	Vapi city	2017? Exact date not known	1		perched on a building (adult)	posted on Facebook
18	Vasona Outskirts Dadra & Nagar Haveli	07 August 2016	1	Shashwat Mishra	roosting in a tree (adult)	Mishra 2016
19	Shingola Dam, Gir, Dist. Junagadh	11 September 2016	1	Devendra Chauhan	roosting (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
20	Kevdi, Chhota Udepur, Dist. Panchmahal	24 September 2016	1	Anuj Raina	flying in strong winds and rainfall	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
21	Ahmedabad	12 January 2017	1	Rushi Pathak & Gopal Jani	rescue	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
22	Vadla Dam, Nalsarovar	11 February 2017	1	Vipul Ramanuj	in flight	<i>pers comm.</i>
23	Semal Pani, Dist. Sabarkantha	May 2017	1	Krutarth Chauhan	in flight (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
24	Don hill station, Dist. Dang	17 August 2015	1	Pranav Vaghasiya	in flight (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i>
25	Polo Forest, Dist. Sabarkantha	09 May 2016	1	Dhairya Dixit	in flight	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)
26	Indroda Park, Gandhinagar	06 September 2015	1	Gaurang Shukla	perched (adult)	<i>pers comm.</i> (photo)

*OHB: Oriental Honey Buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*), IV: Indian Vulture (*Gyps indicus*)

Black Shaheen....

We may have missed some sightings which have not been shared by birdwatchers, but we have tried to collect as many sightings as possible from different locations in Gujarat. Details of multiple sightings from a single location have been given only for Girnar hills, and are not included for locations like Pavagadh and Jessore. The sightings from the Girnar hills are by Ankit Shukla. These sightings are of a resident pair, which is seen regularly in the area, and is being observed and monitored by a group of bird watchers from Junagadh. Other sightings from Pavagadh hills and from Jessore Sanctuary are also of a resident pair, which is seen frequently in the surrounding areas. While it is possible that there may be more than one pair in these areas, there is only one observation of three birds seen at a time, at Jessore, in May 2017 (Nirav Bhatt, *pers comm.*). Isolated sightings from south, central and north Gujarat indicate that some individuals could be resident in these areas too. The sightings from the middle of large cities like Vapi and Vadodara are not surprising as it is 'occasionally observed mainly during winter in densely populated metropolises, such as Mumbai and Bangalore, probably attracted by the plentiful Common Pigeons (*Columba livia*)' (Naoroji 2006). However, it is pertinent to note that the sightings in Vadodara were in July, while the sighting from Palanpur was in December. Thus, it is possible that the Black Shaheen may migrate locally to large cities in search of prey. It is also important to note that the juvenile bird rescued from Vadodara was injured during the kite flying festival (*Makar Sankranti*) in January and its wing was cut, resulting in serious injury (Kartik Upadhaya, *pers. comm.*). This individual survived, but is not able to fly. Hence, the Black Shaheen is also susceptible to injury during this festival.

Breeding

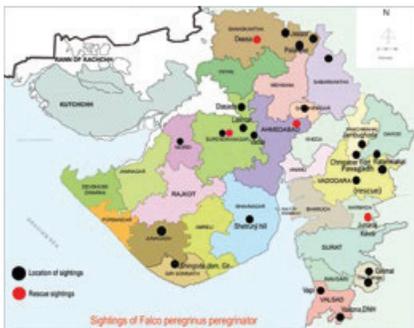
Black Shaheen pairs are mostly sedentary, and hold on to their respective territories throughout the year (Naoroji 2006). Khacher (1996) noted it as breeding in the Girnar hills in

Saurashtra and also at Mt. Abu, but did not give any further details. While there are no direct observations recently of eggs or chicks from Gujarat, there is ample circumstantial evidence to suggest that it could be breeding here in at least the following locations:

Girnar hills: A pair is resident and is being observed in the area since October 2012 and seen at the same site throughout the year. It has been seen and photographed while mating, by Nirav Bhatt, Ankit Shukla and Meet Vala on 18 February 2017. The eyrie of this pair is very difficult to observe and does not allow a direct, visual line of sight of the nest. Further, it is quite inaccessible and prolonged observation is not possible (Ankit Shukla, *pers comm.*). It is strongly suspected that the pair breeds at this eyrie, and the observation of mating shows that the pair could have bred this year too.

Pavagadh hills: A fledged juvenile was heard calling and was being fed by one of the parents at Pavagadh hills on 7 July 2013 (Anuj Raina, *pers. comm.*). The juvenile was photographed and its behaviour was typical of a recently fledged juvenile. There are observations of a resident pair seen in this area all round the year. Two adults, along with two juveniles, were seen and photographed here on 10 June 2017 (Nirav Bhatt and Rahul Bhatt, *pers comm.*). Multiple sightings of this pair have been reported by many birdwatchers from Vadodara, and the sightings of juveniles prove that it is breeding here.

Jessore hills: A pair is resident in this area and seen frequently atop a hill, in Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary. It is seen throughout the year in this location. However, there are no observations of its nest or juveniles. But it is suspected that it breeds in the Jessore hills. The eyrie of this pair is located above the nesting area of Indian Vultures, atop a hill, and this eyrie is also extremely difficult to observe for prolonged periods. But, there are records of a pair at this eyrie throughout the year.



Dewrat Mori



Nirav Bhatt

It is possible that it breeds in other locations in south, central and north Gujarat too. Based on the sightings of recently fledged juveniles, it can be said that the Black Shaheen is breeding here in Gujarat. But, direct observations of eggs or chicks from these areas are desirable, and will be useful in knowing the breeding biology of the Black Shaheen here.

Conclusion

Looking at various sight records in the last few years, it can be said that the Black Shaheen is an uncommon to rare resident in Gujarat, in the hilly and forested area of Saurashtra (mainly Girnar hills) and also in the forest area from north to south Gujarat. Occasional records from urban areas show that the Black Shaheen could be dispersing in the surrounding areas in search of prey. The sightings from other locations in Saurashtra indicate that it could be a local migrant, especially in the winter. It is surprising that there are no recent records from Kachchh, but it is possible that it could occur in Kachchh too as a local migrant.



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Though most of the sightings are of single birds or of a pair, it is possible that in a specific area, there is more than one resident pair if the habitat is suitable. Further study, especially of the breeding biology of the Black Shaheen is required, and also, population estimation, threats and habitat preferences need to be assessed in our state.

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