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Sykes's Short-toed Lark in Gujarat

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The Greater Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) is a polytypic species, breeding from Europe to Central Asia and north-west China. The subspecies *longipennis*, which breeds in Ukraine, N Caucasus and Iran, east to W Mongolia and NW China (Xinjiang), winters mainly in South Asia (de Juana *et al.* 2018). For India, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that in the north-west, the wintering *longipennis* is somewhat paler overall and small billed than the subspecies *dukhunensis*, which winters mostly in the south and east of the country and which has more heavily streaked rufescent upperparts and brighter rufous-buff breast sides.

The Greater Shorter Lark of the subspecies *dukhunensis* is now treated as a distinct species, called the Eastern Short-toed Lark, Mongolian Short-toed Lark or Sykes's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella dukhunensis*) (de Jauna *et al.* 2018). The Greater Short-toed Lark remains a polytypic species while the Sykes's Short-toed Lark (the name used here henceforth) is treated as monotypic. Molecular studies found that the Sykes's Short-toed Lark is a sister species to Hume's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella acutirostris*) rather than the Greater Short-toed

Lark (Alström *et al.* 2013). Further, the differences in plumage, longer wings, deeper or shorter bill and different song and call led to the Sykes's Short-toed Lark being accepted as a distinct species; breeding from Tibet, north and central China and Mongolia, and Transbaikalia and wintering in South and East Asia (de Juana *et al.* 2018). Shirihai & Svensson (2018) also accept this split and state that '*dukhunensis* is best treated as a separate species'. This split was accepted in the recent India checklist too, which lists both the Greater Short-toed Lark and the Sykes's Short-toed Lark for the country (Praveen *et al.* 2018). For India, it is shown as a winter visitor to our country, south from south Gujarat, central India and West Bengal; mostly in entire Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and southern India (de Juana *et al.* 2018).

The Sykes's Short-toed Lark, though similar to the Greater Short-toed Lark, is described as having darker ochre-brown upperparts with darker streaks on mantle and scapulars, pale buff-white or pinkish-buff supercilium, breast and flanks distinctly washed rufous-buff and orange-straw bill with dark tip; juveniles are like adults, but with buff fringes to upperpart feathers and outer primaries with rounded tips. The call is said to be different from Greater Short-toed Lark - a soft, bouncing *heu-du-du-du*, a *tru-tu-tu-tu* and a *trup* or *trep* (de Jauna *et al.* 2018).

On 6 November 2016, I was birding in the eastern part of Little Rann of Kachchh, near Bajana, with Ashok Mashru and Manoj Finava. We saw a flock of around 15-20 Greater Short-toed Larks in the Rann and while photographing these birds, I noticed that one individual looked very rufous and different from the other birds. It had a heavily streaked mantle, rufous wash to entire upperparts, and also to the head and supercilium (which looked pale rufous behind the eye). It had

Short-toed Lark....

a rufous breast band, with light streaking on breast and faint patches on breast side, and a whitish belly. I identified it as a Sykes's Short-toed Lark based on these features.

For Gujarat, the range of Sykes's Short-toed Lark is shown to touch south Gujarat, but no records are shown for the state. As stated before, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) give the wintering range of Sykes's Short-toed Lark as mostly south and east India. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) also give it as mainly in south and east India. Ali (1954) collected specimens of only Greater Short-toed Lark from Gujarat, giving it as a common and abundant winter visitor, which is true even today.

However, there are two museum specimens of Sykes's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat, collected from Awha, in the Dangs, in October 1954, by E. M. Shull and currently housed in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH – skin 778685 and 778686). Thus, there are specimen records from south Gujarat. The above sighting from the Little Rann of Kachchh shows that it could be occurring in the desert and semi-desert areas of Kachchh and Saurashtra too and is perhaps overlooked since birdwatchers are not aware of the presence of this species in Gujarat. A careful scrutiny of images of Greater Short-toed Larks from Gujarat, posted on popular birding websites, is needed to see whether there are more records of the species from Gujarat.

Now, with the Sykes's Short-toed Lark treated as a distinct species and this treatment being widely accepted, this species should be included in the Gujarat checklist as and when

the taxonomy is updated. In absence of more data, it can be currently considered to be a rare winter migrant or a vagrant to Gujarat.

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Tagged Great Knot from Jamnagar

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We visited the saltpans near INS Valsura, Jamnagar, on 7 October 2018. There, we saw a group of 300 Great Knots (*Calidris tenuirostris*) and 70 Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*). We took a few photographs. After returning home and watching the photos on laptop, we found that one Great Knot was tagged with a yellow and black coloured flag, with 'VM' written on the flag on its left tibia. To get the tagging details, we forwarded the photos to Prasad Ganpule. After searching on the internet, he informed that the bird was probably tagged at Kamchatka Peninsula, located in the Russian Far East. However, to confirm this and obtain further details, he had forwarded the photos to Dmitry Dorofeev, who is a senior researcher in All-Russian Research Institute for Environmental Protection. His reply is as follows: 'Yes, this is our bird, from our banding place. Thank you very much for this resight! It is really great and this is the first re-sighting of our flags in India'.

The tagging details of this Great Knot as provided by Dmitry Dorofeev are as follows:

Date: 5 August 2017

Age: Juvenile

Mark on flag: VM

Place: Khairusova-Belogolovaya Estuary, Kamchatka, Russia (57.07° N, 156.69° E)

Usually, the birds tagged at this location are re-sighted in China, Japan, Korea and Australia as these countries fall under the East Asian–Australian Flyway. However, this was the first sighting from the Indian subcontinent. This bird might have flown more than 7500 kms to reach Jamnagar. It is also noteworthy that this is the second ever recovery/re-sighting from a region far south-west of the tagging place. On 20 January 2017, a Great Knot with a flag marked 'E1' was