

## Trumpeter Finch in Kachchh

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**Introduction:** Trumpeter Finch (*Bucanetes githagineus*) is a small, passerine bird of the finch family, having a heavy orange bill, short tail, orange-flesh legs and pink plumage. Its song is distinctive: a unique series of spaced buzzes (toy trumpet-like). The call note is a short, rapidly repeated buzzing. The Trumpeter Finch is shown as a winter visitor to entire Kachchh and Saurashtra (Ali & Ripley 2001), which seems erroneous as explained below. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show it as a resident up to Sindh, Pakistan (adjoining Kachchh) and state that it straggles/wanders to Gujarat in the winter. For Gujarat, Kazmierczak (2000) shows only one isolated record in Kachchh.

There is very little published information regarding the Trumpeter Finch in Gujarat. Ali (1945) did not meet with it in Kachchh and commented that its inclusion in the Kachchh list (by C. D. Lester) was not justified. But there are records of Trumpeter Finch in Kachchh; Himmatsinhji (1988) recorded it at Rudramata Dam, near Bhuj, for three consecutive years. It is a rare and rather erratic winter visitor in Gujarat, with no records of it outside Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). Thus, the occurrence shown for Saurashtra by Ali & Ripley (2001) is incorrect, since there are no records of this finch from this area. I present here some of my observations of Trumpeter Finch in Kachchh.

**Observations:** In November 2008, I was passing through an interior road near Bhuj, Kachchh, with my son Nirav, for birdwatching. From a distance near a village, we saw small birds perched on a boundary wall made from uneven stones. Such boundary walls are common in villages here. The place was having a small waterhole in a rocky area, which was filled with water from the monsoon rains. There was a small stream running from the waterhole. We saw that common birds were present and frequently coming down to drink water from the stream. We recorded Crested Bunting (*M. lathamii*) once, which is a rarity in Kachchh. Female Common Rosefinch (*C. erythrinus*) was also seen in this area.

On 15 November 2008, I photographed some birds unfamiliar to me. After returning home, I checked the field guide (Kazmierczak 2000) and was very surprised to identify it as a Trumpeter Finch. I confirmed the identification by referring to images on the Oriental Bird Images website. At that time, there were only 2-3 images of Trumpeter Finch on this website. I was very excited to find this rarity here. From 15 November till about 30 November 2008, I visited the area daily and subsequently visited it almost 450 times in total in the last seven-eight years, out of which I found this finch 25 to 30 times. From a distance, it can be easily confused with a female House



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Sparrow (*P. domesticus*), Indian Silverbill (*E. malabarica*) or a juvenile Chestnut-shouldered Petronia (*G. xanthocollis*); so it is necessary to obtain good views to identify it. I regularly recorded it from 2008 till 2012. In 2008, between 15 to 23 November, I saw them on four consecutive days. I saw the Trumpeter Finch once or twice in a flock of about 25 birds. I saw them from November till late March. But after 2012 till 2015, there was continuous disturbance in that area and I could not locate the birds. A shortage of rain / water, road repairing work, disturbance by cattle etc. contributed to their absence here. However, it was recorded in Banni (Mishra 2012, Tiwari 2016), where also it was noted in small flocks. It is possible that they may have shifted from this location to the Banni area or chosen a new area. It is also possible that the finch might be present in other suitable sites with water nearby, especially areas around Khari River, near Bhuj, as the habitat is similar to the habitat in which the birds were noted on the outskirts of Bhuj. Further, there is very little disturbance in these areas and it is possible that the birds might be present there. I tried to locate new places around the Khari River area where the Trumpeter Finch might be occurring, but failed to find it there.

**Habitat and Behaviour:** It was found near or around water; in small puddles formed by rainwater or where there was a small stream present. The habitat in this area near Bhuj is stony scrub, interspersed with short grasses. The soil is probably saline and the water is mildly salty (brackish); which is called '*bhambharu*' in local Kachchhi language. There was salt formation at the edge of stream when the stream dried out.

As per my observations, the presence of Trumpeter Finch was based on the quantity of water in the stream. Even when there was very little water, the birds used to come to drink but were not noted once the stream dried out completely.

The Trumpeter Finch always came to the drinking spot in a group. I noted them mostly around 10:00 hrs in the morning and between 16:00 to 17:00 hrs in the evening, though it could have been occurring at other times. The birds would usually fly around the stream and would land on the ground or perch on small trees. Ali & Ripley (2001) have stated that it avoids perching on bushes but here, they were observed perching on *Prosopis juliflora*, *Salvadora* sp., *Acacia* sp., and *Optunia* sp. Then they would come closer, drink the water and remain together for 15-20 minutes if there was no disturbance.



I observed that their routes of coming and going were always the same i.e. they flew back in the same direction from where they approached. Sometimes, they fed in the dry grass before drinking. As per my observations, it feeds on seeds and other parts of grasses in rocky areas and low shrubs and forages almost wholly on the ground, generally in rocky areas with scattered semi-desert vegetation and moves about on the ground in search of food.

It has a characteristic, undulating flight which is very noticeable and quite different from other birds. When it flies in a flock, the birds do not fly in a close formation like Rosy Starlings (*P. roseus*), but fly in a loose flock. I have observed that from December onwards, the plumage starts changing and in January, they have a noticeable pink colour on the tail, breast and mantle. In late March, they are not yet in full breeding plumage, but are quite pink overall. I have not seen the Trumpeter Finch here after late March.

**Conclusion:**

The Trumpeter Finch is a rare, but regular winter migrant to at least two locations in Kachchh. It is seen near water streams in suitable habitat, which is usually a rocky area with grasses. It is never seen in large numbers; the maximum I have noted is 25 birds. However, it is not as rare as was believed earlier. My observations for five years from 2008 to 2012 near Bhuj and the continued sightings in Banni in Kachchh in the last few years are thus noteworthy and add to our knowledge of the species in Gujarat.

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