

Variable Sunbird in Gir National Park: a second record for Gujarat

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was that every time, it was seen at the same spot. It was chased by Purple Sunbirds many times. Since it was seen at the same spot frequently, we thought that it could be visiting this area since there was availability of food due to the flowering of the 'Palash' and also other flowering trees and bushes.

This is only the second record of the Variable Sunbird from Gujarat, and India. It was earlier noted in Khambhaliya, near Jamnagar, by local photographer Jeetu Jam (Jam 2009, Ganpule 2017).

[The Variable Sunbird is resident in Africa, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa; five subspecies are recognized and the species is known to be nomadic and migratory (Cheke & Mann 2018). The Variable Sunbird is not known to occur in India and it is not included in the checklist of birds of India (Praveen et al. 2016, Praveen et al. 2018). There is a previous record of this species from Gujarat; see discussion in Ganpule (2017), wherein the earlier record of Variable Sunbird by Jeetu Jam (Jam 2009) from Khambhaliya, near Jamnagar, was formally reviewed.

Regarding this individual seen in Gir National Park, there are many good photographs available for scrutiny. We can see that it has a metallic-blue crown, blackish blue wings, metallic-blue throat with blackish upper breast, deep orange breast and dark yellowish flanks. There is no doubt regarding the identification and it is a male Variable Sunbird. It is probably of the *fazoqlensis* or *igneiventris* subspecies, and is in worn plumage. The individual which was seen previously near Jamnagar was probably of the *falkensteini* subspecies. However, identification to the subspecies level is difficult and these individuals are best identified as Variable Sunbirds, without going into subspecific identification.

We sent the images of this individual seen in Gir NP to Clive Mann for his opinion. He stated (in litt., email dated 28 February 2018) that it looked like a Variable Sunbird and said that he had forwarded the images to senior bird watchers in East Africa for their views. He further informed us (in litt., email dated 2 March 2018) that this was a Variable Sunbird, probably of the *fazoqlensis/igneiventris* subspecies, which occurs in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia; the opinion of senior bird watchers from East Africa was that the most likely cause for its appearance here was by ship-assistance from a Red Sea port rather than it being an escapee from captivity. Mike Blair, from the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (henceforth OSME), informed that no record of this species is known from the OSME region (in litt., email dated 5 April 2018). Thus, when this species has not been seen in the OSME region, its appearance in Gujarat is quite surprising. He further suggested that ship-assisted journeys between Dar-es-Salam or Mombasa and Mumbai/Gujarat are greater than 4000 kms; the fastest ships taking at least 150 hours, which would make it difficult for a nectar-feeder to

On 22 February 2018, at around 09:40 hrs, I was bird watching near the Hiran River at Sasan (21° 10' 31" N, 70° 35' 15" E), in Gir National Park (henceforth Gir NP), which is a good place for birds as it is an area with large trees and water. I saw one sunbird (*Cinnyris* sp.) in a Bastard Teak or Palash or 'flame of the forest' (*Butea monosperma*). It was looking different from a Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*) as its underparts were orange-yellow in colour, which became dark yellowish near the legs. The bird was very active and busy, feeding and going from one tree to another in search of nectar, making it difficult for me to take photos. After following it for about one and a half hours, I managed to take only two record shots. After returning home and watching the photographs, I could not identify it. I shared the images with my friend Dinesh Sadiya, but we were unsuccessful in identifying this bird. So, on the very next day, 23 February 2018, at 09:00 hrs, we visited the same place hoping to see it again and this time, take a few good photographs. After searching for around two hours in and around the same area, we heard its call and finally managed to locate it. It was perched very near to the ground, on a small branch of a bush. We took a few good photographs. We observed that this individual was chased by Purple Sunbirds. It flew away and we managed to see it again about 150 mts away from this place. It was seen foraging on the flowers of the 'flame of the forest' tree.

After studying the photographs and with the help of experts, it was finally identified as a male Variable Sunbird (*Cinnyris venustus*). We were surprised to know that this species does not occur in our region and is found in Africa. We were very much excited to find this rarity here in Gir NP. Hence, we kept observing it for the next few days. One interesting observation

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survive (in litt., email dated 5 April 2018). An option he suggested was that some exotic species are smuggled by private planes and this could be one of the reasons for its appearance in Gujarat; an escapee from a private collector, which then survived in the wild.

It is now confirmed that two sightings of Variable Sunbird have been noted in Gujarat. With respect to the first sighting from Jamnagar, there were doubts regarding its origins and after a detailed discussion amongst senior bird watchers here, no decision was taken regarding its inclusion or exclusion in the Gujarat checklist. The record was reviewed by Ganpule (2017), and it was not added to the state checklist at that time, pending a decision by a committee. This sighting from Gir NP is the second sighting from the state. The identification in both these cases has been confirmed beyond doubt.

The main issue now is what could be the probable reason for the occurrence of this African species in Gujarat twice in the last ten years? Can both these sightings be attributed to ship-assistance? Is it possible that these are natural vagrants? Are these escapees from the pet trade? Here, it is pertinent to point out that chances of an escapee from the pet trade are less as the Variable Sunbird is not kept as a pet here and is not even sold as a pet in Gujarat (as per details obtained from birders who have knowledge about the pet trade in Gujarat). We could not find any details regarding this species in an extensive online search too. It is also not kept in any zoo in Gujarat. Confirmation was obtained earlier from a large private collection near Jamnagar that they did not have this species in their collection (Ganpule 2017).

It is important to note that the sightings were in two places with different habitats. This sighting from Gir NP is from a forest area and it is almost 50 kms from the coast. While Jamnagar is a port city, there is no major port near Gir NP and thus this sighting from Gir NP is intriguing. Further, this individual was observed over many days and its behaviour was like a wild-type bird, and it did not allow close approach. It was seen feeding on nectar of flowering trees and was observed in a forest area, indicating a wild type bird. The plumage seen in both the individuals recorded in Gujarat was different, which shows that both individuals could be of different subspecies (though we are not going into the details of subspecific identification). Thus, there is no doubt that these were two different individuals. If we speculate that these sightings are of genuine vagrants, then it would be extraordinary for this small bird to make the journey from eastern Africa to Gujarat, crossing the Arabian Sea (almost 2200 kms in a straight line). The African race of the Palestine Sunbird (*Cinnyris osea decorsei*) is known to regularly migrate with the rains but most other sunbirds are either sedentary or short distance migrants (Cheke et al. 2001). Thus, such a type of migration (especially long distances over the sea) is not known for this genus. But, in general, migration in sunbirds has not been

studied in detail and more data is required to make any comment on this.

While it is difficult to be certain about the reasons for these sightings in Gujarat, it is a fact that the Variable Sunbird has now been noted twice in the last ten years. While genuine vagrancy cannot be completely ruled out, the probable reasons for its occurrence here are difficult to ascertain. We have to consider that whatever may be the reason for its appearance here, two sightings cannot be dismissed as 'of unknown origin' when it is known that the species is not known to be kept as a pet here in Gujarat. Thus, a decision needs to be taken regarding its inclusion in the Gujarat checklist.

We have decided to include the Variable Sunbird in the Gujarat checklist based on these two sightings. This is mainly due to the fact that two sightings, of two different individuals, have now been noted. The sighting by Jeetu Jam (Jam 2009), formally reviewed by Ganpule (2017), is treated as the first sighting for Gujarat and India, and this sighting from Gir NP is the second record. We accept it to the checklist based on these two photographic records from the state; from Khambhaliya in 2009 and this record from Gir NP in February 2018. We accept these records in the Gujarat checklist fully aware that the species is resident in sub-Saharan Africa and is not known to occur in India (or the Indian Subcontinent). We feel that there are three probable reasons for its occurrence here (in random order); ship-assistance, pet trade (smuggling?) and migration.

We could not find any published instances of possible vagrancy by ship-assistance in sunbirds. If ship-assistance is considered as a probable reason for the occurrence of the Variable Sunbird here, then a policy needs to be formulated for ship-assisted vagrants. But, this is a controversial subject with ornithologists having conflicting views. Different country checklists treat such records differently. For example, the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (BOURC) clarifies that 'ship-assisted vagrants may qualify for Category A (species in a natural state) provided that they are not fed, watered or receive any other direct human intervention during their journey' (BOURC 2005). We feel that this definition in itself is problematic as it will be almost impossible to verify if a bird has reached with or without human interference. Also, the definition of 'human interference' itself can be challenged.

However, in BOURC's 42nd report (BOURC 2013), it is stated that 'it is not the intention of BOURC to admit port-to-port or coast-to-coast transportees onto the British List and our guidelines state that suspected ship-assisted birds should only be admitted to the List if the species is considered capable of making an unassisted transatlantic crossing under favourable circumstances. In nearly all cases, the data are insufficient to draw a robust conclusion on this point. A decision on the provenance of an individual bird is

a call on balance of probability, and for admission to the list, the balance of probability must be judged to be overwhelmingly in favour of natural occurrence in a wild state’.

In the case of the Variable Sunbird, we do not even have adequate data to even judge if the species is capable of long distance migration. Thus, a policy, even if formulated, may leave a lot to be desired. Many countries keep such species in a separate list, which is again problematic as the origin of many such birds is almost impossible to determine. Thus, there is a difference of opinion on how to treat such records. If or when a policy is formulated in Gujarat on how to treat probable ship-assisted vagrants, such records can be re-evaluated.

Though we have added the Variable Sunbird to the Gujarat checklist, we urge bird watchers here to make inquiries regarding the smuggling or trade of exotic bird species in Gujarat. If more information is available about the pet trade or ship-assisted vagrants, we will have a relook at these records in the future and decide whether this species should be retained in the state checklist. We keep the Variable Sunbird in the Gujarat checklist with the understanding that these records will be reviewed if more information is available. It is also possible that information regarding its migration could be obtained in the future, confirming these records as of genuine vagrants. Thus, while adding this species to the Gujarat checklist at present, we will review it after a few years subject to more data being available.

We are very thankful to Clive Mann for his inputs. We thank Mike Blair for all this help. We are grateful to Praveen J for his comments on the draft manuscript – Eds]

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A ‘putative’ Eastern Yellow Wagtail from Gondal, Rajkot District

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The Yellow Wagtail is now split into two separate species; Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) and Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) (Banks *et al.* 2004, Dickinson & Christidis 2014, del Hoyo & Collar 2018, Tyler & Christie 2018). The taxonomy of Eastern Yellow Wagtail is still not resolved but Alström & Mild (2003) and Dickinson & Christidis (2014) recognise three subspecies: the nominate *tschutschensis*, *taivana* and *macronyx*. The occurrence of the Eastern Yellow Wagtail in India was disputed and it was treated as ‘hypothetical’ in the region by Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), who, for this species, stated that confirmation was needed regarding its presence here, but gave its probable occurrence in the Andaman Islands and India. However, recent sightings of Eastern Yellow Wagtails, in the winter, of the subspecies *tschutschensis* and *taivana* from Assam and the Andaman Islands proved that the Eastern Yellow Wagtail does occur in India (Vishwanathan *et al.* 2017).

Introduction

The Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) is a polytypic species, with several recognised subspecies. Many of these subspecies like *M. f. beema*, *M. f. lutea*, *M. f. feldegg*, *M. f. thunbergi* etc. winter in India and the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). The taxonomy is complex and many of the subspecies are known to hybridize fairly regularly, thereby confusing distributional limits (Tyler & Christie 2018).