Water Pipit in Kachchh

Jaysukh Parekh 'Suman': Suman Remedies, C/17 R.T.O. Relocation Site, Bhuj 370001, Kachchh. nisusuman@gmail.com

Jaysukh Parekh

On 8 January 2017, my son Nirav and I were travelling near Sarado-Dhandh area, Banni region, Kachchh, for bird photography. Suddenly, from a distance, I saw birds in a group, foraging between small plants growing around the water's edge. When I got closer and checked from my car, I was happy and surprised to see a large group of Water Pipits (*Anthus spinoletta*). In an area of about one sq. km, there were more than one hundred birds in different groups. They were readily identified by their plumage, thin pointed bill, streaking on the underparts etc. I took many photographs and confirmed the identification.

The habitat was near a lake, in a muddy area with very small plants and some grass. The birds were feeding from the plants directly and some from the ground, while sometimes, from small wet muddy areas between the plants. The birds were walking very fast during foraging. They were in groups of 20 to 25 individuals. They were standing occasionally when foraging, mainly when there was unusual noise or disturbance. When disturbed, they all would fly quickly one by one or in a group and would land some 15 to 20 meters away. They would restart feeding immediately. Sometimes Grey Wagtails (*Motacilla cinerea*) or Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava*) would feed with them. From a distance, it was difficult to differentiate them from Water Pipits. The Water Pipits were looking smaller and little bulky as compared to the wagtails. It was very tough to detect the moving birds between small plants. Unlike other pipit sp., Water Pipits flew very high and fast when disturbed. On 9 January 2018, the next day, we visited the same place but not a single bird was seen there. But on 10 January 2018, I again saw about 100 Water Pipits in the same area. The birds could have shifted to other nearby areas for feeding. There are large areas with similar habitat around the *Dhandh* (lake) in Banni. I visited the area with bird watchers Ashok Mashru, Gaurang Bagda and others on 27 January 2017 and the Water Pipits were again seen in very good numbers.

The subspecies seen in our region is *Anthus spinoletta blakistoni* and the birds seen here were similar to what has been described in the reference texts for this subspecies (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There were some very dark plumaged birds seen along with the Water Pipits, which were identified later as Buff-bellied Pipits (*Anthus rubescens*) (Ganpule *et al*. 2017).

In the next winter (2017-2018), I visited the same place in November 2017, but Water Pipits were not found like the previous year. Only a few birds were seen in mid-December. This time, there were Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) in large numbers, which were foraging in the same area and from the same plants. Surprisingly, the larks were not seen in such large numbers the previous year. It is possible due to very less rain in that area, the Water Pipits were not noted like the previous year. But, a few individuals were seen and photographed in the same location in this winter too.

[*For Gujarat, there is only one isolated record of the Water Pipit given for Kachchh in Grimmett et al. (2011), while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show it as a winter visitor to northern India, but do not include Gujarat in the distribution map. The earlier and first record of Water Pipit from Kachchh, and Gujarat, is of a few individuals noted near Fulay, Kachchh, in February and March 2007 (Sørensen & Tiwari 2009). However, Ali (1955) wrote that he had seen a few pipits, near Viramgam, on 18 March 1946, with heavily streaked underparts, which suggested Water Pipits, but no specimens were collected. Recently, Water Pipits were also noted in the Little Rann of Kachchh (Ganpule 2017). Based on these sightings and previous published records, it seems that the Water Pipit is fairly regularly seen in Kachchh. It can be said that the species is an uncommon but regular winter visitor, at least to the desert areas of Kachchh.*

Regarding the subspecies seen here, according to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), A. s. blakistoni is seen in our region. Ganpule (2017) reported a Water Pipit of the coutellii subspecies from the Little Rann of Kachchh. Three subspecies are recognized – the nominate A. s. spinoletta, A. s. coutellii and A. s. blakistoni (Tyler 2018). However, Shirihai & Svensson (2018) give only two subspecies, A. s. spinoletta and A. s. coutellii, stating that coutellii and blakistoni are inseparable by plumage and only differ very slightly in some measurements with extensive overlap. The details of the subspecies occurring here can be confirmed by trapping and measuring a few individuals, though, if we follow Tyler (2018), occurrence of both coutellii and blakistoni are likely – Eds]

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Sykes's Short-toed Lark in Gujarat

Prasad Ganpule: C/o. Parshuram Pottery Works, Opp. Nazarbaug, Morbi 363642. prasadganpule@gmail.com

Prasad Ganpule

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