

White-tailed Eagle in Velavadar N.P.: a first photographic record from Gujarat

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Jorbeed, Bikaner and from Tal Chappar, (both in Rajasthan) with photos posted on the website Oriental Bird Images. Hence, it has been noted in western India in the past few years.



The White-tailed Eagle is somewhat similar to other *Aquila* sp. eagles and can also be confused with Pallas's Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucorhynchus*). It can be separated from these species by its large size, short wedge-shaped tail, protruding head and neck, and powerful bill. Another feature which separates it from *Aquila* sp. eagles is that the tarsi are largely bare and yellow in this species. Adult White-tailed Eagles are distinctive, with pale head and huge, all yellow bill, while immatures and juveniles have dark head and neck contrasting with streaked or blotched underbody (Forsman 1999). Regarding this individual seen in Velavadar, it appears to be a juvenile bird as extensive white mottling can be seen on the mantle and breast, along with a regular pattern on the upperwing coverts. Forsman (1999) describes such birds as being in juvenile plumage, and this can be aged as possibly a 2 cy individual. The birds seen in Rajasthan are also usually immatures or juveniles. However, adults have been noted regularly in North-east India (Mondal & Maheshwaran 2016).

For Gujarat, as stated by the author, this is only the second record and the first photographic documentation of the species from the state. Further, the eagle was seen here for almost one month, indicating that it remains in the same location (probably if habitat is suitable) for extended periods in the winter. Thus, this sighting is important for the state and further confirms the occurrence of the White-tailed Eagle in Gujarat – Eds]

References

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On 14 January 2018, I visited Velavadar National Park, in Bhavnagar District, with my wife Sarla and my son Meet. Shri Mohan Ram Legha, DFO, Bhavnagar, also joined us. Our main target was to look for and photograph a Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), which is a rare winter migrant / vagrant to this area. While searching for the same, we came across a large sized eagle sitting on a *Prosopis juliflora* tree. Due to unfavourable sunlight, its features were not clearly visible, and so we could not identify it in the field. It seemed different from the other eagles (*Aquila* sp.) usually seen here. However, we managed to take some record photographs.

After returning home to Surat and watching the photos on my computer, I suspected that it was a White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicollis*). I shared the photos with Prasad Ganpule and Devvratsinh Mori. Both replied that it was a juvenile White-tailed Eagle. I was happy to know that it was this species and this was my first sighting of the White-tailed Eagle. On the same day, a few other birdwatchers from Ahmedabad also recorded this eagle in the area. It was seen till mid-February by different birders and photos were posted on the social media (Facebook) and on the website 'eBird'. Thus, it was seen in this area for almost one month.

The White-tailed Eagle is given as a vagrant to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), with only a single record from Kachchh. The previous record of this species from the state is by M. K. Himmatsinhji, who had recorded it near Mundra, Kachchh, in 1949-1950 (Himmatsinhji 1970). Thus, this is only the second record from the state and the first photographic record of White-tailed Eagle from Gujarat.

[The White-tailed Eagle is a winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent and it is given as being 'generally rare' here (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Grimmett et al. (2011) show isolated records for India, mainly from the sub-Himalayan region till Assam, with scattered records from the Peninsula. There are recent records of the species from