

Sighting of Hume's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella acutirostris* in Little Rann of Kachchh and a review of its status in Gujarat

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In addition to these features, Shirihai & Svensson (2018) stated that triangular-shaped dark centres to scapulars and clean white underparts are also important in distinguishing it from Greater-, and Mongolian Short-toed Lark. However, Mongolian Short-toed Lark is often quite similar and a host of features are required to be studied before the identification can be concluded.

On 13 December 2019, I visited the western part of Little Rann of Kachchh, near Handi-bet, with Ashok Mashru and Manoj Finava. At around 17:30 hrs, we saw many flocks of larks (*Calandrella* sp.) in the area. A small flock of around 15-20 birds perched around our car and the calls uttered by these birds seemed different. These birds uttered a 'thiurr' call, which was different from the call of Greater-, and Mongolian Short-toed Lark. We took some photographs and noted that they had an orange bill with dark culmen and tip, dark lores and eye line, whitish supercilium prominent above the eye, the mantle was less streaked than what is seen in a Greater Short-toed Lark and it had cleaner white underparts. Referring to Shirihai & Svensson (2018), I identified these larks as Hume's Short-toed Larks as the dark lores and especially the bill, with orange-yellow colour and dark culmen, and call, was different than in a Greater-, or Mongolian Short-toed Lark.

The Hume's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella acutirostris*) breeds in the Himalayas – from NW Pakistan till Bhutan and in Baluchistan in Pakistan and winters in northern India, mainly in Gangetic Plains from NW India to Assam (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There are two subspecies – nominate *acutirostris* and *tibetana*, and both winter in the Indian Subcontinent (Alström 2020). The Hume's Short-toed Lark is very similar to Greater Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) and Mongolian Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella dukhunensis*) and is separated by less contrastingly streaked crown, dark lore stripe, better-defined whiter and narrower but more contrasting supercilium, usually less white on outer rectrix, usually longer and more slender and pointed bill with yellow coloration and darker culmen (Alström 2020). In

Table 1: Records of Hume's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Remarks	Reference
1	14 January 1949	Sidhpur, Patan Dist.	Specimen skin 232776 in FMNH, USA	A male collected by Walter Koelz
2	30 December 2012	Velavadar National Park	Photographed – shows distinct bi-coloured bill, dark lores & triangular centres to scapulars	Author's sighting – photo posted on 'Birds of Gujarat' (BOG) website
3	October 2015	Velavadar National Park	Photographed – shows distinct bi-coloured bill, whitish underparts and dark lores	Sunil Kini, <i>pers. comm</i>
4	30 January 2016	Little Rann of Kachchh	Two individuals seen well. Noted dark lores, dark tip to beak, unmarked breast. Confirmed by call - the much different 'thrrrr' from the chirps of the Greater Short-toed Larks	Ramit Singhal & Dinesh Singhal, details posted on eBird – checklist S27201030
5	13 December 2019	Little Rann of Kachchh	A flock of around 15-20 birds. Photographed. Orange-based bill with dark culmen and tip, dark lores, and clean white underparts	Author's sighting – photo given here
6	15 February 2020	Aniyali, Nal Sarovar outskirts	One individual. Photographed. Yellow-orange bill with dark culmen and tip, dark lores	Prof. Andrew Ingilis, Punit Lalbhai & Vivek Menon. ML 215769131 on eBird website
7	21 February 2020	Abdasa, Kachchh	Minimum 2 seen. Significantly paler birds, very unstreaked on crown, cheek and breast. Small beak size, compared to the Greater Short-toed Larks. Photographed	Dylan Vasapolli. Posted on eBird – checklist S64858809

Records from Gujarat

For Gujarat, the Hume's Short-toed Lark was not included in the Gujarat checklist by Parasharya *et al.* (2004). Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show only one record of the species while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) do not show its occurrence in the state. The approximate location of the record shown in Grimmett *et al.* (2011) is in central Gujarat. It is probably based on a specimen in the collection of the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH), Chicago, Illinois, in USA, which was said to be collected from Sidhpur, Vadodara, in January 1949 (see <https://collections-zoology.fieldmuseum.org/catalogue/1486117>, Skin – 232776 in FMNH). There is some confusion regarding the locality of this specimen record since Sidhpur is near Patan, in north Gujarat, and not in central Gujarat. Walter Koelz had collected specimens from Sidhpur (in Patan District) and the co-ordinates given for other specimens collected by W. Koelz match to Sidhpur, Patan, and the location is given as 'Patan District, Baroda' for these specimens. There are no specimens collected from Vadodara by W. Koelz. Hence, this specimen record of Hume's Short-toed Lark is most likely from Patan District and not from Vadodara and thus, the location is depicted incorrectly in the map given in Grimmett *et al.* (2011).

The Hume's Short-toed Lark was included in the latest Gujarat Checklist (Ganpule 2016) based on this specimen record and other records from Velavadar NP and Little Rann of Kachchh. Records of Hume's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat, which have been verified by photographs or calls, are given in Table 1.

The records given in Table 1 are all confirmed records of the Hume's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat. In addition to these records, there are other records from the state which could not be confirmed – for ex., by Dhyey Shah from Velavadar NP in December 2012 (posted on eBird) which shows a lark with dark lores, prominent white supercilium and the bill looks yellowish with dark culmen. However, the photos are not sharp and it is difficult to judge the critical features required for identification. It is not possible to confirm the identification beyond any doubt from the given photos and hence, erring on the side of caution, is treated here as unconfirmed. There are a few other photos from Gujarat, posted as Greater Short-toed Larks on different birding websites, which require closer scrutiny, as there is a possibility of a Hume's Short-toed Lark being misidentified.

Discussion

It can be seen that there are a few confirmed records of Hume's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat and it has been noted in different areas of the state. The wintering range of the

nominate subspecies is given as Pakistan and NW India while the subspecies *tibetana* is said to occur in the N Indian Subcontinent (Alström 2020). It is very likely that the birds breeding in Baluchistan, Pakistan, could be wintering here as this region is not very far from Gujarat. Hence, its occurrence in the state is not surprising but it is not known which subspecies occurs here. However, based on the location where the nominate subspecies *acutirostris* breeds, it is more likely to occur here in the winter.

The main difficulty for birders here is its identification and separation from congeners. The Greater Short-toed Lark is seen in almost all parts of the state and that too, in very large flocks or in good numbers. Such flocks are not seen closely, or properly checked, for the presence of Hume's Short-toed Lark. Good photographs or recording its call is the only way by which the Hume's Short-toed Lark can be identified. Further, there is less awareness among birders here regarding its occurrence in Gujarat. In view of this, the Hume's Short-toed Lark is probably overlooked in the state. From the confirmed records given here, it can be said that the Hume's Short-toed Lark is most likely to be a rare winter visitor rather than a vagrant to Gujarat. Though these records are insufficient to draw any conclusion, the sighting of a flock of 15-20 individuals in Little Rann of Kachchh and other records from different areas suggest that the Hume's Short-toed Lark winters here in small numbers in suitable habitat.

Acknowledgements

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