

Sightings of Slaty-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus*, Little Crake *Porzana parva* and Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* at Mokarsagar Wetland: Additions to the avifauna of Porbandar, with notes on their behaviour

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Introduction

Rails and crakes, belonging to the family *Rallidae*, are typically skulking birds, more often heard than seen. Their usual habitat is reeds and marshes, and they are difficult to see in the open. In Gujarat, Ganpule (2016) listed six species of *Rallidae*: Slaty-breasted Rail (*Gallirallus striatus*), Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*), Baillon's Crake (*Porzana pusilla*), Little Crake (*Porzana parva*), Spotted Crake (*Porzana porzana*) and Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Porzana fusca*). A seventh species, the Slaty-legged Crake (*Rallina eurizonoides*) was later added to the checklist when it was seen and photographed in Dadra & Nagar Haveli near southern Gujarat (Mishra 2017).

Not much is known about the habits of these species and their status and distribution in our state is also not well known. We present here observations of Slaty-breasted Rail, Spotted Crake and Little Crake in Gosabara-Mokarsagar Wetland Complex (hereinafter Mokarsagar), an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) site of Porbandar, Gujarat.

Observations

On 8 December 2019, Ashok Mashru, Manoj Finava, Prasad Ganpule and Swadeepsinh Jadeja planned a birding trip to Mokarsagar Wetland, with Bhaskar Thankey and the authors DV and GB. A detailed description of the Mokarsagar Wetland has already been given in Varagiya & Chakraborty (2018) and can be referred to for the habitats in this area. The group visited Mokarsagar in the afternoon of 8 December 2019 and in the morning of 9 and 11 December 2019. We were thrilled to see thousands of large white-headed gulls (*Larus* sp.) at their evening roost on one side of the wetland.

On 9 December 2019, at around 10:00 hrs, DV spotted a skulking bird moving in the reeds. DV and Ashok Mashru photographed the bird in the few seconds before it disappeared in the reeds again. When the next vehicle arrived, Ashok Mashru showed the photo to Prasad Ganpule, who identified the bird as a Slaty-breasted Rail, a lifer for all six birders (**Photo 1**). The bird was identified as an immature, based on its plumage: the crown and neck were rufous-brown, finely streaked with dark brown and the flanks were marked with irregular wavy white bands and spots. The upperparts were olive-brown, with black markings. The bill was pale pinkish or flesh-coloured, with a darker culmen. We waited for

it to reappear and it showed up together with a Spotted Crake (**Photo 2**), and both birds gave quite good views before they moved into the reeds again.



Gaurang Bagda



Dhaval Vargiya

Unlike the Spotted Crake, the Slaty-breasted Rail is vocal in the winter. A sharp whistled note, repeated several times, was heard twice by us once it disappeared in the reeds. We compared this call with the call of the Slaty-breasted Rail and confirmed that it was indeed the call of this species. Both species were seen together by us in this area probably due to their same food and habitat preference.

On 11 December 2019, GB visited Mokarsagar Wetland in the morning with Dr. Narendra Parmar and at the same place,

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one Slaty-breasted Rail was seen at around 07:15 hrs. We saw it closely and took many photographs, and noted that it was the same bird which was seen two days earlier based on its plumage. After about five minutes, we saw one Spotted Crake at same place along with one Baillon's Crake. We saw a total four Baillon's Crakes at Mokarsagar area in the roadside reeds, probably due to good habitat. We saw one crake which initially looked like a juvenile Baillon's Crake. It was buffish, with whitish face and breast, but with distinct red at base of bill. Based on the red base to bill, we identified it as a Little Crake, but its wings looked shorter and the primary projection was not extending clearly beyond tertials. So, we considered it as a probable immature Little Crake (**Photo 3**). The shorter primary projection could have been due to moulting wings but we were not sure about this.



Photo 3

Caurang Bagda



Photo 4

Caurang Bagda

On 16 December 2019 we visited Mokarsagar Wetland again, but we could not find the Slaty-breasted Rail. However, at the

same place, we saw and photographed one Water Rail and one Spotted Crake feeding together. We saw a total of three Baillon's Crakes. We also found the previously seen probable immature Little Crake at the same spot. Near to that location, we saw a blue-grey plumaged crake, with distinct red at base of bill, longer wings and primaries extending well beyond tertials. After taking some photographs, we confirmed it as a male Little Crake (**Photo 4**). On 22 December 2019, we visited Mokarsagar Wetland and saw two Water Rails, two Spotted Crakes, six Baillon's Crakes and two Little Crakes, including one adult male. We got good photographs of all these birds. These sightings suggested that Mokarsagar Wetland is an ideal habitat for rails and crakes. We also tried to estimate the numbers of these species based on the total counts done by us. The numbers estimated by us were as follows:

Sr. No.	Species	Maximum Count
1	Baillon's Crake	8
2	Little Crake	3
3	Spotted Crake	3
4	Water Rail	5
5	Slaty-breasted Rail	1

Status in Gujarat

The Slaty-breasted Rail was previously known as Indian Blue-breasted Banded Rail. Ali & Ripley (1974) described it as a widespread resident in India. Ganpule (2016) gave it as rare monsoon migrant to Gujarat, based on recent sightings near Barda Hills, Nal Sarovar and sightings from South Gujarat. The Slaty-breasted Rail affects reedy swamps and mangroves, margins of village tanks, inundated paddy cultivation and similar habitats. It is a monsoon (mid June-October) breeder and is quite a generalized feeder i.e. seeds and shoots of marsh plants, mollusks, crustaceans, grubs, worms, and insects are all in its diet based on availability and need. The elongated toes help it to step over floating vegetation while in search of food. It swims well if required and can also dive when alarmed or threatened (Ali & Ripley 1974).

The Little Crake is a quail-like swamp bird of about 20 cm length. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) described it as a winter visitor & passage migrant to India, with few wintering areas shown in Jammu & Kashmir but with only three isolated records from the mainland. Ali & Ripley (1974) described it as uncommon winter visitor. Ganpule (2016) gave it as a winter vagrant to Gujarat. The Little Crake prefers, chiefly, aquatic insects as food. Due to difficulty in identification (it is very similar to the Baillon's Crake) and skulking nature, it remained elusive and data deficient in India for a quite long time. The species was first photographed for India in December 2017 at Jamnagar,

Gujarat (Trivedi 2018) and later, it has been photographed at several locations in Anand, Kheda, Vadodara (Vadhvana) and Nal Sarovar in Gujarat.

The Spotted Crake is given as a widespread winter visitor to India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Ganpule (2016) described it as uncommon to rare winter visitor to Gujarat based on isolated sightings from Rajkot and Ahmedabad Districts. It stays in Gujarat till April. The Spotted Crake affects, mostly but not always, reeds and marshes of irrigation reserves and canals. It also prefers generalized food like the Slaty-breasted Rail. There have been many records of the Spotted Crake in Saurashtra in the past few years.

The Baillon's Crake winters regularly every year in Mokarsagar Wetland, though in a small numbers. It is a widespread winter migrant to Gujarat, with sightings from all regions. But, none of these three species – Slaty-breasted Rail, Little Crake and Spotted Crake – were recorded earlier in any wetland of Porbandar District; only the Baillon's Crake has been recorded from Porbandar earlier (Dhadhal 2005). Hence, these three species are additions to the Porbandar checklist. Further, regarding the Slaty-breasted Rail, except for South Gujarat, this is only the third photographic record of this species from Saurashtra, after a photograph near Barda Hills (on Jamnagar – Barda Road) (Das 2010) and from Dhari (Vagadia 2019).

It is important to note that an immature Slaty-breasted Rail was sighted here. The Slaty-breasted Rail is a monsoon visitor/ breeder to Gujarat and all the sightings (n=9) from Bharuch District were from June to September from 2015 to 2018 (Patel 2019). The sighting from Jamnagar was also in June (Das 2010), which is the breeding season of this species. The sighting from Hajira, Surat, was in February 2019 (Joshi 2019) while the recent sighting from Dhari was from November 2018 and this sighting from Porbandar is third such record from the winter months, which suggests that the species may be more widespread than believed. The sightings of immature individuals twice in Saurashtra are interesting; is this species breeding here in suitable habitats? However, there is no data which confirms this but it could be possible and birders need to keep a watch for this species in Saurashtra. Due to its shy, elusive and skulking nature, it is overlooked by birders. Adding to that, the movements and activities of these species are also somewhat ambient temperature dependent; they are mostly seen during the golden hours i.e. approximately two hours after sunrise and before sunset (Bhatt & Patel 2017).

Notes on behaviour

During our several field trips with birders during December 2019 and January 2020, we spent whole days at the wetland.

One of our objectives was to study the activities of rails and crakes during the day; noting their activity in the afternoon, especially when the sun is overhead, was of special interest for us.

On 22 December 2019, a Spotted Crake was seen at 07:08 hrs. It emerged from the reeds and walked towards a base of *Prosopis juliflora* in the northern direction. The Water Rail was seen at 07:30 hours for 15 minutes. The Baillon's Crake was seen at 08:00 hrs. It was interesting to observe that all these birds used to perch on a stone in shallow water, and they were usually seen preening on the stone after bathing (**Photo 5**). The Little Crake was seen from 08:30 hrs onwards. The Slaty-breasted Rail was spotted in the morning after 08:00 hrs and emerged again at 10:45 hrs for 15 minutes and then it was not seen again on that day. The Spotted Crake was the most active of these species; it was seen feeding, preening and bathing till 13:00 hrs. After that, it remained idle at the base of a *Prosopis* tree, with the Water Rail in the vicinity. The Spotted Crake and Water Rail were seen to be active only after 17:00 hrs, till sunset at around 18:30 hrs.



Photo 5

Dhaval Vargiya

The activity of the Baillon's Crake and the Little Crake was dependent on *Prosopis juliflora* trees (Gujarati name: *Gando Baval*), an invasive species in India and a menace to humans and the ecosystem. Every year, villagers cut down *Prosopis juliflora* trees parallel to the concrete roads of Mokarsagar Wetland, which connect Gosa and Mokal villages. Only trees which create hurdles for vehicles passing on the road are cut down. These cut-down trees are then kept at the same place of its origin, but are strewn in the adjoining water / ponds. The stems of such cut down trees gradually dry out and its

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leaves fall in the water. This process, along with the presence of marshy areas (with reeds growing in between) creates a niche for aquatic insects, which attracts rails and crakes here (**Photo 6**). Aquatic insects are seen at the bottom and mayflies are seen flying on the top where these cut *Prosopis* are put.



The Baillon's Crake and Little Crake were seen feeding on, or searching for, aquatic insects close to dry *Prosopis* trees and stems (**Photo 7**). It was interesting to observe that all the sightings of Little Crake were from the road sides, at the base of dry and cut *Prosopis* trees. It was noted that Little Crakes were many times accompanied by Clamorous Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus*) on top of *Prosopis* trees, feeding on mayflies trapped in spiders' webs. Such *Prosopis* created micro habitats were seen all along the several kms long road. Dry *Prosopis* trees also provide shade and the shallow water maintains the temperature in these habitats. Due to this combination, crakes were seen feeding on insects in such areas and were noted to remain in such habitats almost throughout the day. In general, it requires a great amount of patience to observe these rails and crakes as these species prefer to remain inside the vegetation/reeds and come out rarely. We need to spend more time with such shy and skulking species of rails and crakes to understand how they behave and how long they stay in our wetlands.

Conclusion

The sightings of Little Crake, Slaty-breasted Rail and Spotted Crake are new for wetlands of Porbandar and are important sightings for Saurashtra. The habitat in Mokarsagar Wetland is ideal for these birds. It was seen that they are present in this wetland for more than two months in the winter. These sightings confirm that the Mokarsagar Wetland is an important area for wintering rails and crakes as they are seen in good numbers here.

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