

was cloudy with some intermittent rain. I saw that a flock of Common Pigeons (*Columba livia*) was flying here and there. I observed that this flock was being chased by a falcon and decided to watch the event. In the field, the bird of prey was looking dark and as the light was low, I could not identify it. But, I noted that it had powerful flight. I took some photographs and saw that it was unsuccessfully chasing and attacking the pigeons. A few attempts were made by the falcon which did not succeed. After a few minutes, it gained height and flew away, disappearing in the cloudy sky.

After coming back home, I saw the photos on the computer and noted that this falcon had a black head, rufous underparts and blackish wings. I shared the photos with other birdwatchers and raptor experts Nirav Bhatt and Devvratsinh Mori confirmed that this was a Black Shaheen (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*), also known as the Shaheen Falcon or

the Indian Shaheen. Mori & Joshi (2017) have given the status and distribution of the Black Shaheen in Gujarat; records from almost all parts of the state are listed. There is a previous record of this species from Indroda Park in Gandhinagar. But, the Black Shaheen is quite uncommon around Gandhinagar.

The sightings of these two birds of prey in Gandhinagar are interesting and add to our knowledge of the distribution of these species in Gujarat.

References

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Which subspecies of Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* occur in Gujarat?

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The Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) is a widespread and common winter visitor to the coasts of India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In Gujarat, it is present along the coast, with sightings from all coastal areas of the state (Ganpule 2016). Five subspecies of Whimbrel are usually recognized; four subspecies breed in the Palearctic while the fifth breeds in the Nearctic (Skeel & Mallory 2020). The four subspecies breeding in the Palearctic are *N. p. phaeopus*, *N. p. variegatus*, *N. p. alboaxillaris* and *N. p. rogachevae* (Skeel & Mallory 2020). According to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), the subspecies *alboaxillaris* is not always recognized - these authors state that examined regional specimens are closer to the nominate

phaeopus, while *variegatus* has been thought to be a winter vagrant to NE India and Andaman & Nicobars; *alboaxillaris* is thought to winter in the SW of the Subcontinent.



Jaysukh Parekh Suman

On 1 November 2019, I arranged a trip with my son Nirav to visit the Banni area in Great Rann of Kachchh near Dhordo, as I got a message that there were many temporary water bodies and the migratory birds had started arriving there since October. On arriving at the site, I saw that the water body was about 1 sq. km in size, with very shallow water and surrounded by medium-sized grass. Cattle were feeding and resting around it. A huge flock of Collared Pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*) and Oriental Pratincole (*G. maldivarum*) was seen there by us. Good numbers of gulls and terns, mainly Slender-billed Gull (*Chroicocephalus genei*), Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) and Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) were

present, along with Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), and some waders were seen which included flocks of Eurasian Curlews (*Numenius arquata*) and Whimbrels.



Jaysukh Parekh Suman

I saw a Whimbrel in flight and it then landed in the shallow water. I noted that it was a little darker and smaller than other Whimbrels near it. I was lucky to get a few photos of this bird when it was flying and sitting in the water. After checking it on the computer, I confirmed that it looked a little smaller and darker than other Whimbrels around it. The subspecies identification in Whimbrel is often not possible in the wintering range and only birds in breeding areas can be identified to the subspecies. Further, colour variation from nominate *N. p. phaeopus* in NW Europe to *N. p. variegatus* in E Siberia is probably clinal; intermediates between *N. p. phaeopus* and *N. p. alboaxillaris* also occur (Skeel & Mallory 2020). One of the critical features for identification of subspecies in Whimbrels is the barring on the axillaries – in nominate *phaeopus*, the dark bars on the axillaries are narrow compared with breeders from east of the Yenisey, in *alboaxillaris* the axillaries are either entirely white or have brown bars along one vane, *rogachevae* has clear-cut dark bars on the axillaries which are equally as wide as the white parts while *variegatus* has heavily barred axillaries along with intense dark spotting on lower back and rump (Köhler *et al.* 2013).

Since I was not aware of the subspecies identification in Whimbrel, I shared the photos with Pavel Tomkovich, Gary Allport and Peter Köhler. I received a detailed reply from Pavel Tomkovich (in *litt.*, email dated 6 November 2019):

'Thank you very much for your interest in subspecies identification of Whimbrels. Unfortunately, I am unable to tell you with certainty about the belonging of the bird in your photos to the known subspecies of Whimbrels. This is because of the following reasons:

1. Individual variation in morphological characters exists in most bird species, and subspecies can be identified often only after comparison of a series of birds obtained from different regions (=subspecies), not based on just single specimens.
2. The *rogachevae* subspecies has been described based on study skins of adult breeding birds in rather worn plumage, and I have no clue how subspecies of Whimbrels differ in their fresh plumage, especially juvenile birds. This is a juvenile bird in your photos.
3. Pattern of axillary feathers is one of the important characters for distinguishing subspecies in Whimbrels. However, this character is not available in your photos.
4. I have been told that by researchers from Singapore that Whimbrels with satellite tags migrated from their country to breeding areas of *phaeopus*, *rogachevae* and likely *variegatus* subspecies, which means across most of Siberia. This allows assuming that Whimbrels from India can do the same and may belong to any of the Siberian subspecies.
5. Only based on heavy barring on tail feathers of your bird, I can guess that it likely belongs to either *rogachevae* or *variegatus* subspecies.'

Gary Allport, wrote (in *litt.*, email dated 6 April 2021) that 'it's a juvenile, quite dark, probably nominate race but possibly *rogachevae* but, the photos are not good enough to draw a firm conclusion'. Peter Köhler stated that the barring on the axillaries was not clearly visible but the photo 'shows brown bars a trifle less broad than the white ones, while in *rogachevae*, brown should be broader than white. However, I am uncertain if this is necessarily in favour of *variegatus*'.

Thus, expert opinion was not conclusive but it is likely that this individual could have been of the *rogachevae* subspecies. I checked photos of Whimbrels in flight from Gujarat on 'eBird', especially noting the pattern on the axillaries. In a few photos, the axillary pattern is clearly visible and in these photos, the pattern is similar in what is seen in the nominate subspecies – the dark bars on the axillaries are narrower than white bars. But, in one or two photos, the dark bars are almost as wide as or wider than the white bars, indicating it could be a possible *rogachevae*. It should be noted that migration routes and wintering grounds of *rogachevae* are not known, but, probably, they are related to the Central Asian flyway (Tomkovich 2008).

Subspecific information on Whimbrels in Gujarat is lacking and while it is known that the nominate *phaeopus* winters here in the Indian Subcontinent, it is likely that *alboaxillaris* and *rogachevae* could also occur as winter migrants in our

state. I urge birders to photograph Whimbrels in flight, especially noting the pattern on the axillaries, rump, uppertail coverts and tail, so that subspecies identification can be made. This will be helpful in knowing the Whimbrel subspecies occurring here.

Acknowledgments

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Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* in Kachchh: a second record for Gujarat

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Shantilal Varu

On 14 April 2022, we went to Modhva Beach, Taluka: Mandvi, Kachchh, for watching waders in breeding plumages. While birding in that area, we saw and photographed a wheatear perched on a wooden pole near a fisherman's hut. At first, we presumed that it was a male Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*) in breeding plumage. But, on a closer view and after studying the photographs, we identified it as a male Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) in breeding plumage. A brief description is as follows: it had blue-grey upperparts, greyish crown, whitish supercilium, black eye-mask, pale orangish wash on the throat and upper breast, white underparts, blackish wings and short tail. We had taken many photos and there was no doubt that this was a male Northern Wheatear.

The Northern Wheatear is regarded as a rare vagrant to India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Abhinav *et al.* (2020) provided an overview of the records of Northern Wheatears from India, including its breeding in the Indian Subcontinent; most of the records given are from northern India, from Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. For Peninsular India, there is a record from Karnataka and two records from Kerala given by the authors. Based on their study, the Northern Wheatear was stated to be 'not solely a vagrant to India, as noted by previous authors, but a common and regular summer breeder and passage migrant in Gilgit-Baltistan, a rare but regular passage migrant through western Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions, probably less regular in the eastern Himalaya, and a vagrant in southern India'.

This species is stated to be a vagrant to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), with only one previous record; Clement Francis had photographed a Northern Wheatear in Banni area in December 2011 (Francis 2014). There was a record claimed from Little Rann of Kachchh (Vyas 2009), but Damle & Inskipp (2014) have disputed this record and stated that the 'original photographs appear to show a Desert Wheatear'. Hence, this record from Little Rann of Kachchh was not considered by Ganpule (2016). Regarding the earlier record from Banni, Kachchh, though this species was included in the Gujarat checklist by Ganpule (2016), it was stated that 'details need to be re-checked' for this record; probably due to this statement by Ganpule (2016), this record has not been included by either Damle & Inskipp (2014) or by Abhinav *et al.* (2020).