



BOOK REVIEW: A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF GUJARAT

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Title: A Field Guide to the Birds of Gujarat- 488 Pages (ISBN 978-93-5777-321-8).

Authors: Ganpule, P., Trivedi, B., Varu, M. & Raina, A. D.

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Gujarat is a very special place for birds. It boasts over 600 bird species, which is nearly half the national total. This new field guide is a first for the state and fills a major gap for birdwatchers, conservationists, and the general public. The book is co-authored by well-known and respected birders: Prasad Ganpule, Bakul Trivedi, Maulik Varu, and Anuj D. Raina. It is an amazing publication by the Bird

Conservation Society of Gujarat, which celebrates twenty years of fostering interest and encouraging support for the conservation of the state's birds.

Situated on the western seaboard of the Indian subcontinent, Gujarat is host to a majority of migratory bird species of the Central Asian Flyway that enter the southwest of the country enroute Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In addition, it lies on the eastern border of the West Asian-East African Flyway, and a number of species that breed in northern Eurasia eastward to China, stop off here enroute Africa. Many of these can be recorded here only on the southward migration, including the Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (*Cercotrichas galactotes*). Gujarat's geographic location is also ideal for seeing a few species that range farther to the west of India, such as the Trumpeter Finch (*Bucanetes githagineus*), which just gets into Kachchh in northwest Gujarat (and adjoining western Rajasthan). Thus, Gujarat is a major draw for local and foreign bird watchers, whom this book will serve well.

This review aims to highlight the beauty and amazing value of this new guide and identify a few shortcomings that the next edition (which must surely be planned in the future) may wish to address.

Bringing this field guide together with all the text, images, and species maps has clearly been a herculean task. It has involved a large number of people who have contributed their knowledge, observations, and images, as outlined in the acknowledgments and in the section on the preparation of the maps. This reinforces the wonderful collaborative effort needed and achieved to make this book possible to produce – congratulations to all involved.

The book's size and weight (about a kilogram) with a soft plasticated cover should make it easy to carry into the field. Although, in balancing its size and weight, the font size of the text appears to have been compromised a little and this may make it slightly more challenging for older readers.

The introduction is very informative, tracing the rich history of ornithology in Gujarat, as is the section outlining the rich diversity of habitats that supports these birds, taxonomy, and how the book sections are presented – they are a must read. The introduction mentions the Critically Endangered Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigricaps* still nests in Kachchh, although this may be optimistic given the near extinction of the species that is threatened by an explosion of power lines across prime habitats, feral dogs, overgrazing, illegal killing, and other threats across its range. While referring to the IUCN categories of threatened and near-threatened species, readers seeking an explanation of abbreviations of the different categories (CR, VU, EN, NT) will need to go to the IUCN website or other external sources. The top image on page 15 in the right underwing misidentifies lesser coverts as primary coverts.

The taxonomy section reveals several unresolved issues of the basic taxonomy of many species and subspecies found in the region. The authors have explained this well and despite their effort, it is difficult to easily grasp the complex details of the taxonomic conundrums (see the Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* - with multiple subspecies, two of which, the *curruca*

and *althaea* groups, are usefully described). This leads into a section that explains Appendix 1, which includes species that were added to the state list as recently as 31 December 2022 (a reflection of how up to date this book is!); Appendix 2, with hypothetical species, including potential species to the state, which may encourage birdwatchers to look out for, and identify them, or improperly identified species (and probable escapees); and Appendix 3 with rejected species and reasons for their exclusion.

Readers will discover the taxonomic sequence, and quick index to the book on page 17, although placing this at the very start of the book would have made it more handy for quick use in the field, when trying to find a bird.

As expected, the bulk of the volume is devoted to the 615 species. Each entry provides the English, Scientific, and Gujarati names, length in centimeters, brief text to identify the species, points to differentiate male, female, and juvenile, habitats used, voice, status and distribution in the state, and taxonomic notes. These are accompanied by a distribution map, and multiple images of the taxon. The text is clear and useful for identifying species, pointing out similar-looking species, and helps separate them in the field.

The useful maps illustrate the status and distribution of species at a district level. Being produced in such detail, these maps will set a valuable bench mark for future observations and studies to improve knowledge about current distribution of species, and future changes to it. For some vagrant species, like the Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*, it is not clear why the map includes both a shaded area and circles, while for other species, there are only circles. For future editions, a small improvement would be to present individual records as solid circles rather than rings to be easily visible on these small maps.

Perhaps what sets this guide apart from most others is that it brings together over 3,100 photos to cover all the species recorded in the state – which is a major feat. These are presented as cut-outs, with multiple images per species. The White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* covers some six subspecies, three of which are illustrated. The quality of images varies. Most are sharp, although the printing is light and unclear on some plates. Multiple images are useful to inform a reader of differences between plumages, sex, and age. Still, more could have been done to help identification, such as with a line pointing to a key feature (as is the practice in many field guides) and to label the sex and age of each image. For example, the Rosy Starling (#495e) is identified as a juvenile, but isn't #495f one too? Or why is #511e, of the White-

rumped Shama *Kittacincla malabarica*, such a light blue, compared to the other images? Does this signify a stage in the bird's age, sex, or moult? The Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda* in #396d, with a short tail and a lot of white, appears to be a sub-adult or a moulting bird– but there is no explanation. Likewise, Strickland's Wheatear *Oenanthe capistrata* (#524d), or the Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* (#595e) appear to be juveniles, but this is neither mentioned on the plates, nor described in the texts. Finally, the Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia* in #89a is labeled as breeding, which is likely to be based on its breeding plumage, although its bill is still yellow with a black tip, while the text states that the breeding adult has a black bill and the non-breeding bird has a black-tipped yellow bill. So clarifying this in the text would be important to help correctly identify the bird.

For a few species, the images seem repetitive. It would have been useful to explain the relevance of each to aid identification. The inclusion of more frontal angles that help to identify some species would have been useful. While many species are illustrated with cut-outs in flight, I miss one that shows differences in the tail patterns to more easily separate, say, a Dunlin *Calidris alpina* from a Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. The practice of some guides presenting multiple similar species in flight on a page makes for quick identification and could be considered in the future.

The guide includes useful images that compare the tail patterns of similar looking snipe (Pintail *Gallinago stenura*, Common *G. gallinago*, Swinhoe's *G. megala* and Great *G. media*) as well as for wheatear *Oenanthe* species. Although the illustration of Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe albonigra* (p. 376) appears to be the same as the Variable Wheatear complex on p. 378. From illustrations and images of the species in other guides, it would appear that the Hume's should have more black on the central rectrices than depicted in the image on p. 376.

It would be useful to increase the size of images and include keys to the identification on the plates. Precious space on these plates has been given to photo credits. A creative solution could be to include species numbers in the pages that list contributing photographers instead at the end of the book.

Finally, as explained in the book, inclusion of a full list of references used in its preparation has been omitted. While this would have added several pages and weight, it is valuable information and hopefully the authors and publishers will look at other options to make this available, for example through the BCSG website.

All in all, this Field Guide is an amazing publication and will be most useful to anyone visiting Gujarat, or India. I learned a lot about the birds of Gujarat in going through it quickly for this review. No doubt I will be coming back to dip into it many

times in the future. The book retails for INR 1,500, and will be an invaluable asset in every birder's library. □

Errata

Patel, Aniket. 2022. Sighting of Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* at Pariej: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat. *Flamingo Gujarat*, Oct-Dec. 2022. 5(4):6.

Correction: Patel, Aneet. 2022. Sighting of Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* at Pariej: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat. *Flamingo Gujarat*, Oct-Dec. 2022. 5(4):6.

We regret this error and thank Dr. Aneet Patel for pointing it out - by Eds.

Announcement

We plan to publish a special issue on The RAPTORS OF GUJARAT, which will be the forthcoming issue (April -June '23 or the immediate next) of FLAMINGO GUJARAT – Bulletin of Gujarat Birds, published by BCSG. Please submit research articles, short articles, and short birding notes incorporated with images to us on the recommended mail add. FLAMINGO Gujarat intends to publish special issues from time to time, to create collections of articles on different themes. The aim is to avail hidden research and observations of birders to the readership of 'FLAMINGO Gujarat'. We would appreciate your contribution, efforts, support, and gestures too.

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