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Notes on distribution and plumages of Laggar Falcon in Gujarat

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Nirav Bhatt

Fig-1: Laggar of plumage type – 1



Dhairya Dixit

Fig-2: Laggar of plumage type – 2

Introduction

The Laggar Falcon (*Falco jugger*) is resident in the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). It is one of the four hierofalcons (subgenus: *Hierofalco*) of the world, and is one of the large falcons in this complex (Wink *et al.* 2004). The Laggar Falcon is widely distributed throughout the Indian Subcontinent but is scarce (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

It is now treated as a 'Near Threatened' species, and is suspected to be undergoing a moderately rapid population reduction (BirdLife International 2016). It is stated to be 'commonest' in the desert and semi-arid zone of the country (at home in the hottest part of the country) and rarer in southern India (Naoroji 2006).



The distribution, breeding ecology and local migration of the Laggar Falcon have not been studied in detail. Here, we present the distribution of Laggar Falcon in Gujarat based on verified photographic records, and also report on the different types of plumages seen in the species here.



Nirav Bhatt

Fig-3: Laggar of plumage type – 3

Identification

The Laggar Falcon is a medium sized, slender falcon. The adult has whitish to buff-whitish underparts, plain on throat and upper breast (some adults may have streaking on chest), lightly streaked on chest-sides and central belly. The upperparts are dark brown to grey-brown; forehead is usually plain; reddish crown; faint supercilium contrasting with dark eye-stripe. The central tail feathers are plain when seen from above and are not barred like in a Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*). The plain underparts and prominent moustachial stripe in adults help in differentiating it from adult Saker Falcon, which usually has round spots/markings on underparts and a diffuse moustachial stripe. Juvenile Laggar Falcons are darker brown above, with chocolaty- brown underparts, especially thighs, flanks and underbelly. The crown and nape are duller brown. Bare parts are tinged greenish-grey unlike yellow in adults.

The juvenile Laggar Falcon can be confused with Saker Falcon and Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus calidus*). The

Laggar Falcon....

identification and separation of juvenile Laggar Falcon from the juveniles of Saker Falcon and Peregrine Falcon is complicated and beyond the scope of this work.

Previous records from Gujarat

Ali (1954) collected 8 specimens from various areas of Gujarat and noted that the Laggar Falcon was resident and 'fairly common'. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) also gave it as 'resident and common'. Khachar (1996) stated that it was 'declining'. Naoroji (2006) gives it as a resident in Gujarat, stating that it prefers arid to semi-arid open habitats. Ganpule (2016) gives it as a 'rare resident and winter visitor' and as 'widespread but rare or uncommon'.



Fig-4: Laggar of plumage type – 4

Present distribution in Gujarat

Based on the data collected by us, and given here in the table, the Laggar Falcon is widely distributed in Gujarat, from the western areas to the eastern border. It has been recorded from Naliya Grasslands, Kachchh, and Charakala, near Dwarka, being the sightings from the extreme western part of Gujarat. For the eastern-most part, it has been reported from Dahod. Sightings from southern areas are from the Velavadar National Park, Bhavnagar Dist. and Pariej Lake, Kheda District. Most of sightings are from Kachchh District. The maximum numbers of sightings are from the arid regions of Greater Rann of Kachchh (GRK) and Little Rann of Kachchh (LRK), with few records from nearby places like Surendranagar, Lakhtar and Sachana. In recent times, one breeding pair has been observed from Dahod in 2012 and another from Amreli in 2013.

Types of plumages

We have categorized plumages of Laggar Falcons in to 5 different types based on markings on underparts. We have taken all the data/photographs from available social media sources, personal communication with bird watchers, popular

birding websites like OBI (oriental bird images), INW (india nature watch), IBC (internet bird collection), BOG (birds of gujarat) etc, and where, for a few images, the front (showing underparts) was not visible, to categorize the plumage of such individuals, we have labeled them as 'UI' - unidentified. The plumage types are as follows:

Type 1 – Dark chocolaty plumage: underparts are completely or solid dark chocolaty colored, lacking any kind of streaking, barring etc., - juvenile plumage



Fig-5: Laggar of plumage type – 5

Type 2 – Heavily blotchy: dark brownish underparts but with some white seen, most likely juvenile or in transitional plumage from juvenile to adult

Type 3 – Less heavily blotchy: blotchy part is less and sparsely spaced with the white base of underparts being more visible than type – 2, most likely juvenile or in transitional plumage from juvenile to adult

Type 4 – Streaked adults: less streaked underparts on whitish/creamish base, unlike classic plain white underparts

Type 5 – Adults: classic adult plumage, with very less or no streaking on throat, chest and upper belly, markings on lower belly and thighs may vary in different individuals



Fig-6: Underwings pattern of an adult Laggar

Sightings of Laggar Falcon in Gujarat from 2005 till 2018 – photographic records

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Observer	Reference	Plumage-type
1	15 September 2005	GRK	Kevin Wang & Wojceich Dabrowka	OBI	2
2	3 February 2007	GRK	Sumit Sen	OBI	3
3	3 April 2007	Surendranagar	Nirav Bhatt	Author's sighting	5
4	8 October 2007	GRK	Jugal Tiwari	INW	4
5	1 February 2008	LRK	Girish Vaze	INW	2
6	2 November 2008	GRK	Jugal Tiwari	OBI	3
7	11 November 2008	LRK	Nirav Bhatt	Author's sighting	1
8	12 December 2008	GRK	Jugal Tiwari	OBI	1
9	9 January 2009	GRK	Erwin Collarets	OBI	3
10	18 November 2009	LRK	Arpit Deomurari	IBC	UI
11	28 November 2009	LRK	Nirav Bhatt	Author's sighting	1
12	20 December 2009	LRK	Prasad Ganpule	<i>pers. comm.</i>	1
13	29 June 2010	Thol Bird Sanc.	Falguna Shah	<i>pers. comm.</i>	1
14	24 November 2010	Bagodara	Kandarp Kathju	<i>pers. comm.</i>	2
15	21 March 2011	GRK	Ashok Chaudhary	Facebook	UI
16	1 January 2012	LRK	Vikram Potdar	INW	1
17	2 April 2012	Dahod	Zuzar Boriwala	<i>pers. comm.</i> / 4 chicks with adult observed	1
18	25 December 2012	Nal Sarovar	Vimal Dubbal	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI
19	18 November 2013	Velavadar	Devvratsinh Mori	Author's sighting	1
20	1 January 2014	Near Sanand	Malhar Raj Jingar	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI
21	8 February 2014	LRK	Devvratsinh Mori	Author's sighting	UI
22	1 November 2014	LRK	Gaurang Bagda	Facebook	5
23	13 November 2014	Dahod	Akil Kharodwala	<i>pers. comm.</i>	5
24	1 December 2014	GRK	Amish Parekh	Facebook	5
25	14 December 2014	LRK	Prasad Ganpule	<i>pers. comm.</i>	5
26	21 December 2014	LRK	Nirav Bhatt, Prasad Ganpule	Author's sighting	5
27	28, December 2014	LRK	Dhairya Dixit, Vivek Mansata, Hardik Bhatt	Author's sighting	UI
28	1 January 2015	Sachana	Vipul Trivedi	Facebook	1
29	1 January 2015	GRK	Dilipsinh Chudasama	Facebook	UI
30	2 February 2015	LRK	Devvratsinh Mori	Author's sighting	5
31	2 February 2015	LRK	Aditya Roy	Facebook	UI
32	8 February 2015	LRK	Satish Thayapurath	Facebook	UI
33	15 February 2015	LRK	Marco Valentini	IBC	UI
34	17 February 2015	LRK	R Messemeker	IBC	1
35	1 November 2015	Dwarka	Prasad Ganpule	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI
36	25 December 2015	LRK	Devvratsinh Mori	Author's sighting	3
37	31 December 2015	Kheda	Devvratsinh Mori	Author's sighting	UI
38	27 January 2016	Kheda	Divyesh Kelawala	Facebook	UI
39	1 February 2016	Dahod	Vivek Mansata	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI

Sr. No.	Date	Location	Observer	Reference	Plumage-type
40	7 February 2016	LRK	Anand Patel & Viren Desai	OBI	UI
41	1 May 2016	Dahod	Chacko Abraham	Facebook	4
42	1 September 2016	LRK	Dhairya Dixit, Jay Shah, Hardik Bhatt	Author's sighting	4
43	16 October 2016	Velavadar	Dhairya Dixit, Aseem Khadakkar, Falguna Shah	Author's sighting	1
44	14 November 2016	LRK	Falguna Shah	<i>pers. comm.</i>	1
45	1 January 2017	LRK	Kusahnkur Bhattacharyya	INW	3
46	9 January 2017	LRK	Bhavesh Shah	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI
47	2 December 2017	Dahod	Pragnesh Patel	Facebook	5
48	3 December 2017	Dahod	Saswat Mishra	BOG	5
49	16 December 2017	Kheda	Bhavesh Mengar	<i>pers. comm.</i>	2
50	24 December 2017	GRK	Mohit Aggarwal	eBird	2
51	26 December 2017	Velavadar	Kandarp Andharia	BOG	3
52	1 January 2018	Bagodara	Nirav Bhatt	Author's sighting/ mating observed	UI
53	1 January 2018	Velavadar	Shantilal Varu	Facebook	3
54	21 January 2018	Velavadar	Ankit Shukla	<i>pers. comm.</i>	UI
55	21 January 2018	LRK	Vimal Dubbal, Krutarth Chauhan, Chintu Panchal	<i>pers. comm.</i>	4
56	10 February 2018	Lakhtar	Nirav Bhatt	<i>Author's sighting</i>	3
57	01 March 2018	Dahod	Rushiraj Puwar	<i>pers. comm.</i>	2



Fig-7: Upperwings pattern of an adult Laggar

Observations

Out of 57 sightings reported in table, we have noted that the number of sightings have increased from 2014 onwards. The increase in number of sightings may or may not have any relation to the population of the Laggar Falcon in Gujarat. It is also possible that the same individual(s) may have been noted/photographed multiple times. We have not attempted to identify and separate each individual by plumage. We have also observed that the number of observers (bird watchers/photographers) have increased in last 4-5 years, which could be directly related to the more number of sightings reported.

However, we can conclude that sightings from some areas have been recorded almost annually, which suggests that it is still fairly regularly seen in areas like Dahod, Kheda, GRK and LRK.

Though sightings have been regular in certain areas as mentioned above, only 2 breeding pairs have been recorded in the past six years; in Dahod by Zuzar Boriwala and in Amreli by Viral Joshi (*pers. comm.*). We have not included Viral Joshi's sightings in the above table as unfortunately, they were not supported by photographic evidence. But, with the detailed description of the breeding pair given by him, we believe that the identification is correct. A breeding record from Mandav Vidi, Thangadh, Surendranagar District, has also been reported wherein a pair in courtship display with a nest was observed (Thoria 2008). One juvenile was being fed by an adult female in Dahod and one pair was observed mating by the first author (NB); both these observation support possibility of nesting very strongly. But, the notable point here is that Gujarat, despite being so close to Rajasthan in terms of distance as well as habitat, has very less number of breeding records from recent years. It is possible that breeding is overlooked since there has been no active search for nesting pairs here.

Month-wise sighting trend: It is evident that the maximum sightings are from the winter months – November to February. It has been observed that the maximum sightings are of juvenile birds. Adult Laggar Falcons have also been observed during November to February but the sightings are very few as compared to juvenile birds. In LRK and GRK (which has maximum number of sightings), only 2 sightings are from the period of March – October. So, mostly all sightings in regions where there are maximum sightings, are from the winter months. It is noteworthy that not a single breeding/ nesting pair has been recorded from LRK and GRK. Such a trend is more or less regular since past 10-15 years. This raises a few questions. Are winter sightings due to local migration? Or, is it that since the area is inaccessible in the monsoon, the breeding observations are missed (But this seems unlikely as the breeding period is from January – April, as given by Naoroji 2006)? Are the birds breeding in the vicinity of these areas and not actually in LRK and GRK and are thus overlooked?

Plumage-wise monthly sighting trend: We have noted that the juvenile – dark chocolaty, plumage type 1 – Laggar Falcon is sighted almost throughout the year, raising questions about the breeding period and/or moulting pattern of the species. Juveniles with heavy marking on underparts are observed from September to March, whereas juveniles with sparsely marked underparts are observed only during the wintering months from November to February. Our observations are not sufficient enough to study any details of moult in juvenile Laggar Falcons. Also, there could be some differences in the way in which we have classified the individual birds. The amount of streaking on underparts is subjective, especially for plumage type 2 and 3, and other observers can classify these individuals as immature or sub-adults. Adult Laggar Falcons have been observed throughout year except in the main monsoon months (July-August).

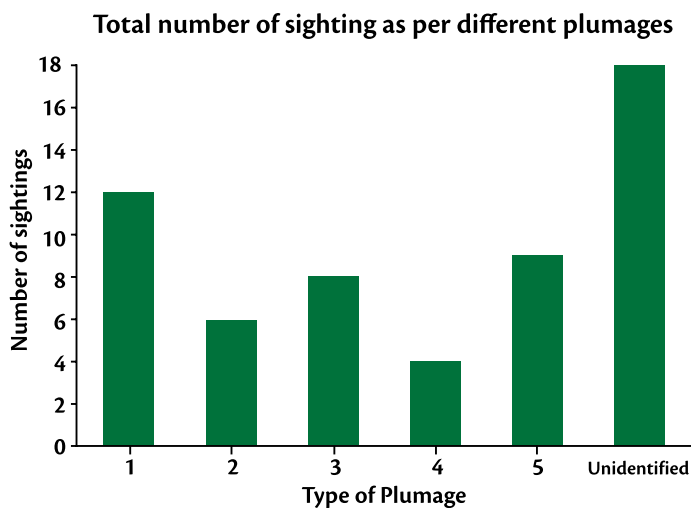
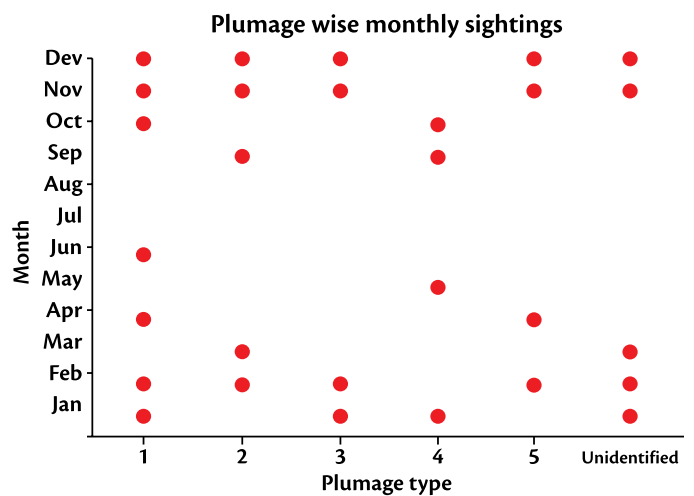
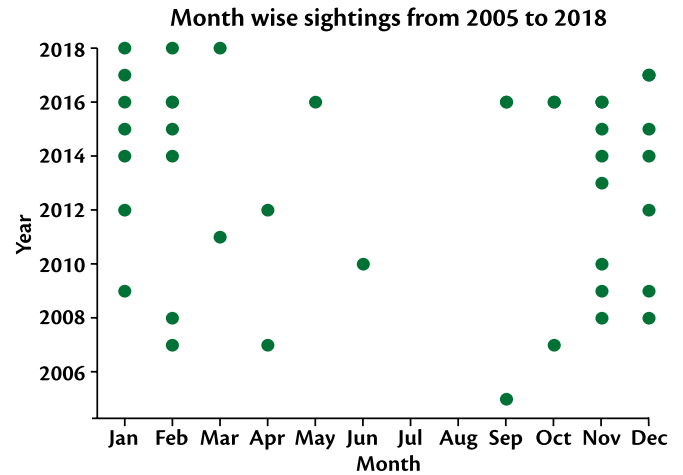


Fig-8: Laggar with a kill

Dhairya Dixit

Discussion

From the available data, we have tried to study the present distribution and population trend of Laggar Falcons and also the types of plumages seen in this species. It is very interesting

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that only three breeding pairs have been recorded in the last 14 years, which is an alarming observation for this species in Gujarat. Here, it should be noted that juveniles are sighted regularly in various parts of the state, which is a good sign and the population could be more or less stable. A detailed study of breeding of Laggar Falcon must be carried out to further monitor the actual population trend and other factors affecting breeding success and/or failures.



Dhairya Dixit

Fig-9: Laggar with a Common Quail kill



Devratsinh Mori

Fig-10: Laggar with a unidentified lark kill

Another interesting observation was that, the typical chocolaty plumaged birds (usually fresh juveniles) were observed almost throughout the year and we can see that the numbers of juvenile sightings are more than adults. This might be due to variation in duration of breeding, but such a large scale variation seems unlikely and hence, a detailed study of the moult of Laggar Falcon should be carried out.

The breeding period of the Laggar Falcon is from January to April, and the young fledge by April or early May (Naoroji 2006). In a recent study on the breeding of the Laggar Falcon in Karnataka, the young fledged in April (Rao & Adaki 2018). Thus, the sighting of juveniles with all dark underparts in December-February is most surprising and suggests that the breeding period may be extending into the monsoon season and/or starting from early winter or that some birds initiate to moult into adult-type plumage very late. But, this needs further study. It should be noted that birds of plumage-type 3 (with less blotchy underparts), juveniles or transitional plumaged birds, have been seen only in the winter months (November – February) till now in Gujarat. Naoroji (2006) states that 'the blotchy streaking on chocolate-brown underparts appears to be a variable trait of juvenile plumage' and also notes that 'uniform chocolate-brown underparts gradually disintegrate into patches and progressively narrower streaks over successive moults till the adult plumage is attained at three years'. However, in most large falcons, juveniles directly moult into adult-type plumage unlike in eagles (*Aquila* sp.) wherein there are distinct moults from juvenile into immature or sub-adult types. Thus, in Laggar Falcon, the juveniles would moult into adult-type plumage over a single moult. However, it is possible that young adults would show some streaks on underparts while older adults show all white underparts. But, again, this requires further study. A study of moult will also help to understand the food resources required for commencing such an energy consuming process like moulting and the moult could also be attributed to prey availability to different individual birds.

We have observed the Laggar Falcon hunting and feeding on a few occasions. We have observed two pairs of adult Laggar Falcons preying on dragonflies in September (by the second author) and an adult preying on an unidentified insect in December (by the first author). Three Laggar Falcons were observed consuming spiny-tailed lizards (*Saara hardwickii*). We had also witnessed a pair hunting a Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) – these observations are by the second author (DD). One bird was observed consuming a lark by the third author (DM). Collection of data on the prey base of the species during various months is required to understand the ecological significance and habitat preferences, which will help to protect the species, as it is resident in a limited geographic area, and restricted mainly to the Indian Subcontinent.

The data presented here can help in estimating the basic facts regarding the sightings and is useful in understanding the present distribution of the Laggar Falcon in Gujarat and gives

details regarding the plumages seen here in this species. It can be seen that the earlier status of 'fairly common' for the Laggar Falcon is no longer true and the species is now uncommon or rare in Gujarat. Whether there is a marked population decline or not needs further study. We recommend carrying out detailed and methodical studies to further understand the distribution, population trends and various plumages (especially moult), of this less studied and globally important falcon.

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Fig 11: Adult pair of Laggar - exhibiting sexual dimorphism, note dark head of male as compared to pale head of female

Dhairya Dixit

Sighting of Black Noddy from Porbandar: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat and a first photographic record from India

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Namrata Jadeja

On 7 August 2018, a Tuesday, my sister Devayaniba Vaghela and her 5-year-old son Harshavardhansinh were visiting Porbandar. At around 13:50 hrs, on the beach in front of Hotel Lord's Inn – the beach is locally known as 'chowpatty' (21° 37' 52" N, 69° 36' 31" E) - they saw an unusual bird perched on the sand. Since my nephew knows I am interested in birds, he asked his mother to photograph the bird and send the images to me. As per their observation, the bird looked quite tired and was unable to fly. My nephew approached quite close to it but still the bird did not fly but walked away a few steps. It is possible that the bird was either exhausted and fatigued or sick.

They duly forwarded the photos to me. However, I could not identify it. I forwarded the photos to Bhavesh Trivedi, who informed me that this was a noddy sp. (*Anous* sp.), but he was not sure of the identity of the bird. I, then shared the photos in a Whatsapp group. Devangbhai Kotecha and Pranavbhai Vaghasiya identified it as a Black Noddy (*Anous minutus*).

[The observers took four photos of this bird. All the four photos show a very dark noddy, with a brownish tinge in plumage, a pale band on the wing coverts is visible on folded wing, the bill is long, narrow and slender and looks longer than the length of head and it has a distinct white patch on forehead and white crown.

There are three species of noddy seen in India; the Black Noddy, Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*) and Lesser Noddy (*Anous tenuirostris*); the identification of these three species is quite challenging and all are quite similar with 'exceptional views and careful study needed in regional waters to separate Black Noddy from (especially) Lesser Noddy' (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

The Brown Noddy is the largest of the three noddies. It has dark brownish upperparts, short and heavy bill, restricted pale cap with white forehead, black lores and paler underwing lining. The Lesser

Noddy is small, with slim bill, pale grey lores, grey plumage and pale grey cap grading to evenly grey sides of face. The Black Noddy is also small in size, with very dark (blackish) plumage, long and thin straight bill, white forehead and cap contrasting with dark lores and black wing lining similar to rest of underparts (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Here, it can be seen that this individual is quite dark, but with a brownish tinge and the pale greater covert bar contrasts slightly with dark upperparts, which is possible due to extreme wear of plumage. The bill is very long and slender, and looks longer than head length. The overall dark plumage with long and slender bill is indicative of this being a Black Noddy. In the Oriental Bird Images website, few images of a Black Noddy in June 2017 from Hong Kong are posted, wherein the plumage looks very worn (dark brownish-black) and the bird shows a pale greater covert wing bar, and looks somewhat similar to what was observed here. However, since the identification of Black Noddy is quite difficult, we sent the images to Klaus Malling Olsen and Hadoram Shirihai, both very experienced with the species.

Klaus Malling Olsen replied (in litt., email dated 16 August 2018) that 'the very long, narrow and slender bill fits Black Noddy as well as genuine white forehead. The plumage is very dark, with a brown tinge, which appear with wear in noddies. The pale areas could be explained by extremely downworn feather parts, which is illustrated in Olsen & Larsson (1995)'. Hadoram Shirihai replied (in litt., email dated 18 August 2018) that 'I agree that it could be Black Noddy due to compact feel and long straight thin bill, but still it is difficult to be sure. It seems to me too pale and too brownish for Black (but may be an extremely worn bird?); the jizz and more dusky hue of plumage is pointing to Black Noddy, so 'possibly Black Noddy'.

For India, there are three previous records of Black Noddy; specimens were collected from near Lakshadweep Islands, west of Nicobars and a third from the mouth of the River Ganges (Praveen et al. 2014); the authors state that the record from the Ganges could be in Bangladesh and that this record is best treated as common for both India and Bangladesh. There are a few sight records from Sri Lanka, some of which could pertain to this species (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). De Silva (2011) states that the species is probably more common than records suggest. Thus, a few sightings from Sri Lanka are known. However, there are no sightings from the western coast of peninsular India. The regionally occurring subspecies is probably *worcesteri* but this requires confirmation (Praveen et al. 2014).

For this individual seen in Porbandar, Klaus Malling Olsen stated unequivocally that this was a Black Noddy while Hadoram Shirihai suggested that this was a 'possible' Black Noddy. Based on the

comments given by the two experts, we are inclined to treat this as a Black Noddy and accept this record from Porbandar as that of a Black Noddy with extremely worn plumage. The Black Noddy is not listed in the checklist of birds of Gujarat (Ganpule 2016) or in the first update to the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2017). Thus, this is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat. Also, this is the first photographic record from India and also a first sighting from the western coastline of the country.

We thank Hadoram Shirihai and Klaus Malling Olsen for helping with the identification. We are grateful to Praveen J. and Jaypalsinh Jadeja for their help – Eds]

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Sighting of Hen Harrier at Nal Sarovar: a first photographic record for Gujarat

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show only one sighting of the species from the state, which is from Velavadar National Park. I have seen and photographed a small group of 5 to 7 Hen Harriers in Tal Chappar Wildlife Sanctuary, Churu Dist., Rajasthan, in December 2012 and also learnt that they have been irregular winter visitors to the sanctuary over the last few years. Thus, I had seen the species earlier and was aware of the identification features to look for in this species.

On 1 April 2018, a Sunday, at around 10:40 hrs, while returning back from a routine bird watching trip in the outskirts of Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, I suddenly saw an unusual looking harrier sp. quartering quite low and flying fast towards me as I was walking around the boundary of a castor field. I got a bit curious seeing this bird, which appeared quite different to me at first glance. As it flew closer, I immediately noticed that it appeared a bit big and bulky and had short but broad wings. The facial appearance was owl-like, with paler markings and it looked quite different from a Montagu's or Pallid Harrier, which I have been observing closely for several years. This harrier seemed to be in search of prey and when it saw me, it immediately changed its course, flying towards the other side of the field. Before I could get my camera equipment and take any images, the bird flew quite fast over the field. I tried pursuing it to get some good images. Unfortunately, I managed to just take 3 flight images of the bird but luckily, managed to capture the under-wing markings, which are helpful in identification. I had already realized in the field that this harrier was quite unusual and was very keen to look at the images in detail to identify it. After reaching home, on

The Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) is an uncommon winter migrant in India, mainly wintering in the North-eastern states, and along the foothills of the Himalayas (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). It is not as widespread as the other wintering harriers like the Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrorous*), Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*) or the Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), which are fairly common and widely distributed in India. The Hen Harrier is also a passage migrant and widespread winter visitor to Nepal and Bhutan. It is a monotypic species and breeds throughout Europe, from northern Spain to the Russian Far East, and also in Central Asia (Orta *et al.* 2018).

For Gujarat, Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) mentions the Hen Harrier for Saurashtra but gives it as 'not common' and does not mention any specific sightings. Grimmett *et al.* (2011)

Hen Harrier...

a closer examination of the images, I realized that the bird clearly showed a prominent dark trailing edge to the wings, along with five barred visible primary fingers, a much broader but less pointed hand, and pale underparts with streaking on breast. These are some of the key features which were helpful in identifying this individual as a Hen Harrier (Forsman 2006, 2016).

To confirm the identification, I later wrote to Dick Forsman, who has done extensive field research on harriers and is considered to be an authority on birds of prey. Dick Forsman, after seeing all the three images, confirmed that the bird was indeed a juvenile Hen Harrier. I was overjoyed when I saw his email and later, was very happy to learn that this is probably the first photographic record of this species from Gujarat. I feel that this juvenile bird was probably a vagrant, which might have lost track during its return migration in April and turned up in Nal Sarovar.

[A study of the three photographs and the identification features mentioned here, along with the confirmation by Dick Forsman, leave no doubt that this is indeed a Hen Harrier. As stated, it appears to be a juvenile, and the plumage points to that.

Regarding its status in Gujarat, Naoroji (2006) gives a sight record from Velavadar National Park (NP) and shows a question mark for coastal Bhavnagar area. Since identification is difficult, it is likely to be overlooked though its presence in Velavadar NP has long been suspected by senior bird watchers here, who think it is a rare winter migrant to this area. There is another reliable sighting from Velavadar NP in January 2008 when a male Hen Harrier was seen by Frank Rheindt, James Eaton and Rob Hutchinson (of birdtour Asia) and the same was confirmed by James Eaton (in litt, by email). Ganpule (2016) gives it as a vagrant or rare winter visitor in

Gujarat, with most reports from Velavadar NP and isolated records from the Little and Greater Rann of Kachchh, and mentions a photographic record from near Rajkot. However, this photo record is of doubtful provenance and could not be verified. Thus, the present photographic record from Nal Sarovar is the first photographic record of the species from Gujarat – Eds]

Acknowledgements

I would like to specially thank Dick Forsman for his kind help in identifying the bird. I would also like to acknowledge the help of Nirav Bhatt in confirming the identification. A special thanks to Prasad Ganpule for his help in preparing this manuscript.

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Sighting of Large-billed Reed Warbler in Vansada National Park

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Pankaj Maheria

On 14 April 2017, we went to Vansada National Park (henceforth VNP), in Dangs, for birding with our friends Pragnesh Patel and Viren Desai, as it was a holiday. At that time, the deciduous forest of VNP is dry, almost brown-looking. The water level is too low and natural streams are almost dried out; so birds have to drink water from artificial waterholes made by the Forest Department. We chose to wait under the bushes



besides such a waterhole. In the afternoon, the movement of birds was less and only a few birds visited the waterhole. But, in the evening time (after around 16:30 hrs), the movement gradually increased and many birds visited the waterhole. We observed Black-naped Monarch (*Hypothymis azurea*), Orange-headed Thrush (*Zoothera citrina*), Ashy Drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Brown-cheeked Fulvetta (*Alcippe poioicephala*), Tawny-bellied Babbler (*Dumetia hyperythra*), Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*), Vigor's Sunbird (*Aethopyga siparaja vigorsii*), White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) etc. in this area. These birds came repeatedly, for four to five times, at the waterhole for drinking.

Here, we saw and photographed an *Acrocephalus* sp. warbler, which also came to drink from the waterhole. We took many photographs and initially identified it as a Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*). We uploaded these images on our website www.birdsofgujarat.co.in as a Blyth's Reed Warbler. Later, Prasad Ganpule saw these images and suspected that this individual could be a possible Large-billed Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus orinus*). He asked for higher resolution images for confirming the identification. Finally, it was confirmed as a Large-billed Reed Warbler. This is another photographic record from Gujarat; the earlier record was from Nalsarovar (Trivedi & Ganpule 2016). This is the first sighting for south Gujarat and VNP.

Large-billed Reed Warbler. Since the Large-billed Reed Warbler had been noted earlier in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary (Trivedi & Ganpule 2016), I was aware of the possibility of this being noted again in Gujarat.

However, the identification of Large-billed Reed Warbler is quite difficult and as explained in Trivedi & Ganpule (2016), it can be confused with Blyth's Reed Warbler as well as Clamorous Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus*). Here, Clamorous Reed Warbler could be eliminated based on the structure, face pattern and general plumage of this bird. For confirmation of the identification, I forwarded the images to Lars Svensson, who has considerable experience of the Large-billed Reed Warbler. He replied (in litt., email dated 19 July 2018) that 'I agree that it really looks like another Large-billed Reed Warbler. I have calculated that it had a bill length to skull of 18.8 mm, which exceeds what can be found in Blyth's Reed Warbler. Also, the tarsus seems to be 24.4 mm, clearly longer than in any Blyth's Reed Warbler. On top of these differences, one can note a fairly pale iris, also a sign of Large-billed Reed Warbler. On one of the images, we can see a long and rather straight middle claw, a final indication of Large-billed Reed Warbler. I think you can safely book it as *A. orinus*'. Thus, the identification was confirmed as a Large-billed Reed Warbler.



As stated by the authors, the earlier record of this species from Gujarat was from Nalsarovar. This sighting in April from VNP is quite interesting since it is from early summer. This record from VNP is indicative of the bird being either in late passage migration or a wintering bird which is late in going back to its breeding area. Not much is known about the migration route of the Large-billed Reed Warbler or of its wintering areas. Here, the main challenge is in the correct identification of the species since it can be easily confused with other *Acrocephalus* sp. Good photographs, from different angles, are required to confirm the identification. Many times, it is not possible to safely identify it in the field and unless measurements are taken, identification is difficult based on photographs. Only

[Many good images were taken by the observers, from different angles, of this individual. When I first saw these photos, I thought that though this bird was similar to a Blyth's Reed Warbler, it had a much longer and stronger bill than usually seen in a typical Blyth's Reed Warbler. The lower mandible was quite pale (looking orange-yellow in strong light) and had only a faint dark smudge near the tip when seen from other angles. Also, when observed closely, the claws on the middle toe and the hind toe were quite long. In addition, the tarsus looked longer than seen in a Blyth's Reed Warbler. Based on the above details, I suspected that this bird could be a possible

if the main features are visible and noted in photographs, can it be separated from Blyth's Reed Warbler. Fortunately, here, the observers took many good photographs of this individual and so the identification could be confirmed.

This is a significant record of the Large-billed Reed Warbler from VNP. It shows that the species could be occurring in other areas of Gujarat but is probably overlooked due to identification difficulties. More sightings will help in understanding the status and distribution of the Large-billed Reed Warbler in Gujarat.

I am very grateful to Lars Svensson for helping with the identification – Prasad Ganpule]

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Sighting of Barn Swallow of subspecies *tytleri* - a noteworthy record from Gujarat

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The Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), breeds in the Pakistan hills, Himalayas and Northeast India; it is a widespread winter visitor to most parts of the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). In the Indian Subcontinent, the most widespread and common subspecies of Barn Swallow are *H. r. rustica* and *H. r. gutturalis* (Ali & Ripley 2001). Adults have bright red forehead and throat, blue-black breast band and upperparts, and long tail streamers; underparts vary from white in *rustica* to pale creamy or white in *gutturalis*, whereas the subspecies *tytleri* has uniform rufous-chestnut underparts and narrow broken breast-band (Turner 2006). The subspecies *tytleri* breeds in south-central Siberia (River Yenisey, east to Yakutskaya), south to northern-inner Mongolia; it winters to eastern India and southeast Asia (Turner & Christie 2016). For India, winter records of this subspecies are limited to the northeastern states. The subspecies *saturata* also has rufous underparts, described as 'rusty-ochre', but it winters in southeast Asia and is not known to occur in India (Turner & Christie 2016). The situation is further complicated by the occurrence of intergrades, as there are areas of overlap in breeding territories wherein individuals with characteristics of two subspecies are known to occur. Hence, taxonomy is complicated.

We saw flocks of Barn Swallows at several places in north Gujarat during one of our field surveys in September 2010. Amongst the Barn Swallows perching on the roadside electric wires, we saw one swallow with dark rufous underparts on

24 September 2010, near Prantij town (23° 27' 0.17" N, 72° 49' 31.63" E), in Sabarkantha District. This bird, along with other swallows, was photographed, and based on the rufous underparts, was identified as a Barn Swallow, possibly of the subspecies *tytleri*. After six years, while examining our old photographs, we realized that it is important to get the identification confirmed from experts. Dr. Rebecca Safran and Dr. Elizabeth Scordato (*pers.comm.*, email dated 18 May 2016) opined that this individual was similar to a *tytleri*, but the possibility of a dark *gutturalis* (which sometimes includes *saturata*, which is rusty-ochre below) could not be ruled out. The phenotypically variable *gutturalis* has sometimes been divided into as many as four different subspecies throughout its range (Scordato & Safran 2014). Also, there is quite a bit of overlap in the color distributions between *gutturalis* and *tytleri*, with darker *gutturalis* the same color as paler *tytleri* (Dr. Elizabeth Scordato, *pers.comm.*, email dated 19 May 2016). Thus, without morphometric measurements, it is difficult to be sure. However, the darker forms of *gutturalis* breed in the Russian far-east, and are not known to winter in the Indian Subcontinent, and thus, this individual can be identified as a Barn Swallow of the *tytleri* subspecies.

Ali (1955) recorded two subspecies of Barn Swallow from Gujarat; *rustica* and *gutturalis*, and both were listed in the checklist of birds of Gujarat (Parasharya *et al.* 2004). The subspecies *tytleri* is known to occur only in north-eastern states of India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Turner & Christie 2016). It has not been reported west of West Bengal (Ali & Ripley 2001). Hence, this is an important record for western India as well as for Gujarat. Moreover, the first date of sighting of Barn Swallow during winter is also very important as Ali (1955) records its earliest arrival date as 27 October in Gujarat. The fact is that wintering birds arrive much earlier in Gujarat, and one of us (BMP, the second author) have seen them as early as the second week of July (in 1993) near Tarapur (22° 28' N, 72° 37' E), in Anand District, Gujarat.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dr. Rebecca Safran and Dr Elizabeth Scordato for helping with the identification. We are thankful to Prasad Ganpule for helping with the references.

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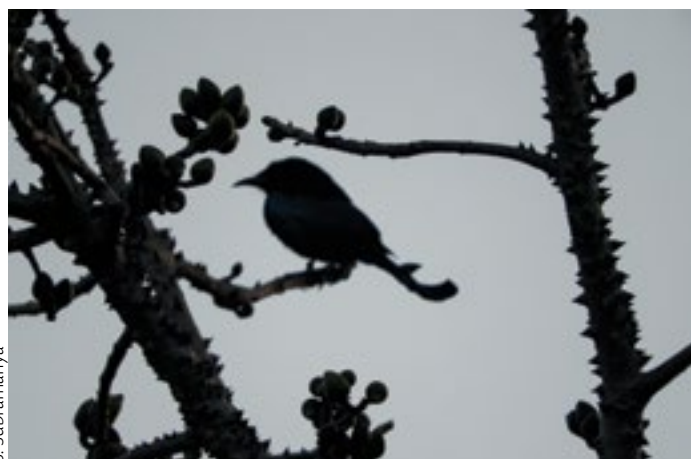
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Sighting of Spangled Drongo at Junagadh Agricultural University, Junagadh

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S. Subramanya

I happened to be at the Junagadh Agricultural University (JAU), Junagadh, between 23 January 2018 to 25 January 2018 to take part in an official meeting, and I did not want to miss-out on the birding opportunity that the University Campus offered. Even before I arrived at the Campus, I had picked my birding spots based on Google Earth, as JAU appeared to be a very poorly birded area as per data on the website 'eBird'. On 23rd morning, while I made my way towards a large constructed pond, the Pari Talav area (21° 29' 54.24" N, 70° 27' 2.70" E), which is surrounded by a garden and orchards, I observed a Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) pair making their way away from me. I watched over half a dozen Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*) milling around a Palmyra Palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) found around Pari Talav, and my attention was drawn to a pair of drongos (*Dicrurus* sp.) flying towards a Silk Cotton (*Bombax ceiba*), locally called as 'Shimalo'. The birds were readily identified as Spangled Drongo (*Dicrurus hottentottus*) pair, also known as Hair-crested Drongo, owing

to my familiarity with the species around Bangalore, where they are not uncommon. The Silk Cotton Tree on which the birds settled and started vocalizing, was back lit against the hazy morning sky. I could only manage a few silhouette photos of the pair whose largish head and bill that looks long and down-curved, besides a long, squarish tail-end, with lower outer-edges curved-up and inwards, were very characteristic to indicate and confirm the identity. The birds flew away as I tried to approach closer for a better photo.

The Spangled Drongo is known to be a resident in India, found from the Himalayan foothills to north-eastern India and down to southern India, encompassing both the Eastern and the Western Ghats, with a noticeable absence in western and north-western India – namely Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab (Ali & Ripley 1987, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

In Gujarat, it is given to be a rare resident in south Gujarat, with an isolated record from Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). Recent sightings of the species from the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary, Narmada District, by Viral Joshi on 9 March 2012 (Joshi 2012) and from Dangs, south Gujarat (Theba 2017) are known. Earlier, it had been noted in Mandvi, Kachchh, many times over a period of a few years from 1948 to 1966 (Himmatsinhji 1998).

It has also been sighted at Indroda Park near Gandhinagar, central Gujarat, in 1992 by Bakul Trivedi and Uday Vora in separate visits. (*pers. comm*)

In this regard, the present sighting assumes importance as the first record of the species in Saurashtra. This sighting indicates that there may be other locations where the species could possibly occur in the right season, coinciding with

Spangled Drongo....

the flowering of Silk Cotton and *Erythrina* sp. trees, as the Spangled Drongo is known to undertake widespread seasonal wanderings, governed largely by the flowering of these trees (Ali & Ripley 1987). The earlier sightings from Kachchh were also from December to February. Thus, the Spangled Drongo is a species that one should look for in the winter and early summer, coinciding with the flowering of *Bombax* and *Erythrina* sp. in other parts of Gujarat.

Ali & Ripley (1987) indicate that there appears to be a clinal variation in the populations of Spangled Drongo from south to north India based on size; the northern population being larger morphometrically (Vaurie 1955). Thus, it would be interesting to ascertain if the occurrence of the species in Gujarat is indeed due to the movement of birds from the Western Ghats population or whether it is a rare resident in the south Gujarat and is a local migrant to other parts of the state in the winter. Details of the sighting of this species with more photographs, along with other species seen during the visit, are available on 'eBird' at Subramanya (2018).

[The exact status of Spangled Drongo in Gujarat is not known; there are no recent photos of this species from Gujarat on popular birding websites. The records posted on 'eBird' from south Gujarat are not photographic records. It is possible that this is an overlooked species. This sighting from Saurashtra is important and indicates that it

could be a winter visitor to some well wooded parts of the state. Birders are urged to look for this species here – Eds]

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Sightings of tagged waders near Jamnagar

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On 25 April 2018, we were birding near coastal areas of Jamnagar in the morning hours. We noticed two Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) which were tagged and ringed. We took some images of the tagged birds. Further, we saw two more Bar-tailed Godwits, one Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), one Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) and two Crab Plovers (*Dromas ardeola*) which were also tagged and ringed. All the tagged birds looked healthy and were seen along with groups of their own species. Six out of eight tagged birds were in breeding plumage except the Kentish Plover and the Crab Plover. We were able to take photographs of mostly all of them along with tags which could be read in the photographs. But, we saw one other Crab Plover which was also tagged and ringed, for which we could not get good photos to read the tag details.

The photographs were sent to BNHS (Bombay Natural History Society) for getting the ringing and tagging details. Following

details were received from the BNHS:

Ringed done by - BNHS team

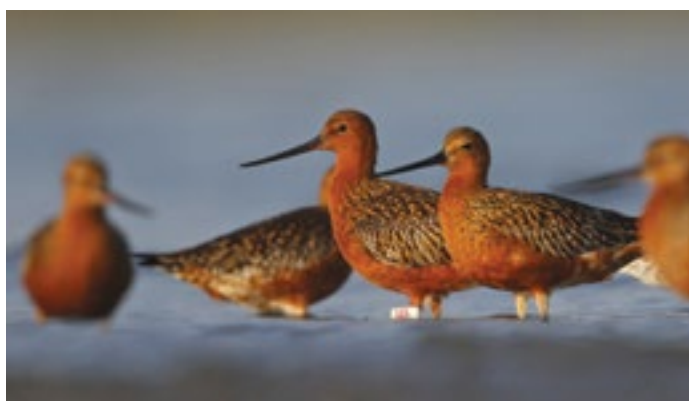
Madhumita Panigrahi, Scientist-A, Wetland Programme, BNHS

Dr. P. Sathiyaselvam, Scientist-C, Wetland Programme, BNHS



Details of tagged waders near Jamnagar

No.	Ring No.	Colour Flag No.	Species Name	Ringing Date	Ringing Place	Age
1	45854	J11	Bar-tailed Godwit	7 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
2	46001	OB0	Bar-tailed Godwit	11 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
3	45899	J49	Bar-tailed Godwit	11 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
4		J41	Bar-tailed Godwit	11 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
5	45896	J46	Bar-tailed Godwit	11 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
6	48856	OB7	Crab Plover	17 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Juvenile
7	178532	U01	Curlew Sandpiper	14 February 2018	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Adult
8	178484	V10	Kentish Plover	31 December 2017	Salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary	Juvenile



Finding place – Sachana, near Jamnagar

Finding date – 25 April 2018

Finding coordinates - within a radius of 100 mts from 22° 35' 00.5" N, 70° 11' 31.1" E.

As per the details we obtained, all the birds were tagged in salt pans near Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, Jamnagar. Seven individuals were tagged in February (two months before the sighting date) while the Kentish Plover was tagged five months before. All adult birds had developed into beautiful breeding plumages. Two of the tagged birds (Kentish Plover and Crab Plover) were juveniles when tagged and they were in non-breeding plumage. It was interesting to note that these tagged birds were in the same general area till early spring and the adults had moulted into breeding plumage. It indicates that they remain in the same area in the winter months and also till they migrate back to their breeding grounds. It will be interesting to see if these individuals come back again to this area in the next winter. Birders are urged to look for these tagged birds here in Jamnagar in the coming winter.

There have been recent sightings of tagged waders in Gujarat; a ringed Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*) was seen in Jamnagar recently (Mori 2018). Earlier, tagged Greater Sand Plover (*Charadrius leschenaultii*) and Lesser Sand Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) have been noted in Kachchh (Parekh 2017, Parekh & Parekh 2017). Thus, with increasing birders, we are obtaining more records of tagged birds from Gujarat.

Acknowledgments

We thank Madhumita Panigrahi, Dr. P. Sathiyaselvam and all other team members who work with wetlands programme, BNHS, for their help and support. We also appreciate the efforts of BNHS scientists who have done this work of tagging and ringing these birds to study migration routes, longevity and other biological aspects.

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Heart-spotted Woodpecker in central and south Gujarat

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Devvratsinh Mori

Woodpeckers (Picinae) in the Indian Subcontinent are represented by 32 species (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). In Gujarat, 10 species of woodpeckers have been recorded (Ganpule 2016). We present here the current status of Heart-spotted Woodpecker (*Hemicircus canente*) in central and south Gujarat, and also give a breeding record of the species from Vansada National Park in south Gujarat.

The Heart-spotted Woodpecker is distributed in Southeast Asia (Gorman 2014); occurring over a large area, but is thinly distributed from W to NE India and possibly Bangladesh, through Burma (Myanmar) to Thailand and Indochina. In India, the species is given as a resident in the Western Ghats, in western Madhya Pradesh, NE India and in the Eastern Ghats (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). In this species, both the males and females are predominantly black, with 'heart-shaped' black spots on white shoulders, with broad white scapular patches and barring of flight feathers. The female has buffy white forehead and crown while it is black with small white spots in males. The throat is whitish and the underparts are dark olive-grey. The tail is strikingly short and rounded. It is a monotypic species, with clinal increase in size from SW to NE India, with individual variation but no significant geographical pattern; as a result, proposed race *cordatus* (W India) is unsustainable (Winkler *et al.* 2018).

For Gujarat, Ali (1954) recorded the species in the Dang area, saying that it was not uncommon, but breeding season of the species was not noted. Monga & Naoroji (1984) saw it in the Rajpipla forests, extending its range north of the Tapti River. This species was recorded on transects on four occasions (involving seven individuals) in Purna Wildlife Sanctuary, in the Dangs (mean encounter rate: 0.11 birds/km, SD=0.23), where it was confined to moist deciduous forest with

bamboo (Trivedi & Soni 2006). In the recent Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016), it is given as an uncommon to rare resident in forest area from south to central Gujarat. Here, it is important to note that a majority of the previous sightings of the Heart-spotted Woodpecker are from the Dangs forests.



Pragnesh Patel

Observations

On the morning of 11 March 2017, we were in eastern part of Vansada National Park (henceforth VNP), at around at 08:00 hrs, when the third author [MB2] heard a call; it was not loud and was like a *kee.... kee.....krrrrrick*, and so we followed this call to see which bird was uttering it. We noticed a pair of adult Heart-spotted Woodpeckers high on the branches of a Teak tree (*Tectona grandis*). But the pair was quite far and also, was quite shy. The birds were changing branches every few seconds, and it was not easy to take proper photographs. Finally, we were able to take some record photos and both the birds were immediately identified as Heart-spotted Woodpeckers using the available field guide (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). The second author had seen it in VNP earlier (Bhatt 2010). The species was identified by the contrasting black and white pattern and a distinctively small body with a large wedge-shaped head, making them easy to identify, and the identification was further confirmed by its call. On the second day, at around 09:30 hrs, we visited the same place and saw four Heart-spotted Woodpeckers. But their activities were a bit different from the previous day. Two birds were looking like juveniles, with paler plumage. They were keeping near to

Sightings of Heart-spotted Woodpecker in central Gujarat

Sr. No.	Place	Date	No. of Birds	Observer (s)	Source
1	Dhobikuva Nursery, Pavagadh	2009	2	R. D. Jadeja	<i>pers. comm.</i>
2	Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary	20 March 2013	1	Mukesh Bhatt	Author's sighting

the female and it was feeding them insects collected from the tree trunk and branches. Thus, we were able to see recently fledged chicks along with the adults. We inferred that a nest would be present somewhere near this area. We also observed that the male Heart-spotted Woodpecker was very shy compared to the female.

We asked birdwatchers regarding the status of this species in Gujarat. We gathered records of the Heart-spotted Woodpecker from various locations in Gujarat from birding websites, social media websites (Facebook) and by personal communication with birdwatchers. While there were many sightings collected from VNP and Purna WLS, we found only two recent records from central Gujarat, which are given here. However, we noted that there are no photographs of this woodpecker from Gujarat on popular birding websites like Oriental Bird Images, Indianaturewatch and Internet Bird Collection. There are many sightings of the Heart-spotted Woodpecker from VNP and Purna WLS on the data sharing website 'eBird' which are not shared here.

Breeding Observation

On 26 November 2016, at around at 08:00 hrs, the fourth author [PP] visited VNP along with his friends Anand Patel and Viren Desai. At one place, Anand Patel heard a call and thought that it was the call of a Heart-spotted Woodpecker. So we went in the bush and started searching there. Suddenly, a female Heart-spotted Woodpecker was seen on a tree, but it was quite far. After watching it for quite a long time and waiting to see what it was doing, we observed that it was perching and flying from one branch to another branch for another fifteen minutes. After some time, we noted that it was perching continuously on a tree trunk. We observed that it went inside to its nest on the same trunk. The nest was highly camouflaged. The tree trunk in which the nest was situated was having some cream coloured, fungus-like material along with some insect nest like protrusions, which surrounded the nest. We could not identify what this was. The fourth author [PP] took some photographs from a distance and left the place. After that, the fourth author visited the same place till March 2017, and the nest and the birds were still there at same place, indicating nesting at this location. Thus, this was further evidence of this species nesting in VNP.

Discussion

From the above details, it can be seen that the Heart-spotted Woodpecker is fairly common in VNP and Purna WLS. The other locations where it has been noted are Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary and from Pavagadh. The historical records are also from these same areas. From these records, it is evident that it has been noted only in the forest areas of south and central Gujarat, and is absent in Saurashtra and Kachchh. It might be more common in central Gujarat than these sightings suggest but, we have been unable to get more records from this region. It is possible that local bird watchers may be having personal records but have not shared these widely.

The nesting and juveniles observed by us are evidence of the species breeding here, at least in VNP. It could be breeding in other areas also, but more details are needed to confirm this. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) gives the nesting season of the Heart-spotted Woodpecker to be from January to March. Winkler *et al.* (2018) state that the nesting season is from November to April. We observed fledged juveniles in early March, while a nest was observed in late November, which is similar to the nesting season described in the reference texts. Ali (1954) did not record the breeding of the species here, and there are no other observations/publications regarding its nesting here. Thus, these observations by us are important and confirm that the Heart-spotted Woodpecker breeds here.

Acknowledgements

We thank Raghuvirsinh D. Jadeja (ACF) for sharing the record from Pavagadh. We are grateful to all bird watchers who helped us in collecting records of this species from the state.

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Nesting of Lesser Goldenback in Vadodara

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Introduction

The Lesser Goldenback (*Dinopium benghalense*), which is also known as Black-rumped Flameback or Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker, is a resident species of the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, Ali 2002). It is a species of open, dry or wet tropical forest, plantation, well-wooded gardens, open woodland and is commonly found around human settlements, avoiding dense forests (Arlott 2014, Gorman 2014). It is a 'Least Concern' species as the population trend is stable (BirdLife International 2018). Though the male and female look similar, the adult male has a red crown and crest, while female has black fore-crown spotted with white, and red hind-crown and crest (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, Ali 2002, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012, Arlott 2014). In India, its nesting season is reported to be from February to August but varies with the weather conditions (Ali 2002, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The Lesser Goldenback is known to nest inside a tree cavity, which might be a natural hollow or the nest is entirely excavated by the birds. The eggs are laid simply on wood chips at the bottom of the nesting cavity. There are previous records of Lesser Goldenback occupying a nest box (Osmaston 1922) as well as nesting in an earthen wall (Singh 1997). Santharam (1997) has observed the species nesting in a cavity after usurping a nest of a Yellow-crowned Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos mahrattensis*), suggesting the opportunistic and readily adaptive behaviour of the bird.

The Lesser Goldenback is a common resident in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). We observed its nesting from mid-April to early June at Sayaji Baug (22° 18' 45.45" N, 73° 11' 22.34" E), located in Vadodara city, Gujarat.

Observations

From 15 April 2018 to 25 April 2018, we observed that three Lesser Goldenback were frequently involved in chasing each other early in the morning, accompanied by squeaky calls in between, which seemed to be their pre-breeding behaviour. They would occasionally peck on the trunks of trees amid the chase, called 'drumming', attracting a mate and claiming territory. After the courtship rituals, the pair selected a nesting cavity in the trunk of *Mitragyna parviflora* tree - 'Kalam' or 'Kalo Kadamb' in Gujarati - (22° 19' 02.39" N, 73° 11' 16.38" E) in a vertical hollow created by a fallen branch growing out of the main trunk. The opening was carved out wide by the pair as per their requirement. The height of the tree was 15.8 mts, canopy cover 34.7%, dbh 1.61 mts and nest-hole height was 8.7 mts. The eggs were probably laid around 4 May 2018, as the female was seen in the cavity for many hours for the first time. On 15 May 2018, we could observe the male and female frequently making visits to the cavity, carrying food material to feed the hatchlings. We used to observe the cavity from 06:00 – 08:00 hrs and 17:00 – 18:00 hrs daily, because this was the time during which the pair was observed to be very actively involved in caring for the young ones. In early morning of 21 May 2018, two juveniles were seen peeping out of the cavity while their parents took turns to guard the cavity one after the other. The female was seen coming down on to the ground and collecting ants to feed the young ones. After feeding, she sat in the cavity. After sometime, the male came with food, gave a call, after which the female came out and then fed the young. Both the parents were observed guarding the cavity. The juveniles were slightly duller than the parents. The nestlings fledged but remained inside the cavity and finally on 4 June 2018, both the juveniles left the nest.

Discussion

Though the Lesser Goldenback is a widely distributed species, the nesting and breeding of the species has not been studied in great detail. We observed that the incubation period here was probably around 11 days, which agrees with the previous observations made in Konkan, Maharashtra (Katdare *et al.* 2006). Ali & Ripley (2001) give the incubation period as 'undetermined' while Winkler & Christie (2018) give it as 17-19 days. But here, our observation of an incubation period of around 11 days was shorter than what is given in the reference texts and similar to the observations made in Maharashtra.



Female feeding young ones



Female guarding the cavity while the male was out collecting food



Male feeding the young ones

The fledging period here was around 20 days, when the chicks left the nest and were seen flying short distances. The fledging period for the species is around 3 weeks (Winkler & Christie 2018). The fledging period observed by us was similar to what is given in the reference texts.

No data is available on the breeding success of this species. Here, we observed that the breeding was successful and both the chicks fledged. It is also interesting to note that the species is thriving in a populated city like Vadodara.

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Short Birding Notes



Probable nesting of Cream-coloured Courser at Nalsarovar

On 28 June 2018, at around 14:00 hrs, I was at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. I saw and photographed a juvenile Cream-colored Courser (*Cursorius cursor*), near an Indian Courser (*Cursorius coromandelicus*) group. The adult Indian Courser was mobbing this juvenile bird, which flew away a short distance. Adult Cream-coloured Coursers were not seen. The juvenile Cream-coloured Courser was identified by its pale sandy upperparts with faint barring, prominent white supercilium, grey patch on crown and buffy underparts. Though Ali & Ripley (1983) state that there is circumstantial evidence of the species breeding in Kachchh, there are no recent reports of it nesting in Gujarat. The Cream-coloured Courser is considered to be mainly a winter migrant to Kachchh, with isolated records elsewhere (Ganpule 2016). Thus, the sighting of a recently fledged juvenile in Nalsarovar in late June is indicative of its nesting here.

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Black Bittern in Rajkot

On 8 August 2018, I was bird watching in the outskirts of Rajkot, in an area with reeds. I was trying to get a good photo of Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*), which is known to occur in the area. It was late in the evening when I saw and photographed a Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*) flying over the reeds. I saw it fly away and was unable to see where it landed. It could be easily identified based on its size and plumage; the yellow neck stripe and black underparts were seen. According to senior birder Ashok Mashru, the Black Bittern has not been noted in Rajkot before and this was the first photographic record from this area.

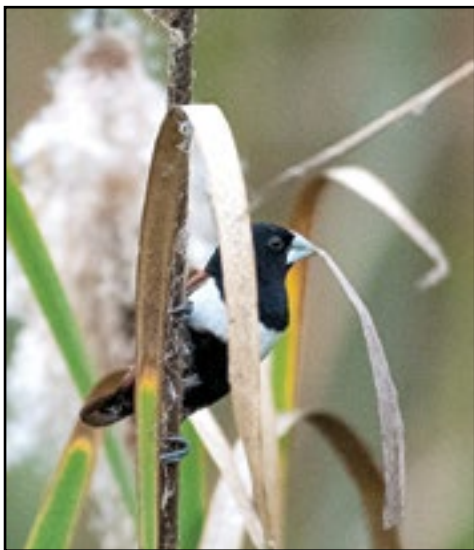
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Chestnut-tailed Starling near Rajkot

On 9 June 2018, early in the morning, Niravbhai Mehta, Bhavya Joshi and I visited Lalpari Lake, Rajkot. We saw and photographed a Chestnut-tailed starling (*Sturnia malabarica*) near the lake. It was perched on a *Prosopis juliflora*. We were surprised to see it here as it is not known to occur in Rajkot. Though there have been recent sightings from Hingolghadh, near Rajkot, this was the first time we had seen it here. According to senior birder Ashok Mashru, this species is quite rare in Rajkot area.

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Nesting of Black-headed Munia near Rajkot

On 22 July 2018, while birding at Baghi village, near Rajkot, we saw a pair of Black-headed Munia (*Lonchura malacca*) with nesting material in its beak in an area with dense reeds. After observing closely, we found the nest. We also searched nearby areas for more nests but did not find any. We took some photos and video. After a couple of days, we visited the place twice but not find the nest or the birds. It seemed that the birds had left the area. This nesting of Black-headed Munia was seen almost after 16 years in Rajkot area; successful breeding of the species was observed here by Ashok Mashru in 2001 (Mashru 2002). On enquiring, Ashok Mashru informed us that he had seen a single bird in 2015 and recently in February 2018 in Rajkot area but had not observed its breeding after 2001 & 2002. It is possible that the Black-headed Munia might be nesting in Rajkot area in small numbers regularly but has not been noted by birders since the nest is usually in very dense reeds.

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Grasshopper Warbler in Mehsana District

It was a pleasant afternoon on 5 November 2017 and we (Vaneet Daniel, C. B. Modhwadia and I) were on way to Bavlu village, District: Mehsana. We were watching some common birds when I saw some movement in the bushes of a farm, hardly 10-12 feet away from me. I stopped and tried to figure out which bird was moving in the bushes. The bird was very shy but I managed to get two photographs and did not see it again. I could not identify the bird at first sight. Later, with the help of experts, it was identified as a Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*), which is an uncommon/rare winter visitor to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). It was indeed a thrilling sighting for me. This was probably the first photographic record from north Gujarat.

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Eurasian Hobby at Pavagadh

On 3 June 2018, we saw three Eurasian Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*) at Pavagadh, near Vadodara. The birds were observed feeding on insects (mostly dragonflies) in mid-air from 09:45 to 13:30 hrs continuously without resting. We observed that the birds were in moult from juvenile to adult plumage, as fresh adult-type mantle feathers were observed along with worn juvenile feathers on the wings. There were two other sightings from Gujarat during this period; by Vikrant Vyas from Timbi Lake, near Vadodara, on 3 June 2018, by Vikrant Vyas and his friends at Wadhvana wetland near Dabhoi, Dist. Vadodara on 8 June 2018, and by Krunal Trivedi from Rajkot on 25 May 2018 (*pers. comm.*). These sightings are indicative of late spring migration and further observations would help to understand its distribution and migration in Gujarat during the spring migration season.

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Unusual nest of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher at Hingolghadh

On 27 July 2018, Raju Karia, Hiren Suba and I visited Hingolghadh Sanctuary in Rajkot District. While watching an Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*), I saw a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*) pair constantly perching on a wall and going into the side of a fiber/plastic toilet unit with food in its bill. On watching from far, we found a dump of leaves, twigs and plant material on a short notch in the fiber wall of the toilet, behind an aluminum bar. On observing closer, we saw three chicks, which were calling for food and the parent birds were feeding them. We took photographs of this unusual nest. The species usually makes a nest in crevices in rocky walls, in tree trunks, between boulders and among roots of upturned trees (Clement & Christie 2018). This nest suggests that the Tickell's Blue Flycatcher can adapt and make a nest in a manmade structure if it is suitable.

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Sighting of Orange-headed Thrush in Velavadar National Park

I visited Velavadar National Park, in Bhavanagar District, for a routine birding trip on 14 June 2018. I reached early, at 07:15 hrs. I immediately started bird watching in a patch full of grass near the main entrance gate. I saw an Orange-headed Thrush (*Zosterops citrina*) moving on the ground and photographed it with my mobile phone. It was quite fearless and allowed close approach. This was my first sighting of the species from Velavadar. I observed this bird for more than 15 minutes without any disturbance. It was not seen again later in the day. Though the Orange-headed Thrush is resident in south Gujarat and has been noted elsewhere in the state (Ganpule 2016), this is an important record for Velavadar National Park.

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Chestnut-tailed Starling at Hingolgadh Sanctuary

On 13 December 2017, I saw and photographed 6 Chestnut-tailed Starlings (*Sturnia malabarica*) at Hingolgadh Nature Education Sanctuary, Dist: Rajkot. I have been birding at this place since many years but I had never recorded this species here earlier. On 12 February 2017, 8 birds were seen near Bhichari village, Dist: Rajkot and on 4 January 2018, 3 birds were seen near Bhutnath Temple, Halenda (about 25 kms from Rajkot). The Chestnut-tailed Starling is resident in Gir forest and adjoining well wooded areas. These records of the species around Rajkot are suggestive of a wider distribution in Saurashtra.

I am thankful to Valkubhai Khacher for showing me this bird at Hingolgadh.

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Watercock near Vadodara

On 4 July 2018, I went to Timbi Lake, near Vadodara. I was passing through a marshy area and suddenly, I saw an unusual bird. I stopped my vehicle and went to see it. It was a male Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*). Due to the very less distance between us, it flew away. The very next day, I visited the same place again hoping to spot it. Surprisingly, it was foraging out in the open and I could get very good photographs. The Watercock is uncommon in Vadodara area and this sighting from Timbi Lake in the monsoon is not unexpected but shows that the species does occur in this area.

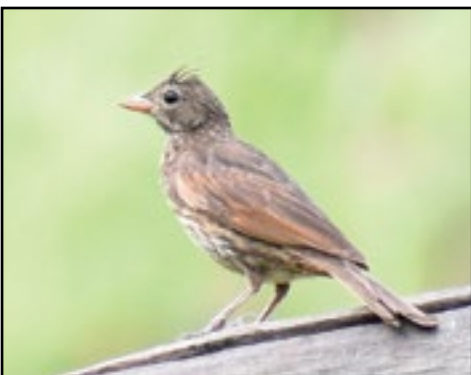
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Red Spurfowl in Dadra & Nagar Haveli

On 19 August 2016, a female Red Spurfowl (*Galloperdix spadicea*) was seen along with 2 chicks in Madhuban Dam forest area, Dadra & Nagar Haveli. It was probably nesting in the nearby bushes. Every monsoon, a family (adult pair with chicks) is noted in this same location. The Red Spurfowl is resident in south Gujarat and seen in the forest areas of the region. So, its occurrence in Dadra & Nagar Haveli is not unexpected. But, it is resident in this area and successfully breeding here.

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Crested Bunting near Bhavnagar

On 29 July 2018, my friend and I went for the birding to Malnath Hills, near Bhavnagar, in the evening at about 16:00 hrs. I saw a bird, slightly smaller than a Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) suddenly flew from one branch to another. I called my friend and we observed that, it was bathing in a small stream and then perched on a wooden fence near the stream. I took some photographs and identified it as a Crested Bunting (*Melophus lathamii*). It seemed to be a juvenile or immature bird, with dark plumage and streaking on mantle and underparts. The Crested Bunting is uncommon / rare in Bhavnagar District.

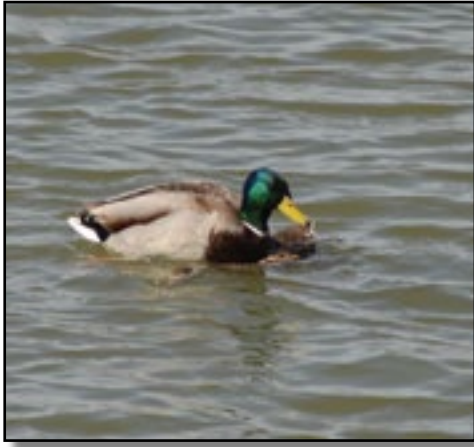
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Indian Pitta in Rajkot

On 26 May 2018, I visited Randarda Nursery, in the outskirts of Rajkot, along with my wife Parul and friends Akshay and Krunal Trivedi for birding. While roaming in the area near the nursery, Akshay and I heard the distinct call of an Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*). Its call is a distinct two-note whistle and very well known to us. I whistled back and the bird responded. After a few minutes, the Indian Pitta came out and we could see it well and take photographs. We spent almost two hours observing it. While the Indian Pitta is regularly seen in Hingolgadh Nature Education Sanctuary near Jasdan, in Rajkot District, this was the first time we had seen the species in Rajkot city.

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Mating of Mallard in the winter in Jamnagar

Reading the note on courtship behaviour and mating of Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) near Rajkot by Kunal Trivedi and Akshay Trivedi (Trivedi & Trivedi 2018) reminded me of my earlier and similar observations at Lakhota Lake, Jamnagar, in 2012. I was at the lake at around 13:00 hrs on 18 January 2012 for photography of a Mallard pair. At around 13:45 hrs, the pair did courtship display and I was able to take some photos. Again, in the afternoon on 25 January 2012, I saw courtship display and mating. Subsequently, I visited Lakhota Lake everyday but saw the courtship and mating a third time only on 9 February 2012. It was quite surprising that each time, I observed this behaviour in the afternoon at around 13:45 hrs. The post-mating behaviour was like other duck species. So, the courtship display and mating of Mallards in the winter was noted in Jamnagar too earlier.

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Bronze-winged Jacana in Rajkot

On 20 January 2018, I went to Randarada Lake, Rajkot, with Prakash Jani and Devang Kotecha, for birding. Due to adequate rain last year, the lake was full of water, with birds scattered around the lake. At one edge of the lake, when we were watching a group of 7 Pheasant-tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*), we were surprised to find 2 Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*) alongside this group. We took photos and confirmed the identification. On enquiring with Rajkot birdwatchers, Ashok Mashru said that he had sighted the species once at Randarda in 2002. Rajdeep Zala had observed this species at a river near Christ College in 2003. Recently, Rajubhai Karia has photographed a Bronze-winged Jacana, first on 5 May 2015 at Randarda, and it stayed there for about 10 days. So this species is not a frequent or regular visitor to Rajkot area.

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Red-tailed Shrike of karelini morph in Kachchh

On 24 August 2018, I was bird watching in the Khari River, near Bhuj, along with my son Nirav. The area is rocky, with small plants and some trees. At around 11:30 hrs, I saw a Red-tailed Shrike (*Lanius phoenicuroides*), of the *karelini* morph, perched on a dry shrub. It was identified as a *karelini* morph individual by its grey upperparts, white supercilium, prominent black eye mask, white underparts and red tail. The white wing patch was seen when it flew. Thus, the identification could be confirmed beyond any doubt. The bird perched on a heap of dry stems and was very active and hunting for prey. It was seen in the same area till about 17:00 hrs. I visited the same spot on the next day but could not find this bird. I also observed two other individuals of Red-tailed Shrikes in the next one week and the plumage of all the three birds was quite different. However, the other birds were of normal morph and this was the only bird of *karelini* morph seen here. The *karelini* morph Red-tailed Shrike has been noted only once before from Saurashtra (Ganpule 2017), and this is the first sighting of this morph from Kachchh.

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'Feather Frame'

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Night 'Czar': Nightjars (*Caprimulgus sp.*) are crepuscular and nocturnal, and supremely proficient to hunt in the hours of darkness. Skimming comfortably through the air, they prefer to feed from dusk to dawn and roost in the daylight hours. Though their large eyes are adapted to detect flying insects in near total darkness, their main armament is the mouth which has evolved for the purpose of catching insects in the air. They have specialized jaw mechanics which enables them to open their



mouths vertically as well as horizontally! Our state has six species of nightjars; Jungle Nightjar (*C. indicus*), European Nightjar (*C. europaeus*), Sykes's Nightjar (*C. mahrattensis*), Large-tailed Nightjar (*C. macrurus*), Indian Nightjar (*C. asiaticus*) and Savanna Nightjar (*C. affinis*).

Nightjars have a small bill with enormous gape. This gape is surrounded by a 'moustache', called rictal bristles. These highly tactile bristles are stiff, countered feathers which are an evolutionary adaptation, helpful while they are preying on insects in mid-air. In the photograph of the Indian Nightjar given here, I have tried to highlight the rictal bristles and the eyes, with the bird's perspective in mind and titled it as a 'czar' (a king) of the night.

Interestingly, the scientific name of nightjars carries a whimsical story. There was a very old and popular belief for many centuries in European countries that nightjars suckle milk from goats and other livestock during the night. This gave rise to the colloquial name 'goatsucker'. Thus, *Caprimulgus* literally means milker of goats!

Book Review

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Title: HANDBOOK OF WESTERN PALEARCTIC BIRDS (2 Volumes) Volume 1 - 648 pp, Volume 2 - 623 pp.

Author: Hadoram Shirihai & Lars Svensson

Publisher: Helm, London,
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. July 2018.

These two volumes, volume 1: larks to warblers, volume 2: flycatchers to buntings, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, are 'the' definitive guide to the passerines of the Western Palearctic (henceforth WP). The authors, Hadoram Shirihai and Lars Svensson are very well known and have vast experience, both in the field and in museum studies, and need no introduction. The two volumes are quite large in size – 29.7 x 21.0 cm (hard cover) and have a combined weight of 5.2 kgs and come with a cardboard cover in which both volumes can be kept. This project was 18 years in the making and the amount of information contained in it is unbelievable.

For both volumes, the format is an introduction, followed by a chapter on 'an approach to moult and ageing birds in the field', general references, one page list of passerine families (old and new), a brief presentation of passerine families (two-three pages), the main species accounts, vagrants to the region, checklist of WP – passerines, photo credits and indexes. The authors state in the introduction

that 'from the start, the aim of the project was to focus on identification and taxonomy, and to make it the most complete and profusely illustrated photographic guide to WP birds', and they have surely succeeded in that.

The taxonomic treatment followed by the authors is different from accepted world taxonomies like Clements/IOC or Howard & Moore, with the authors succinctly explaining in the introduction that they have tried to find a 'sensible balance' between the proposed latest taxonomic developments and obtaining solid proof from independent sources before proposed splits or other changes are accepted. This results in the acceptance of about 15% fewer subspecies compared to other checklists and handbooks, and it is stated that most of the assessment of subspecies taxonomy was done by Lars Svensson. This independent taxonomic approach is quite interesting; of interest for Indian birdwatchers is that the authors do not treat the Eastern Yellow Wagtail as a distinct species and it is lumped with Yellow Wagtail, stating that 'more research is desirable before the taxonomy is revised'. However, the Variable Wheatear is proposed to be split into three species – Blyth's Wheatear (*O. picata*), Gould's Wheatear (*O. capistrata*) and Strickland's Wheatear (*O. opistholeuca*), with the authors explaining in detail why this approach is taken but suggest that future research – especially molecular studies, be carried out. There are a few such instances wherein the taxonomy may seem

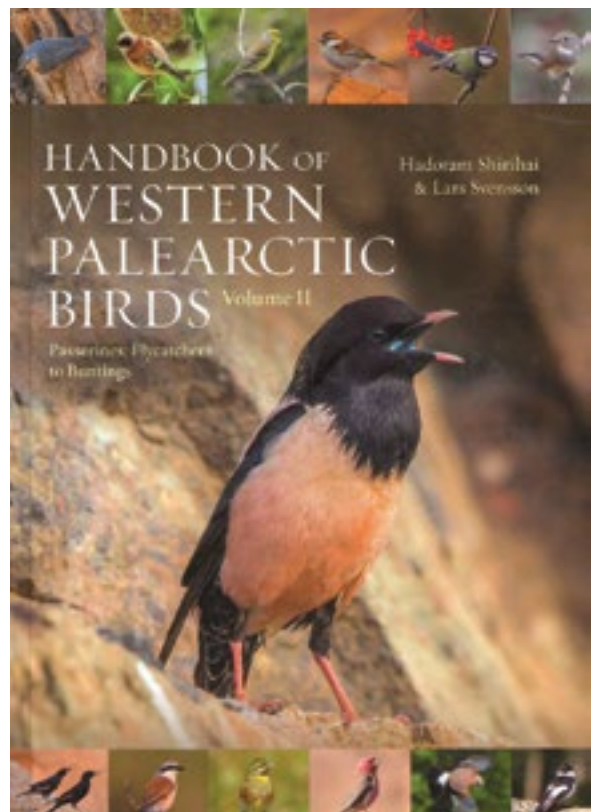
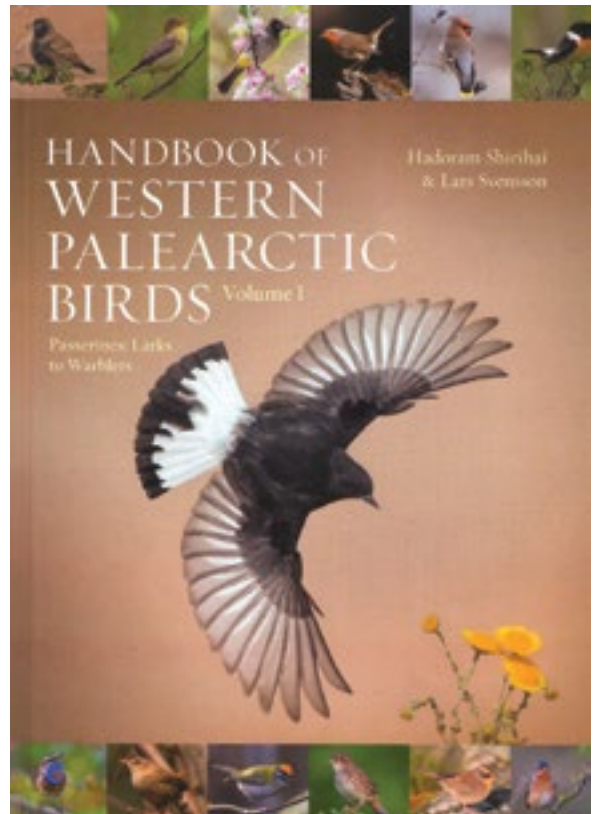
surprising, but the explanation given is quite thorough and convincing.

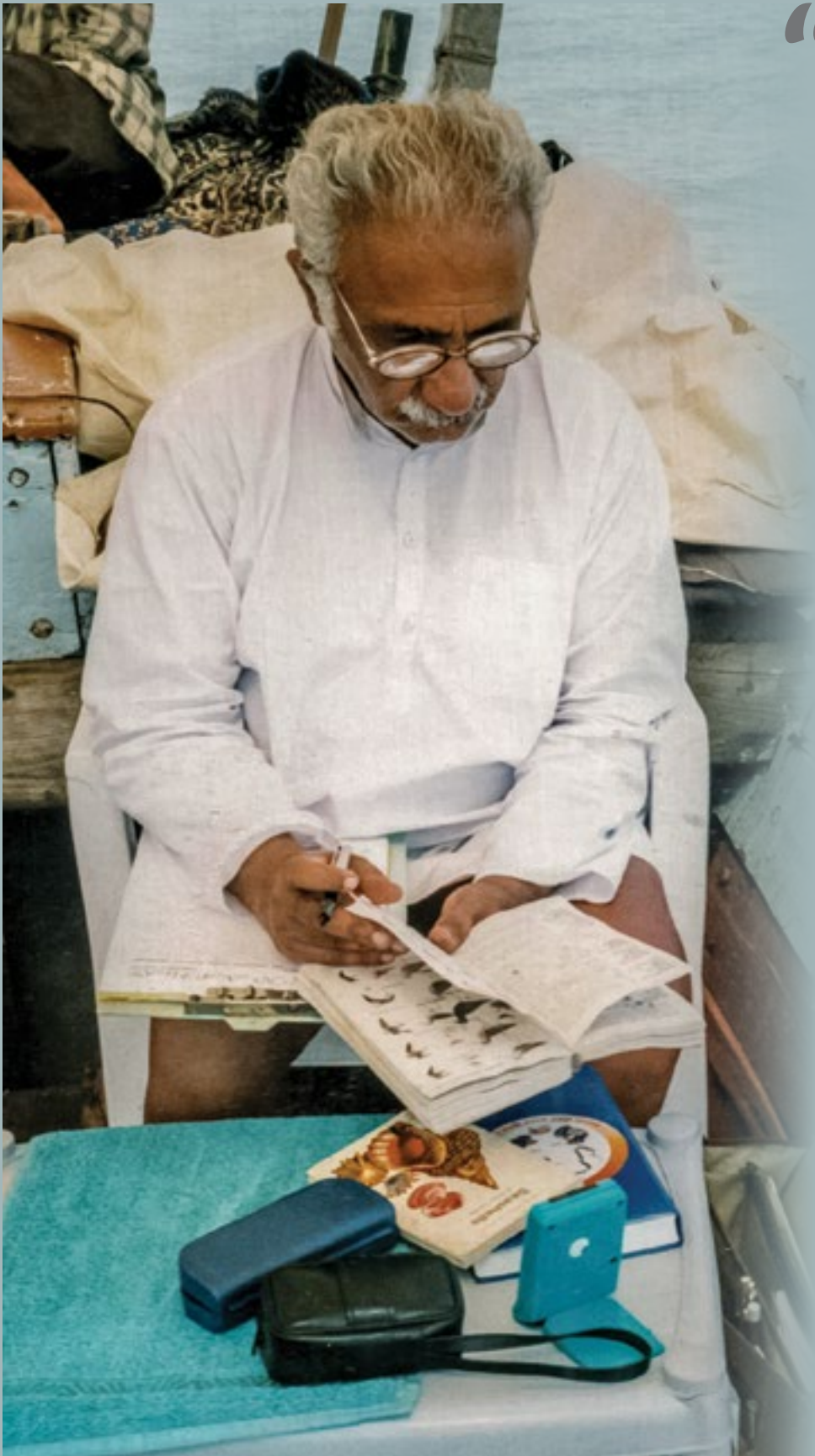
The main species accounts gives a distribution map, notes on identification, vocalisations, similar species, ageing and sexing, biometrics, geographical variation & range, taxonomic note and references, along with some superb and outstanding photographs, accompanied by short but very clear captions which help in the identification. Another very useful feature is the inclusion of photos of similar species side by side. For example, in the species account of Isabelline Shrike, photos of Turkestan Shrike (=Red-tailed Shrike), Red-backed Shrike and Brown Shrike are given alongside those of Isabelline Shrike, along with detailed captions, which are very useful in comparing the different species and their features for identification. And the detailing in this work can be noted by the fact that the species account of Isabelline Shrike has a total of 30 photos, giving the various subspecies, of different age and sex, and their separation from other similar shrike species.

Though the work is regarding WP birds, there is still a lot in it to keep the Indian birder interested. The species accounts of many difficult to identify birds like *Acrocephalus* sp. and *Phylloscopus* sp. warblers are very detailed and have some really superb photographs. Similarly, the species accounts of Shrikes (*Lanius* sp.) are also very good. For example the species account for Woodchat Shrike has 23 photographs! The text, combined with photographs (and captions), gives a complete picture regarding the identification of juvenile, female and male birds. The biometrics given for all species would be of use to ringers and though bird ringing is still at a nascent stage in India, these volumes will be useful for ringers too.

Reviewing a work which contains so much information would need months if not years to scrutinize, is almost impossible. This project is a milestone in bird books and is no doubt one of the most important publications in this decade. The photographs are of very high quality and this makes it very 'user-friendly', which would interest the amateur, the expert as well as ringers. The photographs are what make these volumes unique and spectacular. There are more than 5000 photos (with captions) in this work, contributed by more than 750 photographers, along with photos by the editorial team and the authors. The amount of work required for collecting the photographs itself is staggering. It is also very good to note that a lot of Indian photographers have contributed to this work and there are photos by many Indian bird photographers who are known to birders in India. Though the sheer size and weight makes it impossible to carry these books in the field, the amount of information contained in these two volumes means that it would have a permanent place in one's library as a last word on identification of passerines. Though these volumes are not available on online book sellers in India yet, they can be purchased from websites of the publisher ([https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/handbook-of-western-palearctic-](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/handbook-of-western-palearctic-birds-9780713645712/)

birds-9780713645712/) for GBP 150. Some other websites are offering these volumes at around GBP 120-130. Though these volumes are expensive when converted to Indian rupees, they are, without any doubt, worth it. These volumes would make an important and much required addition to every amateur or serious birders library and would be referred to for years to come on any identification query on passerines. □





“ For years, I had been hearing a pleasant bulbul like “Tchee- cheu, chyue - chyu - chu - chu - chu” in my Vashishtha orchard throughout the day and had attributed the call to the several White-eared Bulbuls in the area. It was only a couple of days back that I discovered that this call was that of the male Paradise flycatchers of which two are white and one chestnut. I know there are three of these exquisite birds in addition to the females because I have seen all three together on several occasions, “dive bombing” jungle crows. During the attacks only the harsh well known “trachh” is uttered. But it was on a lovely, picture post card perfect morning, that I had three flycatchers’ fledglings newly out of their host huddled together on a branch of a tree edging my front garden, and the white male was coming and going attending to them. His exuberance was overflowing in song as he frequently posed on a nearby conifer or swept into an apple tree. It was then I realised that what I had thought were calls of bulbuls, were the song of a bird which has to my mind never been credited with any distinctive utterance other than the harsh call. ”

- Lavkumar Khachar