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Status of Yellow Bittern, Cinnamon Bittern and Black Bittern in Ukai-Kakarapar irrigation command area, South Gujarat

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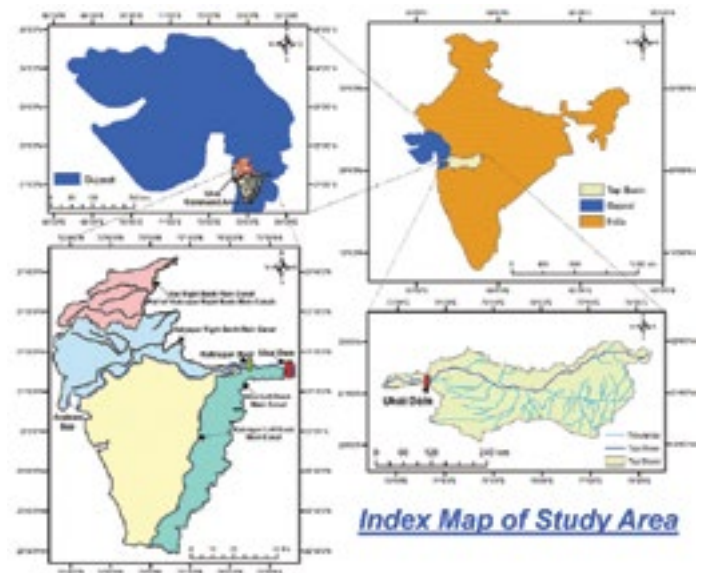
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Jayesh Joshi

Bitterns belong to subfamily *Botaurinae* of *Ardeidae*. *Botaurinae* consists of *Ixobrychus*, *Botaurus* and *Zeyherilus*. The genus *Ixobrychus* contains mainly small bittern species. Here, we give a report about the distribution and status of three species of bitterns, Yellow Bittern (*Ixobrychus sinensis*), Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*) and Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*), in the Ukai-Kakarapar irrigation command area in South Gujarat.

The Ukai-Kakarapar irrigation project, the second largest irrigation scheme of Gujarat, was constructed on the Tapi River in two stages in Tapi District of Gujarat. The first stage of the Kakarapar weir was constructed in 1954 at Kakarapar and the second stage of Ukai Dam was constructed in 1975 near Ukai. The project comprises of (i) Kakarapar Left Bank canal (KLBC), and Ukai Left Bank Canal (ULBC), which runs as a contour canal parallel to the Kakarapar Left Bank, and commands the area above the Kakarapar dam up to the river Par; (ii) Kakarapar Right Bank Canal commands the area between Tapi to Kim rivers, and Ukai Right Bank Canal (URBC), which starts from the Kakarapar Right Bank Canal (KRBC) and commands the area between the rivers Kim and Narmada (Rao *et al.* 1997, Karodiya *et al.* 2014). The total command area of the project is 331557 ha. (Karodiya *et al.* 2014) and is spread over fourteen Talukas of five districts, namely Bharuch, Surat, Navsari, Valsad and Tapi in South Gujarat. Map 1 shows the entire irrigation area of the project (Sharma *et al.* 2016).



Habitat in the irrigation project area

Most of the canals were unlined in the earlier days as they were made 40 years ago. Once the water for irrigation was made available, the crop pattern changed and farmers preferred crops which gave higher returns i.e. sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) and other cash crops, and hence, the demand for water for irrigation also increased. The farmers started taking crops in all seasons, requiring irrigation throughout the year (Karodiya *et al.* 2014). More than twelve co-operative sugar mills are working in the area and sugarcane has become the one of major crops. Paddy (*Oryza sativa*), which requires water for irrigation at regular intervals, started to be sown in two seasons, summer and monsoon, and also became one of the major crops in the area.

The first author (JP) conducted an extensive survey in the URBC and adjoining places, which is his regular birding area. In most of the villages of URBC, besides the main village pond, natural and man-made streams exist, and there are small tanks in the fields, which are locally called 'sim talavadi'. The roads also have in-built drainages on both sides. All these ponds, streams and at some places, even the drainages, remain full of water throughout the year due to constant water supply from the dam. On account of easy availability of water, farmers of the area tend to irrigate their crops excessively. As a result, a huge volume of run-off water gets accumulated in the adjoining uncultivated or barren lands or flows to

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streams, lakes and drainages (Patel 2015). Seepage, percolation, overflow, cracking, and damaging of the earthen canal also adds to the volume of water. Waterlogged areas and wetlands are prevalent in most parts of the URBC command area, which could be due to perennial irrigation facilities provided for sugarcane cultivation, improper maintenance of field channels and inadequate drainage causing water stagnation and luxurious growth of hydrophytes and sedges. Plant species occurring on waterlogged and aquatic lands include *Typha angustata*, *Ipomoea aquatica* etc. (Rao *et al.* 1997). Due to this suitable environment, one of the major growths in the area is of *Typha angustata*. Most of *sim talavadi*, flooded barren lands, periphery of canals and drainages beside roads, are covered with dense or scattered perennial hydrophytes and this provides suitable habitat for bitterns. Very few villages of URBC, which lie at the end of the canal, do not have growths of *Typha angustata*. At some places, it is extremely dense and covers large areas e.g. more than 50 ha. at Ankalava (Hansot), more than 30 ha. at Bolav (Hansot), 30 ha. at Nangal (Ankleshwar) and more than 25 ha. at Adol (Ankleshwar).

The same geographical, agricultural and marshy conditions were found by the second author (YP) in his regular birding area of KRBC of Olpad and Choryasi, by the third author (BP) in many parts of Kamrej and Bardoli of KLBC, and by the fourth and fifth authors (MP & PK) in many parts of Navsari and Jalalpore of KLBC. We have received reports from other bird watchers that similar conditions are present in scattered areas in other parts of this region.

Bittern sightings

Reports of three species, Yellow Bittern, Cinnamon Bittern and Black Bittern, are given in two different tables. The first table contains Taluka-wise survey for distribution of these three species in URBC and adjoining areas by the first author (JP). His survey was in all 46 villages of Hansot, 30 villages of Ankleshwar, and 5 villages of Mangrol under URBC area, 19 villages of Olpad under KRBC, adjoining URBC.

The second table contains Taluka-wise sightings by other authors in total 79 villages of Olpad, Kamrej, Bardoli, Jalapore, Navsari and Surat city under command area of KRBC and KLBC. Olpad Taluka is under KRBC while other areas are under KLBC. These sightings were recorded during regular birding trips and were made without specific surveys. The sightings were spread over the last five years and were recorded in all seasons.

Yellow Bittern

Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show only isolated records for Yellow Bittern for Gujarat. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) mention

it as a breeding visitor in western Gujarat (i.e. some parts of Kachchh). However, both these texts do not show any records for South Gujarat. According to Ganpule (2016), it is an uncommon breeding migrant, seen in many areas of Saurashtra and scattered elsewhere in the state, and is relatively the most common bittern in Gujarat.



Jugal Patel



Jugal Patel

Distribution and density

Table 1: Taluka-wise summary for Yellow Bittern observed by the first author (JP)

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Percentage
1	Hansot	46	37	80.43
2	Ankleshwar	30	25	82.75
3	Olpad	19	15	78.94
4	Mangrol	5	3	60.00
	Total	100	80	80.00

Thus, Yellow Bittern was found in 80 % villages of the area in URBC and adjoining area during surveys by JP.

As given in Table 2, the species was sighted in 13 villages of Olpad, 5 villages of Surat outskirts area, 29 villages of Kamrej,

8 villages of Jalalpore, 9 villages of Navsari, and 14 villages of Bardoli by the other authors.

Table 2: Taluka-wise summary for Yellow Bitterns observed by the other authors

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Observers
1	Olpad	13	13	Yogesh Patel
2	Surat City	5	5	Yogesh Patel
3	Kamrej	29	29	Bharat Patel
4	Jalapore	9	8	Minal Patel, Priyank Kapdi
5	Navsari	9	9	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel
6	Bardoli	14	14	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel

Generally, all species of bitterns are shy and secretive, and live in dense vegetation. We could see only the birds which were perched on top of reeds or which were in flight. However, 20 birds at Sisodra, 14 at Mangrol, 13 at Adol and 12 at Untiyadra were seen within half an hour by JP in URBC during one visit. As mentioned earlier, the majority of villages of URBC and KRBC have more than one area of reeds or a long belt of reeds along the canal and road, which are most suitable habitats for the species. From these figures, we can get an idea about the density of the species here. Thus, the Yellow Bittern is widespread and common in the Ukai-Kakarapar irrigation project.

Status

Table 1 contains the results of the survey of hundred villages of URBC and nearby areas in all seasons, and multiple sightings were noted in most of the villages. The species was found only in the summer and monsoon, from mid-March till end of September, except on three occasions in URBC when it was seen in the winter. These sightings are as follows: three birds seen on 15 February 2018 at Untiyadra, where one individual was seen continuously for fifteen days; one bird at Kalam on 02 October 2017 and one bird at Moti Pardi, Mangrol on 26 January 2012. We intensively searched for the Yellow Bittern along with other bittern species during the winter for five years. However, the species was found in the winter only on three occasions as mentioned here. We also checked the possibility that it may be resident here but we did not find it during the non-breeding season, when it remains hidden in the thick vegetation at day time. *Typha angustata* is a perennial species in the area; however, it dries out for a month during

the winter at a number of places because the canals remained closed for one to two months from 2013 due to maintenance and other reasons. During this period, dried reed beds were burnt and destroyed many times by the villagers. Compared to summer sightings, these three sightings are very less, and hence it seems that the Yellow Bittern is mainly a summer visitor in the URBC area.

However, its status is still not clear in other areas of the project, especially southwards of Tapi. Table 2 contains records of other authors. It should be noted that these sightings were not a part of intensive surveys but are the result of sightings recorded during bird watching trips.

However, some records in winter are available. Minal Patel and Priyank Kapdi have seen the species in twelve villages (Table 2) and the sightings were made multiple times in most of the villages. Out of these, only two sightings of the species were in the winter. Almost no data of the species is available on popular website ‘eBird’ (accessed on 28 September 2018), probably due to the fact that very few birders of South Gujarat use the site. There are twelve records of the species southwards of Tapi and out of these, four records are from the winter; two records at Gaviyar (Surat), one at Navsari and one at Devsar (Bilimora). This data is insufficient to decide whether it is resident or migratory southwards of Tapi. Further research in the winter is required to know the true status of the species here.

Breeding

During May and June, we observed the birds chasing each other, circling in flight, calling, calling with stretched and inflated throat from top of trees when perched etc. Juveniles were observed during July - August. Hence, the species is definitely breeding here.

Conclusion

Overall, our conclusion is that Yellow Bittern is a widespread and common summer breeding visitor in URBC and considering the number of records southwards of Tapi, the species is probably a common breeding resident in other areas of the project.

Cinnamon Bittern

Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show it as a winter visitor around the Gulf of Khambhat and give one isolated record from Kachchh. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), in the distribution map, give it as resident in coastal South Gujarat, up to Khambhat, and also in Kachchh. Ganpule (2016) gives it as ‘uncommon monsoon/ breeding migrant; reported from Saurashtra and South Gujarat, and in suitable habitats locally all over the state’.

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Jugal Patel

Distribution and density

Table 3: Taluka-wise summary for Cinnamon Bittern observed by the first author (JP)

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Percentage
1	Hansot	46	36	78.26
2	Ankleshwar	30	25	83.33
3	Olpad	19	14	73.68
4	Mangrol	5	2	40.00
	Total	100	77	77.00

Thus, Cinnamon Bittern was found in 77 % villages of URBC and nearby areas surveyed; 21 birds at Sisodra, 15 at Mangrol, 12 at Adol, 12 at Rohid were seen within half hour in URBC. Thus, it is common in URBC and nearby areas.

As per details given in Table 4, the species was seen in 13 villages of Olpad, 5 villages of Surat outskirts, 29 villages of Kamrej, 8 villages of Jalalpore, 9 villages of Navsari and 11 villages of Bardoli. Hence, the species is wide spread and common in the Ukai-Kakarapar irrigation project. This species is less common than Yellow Bittern but more common than Black Bittern.

Status

During our surveys in URBC, this species was seen only in the summer and monsoon season, except on one occasion when it was found in the winter on 15 February 2018 at Untiyadra and it may be an exceptional sighting. The species was found from March till end of September. No data is available on 'eBird' regarding sightings of Cinnamon Bittern in the winter. Hence, Cinnamon Bittern is a widespread summer visitor in this area. However, further study is required, especially southwards of Tapi in the winter for knowing its true status here.

Table 4: Taluka-wise summary for Cinnamon Bittern observed by the other authors

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Observers
1	Olpad	13	13	Yogesh Patel
2	Surat City	5	5	Yogesh Patel
3	Kamrej	29	29	Bharat Patel
4	Jalalpore	9	8	MInal Patel, Priyank Kapdi
6	Navsari	9	9	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel
7	Bardoli	14	11	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel



Jugal Patel

Breeding

Males were seen in characteristic breeding plumage like orange bill, purple-red lores and bright legs. Courtship and territorial behavior was observed, which was similar to Yellow Bitterns. Chicks and juveniles were observed during August to September. Thus, it breeds here.

Conclusion

Cinnamon Bittern is a common summer breeding visitor in the entire command area of the project.

Black Bittern

Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show only isolated records of Black Bittern from Gujarat while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) do not give any records from the state. The species was not recorded in Gujarat by Ali (1954). Ganpule (2016) mentioned it as 'uncommon/rare monsoon breeding migrant', with the

remark that it is probably more common than believed. Dr. B. M. Parasharya and others have been recording the breeding activity of Black Bittern, along with Yellow Bitterns and Cinnamon Bitterns in Kheda and Anand Districts since 1990 (Mistry 2016). A recent sighting from Daman is also known (Mishra & Patel 2017).



Jugal Patel

Distribution and Density

Table 5: Taluka-wise summary for Black Bittern observed by the first author (JP)

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Percentage
1	Hansot	46	25	54.34
2	Ankleshwar	30	23	76.66
3	Olpad	19	9	47.36
4	Mangrol	5	2	40.00
	Total	100	59	59.00

The species was found in 59 % of villages of URBC and nearby areas where surveys were conducted. It was seen in groups of three to four birds at a number of places. Thus, it is wide spread and common in the area of URBC.

As per details given in Table 6, the species was sighted in four villages of Olpad under KRBC, three villages of Surat outskirts and Jalalpore, each under KLBC. Piyush Patel has reported it from Majigam, Chikhli (*pers. comm.*, verbally). One sight record by Trupti Vyas in October from Navsari was obtained from 'eBird'. Hence, the species is widespread but not very common, at least in KRBC. Further study is required in areas like Kamrej, Bardoli etc. from where no sighting has been reported yet.

Table 6: Taluka-wise summary for Black Bittern observed by the other authors

Sr.	Name of Taluka	Villages visited	Villages where it was found	Observers
1	Olpad	13	4	Yogesh Patel
2	Surat City	5	3	Yogesh Patel
3	Kamrej	29	0	Bharat Patel
4	Jalalpore	9	3	Minal Patel, Priyank Kapdi
6	Navsari	9	0	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel
7	Bardoli	14	0	Bharat Patel, Minal Patel

Status

This species was seen only in the summer and monsoon season. It was found from March up to second half of October. None of us has observed it in the winter. However, Mukesh Bhatt has reported one Black Bittern on 27 January 2016 on Olpad-Surat Road (*pers. comm.*, verbally) and this is the only record in the winter from entire South Gujarat in the recent past.

Breeding

Juveniles were observed from June to September. Two chicks were seen on 4 June 2015 at Untiyadra by the first author, which was the earliest nesting observation, and juveniles, which still had hair on their crown, were observed on 2 October 2018 at Parvat, which was the last observation of juveniles. It seems that its breeding starts earlier compared to Yellow Bittern and Cinnamon Bittern, and is spread over four months.

Thus, the Black Bittern is a widespread and common summer breeding visitor in URBC area and widespread and not very common summer breeding visitor in KRBC and KLBC. However, this species is less common when compared to Yellow Bittern and Cinnamon Bittern.

Habits

Generally, it is believed that bitterns are crepuscular, shy and secretive, and usually hide in thick vegetation. We have observed all these species on top of reeds, foraging, feeding chicks, and in flight in day time from morning to noon and two hours before sunset. Yellow Bitterns and Cinnamon Bitterns were occasionally observed on shrubs or trees of medium height while Black Bittern was frequently observed

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on trees. Yellow Bitterns and Cinnamon Bitterns were seen calling from top of reeds for five to ten minutes but Black Bittern was never seen calling in the open. We observed that Cinnamon Bittern continues calling even in the presence of humans. Probably, bitterns are bold during the breeding season. However, the first author (JP) has observed Yellow Bittern foraging during day time, without being concerned by his presence, and also in the non-breeding season (winter) for fifteen days at Untiyadra in February. All these three bitterns were breeding at the same place in a mixed colony. Once, in 2013, the first author (JP) observed a breeding colony of Cinnamon Bitterns in a 50 mts area, next to a colony of Yellow Bitterns in another 50 mts area and thereafter, a colony of Black Bitterns. This is quite unusual, and has not been reported from our state earlier.

Threats

Barren land is one of the major parts of reed beds in the area. In a number of places, especially in Hansot and Olpad, the barren land is converted into legal and illegal fish and shrimp farms. Further, these farms use crackers to keep away egrets and herons (*Egretta* sp. and *Ardea* sp.), which also affects nearby roosting and nesting of bitterns. These trends are increasing day by day and the government is allocating more and more land for these farms. Farming of Eucalyptus (*E. globulus*) for paper mills is also increasing in this uncultivated and less fertile land. *Sim talavadies*, which is one of the main parts of reeds, are now-a-days hardly used for irrigation, and are being cleaned and dug under various government schemes like 'Sujalam Suflam' or even illegally by the clay mafia, which is a major threat. Very deep lakes are not useful for *Typha* species and we have noticed that at most places, these *sim talavadies* were dug deeper than approved by the government for the purpose of illegal sale of soil by the contractors. The removal of the reed beds along road and canal sides by farmers and government agencies due to various reasons is also one of the major threats. Sugarcane is a major crop and in earlier days, at the time of it harvesting, labourers used sugarcane leaves for bundling stalks of sugarcane. Now, labourers harvest the crop and use *Typha angustata* for bundling the stalks. Due to this extensive cutting, reed beds are destroyed in some areas, especially in Bardoli and Kamrej. Water level in the dam and irregularity in irrigation schedule has also affected the habitat. All unlined canals are now being repaired with concrete, which has reduced seepage and percolation of water, and this will affect reed beds in the long term. The continued presence and nesting of bitterns in this area depends on the reed beds and necessary action is required to be taken to conserve this habitat in this region.

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Jugal Patel

Observations on breeding of Coppersmith Barbet in Rajkot

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Ashok Mashru

The Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) breeds in a Mulberry Tree (*Morus* sp.), locally known as *setur*, exactly in front of my house since the last four years, from 2015 to 2018. This tree is 15 years old and some branches have become dried or dead, and so it is easy for birds to dig/excavate a hole in the tree. I present here observations on the breeding biology of the species. My observations were not the result of a special study, but are the outcome of my routine while passing by the tree. Sometimes, the different calls of the birds attracted me to come outside and observe it. I have taken all the photographs from my house or from the street.

Observations

Nesting hole

The Coppersmith Barbet usually selects a place for digging a hole where the wood has become dead and soft. It never uses the same hole in the next season, though it used the same tree from 2015 to 2018. However, the same hole is used for the second brood. Every year, it chooses a new place and starts digging. The month in which it starts digging is variable. In 2015, I observed it in mid-February. The digging continued till the first week of May. Such a long duration of digging might be due to the hardness of wood. In another year, digging started in October and was completed in around 20 days. During initial digging, it sometimes changes the location too. After completion, breeding activities do not start. Rather, the hole is used to roost at night. Most of the time pair appears to have been formed before making of the nest. I often see one bird sitting nearby when the other is digging in the wood. We can assume, both the birds are taking turns in the process.

Breeding activity starts in March-April, when one bird calls from the top of the tree continuously while another bird gives final touches to the nest hole. The entry if oblong, need not be horizontal and is sometimes slanted. While nest hole is prepared by one bird, the other bird constantly gives a territorial call.

Courtship

The pair calls simultaneously in the tree. Then, as a part of courtship ritual, the male flutters wings with a sharp call, and with a fruit in its bill, goes near to the female to attract her. This happens in the tree or on the electric wire. This may be repeated 2-3 times before mating. In case of the second brood, the female sits in the nest hole while the male approaches with fruit, flutters wings and peeps in the nest hole and offers food to the female. I have observed that it flutters wings, peeps but does not give fruit to the female. It goes on the wire and calls, where the female comes and then copulates. I have observed another type of courtship behavior, of bill locking and stretching one another in the nest hole, the details of which have been given earlier (Mashru 2017). In May 2016 I saw that one chick had come out of the nest and the parent was feeding it on the wire while another chick was in the nest hole. During this, I saw courtship behavior and mating. This behavior might be primarily because I saw courtship behavior and nesting for the second brood in the same nest hole, which was successful each time. In another observation during the second brood, one bird went inside and the sound of digging was heard. I observed this 2 to 3 times. Since the nest was ready and digging was not required, I assumed that this was not digging but it might have been a tapping sound made for communication, just like what is observed in some woodpecker sp. But, this requires further study.

Incubation

Mostly the Coppersmith Barbet lays a clutch of two eggs. When incubation starts, one bird incubates constantly while the other bird calls frequently, perching on a higher branch of the tree or on an electric wire. Both parents perform incubation duties one after the other. But, at night, one bird remains in the nest while the other roosts in a nearby tree. The incubation period is around 20 days.

Feeding of chicks

I have observed that the calling stops as soon as the eggs hatch. Both the male and female feed the chicks constantly. Initially, I observed, once or twice, small larvae were fed but mostly, they feed figs (fruits of *Ficus* sp. – preferably of *pipar* tree, *Ficus tseila*). I have not observed them feeding any

Coppersmith Barbet...

Mulberry fruit (*setur*), even though it is readily available in the nesting tree. The reason for the selection of only *pipar* fruit might be because the fruit possibly contains insects in it, which is helpful for fulfilling the protein requirements of the chicks. Usually, the birds fill up their bills with 3 to 4 fruits at a time. They perch in the upper part of the tree and call, look around for any predators, and then go inside the nest for feeding. When the chick grows, it peeps outside the nest hole and seizes food. I observed a few times that the parent birds fed the peeping chicks by hovering. Sometimes, the parents take loose excreta in their bills while going to fetch food while sometimes, specially visit for it. The parents always fly away with the excreta and never drop it near the nest hole. When the chicks grow, they start to utter a constant and faint call from inside the nest. Further, the chick keeps its bill and face outside the nest hole, and remains vigilant. After about one month of feeding, the chicks grow and are ready to leave the nest. When chicks leave the nest and take short flights, they usually perch on the tree or on the wire nearby. The chicks call continuously and are still fed by the parents outside the nest.



Ashok Mashru

Nest protection

During the incubation and fledgling period, one bird remains in the vicinity of the nest to provide protection from Five-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii*) and other birds like House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). I have observed that when a squirrel approaches for eating the ripened *setur* fruits, the barbet attacks it with sharp 'zzz...' call and speed. The battle may continue for some time as the squirrel ignores its attack while eating the fruits. But ultimately, it leaves the tree. I have observed Coppersmith Barbet attacking a squirrel in the month of August, even after the nesting was completed. This might

be due to the bird protecting its territory. Another interesting observation was of a Red-vented Bulbul, which had built its nest in the adjoining tree; when the Coppersmith Barbet came with food in its bill to feed the chicks, the Red-vented Bulbul attacked it. But, the barbet used to raise its feathers and adopt an aggressive posture. This happened many times. Once, I observed that the Red-vented Bulbul took a piece of fruit from the barbet's bill.

Roosting

During the nesting season, after preparing the nest hole, one of the birds may roost inside at night. After chicks fly off from the nest, one bird continues to roost in the nest hole for many days. Mostly, evening roosting time is fixed. I have observed that it comes at around dusk time, after sunset on the wire above, calls in a low voice and goes inside the nest hole.



Ashok Mashru

Special observation

On 14 March 2018, the parents started feeding the chicks. On 23 March 2018, I saw one bird going in the nest with food in its bill in the evening. On the morning of 24 March 2018, I saw that one chick was dead and hanging on the nest hole entrance. The parent bird was moving around, coming and going near the nest hole. I touched the dead chick and it fell down. After some time, the parent bird went inside the nest several times and pulled out a second dead chick up to the entrance of the nest hole. The parent bird came near the nest hole many times but did not perch there. After about an hour, I again touched the dead chick with a stick and it too fell down. I did not see any sign of attack on the chick as its body was intact, without any injuries. I could not judge the reason for the death of chicks in the nest. It seemed that the chicks were not predated upon but the reason for death could be poisoning or maybe some other cause. After a few hours, the

pair started calling from the tree continuously. After that, they had a second brood, which was successful.

Discussion

The Coppersmith Barbet pair usually starts nesting in February, which continues up to June, excluding nest digging period. When it starts breeding, it does not get disturbed by other factors. It breeds successfully, with two clutches in same nesting hole each year. In my four years of observations, it was successful and fledged chicks in 7 out of 8 nesting attempts, for a success rate of 87.5%. The pair double brooded in all the four years, which is known for the species (Short *et al.* 2018). The Coppersmith Barbet is aggressive in protecting its nest and chicks, with the pair chasing away squirrels and other birds. Though observed only once, the stealing or attempted stealing of fruits from the barbets by Red-vented Bulbul is intriguing and is suggestive of kleptoparasitism by the bulbul and requires further study.



Ashok Mashru

It was observed that even though the nest hole was excavated much before the breeding period, it was used for roosting. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that the species roosts in holes which are not used for nesting. But here, the same hole was used for roosting as well as nesting. In 2018, after the nesting period was over, two birds (probably the same pair) were seen roosting in two different holes, one of which was used for nesting this year and the other was used for nesting in the previous year. Thus, the birds do use the same holes for nesting as well as roosting.

Another interesting observation was that of the removal of dead chicks from the nest by the parents and then using the same nest hole again. Though the bird could not remove the

dead chicks completely from the nest hole, it did drag it from the hole till the entrance. It could not push it completely out of the hole, possibly since the position was such that it could not exert enough pull to get the chicks out. For both the chicks, it was observed that the parent bird dragged it up to the nest entrance. It was surprising that the parent birds used the same nest hole for the second brood and it was successful. The removal of dead chick(s) from the nest hole has been observed before in Southeast Asia in Singapore (Hung Bun 2007, Lim 2011), and from Malaysia (MWP 2015). In all these observations, the parent bird removed the dead chick(s) from the nest hole and took it away in its beak elsewhere. Here, the bird was not successful in completely removing the dead chicks from the nest, possibly because the chicks had grown up and were too heavy to be carried or the bird could not position itself to remove the dead chick successfully. Though this behaviour had been documented earlier, it has not been described in the reference texts. An interesting question here is why would the parent birds use the same nest when they were unsuccessful in the first attempt? But, it was noted that the second brood was successful in the same nest.

The details presented here offer new insights into the breeding biology of the Coppersmith Barbet. These indicate that the species usually double broods, and has a good breeding success rate here. The observations regarding interspecific competition between the Coppersmith Barbet and Red-vented Bulbul, removal of dead chicks from the nest hole, incubation and fledging period etc. require more study.

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Water Pipit in Kachchh

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Jaysukh Parekh

On 8 January 2017, my son Nirav and I were travelling near Sarado-Dhandh area, Banni region, Kachchh, for bird photography. Suddenly, from a distance, I saw birds in a group, foraging between small plants growing around the water's edge. When I got closer and checked from my car, I was happy and surprised to see a large group of Water Pipits (*Anthus spinoletta*). In an area of about one sq. km, there were more than one hundred birds in different groups. They were readily identified by their plumage, thin pointed bill, streaking on the underparts etc. I took many photographs and confirmed the identification.

The habitat was near a lake, in a muddy area with very small plants and some grass. The birds were feeding from the plants directly and some from the ground, while sometimes, from small wet muddy areas between the plants. The birds were walking very fast during foraging. They were in groups of 20 to 25 individuals. They were standing occasionally when foraging, mainly when there was unusual noise or disturbance. When disturbed, they all would fly quickly one by one or in a group and would land some 15 to 20 meters away. They would restart feeding immediately. Sometimes Grey Wagtails (*Motacilla cinerea*) or Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava*) would feed with them. From a distance, it was difficult to differentiate them from Water Pipits. The Water Pipits were looking smaller and little bulky as compared to the wagtails. It was very tough to detect the moving birds between small plants. Unlike other pipit sp., Water Pipits flew very high and fast when disturbed. On 9 January 2018, the next day, we visited the same place but not a single bird was seen there. But on 10 January 2018, I again saw about 100 Water Pipits in the same area. The birds could have shifted to other nearby areas for feeding. There are large areas with similar habitat around the Dhandh (lake) in Banni. I visited the area with bird watchers Ashok Mashru, Gaurang

Bagda and others on 27 January 2017 and the Water Pipits were again seen in very good numbers.

The subspecies seen in our region is *Anthus spinoletta blakistoni* and the birds seen here were similar to what has been described in the reference texts for this subspecies (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). There were some very dark plumaged birds seen along with the Water Pipits, which were identified later as Buff-bellied Pipits (*Anthus rubescens*) (Ganpule *et al.* 2017).

In the next winter (2017-2018), I visited the same place in November 2017, but Water Pipits were not found like the previous year. Only a few birds were seen in mid-December. This time, there were Greater Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) in large numbers, which were foraging in the same area and from the same plants. Surprisingly, the larks were not seen in such large numbers the previous year. It is possible due to very less rain in that area, the Water Pipits were not noted like the previous year. But, a few individuals were seen and photographed in the same location in this winter too.

[For Gujarat, there is only one isolated record of the Water Pipit given for Kachchh in Grimmett *et al.* (2011), while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) show it as a winter visitor to northern India, but do not include Gujarat in the distribution map. The earlier and first record of Water Pipit from Kachchh, and Gujarat, is of a few individuals noted near Fulay, Kachchh, in February and March 2007 (Sørensen & Tiwari 2009). However, Ali (1955) wrote that he had seen a few pipits, near Viramgam, on 18 March 1946, with heavily streaked underparts, which suggested Water Pipits, but no specimens were collected. Recently, Water Pipits were also noted in the Little Rann of Kachchh (Ganpule 2017). Based on these sightings and previous published records, it seems that the Water Pipit is fairly regularly seen in Kachchh. It can be said that the species is an uncommon but regular winter visitor, at least to the desert areas of Kachchh.

Regarding the subspecies seen here, according to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), *A. s. blakistoni* is seen in our region. Ganpule (2017) reported a Water Pipit of the *coutellii* subspecies from the Little Rann of Kachchh. Three subspecies are recognized – the nominate *A. s. spinoletta*, *A. s. coutellii* and *A. s. blakistoni* (Tyler 2018). However, Shirihai & Svensson (2018) give only two subspecies, *A. s. spinoletta* and *A. s. coutellii*, stating that *coutellii* and *blakistoni* are inseparable by plumage and only differ very slightly in some measurements with extensive overlap. The details of the subspecies occurring here can be confirmed by trapping and measuring a few individuals, though, if we follow Tyler (2018), occurrence of both *coutellii* and *blakistoni* are likely – Eds]

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Sykes's Short-toed Lark in Gujarat

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The Greater Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) is a polytypic species, breeding from Europe to Central Asia and north-west China. The subspecies *longipennis*, which breeds in Ukraine, N Caucasus and Iran, east to W Mongolia and NW China (Xinjiang), winters mainly in South Asia (de Juana *et al.* 2018). For India, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that in the north-west, the wintering *longipennis* is somewhat paler overall and small billed than the subspecies *dukhunensis*, which winters mostly in the south and east of the country and which has more heavily streaked rufescent upperparts and brighter rufous-buff breast sides.

The Greater Shorter Lark of the subspecies *dukhunensis* is now treated as a distinct species, called the Eastern Short-toed Lark, Mongolian Short-toed Lark or Sykes's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella dukhunensis*) (de Jauna *et al.* 2018). The Greater Short-toed Lark remains a polytypic species while the Sykes's Short-toed Lark (the name used here henceforth) is treated as monotypic. Molecular studies found that the Sykes's Short-toed Lark is a sister species to Hume's Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella acutirostris*) rather than the Greater Short-toed

Lark (Alström *et al.* 2013). Further, the differences in plumage, longer wings, deeper or shorter bill and different song and call led to the Sykes's Short-toed Lark being accepted as a distinct species; breeding from Tibet, north and central China and Mongolia, and Transbaikalia and wintering in South and East Asia (de Juana *et al.* 2018). Shirihai & Svensson (2018) also accept this split and state that '*dukhunensis* is best treated as a separate species'. This split was accepted in the recent India checklist too, which lists both the Greater Short-toed Lark and the Sykes's Short-toed Lark for the country (Praveen *et al.* 2018). For India, it is shown as a winter visitor to our country, south from south Gujarat, central India and West Bengal; mostly in entire Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and southern India (de Juana *et al.* 2018).

The Sykes's Short-toed Lark, though similar to the Greater Short-toed Lark, is described as having darker ochre-brown upperparts with darker streaks on mantle and scapulars, pale buff-white or pinkish-buff supercilium, breast and flanks distinctly washed rufous-buff and orange-straw bill with dark tip; juveniles are like adults, but with buff fringes to upperpart feathers and outer primaries with rounded tips. The call is said to be different from Greater Short-toed Lark - a soft, bouncing *heu-du-du-du*, a *tru-tu-tu-tu* and a *trup* or *trep* (de Jauna *et al.* 2018).

On 6 November 2016, I was birding in the eastern part of Little Rann of Kachchh, near Bajana, with Ashok Mashru and Manoj Finava. We saw a flock of around 15-20 Greater Short-toed Larks in the Rann and while photographing these birds, I noticed that one individual looked very rufous and different from the other birds. It had a heavily streaked mantle, rufous wash to entire upperparts, and also to the head and supercilium (which looked pale rufous behind the eye). It had

Short-toed Lark....

a rufous breast band, with light streaking on breast and faint patches on breast side, and a whitish belly. I identified it as a Sykes's Short-toed Lark based on these features.

For Gujarat, the range of Sykes's Short-toed Lark is shown to touch south Gujarat, but no records are shown for the state. As stated before, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) give the wintering range of Sykes's Short-toed Lark as mostly south and east India. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) also give it as mainly in south and east India. Ali (1954) collected specimens of only Greater Short-toed Lark from Gujarat, giving it as a common and abundant winter visitor, which is true even today.

However, there are two museum specimens of Sykes's Short-toed Lark from Gujarat, collected from Awha, in the Dangs, in October 1954, by E. M. Shull and currently housed in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH – skin 778685 and 778686). Thus, there are specimen records from south Gujarat. The above sighting from the Little Rann of Kachchh shows that it could be occurring in the desert and semi-desert areas of Kachchh and Saurashtra too and is perhaps overlooked since birdwatchers are not aware of the presence of this species in Gujarat. A careful scrutiny of images of Greater Short-toed Larks from Gujarat, posted on popular birding websites, is needed to see whether there are more records of the species from Gujarat.

Now, with the Sykes's Short-toed Lark treated as a distinct species and this treatment being widely accepted, this species should be included in the Gujarat checklist as and when

the taxonomy is updated. In absence of more data, it can be currently considered to be a rare winter migrant or a vagrant to Gujarat.

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Tagged Great Knot from Jamnagar

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We visited the saltpans near INS Valsura, Jamnagar, on 7 October 2018. There, we saw a group of 300 Great Knots (*Calidris tenuirostris*) and 70 Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*). We took a few photographs. After returning home and watching the photos on laptop, we found that one Great Knot was tagged with a yellow and black coloured flag, with 'VM' written on the flag on its left tibia. To get the tagging details, we forwarded the photos to Prasad Ganpule. After searching on the internet, he informed that the bird was probably tagged at Kamchatka Peninsula, located in the Russian Far East. However, to confirm this and obtain further details, he had forwarded the photos to Dmitry Dorofeev, who is a senior researcher in All-Russian Research Institute for Environmental Protection. His reply is as follows: 'Yes, this is our bird, from our banding place. Thank you very much for this resight! It is really great and this is the first re-sighting of our flags in India'.

The tagging details of this Great Knot as provided by Dmitry Dorofeev are as follows:

Date: 5 August 2017

Age: Juvenile

Mark on flag: VM

Place: Khairusova-Belogolovaya Estuary, Kamchatka, Russia (57.07° N, 156.69° E)

Usually, the birds tagged at this location are re-sighted in China, Japan, Korea and Australia as these countries fall under the East Asian–Australian Flyway. However, this was the first sighting from the Indian subcontinent. This bird might have flown more than 7500 kms to reach Jamnagar. It is also noteworthy that this is the second ever recovery/re-sighting from a region far south-west of the tagging place. On 20 January 2017, a Great Knot with a flag marked 'E1' was

photographed by Oscar Campbell at Khor-al Beida in the UAE (OSME 2017), which had established for the first time a migratory link between the Russian Far East and the Middle East. Thus, the present sighting by us from India further supports this migratory link and points to a few birds from the Russian Far East wintering in the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East.



Maulik Varu

The Great Knot is a regular winter visitor to the Gulf of Kachchh (Ganpule *et al.* 2011). It breeds in north-east Siberia, Russia, and winters mainly in Australia, but also throughout the coastline of South-East Asia and on the coasts of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. (Bird Life International 2018) This species has been moved from 'Vulnerable' to 'Endangered' owing to recent evidence showing a very rapid population decline caused by reclamation of non-breeding stopover grounds, and under the assumption that further proposed reclamation projects will cause additional declines in the future (Bird Life International 2018).



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Purple Heron preying on a Barred Buttonquail

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On 28 June 2018, at 17:30 hrs, we went for birding and photography in Navsari outskirts area, mainly looking for birds seen in the early monsoon season. We observed few egrets (*Egretta* sp.) in the grass near a wetland. We then spotted a Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) and later we saw through our binoculars that it was hunting and had caught a Barred Buttonquail (*Turnix suscitator*). We identified the buttonquail as a Barred Buttonquail as its typical plumage was seen and photographed. The Purple Heron was trying to swallow the buttonquail while we were watching it. Unfortunately, some cattle in the area disturbed it and the heron flew away in a

dense *Prosopis juliflora* patch. After that we could not find it again.

The Purple Heron has a varied diet with fish, small mammals, amphibians (frogs and salamanders), nestlings or small birds, reptiles (snakes, lizards and skinks), crustaceans, mollusks (water snails), and insects (*Hemiptera* sp., grasshoppers, dragonflies, bees, flies, spiders, beetles, and aquatic larvae) taken (Kushlan & Hancock 2005, Martínez-Vilalta *et al.* 2018). In India, stomach contents of 70 adult specimens of Purple Herons, collected in the Sundarbans, in West Bengal, showed that their diet mainly comprised of fish (57%), but reptiles

Purple Heron....

(21%), crustaceans (14%), and insects (8%) were also taken (Mukherjee 1971).



Minal Patel

In Bharatpur, Rajasthan, a Purple Heron was noted swallowing a full grown Jungle Babbler (*Turdoides striata*), which it had presumably killed (Johnson 1988). It has been noted feeding on a White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) also

(Patel 1998). Recently, the Purple Heron was seen hunting a lark (*Alaudidae*) species in Gujarat (Mistry & Patel 2018). The Purple Heron has not been noted feeding on a Barred Buttonquail and it is an addition to the already varied diet of this heron.

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Golden Eagle near Palanpur: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat

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Kailash Jani

The areas around Palanpur and Deesa, north Gujarat, are very good for bird watching. We regularly visit areas like Balaram-Ambaji Sanctuary, Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary, etc. and record the birds in these areas. These areas are especially good for raptors – we have recorded good numbers of Egyptian Vultures (*Neopron percnopterus*) and also other vulture species (*Gyps* sp.). Falcons (*Falco* sp.) and eagles (*Aquila* sp.) are also commonly seen in these areas.

On 7 December 2018, we had gone for birding at a 'panjrapole' (cattle enclosure) (41° 14' 24" N, 72° 35' 18" E), about 20 kms east of Palanpur, north Gujarat. While watching and photographing Egyptian Vultures, at around 09: 30 hrs, we saw an unidentified eagle perched on a *Butea monosperma*. Two House Crows (*Corvus splendens*) were harassing the eagle. We took some photographs. The third author took some photos with a DSLR camera and 200-500 mm lens, wherein the bird was seen more clearly in the photos.

After coming home, we tried to identify the eagle but were confused. We posted the photos of the eagle on the 'North

Gujarat Bird Watchers Group' on Whatsapp. Nirav Bhatt, who has studied raptors in Gujarat, replied that this was very interesting and requested all photos of this bird, especially of it in flight, to confirm the identification. I then realized that this could be something important and so we visited the area again with some zoology students of the college on 9 December 2018 at around 15:00 hrs. We saw the eagle sitting on the same tree at around 15:30 hrs, in front of Egyptian Vultures and some House Crows. We slowly approached it and took some photos of it perched. The crows and the vultures flew and with them, the eagle also flew away and we were able to get good photos showing the underwing. We shared all these photos with Nirav and he confirmed that this was a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). This was a very important sighting for our area and it is the first record of the species for Gujarat.

possible that a few individuals, especially juvenile and immature birds, could wander down to the plains in the winter.

As stated by the authors, this is the first record of a Golden Eagle from Gujarat. The species has not been mentioned in the recent Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016) or in the first update to the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2017). Thus, this is an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat and the southern-most sighting of the species from India – Eds]

Acknowledgements

We thank Nirav Bhatt for helping with the identification of this eagle.

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Kailash Jani

[The authors took very good photos of this eagle. All the characteristic features of the Golden Eagle are seen here. The underwings showed white bases to flight feathers, golden feathers on the nape were noted, the powerful legs and the large bill were seen. There remains no doubt that this was indeed a Golden Eagle. It was probably a juvenile or immature, as the tail showed a white base with dark terminal band. This individual was reported from this area a few more times and many birders were able to see and photograph it, at least till 14 December 2018. Good photographs of this individual were posted widely on the social media.

In India, the Golden Eagle is resident in the higher Himalayas (Grimmett et al. 2011); it is very rare in the plains and no records are shown for Peninsular India but it is resident in Baluchistan and adjoining areas in Pakistan, which are near to Rajasthan and Gujarat. There is a photographic record of a juvenile Golden Eagle from Desert National Park, Rajasthan, in December 2013 (Bharadwaj 2013). Thus, one record of the species from the desert areas of Rajasthan is known. The species is usually sedentary but northern populations are known to migrate when prey becomes scarce or inaccessible in the winter (Orta et al. 2018). Hence, it is



Kailash Jani

A juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker feeding another juvenile

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The Thick-billed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*) is small flowerpecker sp. seen widely in Gujarat. It visits our campus in Dharpur, Patan, regularly due to the presence of many fruit-bearing trees. Amongst these trees, the Cluster Fig tree (*Ficus racemosa*) is one of their favorites. In the fruiting season, we used to hear their call from the fig tree almost every day, during the mornings, afternoons and evenings.



Pankaj Maheria

On 11 April 2018, early in the morning, we heard a peculiar call from the fig tree, which we suspected belonged to juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpeckers. On closer observation, we spotted three Thick-billed Flowerpeckers; two of them were juveniles and one was an adult. We took some photographs and observed their behaviour. The juvenile birds looked like they had fairly recently come out of the nest, and had already started to peck and feed on fruits from the tree. The adult bird came to feed them with protein diet – mostly arthropod prey, at relatively long intervals. The juveniles continued feeding, foraging and kept calling for the adults the whole time.

One juvenile was more actively foraging, pecking and feeding in comparison to the other. The active juvenile was pecking at the fruit, puncturing and feeding from it. The other juvenile came to feed from same fruit. Both the juveniles perched side by side and fed from the same fruit turn by turn. Suddenly, we observed that one juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker was demanding – begging for food – from the other juvenile bird. To our surprise, the first juvenile actually fed the second juvenile with fruit mash! This was repeated several times. We took photographs and also recorded a video of this behaviour. We were quite amazed as we had never seen this behavior before. We observed their presence in same area for another five days in a row.

To us, this behaviour indicated the strong tendency of juveniles in copying the habits of adults. As they pecked

at the figs, the juveniles also replicated the feeding style of adults as they wiped their bills (which had seeds stuck on them) on a branch while feeding on fig mash and sometimes, probably also copying the feeding tendency of adults in one juvenile feeding another. This behavioral video can be seen on following link: <https://youtu.be/a2z4WCjxw6s>.

[This type of behaviour wherein one bird feeds another is called *allo-feeding*. *Allo-feeding* is a common social behaviour in birds and refers to food-sharing behaviour between adults, in parental care with the adults feeding nestlings, in courtship, incubation, etc.

The behaviour observed by the authors here is quite surprising and relates to *allo-feeding* amongst juveniles of one brood. This type of behaviour wherein one juvenile was seen feeding another juvenile has not been documented previously in the Thick-billed Flowerpecker. As stated by the authors, it could be the juveniles copying the habits of adults or it is possible that the dominant juvenile fed the other juvenile due to its begging behaviour. In African Pied Starlings (*Turdus bicolor*), sub-adults are the most active group in *allo-feeding*, since this may be a means of establishing bonds with other individuals, as in many cases, the participants had been members of the same breeding group in the previous season (Feare & Craig 1999). In a detailed study on *allo-feeding* in a tame population of Arabian Babblers (*Turdoides squamiceps*) in Israel, this behaviour was mainly considered as a display of dominance (Kalishov et al. 2005).

The observations by the authors here of a juvenile Thick-billed Flowerpecker feeding another juvenile need further study and it is not known if *allo-feeding* has been observed earlier between juveniles of the same brood. The reasons for this type of behaviour are not known and it will be interesting to see if there are instances where this has been observed in other bird species – Eds]

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Unusual feeding behaviour of Gull-billed Terns

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Dhaivat Hathi

On 6 March 2015, I visited a village in the outskirts of Madhavpur, in the Ghed region, approximately 55 kms from Porbandar, along with Manish Kargatiya. The village is around 20 to 25 kms from the sea coast. A flock of around 150 Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) were seen in a dry farm of 'desi chana', also known as chickpea. There was no water nearby and we were surprised to see such a huge flock of these terns and decided to investigate further. We noted that the flock was feeding on green-coloured caterpillars (we could not identify the species) in the farm. They were hunting as if they were hunting over the water. They would fly over the farm and dive to catch the caterpillars exactly as they would dive in the water to catch fish or other aquatic prey. The group would divide in two parts and cover two different farms at a time and again they would get together and hunt at one farm. This same behaviour was seen for almost 4 hours that day, from around 15:30 to 19:30 hrs. We went on the next day to observe this behaviour again, but we did not find a single bird in the area. The farmer who owned the farm told us that that the birds would come again after a couple of days, once there are caterpillars; meanwhile, they go to other farms in the surrounding areas.

The Gull-billed Tern is said to be more insectivorous than other tern species; grasshoppers, dragonflies, moths, grubs,

locusts, earthworms etc. are taken (Gochfeld *et al.* 2018). In winter, it was found to prey mainly on fiddler crabs (*Uca tangeri*) and occasionally on fish and locusts in Guinea-Bissau (Stienen *et al.* 2008). In Sriharikota Island, it was observed feeding on insect road kills (Sivakumar 2004). In Gujarat, it is a widely distributed winter visitor and found across the state mainly in all types of water – sea coasts, tidal creeks, rivers, ponds etc. and occasionally in grasslands and agricultural fields.

Three Gull-billed Terns were seen catching locusts and other insects in agricultural fields near Bhavnagar in September 1999 (Bhatt 2000).

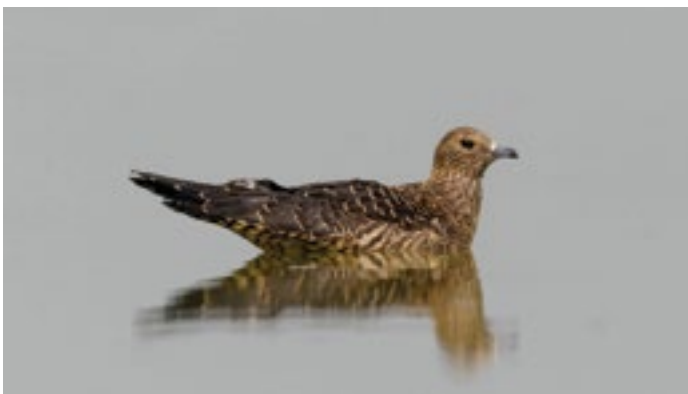
This observation of a large flock of Gull-billed Terns feeding in agricultural fields is interesting and points to the species being beneficial to farmers. The large flock observed here consuming caterpillars all afternoon would have, without any doubt, been helpful to the farmer in removing these pests from the field. Almost no studies are done regarding this behaviour of the Gull-billed Tern during the non-breeding season (in winter) in India and this documentation can be of help to researchers in identifying bird species beneficial to agriculture in India.

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Arctic Skua from Nal Sarovar

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Sunil Kini

The Arctic Skua, (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), which is also known as the Parasitic Jaeger, is a seabird (a pelagic species) of the Skua family, *Stercorariidae*. They have a reputation of being avian pirates, as they are known to steal food from other birds. This species breeds in the north of Eurasia and North America, with significant populations as far south as northern Scotland and it is a migrant, wintering at sea in the tropics and southern oceans (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

On 13 October 2018, a Saturday, at around 09:30 hrs, while on a routine bird watching trip inside Nal Sarovar Sanctuary,

from a distance I suddenly saw an unusual looking bird in the waters. I quickly realized that it was a pelagic species and requested the boatman to move the boat slowly towards it. The bird was quite static and floating in the water close to a large patch of reeds. The bird gave us good views and I could photograph it well. I noted that it was a juvenile and probably a vagrant, which lost track during its migration and landed up at Nal Sarovar. This bird was not seen again, in spite of many attempts to search for it by other birders. This leads us to a conclusion that it might not have stayed there for long and may have moved further on in its migration, probably towards the Gulf of Kachchh. The identification of juvenile skuas is tricky but here, since it was seen well and photographed, the identification was confirmed as a juvenile Arctic Skua based on the small fine bill, small head, streaked neck and nape, and upperparts with a rufescent tinge.

There is one inland record of Arctic Skua from the Little Rann of Kachchh, along with a photographic record from the Gulf of Kachchh during a pelagic trip (Ganpule 2016). It has been noted off the Gujarat coast a number of times during pelagic trips (Naik 2016). There is a previous record of a probable Pomarine Skua (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) from Nal Sarovar (Ganpule 2016), but, this is the first record of an Arctic Skua from this area.

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Black-capped Kingfisher near Veraval

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Ravi Patel

On 11 February 2018, I visited the coastal area near Veraval beach (20° 55' N, 70° 27' E), around 5 kms away from Veraval city, with Divyesh Gheravda and Prem Lalchandani. It is a largely unknown and undisturbed area for birding and is good for bird watching because it is a sandy and rocky coastal area with a small check dam, so fresh water is also present most of the year. We saw Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*), Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), Asian Openbill (*Anastomus oscitans*), Isabelline Wheatear (*Oenanthe isabellina*), Asian Paradise-flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*) and many other common fresh water as well as coastal birds here.

While bird watching in this area, I saw a Black-capped Kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*) perched on a rock by the beach. I called my friends and we took some good images, confirming the identification. On 17 February 2018, I visited this area

again with Pragnesh Patel and Saswat Mishra. We saw the kingfisher again at the same site. This time, we saw it hunt a crab. Another interesting sighting from this area was that of a White-eared Bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*). Though widespread and common in other parts of the state, this bulbul is not common in our area, especially in Gir-Somnath district (*pers. obsv*).

The Black-capped Kingfisher is resident in the coastal areas of Gujarat (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). It is given as an uncommon to rare resident and local migrant in the state (Ganpule 2016). Sightings have been reported from coastal, as well as from inland areas. But, it is not common and this was the first time we had seen this species here. Rank & Parasharya (2005) show sightings from Ahmedpur-Mandvi and Diu (which are not far from Veraval), and state that though it is not common, it is distributed all along the Gujarat coast. This sighting from Veraval is another addition to the sightings of the Black-capped Kingfisher from coastal Saurashtra.

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Greater Coucal impaling chameleon on a thorn for feeding

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The habitat in the coastal belt from Gandhidham/Kandla to Tuna, Badhreshwar and Mundra is quite good for bird watching as well as for mammal sightings. On 22 April 2018, a Sunday, at around 07:00 hrs, I was going from Gandhidham to Bhadreswar coast in search of Golden Jackals (*Canis aureus*); usually, a pack of jackals is seen after crossing the Chokanda Temple. The area is a thorn forest and connects to the coastal belt, where there is a colony of fishermen.

While on the way, I saw a Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*) very near me in search of some prey as it was seen searching extensively for something; digging in the soil, then jumping on thorny trees and perching and changing locations in search for prey. It then found an Indian Chameleon (*Chamaeleo zeylanicus*) in a tree and in a fraction of a second, caught it in its beak and started hitting it on the branch of tree repeatedly, more than 8 to 10 times, and killed it. The coucal then impaled the chameleon on a big thorn of a tree and started to feed on it.

I took a record photograph where the Greater Coucal is with the kill of the chameleon, with a thorn inside the body of the chameleon, thus impaling it. It was quite surprising to see the

Greater Coucal feed on the chameleon in this way. In India, impaling prey on thorns and then eating it is usually seen in shrikes (*Lanius*

sp.) and they are called 'butcher birds' for this behaviour. The Greater Coucal has a very varied diet and is known to eat small mammals, insects, lizards, snakes, frogs, insects, eggs and young of small birds, fruits and seeds etc. (Payne 2018). Hence, the killing and eating of a chameleon by the Greater Coucal is not unusual. However, the way in which it proceeded to eat it was unusual and the Greater Coucal has not been documented or known to eat prey by impaling it on thorns.



Pratik Joshi

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Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush in Gir

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On 27 May 2018, I visited the Barvala Hanuman Temple near Kothariya, in Khambha Range of Gir National Park, with members of Shetrunji Prakruti Mandal. We (Jignesh Trivedi, Jayesh Shah, Mahendra Makwana, Mahesh Mori and I) reached there early in the morning. At around 08:30 hrs, we saw a rock thrush (*Monticola* sp.) near the water point. It had bluish-grey head and upper breast, rufous-orange underparts, brownish upperparts and very short tail.

The bird came near the water and was seen very well by us. Unfortunately, we were not carrying a camera. So, I took some photos with my mobile phone camera. The features described above could be easily seen in the photos I took. But, the photos were not of very good quality. I shared the photos with other birders here and it was identified as a male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*).

The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush is a vagrant or rare passage migrant to Gujarat with records mainly from Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). A recent record from Rampura Grasslands, Dahod, is known (Patel 2017). The species is usually seen during the autumn passage migration in Gujarat and there is only one record in February from Kachchh (Mishra 2015).

There is no previous record of the Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush from Gir National Park and this is an addition to the avifauna of Saurashtra.

[The photos are not of very good quality since they were taken with a mobile phone camera but the distinguishing features can be seen and the identity can be confirmed. This record of the Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush in late May is quite surprising and suggests that this is a late spring migration record. The species breeds in the Western Palearctic and winters in Africa; this could be an individual which was late in returning to its breeding grounds. The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush is mainly an autumn passage migrant in India and most of its previous records from Gujarat are also from this period. There are very few spring records from the country and hence, this is an important record. – Eds]

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Short Birding Notes



Asian Desert Warbler in South Gujarat

On 18 October 2018, Pravin C. Patel and I went for bird watching around Tena village, which is just 12 kms from Surat city. At around 08:00 hrs in the morning, we saw a small warbler-like bird, with light brown coloured upperparts and rufous rump. It was continuously moving from one branch of dried *Prosopis juliflora* to another and in between, it was even hopping on the ground. It was readily identified as an Asian Desert Warbler (*Sylvia nana*), as we had seen it last year at Greater Rann of Kachchh. It gave us plenty of time to take good photographs. It is mainly seen in Kachchh and some parts of Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). We believe that this is the first record of an Asian Desert Warbler for South Gujarat.

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White-bellied Drongo in Kachchh

On 31 March 2018, I saw and photographed a White-bellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caerulescens*) near Dhunai, Ta: Mandavi, Dist: Kachchh. I had recorded the same species on 29 November 2016 and 25 December 2017 in this area previously. According to senior birder Shantilal Varu, this species is rare in Kachchh with only 2-3 previous sightings. All the previous sightings of the White-bellied Drongo from Kachchh are from the winter season and it seems that the species is a rare winter migrant or vagrant to Kachchh in the winter.

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Indian Grey Hornbill in Wadhwan, Surendranagar

A single Indian Grey Hornbill (*Ocyrceros birostris*) was seen at my farm near Wadhwan, Surendranagar, on 27 July 2018, at around 18:30 hrs. This bird was first sighted by Dadabapu Bhavanisinhji Mori. The bird was silent and we could see it from a long distance. On the next morning, I visited the site again, but could not find it. This is an important record for Saurashtra region. Ganpule (2016) mentions a record from Gir National Park and other than that record, this is the only recent record from Saurashtra. This record will also be very significant for understanding the distribution and the range extension of the species in Saurashtra.

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Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher in Vansada National Park

On 19 October 2018, I visited Vansada National Park with my parents (Suryamani Mishra and Smita Mishra) for bird watching as it was open after the monsoon. We entered the park at around 08:30 hrs and drove to many areas for one whole hour without any bird sightings. It was 09:30 hrs, and I saw a bird sitting on the ground catching a fly/insect (probably a bumblebee). I immediately took a few photos but it flew away. I waited for 15 minutes and saw it again and it was identified as an Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher (*Ceyx erithaca*). It had an insect in its mouth. It perched just in front of me for about half an hour. Later on, my friends Dr Anand Patel, Viren Desai and Dr Pragnesh Patel joined me and after one hour, they saw the bird again. There are previous records of the species from Vansada (Mistri *et al.* 2017) but this sighting in October is too late for the monsoon season and indicates that it may remain in this area probably till the onset of winter.

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Oriental Scops Owl at Alang, near Bhavnagar

On 16 October 2018, I found a small owl (*Otus* sp.) at my office in Alang, about 40 kms from Bhavnagar. After taking photos and with the help of experts, it was identified as an Oriental Scops Owl (*Otus sunia*) of the rufous morph. Though no injuries were visible, the bird was unable to fly and seemed dehydrated. So I sent it to Vishwadeepsinh Raol at Bhavnagar for further care. After three days of utmost treatment and care, on 19 October 2018, the bird was released and flew away in the wild. The Oriental Scops Owl is rare in Saurashtra with isolated records from Gir National Park and surrounding areas (Ganpule 2016). Thus, this sighting from Bhavnagar is noteworthy.

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Striolated Bunting in Khirsara Grassland, Rajkot

On 30 September 2018, we went to Khirsara Grassland, near Rajkot, for our regular weekend birding. I saw an unfamiliar bird, and we observed it with the help of binoculars and were fortunate enough to take some good photographs. When I posted the images on the social media for identification, it was confirmed as a Striolated Bunting (*Emberiza striolata*). There is no recent record of the species from Rajkot area but on enquiring, senior birder Ashok Mashru said that he had seen the bird at Nyari Dam about 10 years back. As the bird is commonly seen in Kachchh, its occurrence in Rajkot is not surprising and it was recently seen near Jamnagar too (Pala & Jhaveri 2017). It was seen again in Rajkot on 23 October 2018 by Rajubhai Karia (*pers. comm.*). We went to the same place 2-3 times to look for this species but were not able to find it.

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Grey Partridge preyed upon by Desert Cat

On 2 September 2018, I was looking for nightjars (*Caprimulgus* sp.) near Dhinodhar Hill, Kachchh. I saw two cats there, which were very small in size. I observed that the cats were feeding on some bird. I took photographs and also a video. I observed that the cats were feeding on a Grey Francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*). One of the cats was larger while the second one was much smaller. I came back and saw the photos on my computer and identified the cats as a female and juvenile Indian Desert Cat (*Felix libyca*). I went to the same place the next morning and saw feathers of the Grey Francolin and also noted the pugmarks of the cats. While it is not surprising to note that the Grey Francolin is a part of the diet of the Desert Cat, the direct observation of it feeding on the bird was interesting as this cat is quite elusive and it is evidence of it preying on avian species.

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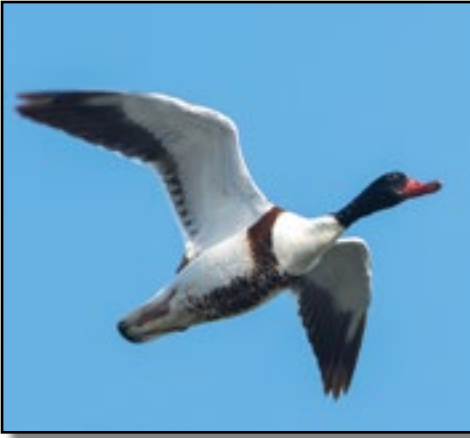


Red-tailed Shrike of karelini morph near Chotila, Surendranagar Dist.

On 16 September 2018, we were on our routine birding trip to 'Wild Paanchal', Anandpur Grassland, near Chotila, Dist. Surendranagar. While walking in the area, we saw many shrikes (*Lanius* sp.), which were common there. But, I found a shrike which looked different and had a light grey head and upperparts, white stripe above eye and white wing patch and underparts. So I took photographs and showed the images to senior birder Ashok Mashru. He and Prasad Ganpule later identified this individual as a Red-tailed Shrike (*Lanius phoenicuroides*) of the *karelini* morph, which is perhaps a first record from this area. One individual of this morph was noted recently in Kachchh (Parekh 2018). But, this morph of the Red-tailed Shrike is rare here.

I am thankful to Shatrughnabhai Jebalia and Ghanshyambhai Jebalia of 'Wild Paanchal' for this beautiful sighting. It would not have been possible to see this bird without their help.

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Common Shelduck in Rajkot

On 24 November 2018, while bird watching in the outskirts of Rajkot, a duck was seen flying. We noticed the blackish neck and larger size, and after some time, it came above us and tried to perch on the ground in front of us. We took some photos of it in flight and identified it as a Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*). We then tried to search for it but we saw it only once and then it flew away. On enquiring with some experts and senior birders from Rajkot, we got to know that the species has not been noted in Rajkot before and this was the first photographic record from this area.

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Striolated Bunting in Navsari

On 22 September 2018, Jay Desai and I visited Navsari outskirts area for regular bird watching. We reached a wetland at approximately 08:00 hrs. We did birding for about 4 hours in that particular area. While returning back, we were lucky to see and photograph a Striolated Bunting (*Emberiza striolata*). We initially thought that it was a lark sp. (*Mirafra* sp.). We then confirmed that it was indeed a Striolated Bunting and managed to take some photographs too. The Striolated Bunting is rare in Navsari area.

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Brown-breasted Flycatcher at Thol Bird Sanctuary, Ahmedabad

On the morning of 19 February 2017, at Thol Bird Sanctuary, near Ahmedabad, my search for an uncommon winter visitor to Gujarat was finally successful. I got my first glimpse of a Brown-breasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa muttui*), and the identification was confirmed by its typical plumage and pale legs. This was probably the first recorded sighting at Thol. My gut feeling about the bird being present at Thol proved to be correct. There have been many sightings of this species since 2007 but these sightings have been mostly from Kachchh and Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). Also, an individual was recently ringed by BNHS at Nal Sarovar, which was confirmed by Shri Uday Vora (*pers. comm.*) and there is a recent sighting from Jessore in Banaskantha (Varde 2018). I saw the bird at Thol from 19 February till 20 March 2017, on every Sunday and on a few Saturdays. On 13 March 2017, a team from BNHS to was there along with me, and we saw it again in the area.

I thank Jignesh Gondaliya for taking the time to explain the habitat where he had seen the bird in Girnar. He was very meticulous in his explanation and that helped a lot in my search for this beautiful species at Thol.

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Ultramarine Flycatcher in the outskirts of Ahmedabad

It was a pleasant morning on 10 December 2017 and as usual, I was roaming in my weekend destination i.e. Serenity Library and Botanical Garden. While I was observing and taking photographs of birds, a small flycatcher (*Ficedula* sp.) came on a perch quite close to me. I took a few photographs and after post processing, I referred to the field guide (Grimmett *et al.* 2011) and also consulted my birding friend Darshanbhai Parikh. The bird was identified as a first winter male Ultramarine Flycatcher (*Ficedula superciliaris*). This was a first record from this area and later on, I informed my birding friend Umang Dutt, who also took photographs of this bird.

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Ruddy Turnstone from Dhari, Amreli

On 11 November 2018, at around 16:00 hrs, I visited Khodiyar Dam, near Dhari, Dist: Amreli. I reached there and started scanning the area with my binoculars. At the edge of the dam, I saw and photographed a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), which was a surprise sighting for me. I confirmed the identification by sending the photos to Ashokbhai Mashru, Viralbhai Joshi and Rameshbhai Vagadiya. This was the first record of a Ruddy Turnstone from Dhari area and it was a first sighting for me also. This species is usually seen on coasts or in coastal areas of our state and I am not aware of any inland records of it here. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) show it as a winter visitor only to the coastal areas of Gujarat and do not give any inland record of this species in the distribution map.

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Common Ringed Plover in Porbandar

On 17 April 2016, we were bird watching in coastal areas of Porbandar between 07:00 to 10:30 hrs. We saw and photographed one Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) in this area. It seemed to be in breeding plumage, as it had orange legs and bill, and a broad black breast band. On the same day, we also saw 25 Pacific Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis fulva*), 30 Grey Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and other waders at the same place. The Common Ringed Plover was a surprise sighting here, as the species is a rare to uncommon winter visitor in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), with regular sightings only from Jamnagar area. There are very few photographic records from Porbandar.

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Common Whitethroat in Wadhwan

A Common Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*) was seen in Wadhwan, near Surendranagar, on 28 August 2014, at around 08:30 hrs. The identification was confirmed by the grayish mantle, wings with rufous fringes to the coverts, breast and flanks showing pinkish wash, and plain faced appearance. I was watching a Rain quail (*Coturnix coromandelica*) and a Rock Bush Quail (*Perdica argoondah*) near Kharva village, when I saw and photographed the Common Whitethroat. I observed the bird for the next 15 minutes from my car. It perched on small bushes in the area. In Gujarat, the Common Whitethroat is an uncommon to rare passage migrant, with sightings mainly from Kachchh and Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). It is rare in Surendranagar district.

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'Feather Frame'

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The odd bill: The Indian Skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) is one of the three species of skimmers found worldwide, the only skimmer sp. in India, and it possesses a bill like no other avian in our country. It has a short upper mandible and a longer lower mandible. This is not a drawback; rather, having a longer lower mandible actually helps in the way it feeds. Skimmers catch their prey by flying low over the water surface, with the mouth open, upper mandible raised and the lower one immersed in the water (which is called 'skimming'). When it strikes prey, the head bends under the body, cushioning the shock and the jaws snap shut. It draws the prey out of the water while the head is still back or down. This happens very quickly. The prey is then swallowed mid-air or after the bird alights. One can witness skimmers skimming in Jamnagar, usually in September - November.

Skimmers usually prefer to feed in shallow water bodies with favourable concentration of prey. They cut the water in a straight path, flying individually or sometimes in loose groups. They get attracted to disturbances on the surface of water caused by the fish. This type of foraging is helpful to feed even at night. The action of skimming over the water surface also

causes a great deal of wear and tear to the tip of the lower mandible. Sometimes, this tip breaks when it hits an object like a stone or some hard obstacle. Breakage and abrasion to the tip of the lower mandible (called 'rhamphotheca') actually helps in controlling the rapidly growing lower mandible. Interestingly, the lower mandible grows continuously, like our finger nails, and helps to compensate for the wear and tear incurred during skimming. □



Yashodhan Bhatia



Yashodhan Bhatia

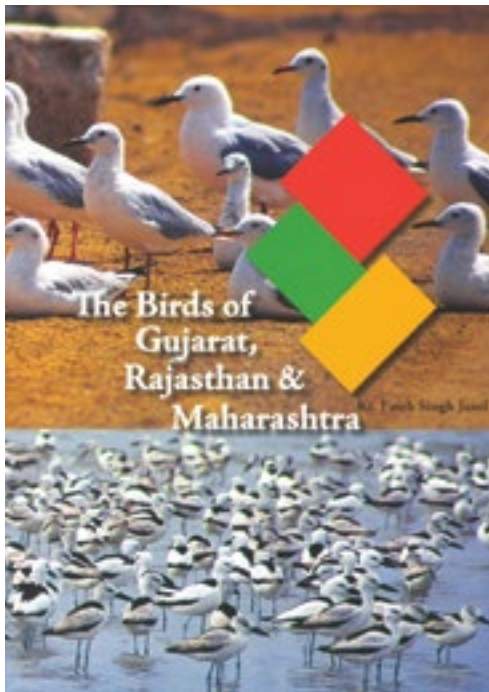
Book Review

Prasad Ganpule: C/o Parshuram Pottery Works, Opp. Nazarbaug, Morbi 363642. prasadganpule@gmail.com

Title: The Birds of Gujarat, Rajasthan & Maharashtra – 253 pp.

Author: Kr. Fateh Singh Jasol

Publisher: The Ravi Shankaran Foundation, 2018.



This book, published by The Ravi Shankaran Foundation, is a guide to the birds of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, the three states in western India. The book is large sized; 29 cm x 22 cm, with a hard cover. The author is a member of Bombay Natural History Society, WWF and other societies and has travelled widely in India. The author explains in the introduction that the 'book is designed to be a convenient compendium of information for birdwatchers and students of the birds of the three western India states, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra'.

The format of the book is an introduction, followed by chapters on habitat, nesting, current sequence of bird families, list of threatened species, main notes on families for the birds of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, references for bird families, checklist for all the three states, summary of recent records for Gujarat, bibliography of new sightings, comprehensive bibliography, and lastly, the index.

The notes for each family give brief details for species within that family, with details of sightings of the rare/uncommon or vagrant species. For example, in the chapter on ducks, details of sightings of Large Whistling Teal (=Fulvous Whistling Duck), Common Shelduck, Marbled Teal (=Marbled Duck), Baikal Teal, Mallard, Falcated Teal (=Falcated Duck), Baer's Pochard, Scaup Duck (=Greater Scaup) and Common Merganser (=Goosander)

are given, along with references, and includes photographs of the many common species in that family occurring in these states like the Common Teal, Gadwall etc. The same format is followed for all other bird families with photographs given for many species within that family.

The checklist given at the end for the three states gives a total of 614 species, with HBK number, and regarding taxonomy, the author states 'I have consistently followed the Synopsis in identifying the species with their number in the text as well as in the Checklists so that users can cross-refer back to the Synopsis or the Handbook'. For Gujarat, the data is mainly sourced from the recent checklist published in *Flamingo* 8(3) – 12 (4) in 2016. For Maharashtra, the author states that he has relied on the checklist by Humayun Abdulali and the data is updated till November 1997. For Rajasthan, the author has relied on a number of sources, including correspondence with other bird watchers.

The book is quite useful and gives details of all the bird families along with species of interest for these three states. Since the details of sightings are given along with references, the interested reader can check the original source. However, now, with so much data available from various online sources, the data presented in the book is not up-to-date, especially for states like Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Even for Gujarat, the data given is insufficient. For example, the author states that the 'disappearance of Stoliczka's Bushchat from Kutch (=Kachchh) was lamented by Himmatsinhji'. But, now, it is well known that the Stoliczka's Bushchat, though uncommon or rare, is regularly seen in Kachchh and there are many isolated records from Saurashtra. There are also errors – in hawks, vultures, eagles and kites, the photo labelled as a Crested Serpent Eagle is an Oriental Honey Buzzard and the one given as a Greater Spotted Eagle is a Steppe Eagle; in warblers, the photo given as a Blyth's Reed Warbler is a Common Chiffchaff. There are other errors in photographs, with a few photographs not properly labelled/misidentified. The author quotes an extraordinary sighting of a Jerdon's Courser from Rajgad and Limkheda ranges of Baria Forest Division (=Devgadh Baria) in Panchmahals, Gujarat; the sighting is attributed to Shri A. P. Singh, ACF Baria, and said to have been published in the *Indian Express*, Ahmedabad edition, on 17.06.94. However, there is no documented sighting of this species from Gujarat and it is a range-restricted species, not known to occur in our state.

Overall, the book is quite interesting and can be used as a ready reference for sightings of uncommon/rare or vagrant species for these three states but it does not include the details of latest sightings. It is not an identification guide but gives information of sightings for these western states. □

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Himmatsinhji was one year senior to me at Rajkumar college, Rajkot, and the friendship we developed at school continued through life till his passing away. A month before his demise, he spoke to me on the ubiquitous mobile phone, from across the Gulf of Kachchh, as I was being shown a nesting pair of Black-necked Storks *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus* in the Khijadiya Sanctuary near Jamnagar. He had been updating notes on that very species in Kachchh! While I can claim generating public awareness for the notification of the Marine National Park, and the Khijadiya Sanctuary, it is the present Jam Saheb Sataji who 'pointed' me to get the action started. It is a pity, the Jam Saheb has not written notes on the birds and other natural history of the erstwhile Jamnagar State, as his knowledge is unrivalled for its personal exposure. And as for me, I shall always consider whatever I saw and learnt in his 'territory' as material borrowed from him. Though after Dharmakumarsinhji and Himmatsinhji, I have the largest number of writings (see Pittie's bibliography later in this issue), I feel I have not done enough considering what I could have. Had I followed Salim Ali's advise and maintained a regular and detailed diary through life. So, when I remonstrated with Himmatsinhji for not having written more, pat came his wry rejoinder, "A pot calling the kettle black!" It is fitting that I conclude this piece by referring to my cousin the late Durbar Shivraj Kumar Khachar of Jasdan for his very qualitative support to the cause of ornithology in Gujarat. Apart from a series of first records for our area in central Saurashtra appearing in the JBNHS, he has to his credit among the very first photographs of the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican to appear in that journal (in all he published 37 papers during 1949–1992). Both of us bird-watched together and developed a very close and affectionate association with Salim Ali. He underwrote the cost of intensive bird banding for the BNHS at Hingolghadh Sanctuary, Jasdan. He also participated in several bird banding camps with Salim Ali in Kachchh.

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Source: Khachar, L., 2010. Gujarat royalty and Indian ornithology. *Indian BIRDS* 6 (4&5): 91–92

- Lavkumar Khachar

