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Bulletin of Gujarat Birds



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Notes on breeding of Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* near Viramgam

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Devvratsinh Mori

Introduction

The Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is a small vulture, with three recognised subspecies; the nominate *percnopterus* is a resident and winter migrant to India while *ginginianus* is resident in the Indian Peninsula and the third subspecies is extralimital (Orta *et al.* 2019). The two subspecies are identical in plumage except that the curved bill tip is dark brown in nominate and yellow in *ginginianus*. The nominate subspecies is mainly restricted to the NW of the Indian Subcontinent from Pakistan into Kashmir, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh (Naoroji 2006). The subspecies *ginginianus* is widespread and resident throughout the Indian Subcontinent, excluding the Trans-Himalaya, Northeast India and the Islands. The Egyptian Vulture is widely distributed in Gujarat; the nominate being a winter migrant to our state while *ginginianus* is a resident (Ganpule 2016). The Egyptian Vulture is still fairly common in north Gujarat region, with scattered sightings from other parts of the state. It is now considered to be an 'Endangered' species due to rapid population decline in India, with long term declines in other parts of its range (BirdLife International 2019). Except northern Gujarat, it is now uncommon in many parts of Gujarat, with scattered sightings from Saurashtra and southern Gujarat.

I studied the breeding biology of the Egyptian Vulture in Gujarat and the details of my study are presented here.

Study area

The study was conducted near Kumarkhan Village (22° 54' N, 72° 01' E), in Ta: Viramgam, Dist: Ahmedabad. The area is mainly agriculture lands (farms), surrounded by some scrub. There are a few large trees in the farms. The main crops in this

area are castor (*Ricinus*) and cotton (*Gossypium*). The village lies to the north of Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, and is about 10-12 kms from the sanctuary. There are two carcass dumping sites near the area; one site is around 300 mts from the nesting tree while the other dumping site was around 600 mts away in a straight line distance.

Methodology

The study was carried out from February 2018 till the end of July 2018. The study was initiated as soon as a nest of Egyptian Vulture was found. The nest seemed to be active and both the adult birds were seen displaying around the nesting area in February. The nest was visually monitored using a Nikon Monarch 10x50 binoculars, and photographs were taken with a DSLR camera (Nikon D7100) and telephoto lens (Sigma 150-600 mm). The nest was also monitored using the automatic motion/time lapse cameras (Cuddeback Silver Series - Model 1224 and Bushnell Trophy Cam - Model 119436), for the duration of the study. My reason for using cameras after incubation, especially during hatching, was to minimise disturbance to the birds. The cameras were fixed on a nearby branch, above nest level, at a distance of two-three meters, ensuring that the breeding pair was minimally disturbed. During my study, I have taken extreme precautions so as not to disturb the birds and established protocols related to studies of breeding birds were followed strictly. The welfare of the breeding pair and the nestling(s) was always kept in mind while observing them.

Observations and results

Nest site and nesting material: The nest was in a neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*), in an area surrounded by agriculture farms. The area surrounding the nest had many other small trees on the periphery of the farms. The height of the nesting tree was approximately 35 feet. The nest was located in a forked branch of the tree trunk and was at a height of approximately 20 feet. The nest was quite large and untidy looking. The nesting materials used were quite varied and I recorded the following: rubber, cattle hair, pieces of leather, cotton, sticks {of neem, *khijado* (*Prosopis cineraria*) & most probably 'babool' (*Acacia nilotica*)}, wool, dog dung, pig dung, leaves of neem tree, roots of plants, plastic strainer and straps, types of ropes, pieces of sponge, different types of threads, cattle dung, pieces of hosiery and woollen clothes, soil and other particles, etc. After the nesting was completed, the nest was measured and had a diameter of around 38 inches.

Egg laying and incubation: The first egg was laid on 1 March 2018. A second egg was laid on 5 March 2018. The eggs were

Devratsinh Mori



off-white and heavily marked brownish. The shape was more round than ovoid. Both the parent birds were observed to incubate the eggs round the clock and rarely left the eggs unattended. The eggs were never left unattended for more than 3-5 minutes and one of the adult birds always used to be present nearby. During the change of duties, each parent rotated the eggs slightly, changing the position with either its beak, or feet. On 18 March 2018, it was observed that one adult brought a dried stick, put it on one side and repaired the nest. The repairing of the nest was observed a few more times during the incubation period and continued even when the chick was growing. The incubation period for the first egg was 42 days (egg hatching on 11 April 2018) and for the second egg was 43 days (hatching on 17 April 2018). During the incubation period, it was observed that many other birds visited the nesting tree. Some interesting observations were as follows: on 14 March 2018, a Red-necked Falcon (*Falco chicquera*) perched on the nesting tree for a few minutes. On 22 March 2018, a Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*) visited the nest when no parent bird was in the nest. The coucal did not try to pirate the eggs. The adult bird came back within 1-2 minutes and the coucal flew away.

Devratsinh Mori



Fledgling growth: The eggs hatched 6 days apart. The first egg hatched at around 10:00 hrs in the morning on 11 April and by 13:30 hrs, the chick was seen raising its head. The one day old hatchling was covered with white down. It was fed and cared for by both the adults. The chick was seen begging for food in the first week. The second egg started hatching at around 11:30 hrs on 17 April 2018 and the chick came out of the egg by 15:30 hrs. Size difference between the two chicks was apparent; the elder chick was much larger than the recently hatched chick. It was observed that both the adult birds did not feed the younger chick and kept feeding only the elder chick. Feeding of the younger chick was neither directly observed by me nor seen in the time lapse cameras. As a result, the second chick died on 21 April 2018. While I am not sure of the exact cause of death, it seems that since it was not fed by the parents, it had starved.

By the end of April, the surviving chick had grown quite large in size but still showed mainly white down feathers. By the first week of May (fourth week), its size had increased but down was still mostly white, with a few black-brown specks of emerging pin-feathers visible on the wings. The chick continued growing and left the nest in the last week of July. The growth of the fledgling is given in detail in the table below.

Growth of the Egyptian Vulture from Day 1 till the end of week 11

Age	Growth and plumage
Day 1	Absolutely white in colour; looked like a small lump of cotton.
Week 1	Body covered with white down, pinkish bare parts.
Week 2	Body covered with white down, greyish head, bill with pale tip and grey legs.
Week 3	Body colour still mostly white with a few black-brown specks of emerging pin-feathers; a number of pins on the wings, nape, and dorsal regions.
Week 4	Good number of black-brown feathers developed on wings, back, and head.
Week 5	The head still covered with white down, large number of black and pale brown feathers on wings, body and underparts.
Week 6	White down on head reduced and replaced with blackish feathers. Rest of the body covered with feathers. Grown almost 70–80% of the size in comparison to the parents.

Week 7	Head almost fully covered with blackish feathers, underparts blackish with pale brownish spots, black feathers with pale brownish tips on wings, very similar to fresh juvenile plumage, size similar to adult.
Week 8	Like fresh juvenile plumage, size similar to adult, stretching / flapping wings.
Week 9 -10	Juvenile plumage, seen perching outside the nest and taking short flights.
Week 11	Juvenile plumage, seen flying and soaring, left nest – fledged.

Food and feeding: Both the parent birds were seen feeding the chick. The chick was fed with small pieces of flesh in the initial days and as it grew older, the adults brought a variety of food to the nest. The food noted was a five striped palm squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii*), House Rat (*R. rattus*), Gerbil (*Gerbillus* sp.), Indian hare (*L. nigricollis*), unidentified fish, common garden lizard (*C. versicolor*), Grey Francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), a probable Greater Coucal, unidentified birds, etc. On observing the nearby carcass dumps, the Egyptian Vulture was noted to be present on a fresh buffalo carcass on 15 March 2018, on a fresh carcass of a young cow on 6 April 2018, and on an almost finished buffalo carcass on 25 April 2018. The carcass dump was observed for 15 days in total but the presence of the Egyptian Vultures was noted only on 3 days.



Devvratishh Mori

Threat from bird fauna and other threats in the nesting area: I observed many other raptor species around the nest tree during the study. A Booted Eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), Black-winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*), Shikra (*Accipiter badius*), Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*), Red-necked Falcon, Indian Spotted Eagle (*Aquila hastata*) and Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) were seen in

the area surrounding the nesting tree. On 11 March 2018, a Booted Eagle approached near the nesting tree in flight. Both the Egyptian Vultures were seen flying near the eagle and trying to drive it away. However, none of the birds of prey approached near the nest, tried to steal the eggs or attack the nestling. A Common Indian Monitor (*V. bengalensis*) was also observed near the nest once.

Discussion

The breeding of the Egyptian Vulture has been studied in detail in India earlier (Dharmakumarsinhji 1955, Ali & Ripley 1978, Naoroji 2006, Orta *et al.* 2019). Naoroji (2006) gives the breeding season for the species from end February/March to June, but mainly from February to May. Here, the first egg was laid on 1 March, which agrees with the breeding period given in the reference texts. The species is said to be adaptable, and nests on crags and cliffs, as well as on large trees and on buildings. The nest here was in a large neem tree. The variety of nesting materials observed here is not unusual. In a study carried out in Uttar Pradesh, a similar variety of nesting materials was seen (Mishra *et al.* 2017). The use of different nesting materials here is probably dependent on their availability from nearby areas and has different uses in the nest as explained by Mishra *et al.* (2017).

The incubation period observed here was 42 days for one egg and 43 days for the other. Naoroji (2006) gives the incubation period as 43 days and states that two eggs are laid but usually only one hatches. However, Orta *et al.* (2019) give the clutch for this species as 1-3 eggs, stating that both adults feed the chicks. In a recent study in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, two eggs were laid but only one was incubated as the other egg rolled off the nest on to the window ledge (Goyal & Sood 2018). Here, it was observed that both the eggs hatched but second chick hatched 6 days after the first one. Orta *et al.* (2019) state that the eggs usually hatch at 3-5 days interval. In this context, it has been found that the younger chick can die if the age-size difference between the chicks is large, which was seen in this case. The second chick was most probably not fed by the parents, resulting in its death. This might be due to its relative inferiority in begging for food compared with the elder chick (Mendelssohn & Leshem 1983). In a study on Egyptian Vulture in Spain, it was noted that if the second hatched chick survived beyond 7-14 days, then it could be expected to survive until it fledged (Donázar & Ceballos 1989). Unfortunately, in this study, the second-hatched chick died after just 4 days. However, in a study on breeding of Egyptian Vulture conducted in Patiala District, Punjab, India, over three years from 2015-2017, it was observed that six young hatched and fledged from three broods of two eggs each, with the

Egyptian Vulture....

hatching interval between the two eggs being six days; all chicks survived to fledging and no mortality or siblicide of the younger chick due to aggression by the elder chick/starvation occurred (Kumar *et al.* 2018). So, more than one young do fledge in this species.

Hatching is said to occur from early to mid-May (Naoroji 2006) while in the present study, hatching was in the second week of April. The nestling/fledging period is estimated to be 70-90 days (Orta *et al.* 2019) or around 75-80 days (Naoroji 2006). In the present study, the fledging period was around 80 days, which agrees with what has been reported earlier. The whole nesting cycle takes around 4.5 - 5 months to complete, which was seen here too. The fledged juvenile is said to be dependent on its parents for almost one month after it has fledged (Orta *et al.* 2019). In this study, I could not carry out further observations to see whether the juvenile had remained with its parents or not.

The spectrum of food seen here agrees with what is known for the species. The Egyptian Vulture is an opportunistic scavenger, and feeds on a variety of bird, mammal, amphibian and reptile remains, offal and any organic rubbish (Naoroji 2006). In the present study, the presence of the Egyptian Vulture in the nearby carcass dump was noted only thrice in 15 days of observation and suggests that it does not heavily depend on cattle carcasses in this area for food and has a varied diet. But, the feeding habits of the Egyptian Vulture in Gujarat require further study as the data gathered here is insufficient to draw any conclusions. On one occasion, a freshly killed/scavenged five striped palm squirrel was brought to the nest and given to the grown chick, which ate it. When the chick was smaller, it was fed by both the parents – feeding it small pieces of flesh from prey brought to the nest.

Conclusion

The breeding of the Egyptian Vulture was partially successful in this study as the adults fledged one chick while the second chick died. Both parents actively looked after and fed the nestling. The incubation period was 42 and 43 days, while the fledging period for one nestling was around 80 days. The adults fed a variety of prey to the nestling. The nesting materials observed here were quite varied, and included many man-made items like pieces of clothes and other plastic items, which are known to be used by the species.

Since the Egyptian Vulture is now an 'Endangered' species, more attention should be given to its food and habitat preferences, breeding biology, etc. here in Gujarat. Active conservation measures should be adopted so that this species continues to thrive here. Gujarat has a good population of Egyptian Vultures, especially in some districts of northern

Gujarat, and it is hoped that its population will increase if proper attention is given towards its conservation.

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Sighting of Great Snipe *Gallinago media* at Nal Sarovar - a first record for Gujarat

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Sunil Kini

On 3 February 2019, a Sunday, we were birding at Vekariya Village, around Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. We reached a marshy spot at around 09:00 hrs and were checking all the birds around that area. We noticed a snipe (*Gallinago* sp.) foraging in this area and decided to get close to photograph it. As we observed and photographed the bird, we could not identify it, as this snipe appeared a bit different from the widespread Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), which is regularly seen here. Realizing this, we decided to photograph it well so as to get the identification confirmed later. After coming back home, the first author again got quite confused and sent the photographs to his friend Devvratsinh Mori for an opinion on the identification. He, after seeing the images of the bird, was also not sure, but doubted that this snipe could be a Great Snipe (*Gallinago media*). To further clarify our doubts, we referred the images to Prasad Ganpule for his expert opinion and requested him to help us with proper identification of the bird. He replied that this looked like a Great Snipe but looking at the rarity of this species in India, it was better to take opinions of experts who were familiar with this species.

The bird was very interesting and for a conclusive identification, it was first referred to Nils Van Duivendijk, who is familiar with the Great Snipe in Europe. Nils, after seeing the photographs, opined that this individual was indeed a Great Snipe and also gave his detailed opinion on the same, which is given here. Knowing this, the bird was searched for and seen again and photographed well by the first author on 10 February 2019 and subsequently, was seen in the field by Prasad Ganpule, Ashok Mashru, and others on 13 February 2019. With enough photographs and good views in the field, it was tentatively identified as a juvenile/immature Great Snipe

while Common Snipe was immediately excluded based on the short bill and more barred underparts. It was a moulting individual. However, some doubts remained as the separation of Great Snipe from Pin-tailed Snipe (*Gallinago stenura*) and Swinhoe's Snipe (*Gallinago megala*) is very difficult and a complex identification issue.

Discussion

The field identification and separation of Pin-tailed Snipe from Swinhoe's Snipe is very difficult and both species combined are known colloquially as 'Swintail' Snipe. Both these snipes are henceforth referred to as 'Swintail' Snipe in this note.

Identification of snipes is difficult under field conditions. The diagnostic features of an adult Great Snipe are as follows: adults have bold white tips to wing coverts, bold dark markings on white underparts, and unbarred white corners to tail. Juvenile Great Snipe is less marked and obscure, belly is fully and regularly barred, it has brown bands on white tail corners, and white on wing coverts is obscure (Van Gils *et al.* 2019).

Even though the Nal Savorar bird seemed to be a juvenile and was in moult, the pattern of the wing coverts which were visible matched well with Great Snipe and did not match with a Common Snipe. While some Swinhoe's Snipe may show prominent white fringes to the coverts, the pattern of wing covert feathers shown by the Nal Sarovar bird was different from Swinhoe's Snipe. The underpart barring seen in this individual was typical of a Great Snipe. Extensive barring was seen on the belly, with barring extending on to the thighs. The thighs were boldly barred and this was seen well in the field and also in the photographs.

On checking almost 150 images of 'Swintail' Snipe on the internet (on Oriental Bird Images website and other birding websites), it was noted that the underpart barring is not as extensive in 'Swintail' Snipe when compared with Great Snipe. Only one or two birds showed more barring than normal but here also, the barring did not extend to the belly and on to the thighs. Some birds may show faint thigh barring but this is never as extensive or as bold as in Great Snipe. See Ghate (2017) wherein a Pin-tailed Snipe with very faint barring on the thighs is seen, but overall, the thighs look unbarred. But here too, there is no barring on the belly and the thigh barring is very faint and not bold like what was seen in the Nal Sarovar bird. This is the only individual of Pin-tailed Snipe which we could find on the internet, which showed a hint of thigh

Great Snipe...

barring. The 'Swintail' Snipe shows more flank barring than a Common Snipe but the barring on the belly is usually not present. This is another feature which matched with a Great Snipe in the Nal Sarovar bird.



Sumil Kini

The Great Snipe shows white in outer tail. The spread tail is very difficult to see under field conditions. Unfortunately, the photos obtained of the tail pattern in this individual were not conclusive enough for identification. Further, from a close observation of the images, it was noted that the tail was also in moult, thus making it difficult to judge the details and it could not be confirmed if the outer tail feathers were present or were shed/growing. However, from what was seen from the photos, the tail pattern did not rule out Great Snipe. In the field, the bird looked 'dumpier', a word used in Peacock (2016); the author gives many photographs of a Great Snipe and explains the identification features of the Great Snipe in the field. We would agree to this description of Great Snipe being 'dumpier' though it is difficult to describe it precisely. The 'jizz' of the Nal Sarovar bird is different from a 'Swintail' Snipe, since it looked larger in size. When compared directly with a Common Snipe which was near to this snipe, it was seen that this individual was distinctly larger. In flight, it was seen that the Nal Sarovar bird had a densely barred underwing, which looked uniformly grey. This conclusively ruled out Common Snipe but 'Swintail' Snipe has a similar underwing pattern. The bill was short, with yellow at base, and a slight droop towards the distal end.

Since the identification was tricky, we sent the images to a few experts and their opinions are given below with their permission.

Nils Van Duivendijk: I totally agree with you that it looks like a Great Snipe. Unfortunately, the bird lacks a great number of coverts, but still the remaining lesser coverts show straight clear-cut bright white tips. The white tips at the rear greater

coverts are likely worn away. Best of all are the typical head pattern with very narrow loreal stripe but very broad and clean whitish supercilium, extensive barred underparts, including the leg-feathering! What is visible of the tail (upperside of central tail feathers) are, in my opinion, enough for a certain ID. Also, the rather short bill and rather pale (bright) greenish legs add to the overall picture for Great Snipe. Most Great Snipes show more V-shaped markings (especially juveniles) on their underparts, but the shape of the markings in this bird fall clearly within the normal variation.

Bill Harvey: On balance, I would agree with juvenile Great Snipe although it should show some white in the outer tail. The dense barring on the underparts, with a narrow white belly centre and the dark underwing are the main factors. The location is also supportive as Gujarat does pick up vagrants (of various species) to and fro wintering quarters in Africa.

Andrea Corso: So, I had a very good looking at the photos and need to explain some things here. Distinguishing Pintail Snipe (or *G. megala* too but less so) from Great Snipe its way way more difficult than indicated in all field guides, as I first pointed out in my papers. The pattern on upperwing coverts is not too odd for *G. stenura* and is not helpful. It could be like this in many *G. stenura*. In 'Swintail' it is rather variable, with birds showing narrower tips but others showing tips almost as in Great Snipe. Not too odd for me. Rather, the tips look like really too small and limited for Great Snipe, even a juvenile moulting bird.

The tail: it is hard for me to see here a tail which recalls Great Snipe!! Not even in juvenile. I mean, there is almost no white at all in the visible tail feathers, the only pale/white you see at the corner, may actually be formed by the pale pin-like, short and paler outer tail feathers of *G. stenura*. In the half open tail visible, in the photo showing your bird preening, I might probably count 4 (or 5) feathers. THIS IS VERY CONFUSING. In fact there should be more than that in Great Snipe. It could well be that the narrower outer tail (1 or 2) are hidden by the T4-T5 rectrices, but I wonder if it is not easier to explain with the fact that in *G. stenura*, it is very easy and common to see only the 4 bigger/wider/longer rectrices while the shorter/narrower/smaller outer ones are often hidden below. (Here, we would like to point out that in one other photo, 7-8 bigger tail feathers are visible. Unfortunately, this photo was not included in the photos we had sent to Andrea Corso – authors).

In flight: Great Snipe, even a juvenile, would have shown much wider and better visible tips and corners. So, it is very hard for me to see a Great Snipe tail here. The pale corner could well be actually the shorter and paler small pin-tail like rectrices of a *G. stenura*, where very often, all the outer tail feathers do look

like 2 or 3 pale feathers, being bunched together and being in fact paler. So, up to now, I could not see anything contra a 'Swintail' Snipe (possibly better for a *G. stenura*) and pro Great Snipe. But here we are then: I have NEVER seen a 'Swintail' Snipe with barred "thighs", the legs feathers are always clean white in any *G. stenura* / *G. megala*. I have seen and studied in the hands, while this is truly a character of Great Snipe, and a very relevant one. While I have actually seen *G. stenura* with VERY barred flanks and belly, sometimes all the way into the lower belly, I never have seen one with barred "thighs". So, my final answer would be that I am very confused and if I should be very honest and very strict, based on the leg feathering I would say Great Snipe but if I should give a firm identification for a – let us say for example – a national first of a major rarity, I would go more carefully. Particularly, the tail pattern, with such a limited amount of white is confusing. Sure, if we have here to consider a single clinching character that is UNIQUE, that is the "thigh" pattern in this bird.

Yoav Perlman: This is a challenging bird. It does not look like a Great Snipe, in my opinion.

Importantly, it is small-bodied and does not appear heavy, long-billed, woodcock-like as a Great Snipe should. It lacks prominent white tips to greater coverts. I would expect even a 1cy to show more white on the tail corners. Wingtips are diagnostically (for 'Swintail' Snipe) rounded. Mantle and scapulars pattern also fits 'Swintail' Snipe better. This amount of underparts barring is OK for 'Swintail' Snipe.

Rob van Bemmelen: Although I indeed work in an area where we have several leks of Great Snipe, most sightings are still brief and of course, of birds that are not moulting. Regarding the option of Great Snipe, I would say that the amount of white in the tail is too small for a Great Snipe. Could the outer tail feathers be missing since it is in moult? The photos seem to suggest so. The amount of barring on the belly as well as the underwing definitely fits well to Great Snipe. But, I do not have experience with moulting Great Snipe or 'Swintail' Snipes. So, I cannot be of much help at this moment.

Thus, there was no unanimity among the experts regarding the identification. Yoav Perlman suggested that this was a 'Swintail' Snipe while the other experts suggested that this was a Great Snipe or a probable Great Snipe. The photos were also sent to Paul Leader, who has extensive experience of 'Swintail' Snipes. But, he replied that he had no experience of Great Snipe and so was unable to comment in this matter. A few other experts did not offer any opinion on this.

After discussion with other bird watchers from Gujarat, we identified this very interesting snipe from Nal Sarovar as a Great Snipe. This sighting of Great Snipe from Nal Sarovar is

an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat as it has not been listed in the Gujarat checklist or in the first update to the Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2016, 2017). This individual seen in Nal Sarovar was a juvenile/immature bird and was in moult. It was seen in Nal Sarovar area for more than two weeks. Looking at the difficulties in identifying snipes, bird watchers are urged to look at all snipes in Gujarat very closely as there is a possibility of the occurrence of Great Snipe here in the future.

[The Great Snipe is a 'Near Threatened' species, thought to be experiencing a moderately rapid population decline, owing primarily to habitat loss and degradation, as well as hunting pressure (BirdLife International 2019). It breeds in Europe and winters in Sub-Saharan Africa, and occasionally in the Middle East (Van Gils et al. 2019). For India, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) give it as a rare winter vagrant to South India and Sri Lanka, with some birds perhaps occurring on passage during its migration from Europe to Africa and back. In the recent India Checklist (v3.0), the Great Snipe is classified as a national rarity (less than 10 records in the country) and also as a historical species, meaning that there has been no documented record of the Great Snipe in India since 1 January 1950 (Praveen et al. 2019). Thus, the Great Snipe is a rare winter vagrant to India.]

Regarding the bird seen here in Nal Sarovar, it can be seen that expert opinion is divided. This individual was probably a juvenile/immature bird and except for the barred thighs, did not show any other diagnostic features seen in the Great Snipe. But, with such difficult moulting birds, it can be expected that identification will be challenging. An interesting thing to be noted is that one of the features that is different between the sexes in Great Snipes is the amount of white in the outer tail feathers, with males having more white than females; the amount of white also increases with age (Höglund et al. 1990). Thus, lack of white on outer tail feathers is not unusual in Great Snipes and depends on the age and sex of the bird. We decided to send the images to Jacob Höglund, who has studied the Great Snipe extensively in Scandinavian countries, for his opinion. He opined that this individual looked like a female Great Snipe. He further consulted his two other colleagues, Dr. Frank Johansson and Dr. Anssi Laurila, who both have experience of Great Snipe, and they all agreed that it was a female Great Snipe (Jacob Höglund, in litt., email dated 20 May 2019).

Based on the opinions of experts, field observations by bird watchers here and also the numerous photographs available for study, BCSG has decided to accept this sighting from Nal Sarovar as a Great Snipe. Though we understand that some doubts could remain, we think that the features seen in this individual fit better to a Great Snipe rather than a 'Swintail' Snipe. The thigh barring seen in this bird is one of the main reasons why we accept this as a Great Snipe. Further, the unequivocal opinion by experts from Sweden like Jacob Höglund and his colleagues, who have extensively studied the Great

Great Snipe....

Snipe for many years and identified this individual as a female Great Snipe, helped us in arriving at our decision. If further research indicates that identification features in Great Snipe and 'Swintail' Snipe are overlapping, especially with respect to thigh barring, then we will have a relook at this record and take more expert opinions / re-check with experts again if required. At present, we accept this record as a first record of the Great Snipe for Gujarat.

We are very thankful to Nils Van Duivendijk, Bill Harvey, Yoav Perlman, Andrea Corso, Rob Van Bemmelen, Paul Leader, and many other experts for their help. We are grateful to Praveen J. for his inputs. We specially thank Jacob Höglund and his colleagues for their help in the identification of this bird – Eds]

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Sighting of Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis* in Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary: an addition to the avifauna of Gujarat

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On 4 June 2019, I was in Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary, near Rajpipla, with Hardik Singh and Ashish Chaudhary. We went to meet my friend Mittal Chaudhary, who is a beat guard in the sanctuary. It was around 19:00 hrs, when RFO Pravinbhai Prajapati also came there and suggested that we visit the forest areas. We then went on to the forest trails and started observing the wildlife. After some time, we heard some noises and on inquiring found that some villagers were passing through the area. We then moved ahead and after about one and a half kms, Hardik remarked that there was a large owl (*Bubo* sp.) perched on a tree. It was about 20:00 hrs and due to the darkness, the owl was not clearly seen. Ashish then took a torch, focussed it on the owl and we could see it clearly in the light. The owl was looking towards us for a few moments and then was searching for prey. None of us had seen this owl before and so I informed RFO Pravinbhai that this owl was something different. We took some photographs and observed that it had long ear-tufts, chevron-shaped markings on white underparts, dark brown upperparts with pale buff edges to feathers, white facial disk and large eyes. It was easily identified as a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl (*Bubo nipalensis*). I informed Pravinbhai that this was a rare owl which is usually seen in Northeast India and in the Western Ghats.

We then moved onwards with the aim of not disturbing the owl further. We visited two villages and interacted with the villagers regarding the sanctuary and its wildlife. We returned back to Sagai Campsite later. After returning back, I searched the literature for records of this owl and confirmed that this was the first record of the species from Gujarat. I was very happy to see this bird here.

[The observers took good photographs of this owl and there is no doubt regarding its identification and it is indeed a Spot-bellied Eagle Owl, which is also known as Forest Eagle Owl. In India, the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl is resident in Northeast India, in forests of the Himalayan Foothills and in the Western Ghats (Grimmett et al. 2011). There are isolated records from forests of Central India, mainly from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh (Deshmukh 2008, Majumder et al. 2011, Rai 2018).

For Gujarat, the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl has not been included in the Gujarat Checklist (Parasharya et al. 2004, Ganpule 2016) or in the first update to the Gujarat Checklist (Ganpule 2017). As stated here earlier, this is the first record of the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl from Gujarat and it is an addition to the avifauna of the state – Eds]

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Sighting of Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* near Mahuva, Bhavnagar District – a first photographic record from Gujarat

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sides of neck and upper breast. This bird was seen standing alone, slightly away from Little Stints. I initially thought that it could be a Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and so picked out my camera (a Nikon P-900), and took a few photographs. On seeing the photographs in detail, I was overjoyed to see that it was a Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*) in breeding plumage. I approached nearer to take some better photographs, but the bird flew away.

Since I had never seen a Red-necked Stint before, I thought that, it would be better to get the identification confirmed by experts. So, after coming home in the evening, I shared the photographs with senior birders and they confirmed that this was a Red-necked Stint in breeding plumage. I was further informed that this was the first photographic record of a Red-necked Stint from Gujarat. I visited this location the next evening, but I did not find the bird again.

[The author took a few photographs of this bird and the rufous-orange or chestnut throat, upper breast and sides of neck are clearly visible. The bill is short and deep-based, and shows white at the base. A Little Stint is seen besides this Red-necked Stint and both can be compared in the photograph. Thus, there is no doubt that this is a Red-necked Stint in breeding plumage.

On 16 May 2019, I visited the salt pans near Victor Port (20° 58' 44" N, 71° 33' 25" E), Victor Village, on the road towards Rajula, near Mahuva, Bhavnagar District. I reached the salt pans at around 17:30 hrs and saw that there were very few birds in the area. I travelled about one km in the area and saw a group of Little Stints (*Calidris minuta*) spread in the area. I stopped in the hope of seeing some rare /uncommon waders in this group. While scanning this group, I noticed a wader slightly larger than Little Stints, which had orange-red throat,

Red-necked Stint....

The Red-necked Stint is now a 'Near Threatened' species (BirdLife International 2019). It is a winter visitor to eastern India, with isolated records from Tamil Nadu (Grimmett et al. 2011). It should be noted that Grimmett et al. (2011) show only one isolated record, which is from Karnataka, for the entire western coast of India (from Kerala to Gujarat). Thus, it seems that the Red-necked Stint is very rare on the western coast of India. The species is a winter migrant to E India, Myanmar, S China and Taiwan through Philippines and Indonesia to Solomon Islands, Australia and New Zealand (Van Gils et al. 2019). Thus, its sighting in Gujarat is surprising. It is possible that this bird took a more westerly route on its return migration to its breeding grounds, thus arriving in Gujarat.

The Red-necked Stint is a vagrant to Gujarat and was included in the Gujarat checklist by Parasharya et al. (2004). However, there is no record shown for Gujarat in Grimmett et al. (2011) or in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). Ganpule (2016) stated that a single bird was ringed under the BNHS-MAPS program at Jakhau, Kachchh, by McClure & Porntip (1972), and included the species in the latest Gujarat checklist. In the list of birds ringed at Jakhau by McClure & Porntip (1972), one Red-necked Stint and 43 Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) were ringed. However, the commoner Little Stint is absent from this list. But, since this is a ringing record, it can be assumed that the bird was correctly identified. Thus, only one previous record of the species is known for the state.

The present sighting further confirms that the Red-necked Stint occurs in Gujarat and this is the first photographic record from the state. It is well known that the Red-necked Stint is very similar to the Little Stint in non-breeding plumage, and difficult to identify and separate in the field in the winter. Bird watchers should be

aware and carefully check flocks of Little Stints in detail as there is a possibility of Red-necked Stint occurring here – Eds]

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I am very thankful to RFO R. D. Pathak, who gave permission to me to go out in the field and I am grateful for his help and support.

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Some significant avian records from Prashnavada Wetland, near Sutrapada, Gir-Somnath District

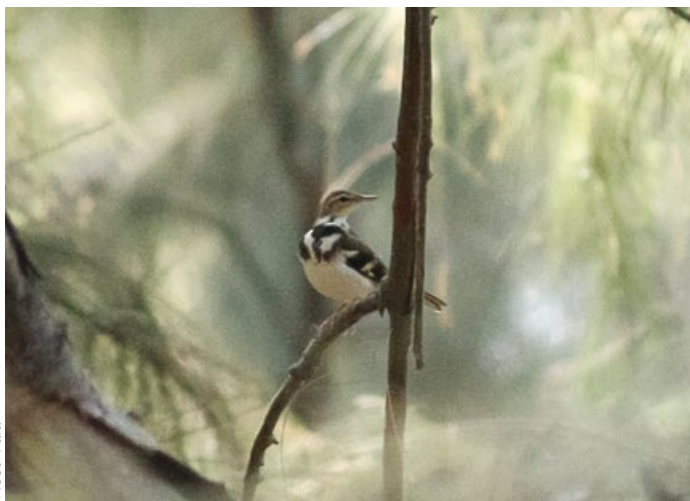
Ravi Patel: F-30, Sidhee Gram Colony, Gujarat Sidhee Cement Ltd., Morasa, Sutrapada. rv.8980478450@gmail.com.

The Prashnavada Wetland (20°48' N, 70°34' E), near Sutrapada, in Gir-Somnath District, supports a wide variety of avifauna. The area includes a mosaic of habitats, with a main wetland and micro-habitats consisting of coastal area, woodland, scrub, and farms. The wetland dries out in the summer and is filled up by the monsoon rains; it is approximately 8 sq. kms in size and is adjacent to the coast. I carried out a detailed study in this area and recorded all the bird sightings from December 2017 to January 2019 – a period of 14 months. The study was conducted round the year, in the winter season as well as in the summer and monsoon. I noted a total of 149 species, out of which 13 species are of interest. The sightings of these species of interest are presented in the table.



Anup Chavada

Meet Vala



Ravi Patel

Gaurang Bagda



The sightings are described in detail as follows:

Black-headed Munia: On 10 November 2017, I was with Gaurang Bagda. We reached the wetland at 07:30 hrs. That day, the temperature was low and it was quite foggy. We had recorded one Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*), four Baillon's Crake (*Porzana pusilla*), two Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*) - one hepatic female and a juvenile, and a Zitting Cisticola (*Cisticola juncidis*). We also saw and photographed three Black-headed Munia. The birds were feeding in the grass with Scaly-breasted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) and Zitting Cisticola. This was the first time I had seen the Black-headed Munia here.

Details of significant avian sightings from Prashnavada Wetland

No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Date of sighting(s)	Accompanying observer(s), if any
1	Black-headed Munia	<i>Lonchura malacca</i>	10 November 2017	Gaurang Bagda
2	Cotton Pygmy-goose	<i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>	1 December 2017	Meet Vala
3	Forest Wagtail	<i>Dendronanthus indicus</i>	2 December 2017 25 December 2018	Meet Vala
4	Red-headed Bunting	<i>Emberiza bruniceps</i>	30 December 2017 13 December 2018	
5	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	16 February 2017 3 February 2018	Saswat Mishra & Dr. Pragnesh Patel
6	Chestnut-tailed Starling	<i>Sturnia malabarica</i>	3 November 2018	
7	Eurasian Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	3 November 2018	
8	Indian Blackbird	<i>Turdus (merula) simillimus</i>	3 November 2018	
9	Sociable Lapwing	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	29 November 2018	
10	Great Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	13 December 2018	Anup Chavda & Shweta Chavda
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	25 December 2018	Dipak Vadher
12	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	13 January 2019	Hemanya Radadiya
13	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	13 January 2019	Hemanya Radadiya

Prashnavada Wetland....

Cotton Pygmy-goose: On 1 December 2017, I was in this area with Meet Vala. We reached towards the coastal trail in the evening. We stopped at the side of the road and scanned the area. At that time, we saw and photographed five Cotton Pygmy-goose here. The birds were feeding and preening. We got some good photographs. This is an uncommon species here.

Forest Wagtail: On 2 December 2017, I went again with Meet Vala. In the morning, we reached the wetland and the area of plantation done by Forest Department. This woodland area is very dense and is devoid of human activity. I have seen forest birds like Indian Paradise-flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) and Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher (*Culicicapa ceylonensis*) in this area. I saw an unusual bird here and after observing it with binoculars, identified it as a Forest Wagtail based on its distinct plumage. A second sighting of the Forest Wagtail from this area was on 25 December 2018. A total of five birds were feeding on the ground and uttered alarm calls when I approached nearer. The Forest Wagtail is uncommon to rare winter visitor in Gujarat, with sightings from Gir / Girnar area and other scattered records from Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016). I believe these are the only records known from coastal Gir-Somnath District.

Red-headed Bunting: On 30 December 2017, on the road near the wetland, I saw approximately 300 buntings in a group. The majority were Red-headed Buntings and a few were Black-headed Buntings (*Emberiza melanocephala*). I observed that the buntings were feeding in a harvested field and roosting on the electric line. The second sighting of a large group was on 13 December 2018, when more than 400 Red-headed Buntings were seen in this area. Again, the group consisted of a majority of this species. Generally, the Red-headed Buntings are seen in small groups of 6-10 birds in this wetland and seeing such large groups twice in this area was noteworthy.

Common Starling: On 16 February 2018, I was with Saswat Mishra & Pragnesh Patel. We were photographing a Water Rail when a dark bird came and started calling. I saw with my binoculars that it was a Common Starling. A second sighting of this species was on 3 February 2019 with Gaurang Bagda. Three starlings in a group were feeding in dry parts of the wetland and roosting on small trees. The Common Starling is an uncommon winter migrant, with scattered records from the state (Ganpule 2016). The sightings from Prashnavada are important and confirm that it visits coastal areas of Gir-Somnath District.

Chestnut-tailed Starling, Indian Blackbird & Eurasian Cuckoo: On 3 November 2018. I went in the morning towards

the wetland and coastal area. I saw a small group of Chestnut-tailed Starlings in this area. I regularly saw this group from November till February. At around 09:00 hrs on the same day, I saw three Indian Blackbirds and observed that there were two males and one female. I took some photographs. On moving further in the area, at around 10:00 hrs, I saw and photographed a Eurasian Cuckoo here. I initially mistook it for a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) but on a closer look, it was easily identified as a Eurasian Cuckoo. The sighting of these three species in a single morning was quite surprising as all these three are uncommon here.

Sociable Lapwing: On 29 November 2018, at 16:00 hrs, I saw a group of Red-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*) while scanning the wetland. At that time, I observed that one bird looked different. On careful observation, I was surprised to see that it was a Sociable Lapwing. It was easily identified by its prominent supercilium, black bill and legs, and dark crown. On the next day, the bird was still there and was seen feeding with the group of Red-wattled Lapwings. The Sociable Lapwing is a 'Critically Endangered' species (BirdLife International 2019). There are published records from Kodinar (Gajjar & Gajjar 2005) and Amreli District (Joshi & Shah 2016); both these areas are not very far from Prashnavada. However, the sighting of a Sociable Lapwing from this area is significant and is probably the only recent record from Gir-Somnath District.

Great Bittern: On 3 December 2018, at around 11:00 hrs, I was birding with Shweta and Anup Chavda. We were observing a small group of Red-headed Buntings. I saw a Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) in flight with one brown-coloured, heron-like bird. I saw with my binoculars that it was a Great Bittern. I called Anup to take a photograph of this rarity! We later observed that there were two Great Bitterns in the area and the Purple Heron was trying to chase the bitterns from its territory. One bittern left the place while the other bittern settled in the reeds nearby. It was the first record of the Great Bittern from Prashnavada Wetland. The Great Bittern is a rare winter visitor to Gujarat and this was a significant record of the species from this area.

Mallard: On 25 December 2018, I was birding with Dipak Vadher. We were birding in the coastal area and took photos of a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). While returning home, I scanned the wetland with my binoculars and saw that some ducks (*Anas* sp.) were disturbed by a dog. When the flock settled again, we saw a male Mallard in the flock. It was easily identified by its distinct plumage and also photographed. This was the first time I had seen a Mallard here. It is rare in this area.

Red-crested Pochard & Sand Martin: On 13 January 2019, I was bird watching with Hemanya Radadiya. We saw a few

White-tailed Lapwings (*Vanellus leucurus*) and took some photos. We saw and photographed a male Red-crested Pochard along with three females. I saw it again on 27 January 2019 & on 3 February 2019 with Gaurang Bagda and Anuj Raina. On the same day, 13 January, Hemanya and I saw Sand Martins here. We observed more than 500 Sand Martins along with Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) and Wire-tailed Swallows (*Hirundo smithii*). The birds were continually catching insects above the wetland. The Red-crested Pochard is uncommon in Saurashtra. This was the first time I had seen it here. The Sand Martin was also seen in such large numbers for the first time.

The above records show that Prashnavada Wetland is an important area for water birds as well as other terrestrial birds. This area is not frequented by many bird watchers and it is not a popular birding destination. Many uncommon and rare

species have been observed in this area in the past one year and more intensive birding may result in a few more surprises. I intend to continue bird watching in this area and look for uncommon / rare birds in this wetland.

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Sightings of Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* from Rajkot and Amreli

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The Eurasian Scops Owl (*Otus scops*) is a polytypic species, which breeds in Europe, in Africa north of the Sahara from Morocco to Tunisia, in the Middle East, Asia Minor and eastwards to Central Asia; it winters in savannahs of west and east Africa (Holt *et al.* 2019). In India, its status is unclear, with Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) stating that it is a rare autumn migrant to NW India while Chandran *et al.* (2016) speculate that the Eurasian Scops Owl, 'if at all it occurs, may be limited as a rare passage migrant to western India, though it is not entirely unlikely in the south'. Kazmierczak (2000) and Grimmett *et al.* (2011) consider it as a winter migrant to southern Pakistan, with isolated records from NW India. For Gujarat, Ganpule (2016) stated that it was believed to be a winter vagrant, with records from Bhavnagar area. Here, we present sightings of Eurasian Scops Owl from Amreli and Rajkot, in Saurashtra, in the years 2017 & 2018.

On 13 November 2018, at around 22:00 hrs, the second and third authors were searching for scops owls (*Otus* sp.) in a wetland near Amreli. They saw an unfamiliar scops owl at the edge of the wetland, where the bird was drinking water. Unfortunately, it got disturbed and flew away. On searching further for the owl in the surrounding area, they subsequently found it perched in a tree. They observed this individual for around 4 hours and were able to take many excellent photos. It was greyish in colour, with some rufous on underparts and

on the facial disk; the underparts were heavily streaked and cross barred; tarsal feathering was absent on the toes, which, along with the rufous in plumage, excluded the Pallid Scops Owl (*Otus brucei*), which is known to be an uncommon but regular winter visitor to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). They also heard the characteristic *tuuew-tuuew* call uttered by this individual, which excluded the possibility of this being an Oriental Scops Owl (*Otus sunia*). Thus, the identification was confirmed as a Eurasian Scops Owl. However, in subsequent visits to the same area, they were not able to find the owl again. This was the first time the authors had seen this species in Amreli.

On 14 December 2018, at around 16:45 hrs, while bird watching near the premises of Rajkot Zoological Park, near Rajkot, which is also known as Pradyuman Park Zoo, the first author was observing a Sykes's Warbler (*Iduna rama*) moving from one tree to another, when a small owl was seen roosting on a purple baubinia (*Bauhinia purpurea*) at a height of 12-14 feet. It was not disturbed by the noise of people passing through there. It was observed that a Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) was constantly disturbing the owl. The first author was able to take many photos. The bird was overall greyish-brown in colour, with cross barring and some rufous patches on its underparts. The Pallid Scops Owl was easily excluded as tarsal feathering on the toes was absent and also by the presence of rufous patches on the body.

Eurasian Scops Owl...



Hemanya Radadia

on an asphalt road. It seemed like the owl was killed due to a collision with some vehicle. The road was passing through *Acacia* sp. dominated thorn forest, with some farms and scrub. The owl was identified as a Eurasian Scops Owl, as we noted that it was greyish in colour, with notable rufous on the facial disk and underparts; tarsal feathering was absent on the toes, which eliminated the possibility of this being a Pallid Scops Owl. The underparts were irregularly streaked, with cross barring on the lower belly. It had long wings extending beyond the tail. Many photographs were taken. On a closer scrutiny of the photos, it was noted that p1 (the outermost primary) was noticeably longer than p6 (the sixth primary). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that in-hand, p1 (the outermost primary) is longer than p6 in Eurasian Scops Owl; it is equal to p6 for Pallid Scops Owl and p1 is much shorter than p6 in Oriental Scops Owl. Based on this, we confirmed the identification of this individual as a Eurasian Scops Owl as this feature was clearly visible in the photos.



Kaushal Sharma

Although call was not heard, the similar Oriental Scops Owl was excluded based on the features described for the Oriental Scops Owl in Chandran *et al.* (2016), which were not present in this individual. Moreover, looking at the recently published records of Oriental Scops Owl from Saurashtra, it was noted that all the birds observed here were of the rufous morph (Bhaliya & Kotadiya 2016, Chauhan 2017, Gohil 2018) and there are no images of a grey-brown morph of Oriental Scops Owl from Saurashtra. Though, it should be noted that this is only indicative and cannot be used to eliminate the Oriental Scops Owl in this case. However, studying the features seen in this individual and comparing with identification details given in Chandran *et al.* (2016), we were confident that this was a Eurasian Scops Owl. This is a first record of a Eurasian Scops Owl from Rajkot District (Ashok Mashru, *pers comm.*, verbally)

On 22 November 2017, the fourth author was travelling near Bagasara, Amreli, when he found a road-kill of an owl

There are only a few places in Gujarat where Eurasian Scops Owl has been recorded. These include Bhavnagar, Kachchh, Little Rann of Kachchh and Mahuva; the last location is from where the species has been regularly recorded (Bhil 2016, Joshi & Legha 2017). It was seen in Mahuva in November and December 2018 too (Gaurang Bagda, 'eBird'). Now, Rajkot and Amreli can be added to the list of places where this species has been seen in Gujarat. Based on the recent records from Gujarat and also from our observations, it seems that the Eurasian Scops Owl is, in addition to being a passage migrant, also a winter visitor to Gujarat. Most of the sightings from recent years are from the winter months – November to February. While it could be mainly a passage migrant through

the state, some individuals do stay back for an extended period in the winter. But, more observations will help in understanding the status and distribution of the Eurasian Scops Owl in Gujarat.

Acknowledgements

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Sighting of Plain Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus* near Nal Sarovar

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collybita) of the *tristis* subspecies, which is also known as Siberian Chiffchaff, and which winters in India; Plain Leaf Warbler can be separated from Siberian Chiffchaff by its smaller size, proportionately shorter tail and larger head. Its call is a hard *tak tak* and a low-pitched *churr*, which is different from the call of a Siberian Chiffchaff (Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

The Plain Leaf Warbler is thought to be a rare winter migrant or a vagrant to Gujarat, and is probably overlooked due to identification difficulties. Sight records from Little Rann of Kachchh and Amreli are known and it is thought to occur in the Greater Rann of Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). However, there are no photographic records from Greater Rann.

On 13 February 2019, we were birding in the areas surrounding Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. At around 08:00 hrs, on the outskirts of Aniyari, a small village near the sanctuary, we saw a flock of Black-headed Buntings (*Emberiza melanocephala*) and Red-headed Buntings (*Emberiza bruniceps*). We stopped to photograph these birds. After a few minutes, we noticed a

The Plain Leaf Warbler (*Phylloscopus neglectus*) is a winter migrant to western India (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that there are a few sight records from India, but no specimens were traced. The Plain Leaf Warbler looks very similar to a Common Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus*

Plain Leaf Warbler...

small warbler (*Phylloscopus* sp.) perched on a dried branch of a *Prosopis* just about 15-20 feet in front of us. It stayed there for 10-15 seconds and changed its position once or twice. Since it was very near to us, we could get good photographs. We initially thought that it was a Common Chiffchaff but saw that it had a shorter tail and a larger head, lacked any yellow at the wing-bend and had a small bill. We referred to Shirihai & Svensson (2018) and in addition to the features described, confirmed the identification as a Plain Leaf Warbler based on the pale olive-tinged edges to the secondaries forming a hint of a panel, white undertail-coverts, whitish supercilium in front of eye become isabelline-tinged behind the eye, darker eye-stripe extending beyond eye, and pale brownish-tinged head and mantle. On the same day and near this area, we saw another warbler which was smaller and looked different from a Common Chiffchaff. However, we could not get any images to confirm the identification. But, we felt that it could also have been a Plain Leaf Warbler.

This sighting confirms the occurrence of Plain Leaf Warbler near Nal Sarovar. Since the identification of Plain Leaf

Warbler in the field is quite difficult, we feel that it is probably overlooked and could be present in suitable habitats, especially in Saurashtra and Kachchh. The Plain Leaf Warbler prefers open wooded areas, tamarisks and acacias in the winter; these are the habitats in which it should be looked out for in the state.

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Unusual prey by White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* and Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* in Jamnagar

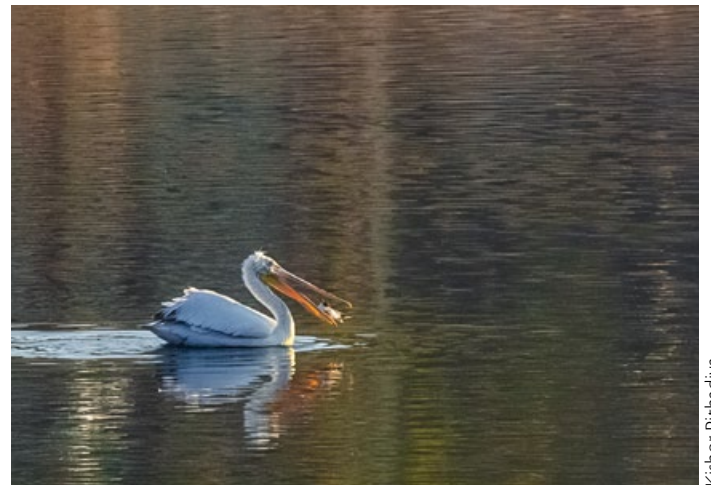
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Kishor Pithadiya

On 25 May 2018, while birding at Lakhota Lake, Jamnagar, which is also known as Ranmal Lake, I saw three White-throated Kingfishers (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), most likely a family, which included both parent birds along with one juvenile, perched on a tree. While searching for prey, they found a bat (*Chiroptera* sp.), which was probably a juvenile, and had come on to the ground and was hiding in a small hollow in the ground. I could not identify the species of the bat – it was probably either a *Chiroptera* sp. or a juvenile of flying fox

(*Pteropus* sp.). It was not the pipistrelle since it was quite large in size. One parent bird caught the bat in its beak and settled on the ground. The other adult bird rushed towards it and snatched the prey with its beak. Thereafter, a competition started and both the birds got busy snatching, tearing and eating the prey. After about seven minutes, they finished the prey, and only the wings were left. The juvenile bird was sitting nearby and observing the parents during the whole event. I took many photos of the birds feeding on the bat.



Kishor Pithadiya

I visit Lakhota Lake almost daily for bird watching. On 17 February 2019, while birding in a part of the lake near Mig Colony, one Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) caught my attention. It seemed actively searching for prey, and so I immediately got ready with my camera. There were a few birds nearby, including a Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) resting on the ground, adjacent to the shallow water. Suddenly, the Pelican caught this tern in its beak, with its pouch open, and within a fraction of a second, swallowed it whole. This happened so rapidly that I managed to take only one photo, wherein the tern can be seen in the pelican's beak! I was amazed to witness this event.

In both these observations, the prey taken is unusual. The White-throated Kingfisher is known to take a variety of prey; insects, crabs, fish, frogs, lizards, mice and small birds are taken (Woodall & Kirwan 2019). But, it has not been documented / photographed in Gujarat feeding on a bat and this is an addition to its already varied diet. The Dalmatian Pelican

usually feeds on different varieties of fish (Elliott *et al.* 2019). Pelicans are opportunistic feeders; the Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) has been documented feeding on birds in Jamnagar, but, the Dalmatian Pelican was observed to be reluctant in taking birds (Patel 2016). However, in this instance, the pelican caught the tern and swallowed it whole. It is possible that the Dalmatian Pelican too takes birds when the opportunity arises.

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Indian Scops Owl *Otus bakkamoena* and Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* in Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, Jamnagar

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On 3 February 2019, the first author visited the Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, near Jamnagar, along with a group of people for the recording of his interview in an educational purpose film about the sanctuary. When he entered the 'jacana' trail, the second author, a wildlife photographer from Jamnagar, along with the other authors (who are from Rajkot), were already there and they directed him to have a look at one of the owls (*Otus* sp.) perched in a nearby tree, which they assumed to be a Pallid Scops Owl (*Otus brucei*). However, after getting some photographs of the owl, the first author realized that it was different from a Pallid Scops Owl and looked more like an Indian Scops Owl (*Otus bakkamoena*) and so he shared the photos with other birders. The identification was confirmed as an Indian Scops Owl with the help of Dr. Maulik Varu and Prasad Ganpule. While returning back, we saw two Pallid Scops Owls on a branch of a tree at a height of around 12 feet. The birds were roosting and were undisturbed by our presence. These individuals were first noted by the Forest Department staff of the sanctuary almost one month prior to our sighting them here. The birds were perching in this tree regularly. The Pallid Scops Owls were also photographed and the identification confirmed.

Scops Owls....



Rajdeepsinh Jadeja

As per the details we gathered from other birdwatchers, both these owl species have been noted in Khijadiya for the first time. While Indian Scops Owl is regularly seen in the forest areas from north to south Gujarat, and in the Gir/Girnar forest in Saurashtra (Ganpule 2016), there are no sightings reported from any other area of Saurashtra. This is the first time that it

has been noted here in Khijadiya and it is a significant record for Jamnagar District. The Pallid Scops Owl is an uncommon but widespread winter migrant to Kachchh and Saurashtra, with many isolated records from Saurashtra in the past few years (Chauhan 2017, Dave 2017). Hence, its occurrence in Khijadiya is not very surprising. But, this is the first time that it has been photographed here and the sighting of two individuals over a period of more than one month suggests that it could be wintering in this area. The habitat in this sanctuary is indeed suitable for owls and there could be more individuals of both species here.

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Rescue of Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* at Porbandar

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Paresh Pitroda

The Eurasian Griffon (*Gyps fulvus*), also known as Griffon Vulture, is an uncommon winter visitor to Gujarat, mainly

seen in the desert areas of Greater Rann of Kachchh, Banni and there are isolated records from Little Rann of Kachchh (Ganpule 2016).

On the evening of 15 November 2013, the second author received a call that a raptor / bird of prey was sitting idle and not showing any movement since last three hours at the farm of Rama Odedara, near Porbandar. Later, we rescued the bird in a dehydrated condition and brought it to the Porbandar Bird Sanctuary.

It was identified as a juvenile or immature Eurasian Griffon based on the cinnamon-brown plumage, bill being completely dark with pale tip, ruff with lanceolated feathers, pointed upperwing coverts and mantle feathers with streaked appearance (Duriez *et al.* 2011). Dr. Parvez Chavda, veterinary doctor at the Porbandar Bird Sanctuary, who joined us on the same day, observed the symptoms and found a pathological infection and thus gave it primary treatment. For further treatment, the bird was immediately sent to Sakkarbaug Zoo, Junagadh. On the next day, we were informed that the bird was out of danger and recovering well.

Since 2000, this was probably the first sighting of any vulture species in Porbandar District. Jaydev Dhadhal had stated that 'two-four vultures seen over Ashapura and Abhapara Hills are seen no more in Barda' (Dhadhal 2000). In a blog, he mentioned White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*) in the checklist of Porbandar but, Eurasian Griffon is not mentioned (Dhadhal 2008). Hence, this is the first photographic record of the species from Porbandar in recent years. It is interesting to note that on 14 November, we had heard about the sighting of two vultures at a dumping site near Kutiyana, which is around 50 km from Porbandar. But, there have been no reports / photographs of vultures after 2013 from Porbandar District that we are aware of. Rescued migratory birds like this vulture should be released before return migration starts and

must not be kept in an aviary permanently if the bird is doing well and capable of flying. If healthy, it would return to its breeding grounds.

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Sighting of a flock of Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* near Bhuj, Kachchh

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Tejus Naik

We were on a bird photography trip to Greater Rann of Kachchh, and 28 January 2019 was the fourth day of our trip. In the three days we spent in Kachchh, we had seen and photographed many desert specialties and uncommon birds like White-naped Tit (*Parus nuchalis*), Greater Hoopoe Lark (*Alaemon alaudipes*), Cream-colored Courser (*Cursorius cursor*), Spotted Sandgrouse (*Pterocles senegallus*), Variable Wheatear (*Oenanthe picata ophistholeuca*), Grey Hypocolius (*Hypocolius ampelinus*), and many more bird and mammal species.

During this trip, in the previous three days, we got almost every targeted bird species from our list, except 2-3 species. Now, on the fourth and last day of our trip, one of our remaining target species was the Trumpeter Finch (*Bucanetes githagineus*). We had tried earlier for this finch but failed to find it at the place where it was recorded a few days back. Then, we decided to spend the last day searching for it.

This year, very less rainfall was recorded in Kachchh area (monsoon – 2018) and it was almost like there was no rain and so, almost every wetland, small water bodies and other ponds and lakes, where rainwater generally remains till the winter, were completely dry. In this harsh situation of water scarcity, the only source of water were small puddles seen by the road side, due to leakages in underground water distribution pipe lines, which are used for supply of drinking water to villages. These puddles attracted many birds since there was no water in nearby areas. The Trumpeter Finch was seen earlier this season in one such place, around an arid and stony area besides the Bhuj – Nirona Road. So, on the last day of our trip, we started for the Trumpeter Finch location at around 07:00 hrs and reached at that place at around 08:30 hrs. A small puddle, containing hardly around 20-25 liters of water, was the location where the birds were seen earlier.

We had heard that only 2-3 Trumpeter Finches were recorded at that place and so waited there. At around 08:45 – 09:00 hrs, a small flock of 12-15 Trumpeter Finch landed near the water and on seeing that flock, we were just amazed. Then, after 8-10 seconds, the flock flew away and perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* just around 50 ft behind us. We continued observing and saw that 2-3 other flocks came and perched there. The total flock size was more than 50 birds. We counted 52 birds and one of us was able to take a photograph with more than 40 birds in a single photo. We were very happy see our target species and that too, in such a large flock. We realized the importance of this puddle of water for the Trumpeter Finch

Trumpeter Finch....

here. At that time, we had around 5 liters of drinking water with us and we decided to fill that small puddle. After adding water to that puddle, we waited there for around an hour and recorded the behaviour of the Trumpeter Finch and took many photographs.

While the Trumpeter Finch is known to occur in Kachchh, and flocks of up to 25 birds have been recorded previously (Parekh 2016), this was the first time that more than 50 birds had

been seen together. It is likely that due to the unavailability of water at other places, the birds had congregated here from surrounding areas.

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Sighting of Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* and Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* in Kevdi Forest, near Mandvi, Surat

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A program on inculcating scientific approach towards bird watching was held at Kevdi Eco Campsite, near Mandvi, in Surat District, on 24 and 25 February 2018. It was organized by BCSG in association with Nature Club Surat, and saw the participation of bird watchers from all over the state.

As a part of the program, we went for bird watching with Pratik Parmar on a route on the morning of 25 February 2018. Another birdwatcher friend met us while we were returning to the campsite. Near the campsite, we saw two birds flying overhead. The second author immediately identified the birds as Black Storks (*Ciconia nigra*) from the typical triangular white patch which is seen from below in flight in this species. It seemed like the birds were immature as the bill was brownish and legs were pale yellowish (both are red in adults). We took some photographs and confirmed the identification.

In another sighting on 25 February 2018, at around 08:45 hrs, the second author, with another group of bird watchers comprising of Kaushal Modi, Kiran Shah and Mallikarjun, sighted a Black-capped Kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*) near a small valley. The bird was perched on a tree and could be seen clearly. We could observe it for some time and took some good photographs.

Both these species are uncommon in this area. While the Black Stork is an uncommon to rare winter migrant to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016), it is quite rare in southern Gujarat. There are very few documented sightings of Black Stork from this region. The Black-capped Kingfisher is also an uncommon to rare resident and local migrant in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). Hence, the sighting of the Black-capped Kingfisher from Kevdi area in late winter is surprising. In general, this area is not visited frequently by birders. These two sightings indicate that the area could be a promising place for bird watching.

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Short Birding Notes



Slaty-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus* near Dhari, Amreli District

On Saturday, 21 November 2018, I went for birding at Khodiyar Temple, near Khodiyar Dam, Dhari, Amreli District. Near the temple, there is a stream, which runs off the river. There are lot of reeds and grasses, with muddy areas in between. At around 10:00 hrs, I saw a rail (*Rallus* sp.) coming out of the reeds and searching for food in the area. I took some photos. With the help of the field guide and photos, I confirmed this as a Slaty-breasted Rail (*Gallirallus striatus*) based on the stout red bill, faintly whitish barred upperparts and pale chestnut crown and nape. It seemed to be an immature individual. On the next day, I went again, but could not find the bird. I heard its call from a nearby area but could not see it. The Slaty-breasted Rail is rare in Saurashtra, though sightings from Barda (near Porbandar) and Nal Sarovar are documented; it is a regular monsoon migrant to southern Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). This is a sighting from the early winter and a very good record for our area.

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Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis pallidirostris* in Bhavnagar

On 16 December 2018, in the morning at 07:30 hrs, my friend Vivek Upadhyay and I were passing through the cable bridge near Bhavnagar. We saw one shrike (*Lanius* sp.) perched on an electric wire. We stopped to watch it but it flew away in the nearby bushes. To confirm its identification, we searched for it, found it and I took a few photographs. After coming home and sharing the photos on social media, it was identified as a Steppe Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis pallidirostris*) by the pale bill, pale black mask in front of eye (not extending on forehead), long primary projection, pinkish wash to underparts, white scapulars etc. The Steppe Grey Shrike is an uncommon to rare winter visitor to Gujarat, and has been mainly recorded from Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). This is probably the first record of the Steppe Grey Shrike from Bhavnagar area.

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Little Crake *Porzana parva* near Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary

On 13 March 2019, in the evening, I was bird watching on the outskirts of Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary. In an area with reeds and water, I saw and photographed an adult male Little Crake (*Porzana parva*). It was identified by the red base to bill and the longer primary projection. Its plumage was typical of adult male. This individual was seen here for 2-3 weeks, in the same area. The Little Crake is a vagrant to Gujarat, with recent records from Jamnagar and Anand/Kheda Districts (photos on the website Oriental Bird Images). This was the first time it has been recorded near Nal Sarovar.

Ashraf Sama: At – Nal Sarovar



Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* in Kuchchh

I saw and photographed a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) near Kunathiya Bustard Sanctuary at Naliya, Kachchh, on 20 January 2019. It seemed to be either a female or a first-winter bird. The habitat is open grassland with some small bushes. I saw the bird perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* and since it was quite confiding, I spent some time with this individual and observed its behaviour. Only one bird was seen. The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush was foraging on the ground, between small rocks and in the dry grass. I saw it go near a *Ziziphus nummularia* tree and collect a fruit from the ground and eat it. The Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush is a rare passage migrant or vagrant in Gujarat, with recent sightings from Saurashtra, Kachchh and Central Gujarat. This sighting is from the winter and suggests that a few individuals could straggle to Kachchh in the winter.

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Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* feeding on a bat

On 2 April 2019, we visited the outskirts of Rajpipla, in Narmada District. It was around midnight when we heard a very faint call, a *whoo-wuk*, a couple of times, and after searching, the call became very clear, but the bird was not visible. After trying to locate the bird, it suddenly flew away, disappeared for a few seconds, came back and perched on a branch of a tree. It was readily identified as a Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*). After taking a few photographs, we were surprised to see that the owl had made a fresh bat kill. After waiting for about 5 to 10 minutes, the owl started to feed on the bat. We could not identify the species of the bat it had caught. The owl tore off small pieces and would take a bite or two, look around, and repeat it. The Brown Hawk Owl feeds mainly on insects, but also takes frogs, lizards, small birds and mammals, including bats (Olsen *et al.* 2019). There are very few photographs of it feeding on a bat.

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White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* at Rajkot

We visited Randarda Lake on the morning of 20 April 2019 for participating in a cleaning program by Wild Saurashtra Group. We saw an unusual and different type of tern amongst a flock of Whiskered Terns (*Chlidonias hybrida*) and River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) coming to feed on *ganthiya* (a fried snack) offered by local people. We identified it as a White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) in full breeding plumage. We saw a total of three White-winged Terns here. Afterwards, Ashok Mashru also saw a single White-winged Tern at Nyari-I Dam on 24 April 2019, and again on the morning of 29 April 2019. Earlier, Raju Karia had seen a White-winged Tern at Nyari-I Dam on 16 April 2014 (Karia 2015). This shows that there is a possibility of it visiting more wetlands in Rajkot area but is overlooked due to similarity with Whiskered Tern in the winter and is noted in early summer due to its conspicuous plumage.

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Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* near Anand

On 10 November 2015, I was travelling between Tarapur and Pariej, near Anand. I saw and photographed a Black-capped Kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*) perched on the side of the road. On a closer approach, the bird flew away and perched on the banks of a small river nearby. I was able to take good photographs, which confirmed the identification. The Black-capped Kingfisher is uncommon or rare, but widely distributed in Gujarat, with sightings from coastal as well as inland areas in almost the entire state (Rank & Parasharya 2004, Ganpule 2016). Very few records from Anand District are known.

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Further observations on breeding of Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*

I had described, in detail, the breeding of Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) earlier in Rajkot (Mashru 2018). I would like to add an observation and a change for this year i.e. 2019, compared to the earlier years breeding observations (2014-2018). I had stated in 'nesting hole' in Mashru (2018) that 'it never uses the same hole in the next season'. In the month of October 2018, the birds started digging a nest hole at two different places but stopped after a few days. In the first week of March, I saw the adult go in the nest hole made in 2018. Then, around 10 March 2019, looking at the behaviour of the pair, I presumed that incubation had started. On 30 March 2019, I saw the bird go in to feed the chicks for the first time. Further, the same nest hole was used for the second brood, which was also successful. So, the Coppersmith Barbet used the same nest hole made in the previous year. The exact reasons for using the nest hole from the previous season remain unclear.

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Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* in Khijadia Bird Sanctuary

On 2 February 2019, we went to Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, near Jamnagar. When we were moving on a road in part II of the sanctuary, a bird flew in and perched on a branch of a *Salvadora* sp. tree, which caught our attention. After watching through binoculars and taking photos, we identified it as a female Grey Hypocolius (*Hypocolius ampelinus*). There were many *Salvadora* trees on this road, and so we were hopeful of seeing more birds as the Grey Hypocolius likes to feed on the fruits of this tree. On moving further along the road, we found and photographed two males. The Grey Hypocolius is a regular winter visitor to Banni area of Kachchh but is rare in Jamnagar with previous records from Narara (Jadeja 2015) and Khijadiya (Buch 2018, Kunal Joshi, *pers. comm.*). Hence, the present sighting suggests that this species might be a rare but regular winter visitor to suitable habitats in Jamnagar District.

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Unusual feeding behaviour of Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

I visited Chhari-Dhand, in Greater Rann of Kachchh, on 7 December 2018, for watching raptors in the area. I saw and stopped to photograph a Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*) which was perched on the ground. The bird was preening its feathers and I started to photograph it. The bird preened some of its back feathers and pulled out small white feathers from its back. I was amazed to see that the Long-legged Buzzard then ate these feathers. It also picked up some small white feathers which had fallen on the ground and ate them. On sharing this observation with experts, Hans Peeters suggested that this bird was eating its moulting down, which would perhaps help in formation of a pellet of indigestible prey remains, which would soon be ejected. This was something new for me and I had never seen any bird of prey eating its own down feathers. I thank Hans Peeters for explaining this behaviour of the Long-legged Buzzard.

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Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus* in Kachchh

On 9 December 2018, we went to explore a hilly and rocky area on the Bhuj - Mundra Road, near Bharapar Village. After some time, we saw a warbler (*Phylloscopus* sp.) which was continuously flying from one rock to another, moving and foraging. We thought that it was something new, and so we waited there to get some photographs. We managed to get a few photographs from a distance. We identified it as a Sulphur-bellied Warbler (*Phylloscopus griseolus*). We waited for some time, but then it disappeared. We shared the photographs with experts, and the identification was confirmed by them. The Sulphur-bellied Warbler is a rare winter migrant to Kachchh, with recent records from Phot Mahadev and Bhuj in Kachchh (Tiwari 2016). Thus, this sighting adds to the records of this species from Kachchh.

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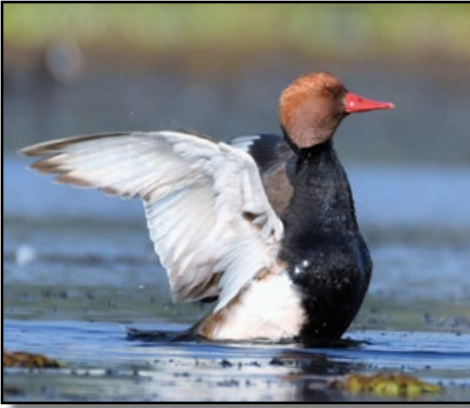


White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* near Navsari

On 19 September 2018, we went to Sultanpur Wetland near Navsari. After watching flamingos (*Phoenicopterus* sp.), we came on to the main road and suddenly, we saw a group of 20 to 25 terns (*Sterna* and *Chlidonias* sp.) flying around the wetland. I observed, from the moving car, a tern with black underwing coverts and black belly, which looked different from the remaining terns. So, we immediately photographed it. For identification, we contacted Anil Bhatt and it was identified as White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*). It seemed to be moulting out of breeding plumage. Anil Bhatt further told us that though the White-winged Tern is a widespread winter migrant to Gujarat, this might be the first photographic record of a White-winged Tern from southern Gujarat.

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Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* near Bilimora, Navsari District

A Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) was seen and photographed for many days in January 2019 at Devsar, near Bilimora, in Navsari District. It was seen in a large wetland in the area. According to senior bird watchers here, it was the first record of the species after ten years as it was last seen here in January 2008. There was one pair seen in this area. The Red-crested Pochard is known to occur in wetlands of Central and North Gujarat while it is rare in Saurashtra and South Gujarat. Thus, this sighting from Navsari District after ten years is quite surprising and it seems that it visits wetlands in this district only rarely.

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White-browed Bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus* near Rajkot

A White-browed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus luteolus*) was seen and photographed near Sindhavadar, in Ta: Wankaner, Dist: Rajkot, on 26 January 2019. The bird was seen perched in the bushes and we managed to take a few photographs. The area is a scrub surrounded by farms. We were surprised to see the White-browed Bulbul here as it is quite rare in Saurashtra. Though a recent record from Rajkot is known (Bhatt & Trivedi 2016), this location is more than 50 kms from the place where it was seen earlier and there are no other recent records from the region.

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Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* near Amalsad, Navsari District

I visited Amalsad outskirts, in Navsari District, on 5 December 2019, with Viren Desai. We had gone there to see and photograph a Great Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) which was found by Praveen Patel and Anil Bhatt. We reached there at around 07:00 hrs and saw the Great Bittern at around at 08.15 hrs. We searched the area for other waders / water birds. At around 10:00 hrs, I saw a bird fly from one patch of reeds towards another and land some distance away in the water. Before it went inside the reeds, we managed to get a record shot from long distance and we immediately identified it as a Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) by its long, down-curved red bill, streaked olive-brown upperparts etc. The Water Rail is uncommon / rare in Navsari District.

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Errata: Flamingo Gujarat 17 (1) - Page 6: In editorial comments, reference of Praveen et al. (2014) is quoted, which is not included in the list of references. The details of the reference are: Praveen J, Jayapal, R, & Pittie, A., 2014. Notes on Indian rarities - 2: Waterfowl, diving waterbirds, and gulls and terns. *Indian BIRDS* 9 (5&6): 113–136

'Feather Frame'

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Pellets: What is a pellet? 'A compact mass, composed of those undigested portions of a bird's food that has been retained in the stomach by a mechanical barrier for a period before being regurgitated and ejected through the mouth and not evacuated as droppings, is called a pellet'. Sometimes, it is also known as castings.

Pellets vary significantly from species to species with respect to size, colour, shape and the proportions of prey remains. They form an important research tool for ornithologists, who are examining the feeding habits and diet variations in birds according to season, year, region and also habitat. The process of the ejection of a pellet may be abrupt and effortless in some birds or take as long as an hour with nausea like appearance or visible discomfort in others. The process usually consists of several upward stretches of the neck and the head, known as convulsive movement, which is followed by lowering and shaking of the head with the bill open, thus discharging the pellet. Pellets also serve another significant purpose. While regurgitating on the way up, the pellets pass through the bird's gullet. On the way, it scours and cleanses the digestive tract, removing pathogens, thus keeping the bird healthy.

Pellets are very important ecological tools for ornithologists studying food preferences and its dynamics in birds. Pellets produced by large birds generally consists of a central core of hard materials such as bones, beaks, claws, scales, teeth etc. covered by softer substances like fur or feathers. Interestingly, hard food fragments such as beaks or legs and long bones of mammals or reptiles tend to align vertically for the ease in ejection. Mostly, the shape of pellets is oval, though it is round sometimes.

Owl (*Strigidae* & *Tytonidae*) pellets are most studied as they usually swallow food items entirely and thus their pellets retain the bones of their prey, which provide good evidence of the birds/mammals/reptiles eaten. Surprisingly, raptors are not so helpful to researchers, as they tear the flesh of their prey and many times, consume the prey partially. This gives an incomplete pellet record. Pellets of kestrels (*Falco* sp.) and some owls which consume small birds have also contained bird rings. Even materials like paper, plastic and cellophane have been discovered in pellets of some birds like gulls (*Laridae*) and albatrosses (*Diomedidae*). Owl pellets have also helped in finding rare or scarce small mammal species. Biologist Rita Gomes Rocha of Brazil was able to discover a couple of species of rice rats (Genus *Oecomys*) which were probably new to science with the help of Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) pellets (<http://mentalfloss.com/article/64613/scientists-uncover-new-species-owl-pellets>).

The small sized pellets of waders (*Scolopacidae*) contain fragments of crustaceans and mollusks as major items. Similarly, that of Oriental Honey-buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) may contain wax, fish bones in kingfishers (*Alcedinidae*), sand in dippers (*Cinclidae*), parts of hard exoskeleton of insects in flycatchers (*Muscicapidae*) and grain husks in small passerines. Interested readers can visit www.pellet.com for more information. This aspect of bird biology has not been studied in Gujarat and this is one area in which further research should be encouraged in our state. □



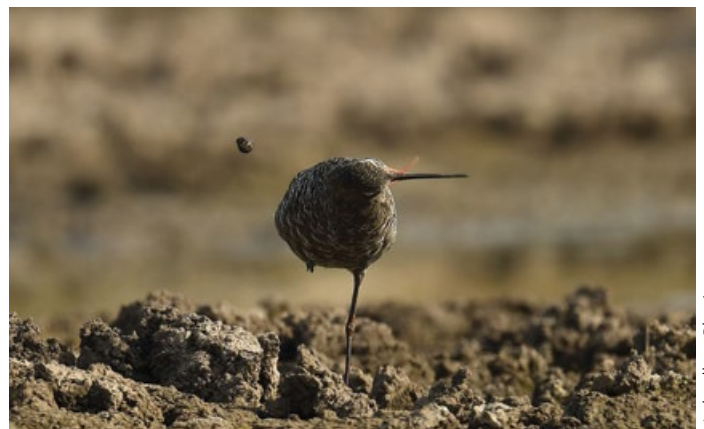
Gull regurgitating a pellet

Rajdeepsinh Jadeja



Shrike regurgitating a pellet

Yashodhan Bhatia



Redshank regurgitating a pellet

Yashodhan Bhatia

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The depression comes from the knowledge that though human beings have down the ages accumulated wisdom they also continue to burden themselves by their ignorance, fears, avarice and selfishness. The great forces of Nature which shaped our bodies and our minds are still feared and despite all the wisdom given to us by great thinkers: the broken piece of ancient pottery mutely highlights humanity's apparent incapacity of accepting the destiny as a sensate, intellectual organism. We continue to nurture in our consciousness the nameless fears of our prehuman ancestors. If every eagle can soar, if every tree can grow into its destined magnificence, why cannot every human being attain a lifestyle at once rich and vibrant. That each of us can indeed achieve a state of enlightenment is a promise enmeshed in the fabric of our culture yet all around us we see the rise of chaos, the erosion of values.

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- Lavkumar Khachar

