

An unusual
Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vupinus*
in Little Rann of Kachchh





On 3 January 2021, I was visiting the western part of the Little Rann of Kachchh, near the village of Tikkar, with Jignesh Miyatra, for bird watching. At around 09:00 hrs, we saw a small-sized *Buteo* buzzard perched on a wooden stick tied by the salt-pan workers. We went closer and saw that it was like a Steppe Buzzard (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*) but its plumage was quite odd for a Steppe Buzzard. A brief description of the bird is provided here:

It had white underparts, with pale brownish streaking on upper breast and belly; the streaking was thin, irregular and sparse; lower belly-sides were darker brownish with barring while central

belly was pale; throat was pale rufous; prominent whitish supercilium was apparent. The mantle was dark brown while the scapulars and wings were pale brownish, blotched with white. The tail lacked rufous and was barred, with darker sub-terminal tail band. The underwings had a dark trailing edge, showing barred secondaries and lacked a dark carpal patch but had a dark carpal 'comma'. It could be aged as a juvenile based on its eye (pupil discernable). We were able to take many photographs. On 17 January 2021, I visited this area again with Ashok Mashru and Manoj Finava. We saw this bird once again, which was easily identified as the same individual due to its distinctive plumage. We took good photographs, including photos showing the underwings. A few photos are given here.

The Steppe Buzzard is very variable in plumage and occurs in different morphs; fox-red, grey-brown, dark rufous and black (Forsman 2006). All types of morphs are seen in Gujarat (Ganpule & Bhatt 2014). The Steppe Buzzard is uncommon in this area but a few individuals are seen here almost every year. However, having seen many Steppe Buzzards over the years, I found this individual to be very different from the birds usually seen in these parts as the plumage was different and the underpart markings were not at all like those seen in typical juvenile *vulpinus*; the underpart streaks are usually 'tear-drop' shaped and underparts are more uniform and regularly streaked. Further, there is no 'pale' morph in *vulpinus* but some juveniles can appear very light (Forsman 2016). Hence, this individual did not match with the typical juvenile *vulpinus* seen here.

I sent the photos to Dick Forsman, Andrea Corso, Nils van Duivendijk and Arend Wassink for their opinions. Dick Forsman replied (*in litt.*, email dated 12 May 2023) that the identification was tricky; this was a likely *vulpinus* but it could be from an area where different taxa meet and the possibility that this bird could carry some nominate *buteo* genes could not be excluded. Nils van Duivendijk and Arend Wassink replied (*in litt.*,



by email) that this could be an Eastern Buzzard *B. japonicus* or Himalayan Buzzard *B. refectus*; they further added that nominate *japonicus*, which is a winter visitor and passage migrant in Kazakhstan, often lacks prominent carpal patches and the 'plumage would fit perfectly with this individual'. Andrea Corso replied (*in litt.*, email dated 24 May 2023) that at Batumi, Georgia (which is a raptor migration point), such pale morph birds are "usually recorded as nominate *buteo* but since they are migrating in flocks of *vulpinus*, and are exactly the same size, same moult stage, same jizz/silhouette, same wing-beats, they MUST be *vulpinus*. And I am sure they are. In fact, I am sure that an EXTREMELY rare white/pale plumage exists also in some *vulpinus*, possibly from its northernmost range. However, I do not know how to eliminate the possibility of a pale *japonicus* as I do not know enough of this taxon. Hence, I cannot give you a positive 100% sure ID".

Thus, expert opinion was divided and this bird could not be identified conclusively. The status of the Eastern Buzzard in the Indian Subcontinent is not known and its migration routes, if these occur in India, are also unknown; it is thought to winter in the Himalayas but this needs further study. However, the Himalayan Buzzard, which

breeds in the Himalayas, is more likely to occur in Peninsular India; its plumage is very similar to the Eastern Buzzard and it would be near impossible to assign individuals to these taxa outside their breeding ranges.

It is important to note that *vulpinus* intergrades with nominate *buteo* in the west and is thought to intergrade with *japonicus* in the east. However, there is scanty data from the eastern part of the range where *vulpinus* is thought to meet with *japonicus*. Not much is known regarding the plumages of such *vulpinus* x *japonicus* intergrades (if any). Further, the migration routes of such individuals are not known. In any case, the field identification of *Buteo* buzzards is many times quite difficult and it is often not possible to identify individuals if they are not trapped / measured / DNA analysis conducted.

While this bird was seen well and photographed from many angles, it would be best to keep the identification as an 'unusual' Steppe Buzzard, based mainly on the location, though the possibilities of it being a Himalayan / Eastern Buzzard or an intergrade with nominate *buteo* could not be ruled out. This shows that there is still much to learn about *Buteo* buzzards wintering in Gujarat.

Acknowledgements

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References

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