

Observation of Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* hunting a Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* in Palanpur

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Photo: Nirav Bhatt

The Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is a rare vagrant winter visitor to Gujarat, with only 3 sightings of the species in the state (Ganpule et al. 2022). Although there was one previous photographic record of Golden Eagle from Desert National Park (a desert habitat in Rajasthan a few years back), the first photographic record for Gujarat was a juvenile male Golden Eagle observed in Palanpur (Prajapati et al. 2018). The second record of this species was from Banni, in Kachchh, which was also a photographic record (Khojani 2020) and the third record of the species was a sight record by Prasad Ganpule and others near Vighakot in January 2021, in Greater Rann of Kachchh at the Indo-Pak border area, where photography is prohibited (Ganpule 2021). However, the most popular sighting of the Golden Eagle for Gujarat till date is the Palanpur bird, which stayed in the same area for about three months (from 9th December to 17th March).

As the Palanpur bird preferred roosting in the same area, which was a carcass dumping site located near Palanpur which is surrounded by hilly terrain and adjacent to Banas River (the river is dry close to the dumping site during observation months), many birders from Gujarat and outside of Gujarat visited the place. They were able to take good



Photo: Nirav Bhatt

photographs of this rare bird in Gujarat. The first and second authors also visited a few times to observe the bird and we were happy to get a few recorded photographs of the bird perched on *Butea monosperma* tree, which is popularly known as *Kesudo*, *Khakhro*, or *Palash*, which in itself is a rare combination as mostly the Golden Eagles are seen in hilly terrain with forest or mountain habitat, while this tree is a specific tree of arid areas. Although many photographers visited the location and the bird was continuously under observation almost daily, there were no photographs of what

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the eagle was feeding on. Therefore, we decided to visit the location with the aim of observing the eagle continuously and trying to find out if the eagle was hunting or feeding on carrion, as Golden Eagles are known scavengers.



Photo: Nirav Bhatt



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We reached the location before sunrise and as per our expectation, after a bit of scanning, the bird was seen at 07:30 hrs perched on a tall bare tree in a relaxed posture having a vantage point providing a clear view of the dumping site. While observing the eagle, we met Vipul and Catherine, who were also there searching for the bird. The bird was bold and it was not bothered with human presence around it. It kept preening the feathers and scanning the surroundings. Occasionally, it would gaze at the birders nearby and continue scanning the habitat. At around 08:55 hrs, the bird took off and casually flew directly to the dump yard where the fresh carcass had been dumped recently. As the area was densely covered with trees, obstructing the uninterrupted view of the eagle. However, we immediately followed the direction where it flew and within 60 seconds, the authors witnessed the eagle carrying some prey in its talons and being mobbed by about 10-12 crows. It perched on top of the *Butea monosperma* tree clutching a live Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) in its talons. The eagle's powerful grip prevented the egret from escaping,

despite its attempts. We managed to take good photos and videos of this natural history moment. Two additional intriguing observations of this bird were the presence of a hole in one of its primary feathers and the absence of a few tail feathers, which had not regrown during its stay at the dump yard. It is again very surprising to note that even with almost daily observations of this bird, which stayed here for more than three months, there have been no published observations of the prey of the eagle. This raises curiosity about the eagle's diet and hunting habits during its stay in Gujarat throughout the winter. Further observations on the Golden Eagle's food preferences and hunting methods in Gujarat's unique terrain would be valuable. The authors hope that similar vagrant birds will provide opportunities for further observations in the future.

References

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