

Lesser Flamingo....

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Sighting of Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* at Chhari-Dhandh, Kachchh: An addition to the Gujarat avifauna

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Photo: Tushar Majethia

On 26 February 2024, I was on a regular birding trip at the Chhari-Dhandh area in Kachchh, along with Tushar Majethia. I saw an unusual wheatear (*Oenanthe* sp.) on a bush top and took some photos. I checked the images online and to my surprise, found that it was a Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*. More photos of this individual can be found in the eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S162992669>. Interestingly, this was a Pied Wheatear of the scarce *vittata* morph, which is white-throated with the black eye mask continuing the neck sides. The crown was extensively black-tipped. It is possible that this was a first-summer bird.

This is the first photographic record of the species from Gujarat. Later, senior birdwatchers also made me aware that it is also an addition to the Gujarat avifauna. On searching references, I found that the Pied Wheatear is included in the 'hypothetical or unconfirmed' section in Appendix 2 of the recently published 'A Field Guide to Birds of Gujarat' (Ganpule *et al.* 2022). The species is given as 'possible in Gujarat. Could occur in the state as a vagrant during passage. A few claimed sight records are treated here as unverified'.

Thus, this sighting confirms the occurrence of the Pied Wheatear in Gujarat. This sighting is in late February and

could indicate early spring passage. Pied Wheatears breed from Central Asia up to the NW Himalayas and migrate to Africa. Hence, it is possible that during return migration, few individuals pass through Gujarat. It is stated that the *vittata* morph is more prevalent in the eastern part of the species' range, and there are reports of this morph in India (from Himachal Pradesh). For western India, there is only one record of the Pied Wheatear from Maharashtra in eBird, which is

of the normal morph. Thus, this is a rare sighting of the Pied Wheatear of the *vittata* morph from Gujarat.

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Unusual Encounter between Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus* and Great Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii* in Gujarat

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On the morning of February 3, 2024, VC, GM, PS, and I were birding in a small unnamed wetland near the coastline (21°36'10.8" N, 69°38'24.0" E) in Porbandar, Gujarat. Afterwards, PS, VC, and I proceeded towards the sea, hoping to find Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sanvicensis*. Along the coast, we saw many Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* and a lone Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* but no indication of Sandwich Terns.

At about 08:30 hrs, VC sighted a plastic float deep in the sea. On the float was a large Tern with a big yellow beak and a grayish back. Despite the immense distance, these field identifiers helped us to narrow down to the Great Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*, which marked the twelfth record for Gujarat (eBird, Feb 2024). The Great Crested Tern is a large tern with a glossy black cap, long crest, gray upper wing and back, black legs, and a chrome-yellow bill. Already elated by the sighting, I clicked many photos of this bird. As I clicked, a large brown bird swiftly appeared in the frame. Due to its sheer speed and size, we knew we had a Skua. The following moments showed a midair tussle between the Tern and the Skua, probably for food, but we were too distant to conclude this. After confirming with Kunan Naik and Nikolas Haass, we deduced Parasitic Jaeger/ Arctic Skua due to the location, behavior, and white outer primaries. This bird was the seventh record for Gujarat (eBird, Feb 2024). The Parasitic Jaeger is tricky to identify due to its similarities with the other closely related species and complex variation and molting patterns. The juveniles are variable in plumage with inconsistent amounts of brown upper parts, barred uppertail, and undertail coverts. The central rectrices extend slightly beyond the others. About half of all birds show orangish brown barring on the back and wash on the neck and head.

Such unusual instances depict the immense potential of Gujarat's coastline, as much of the unexplored region could harbour various elusive species.



Photo: Vyom Vyas

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