

Whistling Duck....

Salim Ali did not record the species in Gujarat but included it based on Palin's sighting from Kachchh (Ali 1954). The first photographic record of the species from Gujarat was from Timbi Lake, Vadodara, in April 2019 (Naria et al. 2019). Besides this, no more sightings have been observed from Gujarat on the eBird platform (eBird 2024). Geographically, the nearest sighting with photographic evidence is from Pedda Cheruvu, Rudrur, Nizamabad County, Telangana, from January 2022 (eBird 2022).



Photo: Vijayendra Desai

This species migrates long distances for suitable habitat (Naria et al. 2019). Its appearance for the untrained

eyes may resemble that of the Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, which also occurs in a similar habitat. We request birders to look for this species in the flocks of Lesser Whistling Ducks. The current sighting of Fulvous Whistling Duck is the second photographic record from Gujarat; hence, it is worth reporting. [On May 26th 2024, Devvratsinh Mori visited the area and made a remarkable observation. To his surprise, he spotted eight individuals amidst a flock of Lesser Whistling Ducks. This is an impressive number for the region - pers. commu.]

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Occurrence of the White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* at Thol Bird Sanctuary: A third photographic record from Gujarat

Rohit Tibrewal: 46, Alok Bungalows, SAL Hospital Road, Thaltej, Ahmedabad 380054. indiaseasalt@gmail.com



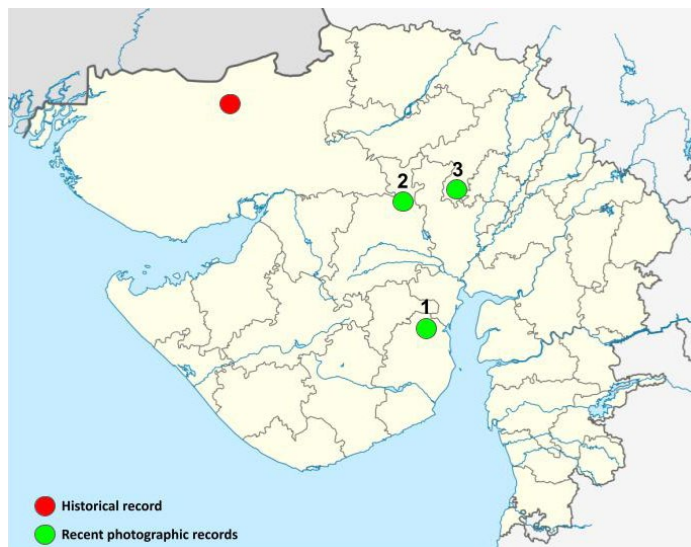
Photo: Rohit Tibrewal

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Introduction

The White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* is a winter visitor to the Indian Subcontinent and is considered 'generally rare' in the region, shows isolated records for India; there have been sporadic occurrences, primarily in the sub-Himalayan regions extending to Assam, with isolated reports from other areas, including the peninsula (Grimmett 2011, Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Recent sightings have also been reported in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh (Khan 2015; Dudhe 2018). Additionally, isolated photographic records from various regions of India, such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh have been documented with photographic evidence posted on eBird. These records indicate an increasing presence of the White-tailed Eagle in India (eBird 2024).

The White-tailed Eagle can be confused with other large raptors, such as those in the *Aquila* genus and Pallas's Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus*. However, it can be distinguished by its substantial size, short wedge-shaped tail, prominent head and neck and robust bill. Unlike *Aquila* species, White-tailed Eagle also has largely bare, yellow tarsi. Adult White-tailed Eagles are notable for their pale heads and large yellow bills, while immatures and juveniles have darker heads and necks with streaked or blotched underparts (Forsman, 1999). The birds observed at Velavadar and in the outskirts of Nal Sarovar appear to be juvenile, identifiable by extensive white mottling on its mantle and breast and a regular pattern on its upper wing coverts, characteristic of a 2 or 2.5 year old individual (Forsman, 1999). Similarly, sightings in Rajasthan have been predominantly immature or juvenile eagles, although adults have been documented in Northeast India (Mondal & Maheshwaran, 2016).



Previous Records in Gujarat

A historical observation for Gujarat is recorded by M. K. Himmatsinhji near Khavda and Mundra, Kachchh, during 1949-1950, represents the sole historical instance of this species in Gujarat (Himmatsinhji, 1970; Naoroji, 2006). Consequently, two notable photographic records of the White-tailed Eagle in Gujarat exist. The first documented sighting occurred in 2018 at Black Buck National Park, where a juvenile individual was observed and photographed by birdwatchers (Bhatt, 2018). The second significant sighting was recorded in 2020 at Bhaskarpara Wetland, further corroborating the species' sporadic presence in the region (Magiawala, 2021). These sightings, although infrequent, are pivotal in understanding the species' distribution in the Indian subcontinent. In Gujarat, this species is considered a vagrant, with isolated records reported from different parts of the state (Ganpule 2022).



The sighting at Thol Bird Sanctuary marks the third photographic record of the White-tailed Eagle in Gujarat. Thol Lake is a critical habitat for a diverse range of migratory and resident bird species, highlighting the sanctuary's importance as a stopover point for rare and endangered avian species (Grimmett, Inskipp & Inskipp, 2011). The documentation of

this sighting adds to the growing knowledge regarding the presence and movement patterns of this rare raptor in India.

[Map 1] Map showing sightings of White-tailed Eagle across the state. The red circle indicates historical records from the Kachchh region, and the Green circles indicate recent photographic records from different districts of Gujarat: 1. Black Buck National Park, Velavadar, Bhavnagar district. 2. Bhaskarpara near Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, Surendranagar district. 3. Thol Bird Sanctuary, Mahesana district.

Observation

Throughout the winter season, I have been regularly exploring the vicinity of Thol Lake (23° 22' 30" N, 72° 37' 30" E), visiting three days a week. On February 13th 2024, while surveying the area, I observed a large raptor from a distance, initially mistaking it for an Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*. As I attempted to approach the bird stealthily from behind the bushes, it noticed me and flew away. Fortunately, I managed to capture a few photographs before it disappeared. Upon closer examination of the images through my camera's viewfinder, I realized this was not an Imperial Eagle but some unfamiliar species. After consulting with avian experts, the bird was identified as an immature White-tailed Eagle. The same evening, I revisited the site with my wife and found the eagle again. It was perched on a neem tree. Aware of the bird's apparent wariness, I took photographs from a distance to avoid disturbing it. The bird remained for a while before being startled by a passing motorbike horn, causing it to relocate to another neem tree further away. On the morning of February 14th 2024, I observed the eagle again from a distance but chose not to approach. The bird might have used Thol Lake as a temporary resting spot during its migration, as it was not seen after that. The presence of the White-tailed Eagle in such an unexpected location underscores the ecological significance of Thol Lake as a potential migratory stopover. For Gujarat, this sighting is significant as it marks the third photographic record of the White-tailed Eagle in the state. The eagle's presence at Thol Bird Sanctuary was observed over nearly two days; the above mentioned few sightings suggest it may remain in suitable habitats for extended periods during the winter months. This sighting is crucial for validating the species' occurrence in Gujarat and enhances our understanding of its distribution within the region.

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