

Short Birding Notes



Sighting of colour aberrant Oriental Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis*

On the evening of 13 July 2024 at approximately 6:10 PM, while birding in Gir National Park, I observed an Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) displaying an unusual colour aberration. Unlike the species' characteristic glossy black and white plumage, this individual exhibited a washed-out, brownish-grey body with pale underparts, lacking the typical sharp contrast. Despite this atypical appearance, the bird was active and alert, engaging in normal foraging behaviour and vocalising softly. Such aberrant plumage is often attributed to leucism or partial melanism, which have been documented sporadically in passerines (Stoddart 1985). Observations of colour aberrant individuals contribute valuable insights into plumage variation within wild bird populations.

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Sighting of Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* at The Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar

I have been working as a naturalist at The Blackbuck Lodge, Velavadar, for the past 10 years. On 22nd October 2024, my fellow naturalist, Vishvajeetsinh, was accompanying our guests on a safari within the Blackbuck National Park. While halted for a herd of Blackbucks, I noticed a dove in front of the safari vehicle. The bird soon flew up and perched on a nearby dried Gando Baval (*Prosopis juliflora*). Despite the dim light, I was able to identify it as an Oriental Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*) using binoculars, and I managed to take some photographs using my phone camera. In most parts of Gujarat, it is found in well-wooded areas (Ganpule et al. 2022). This species has not been previously recorded in or around the Blackbuck National Park or the broader Bhal region, which is characterised by dry, semi-arid shrubland habitat not typically associated with this species.

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Sighting of Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* having a pearl eye (white coloured eye) at Ghoghamba, Panchmahal

On 18 December 2024, I was at Math nursery, where I am posted, which is in Taluka: Ghoghamba, Dist: Panchmahal. During bird watching in the morning on that day around a nearby river, I saw a Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) and took some photos. When I closely observed it by zooming in on the photo, I found that the eye colour in this bird was white. Normally, in Gujarat, Black Drongos have black or dark brown eye colour, and so I was surprised to see this individual having a white eye colour. I sent photos and sighting details to senior birdwatcher Ashok Mashru. Recognizing that this was a unique observation, he sent the photos and other details to an expert, Hein van Grouw, Curator, Bird Group, Dept. of Life Sciences, The Natural History Museum, UK, who has extensive experience in colour mutations in birds. His reply regarding this observation is as follows: "This Drongo, without any breeding tests, etc, we cannot be sure, but the white eyes are most likely the result of a mutation affecting the eye colour only. A similar mutation, for example, is known in the domesticated pigeon and is called a 'pearl eye'. The normal eye colour of Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) is caused by two different types of pigments: the reddish-orange pteridine and white guanidine (the same pigments may be present in the Drongo's eye too). The 'pearl eye mutation' in pigeons deletes the pteridine in the eye, leaving only the guanidine, which, due to the way the light reflects, gives the eye a white colour. I reckon this is the same in the Drongo." Thus, this observation of a Black Drongo with a white eye is an example of a mutation affecting only the eye colour since the plumage of this bird was like a normal Black Drongo. This is probably the first observation of such an eye colour mutation in Gujarat.

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Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* preying on Ruddy-breasted Crake *Zapornia fusca* in Surat, Gujarat

On a calm morning in Surat, I, Dr. Vijayendra Desai, along with Dr. Neha Jariwala and Mr. Kashyap Jariwala, undertook a birding excursion to the Tena area. During the trip, we witnessed a remarkable and uncommon feeding interaction: a juvenile Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) holding a Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Zapornia fusca*) as prey. We observed this interaction from our vehicle, approaching cautiously to avoid disturbing the bird. The heron exhibited typical handling behaviour, attempting to subdue and swallow the crake. The Purple Heron is known for its diverse diet, which commonly includes fish, amphibians, reptiles, insects, and small mammals. It hunts primarily by stealth, striking swiftly at prey in shallow water. While the species occasionally takes small birds, sightings of Purple Herons preying on other waterbirds such as crakes are rare and poorly documented, particularly in Gujarat.

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Sighting of Slaty-breasted Rail *Lewinia striata* at Timbi Lake, Vadodara

The Slaty-breasted Rail (*Lewinia striata*) is a medium-sized bird with a straight bill, rufous forehead and crown, grey throat and breast, olive-brown upperparts, and finely barred black-and-white underparts. It is an uncommon monsoon visitor in parts of Gujarat (Ganpule et al. 2022). Typically secretive, it inhabits dense wetland vegetation and is rarely seen in the open except during early morning or evening hours. At Timbi Lake, located approximately 4 km from the Vadodara city limits, sightings of this elusive species were recorded between late May and early July 2024. The lake's marshy edges and connecting road between Hanumanpura and Timbi villages provided a suitable habitat. On multiple occasions, individuals were observed simultaneously at both ends of the road, confirming the presence of more than one bird. Distinct differences in plumage, such as variation in the extent of the rufous crown, further supported this. During one observation, playback of the Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Zapornia fusca*) call elicited a response from the Slaty-breasted Rail, suggesting potential territorial interaction between the two species, which share similar habitat preferences. Notably, the Slaty-breasted Rail was also observed foraging peacefully alongside a Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*), indicating tolerance between co-occurring wetland species. However, ongoing construction activities, including pipe laying, road widening, and the development of a new ring road, have likely disturbed the habitat. After early July 2024, no further confirmed sightings were made by the authors, although unverified reports have since emerged. This highlights the growing impact of habitat alteration on local wetland bird populations.

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Sighting of Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* in Kachchh

On 19 December 2024, we visited Chadva Rakhal, Ta: Bhuj with Mahendra Tank, Manoj Tank and Nirav Pomal. This place has a well-wooded pocket and a lake nearby. A few species of flycatchers are regularly seen here. We saw Indian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Tickell's blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*), Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*), Black-naped Monarch (*Hypothymis azurea*) and Brown-breasted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa muttui*). While following a warbler calling from a tree, we saw a thrush-like bird hopping on the ground. After observing through binoculars, we noted pale olive-brown upperparts, dark brown malar stripe, yellow bill and legs, white lower belly and undertail coverts. After taking photos, it was confirmed as a female Tickell's Thrush (*Turdus unicolor*). This species is a rare winter visitor to Gujarat, with one previous record from Kachchh. (Ganpule et al. 2022) Mr. Gani Khatri had captured it at Sharad Baug, Bhuj, on 7 November 2014. (Bagda 2016) Hence, the present sighting is an important photographic record from the Kachchh region and is worth reporting.

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An Important Sighting of Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis* in North Gujarat Region at Banas River (Dantiwada), Banaskantha

We have been bird watching around the Dantiwada dam site on the Banas River located about 25 km from Palanpur, for the last 15 years. The research data has been published in The Avian Diversity of Dantiwada Reservoir and its Vicinity. A total of 191 taxa of avifauna belonging to 56 families have been reported (Judal et al., 2024). We recently went birding with Kailash Prajapati on December 08, 2024, between 2.00-4.00 pm. During this visit, it was observed that the water level in the river was relatively high, so we were bird watching in the area behind the dam, near the riverbank of Chekhala village at (24°19'13.0"N 72°24'56.6" E). We observed bird species like Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*), Asian Openbill (*Anastomus oscitans*), Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), Red-naped Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*), Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*), Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Little Cormorant (*Microcarbo niger*), Egret Sp., Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), River Tern (*Sterna aurantia*), etc. During the observation, a new bird was seen near a couple of black wing stilts, while observing them with binoculars and capturing some photographs of the avian species. After identification, it was confirmed to be an endangered species, namely 'Indian Skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*)'. In this session, a new bird species was added to our previous checklist of 191 bird species. In Gujarat, it is an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor, occurring mainly in some coastal areas and a few inland parts of the state (Ganpule et al. 2022). So, it is an important sighting for avian diversity, not only in Dantiwada but in Banaskantha and the North Gujarat region too. According to the information received from the reference, the Indian Skimmer mostly migrates to Gujarat from the Chambal of Madhya Pradesh and some areas of Andhra Pradesh as a monsoon visitor. Today's sighting as a winter visitor, is also an interesting thing.

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Record of White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* at Jamnagar

On 15 December 2024, during an early morning visit to Khijadia Bird Sanctuary near Jamnagar, I observed a large raptor perched on a tree in Part II of the sanctuary at approximately 7:30 AM. At a first glance, I assumed it to be one of the regularly wintering *Aquila* species found in the area. I took a few record photographs before leaving the site. Later, upon reviewing the images, I shared them with Dr. Maulik Varu, who identified the bird as a White-tailed Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*). The identification was further confirmed by Mr. Prasad Ganpule. This species is considered a vagrant to Gujarat, with only four prior confirmed records from the Saurashtra and Kachchh regions (Ganpule et al. 2022 & Tibrewal 2024). However, there has been no previous record from the Jamnagar district. Therefore, this sighting represents the first photographic record of *Haliaeetus albicilla* from Jamnagar, making it a significant addition to the avifaunal records of the region and the state.

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