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**Cover Photo:** 'Whiskered Tern' by Anuj Raina

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**Regd. Address :** 19/414, Satyagrah Chhavni, Satellite Road, Ahmedabad-380015, Gujarat.

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# First breeding record of Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* from Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary, Gujarat

**Dr. B. D. Chaudhari:** Deputy Conservator of Forests, Nalsarovar.

**Deepak Kumar Manilal Solanki:** Range Forest Officer, Nalsarovar.

**Anuj D. Raina:** Bird Conservation Society, Gujarat. anzraina@gmail.com [corresponding author]

**Dr. Bakul Trivedi:** Bird Conservation Society, Gujarat.

**Ganibhai Rahimbhai Sama:** Village - Vekariya, Nalsarovar.

**Bharatbhai Gagubhai Barwad:** Village - Vekariya, Nalsarovar.

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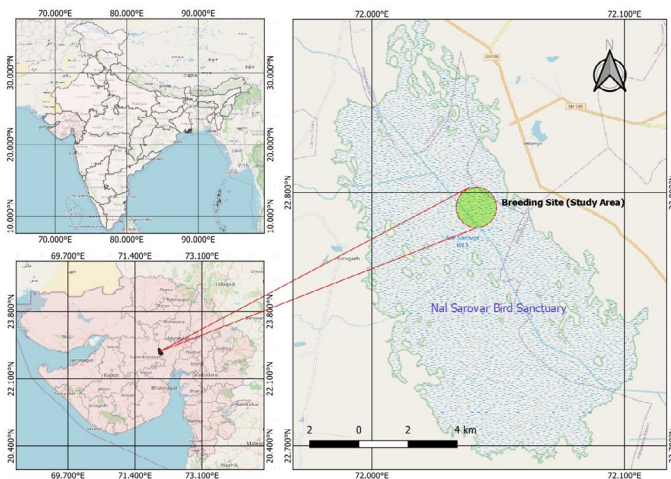
## ABSTRACT

The breeding of the Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) was noted for the first time in Gujarat at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. The breeding biology of the species, along with interspecies and intraspecies behaviour, was studied at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary between June – September 2021. Colonial nesting was noted and breeding was successful.

terns have been reported (Praveen *et al.* 2021). The Gujarat checklist (Ganpule 2020) reports 16 species of terns and 2 species of noddies, of which five species of terns are resident: Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*), River Tern (*Sterna aurantia*), Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*), Saunders's Tern (*Sternula saundersi*), and Black-bellied Tern (*Sterna acuticauda*), while the remaining species are either winter migrant or vagrant. The genus *Chlidonias* includes four species, of which three are listed in the Gujarat checklist, including Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*), White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*), and Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*), while the Black-fronted Tern (*Chlidonias albostratus*), is extralimital. The terns in the genus *Chlidonias* are also referred to as 'marsh terns', as these species are mostly seen around marshes and freshwater bodies.

The Whiskered Tern is a widely distributed and a common winter migrant in Gujarat (Ganpule 2016). Three subspecies of Whiskered Terns are recognized: *C. h. hybrida*, *C. h. delalandii*, and *C. h. javanicus* (Gochfeld *et al.* 2020). Nominate *hybrida* occurs regionally. The Whiskered tern is found in a wide variety of habitats, including inland wetlands, marine intertidal, artificial/aquatic, and marine habitats (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996).

Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) gave the Whiskered Tern as a winter visitor and passage migrant in many parts of the Indian Subcontinent. Ali & Ripley (1981) reported breeding of this species in the Indian Subcontinent in North Cachar in Assam, Kashmir, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bangladesh. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) stated that it is widely distributed in the Indian Subcontinent during the winters. Though the Whiskered Tern is given as a winter migrant to Gujarat, birds in full breeding plumage are regularly photographed here in the state. The 'eBird' status for this species' sightings is year round, with the least frequency for the June-July months and the highest frequency of sightings during the month of September. Recently, breeding has been reported from Morigaon, Kamrul, and Sivasagar districts of Assam (Ranade 2021) and from Kashmir and it is known to breed erratically in N India



Map 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary, a 120.82 sq. km natural shallow lake situated between Ahmedabad and Sanand Districts of Gujarat, was designated as a Ramsar Site (Number 2078) in September 2012. The varying water levels and vegetation support eight different habitat types (RIS 2012). It is the largest wetland in the Thar Desert Biogeographic Province and the largest in the 4-B Gujarat-Rajputana Biotic Province (Rodgers & Panwar 1988). The salinity and spread of the lake varies, depending on the rainfall pattern and quantum. Some of the IUCN red-listed birds of sanctuary include the critically endangered White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), and Social Lapwing (*Vanellus gregarious*), as well as the endangered Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*), Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), and the Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*).

Terns belong to the *Laridae* family (Sterninae subfamily) of birds which includes terns and noddies. In India, 20 species of

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(Grimmett *et al.* 2011). According to the IUCN red list of threatened species (BirdLife International 2022), the species is placed under the 'Least Concern' category. This tern has a wide geographic distribution, including parts of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, and a few isolated records are known from the American Continent (del Hoyo *et al.* 2014). The Whiskered Tern is the largest of the marsh terns, with sexes alike (the male has a heavier bill), and it has a short, slightly forked tail which when spread appears square-cut (Higgins & Davis 1997).

On receiving information that Whiskered Terns were seen nesting in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary and since no nesting record existed for Gujarat, due permission from the state forest department was obtained to thoroughly study their breeding biology (Map 1). With the help of two volunteers and forest staff (including a boatman), frequent visits and systematic studies were conducted to collect breeding data of Whiskered Tern. A three-month study, i.e., from June–August, was conducted with direct field observations along with camera trap study. We present here the details of the breeding biology of the Whiskered Tern in the Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary.

## METHODOLOGY

### Camera Trap study

A camera trap study was conducted to observe nesting behavior, and to get details of incubation, feeding, the behavior of young and predation of chicks (if any). A single infrared waterproof trail camera without flash (no glow) was used for the study. Battery and memory card replacements were done every third day. The first camera installation was done on 27 June 2021, at around 09:30 hrs.



Photo: Anuj D. Raina

Photo 1

The camera was set in duo mode: time-lapse photography and video mode, with a sensor interval of 15 seconds and 15 minutes respectively. Keeping in consideration the disturbance

to the nesting birds and possible negative impact on nesting, only the two outermost nests were considered for camera study purposes. Two bamboo poles were used for camera installation: one fixed vertically as a support for another pole. The vertical pole was submerged and fixed in the muddy lake basin (Photo 1). The second, or the angled pole, was knotted with the vertical pole and fixed with the trap camera. The camera angle of view was framed to capture the nest, hence eliminating the chance of haphazard sensor click for any movement around the camera.

### Field visits

Direct visits to the nesting site were made by all the authors at different times and stages. Visits were made using forest department boats, with each boat having a capacity of 3–4 people. The forest department staff made daily routine visits to the nesting site from June to August. The morning hours were fixed for routine visits to observe nesting behaviour and any signs of anthropogenic disturbance. Binoculars and spotting scopes were used for observing behaviour, while DSLR camera (with telephoto lens) was used to record important behaviour by the pairs. A note of all routine observations was maintained by the forest staff.

On information regarding the nesting attempt by the White-winged Tern, the forest department visited the site on 9 June 2021 and was able to locate a large nesting colony of Whiskered Terns along with one pair of White-winged Terns. A total of 109 nests were reported during the whole study conducted between June and September 2021. The first systematic team survey was conducted on 10 June 2021, during the morning hours. All the visits to the nesting site for observations were made during the morning hours between 07:00 hrs to 12:00 hrs. As the sanctuary was closed for tourism during June – September 2021, the chances of any anthropogenic pressure were low.

## OBSERVATIONS

### Nesting site and nest building

The breeding site had prevalent vegetation to support a floating nest and prevent it being swamped away by strong winds and water currents. The nest observed was a heap of vegetation and grass (mostly aquatic vegetation) fixed and placed over floating or emergent vegetation in shallow water with average depth of about 1.5 m. The nesting area was well covered with macrophytic vegetation, including emergent, submerged, and floating vegetation. Nesting was equally distributed in both open wetlands with submerged vegetation as well as in dense and emergent vegetation (or inside

hydrophytic vegetation) with colonies placed in both. The macrophyte species recorded for nest building include *Hydrilla verticillata*, *Najas graminea*, *Phragmites karka*, *Typha angustata* and *Vallisneria spiralis*. The majority of nest building was done using *Typha angustata*, which is called "Bakhedo" by the locals. The topmost branches of *Hydrilla verticillata* were used as a base for nest building. *Typha angustata* and *Phragmites karak* are generally used as cattle feed by the local community at Nalsarovar. The leftover/dried stems/leaves from these aforementioned species were later used by the Whiskered Tern for nest building (Photo 2). Artificial substrates used for nest building include polystyrene (used by local fishermen as a fishing net float).



Photo: Anuj D. Raina

Photo 2

asynchronous hatching. In one case, a parent was seen intentionally damaging the egg (laid five days ago) in a nest with two hatchlings present. Two eggs were also seen floating near the nesting site. Some of the nests were observed to be fixed with fishing nets as support. On June 15, 16, and 17, the forest department staff fixed 18 nests with bamboo sticks as support to prevent them from being washed away by wind and water. Between 11 August and 2 September, no visit was made for study purposes at the nest site. Surprisingly, the first nest located on 10 June was also the last nest on 2 September to be used by a breeding pair and had three chicks. Each time eggs were laid in old nests, a new set of vegetation was used and the nest renovated. Many of the nests were used thrice for nesting by the Whiskered Terns. It is not known if the same pair had a second or third brood or if different pairs used the earlier made nests.



Photo: Anuj D. Raina

Photo 3

### Nesting

The clutch size here was between one and three (Photo 3). The egg laying was not done on alternate days. The incubation period ranged between 20 and 25 days, followed by

A Table giving details of observations made over the nesting period is given below. A total of 109 nests were observed in the area, with most pairs successful in fledging young. A new nest was last observed on 2<sup>nd</sup> August.

Date	Total Nests	Observation(s)
27-June-21	45	One chick in one nest
28-June-21	48	Three new nests seen observed
3-July-21	48	5 nests with chicks
5-July-21	49	9 nests with chicks, one new nest observed
6-July-21	50	18 nests with chicks, one new nest observed
7-July-21	58	All the eggs laid on 15, 16 and 17 June were hatched with 100% success rate i.e. chicks were present in all nests. A total 40 nests with chicks. 8 new nests observed
14-July-21	63	Breeding completed in 48 nests with chicks fledging. 5 new nests observed
25-July-21	79	Nests with eggs laid on 15 June had all successfully fledged. 16 new nests observed
27-July-21	101	22 new nests observed. These nests were protected and restricted for visit by the forest department
1-August-21	108	7 new nests with eggs
2-August-21	109	One new nest. Last nest observed for the season with three chicks present.

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### Interspecies competition

Other nesting bird species in the area included the Pheasant-tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) and the Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*). Successful nesting of Purple Heron was observed in May-end, while the Pheasant-tailed Jacana nesting was observed during July near the shore of Nalsarovar. The most common species located around the vegetation was the Yellow Bittern (*Ixobrychus sinensis*). A flock of Common Coots (*Fulica atra*) was always observed in the vicinity of the nesting area but was kept away from the breeding / nesting site by the terns. Some of the birds attacked/chased off by the Whiskered Terns include: Red-necked Falcon (*Falco chicquera*), Oriental Honey Buzzard (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*), Heuglin's Gull (*Larus fuscus heuglini*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), Common Coot, Purple Heron, Indian Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*), Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*), Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), Yellow Bittern, Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*), Indian Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*), and Indian Jungle Crow (*Corvus culminatus*). Once, a Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) was spotted near a Whiskered Tern nest but was not chased or attacked by it; just alarm calls were uttered.

### Activity/behaviour of adults

The nest site was well monitored by all individuals of the Whiskered Tern and the terns were vigilant for any threat. The adults were seen flying over the younger chicks as they left the nest and started swimming. Any perceived threat of an intruder was collectively chased off from the nesting vicinity. The parent's behavior was observed to be more aggressive once the eggs were laid. The colony would chase any intruder, swoop down and sometimes attack it with their bills, accompanied by harsh, loud screams or shrieks. The alarm calls, a *kiriri* would invite other individuals to take part in chasing off the potential intruder or predator.

The process of nest repair and reinforcement was a continual activity, and regular nesting material, including aquatic vegetation, was brought for repairing the nest. The colony was highly active during the morning hours. During the afternoon hours, when the temperature soared, the parents were observed seated in the nest. More intraspecific competition was noted rather than interspecific competition, which in this case is attributed to demand for shared resources like food, space, and nesting material. The rate of intraspecific aggression increased once eggs hatched, as most of the hatching occurred at almost the same time. Kleptoparasitism was seen amongst different parents in the colony. In one instance, a Whiskered Tern was seen picking up an egg from the nest and dipping it five feet away. Whiskered Tern copulation was last seen at the

end of July. Chicks were not only fed by their parents, but by other members of the colony as well. For feeding chicks, parents preyed on invertebrates such as odonates and water striders as well as vertebrates such as fish (Photo 4). And most of the feeding and protection was done under the dense vegetation of the wetland.



### Activity of chicks

The young displayed semi-nidifugous behavior, i.e., when between 3–8 days old, chicks were seen seeking refuge during any presumed threat and returning back afterwards. In many instances, chicks were seen lying flat on floating vegetation, camouflaging themselves with the vegetation (Photo 5). After the situation became normal and safe, the chicks would return to their nest, assisted by their parents with calls. Whenever chicks ventured out of the nest, a flock of terns was seen flying over them with loud calls. During the venture, if chicks tried to reach another nearby nest, the parents of that nest were seen attacking the chicks, i.e., the behaviour of terns towards other chicks was seen as aggressive in some cases. By the last week of July, a total of three fledglings were seen flying. In one case, two juveniles were seen flying 100 meters away. The duo was making short alternate flights accompanied by three adult terns flying around them. A brief description of the young is as follows: blackish head and neck, buff-brown crown, black and brown chequered pattern on mantle, pale grey wings, fleshy legs and off-white underparts (Photo 6). The chicks had buff-brown down with black marks on head and mantle and white down on underparts.

### Nesting attempt by White-winged Tern

Nest building by a White-winged Tern pair was observed on 9 June 2021, near the Whiskered Tern nesting site (Photo 7). The White-winged Tern appeared diminutive when seen next to the Whiskered Tern. The White-winged Tern can be distinguished from the Whiskered Tern in non-breeding plumage by its smaller bill, smaller size, and black round ear

patch that extends below the eyes (similar to 'head-phones'). The tail of the White-winged Tern is square-shaped, while the Whiskered Tern has a slight tail-fork.



Photo: Anuj D. Raina



Photo: Anuj D. Raina



Photo: Anuj D. Raina

Generally, the feeding flight of the White-winged Tern was flutterier, more buoyant and graceful than that of the

Whiskered Tern, and the dips into the water were made at a lower level and in a more regular pattern across the surface of the lake. The nest building of the White-winged Tern continued for a few days but was later abandoned. During the process of nest building, the White-winged Terns were continuously attacked and chased by the Whiskered Terns. The nest of the White-winged Tern looked very similar to that of a Whiskered Tern, i.e., the same nest substrate with a floating nest on macrophyte vegetation and a floating piece of polystyrene. The nesting was not successful (eggs were not laid and the nest was eventually abandoned).

### Camera trap study

During the approach for the camera trap installation, the incubating parents left the nest. After the pole and camera were installed, 8–10 terns circled the pole inquisitively. After the first installation, the parents started incubating the nest eight minutes after the team left the spot. The total video length captured for the study is 106.32 minutes (1.77 hours).

The place of the first installation of the camera had two nests. Around the two nests, one egg was seen floating; the first nest had three eggs, whereas the second adjacent nest had a chick on the edge of the nest. Both parents displayed active participation during the brooding phase. A Whiskered Tern was observed incubating the egg after laying the first egg in the nest. During the incubation phase, one parent was continuously present. The incubating parent was seldom seen fixing/repairing the nest while incubating. The 'free' parent would sleep normally at night with its beak tucked in its back, inside its wings, while the incubating parent would sleep with its wings wide open, covering the eggs. The non-incubating partner would continuously shift positions in the nest. In one of the nests where one hatchling with eggs was present, the non-incubating parent was seen bringing food and feeding the hatchling. The chick would constantly move out after a certain time from under the parent while the parent would drag the chick back under its wings. Repairing and reinforcing the nest was a continuous task. In all the videos captured, once all the eggs hatched, only one parent was seen protecting the nest with the chicks. This was presumed to be the male as the male is known to mainly provide for the chicks.

### DISCUSSION

All reported breeding sites of Whiskered Terns were of almost similar habitat type to the habitat seen at Nalsarovar. The nesting behaviour, including floating nest type, nest design, nest size, incubation period, hatching and chick's behaviour was found to be similar when compared with other studies on

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the breeding biology of this species (Ali & Ripley 1981, Fazili 2014, Gochfeld *et al.* 2020, Ranade 2021).

Rainfall is a major factor influencing the water level of the lake, and the growth of vegetation. Because of seasonal fluctuations in water levels, habitats are transformed from one type to another within the same year (Vankar *et al.* 2018). Nalsarovar offers suitable habitat required for colonial species to build aquatic nests, which includes availability of nesting material, safety, food, and the surrounding environment. The aquatic nest construction of the Whiskered Tern has to be stable enough to prevent it from getting swamped and withstand water level changes. The nests at Nalsarovar needed human intervention in some cases but were largely stable and suitable for nesting since breeding was successful in a vast majority of the nests.

Whiskered Terns are generally colonial nesting birds and monogamous in nature; they have monomorphic plumage but have dimorphism in size between the sexes (Gochfeld & Burger 1996). Male Whiskered Terns are larger than females, especially so in head and bill measurements and body mass (Ledwoń 2011). Female Whiskered Terns have been observed abandoning males and offspring. The males, which are larger in size, can provide the chicks with more nutritious food. Hence, females contribute less than males in feeding the chicks (Ledwoń & Neubauer 2017). But here in Nalsarovar, we were unable to sex the pairs; we could not verify whether the male or female were involved in which duties and did not record any bird deserting the nest. In our studies, all nests observed had clutch size between one and three. The semi-nidifugous behavior among chicks was very prominent and after a few days, most of the chicks escaped towards vegetation for shelter and safety. From the camera trap video studies, we could see that during the incubation stage, parents devote almost equal time brooding the eggs, which continues till all the eggs hatch in an asynchronous manner. Once all the eggs are hatched, only a single parent's effort is seen for protection during night hours, which could be the female.

Whiskered Tern nesting is affected by food conditions and prey diversity (Paillisson *et al.* 2007). The Sternidae are mostly colonial nesting and semi-altricial. Conspecific nest parasitism, commonly seen in colonial species, has been recorded in the Whiskered Tern (Paillisson *et al.* 2008). But we could not find any cases of conspecific nest parasitism in this study. Many of the winter visiting species of terns have been seen in sanctuary in breeding plumages but have not been reported breeding. Regular monitoring in different seasons can help in knowing the true status of their breeding, if any, and further emphasize

the importance of Nalsarovar as a wetland and the need for its conservation. It should be noted that Whiskered Terns have been recorded nesting in Nalsarovar again in June 2022.

The observation of attempted nesting by the White-winged Tern is interesting. The White-winged Tern breeds in Europe, east to Siberia and Mongolia to SE Russia and adjacent NE China; it has not been recorded to breed in India. Though the nesting was not successful, this is the first observation of attempted nesting by the White-winged Tern in India. This area should be regularly monitored to check whether nesting is attempted again by this species.

## CONCLUSION

Gujarat houses a wide variety of wetland types and the chances of tern species nesting (which have not been reported earlier) are high. The Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary is well managed by the forest department for the removal of waste (like plastic), vegetation control, controlled fishing, and through regular patrolling. Although the sanctuary remains closed for tourism during the monsoon months, i.e., from June to October, the lake was closed for almost a year under Covid norms by the Government of Gujarat. Due to this, there was very less disturbance for the nesting Whiskered Terns in 2021.

In addition to the sanctuary closure during the monsoon season, the lake was restricted for tourism for almost the entire year due to COVID regulations implemented by the Gujarat Government. Although the forest department conducts regular winter monitoring programs to assess the species diversity and count at Nalsarovar, consecutive seasonal studies are required to monitor all nesting species, and their population counts. Anthropogenic pressure has led to changes in nesting patterns, ecological damage, and has brought many species under threat. The data from studies at Nalsarovar can aid in research, disaster management, decision-making, and conservation programs.

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## Sighting of Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* at Girnar

**Dr. Gaurang Bagda:** Junagadh. [gaurangbagda@gmail.com](mailto:gaurangbagda@gmail.com)

I visited Narayan Dharo, Bhavnath area, near Junagadh, on 13 December 2021 at around 15:00 hrs. It is a good place of birding in the winter season and I visit this area regularly. On that day, I saw many flycatchers like Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*), Brown-breasted Flycatcher (*M. muttui*) and Taiga Flycatcher (*Ficedula albicilla*). I also saw many warblers like Western-crowned Warbler (*Phylloscopus occipitalis*), Greenish Warbler (*P. nitidus*) and Hume's Leaf Warbler (*P. humei*). I saw one bird, similar to a Hume's Leaf Warbler, but with two prominent wing bars, pale legs, pale orangish bill base and having white-edged tertials. The plumage was brighter greenish, with some yellow in supercilium, and the median covert wing bar was well defined.

I thought that this was different from a Hume's Leaf Warbler. So, I sent the photographs to Prasad Ganpule, and he



Photo: Gaurang Bagda

confirmed that it was a Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) based on the strong face pattern, greenish

## Yellow-browed Warbler....

upperparts, white underparts, distinct pale yellowish supercilium, white edged tertials, pale legs, pale base of bill and prominent wing bars.

The bird was very shy and came out from the foliage only for a very few seconds. I visited this site three times but could not see it again. But, on 4 February 2022, I saw the same bird there and got good photographs. More photographs of this bird are given in eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S98834372>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S102000629>.

The Yellow-browed Warbler is a vagrant to Gujarat (Ganpule 2016) and Dr. Anand Patel had photographed a Yellow-browed Warbler at Shoolpaneshwar WLS on 25 December 2015 – see eBird checklist <https://ebird.org/checklist/>

S96386913. As per eBird data, Ashwin Vishwanathan and Esha Munshi recorded the call of this warbler at the Mahal Campsite, in Dangs, on 12 February 2022. It is possible that this warbler is overlooked due to identification difficulties. Birders should be on the look-out for this warbler in well wooded areas of Gujarat. If good photographs are obtained, then identification is easier and call recordings can confirm the identification beyond doubt. It is likely that more records of this species will be made in the coming years.

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## Sighting of Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* at Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar

**Pravinbhai Vegad:** Guide at Velavadar National Park, Ta: Bhavnagar, Dist: Bhavnagar.

**Vishal Japadiya:** Guide at Velavadar National Park, Ta: Bhavnagar, Dist: Bhavnagar.

**Dilip Gadhvi:** RFO, Velavadar National Park, Forest Colony, RFO Quarters, Velavadar – Talaja Jakatnaka Road, Bhavnagar.

**Harpalsinh Chudasama:** Forester, Velavadar National Park: Vishwakarma Society, Nr. Gyanmanjari School.

The Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) is a medium-sized owl, which lives in edges of woodlands, forests and groves. Long-eared Owls are distributed in Europe, western, central, and eastern Asia, North America, Northern Africa, and the northern Indian Subcontinent. This species is a winter visitor to Pakistan and Northwest India. For Gujarat, this species is considered to be a winter vagrant (Ganpule 2016). There are historical records from Kachchh (Ali 1954) and two recent sightings are known from Kachchh; one with photograph from Naliya grasslands (Deomurari 2012) and another is a sight record from Banni (Joshua *et al.* 2006).

A Long-eared Owl was seen and photographed at Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, on 27 February 2022 by Shrey Mehta along with the authors. The authors and Shrey Mehta were on a safari in the national park and they saw this bird perched on a *Prosopis juliflora*, locally known as *gando-baval*, about five feet from the ground and approximately 20 feet away from the safari road. The nearest wetland is approximately 500-600 mts from this site. The bird was located at around 08:30 hrs and was seen for about five minutes. Shrey Mehta managed to get good photographs of this owl, which helped in confirming the identification. This bird was seen only once in the national park and attempts to relocate it failed.

This is first record of the Long-eared Owl from the Saurashtra region.



Photo: Shrey Mehta

### Acknowledgements

We are thankful to Kunan Naik, Esha Munshi & Dhaval Varagiya for their help in the identification. Special thanks to Shrey Mehta for contributing photographs. We are indebted to Rushi Pathak and Dhaval Vargiya for helping us draft this note.

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## Beak deformity in Sand Lark *Alaudala raytal* near Navlakhi, Morbi District

**Prasad Ganpule:** C/o Parshuram Pottery Works, Opp. Nazarbaug Station, Morbi 363642. [prasadganpule@gmail.com](mailto:prasadganpule@gmail.com)

There are numerous salt-pans near Navlakhi, in Morbi District. The Sand Lark (*Alaudala raytal*) is quite common in these salt-pans, especially around small temples where local villagers put grains and keep pots filled with water for the birds. At such places, more than 20 Sand Larks are usually present in the morning and late evening, feeding on the grains and drinking water. I visit this area frequently to watch waders and other birds. I report here two instances of beak deformity in Sand Larks observed in this area.

mandible could have led to difficulties for this bird during feeding and while drinking. But, surprisingly, on a visit to the



On 19 February 2019, while photographing Sand Larks, I saw an individual with a deformed beak (photo 1); both the mandibles were overgrown, making the bill rather long, with a curved upper mandible and a gap was visible between the mandibles. This bird had normal movements and was seen feeding on the grains. A different individual, again with a beak deformity, seen on 15 August 2021, had a very long lower mandible, while the upper mandible was short but not like in normal birds (photo 2). This individual also had a deformed/diseased left foot. It was possible that the long lower

same area on 17 April 2022, I happened to see this Sand Lark again (photo 3). Since the bill was so distinctive, I recognized this individual immediately. Though it was difficult for this bird to pick up grains, it was actively feeding by lowering its head, picking up a grain in its beak and swallowing it. It was noted that this individual was in worn plumage; when seen earlier in August 2021, it was in fresh plumage and the difference between the fresh and worn plumage can be seen in the photos presented here. The

## Sand Lark....

photos also show that the lower mandible had grown even longer than what was seen earlier and the left foot was further deformed. The time period between the first and the second sighting was eight months. It was quite astounding that this individual, with such extreme beak deformity and foot disease was surviving and undergoing moult.

The bill deformity, known as Avian Keratin Disorder (AKD), seems to be present in Sand Larks of both subspecies – *A. r. raytal* and *A. r. adamsi*; instances of bill deformities in Sand Larks from Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Bangladesh

have been documented earlier (Ganpule & Alström 2022). The reasons for bill deformities in Sand Lark are not known and could be the result of a virus or environmental contaminants / chromosomal damage. The exact reasons for bill deformities in Sand Larks need further study.

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## Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* breeding in Jambugoda WLS

**Dhyey Shah:** 39, Geetanagar Society, Pratapanagar Road, Vadodara 390004. [dhyevian@gmail.com](mailto:dhyevian@gmail.com)

**Siddharth Amin:** C/129, Bhagyoday Soc., Opp. Sahyog Police Chowki, Gorwa Refinery Road, Vadodara 390004. [siddharthamin1919@gmail.com](mailto:siddharthamin1919@gmail.com)



Photo: Dhyey Shah

On 27 June 2020, while exploring Jambugoda Wildlife Sanctuary (22° 21' N, 73° 40' E) in search of Indian Pitta (*Pitta brachyura*), we saw a *Muscicapa* flycatcher entering a nest made in a *Butea* sp. tree. The nest was quite high up in the canopy (c. 5 m from the ground). The nest could be described as compact and cup-shaped. A bird was already sitting on the nest when we spotted the nest, and was presumably incubating. On taking pictures, we immediately identified the bird as an Asian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa dauurica*) based on the bill shape, plumage and the date. The nest too somewhat fits with what is mentioned in Clement & Bonan (2020). Later, another bird visited the nest and fed the incubating bird and went away. Before arriving, the bird uttered a loud series of what we can transcribe as whistles, slurry notes and short trills. All of this confirmed that the birds were indeed breeding and had probably already laid the eggs. Ganpule (2016) mentioned that there are isolated breeding records of Asian Brown Flycatcher along with a report from Gir National Park. It is mentioned that it also may breed in other parts of Gujarat, but detailed study was required.

There are several recent records of Asian Brown Flycatchers from Gujarat during the monsoon / summer months (Bagda 2022, Modi 2022, Shah 2022). On searching 'eBird', we found pictures of an individual carrying nesting material and building a nest in Gir (Bagda & Vachhani 2019). It has been recorded from Rampara Sanctuary in July (Mashru 2016) and there exists a previous breeding record from Gir National Park (Mundkur 1990). This confirms that the Asian Brown Flycatcher does indeed breed within the forests of Gujarat. We request birders visiting forests in Gujarat during the summer to look out for such nests which may help us in understanding the bird's breeding range in the state.

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## Sighting of Indian Grey Hornbill *Ocyrceros birostris* in Jasdan, Rajkot District

Satyajitkumar Khachar & Ghanshyam Jebaliya: Jasdan.



This individual was seen in the palace grounds for three consecutive days. On 13 March 2022, in the evening near the home of the second author in Hanuman *bagh*, he heard a call of a bird which was new for him. On investigating, an Indian Grey Hornbill was seen there. It went into a large tree. The call was recorded with a mobile phone. On 18 March, on *Dhuleti* evening, Jayantbhai and Arvindbhai from the Jasdan Nature Club heard the call of the hornbill at *Bhimkui* but they could not see the bird.

Decades ago, the Indian Grey Hornbill used to be resident in the Gir National Park area but with the passage of time and hunting pressure, this species became locally extinct in Gir. This species is presently seen in the jungles from north Gujarat to southern Gujarat. There have been recent sightings from Saurashtra, mainly from Gir area and Wadhwan, near Surendranagar. There could be two reasons for this sighting of the Indian Grey Hornbill in Jasdan; the first reason is that the range of this species is increasing since the past few years and it is now seen in Dholka, Sanand and Gandhinagar regions and so this sighting could be a part of this range expansion while the second reason is that the Forest Department of Gujarat recently caught a few hornbills from Balaram-Ambaji Sanctuary in North Gujarat and released these birds in Gir. This was done to re-establish the Indian Grey Hornbill in Gir National Park area. It is possible that this individual could have migrated locally from Gir and was seen in Jasdan.

The habitat of the Indian Grey Hornbill is forests or well wooded areas. It nests in tree hollows, feeds mainly on fruits of trees and helps in seed dispersal. Due to superstitions, the bill, bones of its legs and its flesh was used and hence, the hornbill was widely hunted. Further, due to rapid urbanization, large trees were cut down, reducing the natural habitat for this species. Now, due to the expanding range of this species and awareness regarding importance of forests, there is a good chance for the survival of the hornbill in Saurashtra. We should all strive to protect large trees, help in preserving forests and plant fruiting trees so that the Indian Grey Hornbill becomes a regular sight in Saurashtra. □

An Indian Grey Hornbill (*Ocyrceros birostris*) was seen in Jasdan, near Rajkot, for the first time recently. This species is a rarity in Saurashtra and was first seen by the first author on 8 March 2022. It was seen in the Jasdan Palace grounds, where there are large flowering/fruited trees. The hornbill was initially seen perched on a small *champa* tree. The first author had seen the Indian Grey Hornbill in the Gir National Park area more than 35 years ago and seeing it in Jasdan was a great surprise. The first author informed the second author regarding the sighting, and urged him to observe it well and if possible, to take photographs. The second author reached the area and after a long search, found the hornbill near the old *gaushala*, perched on a *peepal* tree. It was an unforgettable moment for the second author to see the hornbill in Jasdan. Watching with binoculars, it was seen that the bird had a ripe *peepal* fruit in its beak, and it went towards a building with glass, probably seeing its reflection and thinking there was another hornbill! After a few moments, it went inside a large neem tree, where the second author was able to see it well and take photographs. As the second author approached closer, it went inside the tree. It was not frightened or tired, and its plumage looked good. It preened its feathers and after some time, went towards another large *peepal* tree.

## Nest defense behaviour by River Tern *Sterna aurantia* and Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*

**Yashodhan Bhatia:** 'Birding or Nothing', C/O Bhatia Stores, Old Station Road, Jamnagar, India. jamnagarbirds@gmail.com

Nest defense is a very important behaviour as it is an integral part of the life of every avian species. Unlike forest birds which can build nests that are not conspicuous, most *Larid* species that inhabit coastal areas make nests on islands, shores, larger inland water bodies or salt-pans. Here, they do not have shelter or extensive vegetation to conceal the nest from the view of predators. Practically, such nesting areas are limited in size and thus crowded. These birds have to defend their nests against conspecifics which can be the neighbours of their own species. In spite of this risk, they rely on colonial or semi-colonial nesting to get through a successful breeding season. This obviously has its own benefits. Colonial nesting birds detect predators from a distance and that too more quickly as there are more eyes on guard. So, on one call everyone 'concerned' becomes alert and chases the intruder, however large, collectively, and can drive it away from the vicinity of the nesting area. Here, I present two such interesting observations of terns (*Sterna* species) that are both very diverse in selection of nesting sites and behaviour; however, in both instances, a larger predator was badly mobbed by the extremely aggressive smaller birds in the defense of their fledglings.

Little Terns (*Sternula albifrons*) and River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) together breed on the islands of large water bodies like lakes and dams. Here, natural islands are formed when the water level starts receding during the summer months. Such islands also offer natural protection by providing a safe haven from predatory mammals and even feral dogs. River Terns generally do not breed in the salt-pans (*pers. observation*), but Little Terns are more adaptable in their choice of nesting areas and tend to breed in the salt-pans too, along with Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), Red-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*) and other species. Terns are altricial species and have the tendency to defend their chicks strongly after they have hatched. It is observed that aggression in tern sp. is less frequent during incubation period since they themselves spend more time on their respective nests, incubating the eggs. This aggression becomes more apparent and frequent from

the time the eggs are hatched till throughout the fledgling stage. Nest defense activity increases as the breeding season progresses. Terns are highly flexible in their reactions to the 'trespassers'; they have the ability to recognize if the intruder is a threat and thus assess the potential risk from it whilst it is violating the 'airspace' around the nesting area (*pers. observation*).

We had come across a huge water-body near Jamnagar that was accommodating a healthy nesting site of River Terns and Little Terns on a single island. I was along with my birder friends Mehul Bhadania and Ashish Pankhania. There were 300 plus pairs of River Terns and 30 plus pairs of Little Terns. In April 2021, while observing the activities of these nesting terns from the edge of this water-body, sudden panic calls of River Terns were heard around the island. A Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) made an attempt to hunt a fledgling, but was not successful. A group of River Terns created chaos and confused the falcon. Mobbing a deadly predator such as Peregrine Falcon can be a dangerous venture, but they mobbed it by screaming and swooping on it and chased it till the predator was out of the 'fortified' airspace. I was able to shoot a few frames to get a record of the incident (though only a couple of photographs were in focus), while my birder friends observed the entire incident with binoculars (photo 1).

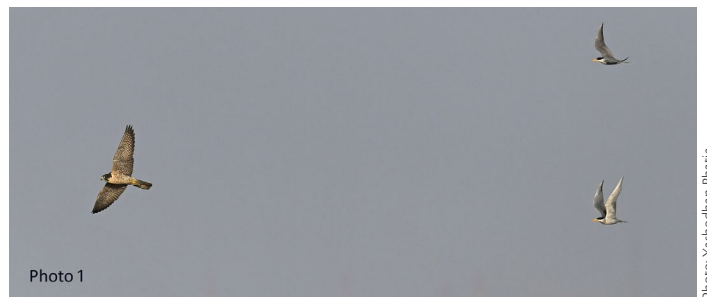


Photo: Yashodhan Bhatia

In another incident at the salt-pans around Jamnagar, I had observed Little Terns mobbing a Indian Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*), at a fair distance away from their nests. A Pond Heron, in flight, was coming from a distance and was mobbed well before the area where the nests were present. Two pairs of Little Terns confronted the 'intruder' midair. Screaming and diving very aggressively

on it, they made the larger predator land on the bund where it tried to hide between the boulders from the assault. From there, one pair went back and the assertive ones continued with the strikes. The assault was so severe that the Pond Heron found itself ducking every time the tern dashed down on it, ripping noisily through the air. Whenever the heron raised its head to recover, the terns came-in very fast, targeting its face. This continued for over a minute as the offensive terns did not give any chance to the Pond Heron to recuperate and fly away. I was able to capture the footage of the incident along with few photographs. In one of the frames, a unique moment is frozen as the Little Tern is literally bombarding the heron! It defecated mid-air and splattered liquid excreta on the panicky Pond Heron (photo 2). Moments later, as the frequency of the raid reduced, the Pond Heron revived itself and flew in the opposite direction of the nest!

Though this is well documented by experienced birders that terns have a retentive capability to categorize and evaluate the risk that can be posed by other birds using the same 'airspace' for their movements where the terns nest, but recording these confrontations on camera was

an exceptional experience for me as a natural history photographer.



Photo 2

Photo: Yashodhan Bhatia

I am also providing a table of my observations of Little Terns chasing away bird species along with such birds that were tolerated through the breeding season around the nesting area.

	List of species chased by Little Terns during nesting		List of species tolerated by Little Terns during nesting
1	Great Thick-knee ( <i>Esacus recurvirostris</i> )	1	Little Cormorant ( <i>Microcarbo niger</i> )
2	Red-naped Ibis ( <i>Pseudibis papillosa</i> )	2	Spot-billed Duck ( <i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i> )
3	Red-wattled Lapwing ( <i>Vanellus indicus</i> )	3	Comb Duck ( <i>Sarkidiornis sylvicola</i> )
4	Yellow-wattled Lapwing ( <i>Vanellus malabaricus</i> )	4	Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse ( <i>Pterocles exustus</i> )
5	Pond Heron ( <i>Ardeola grayii</i> )	5	Sykes's Crested Lark ( <i>Galerida deva</i> )
6	Cattle Egret ( <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> )	6	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark ( <i>Eremopterix griseus</i> )
7	Large Egret ( <i>Ardea alba</i> )	7	Eurasian Spoonbill ( <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> )
8	Little Egret ( <i>Egretta garzetta</i> )	8	Whiskered Tern ( <i>Chlidonias hybrida</i> )
9	River Tern ( <i>Sterna aurantia</i> )		
10	Pied Kingfisher ( <i>Ceryle rudis</i> )		
11	House Crow ( <i>Corvus splendens</i> )		
12	Kentish Plover ( <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> )*		
13	Little Ringed Plover ( <i>Charadrius dubius</i> )*		
14	Eurasian Coot ( <i>Fulica atra</i> )*		

\*These species were only chased after the eggs hatched and that too when they came closer while foraging. The rest of the birds were chased away throughout the breeding season.

## River Tern....

In *Larid* species, colonies are often defended by group defense, and potential predators in the colony are met with aggressive dive-bombing, including alarm-calling and defecating upon and striking the intruder (Winkler *et al.* 2020). Here, I was able to document nesting River Terns and Little Terns using group defense while chasing intruders aggressively and protecting fledglings from predators.

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## Further evidence of breeding of Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* in Kachchh

**Shantilal Varu:** Temple Street, Junavas, Madhapar (Bhuj), Kachchh. [svaru@gmail.com](mailto:svaru@gmail.com)



Photo: Shantilal Varu

On 17 April 2022, I visited Chhari-Dhandh Conservation Reserve, Kachchh, with Jaysinh Parmar, Ibrahim Darvadia, Mahesh Parmar, Mahendra Tank and Manoj Tank. The wetland was entirely dry. While roaming there, we saw six Collared Pratincoles (*Glareola pratincola*) flying and settling in a dried grass patch. Owing to ongoing breeding period, we thought that it could be nesting here. We waited for a while and after sometime, one bird landed on the ground with an insect in its beak; we thought there must be chicks around. After scanning the nearby area, we found two chicks resting in the shade of a broken concrete platform made by the forest department. We took some photographs and confirmed the identification.

The Collared Pratincole was first recorded in Kachchh on 18 October 1992 at a water body between Loriya-Bhirandiyara (it is now known as Vekariya Dhandh in Banni area) by M. K. Himmatsinhji, the members of Pelican Nature Club, Bhuj and I (Himmatsinhji 1999). At that time, along with adult birds, juveniles were also seen. Dr. Bharat Jethva visited Chhari-Dhandh in the summer of 2008 and saw a pair with two chicks. The whole wetland was dry at that time too (*personal communication*). It was the first breeding record of this species

here. Thereafter, on 11 May 2014, A. O. Langa, forest guard, and I saw a pair with one chick. The wetland was dry at that time. Thus, it seems that this species occasionally breeds here in Chhari-Dhandh when the wetland gets totally dried and conditions turn favourable for nesting. More Collared Pratincoles were seen nesting in another part of Chhari-Dhandh this year and nests were observed in the periphery of the area [*see elsewhere in this issue –Eds*].

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## Red Knot *Calidris canutus* in breeding plumage at Jamnagar

Vimal Dubal: Fumo Chem Private Limited, A-1/476, Phase-II, G.I.D.C., Vatva, Ahmedabad 382445. vimal.fmoch@gmail.com



Photo: Vimal Dubal

On 8 April 2022 in the night, Pratik Bhatt and I started our journey from Ahmedabad to Jamnagar to photograph waders in breeding plumage. On 9 April, early in the morning, we, along with Siddharthsinh Sisodiya, visited Sachana, near Balachadi, for photography of different migratory waders in their breeding plumages. We reached there at around 07:00 hrs and started moving towards different groups of waders.

We were trying to photograph Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) in breeding plumage and so we approached a group of godwits while Siddharthsinh went to a separate side to try for other species. We came across one different looking individual, which was also in breeding plumage and looked like a Bar-tailed Godwit from a distance with naked eyes, and so we approached it. It was smaller compared to a Bar-tailed Godwit so Pratik and I took a few pictures of it; I captured a video, and then came to know that there were two of these birds in that group.

The other species we photographed were Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), Little Stint (*C. minuta*), Lesser Sand Plovers (*Charadrius mongolus*) and Greater Sand Plovers (*C. leschenaultii*), Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*), and my most favourite, the Crab Plovers (*Dromas ardeola*). We concluded our session at around 09:30 hrs and came back to the hotel and then checked all the pictures of the unidentified birds and came to know that these were two Red Knots (*Calidris canutus*) in breeding plumage. They were foraging continuously and looked like they were feeding restlessly

because they were about to fly for their return migration. I sent the photographs to Nushad Theba and Manish Trivedi, who further confirmed the identification. Ashish Pankhania and Yashodhan Bhatia were also at the same location, but very far from us. These Red Knots were then seen for more than one week and many bird watchers visited Jamnagar to see these birds.

The Red Knot is given as a winter vagrant to Gujarat, with sightings from coastal Saurashtra and Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). The sighting of these birds in almost full breeding plumage was unusual as there are hardly any records of it in breeding plumage from our state. This is an important sighting for Jamnagar as well as Gujarat.

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Ganpule, P., 2016. The birds of Gujarat: Status and distribution. *Flamingo* 8 (3) – 12 (4): 2-40 □

## Nesting of Collard Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* in Kachchh

Jaysukh Parekh 'Suman': 'Shilp' plot no 19A, Vardhman Nagar Hospital Road, Bhuj - Kutch 370 001. nisusuman@gmail.com



Photo: Jaysukh Parekh Suman

On 19 April 2022, late in the morning, I visited Charri-Dhand in Banni, Kachchh, with my son Nirav, and with Nirav Pomal and Mukim Mutva. We were photographing birds in the area. We saw and photographed Collard Pratincoles (*Glareola pratincola*) in Chari-Dhandh. There were small group of 6-8 birds which were scattered in the area. The area had small to medium dry grass, with depressions covered with dense grass. We observed that sometimes, the birds were flying and landing on the ground. After landing, some birds were walking fast with necks

## Collard Pratincole....

stretched in the front. The temperature was about 40° C and so the birds were panting. Some mud in the area had not yet fully dried and so it was wet, with short dry grass. We saw many birds sitting on the wet mud to cool themselves. Suddenly, one bird landed near this wet area, walked a little and sat down in one of the depressions on the ground. After sitting down, it spread its belly. This looked like incubating behaviour. I was surprised to see this and thought that a nest must be present there. We were in our car and with the intention of not disturbing the bird, we waited for a while. The bird was relaxed but panting continuously due to the heat. After sometime, the bird stood up and walked away. We took some photos with a telephoto lens from a distance and saw one chick and one egg. We also saw that there were four-five other individuals nearby, but not too close to the nest. The bird returned after some time and started re-incubating the egg. As this species generally nests in colonies, we thought that there might be more nests nearby but did not search for them.

After that day, I went there five times in the next few weeks. We saw a few chicks around that area and observed that at least 3 pairs of Collared Pratincoles were parenting the chicks. We could see that the chicks were healthy even though the temperature was more than 40° C.



Photo: Jaysukh Parekh Suman

They were active and were wing stretching, preening and walking on the ground. We also saw some juveniles of Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*) landing near to the Collared Pratincole chicks but the adult pratincoles were tolerant of the larks.

There are very few records of nesting of Collared Pratincoles in Kachchh [see elsewhere in this issue – Eds] and it was thus noteworthy to see that a few pairs had bred in Kachchh this year. □

## Sighting of Tickell's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis* in Bopal, Ahmedabad

**Vyom Vyas:** 8, Jayantilal Park, Ambli, Bopal Road, Ahmedabad 380058. vyomvyas2004@gmail.com



Photo: Vyom Vyas

The Tickell's Leaf-Warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*) is a distinct leaf-warbler with yellowish supercilium and underparts, and greenish, gray-brown, or yellow-tinged upperparts. The yellow supercilium is long and is distinct in all plumages. It has yellowish ear-coverts, contrasting with the green body. Its

remiges and rectrices are brown with olive fringes. It has a distinct pale lower mandible to the bill and the legs range from dark brown to yellowish-brown in colour. When vocalizing, it perches on the tops of small trees, shrubs, and boulders and sings with a series of short notes (in breeding season). In winters, it usually gives short 'chit' calls which are similar to Sulphur-bellied Warbler (*Phylloscopus griseolus*) (Clement 2020).

In the winter months, it prefers a habitat with bushes, trees, forest edges, clearings, and also among cultivated areas (Clement 2020). On 1 October 2021, it was a cool morning. I ventured on a cycle to my backyard birding hotspot amidst Ahmedabad city. The habitat was a small patch with a mix of natural vegetation, agricultural fields, and a few scattered trees (*Acacia sp.*, *Calotropis sp.*, and *Azadirachta indica*). At 09:00 hrs, when it started getting hot, the activity was also very low. During that time, I happened to scan a flock of Lesser Whitethroats (*Curruca curruca*) foraging in a field with short shrubs. Amongst them, there was a bold leaf-warbler that

preferred to stay on top of the shrubs and mixed easily with the whitethroats. I clicked a few photographs of the leaf-warbler and identified it as a Tickell's Leaf-Warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*) by the lemon-yellow wash on the breast and belly, greenish back, long and prominent yellow supercilium, and a pale lower mandible. One of the important features for identification of the Tickell's Leaf Warbler is the olive-green wing edges, which was seen and photographed in this individual. Later, I asked Ashwin Viswanathan and he also suggested that it was a Tickell's Leaf-Warbler.



Photo: Vyom Vyas

The sighting of a Tickell's Leaf Warbler is an uncommon sighting in the drier regions of India (mainly in some parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat). This species has been recorded a few times previously in Gujarat; the first record was by Akhtar & Tiwari (1995), and it was subsequently seen in Morbi (Ganpule

2013), in Vansda National Park, Navsari, in March 2012 (see eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S20694735> - no photograph is available), and at Sant Sarovar, Gandhinagar in 2019 (see photo: [Macaulay Library ML184905771](https://macaulaylibrary.org/ML184905771)). There is a sighting from the Little Rann of Kachchh too (Christian 2017). This is another record of the species with photographic evidence from Gujarat and it is probably the first record from Ahmedabad district. The Tickell's Leaf-Warbler is likely to be overlooked in Gujarat and it is possible that it could be occurring here in suitable habitats.

### Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Ashwin Viswanathan for identification and Dhaval Vargiya for reviewing the draft of this article.

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### Errata

In the article on the Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) with 'progressive greying' in the previous issue [*Flamingo Gujarat* 5 (1): 5-7], a reference from a newspaper, 'The Hindu' is given for an aberrant Eurasian Coot seen in Kerala where it was identified as a 'leucistic' individual. The correct reference is as follows:

Hariharan, C., Raveendran, J., Prabhu, V., & John, A., 2016. Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* affected by progressive greying. *Malabar Trogon* 14 (1-3): 27-28.

and the bird was affected by the mutation 'progressive greying'.

[We are thankful to Praveen J. for pointing out the correct reference for this sighting – Eds].

## Short Birding Notes



### Hair-crested Drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus* near Gir Sanctuary, Dhari, Amreli District

On 20 January 2022, we were exploring the Matangmala revenue area, Dhari. We observed a Hair-crested Drongo (*Dicrurus hottentottus*), also known as Spangled Drongo, along with a flock of the Black Drongos (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) and Lesser Goldenbacks (*Dinopium benghalense*). We were looking for flycatchers and thrushes in that area when we heard a very unusual and noisy bird. It was moving under the canopy of an Indian Cotton Tree (*Bombax ceiba*), Indian Kino Tree (*Pterocarpus marsupium*), Arjun (*Terminalia arjuna*), and Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*). We saw the Hair-crested Drongo following the woodpecker from one tree to another. It was feeding on insects in the holes dug by the woodpecker and imitating a Black Drongo's call. We observed the bird for 10 straight days in the same area and photographed it many times. We saw that the bird mostly perched on Indian Cotton and Arjun tree near the riverside. In Gujarat, the Hair-crested Drongo is rare winter visitor; there are only a few records from Saurashtra (in the Gir region) but it is rare here.

**Maheshbhai H. Sondarva, Maheshbhai S. Parmar & Kaushal S. Sharma:** Amreli.  
kaushal.shrma@gmail.com



### Rosy Minivet *Pericrocotus roseus* in Vansada National Park, South Gujarat

On 28 April 2022, I visited Vansada National Park, in the Dangs, South Gujarat. There, I saw and photographed a male Rosy Minivet (*Pericrocotus roseus*). I could get good photographs and the identification was confirmed by the rosy underparts and grey-brown upperparts. The Rosy Minivet has been recorded in Vansada National Park earlier but there are only a few records from the Dangs on 'eBird'. All the records from the Dangs are from January till April. This record in late April is interesting and shows that this species remains in the Dangs till at least the end of April. Further records will help in understanding its status here in Gujarat.

**Mitul Desai:** Valsad. desaimitul52@gmail.com



### Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary

On 7 January 2022, I went to the Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. I was with a few guests from Mumbai and we took a boat and visited some islands in the sanctuary. We were hoping to photograph the Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) which was seen there. At around 10:50 hrs, we reached the island and saw the plover. There were a few Common Teals (*Anas crecca*) present. There was a Marbled Duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*) with the Common Teals. It flew away and landed further away. I took my guests nearer and we got very good photographs of this rarity. The Marbled Duck remained in this area for a few weeks and bird watchers from all over India visited Nalsarovar and saw it here. The Marbled Duck is uncommon in Gujarat; it was recently seen in Kachchh in September 2021 (Sodha 2021). There are previous records from Nalsarovar area but it is rare here.

**Latif Alvani:** At – Nalsarovar.



### Sighting of Shaheen Falcon *Falco peregrinus peregrinator* near Vadodara

On 12 September 2021, at around 15:00 hrs during my outing to Sindhrot, near Vadodara, with Parag Parikh, we were just driving around enjoying nature. While coming back, I saw a perched bird of prey and could not identify it. Since the weather was overcast, and light was low, we could not see it well from far. Luckily, there was a camera in my car, so I took some record shots and then realised that it was a Shaheen Falcon (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*). To confirm the identification, I sent the photographs to Kartikbhai Upadhyay and Ayaz Mansuri who confirmed that it was indeed a Shaheen Falcon. I had seen the Shaheen Falcon earlier in Jambughoda WLS and I was lucky to see this bird near Vadodara. There are infrequent sightings of this falcon from Vadodara but it is uncommon here.

**Rajvi Parikh:** Vadodara. rajvi77@gmail.com



### **Broad-billed Sandpiper *Calidris falcinellus* in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary**

On 26 August 2021, at around 15:15 hrs, we visited Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. We were searching for birds near Dhrabla-bet, when we saw many birds there. We were surprised to see and photograph a single Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Calidris falcinellus*) in almost full breeding plumage. After that, we visited the site in the morning on 27 August 2021 and saw it again. In Gujarat, the Broad-billed Sandpiper is an uncommon winter visitor, mainly found in coastal areas of Kachchh and Saurashtra, and it is commonly seen around Jamnagar (Ganpule 2016). However, there are very few inland records of this species from Gujarat and this is probably the first photographic record of the Broad-billed Sandpiper from Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary.

**Kamarudin & Ramajhan Kasam Sama:** At Post – Vekaria, Nalsarovar.



### **Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* near Nalsarovar**

On 12 December 2021, while birding around Vitthalgadhi area, near Nalsarovar, we saw a large raptor perched on a Neem tree a bit further away from the road. It was being harassed by few crows (*Corvus* sp.) and flew into an adjoining tree. The distinctive underwing pattern clearly identified the bird as a Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*).

We tried to get closer and approached it near the farm edge to get a few decent photographs before it flew away. A few days later, we again saw the bird on the same perch, indicating that the bird remained in the vicinity for some time before leaving the site. This time, we were able to get good photographs, which further confirmed the identification. There are only a few scattered records of the Crested Serpent Eagle outside of Gir NP / Girnar area in Saurashtra. This was our first sighting of the Crested Serpent Eagle in this area.

**Dakshina Magiawala:** Ahmedabad. aara.ahd@gmail.com



### **Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris* near Bhavnagar**

On 22 September 2021, I was birding in the Malnath Hill Range, near Bhavnagar. At around 10:30 hrs, I saw and photographed a Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*). I saw one small and dark coloured warbler (*Phylloscopus* sp.) at this place. I immediately took photographs and observed it closely. It had distinctive dark greenish upperparts and dirty looking underparts. The dark eye-stripe was broad and it had a long supercilium. The bill was large and dark. I identified it as a Large-billed Leaf Warbler (*Phylloscopus magnirostris*).

In October 2020, I had recorded this species with my friends in the Malnath Hills. This sighting, in September 2021, makes it the second record for this area. It is possible that this species could be a rare passage migrant through Gujarat. More sightings will help in understanding its status here.

**Vivek Upadhyay:** Bhavnagar. viveku39@gmail.com



### **Eurasian Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* preying on a hare**

On 9 January 2022, I was bird watching in Surat outskirts area. I observed that a female Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) was just around 15 feet away from me, and flying towards me. On a closer look, I saw that it had something in its feet. Since it was very near, I was not able to focus my camera but as soon as it went away, I took some photographs. I was surprised to see that it was carrying a hare in its feet. It was probably the Indian Hare, also known as Black-naped Hare (*Lepus nigricollis*) but I could not identify the prey with certainty. It was astonishing to see the marsh harrier carrying this prey. Though this species is known to hunt a variety of birds, mammals and insects, and is a great opportunist, this was the first time I had seen it hunting a hare. The Eurasian Marsh Harrier is stated to hunt rabbits in Spain (Orta *et al.* 2020) but I could not find any record of this species preying on a rabbit/hare in India.

**Dharmesh Kanthariya:** Surat. dkanthariya8@gmail.com



### **Asian Pied Starling *Gracupica contra* in Banaskantha**

During our travel to Nani Bhatamal from Moti Bhatamal (near Dantiwada Dam), Banaskantha, for birding, we spotted two Asian Pied Starlings (*Gracupica contra*) foraging near a field with Millet crop. This bird has not been recorded earlier from our region and there are no published records of the Asian Pied Starling from Banaskantha district. The pair was seen at the location 24° 17' 43.1" N, 72° 24' 48.5" E, on 25 July 2021 at 06:50 hrs. The nearest record for Asian Pied Starling from this location is from Sirohi district, Rajasthan, and from Mehsana district, Gujarat. This species is given as rare in Gujarat with records from many areas though some of these were thought to be of escapees (Ganpule 2016). However, it now seems that some populations could have established in a few areas. This sighting indicates a wider spread of this species in Gujarat.

**Mayank Judal, Kailash Jani & Dr. Suresh Prajapati:** Palanpur.



### **Lesser Goldenback *Dinopium benghalense* in Jamnagar District**

On 21 July 2021, I visited Churi-Aai Temple, near Jamjodhpur, District: Jamnagar, with Shantilal Varu and Dimple Varu. The area has a temple surrounded by well wooded habitat. There, we saw a Lesser Goldenback (*Dinopium benghalense*). We saw it well and Dimple Varu took many photographs. This is the first time I saw the Lesser Goldenback in Jamnagar district. There is a previous sighting of this species in Barda Forest in June 2017 (Vargia 2017). However, this woodpecker is quite uncommon in this area. Maybe, it could be frequenting well wooded areas in the district.

**Maulik Varu:** Jamnagar. drmaulikvaru@yahoo.com



### **Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* near Vadodara**

On 23 April 2022, a Sunday, early morning at 06:30 hrs, I started my birding walk at Sindhrot (near the Nature Education Park), Vadodara. I had specifically gone to photograph the Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*), which have a breeding colony on this road. I took many photographs and went further ahead to see the Spotted Owlets (*Athene brama*), which are seen here. On returning back, I thought of photographing the bee-eaters in flight. While photographing these birds, at around 08:20 hrs, I observed a couple of birds in the sky. They were new for me, and their speed was very fast. I quickly clicked a record photograph of one of the birds, thinking I would check it out later. After a few days, while processing the pictures, I was pleasantly surprised to see that these birds were, in fact, Amur Falcons (*Falco amurensis*). I asked a few experts, and they confirmed the identification. This sighting in late April is indicative of the Amur Falcon being in return migration. This is a rare sighting for Vadodara.

**Ashit Gandhi:** Vadodara. ahgandhi65@gmail.com



### **Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca* near Rajkot**

On 31 October 2021, we went to Hanumandhara, near Rajkot, for a birding trip early in the morning. We were specifically looking for the Red Munia (*Amandava amandava*) which is seen here regularly. We stayed put for about two hours and during that time, we saw one Black-headed Munia (*Lonchura malacca*) in the swamp where the Red Munias perched. Just a few yards from this location, we found a flock of around 7 to 8 Black-headed Munias feeding. Normally, this species is not sighted in Rajkot area regularly and we saw these birds for the first time. There have been a few previous records of this species around Rajkot (Mashru 2005, Ghervada *et al.* 2018) but the Black-headed Munia is uncommon here. This sighting is after almost three years and is an important record for Rajkot area.

**Dipen Trattiya & Ashesh Shah:** Rajkot.



### **Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* pair in Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary**

On 9 February 2021, I was with Akbar Alvani in the peripheral part of Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. While observing birds in the area, we saw a pair of Namaqua Doves (*Oena capensis*) perched together on a tree. We have been observing the Namaqua Dove in this area for the past few years but this is the first time that a pair was seen here. Most of the time, a single bird is seen foraging or perched. We were surprised to see a pair together. The Namaqua Dove is now a regular visitor to the Nalsarovar area in the winter.

**Mehmud Multani:** At – Nalsarovar.



### **Orange-headed Thrush *Zosterops citrina* in Gandhinagar**

On 9 June 2021, at around 17:30 hrs, in Indroda Nature Park, Gandhinagar, we saw an Orange-headed Thrush (*Zosterops citrina*) near a small ravine. It was hopping on the ground, lifting fallen dry leaves and foraging on small worms and insects. The bird was a little shy and took a small flight when it felt insecure. It was seen for one week in a 500 meter radius from the site of the first sighting. As per our knowledge, it is probably the first photographic record in Gandhinagar. The Orange-headed Thrush is a rare resident in South Gujarat forests, with scattered records from other parts of the state (Ganpule 2016). In 'eBird', there are records of this species from different parts of Gujarat but there is no record from Gandhinagar. This sighting adds to the records of this species from the state.

**Irshad N. Theba & Naushad N. Theba:** Gandhinagar. irshadtheba@gmail.com



### **Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* near Rajkot**

On day 25 February 2021, I was with fellow bird watchers Jaymin Panchasara, Bhavin Patel and Parth Bhatt. We were moving around Khambhala rural area, near Rajkot. We saw a male Plum-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*) on a flowering 'flame of the forest' tree. It was a really beautiful sight to see as we were seeing this species in Rajkot for the first time. We went there the next day, on 26 February 2021. Fortunately, we saw both, the male and the female parakeets but unfortunately, we could not take pictures as it was late evening time. We again visited the site on the third consecutive day and saw these birds again. They were feeding on the flowers of the tree. Looking at the plumage and the behaviour of these birds, we felt that they were wild birds and not escapees. There have been previous records of this species from Rajkot but it is rare here.

**Pinkesh Tanna:** Rajkot. pinkeshanna99999@gmail.com

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## FEATHER FRAME

### TINY OASIS

**Yashodhan Bhatia:** 'Birding or Nothing', C/O Bhatia Stores, Old Station Road, Jamnagar, India. jamnagarbirds@gmail.com

Birding for me is perpetual bliss. You see stunning and surprising things (mostly birds!), and you are sure that you may never see it again. But, birding is a continuous journey where, with luck, you continue to see many amazing things. I had an exceptional birding trip at a remote place in Kachchh, Gujarat. The news came from birder friends about a great congregation of birds at Khadir-bet in Greater Rann of Kachchh, and I was aware that this phenomenon would not last long. So, along with a couple of friends, I planned to visit the place immediately on the coming weekend.

This picture was framed in December 2011, near the last of the Border Security Force (BSF) check-post in an incredibly remote part in the Greater Rann of Kutch. Taking a break from the hectic photographic trip of Khadir-bet to witness

one of the largest congregations of flamingos, pelicans, gulls, terns, and other waders, we visited the Wood Fossil Park, which was near Dholavira, and quite inaccessible at that time. This Fossil Park was at the edge of a shallow sea bed, and it being a border area, a chowki was strategically built on a hillock looming over the landmass. The soldiers were aware that there is no potable water within several kilometers of its periphery. So, few meters from the chowki, they had tied a 'non-use' helmet filled with water, to a branch of dry *Acacia* sp. tree. This worked as a 'tiny oasis' and was frequented by bulbuls, prinias, and silverbills for drinking as well as bathing. This gesture by the BSF soldiers was incredibly thoughtful and provided drinking water for the birds in the otherwise dry, desert habitat.



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