

# Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* in Kachchh, Gujarat, India

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## Introduction

The first record of a Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* from the Indian Subcontinent was a specimen collected in the Larkana district of Pakistan on 6th March 1875 (Blanford 1875). The second record also comes from Pakistan when on 26th April 1877 Duke reported it from Kalat in Baluchistan, Pakistan (Hume 1877; Roberts 1992). There was no record till 14th November 1930 when Sálím Ali collected a specimen at Kihim, Colaba district, Maharashtra, India (Ali 1931). After a gap of 30 years two specimens were collected from the Great Rann of Kachchh on 22nd and 23rd March 1960 at Kuar Bet (Shekar 1960).

On 23rd January 1990 S. N. Varu sighted one female Grey Hypocolius at Fulay village in the Banni grasslands of Kachchh district, Gujarat (Tiwari *et al* 1996). Subsequently a team of field researchers from Bombay Natural History Society carried out a detailed study. The maximum number of Grey Hypocolius seen was 150 birds, in three flocks, on 20th December 1993 (Tiwari *et al* 1996). On 24th March 2007 a total 175 Grey Hypocolius were seen in the scrub around Fulay village—perhaps congregating for their return migration. I have recorded the Grey Hypocolius here every winter from November 1990. The wintering birds stay till first or second week of April.

Ali & Ripley (1987) described the species as a rare vagrant to the subcontinent. Roberts (1992) referred to their comments on its status and noted that the recent sightings from Pakistan might indicate that it is an irregular but not uncommon visitor to the desert of Baluchistan.

Studies carried out by Tiwari *et al* (1996), Himmatsinhji *et al* (2002), and the observations in this note suggest that the Grey Hypocolius is a regular winter visitor to Kachchh district.

## Study area and methods

The present study was conducted between November 2005 and April 2008 in mixed scrub habitat of thorn and *Salvadora persica* around Fulay village and near Watchtower No. 1, at the edge of Chhari-Dhand wetland in the grassland of Banni. At least 50 trips were made to the area between 0600-0900hrs and 1700-1900hrs in winter.

Grey Hypocolius were not seen near the watchtower during November 2006–April 2007. That habitat had been destroyed by charcoal-makers.

## Observations

70 birds were present—22 near the watchtower—during 5th November 2005–6th April 2006. In the next season, 17th October 2006–15th April 2007, 175 birds were seen. In the third season, 12 November 2007–20 April 2008, 150 birds were present (Table 1). The presence of Grey Hypocolius around Fulay seems to be directly linked to the availability of food, which, in turn, is affected by a well-set monsoon. This is evident after the monsoon of 2006, when over 600mm of rain fell, and Grey Hypocolius stayed in Fulay for over six months.

## Arrival and departure dates

Grey Hypocolius arrive in Fulay scrub forest in October–November and stay till March–April. Observations over 18 years (1990–2008) suggest that they are regular winter visitors here (Tiwari *et al* 1996; Table 1).

There were three sightings of this species away from Fulay village. The first, on 6th February 1994, was at Lyja Creek, on the seashore near Mandvi in Kachchh district. The second, on 17th January 1999, was in the Lakhpat fort area, on *Salvadora persica* trees, near the Pir Gosh Mohammed ka Kuba—on the edge of the Great Rann of Kachchh (Himmatsinhji *et al* 2002).



Fig. 1. Male Grey Hypocolius in Fulay village, January 2007.

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Fig. 2. *Salvadora persica*

Kavi Taej and Ashwin Pomal came across one Grey Hypocolius at Sindhodi coast in Abdasa area of Kachchh on 2nd March 1999.

#### Feeding behaviour and vocalisations

Grey Hypocolius feed on the ripe berries of *Salvadora persica* (local name *Piloodi* or *Khari jar*). They also feed on the flower-petals and berries of another plant locally known as *Tankara*. They generally feed in small flocks but sometimes forage

alone. A flock consists of 20-25 birds. They prefer feeding in the inner canopy of trees, but also glean off the top canopy and outer crown of the plant. From a distance they resemble a flock of bulbuls (Pycnonotidae) busy devouring *Salvadora persica* berries.

Other species that share the same habitat and feed on the berries of *Salvadora persica* include Rosy Pastor *Sturnus roseus*, and Red-vented *Pycnonotus cafer* White-cheeked *P. leucogenys* bulbuls.

When in a flock, the hypocolius emit a sweet musical two-note call 'piew piew'. They are more vocal in March-April prior to their return migration.

#### Roosting behaviour

Till 2004 Grey Hypocolius roosted in areas where *Acacia nilotica* ('Desi babool') and *Salvadora persica* grew in close association. But during 2005-2007 they changed their preference and began to roost in *Prosopis juliflora* (an exotic weed) and *Salvadora persica* assemblages. Three such roosts were located during 2005-2008 in about 20 ha of scrub near Fulay village.

Pre-roosting behaviour consisted of feeding, preening and calling. Birds came in to roost 30 minutes before sunset. The birds would sink into the inner canopy of the tree to roost. They left the roost around 0700-0730hrs.

Herds of camels, feeding on *Salvadora persica* leaves, would sometimes disturb the roosting Grey Hypocolius—their nocturnal activities revealed by their droppings and hoof-marks the following morning. The disturbed birds would change their roost and spend the night in bushes c.50 m away.

#### Threats and recommendations

The decision of the Gujarat government to allow conversion of the exotic weed *Prosopis juliflora* to charcoal is being abused by local residents and immigrant labour who have begun making charcoal from any species they come across. The illegal cutting of *Salvadora persica* that has resulted, has led to an alarming rate of habitat destruction in Kachchh. It has also affected birdlife severely as frugivorous birds face a severe food shortage. People have not only cut the shoot system, they have uprooted plants using heavy bulldozers, etc. Where such machinery was not available people used heavy iron wire and tractors to uproot the plants. In spite of several reports in local newspapers and information sent to all concerned governmental departments, the destruction is rampant. If rectification steps are not taken immediately, the Grey Hypocolius habitat will be turned to charcoal in a short time.

Habitat protection from the charcoal lobby is required immediately. Ministry of Environment and Forests and the state government should tackle this issue urgently and a total ban on charcoal should be enforced. Several thousand trees of slow-growing native species (habitat of birds) are lost already and what is left is exposed to the greed of charcoal-makers.

This charcoal business is flourishing in Kachchh since two years. The scanty forest cover of a fragile ecosystem cannot sustain this onslaught any longer.

Stop Press: Since this paper was written, the state government has banned charcoal making and now there is hope for the protection of *Salvadora persica* and other indigenous plant species in Kachchh.

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Table 1. Migration dates of Grey Hypocolius

Arrival	Departure	Population
5 November 2005	6 April 2006	70
17 October 2006	15 April 2007	175
12 November 2007	20 April 2008	150