The two races of the Red-throated Flycatcher Ficedula p. parva, and F. p. albicilla have been recently elevated to full species level, the nominate Red-breasted- F. parva, and the Red-throated Flycatcher F. albicilla (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Sangster et al. (2004), and Svensson et al. (2005) had recommended that the two be treated as separate species based on a combination of morphological, vocal, moult, and mitochondrial DNA differences. The Red-throated Flycatcher is also known as ‘Taiga Flycatcher’ (Cederroth et al. 1999), and Svensson et al. (2005) also recommend this name since it is indicative of the bird’s favoured breeding habitat, besides avoiding confusion between two similar English names. F. albicilla is hereinafter referred to in this note as Taiga Flycatcher.

The Red-breasted Flycatcher is a regular winter migrant to Gujarat where it is quite commonly found in forests, cultivation, scrub, etc. But there are no earlier records of the Taiga Flycatcher from Gujarat (Ali 1955; Dharmakumarsinhji 1955; Parasharya et al. 2004); Grimmett et al. (1998), and Kazmierczak (2000) have not given separate distribution maps for the two species. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), and Grimmett et al. (2011) give the winter distribution of the Taiga Flycatcher as mainly in north-eastern, and eastern India, central India, and the Eastern Ghat, reaching up to western Maharashtra, and Goa.

On 6 April 2011, I observed and photographed an adult male Taiga Flycatcher in Morbi, Rajkot district, Gujarat (22°49’N, 70°50’E). It had a rufous throat bordered below by a grey breast band, which is its typical breeding plumage, and diagnostic for the species. Other characteristics, like a smaller all-black bill and black tail, with black upper tail coverts, were also noted. The photographs I took further confirmed its identity. The bird was seen only for two days. The date of sighting is indicative of it being a spring passage migrant. This was also the first time I had noted it here.

It is possible that the Taiga Flycatcher may have been overlooked earlier due to plumage similarities to the Red-breasted Flycatcher. Breeding males of both species are easier to identify, though females and juveniles, of both, are similar and invariably difficult to separate in the field. However, characteristics like bill colour, under parts colouration and the longest upper tail coverts are significant, and it is possible to separate the two by careful observation. Cederroth et al. (1999) give details of differences between the two species.

This sighting is the western-most record for India and extends the range of F. albicilla westwards up to the Saurashtra region of Gujarat.

References

An instance of adult male Grey-bellied Cuckoo Cacomantis passerinus feeding a juvenile

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On 25 July 2012, around 1000 hrs, we happened to see an interesting feeding behaviour of the Grey-bellied Cuckoo Cacomantis passerinus in Sultanpur village (28º27’41”N, 76º53’27”E), about a kilometre away from the Sultanpur National Park, Gurgaon district, Haryana. There were three birds in the vicinity; a hepatic female, an adult male, and a juvenile, perched on adjacent trees, bordering the fields in the village. The prominent reddish gape, and the overall behaviour of the bird led me to conclude that it was indeed a juvenile, and not another female morph. The juvenile seemed to be clueless and lost, and would wait for the adult male to conduct its journey from tree to tree. The photograph below (22) was taken when the young bird crash-landed on a tree-stalk, and the adult male fed it with a caterpillar/grub. Interestingly, the hepatic female, just a tree away, took no interest in this feeding episode, which lasted no longer than five minutes before the birds flew away.

Most members of the cuckoo family (Cuculidae) are known brood parasites. However, the adult males of certain cuckoos are known to occasionally feed fledged young of their own species. This behaviour appears to be a misdirected courtship feeding by the male cuckoo as evident from the following observations: first, young ones which are still at nest are not known to be fed by adult cuckoos; second, female cuckoos have not been observed feeding fledged chicks; finally, this behaviour has been observed only in taxa like Crested, Glossy, Bronze and Cacomantis sp., cuckoos, in which courtship feeding of females by males is a common behaviour (del Hoyo et al. 1997) Interestingly, Lowndes (1952) reported a possible case of such behaviour in Common Cuckoo Cuculus canorus. As this behaviour does not seem to have been documented before in Indian cuckoos, this observation on Grey-bellied Cuckoo is noteworthy.

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References