

Some notes on the breeding of Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* in Gujarat, India

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The Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* is found across India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia, and China (BirdLife International 2013). It is widely found in most parts of India, including the drier zones of Gujarat and Rajasthan (Grimmett *et al.* 1998); its western-most record is from Jodhpur, Rajasthan (Sivaperuman *et al.* 2004). Publications regarding its breeding are scanty (Harington 1904; Santharam 1984; Ganesh & Kanniah 1985), and few relevant images on the Internet.

Here, we provide new information on the breeding of Ashy Woodswallow based on some observations in Gujarat, India. We observed the breeding activities of Ashy Woodswallow at three different locations in two districts of central Gujarat (Vadodara, and Dahod districts).

Gutal Village, Waghodia Tehsil, Vadodara District

On 24 March 2013, we discovered an Ashy Woodswallow's nest on a RCC electric pylon [10] standing in a landscape comprising open scrub, agricultural fields, and a water body, near Gutal Village, Waghodia Tehsil, in Vadodara District (22.373°N, 73.434°E). This nest was at a height of four meters, and located in an open slit on the pylon. A bird was on the nest, and three adultbirds perched on the electric wire about four to five meters from the nest. One of us (RV) climbed the pylon, and discovered the nest was c. 08–10 cm in diameter; a shallow hemispherical cup, constructed with small dry twigs, grasses, and roots. Inside the nest was a black-coloured fledgling (? 2–3 days old), and two, very dull, speckled light brown eggs [11].



11. One chick with two eggs of Ashy Woodswallow.

We observed the nest from 24 March to 15 May 2013 through binoculars (8x40). We took pictures of the nest, and nestlings, at intervals of five to seven days to minimize disturbance.

On 28 March, we noticed just two eggs; the chick was missing. On 07 April there were two more eggs in the nest. The four eggs [12] were now continuously incubated by adult birds.



12. Four eggs in the nest of *Artamus fuscus*; a One Rupee coin is placed for size comparison.



10. Unusual nesting site of Ashy Woodswallow on an electricity transmission pylon. A bird is incubating, and two adult birds are nearby.

Photos: Raju Vyas

On 22 April, we saw an adult bringing food to the nest, and assumed that the eggs had hatched. The next day we saw four chicks in the nest [13]. These may have hatched three to four days earlier, given their size and condition. All four had a few white fibre-like down feathers on their heads, backs, and both the wings. Based on the above, we estimate the incubation period to be of 23–27 days. On 01 May there was a chick missing from the

nest, while the other three were being fed by three different birds, almost in sequence. On 05 May there were only two chicks in the nest. We could not explain the sudden disappearance of the chicks within the span of a week. Had they been predated upon, or had they died naturally, and been removed by the adults? If a predator had taken them, then why were others spared? On 15 May, both the chicks left the nest early in the morning. They appeared similar to the adults, except for being duller, and smaller in size. Three adults were still attended to them [14].

We observed that adult birds fed the chicks with various types of flying insects, including dragonflies, damselflies, and butterflies;

we could not identify some insects. Feeding activities started at sunrise and ended with sunset; the feeding frequency being highest between 0900–1100 hrs and 1600–1700 hrs. Over three days we noticed that the chicks were fed at an average of eight insects per hour, and their diet varied between 3–15 types of insects. They were fed 10–15 per hour during the peak feeding hours in the morning, 8–10 times during the evening. We also noticed that adult birds usually brought de-winged dragonflies as food to the nest [15], rather than ones with intact wings [16].



Photo: Raju Vyas

13. Four Ashy Woodswallow chicks in the nest.



Photos: Kartik Upadhyay

15. An adult Ashy Woodswallow on the nest with a de-winged dragonfly.



14. Three Ashy Woodswallow adults along with two chicks.

Photos: Kartik Upadhyay



16. A parent bird of *Artamus fuscus* with an intact dragonfly (most probably a female of *Rhyothemis* sp.).

Juna Rampura Village, Waghodia, Vadodara District

On 28 March 2013, we found a nest, under construction, on a similar electric pylon as the previous one, near Juna Rampura Village, Waghodia Tehsil, Vadodara District (2.37°N, 73.424°E), situated 1.20 km from it. There were four adult birds in the vicinity of this nest. But after a few days this nest was deserted by the birds; no eggs had been laid. The birds might have abandoned the nest as a new cable was being stretched on that pylon.

On 05 May we observed a pair of Ashy Woodswallows, with two chicks, in the area. The parents were actively feeding dragonflies and damselflies to both the chicks. These adult birds could have been the same that had abandoned the earlier nest reported above.

Dhanpar Tehsil, Dahod District

On 26 May 2013, KU observed a small group of Ashy Woodswallows in a protected area. There were two young birds, with four adults on a tall Silk Cotton tree *Bombax ceiba* at the high vantage point close to Bhuvoro Village, Ratanmahal Wildlife Sanctuary, Dhanpar Tehsil, Dahod District. All four adults were helping feed the youngsters [17].

The Ashy Woodswallow usually nests on trees (Harington 1904; Ganesh & Kanniah 1985), but recent studies have shown that the birds often adapt to the situation and nest on artificial structures too (Santharam 1984; Chun 2004; Narayanan 2013).

Our observations are in line with the known breeding behaviour of the species (Rowley & Russel 2009), i.e., presence of adult 'helpers' who assist the breeding pair in various nesting-related activities, like brooding, feeding, and protection; multiple broods in a season; usage of artificial nesting sites, etc.

Our observations coupled with earlier sighting records (Khacher 1996; Worah 1991 and Trivedi & Soni, 2006; Bhatt 2008) of the species from the state do note that not only *Artamus fuscus* is very widely distributed in various types of habitats from deciduous forest, thorny scrub to agricultural lands of Central and South Gujarat, but also the species breeds in these areas during March to May.



17. Three adults along with two young ones on a Silk Cotton tree.

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In Memoriam
K. S. LAVKUMAR KHACHAR
(1931–2015)