

# Winter records of Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* from Sambhar Lake and its environs, Rajasthan

Harkirat Singh Sangha

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The Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* is an anomalous sandpiper that breeds at mid-to-high latitudes in the northern hemisphere, and migrates to the southern hemisphere. It has an unusual biology, with its reversed sexual dimorphism, and aberrant breeding systems. It is the smallest of the three phalaropes, and has the most extensive circumpolar breeding range (Chandler 2009). It is a pelagic migrant, wintering in south-west Pacific and off Peru, in the Arabian Sea, and from central Indonesia to western Melanesia in upwelling zones and ocean slicks with high availability of plankton (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996).

In the Indian Subcontinent it is an offshore winter visitor (usually found 11–50 km away from the mainland) from Mekran, and Sindh in Pakistan, the Gujarat coast, south-eastern India, and Sri Lanka. It is rarely recorded inland, but on passage is recorded practically throughout Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north-western



Fig. 2. Sambhar Lake and Kochiya ki Dhani

India; a few records are from west Nepal, Bihar, and inland southern India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

According to Ali & Ripley (1980) it is, 'recorded from a few inland localities on spring and/or autumn passage.' Roberts (1991) says they, 'take flight to the sea coast non-stop, but occasional birds can be encountered on inland lakes or freshwater ponds on passage.' However, there are no inland winter records of the species from the Indian Subcontinent in published literature (Ali & Ripley 1980; Roberts 1991; Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The purpose of this note is to report hitherto unknown wintering inland records of Red-necked Phalarope from the Indian Subcontinent (Fig. 1).

An unprecedented inland winter sighting of a Red-necked Phalarope took place on 05 February 1999 at Kochia ki Dhani, a freshwater village pond adjacent to Sambhar Lake (26.58°N, 75.05°E) (Fig. 2); 17 Red-necked Phalaropes were counted (Sangha 2002).

Later, five birds, including one juvenile, were observed on 02 November 2001, also at Kochia ki Dhani (Sangha 2009).

Thirteen birds were recorded on Sambhar Lake on 01 December 2009, while birding with Divyabhanusinh Chavda, and late Shantanu Kumar. These birds were feeding in a shallow part of the main lake.

A third sighting from Kochia ki Dhani occurred on 01 December 2013 when Abhinav C., and I photographed c. 14 birds

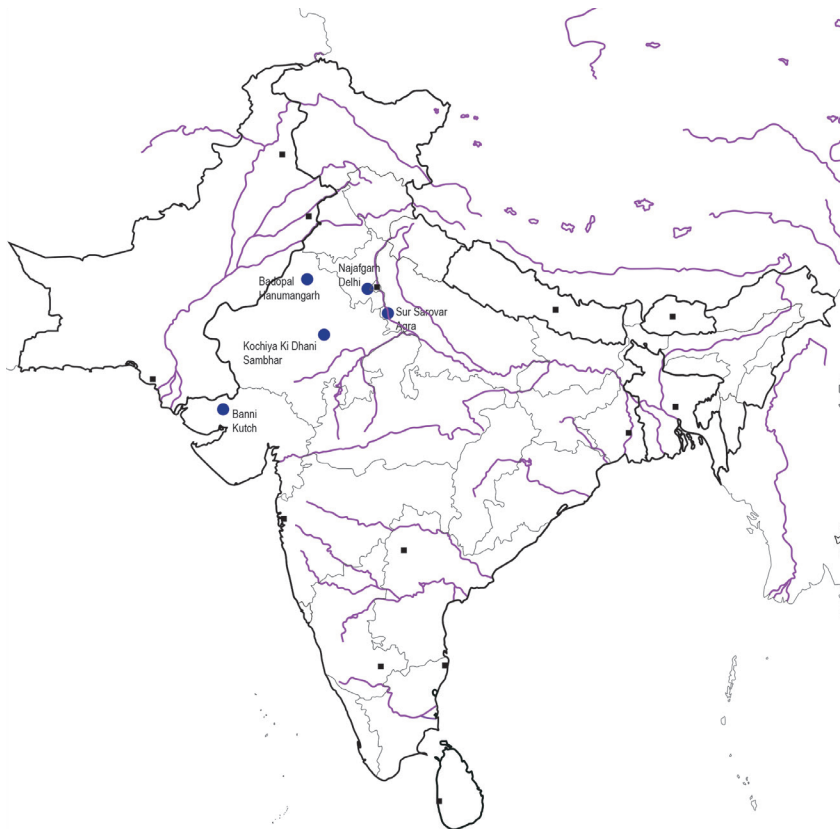


Fig. 1. Winter records of Red-necked Phalarope.

[32]. We watched the very tame flock for more than 30 min. At times they were less than five meters away from us! [33].



Abhinav, C.

32. Red-necked Phalarope at Kochia ki Dhani, Sambhar Lake on 1 December 2013.



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33. Red-necked Phalaropes in flight at Kochiya ki Dhani, Sambhar Lake on 1 December 2013.

One bird was photographed on a fresh water body on 18 December 2007 at Vakeria *dhand* (23.43°N, 23.60°E), Banni, Great Rann of Kachchh (Jugal Tiwari, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 07 September 2016). Another was photographed on 06 February 2015 at the Najafgarh wetlands (28.60°N, 76.99°E), south-western Delhi District (Sanjay Sharma, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 14 February 2015). A single bird was reported from Soor Sarovar, (27.23°N, 77.85°E), Agra District (Uttar Pradesh) on ~08 February 2015 (Jännes 2015).

While birding with Per Undeland of Sweden, on 16 December 2015, at Badopal (25.15°N, 60.04°E), a saline wetland, in Hanumangarh District, Rajasthan, I noticed three Red-necked Phalaropes at a considerable distance, and asked him to look at them. Soon the birds flew further away but we could observe them feeding, not by moving in tight circles but simply swimming and rapidly inserting their bills just below the surface of the water.

Banni is barely c.50 km from the Arabian Sea and it can be presumed that a single bird is likely to be laggard or its presence related to unusual weather prevailing in the region. On the other hand, Badopal wetland, Sambhar Lake, the Najafgarh wetland, and Soor Sarovar are c.800 km, 600 km, 850 km, and 800 km respectively, from the Arabian Sea and situated in interior India.

Red-necked Phalarope is not an uncommon wader, during the autumn passage, at suitable locations in Rajasthan. It is

regular during autumn passage at Sambhar Lake (Sangha 2002), where I have seen the species during August/September almost every year since 1990. Adam (1874) obtained two specimens on 'the 22nd and 25th September' and commented that A. O. Hume was of the opinion that, 'it can only occur at Sambhur as a bird of passage.' It has also been recorded from Revasa (Sikar District), Tal Chhapar (Churu District), Khuri (Nagaur District), and Jaisalmer during autumn passage in Rajasthan (Sangha, *in press*). There are no spring, or summer passage records from Rajasthan, most probably because the above mentioned wetlands are rarely visited by birdwatchers except during winter. Moreover, these wetlands are ephemeral and usually dry up by late winter.

Such unusual inland occurrences, of normally maritime or littoral species, are frequently related to unusual weather patterns, and especially to exceptionally strong onshore winds (Ash & Ashford 1977). It may also be presumed that the above-recorded birds were outgoing and explorative. Scientists studying threatened migratory shorebirds have found they have a range of personality types. A flock of birds may look like identical birds all doing the same thing, but take a closer look and you will see that 'some birds are outgoing and adventurous or explorative, while others prefer the quiet life following the leader,' (Collins 2016).

While recent sightings at Badopal, Najafgarh, and Soor Sarovar may be considered stray records, the repeated occurrence of birds, during winter, at Sambhar is difficult to explain. The question, as to whether their inland wintering is a long established custom, or a new habit developed in the last few years, remains unanswered, and requires study in the future.

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