

Pied Crow *Corvus albus* at Jodhpur, India: Where did it come from?

Pranjal J. Saikia & Vinod Puri Goswami

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Pranjal J. Saikia, Deputy Chief Geologist, Oil India Limited, 2A-District Shopping Center, Saraswati Nagar, Basni, Pali Road, Jodhpur 342005, Rajasthan, India.

E-mail: pranjadib@gmail.com [PJS]

Vinod Puri Goswami, Khejari Ka Chowk, Jaswant Thade ki Ghati, Mehrangarh Fort Road, Jodhpur 342002, Rajasthan, India.

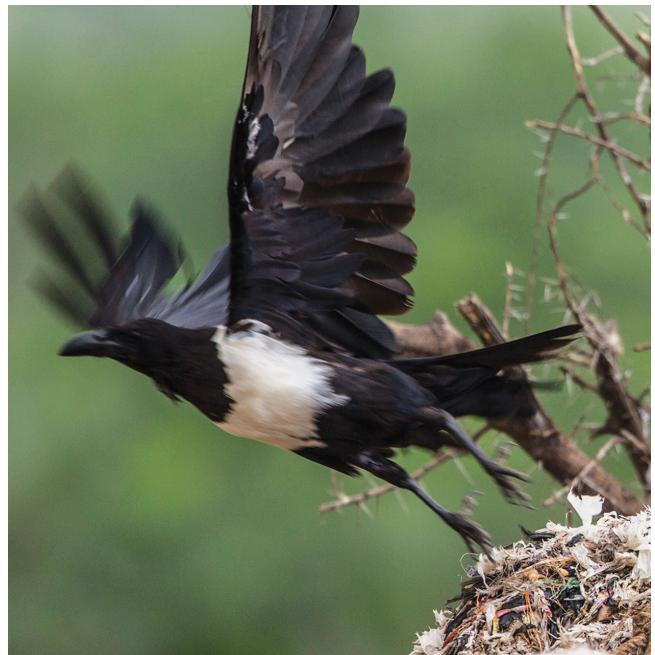
E-mail: vinodpurigoswamijdr@gmail.com (VPG)

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The Pied Crow *Corvus albus* is Africa's most widespread member of the genus *Corvus*. It occurs from almost the whole of sub-Saharan Africa southwards from Mauritania and Mali, central Chad and on the Red Sea coast of Sudan till Cape of Good Hope, apart from the islands of Bioko, Zanzibar, Pemba, Mafia, Comoro, Aldabra, Glorioso, and Madagascar (Madge & de Juano 2017). Although the species is still a vagrant north of the Sahara, one case of a breeding bird, and a number of long-staying birds have been observed during the last few years in Morocco. This note describes an exceptional sighting of a Pied Crow, from Jodhpur, India, and discusses its probable origins.

Observations

On 13 August 2017, we (VPG & PJS), along with Digvijay Singh Rathore, observed and photographed an adult Pied Crow [197, 198] together with few Common (Punjab) Ravens *C. corax laurencei* and House Crows *C. splendens* at a cattle carcass dump, known as "Keru Dump" (26.30°N, 72.88°E), about 20 kms from Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. Identification was straightforward, as we did not know of any other similar looking species. The bird looked healthy and was attempting to socialise with the other corvids. However, the ravens and crows seemed to be avoiding it. The bird was present at the same location at 1100 hrs on 14 August. During our subsequent visits on the following days, and on 20 August, the bird was not found. No other birder seems to have come across this species during its brief stay.



198. Pied Crow in flight.

Identification

Though identification of the bird was beyond doubt, the possibility of aberrant and hybrid Corvids needs to be discussed. The Pied Crow is known to hybridise with the Somali Crow *C. edithae*—exhibiting a variety of grey shades, or speckled breast and collar areas of the body (Madge & de Juano 2017). No such characteristics were observed on this bird and hence it is presumed to be a bird from the pure stock. It is smaller than a Common Raven [199] and larger than a House Crow [200]; and seemed matching perfectly in size with a Pied Crow. Structurally, the bird does not have the peaking head and bill length of a Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos* and is more similar to the larger Common Raven. The Brown-necked Raven *C. ruficollis*, which occurs only in Pakistan (Praveen *et al.* 2017b), is similar in size, and is also known to hybridise in captivity with Pied Crow. However, that species has a more elongated bill than a Pied Crow. The Jodhpur bird is an adult, in perfect plumage, without any aberration whatsoever, leaving little doubt that it is indeed a Pied Crow.



Pics: Pranjal J. Saikia

197. A Pied Crow made a mysterious appearance at Jodhpur.



199. The Pied Crow and a Common Raven. Note the former's smaller size.



Pics: Pranjal J. Saikia

200. A Pied Crow and a House Crow. Note the former's larger size.



Vinod P. Goswami

201. Pied Crow showing moulting feathers.

Discussion

Though we have been visiting this spot often in the past seven years, we have never seen a Pied Crow here. A discussion on Facebook brought forward claims of the bird having been sighted earlier in Rajasthan. However, no photographs or other documentary evidences were available to support these claims, and in such light, these previous claims cannot be verified. The species is not reported from South Asia (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen *et al.* 2017a;) and, in fact, not from anywhere in the Oriental Region (Inskipp *et al.* 1996). Different possibilities, about how it could have arrived in Jodhpur, are discussed below.

Wild vagrant

The Pied Crow is largely a sedentary species. Some movements have been noted, post breeding, in wet years. Vagrants have been recorded from southern Algeria (Madge & de Juano 2017), and southern Libya (Anonymous 2013), and it was discovered breeding in the Western Sahara (Batty 2010). A few records, probably of a few long staying individuals, have been subsequently reported from Morocco, Gibraltar, and Portugal (MaghrebOrnitho 2015a,b). The only record from the OSME region,¹ and also the nearest to India is from the island of Socotra off the coast of Yemen in 2003–2004 (Blair *et al.* 2017), though there are a couple of records from Egypt. Socotra is more than 2500 km from Jodhpur, across the northern Arabian Sea; and is farther away from it by the land route. Essentially, the Pied Crow is an African bird and its regular range is nearly 3000 km away and it has not occurred, till date, in the large intervening area with suitable habitats in the Middle East. Hence, it would really be exceptional for a wild vagrant to have reached India after crossing the Arabian Sea or via land. Strong monsoon winds have the potential to blow weak individuals to the northern Indian coast, where they can get lost. However, typically wind-blown birds are recovered, dead or dying, even 10–20 km from the coast (Prasad Ganpule, *pers. comm.* 27 August 2017). Additionally, it is usually inexperienced and immature birds that get caught in these storms, and get disoriented before they are blown ashore. Our bird appeared quite healthy and Jodhpur is nearly 450–500 km inland from the nearest coast in Gujarat. Though it is true that Pied Crows seem to have been enterprising enough to cross the Sahara to reach northern Africa, they have not yet been recorded crossing oceans without the assistance of ships.

Ship assisted

Some corvids like House Crows are well-known to have dispersed widely with assistance of ships (Cheke 2008), and many records of Pied Crow from the western Palearctic from Britain, the Netherlands, southern Spain and the Canary Is, apart from Brazil are believed to be escapees or ship-assisted (Madge & de Juano 2017). Hence, the possibility of a bird being transported across the Arabian Sea and landing in Gujarat, or Pakistan, and then wandering a bit in search of feeding areas (or mate), until it reached Jodhpur, cannot be discounted. Kandla and Mundra, the nearest ports in Gujarat to our site, are c. 450 km away from it, while Karachi (Pakistan) is c. 650 km away. It could also have been swept by the monsoon winds from a ship that crossed the northern Arabian Sea to another seaport and not necessarily docked in Gujarat or Pakistan. After reaching the shores, the individual must have wandered before reaching Jodhpur. It has been hypothesised that at least some of the individuals seen in north-western Africa and southern Europe could be the same individuals and hence such nomadic behaviour is not unknown for this species (Pepe 2017). However, treatment of the Pied Crow in that region is equivocal – while the birds in Morocco are accepted as wild vagrants, the birds in Spain and Portugal are not (Pepe 2017). In India, ship-assisted migration was discussed in the case of the White-eyed Gull *Ichthyæetus leucophthalmus* (Jamalabad 2016), which was admitted as a wild vagrant—despite the possibility of it having been ship-assisted—because it is a pelagic species and ship assistance is not hampering its free will to fly off. However, it is unclear how this would apply to Corvids which are land birds but are strong fliers in general.

Escapee from zoo/cage

There are several Pied Crows kept in various zoos in Europe (<http://www.zootierliste.de>).

¹ Region between Egypt and Afghanistan including Central Asia demarcated as OSME region by Ornithological Society of Middle East.



202. Pied Crow showing simultaneous moult of primaries and secondaries.



203. Pied Crow with wing feathers in moult.

However, Indian zoos did not hold any, as per a published list by Central Zoo Authority in 2009–2010 (Anonymous 2009–2010). This is not a recent list and it may not be comprehensive. We could not trace records of escapees from Pakistan zoos (if they held any).

The Pied Crow is a popular cage bird and hence it is expected to be traded as a pet. However, there appear to be no known private collections in India that hold this species currently though it is held in private collections in Pakistan (Rajat Bhargava, *in litt.*, e-mail dated, 02 September 2017). A large private collection in Jamnagar, Gujarat, has two Pied Crows, but they are still present there and have not escaped (Prasad Ganpule, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 31 August 2017). In any case, these investigations do not eliminate the possibility that the bird could be an escapee from Pakistan, Afghanistan, or the Middle East, wandering to reach Jodhpur.

The individual kept a distance from us, just like any other wild bird, and did not behave like a pet bird. If it was an escapee, it would not have been held captive immediately prior to our sighting because its feathers show no

obvious signs of unusual plumage wear. Birds kept in wire cages invariably show some signs of wear, especially to the tips of the flight feathers and around the base of the bill. Also the legs and feet of the bird were in very good condition, which would be unusual in an escapee, especially a recent one. On the contrary, the wings are moulting and the moult sequence is congruent with that of wild birds (Gwahaba 1975) with both primaries and secondaries moulting together [201–203]. Moult timing itself is not useful as they moult immediately after breeding and they are known to breed throughout the year (Gwahaba 1975).

Hence, despite the fact that Pied Crows may be present in captivity in our region, this particular bird is unlikely to be of captive origin.

Conclusion

Though identified correctly, the origin of the 'Jodhpur' Pied Crow is still uncertain. Of the three possibilities of its arrival presented above, ship assistance appears to be the most plausible. However, the 'India Checklist' (Praveen *et al.* 2016) needs an unambiguous policy for dealing with such cases. We propose that such a framework be first developed and then this record be evaluated.

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Editors' comment: The 'India Checklist' (Praveen *et al.* 2016) does not provide a clear framework for dealing with records of dubious origin, and specifically, instances wherein ship assistance is involved. A review of the current policy, and framing a more forward-looking strategy, would be needed for handling these cases. This will get defined in the near future, and we shall re-look at this record in the light of such new rules. Until then, the Pied Crow shall be excluded from the 'India Checklist'.