Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes* in Pazhaverkadu (Pulicat) Lake, Tamil Nadu: An addition to the Indian avifauna

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End September is early in the birding season, for watching migrants around Chennai. We heard of Eurasian Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* having been seen in Pulicat Lake (very close to Chennai), and so, on 30 September 2017, at 1445 hrs, we hired a boat from Pazhaverkadu fishing harbour (Tamil Nadu), to explore Pulicat Lake. Around 1515–1530 hrs, on one of the mudflats (13.4331768°N, 80.3136546°E) adjoining a small island of bushes and trees, south-east of Srirahikota Island, we observed a bird along with a few Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres* and Terek Sandpipers *Xenus cinereus*. From a distance it looked like a Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, but seemed a little smaller than one. On closer inspection we thought it was a Green Sandpiper *T. ochropus*. The bird had a striking supercilium with a dark eye stripe and short yellow legs (‘short’ in comparison to those of sandpipers). Its breast was scaly, and hence it looked like a ‘different’ bird. We took a few photographs [212, 213] before it hid from sight. The bird could not be located again.

On returning home, we shared the pictures on the Facebook group ‘Ask Ids of Indian Birds’. Ganesh Jayaraman felt that the bird was not a Green Sandpiper, and suspected it to be a Grey-tailed Tattler *T. brevipes*: subsequently several group members agreed with this identification. Below we provide detailed field notes and our rationale for the identification.


The general appearance of the bird was of that of a sandpiper/Greenshank; it was a bit bigger, and stouter, than a Green Sandpiper with very obvious, shorter, yellowish legs. It had a prominent supercilium and contrasting black eye stripe that presented a striking face pattern. The breast and flanks were scaly with grey wavy crossbars on a dull-white background. This combination of features eliminated all other waders. The bird was found amongst a small flock of Ruddy Turnstones, and was shy. On spotting our boat approaching the mudflat, it quickly hid behind the sandbar, not to be seen again.

Subsequently, a few other birders made several trips to see the bird. One of them, travelling alone on 04 October 2017, reported seeing a bird with similar features, but was not certain. The bird wasn’t seen again at this location when we visited it on 08 October 2017 along with other birders. The vast expanse of Pulicat Lake, combined with travelling constraints between small pockets of sand bars, or islands, posed a challenge in searching for the species. Many birders continued searching for this bird at identical sites around the lake, using the services of the same boatman. After some intense searches, it was sighted on a few occasions in mid-October. A few birders, including Ganesh Jayaraman, who first identified this from Facebook posts, had spotted the Gray-tailed Tattler near the same location and also had taken photographs of the same (Jayaraman 2017). This tattler has since been spotted on 17 October 2017 (Aravind Venkatraman and Ramakrishnan Rajamani), on 20 October 2017 (Ganesh Jayaraman and Sambath Subbaiah), and on 24 October 2017 (Pradeepkumar and Arun Prasad).

In a new turn of events, on seeing the pictures in the social media, Arun Prasad reviewed his images from the previous year, and realised from his records that on 18 September 2016, he had indeed photographed a Grey-tailed Tattler [214], during his visit along with Pradeepkumar Devadoss (Arun Prasad, verbally, 26 November 2017). Unfortunately, he had not identified it properly and left it to be a sandpiper. Now, on reviewing this, he identified it rightly and has since corrected his records and updated the sighting on www.ebird.org (Prasad 2016).

Sighting the bird a few times, over a span of around 20 days, could mean that this individual is wintering here at Pulicat, and has not made a stopover en-route to some other destination. However, two tattlers have not been sighted together here. Probably, there is only one individual wintering at Pulicat. Moreover, if the bird was indeed seen in 2016, then it is probably not a rare vagrant but an annual visitor. The Gray-tailed Tattler is definitely a bird that one needs to look out for in future annual migratory season.

The Grey-tailed Tattler breeds in the Siberian region and winters in South China, Southeast Asia, some of the Pacific Islands, and in Australia (Van Giles et al. 2017). In the Indian Subcontinent, it is recognised as a rare spring migrant to the coast of south-eastern Bangladesh, mainly in the Patenga region, near Chittagong (Thompson & Johnson 2003; Praveen et al. 2017). The only photographic evidence of this bird from South Asia is from the Chagos Archipelago (Carr 2015). The only prior report of a tattler from India was from Goa (Robson 2002), but that record has now been withdrawn by the observer (Tim Inskipp, in litt., e-mail dated 10 June 2015; Praveen J., in litt., e-mail dated 11 October 2017). Hence, this is an addition to the Indian avifauna and is probably the first photograph of the species from the Indian Subcontinent.

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References


