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Fig. 5. Caspian Tern adults and young.

The breeding season of the Caspian Tern recorded on Khijadia bet is quite different from the Charakla salt pans (May–June) of Jamnagar district, Gujarat (Bhatia 2004). It is June–July in Pakistan (Roberts 1991–1992), and between May and June in Sri Lanka (Ali & Ripley 1983).

Population size: On 18 September 2009, we counted 64 nest depressions, and 150 adult Caspian Terns around the colony at Khijadiya bet. This is much less than the number of nests / pairs recorded breeding on the same bet by Tiwari *et al.* (1997) in 1993 (200 nests), and 1994 (300 nests). At Charakla Salt pans, Bhatia (2004) recorded 452 nests in June 2003, and 1,600 adult terns on the colony in July 2003.

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Bhikha Bhagat had discovered this colony in 1993 and had shown it to J. K. Tiwari, S. N. Varu, and P. Majithia (Sanctuary Superintendent, Wild

Ass Sanctuary). After sixteen years, he has discovered breeding colony of Caspian Terns at the same place and we feel proud to be witness of this second breeding record in the Little Rann of Kachchh. We are thankful to R. L. Meena (Conservator Forest, Kachchh Circle), J. G. Bava (Dy. Conservator Forests, Wild Ass Sanctuary), L. N. Jadeja (Dy. Conservator Forests, Eastern Kachchh), J. D. Godhia (Range Forest Officer, Adesar), and J. K. Tiwari (CEDO) for special information. I especially thank B. M. Parasharya for encouraging us to publish this information by preparing this note and adding relevant discussion and references on the subject.

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Birding adventures in Kachchh, Gujarat

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For the third time in three minutes, the jeep spins 360 degrees in the slithery mud. I try, with minimal results, to stay as calm as Lakkubhai, the veteran driver of our 'Sumo' SUV. Outside, the rain continues to pour in sheets, converting the entire terrain into slurry. Though such storms are not common in Kachchh, they still constitute the bulk of the rainfall, in this semi-desert environment, during the monsoon.

Matters were a world apart that morning of 1 September 2008, when we had set out for the Banni grasslands—at 3,847 kms², the largest expanse of flat land in the country. The day had started as a beautiful, sunny one till mid-afternoon. We were

slurping the last of the tea from saucers, they don't do cups in Kachchh, when the western horizon suddenly turned an ominous shade of grey-brown. We hurriedly returned the tea-ware to the nomadic camel herder who had, so kindly, brewed fresh camel-milk tea for us, and made an undignified dash for the jeep.

Earlier over lunch, Jugal Tiwari, our bird-guide, had warned, "If it rains in the Banni, then we're truly stuck. There are no roads here and the soil quickly turns into slush." As the skies continued to darken, we were well aware that the closest metalled road was probably 40–50 kms away. Jugalbhai hurried us on, and though we implicitly trusted his intuitive knowledge of the land, some-



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Dry earth, Kachchh

thing told me that this thunderstorm was going to be one that I would not forget in a hurry.

For the next two hours, we held on dearly to whatever support we could find inside the jeep, while Lakkubhai kept his foot on the recalcitrant accelerator. It was one of the finest displays of cross-country driving I've ever had the privilege to witness. Even a moment's lapse in concentration would have caused the tyres to sink into the thin top-layered soil, so notorious for harbouring quicksand. And when we finally hit the road, the 'high-fives' were born more out of relief than jubilation.

Kachchh (earlier referred to as Kutch, and sometimes, Cutch) is a mysterious land, not easy to comprehend. Much of its area cannot easily be covered, and it is larger in size than some states of India. Spread over 45,612 km², a quarter of Gujarat's land-mass, Kachchh is the second largest district in the country after Ladakh. More than half of it consists of saline marshes of the Great- and Little Rann, which bound the district on the north and east, virtually making Kachchh an island—the other sides are marked by the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Kachchh. The border with Pakistan lies along the northern edge of the Great Rann.

Kachchh literally means a place which is intermittently wet and dry, as a large part of this district is shallow wetland, which submerges during the rainy season and becomes dry during the rest of the year. This makes the terrain extremely treacherous, and the absence of obvious landmarks does not help either, as you wend your way through desolate patches.

I travel, as a part of my passion for photographing all sorts of Indian birds, to various hotspots in the country. Birding, by its very nature, makes one an intrepid traveller as it necessitates voyages to the remote. There existed a famous argument in the early decades after independence as to who was better travelled in India—Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru or the ornithologist, Salim Ali. I don't think Panditji even came a close second!

Of all the Indian Subcontinent's bird-rich regions, it is the arid northwest, and Kachchh in particular, that hold one of the greatest diversity of avian species. This is because of the unique and spectacular habitats Kachchh supports. The bird-list is close to 400 species and the focus of my expeditions was to photograph some important residents, as well migrants, that come from the Middle East, and various parts of Europe. I have now made four trips to this part of the world, including the Wild Ass Sanctuary in the Little Rann, which despite its related name, doesn't lie in the district of Kachchh.

Our patch of magic falls on the migratory route of palaeartic birds. A stream of migrants passes through every year, starting



Desert cat *Felis sylvestris*

from August and continues till end of March. The vast open areas and low-lying flood-plains of Banni and Great Rann together with the man-made wetlands, dams, reservoirs, ponds and lakes provide excellent habitat for waders, waterfowl, and cranes.

As mentioned earlier, Kachchh is a huge area and it can easily swallow any number of trip days, or weeks. Hence absolute focus and rigorous planning are critical to tackle your trip. For me the task was straightforward—divide the area by habitat, thereby targeting birds unique to specific environments. In this way I covered both the Ranns, as well as the semi-desert, grasslands, wetlands, coast, and tropical thorn forest. The diverse habitats support an assortment of speciality birds, including rare and threatened species.

Some of these include Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigripes*, Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indica*, White-naped Tit *Parus nuchalis*, Marshall's Iora *Aegithina nigrolutea*, White-bellied Minivet *Pericrocotus divaricatus*, Cream-coloured- *Cursorius cursor* and Indian *C. coromandelicus* Courser, Greater- *Phoenicopterus ruber* and Lesser- *P. minor* Flamingos, Sarus *Grus antigone*, Common- *G. grus* and Demoiselle- *G. virgo* Cranes. Fourteen different species of larks (Fam: Alaudidae), including Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* dot the landscape. Innumerable raptors too are present.

Summer (passage) migrants that typically come from the Middle East and Africa include Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, European Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Greater Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes*, and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*.

Winter migrants include Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotys houbara*, Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus*, and several raptors, not to mention the esoteric and little-known Stoliczka's Bushchat *Saxicola macrorhyncha*, four types of wheaters (*Oenanthe* spp.), Common Crane (upto 40,000), and several speciality waders like Crab-Plover *Dromas ardeola*, and Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*.

In addition to avian diversity, Kachchh also supports a host of mammals like the wolf *Canis lupus*, golden jackal *C. aureus*, desert- *Vulpes v. pusilla* and Indian- *C. vulpes bengalensis* fox, desert- *Felis sylvestris* and jungle- *F. chaus* cat, Indian gazelle *Gazella bennettii*, blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra*, Asiatic wild ass *Equus hemionus* and the nilgai *Boselaphus tragocamelus*. Spiny-tailed- *Uromastix hardwickii* and monitor- *Varanus bengalensis* lizards make up the bulk of the reptilian population. With a lot of detailed planning, local expertise, and a dollop of Lady Luck, it is possible to see most of these animals and birds. Given the accessible flat

PHOTOS: Ramki Sreenivasan



Camels in Banni



Photos: Ramki Sreenivasan

Banni during the monsoon

terrain, almost all of Kachchh can be covered in a sturdy vehicle.

Though each individual habitat of Kachchh holds its unique charm, the most visually stunning is the Banni grassland. Vast, and absolutely flat, Banni's scapes are breathtaking and difficult to describe. Its skies, grass, and wetlands add further colour and texture to the landscape. Banni's low-lying alluvial plains are flooded during the monsoon by north flowing rivers like the Bhukhi, Gajansar, Chhari, Layari and Nara. The water from the huge catchment areas of Kiro and Palkhiari hills washes away the salinity of Banni. During the monsoon, water levels in Banni become the same as that of the Great Rann, but after the rains most of the water is emptied into the Rann, leaving saucer-shaped natural depressions that hold water and become hot-spots for birds. Based on their size these depressions are called *dhand* (Chhari, Servo), *thath* (Hodko, Baghadio), *chach* (Chachlo, Bhitara), and *kar* (Kiro). None of the above four types of wetlands are perennial, the size and volume of water in these water-bodies being dependent on the quantity of annual rain.

Chhari Dhand, now a Ramsar site, is the largest, and in a good year becomes an 80 km² wetland supporting hundreds of bird species.



Great Rann of Kachchh

Birdlife in Banni is spectacular. Common Cranes over-winter here in the vicinity of Chhari Dhand, arriving in September, and departing in March. The saline soil encourages profuse growth of *Cyperus* sedge, which is their main food. Naliya grasslands are another favourite for wildlife in Kachchh and provide taller grass than Banni to support two shy and endangered bustards, the Great Indian, and the Lesser Florican. Both these gamebirds breed here, but their numbers are small and ever dwindling. I have been rewarded with bustard sightings on all my trips to Naliya and during the monsoon have seen several spectacularly displaying male floricans.

Both Naliya and Banni support an incredible diversity of raptors and it is indeed memorable to see huge flocks of wintering harriers (*Circus* spp.), especially at sunset.

The Rann can be considered a large ecotone, a transitional area between marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and is believed to have been a shallow sea. The Great-, and Little- Rann of Kachchh together form one of the world's largest wetland ecosystems. Strategically located, the Ranns' habitat serves as wintering, feeding, staging, and breeding grounds for millions of migratory birds.

The Great Rann, extending over 20,000 km², is harsh, hot, and seemingly lifeless in summer, when high winds and extreme temperatures prevail. This same habitat is magically transformed into an endless wetland during the monsoon, when the north-flowing rivers of Kachchh empty into the Rann. The migration of birds coincides with the end of monsoon, and early migrants can be seen using the flooded Great Rann as an entry point into the Indian Subcontinent. A number of islets, locally called *bets*, are found in the Great Rann. Access to them is very difficult in the wet season, and it is at this time that most resident birds, like Greater- and Lesser- Flamingo, Caspian- *Sterna caspia* and Little- *S. albifrons* Terns, Little Ringed- *Charadrius dubius*, and Kentish- *C. alexandrinus* Plovers breed.

The Wild Ass Sanctuary (4,954 km²) is located in the Little Rann of Kachchh, and is named after a subspecies of the Asiatic wild ass *E. h. khur*, the last population of which it now harbours. It is an extensive, desiccated, unbroken, bare surface of dark silt,



Great Rann of Kachchh

encrusted with salts, which soon transforms into a spectacular coastal wetland as soon as rains end.

Another unique habitat of Kachchh is tropical thorn forest, like the one near Phot Mahadev. These forests hold rare and specialist birds like White-naped Tit, White-bellied Minivet, and Marshall's Iora.

I managed to photograph most of the denizens I came looking for but, like always, there were many 'dips'. That's the equi-

Asiatic wild ass *Equus hemionus* in the Little Rann of Kachchh

Photos: Ramki Sreenivasan

siteness of birding. You never finish, and there is always a need to return for more, creating a life-long attachment for a place. Kachchh had already done the trick for me, and as I packed my equipment prior to boarding the flight in Bhuj, I couldn't resist planning a longer trip to cover more of Kachchh and its birds. I am already looking forward to it—but in a different month, perhaps a dissimilar season, maybe a disparate adventure!

Gujarat avifauna: a taxonomic miscellany

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Gujarat came on the 'scientific' ornithological map 252 years ago. Carl von Linné, the gifted Swedish botanist and pioneer of the binomial system of nomenclature, christened the brilliantly plumaged Red Munia, "*Fringilla Amandava*" (Linné 1758). He named this by taking the name Amandava from the Italian naturalist Aldrovandus¹ (1522–1605; alias Ulisse Aldrovandi), who might have seen pictures or specimens based on a bird from anywhere in the 'East Indies', as its terra typica was 'India orientali'. This may or may not have been from India itself. Baker (1921) decided that a clear type locality was required and gave it as Calcutta [=Kolkata], which is rather the fixation of a type locality than a restriction since the loose geographic terms in the early literature long antedate the type concept and thus a type locality was not proposed as such. Whistler & Kinnear (1933), apparently unaware of Baker's action, re-restricted it to northern Gujarat. The logic in Whistler & Kinnear's fixation lies in the etymology of the specific binomen "*amandava*" which is thought to derive from a

corruption of the word 'Amdavad', which is the Gujarati word for the city of Ahmedabad (Jobling, 1881; Pittie 2004).

Below I have distilled an avian taxonomic miscellany with roots in the state of Gujarat.

Toponyms: These taxa have been named for places in Gujarat. Red Munia *Amandava amandava amandava* Linné, 1758, Syst. Nat., ed. 10, 1: 180 (Eastern India. Restricted to Calcutta by Baker, 1921, *JBNHS* 27: 725. Whistler & Kinnear, 1933, *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 36: 837, designate northern Gujarat, apparently unaware of the earlier restriction.).

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius guzuratus* (Latham, 1790), *Index Orn.*: II: 554 (Guzerat) (*sic*).

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis suratensis* (Gmelin, 1789), *Syst. Nat.* 1 (2): 778 (Surat, Gulf of Cambay, India). [Surat 21°10'N 72°50'E.]

Yellow-eyed Babbler *Chrysomma sinensis saurashtrensis* Koelz, 1954, *Contrib. Inst. Regional Exploration*, No. 1: 4 (Sasan, Saurashtra). [= *Chrysomma sinense hypoleucum* (Franklin, 1831)

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulisse_Aldrovandi.