

Two new birds for Gujarat

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During a five-day visit to the Banni grasslands, in February 2007, we saw two bird species that had previously not been reported from Gujarat. A single Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* was most unexpected as it is a vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent with only few previous records. The species is a long-distance migrant, breeding in Central Asia, with its normal winter-range in dry areas of southern and eastern Africa. However, the more interesting discovery was perhaps the several records of Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta*. This species breeds in mountains across interior Eurasia and winters further south. The records may indicate the species to be an over-looked visitor to the Gujarat wetlands—at least in years following a good monsoon, like 2006–2007, when plenty of temporary wetlands are found across the Banni grasslands.

Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*

During mid-afternoon on 12th February 2007 we reached the shallow, saline lake of Hodko Dhand, NW of Bhuj. A massive flock of 3,000+ (10% juveniles) Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor* and 54 Greater Flamingo *P. ruber* was the immediately appealing sight in the centre of the partly dried-up lake, and a good concentration of waders crowded the shores—200 Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, 300 Kentish Plover *C. alexandrius*, 20 Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, 500 Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, 600 Little Stint *Calidris minutus*, 25 Dunlin *C. alpina*, 600 Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* and a single Spotted Redshank *T. erythropus*. The single Caspian Plover was located by chance by UGS as he scanned the waders through a telescope. It was almost immediately identified, based on his previous field experience in Africa. The plover stood still at the nearest shoreline (c. 150 m away), with actively feeding Marsh Sandpipers and Little Stints around it, and Lesser Sand Plovers nearby. No sooner we realised the importance of the record, an effort was made to get photographs. Albeit the distances only allowed simple digiscoped pictures, taken with a Canon 350D reflex camera through the Leica 32x80 telescope, we succeeded in obtaining five acceptable shots fit for identification (Fig. 1). Soon afterwards, a passing Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* disturbed the waders, which all flew up. Unfortunately, the Caspian Plover

was immediately lost and never seen in flight. When the waders resettled at a greater distance the species could not be found despite a concentrated effort, including walking several hundred meters into the lake to approach the main concentration of waders. It seems likely that the plover left the lake area during the

turmoil.

Description: A medium-sized plover, being fairly long-legged and long-winged (wings reaching a little beyond tip of tail). It was smaller in size than nearby Marsh Sandpipers. The bird stood still throughout the observation. Compared to nearby Lesser Sand Plovers the bird seemed more 'elegant' with a smaller head and a tapering body—because of the longer wings—and less greyish-looking, with an overall golden tone to its plumage.

Detailed plumage description: Forehead, lores, chin, throat and ear-coverts were white with a buffish tone and a distinct, broad, white supercilium, reaching well behind the eye and ending abruptly, square-cut. These white areas contrasted with a uniform dark crown—giving the slight effect of a cap—and a dark broad eye-stripe starting just in front of the large, dark eye and continuing backwards and fusing into the grey-brown nape. It had a distinct, complete and uniform grey-brown band across its breast with well-marked borders to both the buffish white throat and white belly. Back and wings uniform grey-brown with a golden tone.

Bare-parts: A fine, pointed bill, looking all dark, almost blackish. Legs yellowish-brown.

Discussion

The uniform plumage, without paler fringe feathers on its scapulars, indicates the bird was an adult, as does the markedly well-defined breast-band.

Only two plovers show a complete, broad breast-band: the Caspian, and its sibling species from the eastern Palaearctic, the Oriental Plover *C. veredus*. The latter is a slightly larger bird, the size of a Marsh Sandpiper. It has longer legs and wings, which together with a longer neck gives it a different 'jizz' vis-à-vis a Caspian Plover. We have no field experience with *veredus* but in published plates and photos it appears, in winter plumage, to have a less well-defined breast-band and less contrast in the head-pattern, i.e., it never shows the very sharp distinction between whitish throat and dark breast band. Oriental Plover is a rarer vagrant to the Indian Subcontinent, than the Caspian (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

All in all, we find that the field details noted and the photo-documentation all point to a positive identification of an adult Caspian Plover in winter plumage.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Late in the afternoon, on 12th February 2007, we stopped at Kar, NW of Fulay village, in order to see pre-roosting harriers *Circus* spp., and around sunset the impressive flight of Common Cranes *Grus grus* (c. 15,000+) heading to their night roost. A characteristic 'tsip' uttered by small birds flying overhead drew the attention of UGS. Realising these to be small pipits, and the sound not being the slightly harsh, buzzing call of a Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*—the most likely small pipit to occur in Gujarat during winter—full attention was given to identify these birds. One,



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Fig. 1. Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* at the saline lake of Hodko Dhand, NW of Bhuj, Gujarat, 12th February 2007.



Fig. 2. Water Pipit at Kar, NW of Fulay village, Gujarat, 12th February 2007.

made a single photograph of two birds, while UGS recorded the call. JKT revisited the site on 4th March 2009 and obtained additional photo-documentation (Fig. 2). On this day there were no less than 60 Water Pipits. The pipits seem to gather for their night roosting in the long grass or somewhere nearby.

Description: A typical pipit—a small, fairly long-tailed ground-dwelling passerine with streaks on the breast of an otherwise whitish underside in contrast to a greyish brown upper side. Is smaller than nearby Long-billed Pipit *A. similis* (seen on both days in the same area; one and two respectively).

Plumage description: Uniform whitish underside except for malar stripes reaching streaked lower breast, with the breast streaks being a little darker than the malar stripes. Upper side was greyish-brown with weak streaks, giving a rather plain impression. A pronounced whitish supercilium reaching well behind the eye was striking. Two distinct wing-bars formed by whitish tips to medium and greater coverts. Legs were dark.

The dwindling light during our observation made the more subtle plumage characters difficult to record. However, the photos show a number of such details, namely, uniform ear-coverts with a brownish tone, a greyish nape in contrast to the rather weakly streaked back and crown, and white outer web to outer-most tail feathers. All photos were taken with a flash and it is possible that contrast is slightly exaggerated.

Call: To the ear the call was similar to that of the common European, Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis*, and can be transcribed as a short, thin, and high-pitched 'tsip'. At least 18 individual calls were recorded, between one and five calls per recording. The calls were recorded from birds that were startled from the grass. It is most likely that calls of more individuals are included in the recordings. All calls have been analyzed and demonstrate an overall uniformity with a pitch roughly between 5.2–7.0 kHz (Fig. 3).

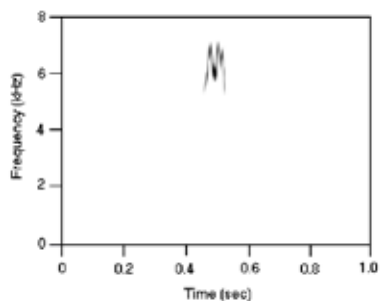


Fig. 3. Sonogram of call of Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* from Kar, NW of Fulay, Gujarat, 12th February 2007.

[Recordings were made with a Sony Stereo Cassette-Corder (TCS-600DV) and a Beyer dynamic directional microphone (MCE 86N(C) S). Calls has been digitized and analyzed by Cool Edit Pro software (Syntrillium Productions).]

Discussion

The plumage description noted in the field and the analyses of the recordings confirm the identification of Water Pipits. Three races are recognised worldwide. As the plumage differences are subtle, it is not advisable with the available information to hazard a guess of the subspecies involved. However, the recorded call matches sonograms of *A. s. blakinstoni*, recorded in Xinjiang Province of western China (Alstrøm & Mild 2003). This area is most likely the source of Water Pipits that reach NW India in winter. This race breeds in the mountains of Tajikistan in the west, through the Xinjiang and Qinghai Provinces of China in the south up to Mongolia in the north.

Six other small pipits occur in South Asia. Recent field guides do not concur regarding their distribution (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). As pipit species are notoriously difficult to identify, it seems appropriate to briefly comment on each. In Gujarat, only the Tree and the Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus* are at present regarded as regular winter visitors while the Olive-backed *A. hodgsoni* is known as a scarce visitor. There is just one record of the Rosy Pipit *A. roseatus* (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Kazmierczak 2000). Two species with at least a theoretical chance of occurring in the area are Buff-bellied *A. rubescens* (ssp. *japonicus*) and the Meadow Pipits—the latter only known as an accidental visitor to northern Pakistan.

The most straightforward species to exclude is Red-throated Pipit, which has a very different call. Besides, it is a heavily streaked bird on top as well as below. Excluded next are the Tree and Olive-backed Pipits. They have similar calls—a short, high-pitched but harsh 'beez', which to the trained ear is clearly separable from that of the Water Pipit. Besides, both species show a less distinct supercilium, a buffish tone to breast in contrast to whitish belly, more distinct streaks on the breast, a less distinct rear wing-bar made up of pale tips of greater wing-coverts, and pale legs. For Olive-backed Pipit the prominent whitish and blackish spots on rear ear-coverts would be present. Habitat-wise both species are more or less connected to at least some tree-cover and the Banni grassland is perhaps not the most likely habitat for at least significant numbers.

Of the remaining species all have calls that, in the field, are difficult to separate from those of Water Pipits—even for a trained ear. However, these species can be excluded in the field, due to plumage characters.

Buff-bellied Pipit is probably the most difficult species to exclude. This is a darker bird with more distinct streaks on the breast, with fewer streaks on the back and pale legs. It is a long-distance migrant from the eastern Palaearctic and a potential visitor to Gujarat (at least as a vagrant). Habitat-wise this species is reported to occur in, 'a variety of open, often wet habitats such as damp grasslands, stubble and ploughed fields, meadows, sea- and lakeshores, mudflats, river courses, etc.' (Alstrøm & Mild 2003).

The Rosy Pipit will show a similar long and whitish supercilium but the species is much more distinctly streaked on both back and below. Besides, this species has pale legs. This breeder from the Himalaya and mountains in central China moves to lower altitudes during winter but it is not a long-distance migrant, i.e., it only descends to the plains of northern India. It could be a possible vagrant to Gujarat. In winter it favors 'wet habitats, such as riverbanks and lakeshores, edges of marshes, flooded meadows, paddy fields, etc.' (Alstrøm & Mild 2003).

Finally, the Meadow Pipit has a similar call but it can be separated on many of the same characters as the Tree Pipit: less distinct supercilium, more streaks on back and below, and pale legs. It is a species from the western Palaearctic, breeding in

northern and central Europe up to the very western part of Asia. It is not likely to be seen in Gujarat even as a vagrant.

Discussion

The occurrence of the Water Pipit in Gujarat is not entirely unexpected. The species is known as a regular winter visitor to the Indus Valley in neighbouring Pakistan (Alström & Mild 2003). Its habitat during winter is, 'wet freshwater areas, such as riverbanks, lakeshores, edges of marshes, wet and flooded meadows, sewage farms, reservoirs, dried fish-ponds and watercress beds and is only very rarely found along seashores' (Alström & Mild 2003). Following a good monsoon the Banni grassland turns into a mosaic of temporary wetlands in an otherwise dry landscape. This situation creates a wealth of habitat for a bird like the Water Pipit. During daytime a wintering Water Pipit is likely to be found in the transition zone between wet and dry areas. It can be a very discrete bird and even if it occurs in numbers, these will be spread over a vast area and difficult to find. Bumping into a pre-roosting concentration is the safest bet. It is always difficult to get good counts of dispersed species and to this end counts at

roosting sites often reveal larger numbers than estimates from regular counts.

Acknowledgements

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— Short notes —

A substitute name for *Parus nipalensis* Hodgson, 1837

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In a footnote to my recent article in *Indian Birds* entitled 'Hodgson's ornithological articles published in the *India Review* (1836–1837)' (Dickinson 2009), the primary homonymy in *Parus* between *Parus nipalensis* Hodgson, 1837, and *Parus (Suthora) nipalensis* Hodgson, 1837, was noted and it was suggested that an application to the International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature would follow. However, that is not needed.

Both names were proposed as names for species. The use of *Suthora* in brackets may not mean that Hodgson believed the small parrotbills formed a subgenus of *Parus* but that is the way that Article 6.1 of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (I.C.Z.N. 1999; hereinafter 'the Code') leads one to interpret Hodgson's name. That Article continues by explaining that a name, "interpolated in parentheses" ... "is not counted as one of the words in the binomen or trinomen." This is the basis for seeing these two names as homonyms.

I therefore act here as First Reviser, under Art. 24.2.2 of the Code, in selecting the parrotbill name *Parus (Suthora) nipalensis* as the prior name thus assigning it priority over the name Hodgson used for a taxon now usually treated as a subspecies of *Parus major*. Thus we preserve the use of the name that is a recognised specific name (*Paradoxornis nipalensis*) and we need to replace the prior name.

To do this, no fresh name need be coined. The name *Parus major planorum* Hartert, 1905, is available from synonymy (see Dickinson *et al.* 2006) and should be adopted.

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¹ This paper, and all others in this series, can be downloaded from www.repository.naturalis.nl. It includes an Appendix specifically relating to Hodgson names and type material. The volume alluded to also includes several other papers on Hodgson and Blyth. Note Nos. 51, 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56 should all be of interest to Indian ornithologists.

Editor's note:

First Reviser: "The first author to subsequently cite names (including different original spellings of the same name) or nomenclatural acts published on the same date and to select one of them to have precedence over the other(s)."

Homonym: "In the species group: each of two or more available specific or subspecific names having the same spelling, or spellings deemed under Article 58 to be the same, and established for different nominal taxa, and either originally (primary homonymy) or subsequently (secondary homonymy) combined with the same generic name [Art. 53.3]."