

Records of Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* from Gujarat, India

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The Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* is a polytypic species that breeds widely in Eurasia, from central Europe, all the way till northern and central China, and migrates southwards to winter in the arid zones of southern Europe, Africa, and Asia (Orta *et al.* 2017). The colour variation of its plumage is clinal from west to east, as birds tend to become overall paler, and their upperparts become increasingly barred (Forsman 1999). Though their taxonomy is in flux, four subspecies are recognised worldwide (Dickinson & Remsen 2013; Orta *et al.* 2017), of which, the nominate, and *milvipus* occur in India in winter (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012); only recently was *milvipus* recorded breeding in Ladakh (Sangha *et al.* 2014). *F. c. milvipus* is considered a rare to uncommon migrant to the Indian Subcontinent, between October to April, with the nominate race wintering throughout north-western India, including Gujarat (Naoroji 2006). Though Butler (1879), and Ali (1945), did not list this species from Gujarat, Dhamrakumarsinhji (1955) considered it, 'not uncommon in the desert tracts of northern Saurashtra, Kachchh and north-western Gujarat.' It is presently considered a rare winter visitor, restricted to the Little Rann of Kachchh (*henceforth*, LRK), and the Greater Rann of Kachchh (*henceforth*, GRK) (Ganpule 2016). Here we review all known reports of the Saker Falcon from Gujarat, including our own to understand its status in the state.

The Saker Falcon is much browner than a Peregrine Falcon *F.*

peregrinus, but very similar to an adult Laggar Falcon *F. jugger*. However, it can be distinguished from the latter by its paler brown upperparts, the feathers boldly-edged with orange-buff, giving a more barred appearance; a less distinct moustachial stripe; uppertail usually barred, at least on all but central tail feathers; underparts paler, less heavily spotted and without the dark brown thighs of Laggar Falcon (Kazmierczak 2000). Racial separation is difficult and hence not attempted here.

The Saker Falcon has been listed as 'Endangered', under the IUCN Red List category because a revised population trend analysis indicates that it may be undergoing a very rapid decline (BirdLife International 2016).

DM saw this species during a raptor survey on 04 January 2012 around at 0945 hours in area below Nanda Bet (Island) and above Rupen River, LRK (23.48°N 71.23°). From a distance it appeared to be a large-sized falcon. After getting closer, good views of the bird could be obtained through binoculars. This large-sized, broad-chested falcon was perched quite upright with its long spotted tail and wings that fell well short of it. It had a small head, compared to its overall body, with a darkish crown and prominent dark eyes. The moustache, which looked thin, was curved and appeared broken between the eye and the bill. The underparts had spots and the falcon had greyish legs and talons. These features eliminated other species, including the

Table 1. Records of Saker Falcon in Gujarat

No.	Place	Date	Observer	Remark	Reference
1	Bhavnagar district	Pre-1955	Dharmkumarsinhji	Irregular visitor in small numbers to the Bhal region.	Dharmkumarsinhji (1955)
2	Wankaner district	Pre-1955	Dharmkumarsinhji	Seen occasionally.	Dharmkumarsinhji (1955)
3	LRK	January 1990	William Clark	A juvenile photographed.	Naoroji (2006)
4	LRK	31 January & 01 February 2004	Indra Gadhavi	Included in checklist prepared by author during wild ass census conducted in southern and eastern fringes of LRK. No further details available.	Gadhavi (2004)
5	LRK	16 February 2008	Chiku Vora & others	Included in the checklist prepared by authors during Houbara survey conducted in LRK. No further details available.	Vora (2009)
6	LRK	21 January 2009	Nirav Bhatt	Adult photographed.	Bhatt (2009b), Bhatt (2009c)
7	LRK	February 2009	Nirav Bhatt	Adult photographed.	Bhatt (2009a)
8	LRK	February 2011	Yogendra Shah	See text.	This work
9	LRK	04 January 2012	Devvratsinh Mori	See text.	This work
10	LRK	06 February 2015	Jainy Maria	Adult photographed.	Maria (2015)
11	LRK	03 December 2015	Yogendra Shah	See text. Photographed.	This work
12	GRK	25 December 2015	Prasad Ganpule	A single bird reported from close to Indo-Pakistan border. Identified by large size, wings falling well short of tail, white underparts with spotting, and smaller whitish head with light brownish upperparts.	Ganpule (2015)



215. Saker Falcon in Little Rann of Kachchh.

Laggar, and the Peregrine. It flushed on closer approach, took a long flight and disappeared in the *Prosopis* bushes nearby. Efforts to relocate it were in vain and hence no photograph could be obtained.

While discussing this sighting, YS updated two other sight records of this species from LRK.

1. In February 2011, in an area below Nanda Bet and above Rupen River, at around 0945 hrs, a bird was seen flying low, and identified as an adult Saker Falcon due its large size, pale head with narrow moustache, broad dark coverts band. No photographs could be taken.
2. On 03 December 2015, an adult bird was photographed [215] in southern area of Zinzuvada village of LRK (23.27°N, 71.63°E).

We have attempted to collate all available records of the Saker Falcon (Table 1), from different websites and publications, to provide a consolidated view of its status and distribution in Gujarat. It appears to be a rare winter visitor to LRK and GRK.

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