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Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus dicruroides* in Rajasthan, with notes on its identification

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Introduction

The Drongo Cuckoo (Genus: *Surniculus*) is a brood parasitic genus restricted to South- and Southeast Asia (Payne 2005). Currently, *Surniculus* comprises four species, of which, the Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo *S. lugubris*, and the Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo *S. dicruroides* occur in India (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Praveen *et al.* 2018). Most field guides still treat them as a single species (Kazmierczak 2000; Grimmett *et al.* 2011), while Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) tentatively recognise this split. The Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo is considered a summer visitor to the Himalayas and north-eastern India, and the Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo is resident in the Western- and Eastern Ghats, Punjab, Uttarakhand, the eastern foothills of the Himalayas, and hills of central India (Erritzøe *et al.* 2012; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Observations

On 07 July 2015, at 1800 hrs, while bird-watching in Khem Villas (26.06°N, 76.43°E, *c.* 100 m asl), an eco-lodge situated on the outskirts of Ranthambhore National Park, Sawai Madhopur, MG heard an unidentified birdsong, which lasted only for a few seconds, and then stopped. The same song was heard again on 13 July 2015 at 1715 hrs. It consisted of six to seven loud whistles: 'fee-fee-fee-fee-fee-fee' (Figs. 1, 2, 3). Upon following the song to its source, MG saw a bird perched on top of an *Acacia* tree. It resembled a Black-Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, in that the overall body was black, and the tail was deeply forked. But it had white bars on the undertail coverts, and a fine, down-curved cuckoo-like beak. It lacked the white rictal spot that is present in Black Drongo. Using these features (Grimmet *et al.* 2011), and its song (https://www.xeno-canto.org/) as clues, it was later identified as an adult Drongo Cuckoo, a species previously unreported from Rajasthan (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). After the first sighting, the Drongo Cuckoo was often seen singing through the wet season (July–September), usually from tree tops that had bare branches. Towards the end of the wet season the songs became less frequent and stopped by the end of September. Most birds were usually spotted from a distance, too far away to distinguish the shape of the tail, but a forked tail was visible in some birds. MG

could not get photographic record of all sightings because every time she tried going closer to the bird, it would fly away, and its song would then be heard from the adjacent woodlot. Its songs were often heard after dawn, and towards dusk, and before and after a shower of rain, or when the skies were overcast. On 19 July 2015, a bird was photographed **[159]**, but it had slightly different characteristics from the bird that was first seen on 13 July. It was overall black, however, the degree to which the tail forked was substantially less than that of the first individual. The underside of the tail also lacked white barring except near the vent. Nevertheless, the beak was still cuckoo-like and hence the identification as a Drongo Cuckoo was beyond a doubt. After the first sighting, the songs of the Drongo Cuckoo were heard again in the following three years during the wet season. All records, including songs and photographs, have been deposited in eBird.

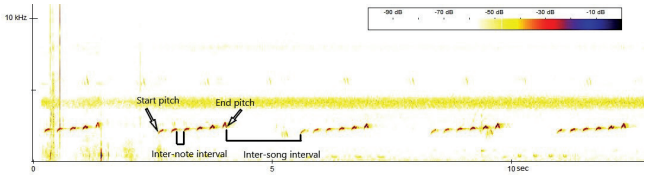

Fig 1. Spectrogram of Drongo Cuckoo song recorded at Khem Villas on 18 July 2015, ***after*** Gala (2015). Text within the figure shows the acoustic parameters measured from the song.

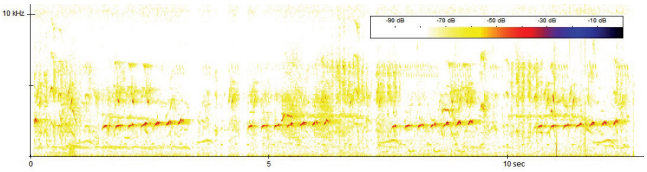

Fig 2. Spectrogram of Drongo Cuckoo song recorded at Khem Villas on 24 June 2017, ***after*** Gala (2017).

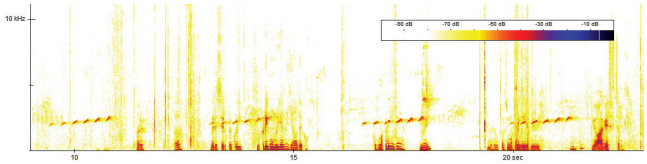

Fig 3. Spectrogram of Drongo Cuckoo song recorded at Khem Villas on 11 August 2017, ***after*** Rathore (2017).

Ashok Mashru

159. Drongo Cuckoo in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. White bars on the undertail covers are not seen but note the distinct cuckoo-like beak.

All sightings occurred in and around a restored patch of land where various species of dry deciduous trees such as *Acacia* (kumttha *A. senegal*, raunjh *A. leucophloea,* khair *A. catechu*), dhok *Anogeissus pendula,* chheela *Butea monosperma***,** goya khair *Dichrostachys cinerea* are dominant in the upperstorey. The understorey consists of grass species such as buffel grass *Pennisetum ciliare* (local name: dhaman) and woody shrubs such as donkey berry *Grewia flavescens* (local name: chabenni) and ber *Ziziphus mauritiana*. Some patches also consist of munj grass *Sacharum munja*. However, the adjoining areas comprise woodlands, agricultural fields, and scrub. The larger landscape consists of the Ranthambhore National Park, a tropical dry deciduous and dry mixed-deciduous forest largely dominated by *Anogeissus pendula* (Champion & Seth 1968).

While discussing this observation with Nirav Bhatt, he mentioned that Prasad Ganpule, Ashok Mashru, and he had, on 11 July 2015, around 0730 hrs, spotted a pair of Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoos mating **[160]**. The female **[161]** appeared to be bigger than the male **[162]**, and the male's tail was less forked than that of the female. The female had more extensive white barring on the vent as well as undertail coverts and also a longer and deeper forked tail than the male, as seen in the photographs.

Ashok Mashru

160. Mating pair of Drongo Cuckoos at Hingolgadh, Gujarat.

Nirav Bhatt

161. Female Drongo Cuckoo in Hingolgadh, Gujarat.

Nirav Bhatt

162. Male Drongo Cuckoo in Hingolgadh, Rajkot, Gujarat.

Extant literature suggests that Drongo Cuckoos are not sexually dimorphic (Payne 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It is unclear whether these differences were unique to this particular pair or whether it was a younger male (Nirav Bhatt, *verbally*, on 13 July 2015, and 11 April 2018). Drongo Cuckoos have been reported from Gujarat in the past (Bhalodia 2014; Wadatkar 2014) but this might be the first photographic record from this state.

Identification

Though Drongo Cuckoos can be easily confused with a Black Drongo, their cuckoo-like down-curved beak, the white barring on the undertail coverts and vent, and its distinctive call are key characteristics for identification. But uncertainty prevails over the separation of the two Indian forms based on plumage, vocalisation, and distribution (Grimmett *et al.* 2011).

Plumage

The degree to which the tail is forked has been suggested as a diagnostic feature in separating these two forms, with the tail being deeply forked in the Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, and less so in the Square-tailed form (Payne 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The tail's fork, in the first individual that MG saw, was deeper than that of the photographed individual. When Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo is moulting its outer tail feathers, the tail could then appear fairly square-ended (Mike Prince, *in litt.,* e-mail dated 20 February 2018), potentially leading to Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoos being misidentified as Square-tailed. Observations from Gujarat support the existence of individual variations. Based on plumage, we believe that some individuals we found in Rajasthan were indeed Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoos.

Vocalisation

Their song has also been suggested as a diagnostic feature to help distinguish between these two forms (Payne 2005; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). However, both works give contradictory descriptions of the songs of Fork-tailed- and Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Drongo Cuckoo songs

Drongo Cuckoo *spp.*	Payne (2005)	Rasmussen & Anderton (2012)
Fork-tailed	Clear, piping whistles; Second note lower or at least not higher than first, mostly rising	Piercing, rich whistles; Second note higher than first, mostly rising
Square-tailed	Mellow whistles; Notes rising evenly	Sharp, piercing whistles; Second note lower than first

Aside from verbal notes on the characteristics of songs, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) also list the following acoustic parameters that may be useful for distinguishing the two species (Table 2): Number of notes in a song (# notes), start pitch (Start_P), end pitch (End_P), interval between two notes (Int_note), and interval between two successive songs (Int_song)

Table 2. Acoustic parameters of Drongo Cuckoo songs according to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012)

Drongo Cuckoo species	# notes	Start_P (kHz)	End_P (kHz)	Int_note (ms)	Int_song (s)
Square-tailed	5–6	2.6–2.8	3.5	100	1–1.5
Fork-tailed	5	1.4–1.9	2.6–2.8	150	1.5

We visualised our recorded songs through spectrograms using BatSound (www.batsound.com) and estimated the same parameters averaged over all clear songs (see Fig 1 for estimation of parameters from spectrogram). We found that our recordings (Table 3) closely matched the Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo's song on start pitch, end pitch, and interval between two notes.

Table 3. Acoustic parameters of Drongo Cuckoo songs recorded in the present observations

Spectrogram	# notes	Start_P (kHz)	End_P (kHz)	Int_note (ms)	Int_song (s)
Fig 1	5, 6	2	2.4	158	1.3
Fig 2	7	2	2.4	–	–
Fig 3	6	2	2.4	150	–

All parameters could not be measured for Fig 2, 3 because of unclear calls

Discussion

On present knowledge, the breeding species of central India is the Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, and both, Ranthambore, and Hingolgadh lie on the outer edge of central India. All observations, including songs, during the wet season indicate that it possibly breeds in these parts. Though Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) stated that it is 'probably mostly or entirely resident', field observations indicate this species to be mostly migratory to south-western Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu where it appears to be absent during the south-west monsoon season from June till first week of September (eBird 2018). However, Erritzøe *et al.* (2012) speculated that many Drongo Cuckoo individuals found in northern India during the monsoon are Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoos, indicating an uncertainty about their distribution. Payne (2005) noted that the species range is restricted to north-eastern

India, and mentioned that it occurs in fruit orchards and pepper vine plantations of southern India. Payne (2005) also speculated that Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoos might breed in Kerala, from January to March, but this information is not corroborated by any other work.

The new records of Drongo Cuckoos described in this paper indicate a potentially wider distribution. Therefore, we suggest caution in trying to identify Drongo Cuckoos based solely on existing range information. Notwithstanding the difficulty of identifying the species correctly, there have been no previous records of any species of Drongo Cuckoo reported from the state of Rajasthan anywhere, published or online. Experienced birders, familiar with the bird fauna of Rajasthan, also reported not having seen, heard, or come across reports from this region (Dharmendra Khandal, *verbally*, on 13 July 2015). Hence, this would be the first report for the state. The presence of more than one individual, and its regularly heard songs indicate that this species might breed in Sawai Madhopur. We think that more observations of Drongo Cuckoos, which combine photographs and song recordings of the same individual, will be useful in determining which diagnostic features could be robustly applied to identify the species.

Interestingly, there is a recent proposal that Fork-tailed and Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoos be lumped together as one species (Gill & Donsker 2018b)!

Acknowledgements

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Swinhoe's Minivet *Pericrocotus cantonensis* in Gujarat

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Swinhoe's Minivet (Brown-rumped Minivet) *Pericrocotus cantonensis* breeds in central, eastern, and south-eastern China, and winters in parts of southern Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (Taylor 2018). It is poorly known from the Indian Subcontinent with accepted reports from Bangladesh (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and its recent addition to the Indian avifauna (Praveen *et al.* 2018), based on records from Odisha (Rajguru & Ukil 2016), and Karnataka (Sridharan *et al.* 2016).

The observations presented below are from Indroda Nature Park (*henceforth*, INP) (23.20°N, 72.64°E), which is situated on both the banks of Sabarmati River in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. INP is a protected forest area of about 428 ha with *Terminalia arjuna, Azadirachta indica, Senna siamea, Butea monosperma, Bombax ceiba, Acacia nilotica, Vachellia tortilis, and Mangifera indica* being the predominant trees.

On 25 February 2018, we went to INP while conducting a bird watching training programme, with a group of participants. At 0730 hrs, in a flock of Small Minivets *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* perched in an *Albizia lebbeck* tree, we spotted two slightly larger, and different looking minivets. Shortly, one of these birds flew away, and here we report about the other bird. The bird was