

Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla* in Gujarat: Status and distribution, with notes on its identification

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Introduction

The Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla* is a winter migrant to India. Its winter distribution is mainly to north-eastern, eastern, and central India, and the Eastern Ghats, reaching up to western Maharashtra, and Goa (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005; Grimmett *et al.* 2011). No sightings from Gujarat are given in these texts, but it has been reported from Morbi, Gujarat (Ganpule 2013), with the sighting of an adult male in April 2011.

Observations

I always suspected that the Taiga Flycatcher was more common in Gujarat than previously expected, and it could have been overlooked since it was considered a subspecies of the Red-breasted Flycatcher *F. parva*, and had only recently been split (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

I carried out surveys in many areas in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat during the winter of 2013–2014. I contacted birdwatchers here for their sightings of *F. parva* / *F. albicilla* and also looked at images on the Internet (www.orientalbirdimages.org, www.indianaturewatch.net, www.abc.lynxeds.com) for reports/images from Gujarat.

Results from my surveys, and other records, of Taiga Flycatcher from Gujarat are presented below (Table 1).

Two individuals recorded in Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary on 06 April 2014 (G. Bagda, *in litt.*, email dated 07 April 2014) in the same area where I noted five individuals on 22 March 2014, were probably the same birds. All five individuals that I noted were adult males, either in breeding plumage or moulting into breeding plumage, and birds noted later in the same area were also in breeding plumage.

The record from Thol, near Ahmedabad (Maheria 2014), identified as an Asian Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica* is actually a *F. albicilla*.

Identification

Since it is now established that *F. parva*, *F. albicilla*, and the Kashmir Flycatcher *F. subrubra* occur in Gujarat (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Ganpule 2012), identification and separation of the three in first winter plumage is quite challenging. Cederroth *et al.* (1999) deal with the identification of *parva* and *albicilla*. For the identification of first winter *F. subrubra*, see Ganpule (2012). Some additional notes on identification of first-winter *F. albicilla* are presented below:

1. Some first-winter males may show a small red throat patch in the winter. Some adult males also retain this red patch on throat. Compare with Cederroth *et al.* (1999) who remark that 'most (all?)' adult male *albicilla* moult into a female-like plumage in winter (p. 465, pl. 8). This could lead to possible confusion with *parva*. A first winter male was wintering near Morbi and I was able to observe it for three months. It moulted into breeding plumage [183, 184, 185, 186] by March end. Note progression of moult [184, 185, 186], which seems complete on 27 March 2014. It showed a red throat patch throughout winter, as can be seen from the images. What percentage of males show this red throat patch in winter is not known and requires further study.
2. It is difficult to identify *albicilla* only on plumage characters. Shape, colour of bill, and call are the easiest way to separate *albicilla* from *parva* and *subrubra*.
3. In a first-winter *albicilla*, the tertials pattern may be worn by

Table 1. Sight records of Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla* in Gujarat

Date	Place	Remarks	Observer
25 January 2006	Gir National Park	Olsen 2006	K.M.Olsen
February 2013	Sagai, Rajpipla, South Gujarat	–	A.Mashru (<i>in litt.</i>)
March 2013	Gir National Park	–	A.Mashru (<i>in litt.</i>)
13 October 2013	Morbi	–	Author's sighting
27 October 2013–30 March 2014	Morbi	Wintering bird – probably first winter female	Author's sighting
15 November 2013	Rajkot	–	A.Mashru (<i>in litt.</i>)
10 December 2013–27 March 2014	Morbi	Wintering bird – first winter male	Author's sighting
06 March 2014	Thol Wildlife Sanctuary, Near Ahmedabad	Maheria 2014	P.Maheria
22 March 2014	Near Bordevi, Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary	Five Individuals seen in the area	Author's sighting



183. December 2013



185. March 2014



184. March 2014



186. March 2014

February–March and seem similar to *parva*, unless closely seen. This feature is useful for identification only in early winter when the birds are in fresh plumage.

4. From first week of March onwards, male Taiga Flycatchers are either in moult or may be in breeding plumage and identification is easier if seen in this plumage, since *parva* and *subrubra* do not show this character.
5. For identification of adult and first-winter female *albicilla*, tail colour and uppertail coverts are usually more jet black, but it

is difficult to rely on this single plumage feature. Bill colour, shape, and call are the best way to separate it from *parva* and *subrubra*. Plumage characters can be indicative but are not conclusive for identification.

6. Tail colour/uppertail coverts in some first-winter male *parva* and *subrubra* also look as black as in *albicilla*. In such cases, a combination of other characters is necessary to separate *albicilla* from the other two.
7. I was able to observe the two individuals wintering near

Morbi, for an extended time period. The behaviour of *albicilla* is similar to *parva* and *subrubra*. However the tail fanning behaviour of a *subrubra* (Ganpule 2012) was not observed in the other two.

Discussion

Looking at the above records from Gujarat, it is quite possible that the Taiga Flycatcher may have been overlooked in the past for the more common and similar looking Red-breasted Flycatcher. Even now, it is easily misidentified, as seen above.

Kannan & Santharam (2013) expressed doubts regarding the reported range extension based on a single sighting (Ganpule 2013). Certainly single sightings cannot be range extensions, but for similar looking birds that tend to get overlooked, single sightings could be an indicator of them being more widespread than previously thought. The fact does remain that the Taiga Flycatcher was only recently elevated to full species status, and hence previous sightings may have been reported as Red-breasted Flycatcher, without specifying whether they were *parva* or *albicilla*. Thus in cases where there have been taxonomic updates, it would be advisable to reassess the status and distribution.

Conclusion

The Taiga Flycatcher is a passage, as well as winter, migrant to Gujarat. Wintering birds have been noted in the Morbi area. It is quite possible that Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary and Gir National Park are areas where Taiga Flycatchers winter, since they were noted in the same area twice. Further surveys are needed to

confirm this. It seems to be widely distributed with sightings from the Saurashtra region and southern Gujarat, and it is probably common in the Gir and Girnar areas, either as a passage migrant or winter visitor, as five individuals were seen in a single day. Thus its status can be described as 'uncommon winter visitor' and 'passage migrant'. A detailed survey in suitable areas will be helpful to understand its status and distribution in Gujarat.

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Recent sighting of Amur Falcons *Falco amurensis* near Sohildev Wildlife Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh

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Recent instances of large-scale, localised hunting of Amur Falcons *Falco amurensis* in parts of north-eastern India, particularly Nagaland through which the species undertakes fall migration every year, have been a serious conservation issue (Dalvi & Sreenivasan 2012). According to Rasmussen & Anderson (2012) the Amur Falcon is a 'fall passage migrant' through central and eastern Himalayas, southern Assam hills (Cachar, Eastern Meghalaya, Manipur), and the Peninsula.

The Bombay Natural History Society has been given a one year project by Sarus Sanraskshan Samiti and Uttar Pradesh

Forest Department to document and study the avifaunal diversity of Sohildev (or Sohelwa) Wildlife Sanctuary located at Tulsipur Tehsil of Balrampur District, and Bhinga Tehsil of Saravasti District along the Indo-Nepal border. While on way for our first winter transect to the Poorvi (East) Sohelwa range from Bhinga on 09 November 2013, we recorded at 1620 hrs more than 150 Amur Falcon, about 10 km before the Poorvi Sohelwa forest rest house (27°48'N, 82°02'E).

We first sighted the falcons from the road, perched c. 300 m away on electric wires passing over a harvested paddy field