

First confirmed record of Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* in Gujarat, India

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Introduction

The Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* is a Holarctic species that breeds in Europe, North, and Central Asia, and North America, wintering in tropical Africa, and Central- and South America. Though the species is not globally threatened, its population trend appears to be decreasing (BirdLife International 2009). It is a strong migrant, travelling both, over land, and water.

It is a vagrant (Ali & Ripley 1981; Alfred *et al.* 2001; Kazmierczak 2006), or very rare winter migrant (Kannan *et al.* 2009) in India. There are only a few places in India from where this species has been reported. These are: Point Calimere (Tamil Nadu)—where Abdulali & Ambedkar (1984) recovered a ringed Black Tern in 1970, and S. Balachandran ringed several individuals between 1989 and 1991, during the BNHS Bird Migration Project (Balachandran 1994); Kaliveli Lake (Tamil Nadu), and Pulicat Lake (Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh), where 17 birds (Balachandran 1994), and one individual (Kannan *et al.* 2009) were ringed respectively; Delhi, where H. G. Alexander sighted an individual in October 1949 (Ali & Ripley 1981).

From Gujarat, I had reported the occurrence of a few birds from a suburban marsh ecosystem in Ahmedabad (Gujarat) in 1991, subsequently noticed by Futehally (1991). However, Khacher (1996) did not include it in his ornithological overview for Gujarat though he mentioned that, “more intensive birdwatching may confirm that Gujarat is on itinerary of the migratory Black Tern (apart from Common Tern and Roseate Tern).”

Bhaskarpura wetlands

On 2 October 2009, I visited an inland marsh at Bhaskarpura, near Vithalgadh village (22°59'22"N 71°58'33"E) in Lakhtar taluk (tehsil) of Surendranagar district (Gujarat). It is located 24 km north-east of Lakhtar, and c. 76 km south-west of Ahmedabad. This wetland is known as ‘Bhaskarpura wetland’ among the birdwatchers of northern Gujarat / Saurashtra, and is a designated Important Bird Area (IBA) (Islam & Rahmani 2004). It is a largish shallow wetland having the depth of 50–75 cm (Anon. 1998). It is located c. 15 km from Nani Kathechi village (Anon. 1998), on the western shore of Nalsarovar Lake (Fig.1), which is a well-known bird sanctuary established in 1969.

On reaching the wetland, we noticed that on its western side there was a long bund that separated it from adjoining cotton fields. Thus, on the western side of the bund, there was a cotton field, and on its eastern side, Bhaskarpura wetland (Fig. 2). We walked on the bund for about 500 m, reaching a weir-like structure (Fig. 3). On one side of the weir was the Bhaskarpura wetland with a lot of emergent aquatic vegetation (EAV) dominated by sedges



Fig. 1. Location of Bhaskarpura wetland with respect to Nalsarovar lake—a bird sanctuary [Source: “Environmental Impact Assessment of Sardar Sarovar Project on Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary”, A Technical Report of GEER Foundation (1998), Gandhinagar]

(i.e., plants of *Cyperaceae* family). On the other was a small, yet deep, pond that had emergent vegetation only along its edges, but had abundant submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV). This pond had a lot of fish of varying age, and size, i.e., from fingerlings to adults. A thin film of water flowed continuously over the weir, from the large wetland with abundant EAV to the small pond, a result of inflows from an ‘escape’ of a Narmada canal (Sardar Sarovar Project) that constituted the northern boundary of the large wetland.

To my surprise, I found that a large number of fingerlings were swimming across the weir from the SAV-dominated pond to the larger wetland. This continuous movement of fingerlings attracted some terns that apparently included around five River Terns *Sterna aurantia*, and an equal number of smaller-sized marsh terns. Undoubtedly, a couple of the latter were Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybridus*. However, three to four of the marsh terns had dark patches on



Fig. 2. A view of Bhaskarpura wetland.



Fig. 3. A weir with convex crest/top. Water flows in the form of thin film across the weir from the marshy wetland of Bhaskarpura (on right hand side) to a pond-like waterbody (on left hand side).

the sides of their necks, in front of the base of the wings. Their head pattern also appeared different from that of the Whiskered Terns. I saw these details only when the terns flew close to me, as I did not have a pair of binoculars. As I was aware about the possibility of the occurrence of the Black Tern in Gujarat, I took several digital photographs (12x optical zoom, 6.1 MP res.) whenever these terns flew closer to me.

Confirmation of identity

Later, on studying the pictures, I found that one was of Whiskered Terns in winter plumage. However, each tern in the other three photos (Figs. 4–6), had a dark patch on each side of its neck. Moreover, the head pattern of these terns was quite different from that of Whiskered Tern. Thus, I presumed that these were Black Terns.

However, my friend, Mr. Kandarp Kathju, who is a keen birder and naturalist, advised me to send the pictures to an expert for confirmation of my identification. I emailed the photographs to Dr. Taej Mundkur, Programme Manager - Flyways, Wetlands International Headquarters, The Netherlands. He wrote back saying that the terns in pictures sent by me appeared to be Black Terns to him and to his colleagues in office. For further



Fig. 5. Black Terns foraging over the convex shaped crest/top of a weir-like structure.

Fig. 6. Black Tern close to water surface to collect its prey.

confirmation he forwarded my pictures to Mr Jan van der Winden of Bureau Waardenburg Ltd. (Consultant for Environment and Ecology), the Netherlands.

After some days, Dr Mundkur received Jan's reply, "Very interesting indeed to receive some pictures from Black Terns in India. They are correctly identified as Black Terns. The pictures do not show adults in non-breeding plumage, but birds moulting from juvenile into first winter plumage". Dr Mundkur added, "This is an important observation for the region of west India (Gujarat state). There are a few records from across the country. And Simon Delany mentioned seeing numbers during south migration in the Himalayas many years ago."

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