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An European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* in Maharashtra, India

We report the first confirmed sighting of the European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (hereinafter, EHBU) in Maharashtra, India. On 06 November 2024, at 0905 h, we observed a large raptor soaring over Vetat Tekdi grasslands, near quarry area (18.527°N, 73.817°E) in Pune District, Maharashtra [197, 198]. The bird appeared to be molting feathers from both wings and the tail. It was being mobbed by Black Kites *Milvus migrans*. Photographs were taken from multiple angles. Initially the bird was identified as an Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* (hereinafter, OHBU). However, when photographs were shared on the Pune Birding Community forum, Adesh Shivkar noted that the features suggested EHBU rather than OHBU. On the next day, 07 November 2024, the bird was again seen briefly soaring at the same site at 0710 h. This time again, it was being chased by Black Kites.



Mayur Arole

197. European Honey-buzzard, with clearly visible dark carpal patch and four fingered primaries, photographed on 06 November 2024 at Vetat Tekdi, Pune, Maharashtra.



Aniruddha Gokhale

198. European Honey-buzzard showing a single, prominent dark terminal tail band, photographed on 06 November 2024 at Vetat Tekdi, Pune, Maharashtra.

Based on the identification criteria in Anand et al. (2020), following characteristics were observed in the bird clearly distinguishing it from OHBU and OHBU x EHBU hybrid;

- 1. Dark carpal patch:** Prominent and clearly visible on the observed bird, absent in OHBU.
- 2. Single dark terminal band on the tail:** Unlike OHBUs,

which typically exhibit two or more dark tail bands, the bird had a single, prominent dark terminal band.

- 3. Subtle outer bar on secondaries:** The outer bar of the secondaries in the observed bird merged subtly into the coverts before reaching the body, unlike in OHBUs, where the bar extends further toward the body.
- 4. Fewer primary fingers:** The bird showed only four primary fingers, whereas OHBUs typically have six.
- 5. Eye color:** The bird's eye appeared yellow, in contrast to the red eyes typically seen in OHBUs.

As there are no features that would suggest an OHBU, we can rule out the possibility of an OHBU x EHBU hybrid. The identification was further confirmed through expert consultation, including discussions with Nirav Bhat, who also noted these distinguishing features. The species was sighted again on 14 February 2025 at the same location (Rane 2025).

These observations represent the first documented record of the EHBU in Maharashtra. There is one previous record of a hybrid OHBU x EHBU individual photographed from Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai in 2022 (Desai 2022). These sightings add to the growing knowledge of the distribution of the EHBU in India and is of considerable interest to birders and ornithologists in the region.

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A Pied Crow *Corvus albus* at Pulicat Lake, India: Could ship-assistance be the reason for all records from India?

Pulicat Lake is the second largest brackish water lagoon in India, covering c.620 sq. km. It has numerous islands, and is fed by three major rivers, making it a vital ecosystem for diverse flora and fauna (Francis & Aram 2016). The lake spans across two districts, Nellore in Andhra Pradesh and Tiruvallur in Tamil Nadu. In this note, we report a sighting of the Pied Crow *Corvus albus* from the Tamil Nadu sector of Pulicat Lake, a species native to Sub-Saharan Africa and not previously recorded from this region.

On 22 November 2024, at around 1000 h, we (BSN, SDR, & RS) saw a Pied Crow in the Annamalaichery area (13.457°N, 80.264°E) of Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu. The weather was clear and sunny. The bird was initially observed through a Nikon D5600 camera with a 70-300 mm lens. It was seen perching

alongside a House Crow *C. splendens*, both appearing to feed on a piece of meat placed on wooden poles typically used by local fishermen for laying out fishing nets [199]. The larger crow, presumed to be the Pied Crow, eventually took possession of the meat after a brief tussle with the House Crow [200, 201]. It flew to a nearby wooden stand used for hanging fishing nets, where it continued feeding and later preening [202]. After a few minutes, it flew towards nearby human habitation and was not seen again.



199. Pied Crow perched beside a House Crow.



200. Pied Crow tussling mid-air with a House Crow over a piece of meat.



201. Pied Crow in possession of the piece of meat after the tussle



202. Pied Crow preening its feathers after feeding

The bird's striking black-and-white plumage drew our attention. The head, neck, and upper chest were black with a glossy blue and purple sheen, contrasting sharply with a distinct white collar on the upper mantle. This white extended across the breast and down the sides of the body. The rest of the upperparts and underparts were dull black with less gloss [203, 204]. The bill and legs were black, and no vocalisations were recorded during the sighting.



203. Lateral view highlighting the sharp white collar and contrasting black plumage.



204. The bird perched on a wooden pole used by fishermen for drying nets, exhibiting its distinctive white breast

The bird in question was identified as a Pied Crow based on its distinctive plumage, size, and overall structure. While the identification appears clear from both direct observations and photographic evidence, it is important to consider other possibilities, such as hybrid or colour aberrant crows.

The individual appeared noticeably larger than the House Crow observed nearby, with a more robust build. Its proportions, including a moderately graduated tail, upright posture, and less domed head, further supported the identification. In contrast to the Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos*, this bird lacked the heavy arched bill and uniformly black plumage (Ali & Ripley 1987). The species identification was confirmed by Dr. Rajah Jayapal via email (Rajah Jayapal, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 14 April 2025) as well as in person.

Colour aberrations such as leucism and progressive greying have been reported in native crows, but these usually result in irregular feathering, reduced social acceptance, or abnormal behaviour (van Grouw 2021; Amar-Singh et al. 2023). No such features were observed in this bird. Its healthy behaviour, lack of asymmetry, and natural looking plumage suggest this individual was not a colour aberrant but a genuinely wild bird. These aspects collectively support the identification of the bird as a Pied Crow; a species not previously recorded from this region.

The Pied Crow is widely distributed across Sub-Saharan Africa, ranging from Senegal and Sudan in the north to South Africa and Madagascar in the south. It inhabits a wide variety of open habitats, including savannahs, farmlands, urban areas, and coastal zones, often in close association with human settlements (Madge et al. 2009). While primarily an African species, the Pied Crow has shown occasional tendencies toward range expansion. In the Middle East, scattered records exist from Yemen and southern Saudi Arabia. Additionally, eBird reports from Oman, UAE, Kuwait, and Iran classify the species as an escapee. There are records from Europe on eBird (eBird 2025). Isolated records have also emerged from South America, particularly along the Brazilian coast (Silva & Olmos 2007; Lima & Kamada 2009), though no breeding population has been established. In South Asia, it was first reported from Rajasthan (Saikia & Goswami 2017) and was initially classified as of 'unknown origin'. It was later accepted for the India checklist with possible reasons for dispersal being ship assistance (Praveen et al. 2019). In 2020, another Pied Crow was photographed in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, with the image uploaded to eBird (Joshi 2020); c.575 km from the current record. However, the Visakhapatnam record is currently marked as 'Provisional' on eBird, and no formal publication has followed yet.

The present sighting from Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu, therefore, adds to a small but growing number of observations suggesting sporadic and possibly increasing incursions into India's east coast. Whether these are isolated vagrants, ship-assisted birds or indicative of a larger dispersal trend remains uncertain, warranting further attention. While natural vagrancy cannot be ruled out, such an unusual occurrence outside its known range raises several questions regarding origin, mode of arrival, and the potential for naturalization. Given the proximity to coastal shipping routes and major ports at Chennai, Ennore, and Kattupalli, as well as Visakhapatnam, it is plausible that the individuals recorded along the eastern coast of India could have arrived with maritime assistance, similar to the suggested reason for the Jodhpur record (Saikia & Goswami 2017; Praveen et al. 2019).

An alternative possibility is escape from captivity. Pied Crows are held in several European zoos and private collections (Saikia & Goswami 2017), and the species is occasionally traded as a pet. However, there are no verified records of this species being kept in Indian zoos or private collections (Central Zoo Authority 2024–2025). The individual at Pulicat showed no signs of feather wear or injury typical of captive birds, and its behaviour remained wary and similar to a wild bird. These factors make a recent escape from captivity unlikely.

Globally, the Pied Crow has demonstrated notable adaptability and potential for range expansion, with increases in abundance supported by road and powerline infrastructure (Cunningham et al. 2016; Londei 2020). While breeding populations remain unconfirmed outside its native African range, isolated records from regions such as the Brazilian coast have flagged the species as a potential invasive species (Adelino et al. 2017). These observations highlight the Pied Crow's ability to persist in human-modified landscapes and the need for monitoring isolated vagrancy events like this. Continued monitoring in the Pulicat region and surrounding coastal areas may reveal whether this sighting represents an isolated event or is a part of a recurring pattern of vagrancy.

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