



At last! Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, Ayn Tabraq (All photos taken on the 2015 tour & by Mike Watson).

OMAN & BAHRAIN

22 OCTOBER – 7 NOVEMBER 2015

LEADERS: MIKE WATSON & HANNU JÄNNES.

Cyclone Chapala! Despite the influence of the most severe depression ever recorded in the Northern Indian Ocean, our eighth Oman & Bahrain tour was another successful visit to this region, recording a respectable total of 242 taxa and 55 Birdquest 'diamond' species (regional specialities). Oman is well established as the premier birding destination in the Middle East for so many reasons. It is full of regional specialities, offers a fantastic migration spectacle as well as some great sea birding. The highlights this time were again Oman's special owls. We saw Omani Owl again, only the third tour group to see it (the first and second were us too), as well as Pallid and Arabian Scops Owls, Lilith Owl and Arabian Spotted (the potential split from Greyish) Eagle-Owl. Cyclone Chapala may have disrupted our itinerary but it also brought us some great seabirding, notably Swinhoe's Storm Petrels! A great mixture of Middle Eastern specialities and sought-after migrants included: Arabian and Sand Partridges; Persian Shearwater; Jouanin's Petrel; Masked Booby; Socotra Cormorant; Lappet-faced Vulture; Crab-Plover; Sociable Lapwing; Long-toed Stint; Broad-billed Sandpiper; Sooty Gull; Spotted Sandgrouse; Common Wood Pigeon (of the Central Asian form *casiotus*); African Collared Dove; Bruce's Green Pigeon; Forbes Watson's Swift; Sooty Falcon; Steppe Grey Shrike; Fan-tailed Raven; Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark; White-spectacled Bulbul; Streaked Scrub Warbler; Plain Leaf Warbler; Arabian Babbler; Asian Desert Warbler; Ménétries's Warbler; Abyssinian White-eye; Tristram's Starling; Rufous-tailed



European Roller, Salalah - we enjoyed another good passage of these wonderful birds this year.

Scrub Robin; Northern Caspian Stonechat; Blackstart; Variable, Hume's, Red-tailed & Arabian Wheatears; Nile Valley, Palestine and Shining Sunbirds; Rüppell's Weaver; Indian Silverbill; Masked Wagtail; Yemen Serin and Striolated Bunting. We also added Ruddy Shelduck, Greater Painted Snipe, Hooded Wheatear and, best of all, the long-awaited and wonderful Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak to the Birdquest Oman List.

The Kingdom of Bahrain weighed in again with the most sought-after bird of the circuit, Grey Hypocolius (a wonderful pre-roost gathering of around 170 birds) plus Egyptian Nightjar and Iranian (or Persian/Eastern Mourning) Wheatear. A very good line-up worth the small detour across the Gulf! Oman remains the safest country in the Middle East with a stunning landscape, great road network, generally good food and accommodation throughout and a warm welcome for tourists. It was also good to see that Bahrain is back to 'normal' peace and quiet now after the turmoil of 2011's 'Arab Spring' and even its roads are becoming less frantic (this will be difficult to believe for first time visitors), owing to a massive police presence. Our wonderful host, Mubarak, made our stay a very special one as usual. It is such a shame that many people are influenced by events in the rest of the Middle East and never get to experience traditional Arabian hospitality!

Oman, which is roughly about the same size as the UK but with a sparse population of just over two million, remains one of the most liberal Muslim countries in the world and is happily almost totally crime-free. In 630AD it was one of the first countries to embrace Islam and today Ibadhis (one of the most traditional and tolerant branches of Islam, founded within 50 years of the prophet Mohammed's death) comprise about three quarters of the Muslim population with Sunnis and Shi'as only 12% between them. Oman is unique in the Muslim world in this respect and this probably accounts for why it is such a safe country to travel in. The large number of happy, smiling migrant workers from the Indian Subcontinent, at around half a million represents a quarter of Oman's total population! Whilst driving along modern Oman's fast highways, past the numerous new property developments and immense shiny car dealerships in Muscat (the Toyota showroom is particularly impressive!) it is easy to forget that as recently as 1970, when the present Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, came to power, it was a sleepy backwater, isolated from the rest of the world, with only one hospital and one school in the whole country, no telephones and only 10km of paved roads. The previous sultan, Said bin Taimur bin Faisal Al Busaidi, kept his subjects suspended in a medieval state with draconian laws against acts such as listening to music in public and the wearing of sunglasses! Anyone who left the country, for whatever reason, was immediately



Omani Owl territory, Al Hajar mountains.

exiled and was imprisoned if they tried to re-enter. In fact even the gates of Muscat were closed every night! Vehicles were almost non-existent as all applications had to be personally approved by the Sultan and all were declined.

However, Oman was not always a sleepy backwater, having previously been an influential player in this part of the world. There are references to a sea faring and trading nation known as 'Magan' dating back to the third millennium BC. Its people traded frankincense and myrrh as far as Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Rome and, later, China to where Abu Ubayda, a renowned Omani merchant and navigator, made the first voyage in 750 AD. In 1290 AD Marco Polo visited Oman writing that '*[Dhofar] stands upon the sea and has a very good haven, so that there is a great traffic of shipping between this and India, and the merchants take hence great numbers of Arab horses to that market, making great profits thereby*'. He also noted that '*[the ships] have no iron fastenings and are only stitched together with twine made from the husk of the Indian nut [coconut]*'. Realising the imminent threat to his country posed by its warlike communist neighbour, The Peoples Republic of South Yemen, the young (Sandhurst-educated) Qaboos, heavily supported by the British, deposed his father and took control, just as his father had done before him in 1930. The old Sultan spent the remainder of his life in exile as a resident of the Dorchester Hotel in London. Over the next four and a half decades Qaboos has developed his country using its abundant oil and gas reserves and he is responsible for, amongst other things, creating a network of 11,000 km of paved roads. Part of his plan is to develop a knowledge and service economy, which will endure the depletion of Oman's fossil fuels. The present Sultan is universally adored but he has been in ill health for some time now and one wonders what will become of Oman after he is gone.

Back to the 2015 tour...The next morning saw our usual start with a pelagic trip off Muscat. A few Striated and Western Reef Herons were seen around the luxury yachts in the port and an osprey was perched atop a rock stack as we got underway. Smart Bridled Terns passing by only a short way out of the harbour was a good sign! Al Fahal Island is a huge lump of yellow limestone around 16km offshore and is home to a colony of Sooty Falcons. On arrival we were greeted by the sight of an adult falcon mobbing a Grey Heron, which was taking a rest on the island, swooping down and screaming at it to leave before it eventually took the hint. We witnessed another great performance by these wonderful little birds, with 30-40 of them, including many juveniles and some fairly low on the cliffs, as we circled the island several times. Unfortunately we missed Red-billed Trop-



European Nightjar of the eastern form unwini, at sea off Muscat.

icbird again despite some effort and we wonder what has happened to them here? A European Nightjar of the pale eastern form *unwini* disturbed from its refuge in an alcove at the base of the cliffs sought a darker hiding place before we headed out to sea in search tubenoses. Another exhausted European Nightjar approached our boat later out at sea and made a few passes, presumably thinking about landing next to us before it veered off and away. This is quite a regular phenomenon here with birds having left the Iranian coast the night before finally reaching sight of land next morning. A Bonelli's Eagle was seen on the island as well, the first one we have recorded here. Ocean-going seabirds were much in evidence today with Masked Booby and Flesh-footed Shearwater putting in early appearances, followed by sought-after Jouanin's Petrels and Persian Shearwaters. Several of each afforded some great views as we raced after them at full speed. However, they could keep ahead of us effortlessly, jinking one way and then another over the waves, on their way somewhere.

Some Red-necked Phalaropes flew here and there as we sped over the waves in our 400 BHP craft and a lone Arctic Skua also passed by, heading east. Just as we neared port again, our boat driver made a few phone calls and asked if we would like to see some dolphins? Silly question and soon enough we were enjoying several groups of gorgeous Spinner Dolphins breaching around our boat. A fantastic end to one of our best boat trips off Muscat to date and very fortunate indeed considering the weather that lay ahead of us on the tour in the South of Oman although we were blissfully unaware of this at the time.

In the early afternoon a visit to the rear entrance of Al Qurm (= '*the mangroves*') Park in Muscat was quite productive, despite the nature reserve having become a bathing and fishing area for migrant workers. Ducks are generally scarce in Oman but included a Northern Shoveler and some Common Teal and Garganey. Herons featured and we saw Black-crowned Night, Indian Pond and Purple Heron of note. Pond herons are becoming scarcer in Oman, probably linked to the demise of their mangrove habitat and now sometimes take some finding. It makes me smile to think how I ignore them when in India! Overhead a gathering of Greater Spotted Eagles numbered five birds and in the tidal creeks our first shorebirds included: Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits; Eurasian Whimbrel and Curlews; Grey, Common Ringed, Kentish, Lesser Sand and Greater Sand Plovers as well as a few Common Greenshanks and Common Sandpipers. A Gull-billed Tern and a couple of Sandwich Terns were amongst the many Slender-billed Gulls here. Some perplexing snipes transpired to be Common and were a good lesson not to rely solely on the head pattern and other plumage characters, (one of them had looked good for Pin-tailed).



Sooty Falcon, Al Fahal Island.

Our first 'exotics' included Indian Rollers and Green Bee-eaters but in the midday heat it was difficult to find anything else of note before we called time and headed off north along the Batinah Coast. Next stop was another regular site on this tour, Ras as Sawadi, a low lying promontory just west of Muscat. We arrived at high tide to find local boatmen arguing over rides around the offshore islets and the beach covered with people and vehicles, as is the norm at weekends these days. Although there is never anything here that could not be seen elsewhere it used to be a much more pleasant place to bird. We still managed a few good species here despite the disturbance with a Persian Shearwater far offshore, a Masked Booby for some, six Sooty Falcons perched on the islets and on the nearby *sabhka* (the occasionally flooded mud/sand area above the beach) we eventually tracked down a Steppe Grey Shrike as well as Southern Grey Shrike plus Isabelline, Desert and Pied Wheatears. A nice way to end the birding on the first full day of the tour. Travelling north along the Batinah coast expressway we made fast progress to Oman's main industrial city of Sohar for a one night stay.

Before dawn we headed a little further north to Liwa for a concerted effort to see its two special birds. The first, the endangered Middle Eastern *kalbaensis* form of Collared Kingfisher eventually sat up nicely in the mangroves after some persuasion but the second, Sykes's Warbler refused to show this time. Indian Reed Warblers called from the shadows, Common Kingfishers darted past and a distant perched eagle transpired to be a young Bonelli's. On the sandy beach here a couple of Greater Flamingos were the first of the tour and were accompanied by two Eurasian Spoonbills, while three Socotra Cormorants flew by offshore. The scrub along the ridge of the beach produced some interesting birds including Desert, Pied and our first Red-tailed Wheatear as well as another two Steppe Grey Shrikes. A Ménétries's Warbler appeared briefly for Mike and a constant stream of Purple Sunbirds passed overhead along with a Tree Pipit but the brightest sighting was of a couple of gaudy Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters perched in the mangroves, taking in the early morning sun. Sadly the mangroves here are a little past their best and are showing signs of die-off, in the shadow of Sohar's growing port and its large aluminum smelter to the south. It was also puzzling to miss Daurian Shrike, a bird we have always seen here previously, especially as they spend the winter along the northern coast of Oman, their Turkistan relatives continue much further south to their own wintering grounds in East Africa.



Red-tailed (or Persian) Wheatear, Liwa.

Further north, within a stone's throw of the UAE border, we visited Khatmat Milahah, a regular stop on this tour, primarily for Variable Wheatear, a migrant, which crosses the Strait of Hormuz to spend the winter here. We saw one of these, of the sooty *picata* form, very easily from the vehicle but we had to walk a little to see the other speciality of this site, Plain Leaf Warbler, which comes from a roughly similar breeding area to the wheatear. Thankfully they are easily located by their sparrow-like call and we managed to find four. One of these miniature chiffchaffs was singing this time. Sadly the lovely ghaf tree plain at Khatmat is being carved in two by a vast expressway, a sad sight of yet more devastated habitat. Other good birds included lots of feisty little Lesser Whitethroats of the form *halimodendri*, also from Central Asia and some family parties of the perky Arabian Babbler. No wonder I used to have difficulty with them considering that the birds we used to record as Desert Whitethroat/*minula* in Oman are now thought to be one and the same as *halimodendri*. We turned back south for a late lunch in Barka and the rest of day was spent resting in preparation for a long nocturnal owling session.

Thinking of our evening meal as breakfast, we headed off into the Al Hajar Mountains, returning to an area where we found Omani Owl at a new site on our pre-tour recce a few days earlier. Winding our way deep into a remote wadi long after dark we were soon in position opposite a cliff face where we knew a pair was in residence. Friends of ours had drawn a blank in these mountains the previous month so we knew how tricky these owls can be even with a lot of effort but we had seen an Omani Owl on each of the two all nighters on our recce so we were quite hopeful. Happily again, within minutes of our arrival, we could hear the distinctive compound hooting of Omani Owl in the distance and then the insistent call of a female, quite loud and clear, much closer and surely in view? On went the big torch and there she was for all perched on a rock about 50 metres away, breast streaking and all on show. Wow! 'So it does exist after all' said our guest Jens. Big smiles followed all round. From our experience so far of eight sightings, we think these owls very quickly adapt to playback and then become hard to see, so please excuse us for keeping this latest site to ourselves. The best advice we can offer is that they appear to be quite widely distributed in these mountains so spending time trying to find new pairs unused to playback is probably the way to go. The next bird on the shopping list was Pallid Scops Owl, another fairly common bird of the Al Hajar Mountains and again we saw it very easily. In fact this time a bird was calling within walking distance of the Omani Owl and we simply walked up, shone the torch and watched it in the scope hooting away endlessly. In the still darkness of the desert night the hooting call of a single Pallid Scops Owl



Variable Wheatear, Khatmat Milahah.

can sound just like your own heartbeat. We returned later in the hope of finding it at its day roost but no luck. We checked hundreds of trees on our recce without any luck either and although we had another pair lined up at the Omani Owl 'type locality' we were happy to settle for nocturnal views. Another Omani Owl, presumably the male was hooting from far away as we walked back to our vehicles. The wadis here are very quiet at night apart from the odd lizard and toad, Arabian Leopards used to occur here but were long since extirpated. As dawn approached we returned to Wadi 'Mac' but unfortunately the roosting holes, where we had seen the birds in 2014, did not appear to be in use. Instead, as dawn broke, we enjoyed some nice looks at our first Hume's Wheatears, Streaked Scrub Warblers, Desert Larks of the form *taimuri*, Ménétries's Warblers, Striolated Buntings and a Long-billed Pipit for some plus another four diddy little Plain Leaf Warblers.

There was no need for another late night owling session now so, after a short rest, we ventured out again in the afternoon, to the Sound Approach's Omani Owl 'type locality', where we gazed in amazement wondering how ever did Arnoud manage to get those photos in such terrain? Even more amazing is how did Killian manage to take the daytime roosting shots in Wadi 'Mac' by the way? Birding was quiet this afternoon but did include a Little (or Lilith) Owl at its daytime roost, in more or less the same place we saw it on the Omani Owl Expedition in February 2014. A Turkestan Shrike here was our first of 78 logged on the tour, as we coincided with their main passage this year and other birds noted were Blue Rock Thrush, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and more Hume's and Red-tailed Wheatears.

With time to spare following our owling success we day-tripped the Sayq Plateau. Although the pace of development in Oman is worrying, at least we can travel around the country very quickly now. Again reaching the foot of the Sayq Plateau in record time we could have breakfast in the majestic Wadi Muaydin long before the sun had topped its tall canyon walls. Bernard chanced upon three Sand Partridges on the wadi floor but these unfortunately evaded the rest of us. No need to worry about this one though! See later. We made our ascent to the plateau via the long new road that snakes up through the stark desert landscape of jagged limestone peaks to an altitude of 1950m asl. Up there we explored a delightful landscape of limestone pavement interspersed with ancient gnarled olive trees and contorted old junipers. The most common bird by far was Black Redstart of the form *semirufus*, with mostly males defending their winter territories. Not far behind was White-spectacled Bulbul but there were few other birds here. A couple of pairs of the scarce *negevensis* form of Lappet-faced



Turkestan Shrike, 'The Juniper Forest', Sayq Plateau.

Vulture cruised overhead, their distinctive saw-toothed secondary feathers clearly visible (the only ones of the tour), followed by a couple of subadult Eastern Imperial Eagles. Green Sandpiper and Wood Sandpiper were both by a small roadside pool, they are scarce visitors to the plateau. There is not much standing water up there. A Long-billed Pipit near a small flock of Tawny Pipits caused excitement and we noted three smart Turkestan Shrikes. The latter has even bred here, one of several birds with a more Central Asian breeding range that extend their ranges into Arabia via the Al Hajars. A gathering of 98 Brown-necked Ravens was notable but seems to be a regular occurrence on the plateau, however, a flock of 27 Common Wood Pigeons in the 'juniper forest' went some way back towards the numbers we used to see, thanks to a bumper crop of olives and junipers this year no doubt. We have never seen so much excitement over a wood pigeon before but this is the only place in Arabia they can be found and who knows what might happen with the Central Asian form *casiotus* that represents the pigeon here? We've seen less likely splits. Our first Common Whitethroat of the form *icterops* caused a little head-scratching but most of our time was spent admiring the jaw-dropping desert mountain scenery here from viewpoints like Ar Roos, Al Aqor and the 'Grand Canyon'. There are not many better views in Oman, or anywhere else for that matter.

We noted the continued progress of the massive new hotel development on the rim of the canyon at Jabal al Akhdar overlooking the terraced hillside of Al Ayn, as Oman pushes itself forward as a tourist destination. We may have to look for somewhere a little more remote in this range to find its special birds in future. We stopped at the spectacular Al Ayn ('*The Spring*') where terraced hillsides cascade over the valley with their groves of pomegranate and walnut trees irrigated by a network of man-made channels or *falaj*. Formed in an earlier, wetter climate the light coloured calcareous travertine here was deposited by mineral-laden spring waters flowing from the surface and evaporating. In fact Oman was once part of Gondwanaland and during the last Carboniferous and Permian periods (280-300 million years ago) it was close enough to the South Pole at 40 degrees south to undergo several glaciations! All too soon it was time to head back north to our resort by the coast though and prepare for the next leg of our journey.

Breakfast in a small wadi near Sinaw produced a few interesting birds including four Egyptian Vultures on electricity pylons, a rare dark morph Short-toed Eagle and reasonable views of Grey Francolin for some. The landscape as one drives eastwards from the Sayq plateau gradually flattens into a featureless and empty sea of sand and gravel. Here people fight a constant battle against the shifting sands, their homesteads sur-



Birding on the Sayq Plateau (clockwise from top): Ar Roos; lone olive tree; Bob at the 'Grand Canyon' & wood pigeons!



Desert Lark of the local form taimuri, Al Hajar Mountains.

rounded by perimeter walls, built to keep the relentless attack at bay. This journey went smoothly until almost inevitably an unwelcome item of news appeared on my iPhone, at almost exactly the same point as the last two tours! Unfortunately this was news of an approaching cyclone 'Chapala', which was forecast to disrupt the weather for the days ahead. In fact it was forecast to become the most severe depression ever recorded in the Northern Indian Ocean! Again we could scarcely believe our luck as exactly the same had happened in both 2011 with Cyclone Kelia and in 2014 with tropical storm 'Ni Lofar'. At least we made the right decision to abandon attempts to get to Masirah Island, where we could have been stuck again. It was uncertain exactly where the storm would make landfall but subsequent weather reports mentioned it intensifying to a category four cyclone, a year's worth of rain in one day, 200 kph winds and a storm surge of up to 7m! The tremendous flooding caused by Kelia was fresh in my mind as well as the scenes of devastation caused by Cyclone Gonu that I saw in Muscat in 2007. There is no doubt that these severe weather events are becoming more frequent and should even be expected now at this time of year. As I write there has already been another cyclone 'Megh' since we left Oman and yet another storm is due to follow a similar course across the Northern Indian Ocean this week! We would need to keep an eye on things over the coming days and be ready for the worst.

Eventually we reached the remote desert town of Al Hij, gateway to the awesome Barr al Hikman, wader capital of the Middle East. Al Hij seems to have been renamed 'Mahut' on road signs and maps recently. At the end of the long journey we checked into our hotel, which is more acceptable these days than when I first visited this area and is quite comfortable now. Again more new housing developments are still springing up on the outskirts of Al Hij as a new highway approaches.

We arrived in time to do plenty of birding at Barr al Hikman and now came the time to start sifting through the many thousands of shorebirds scattered all along the coast. Barr al Hikman is simply shorebird heaven with birds stretching into the distance along the coastline as far as the eye can see and we were lucky to find the area's main target, Great Knot, very quickly indeed, in fact only a few metres away from the same patch of mud we saw them on the falling tide in 2014! Ten in total, they stayed fairly close together as the waters receded. Barr al Hikman is the only regular wintering site for Great Knot in the Western Palearctic (if you follow our treatment that it includes the whole of the Arabian Peninsula) and it is also worth remembering how far east it breeds in Siberia. The westernmost Pectoral Sandpipers are further west than the westernmost Great Knots!



Broad-billed Sandpiper, Shannah.

The second interesting shorebird we look for at Barr al Hikman is Broad-billed Sandpiper and we were delighted to see eight here from the same point as we watched the Great Knots. Migrants also follow this coastline and are attracted to small settlements. Around the small desalination plant at Filim we found a Black-crowned Night Heron, Bluethroat, Red-backed (our only one of the tour) and Turkestan Shrikes and a showy Red-throated Pipit. The marvellous shorebirdscape included: our first Eurasian Oystercatcher; some mega distant Crab-plovers; Kentish, Lesser Sand and Greater Sand Plovers; Bar-tailed Godwits; Eurasian Whimbrels; Common Redshank; Marsh Sandpiper (3); Common Greenshank; Wood, Terek (c.15) and Common Sandpipers; Ruddy Turnstone; Sanderling; Little Stint; Curlew Sandpiper and Dunlin. Fabulous stuff for any shorebird enthusiast!

After a surprisingly tasty lunch in Al Hij, it was not long before we found plenty of the last of the three shorebirds we were looking for, the hyper-distinctive Crab-plover. Around 70 of which were scattered along the mudflats south of Shannah. Grey Plovers and Eurasian Curlews of the long-billed form *orientalis* were also here along with another 5 Marsh Sandpipers and a very approachable lone Broad-billed Sandpiper. Small terns here were either Saunders's (more likely?) or Little - according to literature they are doubtfully separable in Arabia in winter. We then turned our attention to looking for migrants along the beach amongst the huts and the dune vegetation. We have had some success here in the past, finding such as Pied Cuckoo and Red-rumped Swallow and this time we saw another nice selection of birds including: Common Quail (great flights views of two birds); Eurasian Wryneck; Asian Desert Warbler (2); Common Whitethroat; Spotted Flycatcher and 11 Turkestan Shrikes. Many of the traditional huts have now been abandoned as people have been relocated to newly built homesteads and we did not see any that were occupied this time.

Well before dawn we were on the road again, pausing for breakfast at a wadi referred to in birding tour reports as the 'fairly salty wadi', known for occasional drinking sandgrouse and migrants. Sadly we did not see any sandgrouse, although we saw plenty of their footprints, and a wing of a predated Garganey was the only other sign of a bird bigger than a passerine. Breakfast was interrupted by the appearance of a long-awaited bird on this tour, Hooded Wheatear, a fine black-and-white male but it gave us the slip and all we could find when we walked towards it was a female Pied Wheatear and a few Desert Wheatears. A Mountain Gazelle skull was found here but it now resides in the customs hall at Salalah airport (unfortunately for one of us who wanted to take it home). Towards the next main town of Ad Duqm we spotted another Steppe Grey Shrike before we



Red-throated Pipit, Barr al Hikman.

turned west and headed inland towards the Empty Quarter. The next town of any size, Hayma, is the gateway to the Empty Quarter and while filling up with gas here we noticed an interesting White Wagtail on the forecourt, that turned out to be a Masked Wagtail. An uncommon visitor and one that we had only seen previously at one site away from the now closed Sohar Sun Farms.

We arrived at Al Ghaftain resthouse, our regular stop on this tour, just in time for a welcome sit-down lunch, with air con! However, migrants were again generally scarcer than usual this time and the best we could manage was a very smart Oriental Turtle Dove of the form *meena* found by Bernard in the usually productive northeast corner of the garden. Hannu has spent a lot of time studying them and was quickly able to give us a master class in turtle dove identification. Oriental Turtle Dove is a scarce migrant in Oman and this was only the second time we had seen it on this tour. The rest house garden was also host to three Grey Herons (!), a couple of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, five Turkestan Shrikes, Common Chiffchaff, Ménétries's Warbler, Spotted Flycatchers and the small oasis just to the south of the rest house produced an Asian Desert Warbler and a Common Cuckoo of note. Further south along the desert highway we reached Qitbit Resthouse. It was wonderful to see how it has been tidied up (a bit) since the horrendous construction camp was dismantled but it still needs a lot more work.

We delayed our check-in and birded the garden until dusk, adding several new birds to our trip list but no megas. A dead first year Greater Spotted Eagle in the garden was a very sad sight but live sightings included an eastern race Common Nightingale (I could believe it if this was a different species to the western form!); Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin; European Roller; another four Turkestan Shrikes; Eastern Olivaceous Warbler; Common Whitethroat; Ménétries's Warbler; Red-breasted Flycatcher (3) and both Black and Common Redstarts. After nightfall a short drive produced no less than three Rüppell's Foxes and a dazzled Cape Hare in the surrounding desert. Next morning in the garden added Barred Warbler, Eurasian Hoopoe, Eurasian Blackcap and Common Rosefinch to our trip list before we drove out to the oasis a couple of kilometres away. We waited for a couple of hours but no sandgrouse came. Instead, one of our cars had a male Pallid Harrier drift past, followed by a Short-toed Snake Eagle. Closer to the vehicles we noted Siberian Chiffchaff and Asian Desert Warbler. An extreme desert walk in an area to the west of Qitbit that had Dunn's Lark as recently as 2012 produced only Black-crowned Sparrow Larks and Desert Wheatears of note.



Masked Wagtail, Hayma gas station.

Dokah Farms is a new development to the northwest of the farming operation that failed after the turn of the millenium and is now one of the best migrant hotspots in the desert. We made our first visit this year and found the pivot fields and nearby palms to be very birdy. Some off course herons had pitched down here, including: Squacco and Grey Herons and Little Egret. An adult Eastern Imperial Eagle was an impressive sight. Sandgrouse were represented by Chestnut-bellied and the more common Spotted but sadly no Crowneds. European Rollers were in evidence with around 20 estimated and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were also very visible with around 30 of these hawking for insects from the pivot gantries. Around 15 Turkestan Shrikes and a single Steppe Grey Shrike were also present along with our first Greater Hoopoe Lark. Greater Short-toed Larks were very common here and a Common Rock Thrush sheltered from the sun in the shade of a gantry. Wheatears are often very common at these desert farms with double figures of both Desert and Isabelline logged today in addition to a lone Red-tailed Wheatear, our furthest south to date. The main Salalah highway to the south of the farms produced numerous small parties of Spotted Sandgrouse on the gravel verge in the evening sunshine, presumably gathering here to take gravel to aid their digestion? Half a dozen Greater Hoopoe Larks also flew up from the roadside.

Finally, driving along the course of Wadi Rabkut we quickly located a covey of four busy Sand Partridges, including two smart males as well as a Eurasian Hobby, which looked set to roost here for the night. Also in the broad wadi were a couple of Pied Wheatears and our first Blackstart before we called it a day and made our way to our hotel in the nearby truck-stop town of Thumrayt, gateway to Oman's oil and gas fields. We did not realise at the time just how well we were going to get to know this little town and the menu of its sole acceptable restaurant!

Heading out in the dark from our hotel in Thumrayt, we sped west along a new sealed road to Mudday (or 'Mudhai' on road signs). This is a new site, not even in the site guide and is basically a small village with an oasis and several palm groves but it is now easily accessible thanks to the new road. As well as being a wintering site for hypocolius (again we were too early this time) it is also a very easy place to see both Nile Valley Sunbird and African Collared Dove, both of which have established a breeding toehold in southern Oman. The sunbirds were everywhere, feeding on small flowering acacias and a couple of the collared doves were easy to spot alongside their slightly larger Eurasian cousins (they are only slightly larger than Laughing Dove) before we could see the bright white belly and undertail coverts properly. Also in the Mudday



Empty Quarter scenes (Clockwise from top): birding the desert at Qitbit; Oriental Turtle Dove (of the form meena) at Al Ghaftayn resthouse garden; Empty Quarter road signs and Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin at Qitbit resthouse garden.



Nile Valley Sunbird (eclipse male), Mudday.

area we recorded 22 Sand Partridges, feeding around an extended camel farm as well as a mixture of off course migrants that included: Greater Spotted Eagle; Green Sandpiper; Eurasian Golden Oriole; Siberian Chiffchaff and Common Rock Thrush of note. Other desert residents around the small settlement included: Desert Lark (of the sandy form *saturata* here) and Blackstart. Many of the small businesses here are now very run-down and few seem to survive, no doubt owing to faster access to Thumrayt along the new road.

By now the threat of Cyclone Chapala was becoming clearer and we made the heart-breaking decision to switch three of our five nights at our beach front apartments in Salalah to Thumrayt. Had we not done so and the cyclone crashed into Salalah it would not have been possible to find anywhere to stay in the very limited accommodation in the desert so we had to decide now. In the end this proved to be the cautious approach but it was interesting to note that many had made the same decision and all 27 rooms at Thumrayt were full and some with double figures of occupants! Much of the Dahariz area of Salalah was evacuated at the peak of the storm and a tidal surge breached East Khawr, although well short of the predicted seven metres maximum, which would have put all of Dahariz under water.

Rain was forecast for the whole of the rest of our stay in the south from two days hence so we decided to try and 'bird race' the important species in a day and a half and then try to salvage what was left to see from the safety of the rain shadow in Thumryat after the worst of the storm had passed. Therefore we headed south to the coast and Al Maghsayl, which has always served us well in the past. We knew the location of the much-sought after Desert Owl's roosting alcoves but we had been warned '*Strix owls often change their roosting sites*' and unfortunately after a fairly long hike we discovered that they had done just that. That was a major disappointment after spending time gazing at the photos in the Sound Approach's 'Undiscovered Owls' book taken here. Will I ever see one again as well as on the fence of the tennis court all those years ago at Ein Gedi I wonder? Another four Sand Partridges, smart Arabian Wheatears, a pair of Verreaux's Eagles, a Bruce's Green Pigeon (for Mike) and a pair of Striolated Buntings (scarce in the south of Oman) were adequate compensation for some in one of the most beautiful sculpted limestone landscapes in all of Oman. However, for once, thankfully not everyone needed Desert Owl this time. Returning to the city of Salalah, crossing ornamental roundabouts and past the banana sellers' stands, we finally rolled up at our apartments on the beach in Dahariz. Getting out of our vehicles in the warm and humid night air and the sound of waves on the beach in the darkness behind us is always such a welcome feeling, even if this was only going to be for one night this time.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Dokah Farms, Empty Quarter.

Our big day started in the Dhofar Mountains, where in a remote wadi we began our search for the two most important owls in the south, the recently recognized split, Arabian Scops Owl and the proposed future split, Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl (split from Greyish). We managed some grim, brief views of the latter and only heard the former in a place where we have seen both very easily in the past. A most disappointing outcome! A couple of Arabian Wolves and European Nighthjars in the darkness had raised spirits a little but as the sun came up unfortunately it was 'game over'. That was nil from three owls so far, not a great start to what we knew was going to be a race against the storm. Maybe the cool breezy weather had not helped. It has been proven that some birds can sense the onset of a serious storm far in advance.

As dawn broke we headed to Ayn Hamran. Dhofar is one of the more scenic sections of the tour, with a very different landscape and avifauna to match. The annual summer monsoon or *khareef* keeps the coast and its adjacent mountains humid and turns them green during the summer rains allowing an opportunity for many species of an African origin to extend their ranges into Arabia. The harsh desert interior represents more of an obstacle to them than the Bab Al Mandab strait and, for this reason, the Dhofar coast is recognized by some authors as part of the Afrotropical faunal region rather than the Palearctic. We favour including all of Arabia in the Palearctic for the sake of simplicity. A series of springs or ayns flow from the base of the dramatic weather beaten limestone escarpment and Ayn Hamran is probably the one with the best range of Dhofar specialties and like so many sites in the region, this pretty wooded valley is very birdy. This site is our traditional starting point in Dhofar and we made another good start here with: Short-toed Snake and Bonelli's Eagles; Bruce's Green Pigeon; Grey-headed Kingfisher; Eurasian Hoopoe; Eurasian Wryneck; Black-crowned Tchagra, African Paradise Flycatcher; Arabian Warbler, Abyssinian White-eye, Tristram's Starling, Blackstart, Shining Sunbird, (the by now very much sought after) Long-billed Pipit; Cinnamon-breasted Bunting and Rüppell's Weaver. Sadly the Arabian Scops Owl roost we found last time was deserted. There were still a lot of birds missing from this list as well so we still had plenty of work to do.

We checked a couple of other sites along the escarpment, adding Palestine Sunbird and at last, at last at last, Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak! We received a hot tip from one of our friends and were shown an innocuous-looking camel drinking pool, where the grosbeak had been seen some days previously. Before too long we spotted a juvenile grosbeak perched in a small tree above the drinking pool. Success! The only problem was that not everyone had managed to get onto it before it flew off. A good lesson in taking a quick view through



Male Pallid Harriers at Dokah Farms, Empty Quarter.

someone else's scope before you look for it in your own! However, during exciting events like this it is often difficult to keep calm and think straight. Happily it was not too long before it returned, followed soon afterwards by a lovely pair of adult grosbeaks! Another wow moment! One of them started singing and even dropped down to eye level in a small acacia as I approached with the big lens, allowing some great photo opportunities and stayed put long enough for me to back off, leaving it perched for Hannu to record its voice. I had waited a long time for this moment having searched for many hours along the escarpment without any luck on previous tours. Knowing the birds' current drinking routine is obviously the key to success, although there does seem to have been more sightings than usual this autumn despite the poor monsoon. A Pied Cuckoo here was almost ignored, a sign of what was happening out in the Indian Ocean to the south of us, it had started already! We also added three Namaqua Doves to our triplist.

We returned to the beach villas for a welcome sit-down lunch and afterwards we checked the sea off there briefly, adding Brown Noddy amongst a feeding party of Bridled Terns. Six Socotra Cormorants flew past as well as a dark morph Arctic Skua. Upslope, on the grassy pastures of the Dhofar Mountains we headed to Tawi Attair, the site of an immense limestone sinkhole at which Yemen Serin was found by cavers in 1997, more than 1000km from the nearest population in Yemen (although it has since been found at another sinkhole to the west of Salalah). The Yemen Serins were, as always by this time of day, a little distant across the sinkhole but afforded some reasonable scope views. Again, as usual, it was the local Bonelli's Eagles that stole the show, casually soaring past us less than 20m away! We also managed to get some fairly good looks at Forbes Watson's Swift here as well as at least 13 fine Arabian Partridges that made their way in to the sinkhole in the late afternoon. The sound of a call to prayer from a nearby mosque echoing across the giant sinkhole added to the ambience of this amazing place. As darkness fell, we took the high road back along the mountain ridge to our refuge in the desert at Thumrayt.

Next morning we decided to play safe and head back to the farms in the desert, partly in the hope of seeing some more sandgrouse but also to explore some of the fields we had not checked thoroughly on our way south. We chose to return to Dokah Farms instead of Shasar or Al Baleed and this paid off. We made a great start on one of the irrigated pivot fields with a newly sown segment adjacent to the taller grass. A pair of adult male Pallid Harriers were huddled together on the grassy field as we approached, a young Steppe Grey Shrike perched on the pivot gantry and an adult Pacific Golden Plover flew over, calling, followed not long after by a



Greater Spotted Eagle, Khawr Rori, Salalah.

Marsh Sandpiper, both badly off course. Lark flocks mostly featured Greater Short-toeds and a few pipits were seen, notably Richard's and Red-throated as well as Citrine Wagtail. One of the highlights of the morning was non-avian though. A very furtive, sand-coloured cat showed all the field marks of Wild Cat, with a thick tail with a broad dark tip and then only a couple of rings and no dorsal stripe at the base, as well as a big broad face, although proving one of these to be of pure provenance is nigh impossible. Eventually some small groups of sandgrouse appeared but again they were Chestnut-bellied and Spotted rather than the still missing Crowned. Yet another Steppe Grey Shrike brought the tally so far to seven, easily more than we have ever seen before. Paul struck gold on a large dry pivot field that held a pair of the hoped-for Cream-coloured Courser, running around but stately looking as ever. Turning our attention to a field that was in the process of being mown we caught up with a White Stork that had been touring the fields earlier. *'Now what about Sociable Lapwing?'* *'Well, it is possible on this date but we are probably about a week too early for them'* and then literally seconds later...Paul shouted *'Sociable Plover'*, using its old-school name. Wow, he was on fire today! There were actually two birds, both beautifully marked youngsters, hatched this year somewhere in Central Asia and here in Oman already. We then spent some time ferrying folks out into the field in one of the Land Cruisers for a closer look at these beauties. What a classic morning's birding!

After lunch we explored Wadi Rabkut again, much more thoroughly this time but again failed to turn up any sandgrouse. We noted more Sand Partridges, Southern Grey Shrike, four Greater Hoopoe Larks, Desert Larks of the *saturata* form again, Common Rock Thrush and Blackstart but not much else. A good candidate for African Collared Dove refused to show its undertail area properly in the wind and a sunbird zipped past that was probably a Nile Valley but otherwise this was a disappointing session as the storm was forecast to hit Salalah tonight. The morning after the worst of the storm we headed back down the hill to Salalah and were surprised and pleased to see that there had been minimal impact. Enormous thunder clouds still covered the coastal plain and turned the sky out to sea to indigo as the centre of the cyclone headed west towards the coast of Yemen. We experienced a couple of major downpours but otherwise we could continue birding without any major problems. We started at Raysut Water Treatment Plant where we could have done with nose-pegs as well as waterproofs, however, the settling pools here were very birdy as usual. We added several species to the triplist including: Black-winged Stilt; Spur-winged Lapwing (a long staying vagrant in the company of Red-wattled Lapwing, which is equally uncommon on the south coast); Ruff, Pheasant-tailed Jacana (a regular winter visitor to Dhofar from India) and White-winged Tern. Other interesting species here were Marsh Sand-



Bonelli's Eagle, Tawi Attair Sinkhole.

piper and a couple of Citrine and *thunbergi* Yellow Wagtails. In the distance we could see that Raysut tip was well attended by a throng that included: Steppe Eagles (c.300); Abdim's Stork (c.200) and White Stork (c.150). Abdim's Stork is an African migrant and has made some large influxes to southern Oman in recent years. The hundreds of Steppe Eagles were scattered around the area and were perched on roadside rocks around the tip, with more of them streaming in from the mountains all the time. With the closure of other dumps in Oman, many of the eagles come to Salalah for the winter now. We drove closer to take a better look at the typically horrible scene and added Eastern Imperial Eagle (at least five), Greater Spotted Eagle (two) and Black Kite (two, an uncommon bird in Oman!) as well as at least one million stray dogs.

We headed towards the beach at Raysut looking for a suitable spot to have breakfast away from the stinking tip and water treatment plant and were met with the aftermath of the storm surge, which had obviously covered the beach. The sea was still pretty rough even in the lee of the harbour wall and numerous seabirds were just offshore, birds we would usually expect to see much further out or on a pelagic like Flesh-footed Shearwater, Persian Shearwaters and Jouanin's Petrels. Up to 12 Socotra Cormorants were sheltering in the mouth of the harbour and Bernard had a small all dark petrel briefly that was surely a Swinhoe's. Many hundreds of gulls were on the beach here, mostly Sooty and Siberian.

With so much action going on here we decided to head for Al Maghsayl, where we would have a better vantage point. The sea was pretty rough here too with much bigger rollers than usual in the bay and we were initially moved on by the police with talk of 7m waves coming. We also got foolishly soaked here before we did move on but the huge waves never came and we carried on birding, dried out and checked the khawr behind the beach. This had been breached the previous night with some of the reedbed wiped out and consequently we failed to see any crakes or herons at what is usually the best place for them. We did add Eurasian Coot for some and Common Black-headed Gull for others, a Gadwall for all as well as Glossy Ibis. Fortunately the water had not penetrated as far as the reed-edged pools in Wadi Ashawq and we enjoyed a nice Baillon's Crake there, found by Karel. A Red-necked Phalarope on the khawr was a product of the storm but best were the seabirds that we saw from the viewpoint above the blowholes. A short seawatch quickly produced the much-hoped-for Swinhoe's Storm Petrel, at least three of these tiny all dark petrels skipping over the wave crests and disappearing from time to time in the deep troughs between them. At times we had them alongside Wilson's Storm and Jouanin's Petrels for a great comparison. The forked tails of the Swinhoe's were difficult



Pied Cuckoo, Khawr Rori - a product of Cyclone Chapala.

to see at times and as with Leach's they could even look square-cut from some angles. Their upperparts were uniform except for pale upperwing covert patches and there was no trace of a pale base to the primaries on any of them. Their wings looked a little ragged though, no doubt battered by the cyclone that blew them into our path. They are normally to be expected during the *khareef* and it is an ill wind! Swinhoe's is a difficult bird to see anywhere in the world! Passerines included more Citrine Wagtails and a Bluethroat but small birds were otherwise rather quiet. We also enjoyed around five Brown Boobies, some diving into the sea just off the blowholes, lots of Bridled Terns and some 'sea' turtles. Fantastic stuff! We ended the day with a quick look at East Khawr where we noted another Black Kite, a couple of Eurasian Spoonbills and c.150 Ruffs but we did not add anything new before it was time to head back up the hill and contemplate the extended menu of the Thumrayt Palace!

Khawr Rori is always very birdy and we had one of our best visits to date! We were greeted by a couple of Pied Cuckoos right next to the cars, more storm-blown visitors. A gaggle of waterfowl flew by, a Greater White-fronted Goose and two Ruddy Shelduck; a Cotton Pygmy Goose lurked by the reeds (another winter visitor from India); two Intermediate Egrets were present with the other herons and egrets; eagles overhead included Greater Spotted, Steppe and Bonelli's. The marshy northwest inlet came up trumps with two Baillon's Crakes (both found by David); Indian Reed Warblers; an interesting wagtail showing some characters of Eastern Yellow Wagtail of the form *taivana* was probably a hybrid between Yellow Wagtail forms but first place went to a brief Greater Painted Snipe lurking in the shadows, the 8th record for Oman. The famous ruins of Sumharan here are said to be the site of the palace of the Queen of Sheba (although we have heard that this is not 100% certain, they look nice but there was quite a lot of work going on there at the time of our visit).

We spent the afternoon up in the mountains again, to the east of Salalah, visiting a wonderful site on the escarpment, Jabal Samhan. Perched high above the flat Mirbat plain (which is comprised of one of the oldest basement rock formations in the world, more than 800 million years old, well before any life appeared. With younger, overlying layers of rock having been planed off by the sea around 50 million years ago) we were delighted to find the regular pair of Verreaux's Eagles still in residence. Despite the low cloud cover we were able to witness some skydancing and even mating! Maybe the rain had triggered them into breeding mode with the prospect of lots of baby hyraxes on the way soon on the escarpment below? An intruder appeared and at one time we had three eagles in the air together before the resident pair settled down again. This area is also great



Dhofar scenes (clockwise from top): Jabal Samhan; Desert Roses; Cyclone Chapala at Al Mahgsayl & Carter's Rock Semaphore Gecko

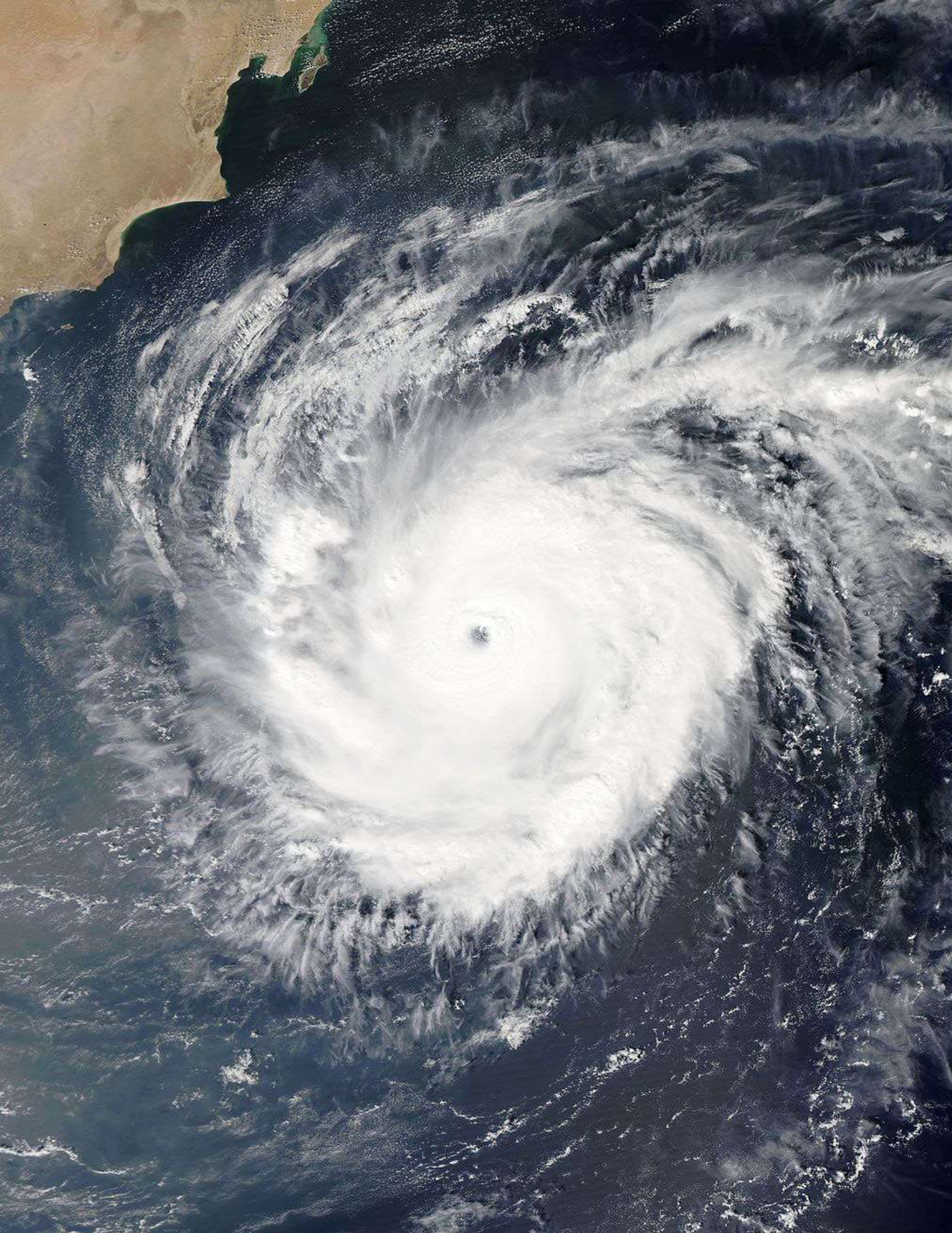


Arabian Spotted Eagle-Owl, Dhofar Mountains.

for trees with some nice Desert Roses nearby, some of which still bore a few pink flowers. In the mountains we noted a few raptors adding the scarce Long-legged Buzzard to our growing list amongst Booted, Bonelli's and Eastern Imperial Eagles. Corvids were also much in evidence up here with many European Rollers on roadside wires alongside the resident Fan-tailed Ravens. After dinner almost everyone joined the last ditch owling sessions. The first of these was very successful, with the magnificent Arabian Spotted Eagle-Owl and Arabian Scops Owl both seen superbly well with absolutely minimal effort, as it should be but Desert Owl for once remained out of reach, with a pair only heard calling far away in reply to our efforts.

Our last morning in Salalah was spent with Jens and Hanne Eriskén, who kindly showed us a couple of species, which had eluded us so far, at their special sites. First of all the mostly nocturnal Spotted Thick-knee at a somewhat bizarre location. Seeking shade from the sun under small scattered acacias we could watch at least six birds very nicely (and we also found a dead one). Next came Singing Bushlark, with plenty of these stubby little birds whirring up and down in a grassy field. We also saw a Northern Caspian Stonechat of the form *hemprichii* here. Showing as much white in the tail as a wheatear we have only seen this member of the Siberian Stonechat group once before in Oman. Numerous European Rollers and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters abounded here and a juvenile Montagu's Harrier floated past.

A quick stop at Al Baleed Archaeological Park produced no less than 28 Pacific Golden Plovers and a couple of Purple Herons but not much else during our brief visit. Finally we ended our birding in Oman with another visit to East Khawr, where we have often found rarities. This time it was a Long-toed Stint amongst the c.130 Little Stints and c.120 White-winged Terns, only our third in Oman and a very welcome addition for some. Also here were 92 Glossy Ibises, six Squacco Herons, four Greater Spotted Eagles and on a second visit en route to refuel the rental vehicles, a Pied Avocet. This was only our second in Oman so far and the first since 2006. Soon it was time to say goodbye to Kumar and Salalah and head to Salalah's shiny new airport terminal. So new that our taxi driver had no idea how to operate the car park entry system. Fortunately David was on hand to show him and we were on our way again (Bernard minus his gazelle skull) to our even shinier Muscat hotel, where we enjoyed a great meal, thinking about the grand finale to our tour that lay ahead.



Cyclone Chapala around 500km off the southern coast of Oman, thank goodness it spared Salalah!



Egyptian Nightjar, Hamala, Bahrain.

Occupying an important strategic point in the Persian Gulf, Bahrain ('two springs') has been inhabited for thousands of years, by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and latterly the Arabs, under whom it became an Islamic state and then formally a kingdom in 2002. The island has been ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family since the nineteenth century, with considerable support from the British. Oil was first discovered in Bahrain in 1932 leading to rapid modernization and it also helped its establishment as the Middle East's financial hub, following the decline of Beirut. Recently it has gained further wealth through the reclamation and subsequent sale of land from the sea surrounding its northern coast, particularly around the (former) island of Muharraq.

Bahrain might not be the most attractive birding destination in terms of landscape but it has never yet let us down in producing the number one most sought after bird on this tour, Grey Hypocolius. The pressure was off as again a message from 'the Major' had already advised that they were back. After checking in to our smart hotel we made our way down one of Bahrain's fast and almost slip-roadless highways to the centre of the island, where we met Mubarak, our wonderful Bahraini host. Unfortunately the regular Iranian (or Persian Mourning) Wheatear had not returned to the same wadi we have seen it every tour since at least 2006. Some searching failed to find one here or elsewhere in the Jebel so we headed off to buy some lunch.

Mid afternoon approached and we took up position at the now regular pre-roost site for Grey Hypocolius in the Jasra village area. The pre-roost areas are usually patches of acacia scrub, where the birds congregate before making their way down inside the bushes, we think to dust bathe, before flying off to their roost, presently in the palms of VIP gardens. The first birds flew in from high in the sky and then more arrived, in small groups, however, as usual, there was no large build up, just lots of comings and goings. The birds tower from the scrub as they leave and head off with purpose towards their roosting area, sometimes swinging from side to side as they gained height, presumably to avoid potential predators. They really are unique and superb-looking, sleek birds, so reminiscent of waxwings in their appearance and behavior. We estimated around 130 of these excellent birds today. Also here were both Daurian and Steppe Grey Shrikes, Grey Francolin, Indian Silverbill and a cage-jumping write-in, Pin-tailed Whydah!

Our first day in Bahrain always ends with a farm session and happily Mubarak was able to use his considerable charm to talk the security guy into letting us in. It was thanks to this that we were able to see the wonderful Egyptian Nightjar, with up to four birds at a time sat on the warm farm tracks soon after dark. One of them al-



Grey Hypocolius, Jasra District, Bahrain.

lowed very close approach for all who wanted to, a stunning close view and my best so far. We also saw them hawking in the spotlight over the alfalfa grass fields, ghostly white underwings in the darkness. We added a few new species here including Daurian Shrike (it has never waited so long to appear on this tour before!), Caucasian Water Pipit, European Stonechat, Eurasian Skylark and Corn Bunting.

Next day we decided to give the wheatear another try and to our horror Karel spotted one on the wall of a huge military base as we drove past on our way to the Jebel. We drove by it again to confirm but not everyone got onto it and despite the happy waving guy in the nearby watch tower we were very nervous about trying for it again. Fortunately David came to the rescue in a wadi near the usual site with a great bit of spotting and we were all soon watching a fine Iranian Wheatear in the scopes. Phew! Bahrain is the easiest place for Western birders to catch up with the form *persica* at the moment. It should not be a big surprise for this form to be significantly different to the others in the Mourning Wheatear group, after all it is the only habitually migratory one.

We called in at Bahrain's racecourse, whose artificial lake in the centre of the track (as well as the irrigated track itself) usually has some good birds and we added Common Pochard to the trip list. There were plenty of Water Pipits on the track but nothing else of note before we continued to the island of Muharraq in search of waterbirds and gulls. We spent the rest of the morning at Busaiteen, along the edge of the remnant mudflats primarily in search of gulls. White-headed gulls can be a nightmare to pigeonhole in the Middle East but we saw some whose characters fitted Caspian Gull and some which resembled Siberian Gull but we were mostly left scratching our heads. The curtain closed on our very enjoyable and action-packed tour with another visit to the hypocolius pre-roost gathering and, starting a little earlier than the previous day, we estimated over 170 by the time we left. This was a fine way to finish before we returned to Manama for our end of tour meal with our host.

Finally thanks to our enthusiastic group members and everyone else who helped us with information and logistics for another great visit to this excellent corner of Arabia. As ever returning to the cold, damp ornithological desert of East Lancashire after another amazing adventure was an unwelcome prospect.



Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Ayh Khees, Salalah.

Bird of the trip (as voted for by the group)

1. Omani Owl
2. Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak
3. Grey Hypocolius
4. Arabian Partridge
5. Egyptian Nightjar
6. Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl
7. Swinhoe's Storm Petrel
8. Sooty Falcon
9. Sociable Lapwing
10. Crab-plover



Sociable Lapwings, Dokah Farms, Empty Quarter.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species). Conservation threat categories and information are taken from Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* One at Khawr Rori, only the second time we have seen it in Oman.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* Two at Khawr Rori were our first in Oman.

Cotton Pygmy Goose *Nettapus coromandelianus* One at Khawr Rori was only our second in Oman.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* A drake at Al Maghsayl.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Four at Khawr Rori.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* First noted at Al Qurum, Muscat. Also seen in Bahrain.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* The first at Barr al Hikman was followed by some at Raysut and Khawr Rori.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* First noted at Al Qurum, Muscat.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Several sightings after the first at Al Qurum, Muscat, where a maximum of c.10.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* Four at Bahrain Racecourse was the only record.



Jouanin's Petrel, at sea off Muscat.

Arabian Partridge ♦ *Alectoris melanocephala* Maximum 13 at Tawi Attair plus 3 more in the Dhofar Mountains.

Sand Partridge ♦ *Ammoperdix heyi* A total of 36 with a maximum of 22 at Mudday is our highest ever tally

Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus* Several sightings, the first in Muscat. Also seen in Bahrain.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* Two at Shannah and a single for David at Dokah Farms.

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* One seen well off Al Maghsayl.

Swinhoe's Storm Petrel ♦ *Oceanodroma monorhis* At least three close inshore off Al Maghsayl.

Flesh-footed Shearwater *Puffinus carneipes* Singles on the Muscat Pelagic and at Raysut and Al Maghsayl.

Persian Shearwater ♦ *Puffinus persicus* Six on our Muscat pelagic, one Ras as Sawadi and another off Al Maghsayl.

Jouanin's Petrel ♦ *Bulweria fallax* Four on our Mirbat pelagic and around another 30 off the Dhofar Coast. **NT**

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Around 10 at Al Qurm was the maximum estimate.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* First noted at Liwa and a maximum of c.300 at Barr al Hikman.

Abdim's Stork *Ciconia abdimii* Another amazing gathering of c.200 at Raysut Tip.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* Around 150 at Raysut and one at Dokah Farms.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* A maximum of 92 at East Khawr.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Two at Liwa followed by another three in Dhofar.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* One at Al Qurm Park, two at Liwa and another at Barr al Hikman.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* Three noted at Al Bustan. Ssp *brevipes*.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* First noted at Dokah Farms, and around another 20 in Dhofar.

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* One at Al Qurm, Muscat.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* One on the Batinah Coast and another 8 in Dhofar, a poor showing.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* A scatter of sightings included three in the desert at Al Ghaftayn.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* Two at Al Qurm was followed by another four in Dhofar.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* A small scatter of sightings after the first at Al Qurm, Muscat.

Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia* Two at Khawr Rori.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A small scatter of sightings after the first at Dokah Farms.

Western Reef Heron (W R Egret) *Egretta gularis* First noted at Al Bustan.

Masked Booby ♦ *Sula dactylatra* One on our Mirbat pelagic and another off Salalah.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* At least five off Al Maghsayl.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Around 20 in Bahrain.

Socotra Cormorant ♦ *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* Three off Liwa and another 18 in Dhofar. **VU**



Spotted Thick-knee, Salalah.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* A total of 18 was a high count for this tour.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* Two adults on the Sayq Plateau and four near Sinaw. **EN**

Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* Four on the Sayq Plateau. Ssp *negevensis*. **VU**

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* A dark morph near Sinaw, one Qitbit and four in Dhofar.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* A total of 19, the first at Al Qurm plus one dead at Qitbit. **VU**

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* Three in the Dhofar Mountains and one at East Khawr.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* Maximum in Dhofar of around 300 at Raysut.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* Two on the Sayq Plateau, followed by an adult at Dokah and seven in Dhofar. **VU**

Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* Two pairs plus a singleton in the Dhofar Mountains.

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata* Singles at Al Fahal Island and Liwa and a total of eight in Dhofar.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* One in Bahrain for Karel only. (NL)

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* A scatter of sightings after the first at Al Qurm, Muscat.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* Three, all adult males, at Qitbit (1) and Dokah Farms (2). **NT**

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* Two males nr Dokah plus an unidentified ringtail there and one at Jarziz Farm.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* Two at Raysut and one at East Khawr were our first in Oman.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* An adult in the Dhofar Mountains.

Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* One in a pool in Wadi Ashawq and another two at Khawr Rori.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Common, the first noted at Al Qurm, Muscat.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* One at Al Maghsayl was the only record.

Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis* Six plus one dead in Salalah and another 2 unidentified thick-knees elsewhere.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* Several at Barr al Hikman and two in Dhofar.

Crab-plover ♦ *Dromas ardeola* Around 70 at Barr al Hikman.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* First noted at Raysut.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* One at East Khawr.

Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* A long-staying vagrant at Raysut.

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* Common on the Batinah coast and also noted at Raysut.

Sociable Lapwing ♦ *Vanellus gregarius* Two first winters at Dokah Farms.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* A total of 40 included 28 at Al Baleed Archaeological Park in Salalah.

Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola* First noted at Al Qurm and common at Barr al Hikman.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* A small scatter of sightings after the first at Al Qurm.



Long-toed Stint, East Khawr, Salalah.

- Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* One at Dokah and seven in Dhofar.
- Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* First noted at Al Qurm and very common at Barr al Hikman.
- Lesser Sand Plover** *Charadrius mongolus* First noted at Al Qurm, abundant at Barr al Hikman. Ssp *pamirensis*.
- Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultia* First noted at Al Qurm, common Barr al Hikman. Ssp *columbinus*.
- Greater Painted Snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis* One at Khawr Rori for some, the 8th record for Oman.
- Pheasant-tailed Jacana** *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* One at Raysut was our first in Oman since 2005.
- Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago* Common, first noted at Al Qurm.
- Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa* One at Al Qurm and c.20 noted in Dhofar. **NT**
- Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* First noted at Al Qurm and very common at Barr al Hikman.
- Eurasian Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* First noted at Al Qurm and common at Barr al Hikman.
- Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata* First noted at Al Qurm and common at Barr al Hikman. Ssp *orientalis*. **NT**
- Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus* First noted at Al Qurm and abundant at Barr al Hikman.
- Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis* Eight at Barr al Hikman and seven in Dhofar was our best total so far.
- Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* First noted at Al Qurm, common at Barr al Hikman.
- Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* One on the Sayq Plateau and four sightings thereafter.
- Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* One on the Sayq Plateau and then a small scatter of sightings.
- Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* First noted at Al Qurm, common at Barr al Hikman and one for Hannu in Dhofar.
- Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* A scatter of sightings after the first at Al Bustan.
- Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* Common at Barr al Hikman and two in Bahrain.
- Great Knot** *Calidris tenuirostris* Ten at Barr al Hikman. **VU**
- Sanderling** *Calidris alba* Several at Barr al Hikman.
- Little Stint** *Calidris minuta* Abundant at Barr al Hikman, followed by a scatter of sightings in Dhofar.
- Long-toed Stint** ♦ *Calidris subminuta* One at East Khawr was our third in Oman.
- Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea* First noted at Barr al Hikman, followed by a small scatter of sightings.
- Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* First noted at Barr al Hikman, followed by a scatter of sightings, abundant at Barr al Hikman.
- Broad-billed Sandpiper** ♦ *Limicola falcinellus* Nine at Barr al Hikman.
- Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax* A maximum of c.150 at East Khawr in Salalah.
- Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* Several off Muscat and one at Khawr Maghsayl.
- Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* Two at Dokah Farms
- Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus* Two off Salalah Beach Villas.



Bruce's Green Pigeon, Ayn Hamran.

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* Common throughout the tour.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* One at Khawr Maghsayl.

Sooty Gull ♦ *Ichthyophaga hemprichii* Common throughout the tour, especially in Dhofar.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* Several noted including in Bahrain, less common than previously.

Lesser Black-backed Gull ♦ *Larus fuscus* One at Taqah showed characters of ssp. *intermedius* rather than Baltic Gull

Heuglin's Gull *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* First noted at Al Qurm and common from Barr al Hikman southwards.

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* Maximum 12 at Raysut..

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* First noted at Barr al Hikman followed by seven in Dhofar.

Greater Crested Tern (Swift T) *Thalasseus bergii* First noted at Al Qurm.

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis* First noted at Al Fahal Island.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* First noted at Al Qurm.

Saunders's Tern ♦ *Sternula saundersi* First noted at Barr al Hikman but thought not to be separable from Little Tern.

Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* Eight at sea off Muscat and c.35 in Dhofar.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* A couple in Dhofar, very scarce this year.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus* Maximum c.20 in Dhofar.

White-winged Tern (W-w Black T) *Chlidonias leucopterus* Maximum c.120 at East Khawr, Salalah.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* One off Muscat and another off Salalah.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* A total of 60 logged from Dokah Farms onwards.

Spotted Sandgrouse ♦ *Pterocles senegallus* Around 90 logged from Dokah Farms onwards.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse ♦ *Pterocles lichtensteinii* A sandgrouse at Wadi Ashawq was almost certainly this species.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Common throughout the tour.

Common Wood Pigeon ♦ *Columba palumbus* A flock of 27 in the 'juniper forest' on the Sayq Plateau. Ssp *casiotus*.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common throughout the tour.

African Collared Dove ♦ *Streptopelia roseogrisea* At least two at Mudday, a fairly new stakeout for this species.

Laughing Dove (Palm D) *Spilopelia senegalensis* Common throughout the tour.

Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* Three at Ayn Tabraq and around 14 in Bahrain.

Bruce's Green Pigeon ♦ *Treron waalia* Three at Ayn Hamran.

Jacobin Cuckoo (Pied C) *Clamator jacobinus* One at Ayn Tabraq and three at Khawr Rori.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Noted at Al Qurm, Muscat and it was common in the Dhofar mountains.

Sooty Falcon ♦ *Falco concolor* Around 40 on Al Fahal Island and six at Ras as Sawadi. **NT**



Steppe Grey Shrike, Dokah Farms, Empty Quarter.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* Singles at Wadi Rabkut, Raysut and Khawr Rori.

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Ring-necked P) *Psittacula krameri* Abundant in the north, noted in the south and in Bahrain.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorusii* Singles at Al Ghaftain and Dokah - our lowest ever tally.

Western Barn Owl *Tyto alba* One in Salalah.

Pallid Scops Owl ♦ (Striated S O) *Otus brucei* Wonderful views of one hooting in the Al Hajar Mountains.

Arabian Scops Owl ♦ *Otus pamela* One spotted and another c.5 heard in Dhofar.

Arabian Spotted Eagle-Owl ♦ *Bubo [africanus] milesi* Three night-time sightings of this magnificent owl in Dhofar.

Desert Owl ♦ *Strix hadorami* A pair heard in Wadi Ashawq. (H)

Omani Owl ♦ *Strix omanensis* One seen and another heard-only in the Al Hajar Mountains.

Little Owl *Athene Noctua* One in the Al Hajars and another across the road between Al Hij and Ad Duqm. Ssp *saharae*.

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* Two at sea on our Muscat pelagic and two in Dhofar. Ssp *unwini*.

Egyptian Nightjar ♦ *Caprimulgus aegyptius* At least four at a farm in Bahrain.

Forbes Watson's Swift ♦ *Apus berliosi* Around 15 at Tawi Attair plus many unidentified swifts in Dhofar.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* c.15 Khawr Rori were seen in good light.

Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* Common in northern Oman.

European Roller *Coracias garrulus* Three at Barr al Hikman and common from Al Ghaftain onwards, a total of 108. **NT**

Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* Three at Ayn Hamran and another at Raysut.

Collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris* One Liwa. Ssp *kalbaensis*.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* One at Al Qurm and two at Liwa.

Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis* Very common in northern Oman.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* Noted from Liwa southwards, a total of c.140 logged.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Two at Qitbit followed by another four throughout the tour.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* One at Shannah and another singing at Ayn Hamran.

Black-crowned Tchagra *Tchagra senegalus* Twelve logged in Dhofar.

Isabelline Shrike (Daurian Shrike) *Lanius isabellinus* Seven noted in Bahrain.

Red-tailed Shrike (Turkestan S, Rufous-t S) *Lanius phoenicuroides* Noted from the Al Hajars southwards, a total of 78.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* First noted in the Al Hajar mountains, a total of 17.

Steppe Grey Shrike ♦ *Lanius pallidirostris* A total of 8 after the first at Ras as Sawadi, including one in Bahrain.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* Two at Mudday and one at Dokah Farms.

African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis* Five noted in Dhofar after the first at Ayn Hamran.



Plain Leaf Warbler, Al Hajar Mountains.

House Crow *Corvus splendens* Common in the north and sadly becoming established around Salalah now as well.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* A large flock of 98 at Da'an al Pesaiten on the Sayq Plateau.

Fan-tailed Raven ♦ *Corvus rhipidurus* Up to 40 per day in the Dhofar Mountains.

Grey Hypocolius ♦ *Hypocolius ampelinus* Up to 170 at a pre-roost gathering in the Jasra district of Bahrain.

Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* A total of 14 in the desert, maximum 6 between Dokah and Thumrayt.

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* Six northern Oman (*taimuri*) and nine in the Empty Quarter (*saturata*).

Black-crowned Sparrow-lark ♦ *Eremopterix nigriceps* Maximum c.30 at Dokah Farms.

Singing Bush Lark *Miraafra cantillans* C.10 at a farm in Salalah.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* Common in northern Oman.

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* Maximum c.150 Dokah Farms.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Heard at a farm in Bahrain, where it is a common wintering bird. (H).

White-eared Bulbul (introduced?) *Pycnonotus leucotis* A small scatter of sightings. Very common in Bahrain.

Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* Noted at Al Nahda Resort, Barka and in Bahrain.

White-spectacled Bulbul ♦ (Yellow-vented B) *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* Common throughout the tour.

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia* Around 10 at Al Qurm and one at Raysut for Bernard only.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Noted throughout the tour, especially common in Dhofar.

Pale Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* A scatter of sightings throughout the tour, especially in mountainous wadis.

Streaked Scrub Warbler ♦ *Scotocerca inquieta* A total of 11 in the Al Hajar Mountains.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* Common at the Empty Quarter oases/rest houses.

Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus [collybita] tristis* Singles at Qitbit and Mudday.

Plain Leaf Warbler ♦ *Phylloscopus neglectus* Four Khatmat Milahah and another five in the Al Hajar Mountains.

Indian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus brunnescens* Heard at Liwa and several seen at Khawr Rori.

European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* Heard singing at Khawr Rori. (H)

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida* One in the Al Hajars and another at Qitbit.

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* Common throughout the tour.

Arabian Babbler ♦ *Turdoides squamiceps* A total of 34 in the north from Khatmat Milahah onwards.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* A male in Qitbit Motel garden.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* A first winter in Qitbit Resthouse Garden.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* Commonly seen Al Hajar Mountains (*halimodendri*) and in the south (*curruca*).

Arabian Warbler ♦ *Sylvia leucomelaena* Two seen at Ayn Hamran.



Tristram's Starling, Jabal Samhan.

- Asian Desert Warbler** ◇ *Sylvia nana* A total of six logged, first noted at Shannah.
- Common Whitethroat** *Sylvia communis* A total of nine logged, first noted on the Sayq Plateau. Ssp *icterops*.
- Ménétries's Warbler** ◇ *Sylvia mystacea* A total of 10, first noted at Liwa. Ssp uncertain.
- Abyssinian White-eye (White-breasted W-e)** *Zosterops abyssinicus* Common in Dhofar.
- Common Myna** *Acridotheres tristis* Sadly abundant and now even common in Salalah.
- Tristram's Starling** ◇ (T Grackle) *Onychognathus tristramii* Around 300 noted in Dhofar.
- Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin** ◇ (R Bush R) *Erythropygia galactotes* One Qitbit and another at Jasra in Bahrain.
- Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* First noted in the Al Hajars with a total of 35 logged. Our highest total.
- Bluethroat** *Luscinia svecica* One at Barr al Hikman and one at Al Maghsayl.
- Common Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos* Singles at Qitbit and Dokah Farms. Ssp *hafizi*.
- Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* Three at Qitbit was a low tally.
- Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* Common in the north, especially around Sayq. Also one at Qitbit. Ssp *semirufus*.
- Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* One at Qitbit.
- Common Rock Thrush (Rufous-tailed R T)** *Monticola saxatilis* Four on the Sayq Plateau.
- Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius* Three in the Al Hajars.
- European Stonechat (Common S)** *Saxicola rubicola* Two at a farm in Bahrain.
- Northern Caspian Stonechat** ◇ *Saxicola [maurus] hemprichii* One at a farm in Salalah.
- Isabelline Wheatear** *Oenanthe isabellina* First noted at Ras as Sawadi, a total of c.70 logged during the tour.
- Desert Wheatear** *Oenanthe deserti* A common feature of the tour, around 110 logged.
- Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* One at Ras as Sawadi and seven thereafter.
- Hooded Wheatear** ◇ *Oenanthe monacha* A male between Al Hij and Ad Duqm was our first in Oman.
- Blackstart** ◇ *Oenanthe melanura* Noted from Wadi Rabkut southwards into Dhofar.
- Variable Wheatear** ◇ (Eastern Pied W) *Oenanthe picata* One at Khatmat Milahah. Ssp *picata*.
- Hume's Wheatear** ◇ *Oenanthe albonigra* 19 logged in Northern Oman.
- Iranian Wheatear** ◇ (Eastern Mourning W, Persian M W) *Oenanthe [lugens] persica* Two in Bahrain.
- Red-tailed Wheatear** ◇ (Persian W, Rufous-t W) *Oenanthe chrysopygia* A total of 12 in Oman plus four in Bahrain.
- Arabian Wheatear** ◇ (South A W) *Oenanthe lugentoides* 16 noted in Dhofar.
- Nile Valley Sunbird** ◇ *Hedydipna metallica* c.10 at Mudday.
- Palestine Sunbird** ◇ *Cinnyris osea* Two at Ayn Khees was the only sighting this time.
- Shining Sunbird** ◇ *Cinnyris habessinicus* Several at Ayn Hamran.



Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, Ayn Tabraq.

- Purple Sunbird** *Cinnyris asiaticus* Common in northern Oman, first noted at Al Bustan.
- House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* Very common in northern Oman. Ssp *hufhufae*.
- Rüppell's Weaver** ♦ *Ploceus galbula* Several in Dhofar.
- African Silverbill** *Euodice cantans* Common in Dhofar.
- Indian Silverbill** ♦ *Euodice malabarica* First noted at Al Bustan.
- Pin-tailed Whydah (introduced)** *Vidua macroura* Four at Jasra in Bahrain.
- Grey-headed Wagtail** *Motacilla [flava] thunbergi* Noted at Raysut.
- Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* First noted at Al Dokah, a total of 11 logged this year was back to normal.
- Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea* Noted at Ayn Hamran.
- White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba* A small scatter of sightings.
- Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla [alba] personata* One at Hayma.
- Richard's Pipit** *Anthus richardi* One at Dokah Farms.
- Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris* A small scatter of sightings.
- Long-billed Pipit** *Anthus similis* Two in the Al Hajar Mountains and two at Ayn Hamran.
- Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* One at Liwa was followed by another three. A low total.
- Red-throated Pipit** *Anthus cervinus* One at Barr al Hikman followed by another eight.
- Water Pipit** *Anthus spinoletta* One heard by Hannu at Dokah Farms and 27 logged in Bahrain. Ssp *coutelli*.
- Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus* One heard by bird calls maestro Hannu at Qitbit. (H, LO)
- Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak** ♦ *Rhynchostruthus percivali* Three at Ayn Tabraq, a long-awaited addition!
- Yemen Serin** ♦ *Crithagra menachensis* Seven in the sinkhole at Tawi Attair.
- Striolated Bunting** ♦ (Striated B) *Emberiza striolata* Eight in the Al Hajar Mountains and two at Wadi Ashawq.
- Cinnamon-breasted Bunting (African Rock B)** *Emberiza tahapisi* Very common in the Dhofar Mountains.



Spinner Dolphins at sea off Muscat.

Mammals

Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* One spotted in the desert at Qitbit.

Wild Cat *Felis silvestris* One at Dokah showed characters of this species but it is tricky to rule out domestic cat DNA.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* One at Maghsayl.

Rüppell's Fox (Sand F) *Vulpes rueppellii* Up to three in the desert around Qitbit.

Grey Wolf *Canis lupus* Two seen on successive owling sessions in the Dhofar Mountains.

Egyptian Rousette *Rousettus aegyptiacus* Seen drinking from the swimming pool at Salalah Beach Villas.

Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops aduncus* Around 20 offshore from Al Maghsayl.

Spinner Dolphin *Stenella longirostris* Around 30 at sea off Muscat.

Mountain Gazelle *Gazella gazella* Six in the desert, locality withheld.

Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis* Common in Wadi Ashawq and also noted at Tawi Attair.