

# SOCOTRA & ABD AL KURI TOUR REPORT

## 2022

18 – 25 OCTOBER 2022

by Mark Beaman

This was our fourth visit to the remote island of Socotra, positioned far off the Horn of Africa in the Indian Ocean. But this time we added an exciting extra in the form of an expedition to even more remote Abd al Kuri island, nearer to the African mainland and home to the endemic Abd al Kuri Sparrow. Our latest expedition to the islands was highly successful, featuring all 11 endemic bird species (as well as numerous endemic reptiles and plants), Nubian Nightjar, some great seabirds including Lesser Noddy, Swinhoe's Storm Petrel, Persian Shearwater and Jouanin's Petrel and even a vagrant Somali Fiscal! The bird species total of 125 was unusually high for a week in the islands and most likely an all-time record. All in all a fantastic and highly rewarding adventure!

A strange thing about present-day Socotra is that although it is part of the country of Yemen, it is administered by a separatist government that wants nothing to do with the troubled government in Sana'a and the island is effectively occupied by the United Arab Emirates. At least this strange situation makes for a peaceful place where it is easy and safe to visit.

We started birding as soon as we left the airport, spending our first day visiting some of the coastal 'khors' (brackish lagoons) that are a feature of Socotra's coastline. Lots of waterbirds featured during our stops, including many Sooty Gulls and wandering African Sacred Ibises and Pacific Golden Plovers, with the highlights being migrant Spotted and Little Crakes. Widespread local breeding species included Common Kestrel, Brown-necked Raven and Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark. Our first Socotra endemic was the ubiquitous Socotra White-eye although they were greatly overshadowed by the wonderful performance put on by several Socotra Scops Owls at dusk.

No report about Socotra could fail to mention the extraordinary numbers of Egyptian Vultures. This species is sliding away towards extinction in many parts of its range, but on Socotra they are super-common, and fearless to boot, scavenging everywhere from the streets of Hadibo to the high mountain pastures. You can get so close you can touch them if you are stealthy!

Most of Socotra's endemics inhabit the interior mountains. Even from the Hadibo area, there are fantastic vistas of the rocky spires and pinnacles of the Haggier Range and the eastern part of the Diksam Plateau. Soon we were amidst the mountains and walking through our first grove of other-worldly Dragon's Blood Trees, surely the most iconic endemic lifeform on Socotra! These strange-looking trees extend over large areas in the highlands but their future survival is badly compromised by overgrazing by goats. It was sad to see so few young trees, with many individuals being hundreds of years old. The villagers still harvest the resin, which acts as an

anticoagulant, from the trees and many of the trunks were pockmarked with scars from resin collection.

During the morning we encountered such endemics as Socotra Buzzard, Socotra Warbler, Socotra Starling, Socotra Sunbird, Socotra Sparrow and the beautiful Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak, as well as the endemic forms of Great Grey Shrike and Long-billed Pipit. However, it took some searching among the rocky wastes before the endemic Socotra Bunting gave itself up to all. This species is way less common on the island than the ubiquitous Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. Non-endemic breeding species included Forbes-Watson's Swift, Pale Crag Martin and Somali Starling. Palearctic migrants were passing through the area and included Eurasian Golden Oriole and Common Rock Thrush. A big Socotra Chameleon was an added bonus and we finished off the day with the endemic but relatively localized Socotra Cisticola. All the Socotra endemics fell into our laps in the first day and a half.

The crossings between Socotra and the even more remote island of Abd al Kuri were a birding adventure in themselves. Taking 6-7 hours each way, they were a great opportunity for seabirding. Most of the birds we encountered were the local breeding species and included hundreds of Masked Boobies, Socotra Cormorants, Persian Shearwaters and Jouanin's Petrels, plus smaller numbers of Brown Noddies, Bridled and Sooty Terns, Brown Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds. A Lesser Noddy off Abd al Kuri and a White-eyed Gull at the western tip of Socotra were major highlights, as were no fewer than 20 Swinhoe's Storm Petrels (including a group of seven at one point)! Such a big total of the latter species makes one wonder if they are not regularly present in this area at certain times of year, rather than just a vagrant.

Cetaceans were not too diverse but included pods of Indo-Pacific Bottlenose and Spinner Dolphins. The big surprise was an encounter with two Longman's Beaked Whales far out to see in glassy calm conditions.

Abd al Kuri is a wild and spectacular island with far drier conditions and much less vegetation than Socotra. We camped for two nights near a long and beautiful white-sand beach that hosted thousands of ghost crabs. Here in the Socotra archipelago, the crabs create pyramidal mounds that rise up from the sand like hundreds of little alien cities. We were completely alone with our camp crew save for an occasional visitation by the local villagers.

The big target was of course the endemic Abd al Kuri Sparrow and we drew a blank at the first village we checked but then encountered around 100 in total at the second village, including a flock of 80 feeding at a single goat corral. The people on Abd al Kuri were friendly and hospitable, but both very poor and conservative so we had to explain that those cameras were for the birds, not the local womenfolk. Some of us even got invited into houses for tea.

We also had time to seek out the huge endemic euphorbias on the hillsides, find some Cream-coloured Coursers and in particular look for migrants in the shallow wadis. Clearly there had been a 'fall' as we encountered a good number of species that were first or second records for the Socotra archipelago like European Turtle Dove, Red-tailed Shrike, 'Steppe Grey Shrike', Willow, Wood, Barred and Icterine Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat, Eurasian Blackcap, Common Redstart and Ortolan Bunting. Much more unexpected was a Somali Fiscal and we wondered if it could be the same individual seen in November 2021, which was a first record for the islands.

Back on Socotra, we had time to track down more of the breeding birds including Bruce's Green Pigeon, Nubian Nightjar, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Peregrine Falcon and the surprisingly rare

White-browed Coucal. A second Spotted Crake, another Little Crake and a vagrant Little Bittern added to our 'khors list', mating Socotra Buzzards were an unexpected treat and no fewer than 11 Socotra Buntings during our second trip to Diksam must be something of a record.

All too soon our week in the islands was up, but we certainly packed in a lot. The Socotra archipelago is a truly unique place: awesomely beautiful and full of wonderful plants and creatures to admire.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

(there were no heard-only species)

### BIRDS

Garganey *Spatula querquedula*

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Nubian Nightjar ◊ *Caprimulgus nubicus*

Forbes-Watson's Swift ◊ *Apus berliozi*

White-browed Coucal *Centropus superciliosus*

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* 2 on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse ◊ *Pterocles lichtensteinii*

Rock Dove (feral) *Columba livia*

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* 1 at Khor Sirhin on Socotra on 18 October and 1 on Abd al Kuri on 21 October were the first and second records for the Socotra archipelago.

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*

Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waia*

Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana*

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*

Little Crake *Zapornia parva*

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

**Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus* An immature on Abd al Kuri on 20 October was the first record for the island.

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus*

**Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva*

**Grey Plover (Black-bellied Plover)** *Pluvialis squatarola*

**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*

**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius*

**Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus*

**Lesser Sand Plover** *Charadrius atrifrons* One on Abd al Kuri from 20-21 October was the first record for the island.

**Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultii* One on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

**Eurasian Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*

**Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata*

**Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica*

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea*

**Temminck's Stint** *Calidris temminckii* One on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

**Sanderling** *Calidris alba*

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta*

**Pin-tailed Snipe** *Gallinago stenura*

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus*

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* One at sea off Abd al Kuri on 22 October was the first record for the island area (it was heading for the island).

**Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatilis*

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola*

**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus*

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia*

**Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* Five on Abd al Kuri on 21 October appears to be the first record for the island, although they could occur regularly given the habitat there.

**Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus*

**Lesser Noddy** ♦ *Anous tenuirostris* One with four Brown Noddies just off the eastern tip of Abd al Kuri on 22 October was the first record for the island.

**White-eyed Gull** ♦ *Ichthyaetus leucophthalmus*

**Sooty Gull** ♦ *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*

**Lesser Black-backed Gull [Baltic Gull]** *Larus [fuscus] fuscus*

**Lesser Black-backed Gull [Heuglin's Gull]** *Larus [fuscus] heuglini*

**Lesser Black-backed Gull [Steppe Gull]** *Larus [fuscus] barabensis*

**Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica*

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia*

**Greater Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bergii*

**Lesser Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bengalensis* Three at Abd al Kuri on 22 October appears to be the first record for the island.

**Sandwich Tern** *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

**Little Tern** *Sternula albifrons*

**Bridled Tern** *Onychoprion anaethetus*

**Sooty Tern** *Onychoprion fuscatus*

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo*

**White-winged Tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus*

**Red-billed Tropicbird** ♦ *Phaethon aethereus*

**Wilson's Storm Petrel** *Oceanites oceanicus*

**Swinhoe's Storm Petrel** ♦ *Hydrobates monorhis* One between Qalansiyah and Abd al Kuri on 20 October and an extraordinary total of 19 on the return journey on 22 October (including groups of four and seven) represent the 2nd and 3rd records for the Socotra archipelago.

**Persian Shearwater** ♦ *Puffinus persicus*

**Jouanin's Petrel** ♦ *Bulweria fallax*

**Masked Booby** ♦ *Sula dactylatra*

**Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster*

**Socotra Cormorant** ♦ *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*

**African Sacred Ibis** *Threskiornis aethiopicus*

**Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus*

**Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus* An immature at Khor Dibnih from 23-24 October was the second Socotra record.

**Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides*

**Indian Pond Heron** *Ardeola grayii*

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* One on Abd al Kuri on 22 October was the first record for the island.

**Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea*

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba*

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*

**Western Reef Heron (Western Reef Egret)** *Egretta gularis*

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus*

**Egyptian Vulture** *Neophron percnopterus*

**Socotra Buzzard** ♦ *Buteo socotraensis* Endemic

**Socotra Scops Owl** ♦ *Otus socotranus* Endemic

**Eurasian Hoopoe** *Upupa epops* One on Abd al Kuri on 20 October was the first record for the island.

**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus*

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*

**Red-tailed Shrike (Turkestan Shrike)** *Lanius phoenicuroides* Two on Abd al Kuri from 20-21 October was the first confirmed record for the Socotra archipelago.

**Great Grey Shrike [Steppe Grey Shrike]** *Lanius [excubitor] pallidirostris* One on Abd al Kuri from on 21 October was the first record for the island and the third for the Socotra archipelago.

**Great Grey Shrike [Socotra Shrike]** *Lanius [excubitor] uncinatus* Endemic. No striking morphological differences that would suggest a likely future split, but the population is very

isolated.

**Somali Fiscal** ♦ *Lanius somalicus* An unexpected find on Abd al Kuri on 21 October! The 2nd record for the island and the Socotra archipelago. It is conceivable this was the same individual as the bird recorded in November 2021.

**Eurasian Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus* Two on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

**Brown-necked Raven** *Corvus ruficollis*

**Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark** *Eremopterix nigriceps*

**Greater Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla* Eight on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the second record for the island.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*

**Pale Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* It was weird to find 8 flying around at the rocky islet of Sabuniya!

**Wood Warbler** *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* One on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island (and the fourth for the Socotra archipelago).

**Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus* One on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island (and the second for the Socotra archipelago).

**Icterine Warbler** *Hippolais icterina* An immature on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the Socotra archipelago.

**Socotra Cisticola** ♦ *Cisticola haesitatus* Endemic

**Socotra Warbler** ♦ *Incana incana* Endemic

**Eurasian Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla* Three on Abd al Kuri on 20 October and one at the same location on 21 October was the first record for the Socotra archipelago.

**Barred Warbler** *Curruca nisoria* Five immatures on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the Socotra archipelago.

**Lesser Whitethroat** *Curruca curruca* One near the eastern tip of Abd al Kuri on 20 October and two at a different locality further west on 21 October were the first records for the island (and the second and third records for the Socotra archipelago).

**Socotra White-eye** ♦ *Zosterops socotranus* Endemic

**Somali Starling** ♦ *Onychognathus blythii*

**Socotra Starling** ♦ *Onychognathus frater* Endemic

**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* One near the eastern tip of Abd al Kuri on 20 October and two at a different locality further west on 21 October were the first records for the island.

**Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Two on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the Socotra archipelago. At least one showed the characters of the form *samamisticus*.

**Common Rock Thrush (Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush)** *Monticola saxatilis*

**Isabelline Wheatear** *Oenanthe isabellina* Up to three in various places on Abd al Kuri from 20-21 October, apparently the first records for the island.

**Desert Wheatear** *Oenanthe deserti* Up to six in various places on Abd al Kuri from 20-21 October, apparently the first records for the island.

**Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* One on Abd al Kuri on 20 October and a different individual on 21 October were the first records for the island.

**Socotra Sunbird** ♦ *Chalcomitra balfouri* Endemic

**Socotra Sparrow** ♦ *Passer insularis* Endemic

**Abd-al Kuri Sparrow** ♦ *Passer hemileucus* Endemic. This interesting species is very different in appearance from the Socotra Sparrow *P. insularis*, with which it was formerly but incorrectly lumped, and presumably derives from an entirely different invasion by 'rufous sparrows' from the African mainland. Nowadays very much a village bird while feeding between mid-morning and mid-afternoon, but nesting, roosting and early and late foraging occurs in the surrounding arid habitats with low bushes.

**Western Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava*

**Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea* Three on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*

**Long-billed Pipit [Socotra Pipit]** *Anthis [similis] sokotrae* Endemic

**Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* One on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island.

**Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak** ♦ *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* Endemic

**Ortolan Bunting** *Emberiza hortulana* Two immatures on Abd al Kuri on 21 October was the first record for the island and the second for the Socotra archipelago.

**Cinnamon-breasted Bunting (African Rock Bunting)** *Emberiza tahapisi*

**Socotra Bunting** ♦ *Emberiza socotrana* Endemic

## MAMMALS

**Longman's Beaked Whale** *Indopacetus pacificus* Two not far from Sabuniya on 22 October. A rarely observed cetacean. We were fortunate it was flat calm!

**Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin** *Tursiops aduncus*



**Spinner Dolphin *Stenella longirostris***