

First breeding of Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* on Socotra, Yemen

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Despite visits by at least three previous ornithological expeditions, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* were not recorded on Socotra until March 1993 during the OSME survey (Kirwan *et al* 1996). Since then they have been recorded in increasing but fluctuating numbers by BirdLife International/Socotra Conservation Development Programme (SCDP) surveys. The highest count, a high count for any Middle Eastern wetland site, was 109 at Qalansiya estuary, NW Socotra, in February 2006 (RF Porter pers comm, Plate 1). Until the discovery of breeding on the island (Figure 1), the Black-winged Stilt was considered a recent winter visitor and passage migrant, but with some suggestion of year-round presence.

BREEDING OBSERVATIONS

Birds have been recorded during surveys at potentially suitable nesting areas: at Qalansiya estuary, Wadis Sheq and Sirhan (at Hadibu), Mateaf lagoon (SE Socotra), Qariyeh lagoon (N Socotra) and Wadi Zirage in the central highlands (Plate 2). The first indications of breeding behaviour were noticed on 23 February 2006 at Sirhan lagoon (Plate 3), close to Hadibu, where four pairs were engaged in territorial disputes.



Plate 1. Qalansiya estuary, February 2006, Socotra. © RF Porter

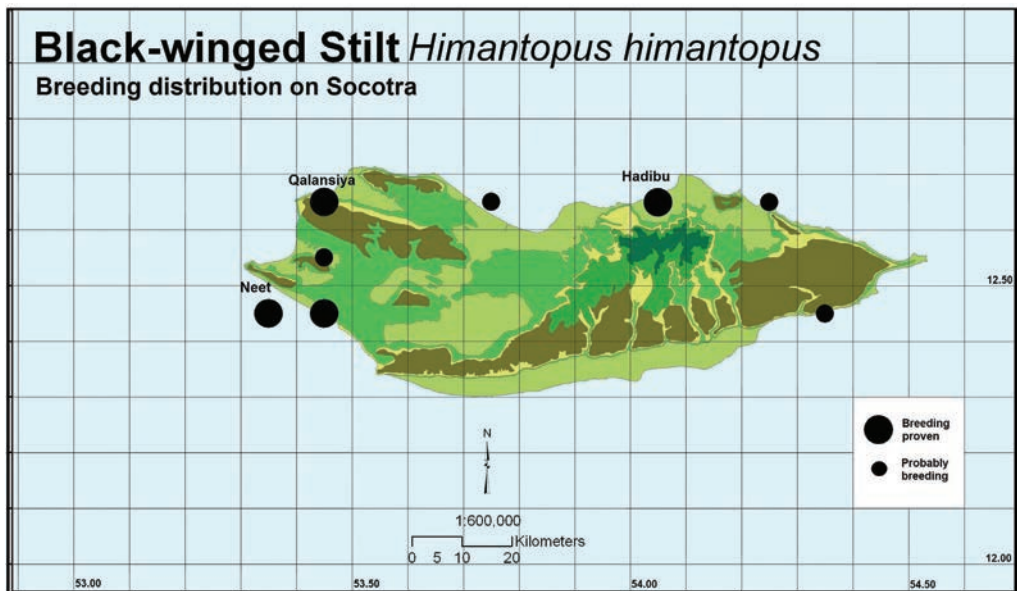


Figure 1. Breeding distribution of the Black-winged Stilt on Socotra, based on Porter & Suleiman (in prep). © RF Porter & AS Suleiman (SCDP/BirdLife International)



Plate 2 (left). Wadi Zirage, October 2008, Socotra. © RF Porter



Plate 3 (right). Author at Sirhan lagoon, February 2004, Socotra. © RF Porter



Plate 4 (left). Salt flats at Neet, February 2007, Socotra. © RF Porter



Plate 5 (right). Black-winged Stilt nest with two eggs, in stagnant pool, Neet, May 2007, Socotra. © Ahmed Saeed Suleiman

On 22 February 2007, RF Porter, Paul Scholte and I visited the coastal plain at Neet, SW Socotra, some 4 km long and 500 m wide and consisting of a series of low-lying areas that fill with seawater during the monsoon season (May–August), but then dry out (Plate 4). It is important for salt production. Here we observed several old, raised, mud nests on the dried out salt flats. From the description of the birds given to us by the local villagers, these were the nests of Black-winged Stilts. They told us the birds had nested during the summer monsoon. I revisited the site 28–30 May with Tabet Abdulah of SCDP. Whereas we have regularly visited this coastal area, this was the first visit during the monsoon season, when travelling by boat is impossible due to extreme wind speeds. On 29 May, 11 nests on slightly elevated clay mounds covered by dried algae, were found in the stagnant pools (Plate 5). The tops of the mounds were covered with small stones and dead mangrove leaves and twigs. Two nests contained two eggs. From the number of adults present we estimated that the number of breeding pairs was over 30.

Proof of breeding of Black-winged Stilts was also obtained at Sirhan lagoon. In 2007, two downy young c2–3 days old, were found on 11 May. In 2008, a nest with two eggs was found on 9 April, a chick on 12 April, two nests (two eggs, one egg) were found in May (built on palm-tree trunks), and one chick was observed then also. Breeding was also demonstrated at the Qalansiya estuary, where a pair was seen copulating on 17 February 2007 (RF Porter pers comm).

DISCUSSION

The Black-winged Stilt has undergone a significant change in status in Arabia in the last 50 years. It was previously regarded as a scarce migrant and winter visitor but now it is an increasingly widespread breeding bird (MC Jennings pers comm). Thus the discovery of breeding on Socotra is not unexpected. Colonisation from Somalia is perhaps unlikely, as there is only one known breeding record there (Ash & Miskell 1998). The current population on Socotra may be in excess of 150 birds and the breeding season on the island extends from at least mid February (when birds seen copulating) to June (when there must still be chicks if birds have eggs at the end of May).

The feeding and breeding areas of the Black-winged Stilt (and other waders) on Socotra are highly sensitive and vulnerable to man-made developments, especially as wetland habitats are rare on this predominantly arid island. In the last few years an asphalt road has been built across the mouth of one estuary where stilts are nesting, and across an inland lagoon where stilts occur. Two other estuaries are threatened by a proposed road. In addition, these roads and accompanying dams have blocked the connection between the channels and the sea, thus limiting the tidal nature of the lagoons. Their restoration should be a priority. According to the 2000 Socotra Conservation Zoning Plan (SCZP, Presidential Decree 275), Neet is a strictly protected area under the management of Yemen's Environmental Protection Authority and SCDP in close collaboration with local communities. It is very important that all wetlands on Socotra receive adequate protection especially through the SCZP, possibly with further assistance from organizations such as the RAMSAR Bureau. Yemen has recently become a signatory of the Ramsar Convention and its first designated site is Socotra's Ditwa lagoon. The conservation of wetlands will surely be further enhanced now that Socotra has become a World Heritage Site for its outstanding biodiversity.

Black-winged Stilts fiercely defend their young from human and avian intrusion, chasing off the invader with loud calls. In and around Hadibu, the introduced Indian House Crow *Corvus splendens*, an aggressive invader, is likely to predate the eggs and young of nesting waders and it is essential that its population continues to be subjected to the rigorous control programme of the Environmental Protection Authority.

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