

PHOTOSPOT

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* has been the subject of a previous Photospot in *Sandgrouse* (Shirihai *et al* 1999) but I make no apology for revisiting this difficult-to-observe, and to count, *Nyctiperdix* pteroclidid (Johnsgard 1991, Moeller 1993, de Juana 1997). Shirihai *et al* (1999) briefly described the species' poorly known ecology and breeding biology including its population size in Israel and its visits to a pumping station drinking trough in Eilat, described its plumage and noted the broad area of bare skin around the eye. Daytime photographs of adults of the species in Israel (by Arie de Knijff, Hadoram Shirihai) and Oman (Hanne & Jens Eriksen) were featured.

Most encounters with Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse fall into two groups, stumbling across the species during daytime, when they often flush, and 'watching' the birds under near-dark conditions at their drinking sites. Gary Brown's photos fall into the first category. His account of photographing the nest, eggs and the incubating female follows.

"I came across a female Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse on its nest in Wadi Bih by pure chance in early May 2005. This remote wadi is situated in the mountains of the southern Musandam (northern Oman). I was on my way to Dibba in the UAE, and stopped by a rough track at about 600 m asl to take some photographs of the spectacular mountain scenery. Whilst looking for a good spot to set up the tripod, I suddenly noticed a bird creep away from in front of me without flying off. Looking down, I realised I was standing immediately in front of the nest of a Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse that contained 3 eggs. Moving back carefully, I took photographs of the nest, a mere depression in the ground, and eggs (Plate 1) and the nest site, a small area of flat rocky ground with very sparse vegetation (Plate 2). I decided to leave the site for a while because I was interested in obtaining photographs of the female on its nest. Before leaving, I made sure I knew exactly where the nest was located, because although the area was very small, experience had taught me that relocating well-camouflaged birds could be very tricky. On my return about five minutes later, the bird was already back on her nest incubating. I began by taking shots from about 30 m, gradually moving forwards on all fours. The final shots (Plate 3) were taken from a distance of less than 5 m, but holding the camera steady on the very uncomfortable rocky surface was not easy." Gary also managed to photograph the species on a visit to the island of Socotra, Yemen, in December 2008.



Plate 1. 'Nest' of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* with 3 eggs, Wadi Bih, Oman, May 2005. © Gary Brown



Plate 2. The nest site (Plate 1). Eggs visible in centre of photo. © Gary Brown



Plate 3. Female on the nest (Plate 1). © Gary Brown



Plate 4. Pool in date palm grove where Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* was encountered, Socotra, Yemen, December 2008. © Gary Brown



Plate 5. Low scrub dominated by *Acacia edgeworthii*, a stronghold of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, north coast east of Hadibu, Socotra, Yemen, December 2008. © Gary Brown

"Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse is locally quite common on the northern coastal plains of Socotra, but the birds are best located after dusk when their distinctive calls draw attention to them as they come in to land at favoured drinking sites (Plate 4). However, it is virtually impossible to photograph the birds well in the dark, even with a sophisticated flash set-up. Our group of four, led by local birdwatcher and conservationist Ahmed Saeed Suleiman, was able to make out several birds, thanks to bright moonshine, but the views were not particularly good."

"Ahmed also accompanied us on a trip during the day to one of the species' strongholds: in the low scrub dominated by the shrub-like *Acacia edgeworthii* on the north coast to the east of Hadibu (Plate 5). The birds hide out there in the very shallow stony drainage channels which have little plant growth. Despite a group of five of us looking for the



Plate 6. Male Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii* in *Croton socotranus* shrubland at the mouth of Wadi Dihazafaq, c4.5 km ESE of Hadibu, Socotra, Yemen, December 2008. © Gary Brown

birds, we were out of luck. On one of the last days of my visit, my wife and I were being driven along a rough track down from Wadi Dihazafaq (c4.5 km ESE of Hadibu) through some rather monotonous *Croton socotranus* shrubland. Suddenly, the driver stopped the car, and standing on the track immediately in front of us was a rather spectacular male Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. I was sitting in the back of the car and was unable to get my camera ready in time before the bird disappeared into the scrub. Undeterred, I got out of the car and figured out where the bird could be hiding. I walked carefully for about 100 m into the scrub, and then headed very slowly back towards the car. Sure enough, I found the bird sitting about 20 m from the track. I stopped about 10 m from the bird and knelt on the ground where I was able to photograph the bird at my leisure (Plate 6)."

Paul Doherty has attempted crepuscular shots in Israel (Plates 7 & 8). "Both photos were taken on 29 October 1986 from a car parked at the water pumping station just outside Eilat. My notebook shows a minimum of 44 birds coming to drink in the gloom of dusk that evening. They would fly in, land and, once they were happy the coast was clear, walk cautiously up to the spot where a leaky pipe meant there was a supply of water, drink briefly then fly off into the dark calling. They're both flash shots, the background lighting from Eilat was some help, but it was a bit of a case of press the shutter and hope for the best. They don't normally come in until it is almost dark (or at least at Eilat they didn't normally)."

"Incidentally, I tried to video them in Israel in the late 1990's and the different light sensitivity and metering of a video camera compared to a still one was interesting. I was sat there in the gloom thinking OK if they come now I can still get something. Then it was a case of OK I've tweaked every possible setting but if they come now I'll just scrape through. Then as soon as the light went the Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse arrived. It seems they wait for that extra bit of darkness/gloom before they fly in." A video sequence of



Plate 7. Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Eilat, Israel, October 1986. © Paul Doherty



Plate 8. Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Eilat, Israel, October 1986. © Paul Doherty

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse taken by Leo Boon in near-dark conditions near the Eilat drinking trough in December 1998 can be seen on the *DVD Guide to the Birds of Britain & Europe* (www.birdvideodvd.com). A near-dark drinking sequence of this species taken by Max Whitby in Israel is on *BWPi2.0* (www.birdguides.com). The use of IR illumination and (expensive) night-vision equipment might assist matters.

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