

First record of Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* in Qatar

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On 10 December 2008 I was counting shorebirds on the silty foreshore near Ras al Ilaj on the east coast of Qatar. The area is currently undeveloped but is proposed as the site for the New Doha Port Project. I had been visiting the area for over a year in connection with the port and found it to support a diverse range of waterbirds, shorebirds and terns with around 2000 birds in winter, including over 500 Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber*, and increased numbers of shorebirds on passage in spring and autumn. The habitat comprises shallow silty or sandy foreshores fringed with mangroves and backed by intertidal lagoons, saltmarsh, sabkha and stony desert.

I was walking out onto the intertidal area to gain closer views of resting terns when a single shorebird flew towards me, circled completely around at a distance of c50 m, and



Plates 1–3. A Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*, 10 December 2008, Qatar. © Michael Chalmers

then flew off. After raising my binoculars I was surprised to note it was a Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*, a species I am very familiar with in Hong Kong, where I have observed birds in spring, autumn and winter for over 30 years, and also on the breeding grounds in north-east Siberia. Fortunately, I had my camera and 400 mm telephoto lens with me and fired off several flight shots before the bird disappeared (Plates 1–3).

The identification was based on the combination of the following features. Firstly, it was a medium-sized wader significantly larger than the nearby Dunlin *Calidris alpina* with bulkier build and slower more measured wingbeats. First fleeting impressions were of a bird similar in size to Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, which I had seen in the area on a previous occasion. It had a medium length slightly decurved black bill. In flight it showed scaly pale brown upperparts with a thin indistinct whitish wing bar. The most prominent feature on the upperwing was the large blackish area around the bend in the wing and across the primary coverts contrasting with the paler lesser and median wing coverts and flight feathers. The rump and uppertail coverts were white and contrasted with the dark tail. The feet and legs were dark and did not project beyond the tail end. The underwings and underparts, apart from the darker breast and wing tips, were generally whitish with characteristic large dark spots across the breast and flanks. There was no distinct head or face pattern. Overall, the bird fitted all the key characteristics for a winter plumage Great Knot. This species is generally not vocal and no call was heard. In addition to its apparent larger size and proportionally longer bill, separation from Red Knot *Calidris canutus* was confirmed by the distinct white rump, inconspicuous wing bar, unmarked whitish underwing, plainer face, and spotting to the breast and flanks.

Hayman *et al* (1986) stated that Great Knot breeds in the subarctic highlands of north-east Siberia and winters in India, south-east Asia and Australia but is only a vagrant to Arabia. However, Aspinall (1993) reported Great Knot at a number of sites in Arabia, and Richardson and Aspinall (1998) recorded it as a regular autumn migrant and winter visitor to the United Arab Emirates from 1990 following the first record in 1986. Since then wintering flocks of up to 90 have been reported in the UAE (Vine 1996). The first records for Kuwait occurred in 2004 (Anon 2004). It was thus only a matter of time before records of this long-distance migrant would occur in suitable habitat in neighbouring Gulf countries such as Qatar.

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