

# Migrant Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus* observed foraging preferentially in low desert shrubs much in the manner of Asian Desert Warblers *Sylvia nana*, Lulu island, Abu Dhabi

OSCAR CAMPBELL

The Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* is a common spring migrant through the United Arab Emirates (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010) and occurs predominately in areas with native though often planted trees, especially Ghaf *Prosopis cineraria* and to a lesser extent Sidr *Zizyphus spina-christi*. In these it feeds arboreally, in typical *Phylloscopus* manner. This generally involves active gleaning and sallying through the canopy with birds often concentrating on the outermost branches.

Spring passage through Abu Dhabi emirate, UAE, generally peaks in the first half of May. On 7 May 2010 I found many Willow Warblers amongst a selection of other passerine migrants on Lulu island, off Abu Dhabi city. In all, I counted 31 Willow Warblers in four hours of surveying. Almost all showed characteristics of the subspecies *yakutensis* (or *acredulayakutensis* intergrades). These birds were unusual in that they were foraging almost exclusively on the ground. Lulu island is entirely man-made (mainly less than 15 years old) with much irrigated planting, but also some areas of unwatered semi-natural vegetation doubtlessly resulting from germination of an imported seedbank. The island has extensive areas of young date palms *Phoenix dactylifera*, overgrown ornamental gardens and watered strips of *Eucalyptus*, *Salvadora persica* and *Zizyphus* all growing as trees to 5–10 m high, although relative to the rest of Abu Dhabi island few *Prosopis cineraria* occur.

Despite the abundance of apparently suitable trees in which to feed, I was surprised to observe that, almost without exception, the Willow Warblers frequented the flattest, least vegetated areas in the centre of the island. Here, coarse sand plains amidst sand dunes are sparsely covered in low shrubs comprising *Heliotropium kotschyi*, and especially *Salsola imbricata*, *Tribulus* sp, *Zygophyllum* sp and *Indigofera colutea*. The warblers almost exclusively utilised *Zygophyllum* or *Salsola* bushes, either perching on the edge or top (and hence no more than half a metre above the ground) or perching on the ground and reaching up to glean from the underside of leaves, much in the manner of the Asian Desert Warblers *Sylvia nana* that winter in these areas on Lulu. I located 20 Willow Warblers in less than a hectare, including loosely associating 'flocks' of six and nine individuals. All foraged exclusively in the manner described. When approached too closely they merely moved some tens of metres ahead, before settling in another *Salsola*.

Willow Warblers located elsewhere on the island that morning were all observed foraging in this manner and this included individuals located alongside a dense strip of *Salvadora* and *Zizyphus* trees. Although they flew up into the trees on close approach, they soon returned to forage on adjacent *Zygophyllum* shrubs. Five other species of warbler, totalling 15 individuals, were located on the same morning but, apart from one Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*, all utilised small trees or large bushes.

Willow Warblers are known to forage at all vegetation heights, although with a marked preference for the canopy (Cramp & Simmons 1992). Studies referenced therein included observations on migrants in *Phragmites* reedbeds in France, these birds spending 10% of their time feeding on the ground, and on birds (presumably breeding) in Sweden in June,

where feeding site preference varied with the weather: during cold and rainy conditions 90% of the Willow Warblers fed on the ground, compared with 10–35% when conditions had improved. Of course, migrant warblers of any genus grounded or stopping over in treeless sand desert would have no option but to feed or rest in small shrubs, but on Lulu island a choice existed.

Chiffchaffs *P. collybita* wintering on Abu Dhabi island sometimes descend from the canopy to feed on the ground and this behaviour may correlate at least partly with damp, cool conditions (pers obs). However, the behaviour of the Willow Warblers on Lulu island cannot be accounted for in this way, as conditions were sunny and warm ( $c32^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), with light winds. Interestingly, a migrant Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus* on Lulu island 24 October 2009 fed in exactly the same manner as the Willow Warblers there on 7 May 2010. It seems possible that naturally colonising native shrubs such as *Zygophyllum* and *Salsola* are richer in insect food (of suitable size for *Phylloscopus* warblers) than more recently planted trees, and this might account for the manner and method of feeding observed. However, on many visits to this site, I have never observed other common wintering or passage species (such as Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca minula*, Menetries's Warbler *S. mystacea* or Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida*) feeding in this manner, with the exception of Asian Desert Warbler for which ground-feeding is, in any case, the norm.

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#### **REFERENCES**

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Oscar Campbell, British School Al Khubairat, PO Box 4001, Abu Dhabi, UAE. [ojcampbell25@yahoo.com](mailto:ojcampbell25@yahoo.com)