

Trip report Dhofar, Oman July 13-26 2015.



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Having visited the Dhofar province in the 90s, in May, August, September and November, I thought it was worthwhile to spend a fortnight with my son there in July, to see what the bird- and animal-life would be like at the onset of the monsoon. This is the only part of Arabia that gets affected by the monsoon (or kharif as it is known locally) and this of course has a great effect on animals and plants.

Preparations

For trip planning, see trip reports on www.cloudbirders.com and also the informative website www.birdsoman.com. *Birdwatching guide to Oman* and *Oman Bird List* are essentials. Check also the online updates to these. For a field guide Porter and Aspinall's *Birds of the Middle East* is recommended. We used the *Oman: Dhofar Road Map* by www.hupeverlag.de as an overall map but for field use we used ipad (get a local sim card for internet, there is an Omantel shop in Mirbat) and iphone with Google Earth and Google maps. For reptiles we had Andrew S. Gardner's *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Oman and the UAE*. It is horribly expensive and not at all designed as a field guide and thus quite frustrating and difficult to use in the field. But it is informative if one spends time with it and useful for looking stuff up back at the hotel.

Weather

July is during the monsoon season. The first week was rather sunny, but hazy, and there was more rain during the second week. Temperatures varied between 25 and 30, except in the desert around Thumrait where it of course was warmer and drier. The rain is in the form of drizzle and quite local, and if it is too heavy you just move to another site a few kilometers away. The area east of Mirbat is less affected, and there was much more sunshine there. There is no need for rain gear as it dries up quickly, not boots either (unless you plan walking in water, bilharzia exists here). But tracks can be quite muddy and some type of semi water resistant footwear with a good grip is recommended. A small umbrella can be a good idea. Light can be an issue when taking pictures in forests during overcast conditions.

Stick insects, disease, dangers et al

During the monsoon there is an abundance of mosquitos and midges. I had no issues being bitten, but my son and our local friend had. If you are sensitive, bring repellent. Otherwise this is not a place where you fall sick from food etc as hygienic standards are high (always clean hands after handling money and before eating though). Bilharzia occurs in still standing water so do not expose bare skin to water. Malaria does not occur. Swimming/snorkling in the sea is forbidden during the monsoon due to the strong undercurrents. Venomous snakes exist, including the Arabian Cobra, so some care should be taken when walking in tall grass/among rocks. The local people are extremely friendly, helpful, welcoming and discreet, and there are no issues with unrest, begging or serious crime. Many people in the towns know some English, but it is a good idea to learn some of the common words, especially referring to directions if you need to ask your way around. If you are here during the warm season, it is always polite to offer water to people you meet when you are remote, so bring some extra. There is none of the money-craving mentality one encounters in e.g. North Africa and if a local approaches (most will not) it will be out of pure curiosity and friendliness.

Travel and hotel

We flew Copenhagen-Doha-Salalah with Qatar airways. Total price SEK 15 000/head including 14 nights accommodation with breakfast in a five star hotel in Mirbat, the Marriott Resort (booked through Expedia). The hotel is thoroughly reviewed on Trip Advisor. Bearing in mind it is a resort, food is quite pricey, but we alternated with take-aways from local restaurants in Mirbat which serve food better suited for birders' wallets. There is also a resort-like hotel in Taqah, which would be well situated for easy access in and out to/from birding, between Salalah and Mirbat, for birding. Salalah now has some traffic and it can take some time to get around but if looking for budget hotels they will only be found in Salalah. Apparently there is a small hotel in Raykhut, if one wishes to explore that area properly. The flight connection in Doha was very quick (although we had to spend a night

on the return which we saw as a touristy bonus) and a major benefit is that Qatar Airways allow 30 kg luggage in economy, and provide no hassle with bringing lenses and cameras aboard.

Local travel

I usually rent from Hertz but they are not present in Salalah so I used autoholidays.com and got a 4WD from Europcar. The service was so and so, and the Suzuki Grand Vitara had an annoying electronic key system which we fortunately could disconnect. A medium or small 4WD is necessary, in my view, for doing short offroad excursions into wadis. You can use a 2WD but you will not be able to venture far off from the road network, which does take you to most places though. A large 4WD is overkill as you are not likely to travel far into the desert unless you are very experienced and/or accompanied by another vehicle. Tyre check (incl spare) is essential before taking out a vehicle. Petrol was a sixth of the price in Sweden. Roads are good, and from Salalah to Taqah there is now a lit dual carriageway. Night driving between Taqah and Mirbat and up the mountains is risky though, due to traffic, camels and poor lighting. A dual carriageway, all the way to Sadah from Taqah is under construction so this stretch should improve in the future.

Ramadan

We arrived during the final week of Ramadan. This was excellent as there were no people out in the ayns and wadis during the day. When Eid started places like Ayn Hamran, Wadi Darbat and the road to Tawi Athair was full of people. Especially Wadi Darbat was disturbed and it was even difficult to find parking. So better to avoid these places during holidays/weekends.

Sites

Transcriptions of Arabic varies and there is no right or wrong. Khor can be written Khawr, Hamran as Homran and Hinna as Hanna. So don't pay too much attention if a vowel is different from expected. I transcribe here as I am used to, and it may differ slightly from what is used in e.g. Birds Oman.

In addition to the update of the Birdwatching Guide to Oman at <http://www.birdsoman.com/guideupdate.html> I can add the following:

Sahanoot farm - I can confirm that it is impossible to enter.

Garzaiz farm - We were allowed in one day, but not the other. Eventually we managed to negotiate 15 minutes without leaving the car with the help of our local friend Said who was with us. The farm was excellent for dragonflies. But this is mainly a migration spot. Plenty of good photo opportunities of Singing Bushlarks.

Wadi Darbat - at the end there is a cycle-boat rental and this part was pretty disturbed by people during daytime. A cobra was reputed to live in a tree along the path over the hill past the boats.

Wadi Soop (on the road Mirbat-Sadha) — excellent for gazelles and we also saw some Little Owls. Probably good for various migrants in season.

Lagga Shalyon (also on Mirbat-Sadha road) - beautiful place with a good population of Arabian Partridge. We were advised against walking to the spring by a local as there were illegal residents there, other sources said that the army had solved the issue.

Ras Janjali (or Janjari)- sea-watching spot (see my paper in Sandgrouse 14: 62-71)
Straightforward to find: when exiting Marriott, take right through the tourist village and after 7,7 km on a bumpy but 2WD drivable track turn right and head to one of the tracks up the cliff. Apparently this name may not be known to locals if asking directions, there is a several years old thread on Bird Forum about this.

Marriott Resort Mirbat - not much of interest but the khor just east of the perimeter fence (reachable by turning right after the tourist village on the road to Janjali) was very interesting. Take either track east or west of the khor depending on sunlight. The Marriott is possibly better during migration.

Wadi Kheesh - 17.110426, 54.264326 . This is the wadi west of Ayn Hamran (name may be of restricted use among locals, not sure of official name). Drive the gravel pipeline road (says private but everyone does) and turn off when you see a garden in the distance to the north, after having passed several "roller-coaster up and down" passages. We made two visits, on both we had Golden-winged Grosbeak. There are no people here, even if Hamran is crowded and plenty to discover. This was the only place we saw Tchagra. A week after our visit Yemen Serin was seen and photographed here.

Wadi Athom and Wadi Tabruk 17.098361, 54.326550- also nice and quiet places. They are signposted from the road leading up to the mountains just west of Khor Sawli. We had excellent owling in Wadi Athum.

Wadi Hinna - it is not signposted but described in the guide. We had Golden-winged Grosbeak here once. If there are no people by the ayn, scan from the hill towards it. That is how we found the cobra. The cobra disappeared underneath the concrete on the west side of the spring.

Wadi Nahiz - 17.187983, 54.082465. Beautiful place and good for Spotted Eagle Owl. They roost either in trees or in shallow caves at ground level, on the hills.

Upper reaches of Wadi Darbat - 17.167011, 54.469558 . Nice general birding

General impression

I think this year was not as good for seabirds as previous years, but I did not spend much time seawatching. There were fewer resting terns than in May and August/September and of course very few migrant raptors. Also, the birdlife is more varied later in the autumn, when migrants also pass through. But for seeing some of the local specialities, sea-watching and a nice climate this was a perfect time to visit. We did not see Yemen Serin though at Tawi Attair, which was a little surprising and Tchagras were scarce compared to other times I have been there.

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List of bird species.

Subspecies has been taken from igoterra.com and the Oman Bird List and are not based on field characters, where unclear or differing between the two they have been omitted.

Cotton Pygmy-Goose/bomullskricka *Nettapus coromandelianus*
1 Khor Rouri 14.7.

Arabian Partridge/arabisk rödhöna *Alectoris melanocephala*
Seen or heard at most sites. 50 inds Lagga Shalyon 15.7.

Little Grebe/smådopping *Tachybaptus ruficollis capensis*
Singles here and there.

Greater Flamingo/flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*
Up to 20 East Khor.

Jouanin's Petrel/arabpetrell *Bulweria fallax*
Singles often seen when scanning the sea, 150 past Sadha harbour 23.7.

Persian Shearwater/arablira *Puffinus persicus persicus*
Singles seen Ras Janjali 13 and 20.7.

Wilson's Storm-Petrel/havslöpare *Oceanites oceanicus*
Singles often seen when scanning the sea.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus indicus*
1 Khor Rouri 19.7.

Masked Booby/masksula *Sula dactylatra melanops*
Small groups off Ras Janjali and Sadha as well as the coast north of Sadha. Max 300 during 45 minutes at Ras Janjali.

Socotra Cormorant/sokotraskarv *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*
1 in Sadha harbour 15.7, singles seen when scanning the sea from the coast north of Sadha.

Yellow Bittern/Kinesisk dvärgrördrom *Ixobrychus sinensis*
1 East Khor 21.7.

Little Bittern/dvärgörddrom *Ixobrychus minutus*
Singles at every visit to East Khor, also seen Khor Sawli and Rouri.

Gray Heron/gråhäger *Ardea cinerea cinerea*
In most khors.

Purple Heron/purpurhäger *Ardea purpurea*
2 at Al Baleed Archeological Park 22.7.

Great Egret/ägretthäger *Ardea alba*
1 at Khor Mirbat 22.7.

Western Reef heron/revhäger *Egretta gularis*
1 Khor Rouri 14.7.

Little Egret/silkeshäger *Egretta garzetta*
Singles in khors.

Cattle Egret/kohäger *Bubulcus ibis*
2 East Khor 23.7.

Squacco Heron/rallhäger *Ardeola ralloides*
The most numerous *Ardeola* especially at East Khor and al Baleed Archeological Park, 30 at the latter site.

Indian Pond-Heron/rishäger *Ardeola grayii*
1 East khor and 1 Al Baleed Archeological Park 22.7.

Striated Heron/mangrovehäger *Butorides striata brevipes*
1 East Khor 17.7.

Black-crowned Night-Heron/natthäger *Nycticorax nycticorax*
Juvenile Khor Mirbat 17.7, 15 Al Baleed Archeological Park 22.7.

Glossy Ibis/bronsibis *Plegadis falcinellus*
Singles Khor Rouri, Mirbat khor and East Khor.

Sacred Ibis/helig ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*
1 East Khor during the week.

Eurasian Spoonbill/skedstork *Platalea leucorodia*
Singles at East Khor.

Osprey/fiskgjuse *Pandion haliaetus*
Singles seen north of Sadha.

European/Oriental Honey-buzzard/bivråk *Pernis apivorus/ptilorhynchus*
2 in Ad Dahariz park 21.7.

Lappet-faced Vulture/örongam *Torgos tracheliotos negevensis*
2 Wadi Dirbat 16.7 and 1 between Thumrait and Wadi Rabkhut 24.7.

Bonelli's Eagle/hökörn *Aquila fasciata*
Singles Wadi Darbat, Madinat ul Haq and Wadi Soop.

Eurasian Moorhen/rörhöna *Gallinula chloropus*
Seen in most khors.

Spotted Thick-knee/fläcktjockfot *Burhinus capensis dodsoni*
A pair with a chick Al Baleed Archeological Park 22.7.

Black-winged Stilt/styltlöpare *Himantopus himantopus*
Seen in khors, newly fledged juvenile in East Khor.

Eurasian Oystercatcher/strandskata *Haematopus ostralegus longipes*
2 Mirbat 13.7.

Greater Sand-Plover/ökenpipare *Charadrius leschenaultii*
Singles East Khor, seemingly *columbinus*.

Kentish Plover/svartbent strandpipare *Charadrius alexandrinus*
Up to 20, including chicks, East Khor.

Little Ringed Plover/mindre strandpipare *Charadrius dubius*
5 east Khor 17.7.

Pheasant-tailed Jacana/fasanjacana *Hydrophasianus chirrups*
1 Khor Rori 14.7.

Common Sandpiper/drillsnäppa *Actitis hypoleucos*
Singles in khors and on coasts.

Green Sandpiper/skogssnäppa *Tringa ochropus*
Singles in ayns and khors.

Common Greenshank/gluttsnäppa *Tringa nebularia*
Singles in khors.

Wood Sandpiper/grönbena *Tringa glareola*
1 Wadi Darbat 15.7.

Common Redshank/rödbena *Tringa totanus*
A small group of c 10 East Khor.

Whimbrel/småspov *Numenius phaeopus*
Singles Khor Rouri.

Eurasian Curlew/storspov *Numenius arquata orientalis*
4 Khor Rouri 21.7.

Ruff/brushane *Calidris pugnax*
C 40 East Khor during the week.

Curlew Sandpiper/spovsnäppa *Calidris ferruginea*
1 East Khor 21.7.

Sanderling/sandlöpare *Calidris alba*
2 East Khor 21.7.

Little Stint/småsnäppa *Calidris minuta*
1 East Khor 21.7.

Slender-billed Gull/långnäbbad mås *Chroicocephalus genei*
Single bird in chore north of Sadha and 7 Khor Rouri 19.7.

Sooty Gull/arabsotmåå *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*
Common.

Caspian Gull/kaspisk trut *Larus cachinnans*
Third-year bird Khor Rouri 14.7.

Little Tern/småtärna *Sternula albifrons*
Up to five recorded East Khor and Khor Rouri.

Saunders's Tern/persisk småtärna *Sternula saundersi*
One bird each Khor Rouri and East Khor, with Little Terns.

Gull-billed Tern/sandtärna *Gelochelidon nilotica*
2 seen East Khor 21.7 and 1 Al Baleed Archeological Park 22.7.

Caspian Tern/skräntärna *Hydroprogne caspia*
Singles Khor Rouri.

White-winged Tern/vitvingad tärna *Chlidonias leucopterus*
3 east Khor 21.7.

Whiskered Tern/skäggätärna *Chlidonias hybrida*
1 east Khor 14.7.

Common Tern/fisktärna *Sterna hirundo*
Singles, mostly second-year birds, in a few khors.

White-cheeked Tern/vitkindad tärna *Sterna repressa*
1 Khor Rouri 17.7.

Great Crested Tern/tofstärna *Thalasseus bergii velox*
Common.

Sandwich Tern/kentsk tärna *Thalasseus sandvicensis*
Up to 10 Khor Rouri.

Lesser Crested Tern/mindre iltärna *Thalasseus bengalensis*
2 Khor Rouri 17.7.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse/brunbukig flyghöna *Pterocles exustus erlangeri*
Small groups (up to 6) around Mirbat and along roads.

Rock Pigeon/tamduva *Columba livia*
Singles.

Eurasian Collared-Dove/turkduva *Streptopelia decaocto*
Common Salalah, singles Mirbat.

Laughing Dove/palmduva *Streptopelia senegalensis cambayensis*
Common.

Namaqua Dove/långstjärtsduva *Oena capensis*
Seen at Saada North and Al Baleed.

Bruce's Green-Pigeon/gulbukig grönduva *Treron waalia*
Seen in most wadis/ayns with fig trees.

Dideric Cuckoo/didrikgalnsgök *Chrysococcyx caprius*
Common.

Barn Owl/tornuggla *Tyto alba erlangeri*
One heard 20.7 at Ayn Athum.

Arabian Scops-Owl/arabisk dvärguv *Otus pamela*
Several heard and seen Ayn Athum 20.7.

Spotted Eagle-Owl/fläckuv *Bubo africanus milesi*
One seen wadi Athum 20.7, several seen in day roost at Wadi Nahiz 23 and 24.7.

Little Owl *Athene noctua saharae*
Several seen north and northeast of Mirbat, e g Wadi Soop.

Forbes-Watson's Swift/somaliaseglare *Apus berliozi*
Common first week, good views at Tawi Athair, Wadi Dirbat (came down to drink mid morning) and most mountain sites. Distinctive call easy to differ from Pallid.

Gray-headed Kingfisher/gråhuvad kungsfiskare *Halcyon leucocephala*
Common.

Green Bee-eater/grön dvärgbiätare *Merops orientalis cyanophrys*
Fairly common, but not recorded daily. Most individuals in very worn plumage.

Eurasian Kestrel/tornfalk *Falco tinnunculus rupicolaeformis*
Singles daily.

Barbary Falcon/berberfalk *Falco pelegrinoides*
Singles from road Tawi Athair-Saiq and Mirbat-Taqa.

Rose-ringed Parakeet/halsbandsparkit *Psittacula krameri borealis*
Common in Salalah.

Black-crowned Tchagra/svartkronad tchagra *Tchagra senegalus percivali*
Only seen Wadi Kheesh.

Southern Gray Shrike/ökenvarfågel *Lanius elegans aucheri*
1 in khor between Sadha and Hasik.

African Paradise-Flycatcher/afrikansk paradisflugsnappare *Terpsiphone viridis harterti*
Common.

House Crow/huskråka *Corvus splendens*
Common Salalah.

Fan-tailed Raven/kortstjärtad korp *Corvus rhipidurus*
Common, also on the plains and around habitations.

Singing Bushlark/sångbusklärka *Mirafra cantillans simplex*
Common Garziz farm and on top of the mountains. Singles in Wadi Darbat and Ayn Hamran.

Greater Hoopoe-Lark/härfågellärka *Alaemon alaudipes doriae*
1 Wadi Rabkhut.

Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark/svartkronad sparvlärka *Eremopterix nigriceps melanauchen*
Small parties around Mirbat, Khor Sawli and Wadi Soop.

Desert Lark/stenökenlärka *Ammomanes deserti*
Singles around Thumrait and Wadi Rabkhut.

Crested Lark/tofslärka *Galerida cristata brachyura*
Common.

Rock Martin/afrikansk klippsvala *Ptyonoprogne fuligula arabica*
Common.

Barn Swallow/ladusvala *Hirundo rustica*
Recorded in Mirbat, Sadha and Salalah.

White-spectacled Bulbul/levantbulbyl *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*
Common.

Clamorous Reed-Warbler/papyrussångare *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*
1 in the western end of Khor Rouri.

Graceful Prinia/streckig prinia *Prinia gracilis yemenensis*
Common.

Red Sea Warbler/rödahavssångare *Sylvia leucomelaena leucomelaena*
Seen Ayn Sahanawt and Ayn Kheesh.

White-breasted White-eye/abessinsk glasögonfågel *Zosterops abyssinicus arabs*
Common.

Blackstart/svartstjärt *Cercomela melanura neumanni*
Common.

Arabian Wheatear/arabstenskvätt *Oenanthe lugentoides boscaweni*
A pair in the upper part of Wadi Darbat, near Madinat ul Haq.

Common Myna/brun majnastare *Acridotheres tristis*
Common.

Tristram's Starling/sinaiglansstare *Onychognathus tristramii*
Common.

Palestine Sunbird/palestinasolfågel *Cinnyris osea*
Singles in the mountains.

Shining Sunbird/abessinsk solfågel *Cinnyris habessinicus hellmayri*
The commoner of the two sunbirds.

Striolated Bunting/bergsparv *Emberiza striolata striolata*
Singles in drier areas.

Cinnamon-breasted Bunting/afrikansk klippspärv *Emberiza tahapisi arabica*
Common.

Golden-winged Grosbeak/arabisk guldvingefink *Rhynchostruthus percivali*
Seen Wadi Hinna and on both visits to Wadi Kheesh.

House Sparrow/gråspärv *Passer domesticus*
Singles Salalah, one male Marriott Hotel, Mirbat.

Rueppell's Weaver/rödahavsvävare *Ploceus galbula*
Common.

African Silverbill/afrikansk silvernäbb *Euodice cantans orientalis*
Fairly common.

Scaly-breasted Munia/fjällig munia *Lonchura punctulata*
Seen at Garziz farm and Ad Dahariz park.

Mammals

Bats

Several large bats seen at Salalah airport, smaller bats in Salalah. Also several bats caught insects around our flashlights at Ayn Athum when we were owling.

Fox

An unidentified fox was seen at long range at night north of Mirbat.

Arabian Wolf hybrid

There had been observations of wolves before our visit, but I think these are dog x wolf hybrids. While sitting out at a den in a wadi north of Mirbat one evening we heard and later saw one of them and it certainly called like a dog.

Golden Spiny Mouse *Acomys russatus*
Seen at Ayn Kheesh and Ayn Sahanowt.

Mountain Gazelle *Gazella gazella*
Up to 18 seen one day in wadis northeast of Mirbat.

Herptiles

Dhofar Toad *Duttaphrynus dhufarensis*
Singles, but common at Ayn Kheesh.

Yemeni Spiny-tailed Lizard *Uromastyx benti*
1 at a road stop north of Sadha.

Anderson's Rock Agama *Acanthocercus adramitanus*
Common.

Sinai Agama *Pseduotrapelus sinaitus*
Singles.

Banded Ground Gecko *Bunopus spatulatus*
One seen.

Carter's Semaphore Gecko *Pristurus carteri turberculatus*
Singles.

Rock Semaphore Gecko *Pristurus rupestris*
Common.

South Arabian Fringe-toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus felicis*
Singles.

Ocellated Skink *Chalcides ocellatus*
Singles Wadi Hinna, Wadi Darbat and Khor Mughsayl.

Wadi Racer *Platyceps (Coluber) rhodoracis*
One Wadi Hinna.

Arabian Cobra *Naja arabica*
One Wadi Hinna.

Odonatha

(These were mainly seen the first week when the weather was more sunny. None were caught, but identified through binoculars and photos but I wish to stress there may be misidentifications involved among the *Ischnura*).

Black-tailed Bluet *Azuragrion nigridorsum*

Evan's Bluetail *Ischnura evansi*

Oasis Bluetail *Ischnura fountaineae*

Elegant Sprite *Pseudagrion decorum*

Blue Emperor *Anax imperator*
Fairly common. Interestingly, they exhibited a more blue face than European ones.

Broad Scarlet *Crocothemis erythrea*

Black Percher *Diplacodes lefebvrii*

Coastal Glider *Macrodipteryx cora*

Skimmer *Orthetrum chrysostigma/ransonetti*

Oasis Skimmer *Orthetrum sabina*

Violet Dropwing *Thrinemis annulata*

Red-veined Dropwing *Thrinemis arteries*

Blue Basker *Urothemis edwardsii*

Ringed Cascader *Zygonyx torridus*

