

Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga* summering in Saudi Arabia?

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The Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* is on the IUCN Red List and is classed as vulnerable (BirdLife International 2011). It is a regular passage migrant and winter visitor to the Arabian peninsula, with most records coming from the better recorded countries of the United Arab Emirates and Oman. The number of sightings of the species in the United Arab Emirates has increased in recent years (UAE Bird Database), which is also the case in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia (Meadows 2011, PR pers obs) suggesting the wintering population in the Arabian peninsula is increasing. Birds winter in all Arabian peninsula countries and are generally present from late September until late April or early May (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010, Al-Sirhan 2011, Eriksen *et al* 2003 updated 2011, King 2006, 2011).

Winter records are now well documented with detailed reports by Harbard & Wolstencroft (1992), Symens & Alsuhaibany (1996), Loblely (2007) and Meadows (2011). The birds recorded in late April are quite late for migrants but Dick Forsman (pers comm) mentioned young birds often linger in spring unlike adults, and late April is not too late for juvenile Great Spotted Eagles to be seen on their wintering grounds.

Whilst bird watching in the early morning of 21 July 2011 at Sabkhat Al Fasl (Jubail), Eastern province, Saudi Arabia, we saw a second calendar year Greater Spotted Eagle (Plate 1). This is a very early record for the species and could well relate to a bird

that had spent the summer there. The same bird was seen again by us at the same site 18 August 2011. It looked in good health, appeared to be able to fly normally and was moulting some feathers including its flight feathers.

The only published information we could find regarding summer records of the species in Saudi Arabia was a mention of immature birds being present at Qatif (70 km south of Jubail) in May and June (Bundy *et al* 1989). These records involved three birds (Graham Bundy pers comm) with one seen on 26 and 27 June 1980 that was thought to be a second summer (3rd calendar year) individual. The other two records were immatures seen in Qatif where one was seen 30 May 1980 and the other 15 May 1982. It was thought likely that a few non-breeding immature birds summered in the area when the habitat was more favourable, unfortunately the site was developed from late 1981 (Graham Bundy pers comm).



Plate 1. Second calendar year Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Sabkhat Al Fasl, Eastern province, Saudi Arabia, 21 July 2011. © Philip Roberts

PR has three previous records of Greater Spotted Eagles in the summer at Sabkhat Al Fasl, all of which were 2nd calendar year birds. Specifically: one seen 29 June, 13 July, 27 July, 10 August and 17 August 2007; one 28 August 2009 and one 12 August 2010. Sabkhat Al Fasl is a man-made wetland site that is located in the central coastal lowlands on the southwest border of Jubail industrial city. It consists of a large sabkha (salt flat) area surrounded by landfill and divided up by sand dams, fed by excess treated organic waste water from Jubail industrial city (Symens & Alsuhaibany 1996). Some water is present at this site all year and some parts are vegetated by large stands of *Phragmites* reeds and *Tamarix* scrub. This habitat is the favoured site for the wintering birds and would presumably be attractive to summering Greater Spotted Eagles.

We have only been able to find one summer record of the species from other Arabian peninsula countries and this came from Bahrain, where one was recorded throughout June 1984 at Al-Areen and what was presumed to be the same bird again present from August 1984–March 1985 in a small grove by Ra's Tubli (Nightingale & Hill 1993). It is perhaps worth mentioning that c15 pairs of Greater Spotted Eagles formerly bred in northern Israel but this population is now extinct; last nests were recorded in the 1960s (Shirihai 1996).

This note documents seven summer records of the Greater Spotted Eagle in Saudi Arabia. This suggests that a very small number may spend the summer and perhaps other instances may come to light enabling us to get a clearer picture of the status of this species in the Arabian peninsula during the summer months.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Graham Bundy for supplying details of the Qatif summer records and Brian Meadows for information on the Bahrain birds and informing us of the Israeli breeding records. We also acknowledge the help of Dick Forsman and Mike Evans. Chris Harbard and James Wolstencroft supplied a copy of their report and Tommy Pedersen supplied all records of Greater Spotted Eagle on the United Arab Emirates database.

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