

# First record of Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor* in the United Arab Emirates

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Al Wathba wetland reserve comprises a large saline lake some 40 km east of Abu Dhabi city. It is managed by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD) and is the single most important non-estuarine site in the United Arab Emirates for waterbirds, regularly holding in excess of 10 000 waders, ducks, Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber* and roosting gulls in mid-winter. On the afternoon of 3 January 2010 during one of my regular visits to the main lake I found a Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*. With perseverance, I managed to get some quite close (but rather brief) views before it flew out into the middle of the lake to join a party of swimming Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. The following field-notes were made immediately after the sighting:

General structure and appearance: compared to (memories of) both Red-necked Phalaropus *lobatus* and Grey Phalaropes *P. fulicarius*, plumage much greyer and less contrasty than either and bill longer and even thinner than Red-necked. Compared to Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, rather smaller; probably a little smaller than Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Bill as long as Marsh Sandpiper's but even thinner and finer.



**Plate 1.** Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Graham Talbot



**Plate 2.** Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Graham Talbot



**Plate 3.** Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Steve James



**Plate 4.** Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Steve James

Short legged; in flight very little leg extension but structure otherwise similar to Marsh Sandpiper, *ie* rather long winged and much more relaxed and bigger than the calidrid-like Red-necked (or Grey) Phalarope.

Plumage in flight: obvious large, seemingly square, white rump patch; tail seemingly rather pale too. No white slash up back. Wings plain, no wingbar but there seemed to be a diffuse, thin, paler trailing edge to inner secondaries.

Plumage on the water: Definite 'phalarope-mark' on head *ie* eye patch present and clear but grey, not black and not striking or contrasty at long range. Also, crown marking rather extensive and dark grey; hence rather narrow pale line between crown and eye patch. From behind, neck extensively shaded grey, hence seemed all grey from crown to saddle; not exhibiting a white nape with narrow blackish central line as on Red-necked or Grey Phalaropes. Saddle and wings rather uniform grey.

Bare parts: bill all dark. Legs only seen briefly and at longish range; seemed olive or greenish and certainly rather pale; similar in tone to adjacent Marsh Sandpipers.

The relative brevity of the views and the fading light meant that a thorough analysis of feather detail was not possible. The following afternoon I returned to the lake with several other observers but the phalarope proved very elusive and was only seen briefly and distantly. However, on 9 January EAD kindly granted access to the site for all UAE birdwatchers and reasonable views were obtained by some 15 observers. Although the bird remained generally unpredictable and somewhat distant, some photographs were obtained (Plates 1–4). The bird was last seen on 10 January; despite being in active primary moult, intense coverage over the following weeks failed to relocate it.

The bird proved impossible to age. Views and photos were insufficient to detect any worn, retained juvenile wing feathers (if present). Unusually for a migratory wader from the northern hemisphere, the majority of first-winter Wilson's Phalaropes have a complete moult in their wintering quarters, which is generally completed in January–March (Cramp & Simmons 1983). This makes any birds in active wing moult in winter unageable (at least on this character) as all adults follow the same strategy.

Wilson's Phalarope breeds across the interior of North America, from southwestern Canada east to Ontario and south to Kansas and northern California. Breeding populations appear to be declining, perhaps as a result of changes in land use. They are long-distance migrants, spending the winter in Peru and Argentina. The species has a history of far-flung vagrancy, appearing annually in western Europe and has reached southern Australia, the Falkland islands and even Antarctica (Cramp & Simmons 1983). It has been recorded on four previous occasions in the Middle East, most recently in 1997. There are two records each from Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008) and Oman (Jens Eriksen pers comm).

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## REFERENCES

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