

# A description of the nest and eggs of the Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, Oman

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The Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* is considered by several authorities to be a distinct species separate from the Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens* (eg Jennings 2010, Birdlife International 2013, Gill & Donsker 2013). This treatment has been supported by an analysis of the Mourning Wheatear complex using molecular markers and comparative morphometry, which recommended adopting three species: *O. lugens*, *O. lugentoides* and *O. lugubris* (Förschler *et al* 2010). The Arabian Wheatear is polytypic with two subspecies, the nominate *lugentoides* occurring in southwest Arabia and *boscaweni* inhabiting a drier and lower altitude biotope in eastern Yemen and southern Oman (Jennings 2010).

Despite being a common breeding species in southern Arabia, with an estimated 800 000 and 130 000 pairs of nominate *lugentoides* and *boscaweni* respectively, there is little detailed information on the breeding ecology of the species (Jennings 2010). Castell *et al* (2002) noted the lack of published information on breeding biology and described a nest site of *O. l. lugentoides* in a low cliff within a crevice lined with flat pebbles leading to the grass nest, which was constructed c30 cm from the entrance. A description of the nest and nestlings of Arabian Wheatear can be found in Castell & Castell (2009), but the eggs do not appear to have been described.

On 3 April 2012 I found an active Arabian Wheatear nest in Wadi Darbat, near Salalah, southern Oman. The nest was positioned c20 cm back in a deep recess c2 m up a rock wall within a relatively shallow cave. The wide-mouthed cave was at the base of a rock outcrop of a well-wooded hillside: the cave also housed a wood-built stockade, not in use, and cavities in the 4–6 m high roof provided nest sites for several Tristram's Starlings *Onychognathus tristramii* and Rock Doves *Columba livia*. The nest was similar to that described previously and a number of small stones had been placed within the cavity in front of the nest, a common feature of the nests of several wheatear species (Plate 1, Harrison & Castell 2002), whilst the nest itself was roughly constructed of dried, coarse grass with a shallow cup lined with finer grass. The nest held four ovate eggs, which were unusually heavily marked for a wheatear species (Plate 2). The ground colour was



**Plate 1.** The Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* nest entrance, in a cave recess, showing numerous small stones placed at the entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon



**Plate 2.** The clutch of four heavily-marked eggs of Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon



**Plate 3.** The male Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* at the nest entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. The nest is behind the bird. The rim of the nest and rampart of stones extend out to the left of the bird. © A Dixon



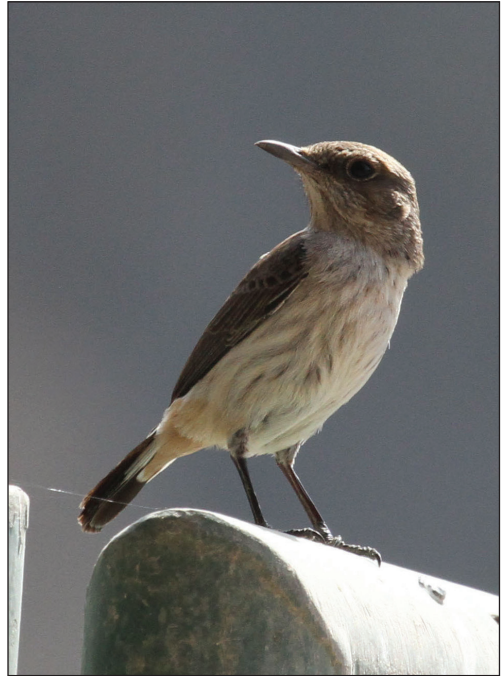
**Plate 4.** The female Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* at the nest entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon

off-white with spots and blotches of sienna, brown and brick red concentrated towards the broader end forming an indistinct ring. Both adults, presumably *boscaweni*, were photographed close to the nest (Plates 3, 4); the male had a white crown, black throat, a black terminal band on its tail and rusty-buff undertail coverts, whilst the female had a





**Plate 5.** The male Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* away from its nest, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon



**Plate 6.** The female Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* away from its nest, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon

dark grey-brown back, with a lighter grey-brown head and a buff underside that appeared quite streaky and paler rusty-buff undertail coverts. Both birds were also photographed away from the nest (Plates 5, 6).

All species of the genus *Oenanthe* breeding in the Western Palearctic build their nests inside cavities or rodent burrows and have eggs with a white or pale blue ground, which are typically lightly spotted with orange, red and brown mainly at the larger end (Cramp 1988). The eggs of Arabian Wheatear described here follow this general pattern but are much more heavily marked than is typical for the genus. As this is the only clutch of eggs described it is not possible to state whether or not these heavily marked eggs are characteristic of the species.

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