

# Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* on Socotra, a new bird for Yemen

RF PORTER & AHMED SAEED SULEIMAN

On 2 March 2011, in the pre-dusk period, we found a Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* at Wadi Sirhan lagoon on Socotra. It was feeding on algal growth in the shallow water of the lagoon (formed by the enclosed estuary of Wadi Sirhan) alongside a Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* and three Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*. Although rather distant when first seen (c300 m away) it was immediately obvious as being a large, rather upright, slim-necked crane-type, about the body size of a Common Moorhen but often standing much taller. The pale buff-brown plumage was relieved only by black streaking on the coverts and tertials. Closer views through a telescope showed finer black streaking on the mantle, a stout, rather dull yellowish bill and long, dull green legs.

It was watched on several days but was a shy bird and difficult to approach without it hurrying or swimming, in a moorhen-like manner, to the shelter of palm fronds that hung over the edge of the wadi. It was most evident in the period shortly after dawn and before dusk.

Several distant photographs were taken on 7 March (Plates 1–3), which show the various poses it could adopt, the rather slim-necked appearance when standing upright and the large, triangular bill. In many ways it was like a large Corncrake *Crex crex*, but with a moorhen-like jizz and the generic name, *Gallicrex*, seems totally appropriate. The unbarred underparts (with at times a slightly warm tinge) and the pale brown crown suggest it was an immature, which would have hatched the previous year.

The Watercock has been recorded twice before in the Middle East—both records in southern Oman where one was present 18 April–8 May 1992 (Eriksen *et al* 2003, Porter & Aspinall 2010) and another 28 Dec 2008–28 Jan 2009 ([www.BirdsOman.com/obl6-update.html](http://www.BirdsOman.com/obl6-update.html)). The species has a widespread breeding range in southeast Asia with the westernmost populations in India (Grimmett *et al* 1998), with Sind apparently being the



**Plate 1.** Watercock *Gallicrex cinerea* on Sirhan lagoon, Socotra, Yemen, March 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 2.** Watercock *Gallinula cinerea* on Sirhan lagoon, Socotra, Yemen, March 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 3.** Watercock *Gallinula cinerea* and Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* on Sirhan lagoon, Socotra, Yemen, March 2011. © RF Porter

closest to the Middle East (see Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Post breeding southerly movements or dispersal are little understood (del Hoyo *et al* 1996) but Grimmett *et al* (1998) indicate dispersal after the monsoon and it is known to be a summer visitor to the Maldives (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Though pure speculation, it is possible that the Socotra bird (and those in Oman) had been present since the previous autumn, the time when a vagrant from the Indian sub-continent would be most likely to arrive on the island.

## REFERENCES

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RF Porter, BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge CB3 0NA, UK. [RFPorter@talktalk.net](mailto:RFPorter@talktalk.net)