

Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* in the United Arab Emirates: the first and second national records

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On the morning of 31 October 2013, I was bird-watching with visiting birder Jimmy Kirby at Wamm farms, Dibba, in Fujairah emirate on the east coast of the UAE. This site is one of the few remaining places in the UAE to have irrigated fodder fields, making it an important stopping point for migrating birds and it has a good record of attracting rarities. As we were driving along the road towards the farm gates, a medium-sized white-winged bird flew across the road in front of the car, passing over at a height of c3 m and landed in long grass just over the fence of Fujairah goat farm. It recalled an *Ardeola* heron, but, in the fleeting glimpse obtained, the jizz did not fit and we could not immediately identify it. On entering the farm, we quickly located the area where it was seen to land and found it in a small open patch in the long grass. The bird was wary, but confiding, and allowed us to get into a position where we could see the bird clearly and obtain photographs (Plate 1). The bird was easily identifiable as a Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*. It remained completely motionless for c3 or 4 minutes, gradually relaxing before flying to a nearby puddle on one of the farm tracks, where it remained for about an hour. Despite a thorough search later in the afternoon and following day by other birders, it was not seen again.



Plate 1. Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* at Wamm farms, UAE, 31 October 2013. © Mark Smiles



Plate 2. Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* at Zakher lake, UAE, 30 November 2013. © Mike Barth

A month later, on 28 November 2013, Gregory Askew found a second Pheasant-tailed Jacana (Plates 2 & 3) whilst birding at Zakher lake, a large wetland amongst the sand dunes on the outskirts of Al Ain, Abu Dhabi emirate, roughly 180 km south of the first sighting. The bird stayed for 13 days, feeding along the shoreline at the western end of the lake and was often seen aggressively chasing waders, especially Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*, if they approached too closely. It was last reported 10 December 2013.

Identification of the species is very straightforward and it is unlikely to be confused with any other bird within the region; however, aging of these birds is complicated by a lack of detailed plumage information available in the literature. Comparison of photographs of both birds confirms them to be different individuals, both presumed to be first-winter birds due to the rufous tone to the crown; adults apparently show a blackish crown in non-breeding plumage. Both UAE records were duly accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee as the first and second national records.

Pheasant-tailed Jacana is common and widespread throughout the Indian sub-continent and eastwards through southeast Asia, southeast China and Taiwan, the Malay peninsula, southern Borneo and the Philippines. Breeding occurs June–early September in northerly populations, and during wet or monsoon months in India and southeast Asia. It is the only jacana with established migratory patterns, although the routes taken are unknown. It is almost entirely a passage migrant and winter visitor between October–May/June in peninsula Malaysia, and also, in much lower numbers, in Sumatra, Java and Oman. Vagrants have been recorded in Bali, northwest Australia, Japan, South Korea and parts of Arabia (Jenni & Kirwan 2013).

Within the Arabian peninsula the Pheasant-tailed Jacana is remarkably rare outside of Oman. There have been over 730 records in Oman and the species is described as a locally fairly common winter visitor early November–late May in the south of the country, occasionally over-summering (Eriksen & Victor 2013). There are 2 records of breeding in



Plate 3. Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* at Zakher lake, UAE, 30 November 2013. © Mike Barth

the south (Jennings 2010). By contrast, the most recent record from northern Oman was 2005. In Qatar, there is a single record of two birds wintering January–May 2006 (QBRC 2013, J Buchan pers comm) and there are only five records of Pheasant-tailed Jacana in Yemen, including Socotra (Brooks *et al* 1987, R Porter pers comm), with the latest record being on Socotra in January 2014, the same month that the second national record for Saudi Arabia was found 24 years after the first in 1990 (Stagg 1994, J Babbington pers comm). It is interesting that the UAE birds occurred in the same winter as these latest records from Saudi Arabia and Socotra.

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