

First fully documented record of Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli* for Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula

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Summary: An adult Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli* photographed in October 2018 in the Tanoumah area of southern Saudi Arabia is the first fully documented record for that country and for the Arabian Peninsula. It appeared to show characteristics of the north-east African race *erlangeri*. Previous reports of this species in Arabia are discussed.

Whilst birding in the Tanoumah area on 12 October 2018, Phil Roberts and I came across a group of about 50 Eurasian Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* in the air together, many later coming down and resting on rocks before continuing southwards. This is easily the largest gathering of this species either of us has observed in Saudi Arabia. The birds may possibly have been migrating down towards the Bab-el-Mandeb strait as there were also up to 50 Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* present in the area. Steppe Eagle migrates in large numbers across this strait, with over 10 000 birds crossing in a single day (Welch & Welch 1989), although a few also spend the winter in Saudi Arabia including in the Tanoumah area. The Bab-el-Mandeb strait is a relatively easy, if a following north to north-west wind is blowing (Welch & Welch 1989), and short-distance crossing between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. It divides the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden and is a proven flyway for many birds of prey, particularly in autumn, including Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (Buechley *et al* 2018). Tanoumah is positioned along the edge of the main escarpment of the Asir Mountains and has very steep cliffs where Eurasian Griffon Vultures roost and rarely breed (Jennings 2010, authors' pers obs). We did not get good views of the birds when initially seen as we saw them from the car and could not stop quickly. I parked the car as soon as possible, but the road was busy and by the time we returned to the area on foot some of the birds were on the ground. No birds could be seen in the air at this point but soon the birds on the ground took off and a group of about twelve birds flew around briefly before disappearing behind the cliffs. I quickly took a few photographs of two birds but unfortunately the terrain prevented any further sightings. On seeing these photographs, Yoav Perlman (pers comm) pointed out that one of the vultures (Plates 1 and 2) looked different and thought that it could be a Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli* or a hybrid, as it did not look quite right for Eurasian Griffon. I contacted Dick Forsman for his opinion, sending him two high-resolution images. Dick Forsman (pers comm) quickly responded saying the bird was an adult due to its woolly collar, greyish flight feathers with darker edges, pale bill and advanced moult. He also noted that the Eurasian Griffons in Arabia should be of the eastern *fulvescens* type, like the ones he has seen in Israel, which have paler underwing coverts than their European relatives, and that this should be obvious. The bird was so far from being a typical adult Eurasian Griffon of the eastern type (Plate 3) that he was of the opinion that this option could definitely be excluded. With the very contrasting black-and-white pattern to the greater and median underwing coverts, narrow head and typically marked axillaries, Dick felt quite sure that the bird was a Rüppell's Vulture of the north-east African subspecies *erlangeri*. Most of the long undertail coverts seem to be missing due to moult, but those remaining showed the pale tips typical of Rüppell's Vulture. Dick also mentioned that having studied Ethiopian Rüppell's Vultures on many trips to the country, he has a very strong impression of them being some kind of a hybrid population between *fulvus* and



Plate 1. Adult Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli erlangeri* near Tanoumah, Asir province, Saudi Arabia, 12 October 2018. Note very contrasting black-and-white pattern to the greater and median underwing coverts, narrow head and typically marked axillaries. © Jem Babbington



Plate 2. Adult Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli erlangeri* near Tanoumah, Asir province, Saudi Arabia, 12 October 2018. Aged by pale, woolly collar, greyish flight feathers with darker edges, pale bill and advanced moult. © Jem Babbington

nominate *rueppelli*, as mentioned in his book (Forsman 2016), with the Saudi Arabian bird being a perfect example of this type in showing features of both species. Dick's views matched Yoav's original thoughts almost exactly.

The status of Rüppell's Vulture in Saudi Arabia is unclear and clouded by the records of Richard Meinertzhagen. A specimen was obtained by Philby in May (year uncertain) near Taif and at Wadi Hamaa in February, the latter being one of seven birds feeding on a dead camel. Another party of four were seen on a tree near a carcass at Lodar in January and another party of eleven at Madhatha in February. Two were seen at Kharj Oasis on 8 February 1951 (Meinertzhagen 1954). Gutierrez (2003) mentioned that Hollom *et al* (1988) changed the status of the species to a vagrant in the south-west of the Kingdom and later still it was regarded as doubtfully recorded in south-western Arabia (Porter &



Plate 3. Adult Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* of the eastern race *fulvescens*, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Babbington

Aspinall 2010) due to the uncertainties around the records. Mundy *et al* (1992) gave no credit to any Saudi Arabian records and stated that Rüppell's Vulture does not occur in Saudi Arabia. Since this time, there have been no additional records that can be substantiated. The only specimen that can still be studied is the bird collected by Philby near Taif, which is kept at the British Museum in Tring, England, but there are doubts over its provenance since its original label was lost and because of the involvement of Meinertzhagen with this bird (Knox 1993). After additional research into the species' status in Saudi Arabia, and looking at the updated Saudi Arabia list that has been put together by various experts on the country such as Mike Jennings, Phil Roberts, Abdullah Alsuhaibany, Chris Boland, Mohammed Shobrak and myself, it became clear the species was not on the Saudi Arabian list. This is due to the exclusion of all Meinertzhagen's records due to his fraudulent activities (Knox 1993).

This record thus becomes the first fully documented record of Rüppell's Vulture for Saudi Arabia and as there are no accepted records from any countries that make up the Arabian Peninsula, it would make it the first for this region as well. As a result, I was reluctant to claim a first for the Kingdom and region without first checking an older record that was still thought to be correctly identified, a bird at Al Qara'ah, Asir Province, Saudi Arabia, on 4 September 1984. Saudi Arabia does not have a rarities committee so I again asked Dick Forsman if he could help with the identification from a set of notes and two photographs sent to me by Greg Askew who received them from the original observer. Dick very kindly again shared his knowledge with me, identifying the bird as a juvenile Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus* due to the pale feet, spiky secondaries and tail feathers and darkish throat, all typical of this age-class of Lappet-faced Vulture. This confirms our record near Tanoumah as the first record of Rüppell's Vulture for Saudi Arabia and for the Arabian Peninsula. The closest and only other record for the entire Middle East region is a probable third calendar-year bird seen at Lakhish Hills, South Judean Plains, Israel, on 5 May 2014 where the bird was associating with Eurasian Griffon Vultures away from their main colonies.

The likelihood of Rüppell's Vulture occurring in Saudi Arabia appears remote due to its small global population of only 22 000 birds and the fact this population is decreasing due to loss of habitat, incidental poisoning and other factors (BirdLife International 2018). The declining numbers of the species can be seen from the IUCN assessments, on which it had a Red List status of Near Threatened from 2007 - 2011, rising to Endangered from 2012 - 2014 and to Critically Endangered from 2015 due to severe declines in parts of its range. In recent years, 1999 and 2008, there is evidence of adult Rüppell's Vultures occupying breeding colonies of Griffon Vultures in the Iberian Peninsula, and an increasing number of Spanish records of vagrant Rüppell's Vultures, the vast majority being juveniles or immatures, occurring around the Strait of Gibraltar since 2008 (Gutierrez 2011).

There is evidence of migration of vultures through Arabia, with wing-tagged and satellite-tagged Eurasian Griffon Vultures occurring in Saudi Arabia. Migration involves periodic and large-scale movements commonly associated with competition and seasonal changes in weather and food sources (Alarcón & Lambertucci 2018). Vultures occurring in Saudi Arabia have mainly come from Israel, but there are also records in Saudi Arabia of Eurasian Griffon Vultures and Cinereous Vultures *Aegypius monachus* originating from the Greater Caucasus in northern Georgia (Gavashelishvili 2005, McGrady 2006) and the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria (Rewilding Europe 2018). Local movements of Lappet-faced Vulture within Saudi Arabia have also been recorded through satellite transmitters (Shobrak 1996, 2014).

Rüppell's Vulture is a large vulture found throughout the Sahel region of central Africa in areas of arid steppe, grasslands, mountains (up to 4500 m in Ethiopia) and

woodlands. Once considered common in these habitats, Rüppell's Vulture is experiencing steep declines, especially in the western parts of its range. It feeds entirely on carrion and bone fragments of larger carcasses, mainly soft muscle and organ tissue. There are two subspecies, the nominate *G. r. rueppelli* (AE Brehm, 1852) which ranges from south-west Mauritania and Senegambia east to Sudan and western Ethiopia, and south to Kenya and northern Tanzania, and *G. r. erlangeri* (Salvadori, 1908), which ranges from Ethiopia (except the west) to Eritrea and Somalia (Kemp *et al* 2018). The eastern subspecies is paler and more like Eurasian Griffon Vulture than its darker relative to the west.

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I would like to thank Yoav Perlman and Dick Forsman for their generous help in identifying this bird. Without their help and knowledge, it may well have remained unidentified. Dick Forsman also kindly re-identified a previous old record of Rüppell's Vulture from Saudi Arabia as a Lappet-faced Vulture, enabling the bird seen by Phil Roberts and myself to become the first record for Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula. Yoav also supplied me with details of the Israeli record of Rüppell's Vulture. I would also like to thank Phil Roberts for his company in the field and Chris Boland for allowing me access to the updated Saudi Arabia List. Mohammed Shobrak kindly provided a very interesting paper on telemetry studies of vultures and condors and Greg Askew sent details and photos of a previous claim of Rüppell's Vulture in Saudi Arabia, allowing it to be reassessed as a Lappet-faced Vulture.

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First record of Rüppell's Warbler *Curruca ruppeli* for Uzbekistan and Central Asia

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Summary: A male Rüppell's Warbler *Curruca ruppeli* seen and photographed in southern Uzbekistan in April 2017 is the easternmost record of the species by around 1000 km and the first for Central Asia.

On 9 April 2017 a male Rüppell's Warbler was seen in the central part of Kyzylkum Desert around 70 km to the west of Gazli town (N40°35.637' E62°40.505') in southern central Uzbekistan. The bird was observed from 10:10 to 10:14 am feeding in White Saxaul *Haloxylon persicum* bushes and flew from one bush to another, never singing or calling, staying low and often inside cover, but fairly close to us. The bird resembled a male Ménériés's Warbler *Curruca mystacea*, but the presence of a black throat and the prominent white edges to the tertials and greater coverts clearly identified it as a male Rüppell's Warbler. In this same area we also found migrating Lesser Whitethroats *Curruca curruca*. The habitat in this area consists of plant communities common for sand dunes, including bushes of Saxaul *Haloxylon* spp., Sand acacias *Ammodéndron* spp. and *Calligonum* spp.. An analysis of literature has shown that this record is the first of this species for Uzbekistan and for Central Asia. Early avifaunal surveys in the countries of Central Asia covering the former USSR (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) do not mention this species (Dementyev *et al* 1954, Meklenburtsev 1995). The same is true of later reviews of the avifauna of the Bukhara region (Turaev *et al* 2015) and of Central Asia generally (Ayé *et al* 2012, Rustamov 2013, Koblik & Arkhipov 2014, Ryabintsev *et al* 2019), none of which made reference to this species.

Rüppell's Warbler has a loop migration, heading south across the Mediterranean in the autumn and returning northwards further east in the spring (Aymí & Gargallo 2019). According to the distribution map of Rüppell's Warbler (BirdLife International 2019), the



Plate 1. Male Rüppell's Warbler feeding in saxaul bush, 9 April 2017, Kyzylkum desert, Uzbekistan. © Robert Tizard



Plate 2. Male Rüppell's Warbler feeding in saxaul bush, 9 April 2017, Kyzylkum desert, Uzbekistan. © Valentin Soldatov

closest country to Uzbekistan where this species regularly occurs is Syria. A specimen of this species collected on 2 April 1941 by Walter Koelz at Do-Run, Lorestan in western Iran (Roselaar & Aliabadian 2009), now held at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, was previously the easternmost record of this species. This Uzbekistan record, around 1000 km to the east of Lorestan, therefore becomes the easternmost documented sighting of the species and the first for Central Asia.

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