

Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus*, first breeding in Kuwait and the Arabian peninsula

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Two pairs of Hypocoliuses *Hypocolius ampelinus* nested at Jahra pools reserve, Kuwait, in 2014 and raised five chicks. The Hypocolius has a restricted range and is the only member of its genus and of the Hypocoliidae. Kuwait is now the sixth country in which this species has bred; after Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan (Clements 2007).

Jahra pools reserve is a coastal reserve with large pools of 3-stage-treated sewage water. Water levels are maintained year-round. There are extensive *Phragmites australis* reedbeds and *Typha domingensis* and part of the reserve is halophyte sabkha. The Hypocolius is a fruit eating species favouring date palms *Phoenix dactylifera* for their dry fruits, also feeding on the berries of *Nitraria retusa* and *Lycium shawii*. Most of the date palms along roads and in parks in Kuwait are left uncultivated during the summer, and in winter Hypocoliuses feed on the dates. The birds are usually found at sites where there are palm trees, such as parks, farms and home gardens. The Hypocolius is an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor in Kuwait, but there are a number of sightings in mid summer. It was first suspected breeding in Kuwait when Rashed Al-Hajji photographed a juvenile at Jahra farms on 8 August 2012 (Plate 1). It was not accompanied by adults, so was regarded as a juvenile that had bred elsewhere perhaps in Iraq or Iran.

In summer 2014 the species was watched in early June at Jahra pools reserve by many observers but on 30 June KAG, the manager of the reserve, noted a Hypocolius male feeding on its own under a *Tamarix aphylla* tree but things changed when a small bird appeared close to it (Plate 2). It looked initially like a female House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* but after careful observation it was in fact a Hypocolius fledgling. It had pale



Plate 1. Juvenile *Hypocolius ampelinus* at Jahra farms, Kuwait, 8 August 2012. © Rashed Al-Hajji



Plate 2. Fledgling *Hypocolius ampelinus*, Jahra pools reserve, Kuwait, 30 June 2014. © Khaled Al-Ghanem



Plate 3. Juvenile *Hypocolius ampelinus*, Jahra pools reserve, Kuwait, 1 July 2014. © Khaled Al-Ghanem



Plate 4. Adult male *Hypocolius ampelinus* on nest, Jahra pools reserve, Kuwait, 30 June 2014. © Khaled Al-Ghanem

plumage and short tail; it then started to follow the adult and beg for food, fluttering its wings. The adult fed it with a red berry from nearby *Nitraria retusa* shrubs. Minutes later a juvenile joined and a female as well, the juvenile was larger than the fledgling with a grown tail and it flew well. The family of four then left to a *Nitraria retusa* bush and started



Plate 5. Male and female *Hypocoliuses ampelinus* feeding three chicks at Jahra pools reserve, 31 July 2014.
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to feed on its red berries. This plant continues to produce berries until October. The next day KAG was able to photograph the juvenile (Plate 3). The family was also noticed later flying on a number of occasions towards Jahra farms where they probably feed on dates.

Also on 30 June 2014, KAG discovered another breeding pair when he noticed an adult male on a nest (Plate 4). The nest was c2.5 m above the ground and c3 cm deep, robustly built on a *Tamarix aphylla* tree firmly supported by the trunk and thick branches and lined with feathers and *T. aphylla* leaves, semi-shaded from the sun. Air temperatures during July reach 47°C. The nest was c50 m away from the reedbeds. During July both parents were alternately incubating; KAG did not know how many eggs were in the nest, but later they produced three chicks. While on the nest chicks were fed insects by both parents (Plate 5). The parents kept close to the nest protecting it from intruders. When an intruder bird comes close to the nest site an adult would go to the intruder and call at it until it left, it then would follow it until it was far away from the nest site. After leaving the nest the parents fed the fledglings with plant material, *Nitraria retusa* berries and insects. Later the juveniles and the two adults were noticed foraging in the reedbeds at the edge of a bank.

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REFERENCE

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