

Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris* in the United Arab Emirates— first record for Arabia

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On 11 October 2014, whilst birding in Al Mamzar park in Dubai, UAE, I came across a *Phylloscopus* warbler that I did not recognise. Having already found a Green Warbler *P. nitidus*, itself a rarity in the UAE with only 11 prior records and a Wood Warbler *P. sibilatrix*, only minutes earlier, it was easy to compare the size, structure and habits of this bird against these congeners. The bird was quite robust, being similar in size to the Wood Warbler, and was foraging deliberately amongst the lower branches of the canopy, often at head-height and offered good, prolonged views. The bird had two wing-bars, a long, tapering supercilium above a darkish eye-stripe that broadened behind the eye, slightly dingy underparts, grizzled cheeks, greyish-pink legs and a longish pink-based bill. I considered the possibility of it being either one of the Arctic Warbler *P. borealis/examinandus/xanthodryas* complex or a Two-barred Greenish Warbler *P. plumbeitarsus*, though I couldn't recall if the presence of two wing-bars was possible on the former. The bird remained until the following day, being seen briefly on the 12th, but, rather frustratingly, was not heard to call during its two-day stay.

In the absence of any calls, the chances of conclusively identifying it initially seemed slim; however, photographs (some reproduced here, Plates 1–4) taken by myself and Simon Lloyd, who managed to see the bird a few hours after discovery, provided sufficient detail to supplement my field notes and led to eventual identification and acceptance by the Emirates Bird Records Committee as the first national record of Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*.

Plumage: Uniform olive-green upperparts with slightly darker and greyer tone to crown more evident in shade. Very long, slightly creamy, supercilium tapering to the rear above dark eye-stripe narrow on the lores, but broader behind the eye, cutting through whitish eye ring. Supercilium not bridging above upper mandible. Cheeks mottled greyish, with



Plate 1. Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*, Al Mamzar park, Dubai, 11 October 2014. Note the long, slightly creamy, supercilium, double wing-bars and large, pinkish-based bill. © Mark Smiles



Plate 2. Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*, Al Mamzar park, Dubai, 11 October 2014, showing the length of the first primary (p1) relative to the primary coverts. The emarginations on primaries 3–6 are also evident in this image. © Mark Smiles



Plate 3. Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*, Al Mamzar park, Dubai, 11 October 2014. In this image, the dusky, grizzled cheeks and breast are well illustrated, as is the long bill with pinkish cutting edge. © Simon Lloyd

greyish wash extending down onto upper breast. Underparts, including undertail coverts, whitish. Wings with two obvious creamy bars formed by pale tips to outer 5 or 6 greater coverts and 2 or 3 median coverts.

Bare parts: Bill noticeably long with dark brown upper mandible and pinkish-based lower mandible, both with pinkish cutting edges. Legs greyish-pink. Eye all dark with no obvious contrast with iris.

Call: Not heard.

Structure & habits: Comparable in size and bulk to Wood Warbler, feeding and moving deliberately in lower branches of trees, unlike the quick, nervous actions of canopy-feeding Green Warbler seen minutes earlier. Primary p1 extends well beyond greater coverts. Emarginations on p3–6, wing-tip formed by p4–5 and p2 approximately equal in length to p7–8.

Identification was by no means straightforward, being largely a process of elimination in the early stages. The images obtained showed that the length of the first primary (p1) extended well beyond the primary coverts, allowing Arctic Warbler (*sensu lato*), whose first primary projects a mere 3mm beyond the greater coverts, to be quickly discounted.

The other possible *Phylloscopus* warblers with wing-bars and plain tertials normally encountered in the Western Palaearctic were also considered *ie* Greenish *P.trochiloides*, Two-barred Greenish and Green Warblers. Comparing the images with wing formula data



Plate 4. Large-billed Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*, Al Mamzar park, Dubai, 11 October 2014. Close-up of bill showing large dark smudge on lower mandible. © Mark Smiles

Table 1. Comparison of features of the Al Mamzar *Phylloscopus* with possible confusion species/congeners recorded in the Western Palearctic. Data summarised from Van der Vliet *et al* 2001.

	Al Mamzar bird	<i>P. borealis</i>	<i>P. plumbetarsus</i>	<i>P. trochiloides</i>	<i>P. nitidus</i>
Upperparts	Olive with slightly greyer crown	Darker olive than <i>trochiloides</i>	Dark olive, often with greyish crown	Olive-green	Bright olive-green
Underparts	Dingy across breast	Dingy across breast	Usually clean whitish	Clean whitish	Variably yellow-washed
Movements	Deliberate	Deliberate	Quick & nervous	Quick & nervous	Quick & nervous
Greater covert bar	Across 5–6 GCs	6 GCs max	5–7 GCs	4–5 GCs	6 GCs max
Length p1 vs greater coverts	Well beyond GCs	+3 mm	+5–10 mm	+5–10 mm	+5–10 mm
Length p2	Level with p7–8	p5–6	p7–8	p9–10	p6–7
Emarginations	p3–6	p3–5	p3–6	p3–6	p3–6
Primary projection (of tertial length)	c55–60%	70–90%	55–65%	55–65%	55–70%
Wingtip	p4–5	p3–4	p4–5	p4–5	p3–4

from Van der Vliet *et al* (2001, Table 1) revealed that the combination of emarginations and relative lengths of the primary feathers eliminated both Greenish and Green Warblers, but not Two-barred Greenish Warbler. However, the bird's habits, size and very strong bill, did not fit this species either.

Considering further possible eastern species, the leg colour was too dark for the smaller Pale-legged Leaf Warbler *P.tenellipes* (*sensu lato*), the upperparts not contrasting enough with either crown or rump and the bill rather too long, albeit similarly marked. Both Western *P. occipitalis* and Eastern Crowned Warblers *P. coronatus* were eliminated by virtue of the lack of any sign of a median crown stripe and by the Mamzar bird's large bill being pinkish, not orange, and strongly marked on the underside. This latter feature was particularly striking in many of the photographs taken and this, together with the plumage characteristics, correlated strongly with Large-billed Leaf Warbler (Clement 2016a–d). This conclusion was further supported by comments from Paul Leader (Hong Kong) and Peter Kennerley (UK) and fellow birdwatchers in the UAE.

According to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012), Large-billed Leaf Warbler is a Himalayan species, inhabiting both deciduous and coniferous forest, usually near mountain streams, between 1800–3700 m in northern Pakistan and west Arunchal eastwards through southern and southeastern Tibet, west China and northern Myanmar. Grimmer *et al* (2008) map the species as breeding in the Safed Koh range of northern Pakistan. It may therefore breed in adjacent Afghanistan. It winters in evergreen hill forests in Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats, occurring widely on passage in northwest and northeast India. The species arrives in its wintering grounds from the end of August or early September onwards, remaining until as late as the following May (Clement 2016a), hence its appearance as a vagrant in the Middle East is perhaps not entirely surprising.

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