

PHOTOSPOT

Socotra and Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeaks

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Quite recently the Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* was split into three species of which two are resident within the OSME region, namely, the Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak *R. socotranus* (Plates 1, 2), which has kept the original scientific name, and the Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak *R. percivali* (Plates 3–5). The third species, the Somali Golden-winged Grosbeak *R. louisae*, is resident in Somalia.

The two OSME golden-winged grosbeaks are among the most sought after species by resident and, in particular, by visiting birdwatchers. The Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak is an Arabian endemic found only in the southwestern part of the Arabian peninsula. In Oman it is found in the southern foothills of the Dhofar mountains, from Jabal Samhan in the east to just over the border with Yemen in the west. A separate population is found in the highlands of western Yemen stretching northward to the Asir region of Saudi Arabia. For political reasons it is difficult to visit Yemen and Saudi Arabia at the moment, but luckily, Oman offers a safe and excellent chance to see this species. Some guidelines, however, may be needed to find the bird. A well-known spot for the species has for a long time been Ayn Hamran located some 15 km east of Salalah but it can certainly not be expected on every visit to this site, so several visits may be needed. The birds feed in the canopy of flowering trees and the chance of spotting them is increased



Plate 1. Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* Wadi Ayhaft, Socotra island, Yemen, 14 January 2006. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 2. Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* Wadi Ayhaft, Socotra island, Yemen, 14 January 2006. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 3. Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus percivali*, Ayn Tobroq, Oman, 4 May 2012. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 4. Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus percivali*, Ayn Tobroq, Oman, 19 January 2016. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 5. Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus percivali*, Ayn Tobroq, Oman, 22 February 2016. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen

by listening carefully for the calls which resemble European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*. The dry hills up from the spring are good places to search for the bird.

An even better place is the nearby area known as Ayn Tobroq. To find this place drive east out of Salalah and continue straight through the roundabout for Ayn Hamran for a further 5.4 km to the next roundabout. Turn left here and turn right after 4.7 km just before the road starts to climb up the mountains. A signpost in Arabic shows this turnoff for Ayn Tobroq and to another spring, Ayn Athum. After 1.3 km the road splits. Here a signpost in English shows a left turn for Ayn Tobroq or one can continue straight for Ayn Athum. However, immediately opposite this turnoff for Ayn Tobroq is a watering station where small trucks come to collect water. As some water is usually spilled there is always a small pool. The Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeaks come to drink here especially early in the morning around 07.00 h. In the evening, just before it gets completely dark, the same pool attracts Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, a species that can be difficult to find in the Salalah area. From the turnoff the road ends in a parking lot at Ayn Tobroq. The permanent spring here also attracts many birds, including grosbeaks, especially in hot weather. Look for them where the spring water crosses a track immediately before the parking lot. Ayn Athum is yet another spring frequented by Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, but the scenic beauty here is perhaps less pleasing than at Ayn Tobroq. The road to Ayn Athum, however, passes through excellent wooded areas where the Arabian Scops Owl *Otus pamelae* is common.

While the Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak can be a bit tricky to find, at least it is easy to identify. In all plumages, the bright yellow patches on the wings and sides of the tail combined with a massive black bill are unmistakable. Both adult male and female have a brownish head with a large, white cheek spot. The face is black near the bill with the male showing the most extensive amount of black. Immature birds are duller but the yellow markings are conspicuous.

The Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak is endemic to Socotra island, Yemen, and can be found in wooded areas such as Wadi Ayhaft near the main town of Hadibo. It is similar to the Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak in having a black bill, white cheeks and yellow patches on the wings and tail but it has a much darker head overall.

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