# The discovery of a breeding population of Egyptian Nightjars Caprimulgus aegyptius in the United Arab Emirates

#### OSCAR CAMPBELL & MARK SMILES

The known status of Egyptian Nightjar in the United Arab Emirates has changed in recent years. Formerly considered a highly localised winter visitor and scarce passage migrant, a fledged juvenile found in June 2013 raised the possibility of local breeding at Ajban, Abu Dhabi emirate. Subsequent fieldwork 2014–2017 at that location indicated the presence of a small population, with singing males and fledged juveniles recorded annually and nests found in 2016 and 2017. This short paper reviews the prior status of the species in the UAE and outlines results concerning evidence for breeding from an ongoing study.

## INTRODUCTION

Egyptian Nightjar Caprimulgus aegyptius is a polytypic species with nominate C. a. aegyptius breeding disjunctly from northeast Egypt and Iraq to eastern Iran and southern Kazakhstan (Holyoak 2001, Cleere 2017). Most populations are strongly migratory, wintering mainly in the eastern Sahelian zone of Africa. In the Arabian peninsula, the species has historically been a scarce migrant and winter visitor, with no breeding records noted by Jennings (2010) but the possibility deemed likely based on records of oversummering birds in both Kuwait and the Eastern province, Saudi Arabia, since the start of the 21st century (M Jennings in litt). Such over-summering has continued and the species is now regularly present in Eastern province and nearby Qatar from June onwards, with peak numbers July-August (Babbington 2013, 2015). Birds have not been heard singing at the Eastern province site, although a juvenile was photographed in July 2016 (J Babbington in litt). Egyptian Nightjar bred in Bahrain March 2014, when a nest with chicks was found (Babbington 2015, Harrison & Lamsdell 2015). That was the first published breeding record for the Arabian peninsula, although apparently breeding was first discovered in Bahrain in March 2009 (A al Kaabi in litt to M Jennings). Breeding has been deemed likely, but unconfirmed, in Kuwait (Pope & Zogaris 2012) where the species is mainly recorded August-September. It is a scarce migrant in spring in Kuwait (contra Babbington 2015) and has recently been found during the summer months when breeding has been suspected (AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan in litt). In Oman, there are no records June-August and very few April–May (Eriksen & Victor 2013), a status rather different to elsewhere in the region, although this may partly reflect observer coverage. The present paper briefly reviews the changing status of Egyptian Nightjar in the United Arab Emirates and outlines the discovery of a breeding population, the first indications of which came to light in 2013.

## STATUS IN THE UAE

The current known status of Egyptian Nightjar in the UAE is markedly different compared to that before 2010 (Figure 1). However, difficulty in detecting the species away from established, popular birdwatching sites may have masked its true status. Systematic ornithological recording began in the 1980s. Richardson (1990) regarded Egyptian Nightjar as a very scarce passage migrant, but wintering birds were temporarily regular, sometimes numerous at one irrigated site at Al Wathba, Abu Dhabi emirate, 2000–2006. At least 23 individuals were recorded during winters 2002/03–2004/05 but there has been a marked decline since then (contra Babbington 2013), coinciding with the cessation of irrigation and subsequent gradual drying of the site (UAE Bird Database, Richardson *et al* 2003). However, a report of 11 in November 2016 (Harrison 2017) implies the site is still used, at



Figure 1. Average monthly counts of Egyptian Nightjars in UAE before 2010 and after.

least occasionally. Winter records from other locations are highly erratic and invariably involve low numbers, although eight were recorded at (the now obsolete) Al Ain Camel Race track, Abu Dhabi emirate, in January 2000 and 12 at Wamm farms, Fujairah emirate, in December 2007. The latter site is still intact but such counts have not been repeated, despite regular coverage.

On passage, the species occurs in March (mainly in the first half of the month; very rarely to late April) and September. Numbers are very low *eg* just seven individuals found 2007–2017 during a survey of UAE migration hotspots totalling over 3500 h (Campbell & Smiles in prep) but occasional September influxes have seen up to 23 recorded at Al Wathba (UAE Bird Database). There are very few October records, implying that September birds continue southwards on passage and that wintering birds arrive later, presumably from a different population.

Aspinall (2010) reported only one record potentially indicative of breeding, a bird singing in Ras al Khaimah emirate in May 2005. However, since at least 2013, the species has been present regularly at Ajban (Abu Dhabi emirate) March–September where fledged juveniles have been detected annually from June 2013, singing birds recorded since 2014 and, in March 2016 and April 2017 an incubating female was found and later observed brooding chicks. The remainder of this paper summarizes the status of Egyptian Nightjar as a breeding species at Ajban. Observations on aspects of the natural history and breeding biology of birds at this site are presented in Campbell & Smiles (in press).

# BACKGROUND AND METHODS AT AJBAN

Ajban farms (24.62° N, 54.71° E, 5–20 m asl) are 40 km northeast of Abu Dhabi island. It is an area of flat, cultivated and formerly-cultivated desert with many plots abandoned and slowly reverting to semi-natural desert. In June 2013, a juvenile Egyptian Nightjar was photographed and the photo passed onto the Emirates Bird Records Committee (photo *Phoenix* 30: 14). Whilst highly suggestive, this record was deemed insufficient to prove local breeding, as the bird was capable of sustained flight and could have arrived at Ajban from elsewhere. Subsequent observations at the site in August–September 2013 indicated up to 25 birds present (UAE Bird Database, OC pers obs). From April 2014 onwards, the site has been regularly visited by the authors, in an effort to confirm breeding and to study aspects of the ecology of the species there. Visits incorporated regular counts in an area favoured by roosting birds, locating birds presumed to be on territory by song and searching for nests by walking and scanning areas where singing birds had been located. Playback was used sparingly in an attempt to detect birds on territory but spotlighting was generally ineffective and rarely used.

## **RESULTS AT AJBAN**

Results are summarised in Table 1. Egyptian Nightjars were recorded singing from April (2014 and 2017) and from mid–March (2015 and 2016) each year. Singing generally continued strongly until late May and occasionally was heard into June. Presumed territories located by song numbered six (in three discrete areas) in 2014, four (in two areas) in 2015, five (in two areas) in 2016 and five (in three areas) in 2017. A male was regarded as being on territory if singing was heard from the same area on at least two visits. Each discrete area was within 2.5 km radius of an area where birds communally roosted (see below).

On 25 March 2016 and 8 April 2017, single nests with an incubating bird and two eggs each were located in a fenced-in area of compacted sand-gravel desert, interspersed with the dwarf shrub *Haloxylon salicornicum*. This was an area that annually held singing birds. The 2016 nest had chicks by 9 April, with a hatching date estimated as 5 April. The chicks, still being brooded, were last seen on 13 April (Plate 1) *c*70 m away from the nest site but could not be located on 16 April. In 2017, the eggs had hatched by 28 April (estimated hatching date 27 April) and the chicks located *c*5 m from the nest site (Plate 2). They could not be located during a subsequent visit on 10 May. Although in each case the ultimate outcome is unknown, this is likely due to difficulty in locating mobile and cryptic chicks. Movement of chicks from the nest scrape soon after hatching is reported by Holyoak (2001) and, indeed, is common amongst a number of nightjar species (Jackson 2007). Fledging takes up to four weeks (Cramp 1986, Cleere 2017).

An area (2 km from the nesting site) favoured by roosting birds was located in August 2013 and searched regularly thereafter. Habitat was flat, saline desert, dominated by shrubby *Tamarix* and close to several small, presumably permanent, waterbodies. Birds were present April–September annually, with a steady increase in numbers until July–August when *c*30 were present annually. Juveniles (Plates 3 & 4), distinguished by minor plumage details including wing covert pattern, were located annually from early June, with an early juvenile also found on 10 May 2017. Numbers utilising this roost dropped markedly from mid September with generally none present thereafter (although coverage October–February was limited and an Egyptian Nightjar was located there in January 2015). Based on this data, it appears that Egyptian Nightjar is predominately a summer

 Table I. Summary of breeding-population data collected 2014–2017 at Ajban. Note that 2017 incorporates data up until early July; peak numbers at the roosting site normally occur in July–August.

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of territorial males located	6	3	5	5
Number of nests found	0	0	1	I
Maximum number of juveniles found in single visit	4	I	4	3
Maximum number recorded at roosting site in single visit	30	30	35	39



**Plate I** (left). Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius*, a presumed female, brooding chicks estimated to be *c*8 days old, Ajban, United Arab Emirates, 13 April 2016. Even at this young age, the birds had moved some 70 m away from the nest. © *Mark Smiles* 

**Plate 2** (right). Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* chicks, estimated to be one day old, Ajban, United Arab Emirates, 28 April 2017. These were found 5 m away from the nest, sheltering on the slope of a small rise. © *Oscar Campbell* 



**Plate 3** (left). Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* Ajban, United Arab Emirates, 25 June 2014. This bird is identifiable as a juvenile on the basis of a combination of rather obvious pale tips to the greater coverts and the obviously fresh remiges with no sign of moult. Primary moult is invariably obvious in adults throughout May–August. © Oscar Campbell

**Plate 4** (right). Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* Ajban, United Arab Emirates, 7 June 2017. A juvenile showing obvious white tips to the greater coverts. This feature is often quite visible from a distance on fresh birds, appearing as a distinctive pale panel. © *Mark Smiles* 

visitor to Ajban although it is feasible that some remain in the area all year but, as they disperse and become rather inactive, are very difficult to locate.

Whilst not considered conclusive at the time, the appearance of a juvenile in June 2013 (see above), in the light of data from subsequent years, strongly suggests that breeding occurred locally that year. Further evidence of this emerged in 2014 when Abraham Arias (pers comm) was informed by a manager on a nearby farm on the southern edge of the study site (but inaccessible to the authors) that he had found the nest of a nightjar species in the spring or summer of either 2012 or 2013. No images are available and the correspondent in question had only a hazy recollection of the discovery, although the details presented sounded convincing. If correct, as well as pre-dating confirmed breeding records in the UAE, this would imply a larger area of occupation for this species in the

UAE than the present small study site. Further evidence was obtained late in 2016 when the species was also reported, over several seasons, to have been present and heard singing in an area of vegetated gravel plains *c*30 km to the north of Ajban. This report was made by a non-birdwatcher to R Hornby (*in litt*) and again the details, whilst sketchy, seem plausible. In between this location and Ajban, in June 2017, a single bird was found twice within a week, 10 km north of the study site (MS pers obs). Finally, there is an intriguing record in the UAE Bird Database of five birds reported at Ajban in September 2010. At the time these were simply assumed to be migrants but, in light of subsequent events, it is possible that the species has been breeding undetected at the site for some years now.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to a number of birdwatchers, both UAE residents and visitors, who accompanied us occasionally during our visits. In particular, Abraham Arias joined us for many visits in 2014 and Richard Hornby assisted with botanical identification and a description of the site. Mohamed al Mazrouei initiated this whole study with his discovery of a juvenile in June 2013. Tommy Pedersen provided encouragement as ever, as well as details from the UAE Bird Database. Mike Jennings and Jem Babbington helpfully answered enquiries and the comments of two reviewers were useful.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Aspinall, S. 2010. Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates. Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi.

Babbington, J. 2013. The changing status of Egyptian Nightjar in eastern Arabia. Phoenix 29:19.

Babbington, J. 2015. Photospot: Egyptian Nightjar Caprimulgus a. aegyptius. Sandgrouse 37(1): 97-101.

Campbell, O & M Smiles. In press. Observations on the natural history of breeding Egyptian Nightjars in the United Arab Emirates. *British Birds* 

Campbell, O & M Smiles. In prep. A comparison of spring and autumn migration through the United Arab Emirates.

Cleere, N. 2017. Egyptian Nightjar (*Caprimulgus aegyptius*). *In*: del Hoyo, J, A Elliott, J Sargatal, DA Christie & E de Juana (eds). *Handbook of the Birds of the World Alive*. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. [retrieved 20 May 2017 from www.hbw.com/node/55212]

Cramp, S (ed). 1986. The Birds of the Western Palaearctic. Vol 4 Terns to Woodpeckers. Oxford University Press, UK.

Eriksen, J & R Victor. 2013. Oman Bird List Edition 7. Centre for Environmental Studies and Research, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat.

Harrison, I. 2017. Around the Region. Sandgrouse 39(1): 110.

Harrison, I & C Lamsdell. 2015. Around the Region. Sandgrouse 37(1): 115.

Holyoak, DT. 2001. Nightjars and their Allies: The Caprimulgiformes. Oxford University Press, UK.

Jackson, HD. 2007. A review of the evidence for the translocation of eggs and young by nightjars (Caprimulgidae). *Ostrich* 78: 561–572.

Jennings, MJ. 2010. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. Fauna of Arabia 25.

Pope, M & S Zogaris (eds). 2012. *Birds of Kuwait – A Comprehensive Visual Guide*. KUFPEC, Biodiversity East, Cyprus.

Richardson, C. 1990. The Birds of the United Arab Emirates. Hobby Publications, Dubai & Warrington, UK.

Richardson, C, D Diskin & SJ Aspinall (eds). 2003. Systematic list for Years 1995–2000. *Emirates Bird Report* 20: 30–274, www.uaebirding.com/Resources/EBR20-1995to2000.pdf. [Retrieved 20 May 2017]

Oscar Campbell c/o PO Box 4001 Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. ojcampbell25@yahoo.com Mark Smiles c/o PO Box 17836, Dubai, UAE. marksmiles63@gmail.com