

BIRD NOTES FROM OFFSHORE

Adrian Chapman

[During his stay in the Emirates in the 1980's and early 1990's, Adrian Chapman took every opportunity to visit remote parts of the country to study the birdlife. Several of these expeditions included visits to islands where seabirds were found in abundance. Now, in the latter half of the 1990's, development is spreading throughout the country and the island seabird colonies are under great pressure. This historical account is published here for the record. It is interesting to compare it with the seabird survey undertaken by Aspinnall *et al*, published elsewhere in EBR19. - Ed.]

I have visited many offshore sites since my arrival in the UAE and have never been disappointed with the birds to be found. However, the visit of Moira and David Robinson and myself to Dalma and nearby islands on 30.04.90 to 04.05.90 was probably the most rewarding yet.

The principal features to be recorded were our visits to nearby Yasat Island, Umm Ambar Island and Umm Al Hatab Island to examine the seabird breeding colonies and quite obvious visible bird migration passage throughout our stay on Dalma Island. The latter phenomena resulted in some species disappearing from day to day and other species arriving to take their places. The weather was fine throughout the period, the wind from the north (shimal) was variable, increasing on the 4th May to about Beaufort force 6. The effects of these winds on the migrating birds was also easy to see, with quite exhausted birds sheltering in almost every bit of cover available. It is such experiences as this that makes one realise just how fantastic a feat is undertaken by small migrating birds annually and how perilous these often very long journeys can be. Following is a systematic list of the birds noted during our stay in the western region.

SPECIES LIST

Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* Seen in small flocks around Dalma, Yasat, Umm Ambar and Umm Al Hatab Islands and also at sea around the area. There is evidence of a large breeding colony - perhaps 750 x 500 metres in area on the north-east side of the northern most island of the Yasat group. Approximately 500 birds were present just offshore this site.

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis* At least two seen regularly around Dalma Island coast. At least three pairs seen around Yasat Island on 01.05.90. Both colour morphs present.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* A ring-tailed harrier of heavier build, broader wings and more ponderous flight than a Pallid Harrier seen at same time showing large white rump patch, considered to be this species. Seen on Yasat northernmost Island on 01.05.90.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* A well-marked female seen quartering over the nesting colony of Saunders' Little Terns - more or less alternately with the previous bird (Hen Harrier) on Yasat northernmost Island on 01.05.90.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* At least six individuals seen around Dalma Island throughout the period. Cliff top nest site not used this year. Two birds and two nests found on Yasat Island 01.05.90. One of these nests looks as though it was occupied this last breeding season.

Hobby *Falco subbuteo* One male seen stooping on passerines at the sewage dump in the hills, later found perched in the barren rock hills on 03.05.90.

Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* We were very pleased to record up to three birds have returned to the island, seen throughout our visit. We hope to return later to confirm breeding of this rare summer visitor.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* One male seen hunting over the cultivated area on the western side of Dalma Island on 03.05.90.

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* Two adults and one juvenile located in the cultivations on the western side of Dalma Island on 03.05.90. The young bird was about three quarters grown and could fly. Our opinion is that

the breeding must have taken place on Dalma Island itself, as it is unlikely that the young bird was sufficiently accomplished at flying to make even the shortest sea crossing to the island. To say the least this observation was a surprise and unexpected treat.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* Breeding residents on Dalma Island and Yasat Islands. Several adults and one flightless chick seen on both islands.

Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* Up to 2,000 birds loafing on beaches off Dalma Island most days. Also commonly seen at sea during crossings and resting on sandbar south of Muhemmel Island.

White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa* Seen in large numbers during sea crossings and at rest on beaches of Dalma Island. Breeding colonies were forming on all Yasat Islands. 2 eggs in scrape found on the middle of Yasat Islands. From these observations the main breeding activity would be May/June.

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* Seen in large numbers during sea crossing, generally scarcer near to Dalma Island. Large numbers collecting at Yasat Islands and breeding colonies forming. Like the previous species it would appear the main breeding activity would take place May/June.

Saunders' Little Tern *Sterna saundersi* Seen in small numbers during all sea crossings. Breeding colony on the central stony plain of Yasat northern Island, and also breeding on the southern spit of Dalma Island. One young chick found.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Two birds perched in rock crevices in the hills on 03.05.90 considered to be this species rather than domestic pigeons.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* One seen in cultivated area of Dalma Island on 30.04.90 and 03.05.90.

Palm Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* Common breeding resident on Dalma Island. Nest with two almost fully fledged chicks found.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* ca. 25 circling about the rocky outcrop of Umm Al Hatab on 01.05.90, further sightings include 2 on Dalma Island on 02.05.90 and another 4 on the 03.05.90.

Black-crowned Finch Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* Assumed a breeding resident on Dalma Island. Up to 50 birds seen in the general area of cultivation on the western side of the island.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* Seen on 30.04.90, 02 and 03.05.90 on Dalma Island in several places. Numerous on the western cultivated area and singing from perches atop bushes and in soaring flight. Probably a breeding resident.

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* Single bird seen in garden on Dalma 30.04.90 and 03.05.90.

Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes* Two seen at sewage dump on 01.05.90.

Acro. Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris/scirpaceus* Ca. 20 seen in cultivated area western side of Dalma Island on 03.05.90. All birds seen were silent but showed none of the finer detail associated with Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* Three on 02.05.90 and one on 03.05.90. We spent two hours trying to photograph this latter bird. We obtained photos of acacia thorns, but precious little of the bird, such was its expertise in maximising the use of the limited cover.

Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus* Lamentably, sufficient attention was not paid to a beautiful "red-back" male which had white patches at the base of the primaries and white rump. Head pattern details were not recorded, but at least one of the red-backed Shrikes (*Lanius collurio*) recorded on the 30.04.90 may very well have been this species. All "red-backs" subsequently seen did not display the above mentioned plumage characteristics.

Pale Rock Sparrow *Petronia brachydactyla* A "sparrow" seen perched on a tree in the low cost housing complex, Dalma Island on 01.05.90. Pale supercilium, no chestnut patch on wing coverts and no yellow throat patch seen. At first thought to be a tinkling, trilling type call. Considered to be this species.

Indian Silverbill *Euodice malabarica* A closely packed, ever moving bunch of six perched in the top of a bare tree in cultivations on Dalma Island on 03.05.90.

OTHER SPECIES SEEN

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Little Stint *Calidris minuta*
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
Curlew *Numenius arquata*
Redshank *Tringa totanus*
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*
Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*
Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*
Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*
Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*
Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*
Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*
Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida*
Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*
Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*
Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*
Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*
Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*
Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*
Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*

We consider close views of fifty-six species of unusual or rare birds to be an excellent five days birding. From the numbers of birds recorded it is obvious that very active northerly migration was taking place throughout our stay offshore.

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