UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

PART ONE

ABU DHABI

The United Arab Emirates has been acknowledged as one of the top four destinations in the whole of the Middle East for bird-watching tours. As regular readers of Arabian Wildlife will know, it is also the home to some small populations of the endangered Arabian leopard and caracal, both foci of attention for the UAE-based Arabian Leopard Trust, whilst its coastal mangroves are among the most extensive to be found anywhere around the Arabian peninsula.

Abu Dhabi's natural heritage offers the discerning visitor something more than the readily available sun, sea, sand and shopping. The variety of landscape, habitat, animal and plant life presents a continuing challenge and absorbing interest to long-term residents of the country, and as thousands of visitors a year are now discovering, even a limited experience of the environment of Abu Dhabi offers a very special reward to the eco-tourist.

ABU DHABI ISLAND AND SURROUNDING AREAS

The capital, home to over 500,000 people is a mixture of high-rise apartment blocks, shopping centres and office buildings, interspersed with some remarkably lush parks and gardens and small but delightful woods, while it is bounded on its eastern side by an extensive mangrove-lined creek, a mere 75 metres or so from a busy Corniche road.

The eco-tourist will find that the capital's main attraction is its birdlife, with a variety of interesting resident and migrant species to excite the avid 'twitcher'. Top birding locations include the following:

Bateen Wood and Mushrif Palace Gardens

In the centre of the island, these two sites are a lushly overgrown (and artificially watered) small wood with, just across the road, a fine open park adjacent to the Presidential Guest Palace. Both are attractive to migrants, with species like Masked Shrike, Blyth's Pipit, Eversmann's Redstart and Red-breasted Flycatcher being possible sightings. A number of raptors winter in the area, including Sparrowhawks and Honey Buzzards (rare elsewhere in the Emirates), while Arabia's second Oriental Honey Buzzard was seen over the wood in November 1994.

Eastern Lagoon and Corniche

Several kilometres long, the new Eastern Corniche road runs along the side of the lagoon which is fringed on the other side by some of the best mangroves to be found anywhere along Abu Dhabi's coastline. At low tide, the mudflats attract thousands of waders in winter, many of which, coming from their Siberian breeding ground, like the Greater and Lesser Sandplover or the Terek Sandpiper, are much sought after by visiting birders. Resident species, including the Western Reef Heron and Little Green Heron, while during the winter months, the grassy verges and the mangroves overlooking the lagoon are popular sites for flocks of Cattle Egrets.

In the lagoon itself, the occasional humpbacked dolphin can be seen idly swimming along, 20 or 30 metres from land. Dolphins are more easily encountered, however, by taking a boat trip out from the Intercontinental Hotel on the western side of the island, towards the neighbouring islands of Balfrani and Futaisi (the latter closed to the public), while the sand banks and shorelines can accommodate literally thousands of seabirds during the winter months, including local specialties like the Slender-billed Gull, Lesser-crested Tern and Socotra Cormorant, the latter virtually endemic to the southern Arabian Gulf.

Al Ghar and Al Wathba

Good birding can be found at the Al Ghar Lake and the Al Wathba Camel Track around 40 km inland. In 1993, the former held Arabia's first colony of Greater Flamingos for over 70 years, and, provided water is present, is a regular breeding site for Black-winged Stilt and Kentish Plover, while the 10 sq km of grassland in the centre of the Al Wathba Camel Track has produced local rarities like Oriental Skylark, Grey Hypocolius, White Stork, Cream-coloured Courser and Merlin.
The nearby sand dunes, interspersed with rocky outcrops, easily visited without the need for four-wheel-drive skill, hold a variety of other wildlife, ranging from small mammals like the lesser jerboa and gerbils to a range of reptiles, from the sand skink to the larger desert monitor and the vegetarian spiny-tailed agamid. Even if the wildlife doesn’t make a showing, the calmness and solitude of the dunes themselves have much to offer the visitor.

**THE AL AIN AREA**

The oasis-city of Al Ain has modern parks and gardens like Abu Dhabi, but most visitors find the traditional agriculture of the palm-groves and their falaj water channels more fascinating. Here irrigation techniques that are at least 3000 years old are still in use, even if some of the water today is pumped from a desalination plant on the coast. On a hot summer’s day, a walk through the palm groves can be cool and refreshing, with the song of birds like the Little Green Bee Eater, the Palm Dove or the Purple Sunbird as company.

Jabal Hafit, whose summit is now reached by a fine road, is the best place in the UAE to see rocks of Egyptian Vultures, although it is years since the last Arabian tahr was seen on the mountain. The vultures, and other raptors, like the occasional Golden Eagle, find plenty of food in the nearby Al Ain Zoo, the largest zoological gardens in the Middle East. Free-flying Sacred Ibis can be seen here, as well as endangered Dorcas gazelle, ibex and a host of imported animals and birds, including, remarkably, a flock of penguins that have somehow adapted to the desert conditions.

To the north-east of Al Ain and Buraimi lie the Hajar Mountains, great craggy and seemingly barren peaks composed of some of the oldest rocks in Arabia. Within their wadis are high streams of freshwater and little mountain oases, like the Omari village of Aboule, a popular weekending place for residents and visitors alike.

In the mountains, the lucky visitor may see the occasional Arabian gazelle, while the wadi pools and streams, often bedecked with ferns and other rare flora, hold Arabian toads and wadi racers, agile snakes of the Colubrid family, as well as brightly-coloured butterflies and dragonflies. Also resident, though much more cautious of man, with good reason, are a few caracal lynxes. The Arabian leopard now seems to be confined to the higher mountains further north. Those in search of new discoveries should take a look at the small fish in the wadi streams. Local scientists are convinced that there are new sub-species at least out there waiting to be identified.

If a living species or sub-species can’t be discovered, there is always the chance of finding an extinct one. The Late Cretaceous rocks that form the mountains were laid down on the seafloor many millions of years ago, and now contain fossilized mussels, echinoids, corals and other marine life. One place to look is the horseshoe-shaped Jabal Hywaysah, inside Oman just outside Buraimi. Known as ‘Fossil Valley’ to local residents, it can be visited by saloon car, and without visa, and is one of the best places to fossick for fossils anywhere in the region. Numerous previously unknown species of echinoids have been described from here by scientists from London’s Natural History Museum, while others, yet to be described, are probably to be found decorating mantelpieces all over Abu Dhabi!

On the edges of gravel plains to the west of Al-Ain caracals and gazelles are sometimes sighted, and the ubiquitous Arabian red fox may be seen almost everywhere, particularly in car lights after nightfall. Also present on the edge of the desert, as well as in and around Al Ain itself, are the UAE’s three species of hedgehogs, Brandt’s, Ethiopian and the long-eared.

**THE WESTERN DESERT AND LIWA**

The Western Desert stretches from the highway between Al Ain and Abu Dhabi city across to the western and south-western borders with Saudi Arabia. The population centre of the area was traditionally the Liwa Oasis, a chain of palm gardens sheltering on the leeward side of great rolling sand dunes. Liwa has changed much since it was first described by Wilfred Thesiger nearly half a century ago, with roads, new settlements and farms, but it still retains some of its original character. The new greenery has attracted migrant birds to over-winter, while the Namaqua Dove may also be seen by the lucky visitor as it continues its explosive range extension across the Arabian peninsula. With less than a dozen confirmed records for the whole country, however, it remains one of the UAE’s rarest birds; and any visitor fortunate enough to sight one should make sure they submit details to the Emirates Bird Records Committee.

The wildlife is similar to that found in the rest of the desert around Al Ain or inland from Abu Dhabi. The key local speciality for the eco-tourist is geological rather than biological in nature, Abu Dhabi’s ‘Desert Roses’, crystalline assemblages of gypsum and other salts formed as a result of the evaporation of the inland sabkha flats that lie between the major ranges of dunes. The best place to find them is between Liwa and the Shah oilfield to the south, on the very edge of the Rub al-Khali or Empty Quarter.

One of the most amazing sights for the visitor is the rolling fields of fodder and massive tree plantation to be seen down the main road to Liwa, part of the extensive programme of afforestation and agricultural extension that has taken place over the last couple of decades. Some of the plantations cover huge areas. Two in Bainuna, to the north of the region, for example, together cover well over a couple of hundred square kilometres.

These areas, free from the pressure of hunting or of the increasingly serious problems caused by over-grazing, are veritable havens for local wildlife. Last year, in the first cautious step towards the reintroduction of some of the country’s endangered animals into the wild, a number of Arabian gazelles were released into one of the larger plantations, where they are now thriving.

Some native mammals can still be found, including not only the common Cape hare, Arabian red fox, jirds and jerboas, but also rarer species, like the timid sand cat, although the hyaena is believed to have disappeared within...
the last 20 or 30 years. Reports of honey badgers remain unconfirmed - eco-tourists wishing to add to the country’s list of wildlife, please note!

THE COAST AND ISLANDS

The coastline of Abu Dhabi is over 400 km long. Low-lying, often of sabkha sand-flats that stand only a few centimetres above high-tide mark, it has changed much over the past few thousands of years, and the evidence of former coastlines can still be seen. The highway from Abu Dhabi to the western industrial zone of Ruwais, for example, passes across the sabkha, and to the south, inland, the old shoreline can be identified, a low range of hills that mark the beginnings of the desert.

From the sabkha itself, sandstone and limestone hills jut out, some little more than eroded stumps with a mushroom-shaped top, and others that would formerly have been large islands. After heavy rainfall, much of the sabkha can still be flooded. The tops of the mesas are often covered with flint tiles, and it is here, archaeologists believe, that some of the earliest evidence of man’s presence in the Emirates may be awaiting discovery.

Close to the edge of the sabkha are over a hundred ‘real’ islands, separated from the land by shallow backwaters and creeks that represent the drainage channels of a moister time, and often fringed by extensive forests of mangroves. For the visiting eco-tourist, this area can be somewhat frustrating because access to the coast-line is often blocked, either by the difficulty of crossing the sabkha or because large areas have been fenced off as private property.

One of the most fascinating discoveries made in this region has been evidence that some six million years ago, in the Late Miocene, a huge river ran across what is now desert from the mountains and drained into the Arabian Gulf. The sandstone mesas and bluffs that are the eroded remains of the flood plains have yielded the most extensive terrestrial fossil fauna from the period known anywhere in the world, including an early ancestor of the horse, Hippotherium abu-abiense, and a previously unrecorded genus of gerbils, Abudhabia bayunensis.

The fossil discoveries were made by a team from London’s Natural History Museum, working with the support of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, and the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, a healthy example of the way in which Abu Dhabi’s oil industry is helping to back scientific research into the country’s historical, pre-historic and palaeontological past.

Part of the coastline can still be reached easily. At small villages such as Harmiya, fisherman ply their ancient trade. Green or hawksbill turtles breed on the remoter beaches, and dugongs are to be found in some numbers feeding on the seagrasses in more sheltered waters.

Most of the undisturbed inshore islands are not accessible to the general public, a fact that may be frustrating for the visitor, but for the wildlife of the islands, the restrictions are distinctly beneficial. On Abu Al Abayad and nearby Umm Amim, for example, are the only two Crab Plover colonies known anywhere on the Arabian side of the Gulf. The species can be seen on the shoreline of the Dhabbiyah peninsula in winter. On other islands, like Al-Salahah, North Yasat and Kharda are Socora Cormorant colonies, while terns can be found breeding in summer throughout the islands, particularly on Qarnein, over 100 km, offshore, which had nearly 40,000 pairs of breeding birds in the summer of 1994, including Bridled, Swift, Lesser Crested and White-checked Terns, as well as Sooty Gulls.

One island that is gradually opening up to the public, however, is Sir Bani Yas, the private nature reserve of President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan. Although for historians, the main attraction on the island is the remains of the first pre-Islamic Christian site ever found in the Emirates, those of a more ecological bent will find its eclectic collection of animals fascinating. Where else outside Africa can one see herds of several hundred gazelles, (sand, Arabian and Thomson’s) kicking up dust as they spring across the landscape? Arabian oryx can be seen, along with their cousins the scimitar-horned oryx, beisa oryx and jembsok, while other species breeding happily in the large enclosures or running wild include the addax, waterbuck, and even llamas and giraffe.

Sir Bani Yas and the other offshore islands also act as attractive stopping-over points for migrant birds, including both passerines and the raptors that feed upon them, and the western islands of Abu Dhabi have the bulk of eastern Arabia’s breeding pairs of Sooty Falcons, as well as 90 per cent of the region’s Ospreys.

NATURE RESERVES

At the time of writing, there are no formally designated nature reserves within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, although the area of the Eastern Lagoon mangroves, just to the east of Abu Dhabi island, has been declared a protected area by Presidential order. Access to many of the islands, however, is restricted by their owners, many of whom are concerned with the need to conserve wildlife.

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