PART TWO
DUBAI AND THE NORTHERN EMIRATES

In Dubai and the northern emirates, the serious eco-tourist can experience an exciting destination, parts of whose culture and terrain remains in almost pristine condition.

Dubai had already established itself as a quality tourist destination, offering winter sunshine, beaches, cheap shopping and desert safaris, by the time commercially-organized bird-watching tours started in 1992, when a party of German visitors found (to their delight) over 170 species during a 10 day tour. Gone forever was the preconception that there were ‘no birds in Arabia’! The potential for growth in bird-watching eco-tourism is underpinned by the fact that the UAE’s bird list stands at slightly over 400 species, with Dubai and the northern Emirates arguably having the most species to offer. Of these, 80 are breeding residents and the remainder are migrants from north and central Asia, northern Europe, India and even Africa. On a 10-day tour it is possible to see all the ‘difficult’ Arabian species, such as Socotra Cormorant, Crab Plover, Sooty Gull, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, Black-crowned Finch Lark, Hume’s Wheatear and Purple Sunbird, plus dozens of other Asian migrant specialities.

THE GULF COAST

Wader watchers are in their element in the northern Emirates where a visit to one of the three major wetlands on the Gulf coast should produce an exciting abundance of palearctic shorebirds.

The sheltered tidal lagoon at Khor Dubai, 50 ha of tidal mudflats located within Dubai’s city limits, holds over 50,000 birds at any one time during the winter season. Internationally important for its large migrant flocks of Lesser Sand Plovers (up to 3000 counted in winter) and Broad-billed Sandpipers (up to 4000 can occur in autumn), it also supports significant numbers of Kentish Plover (up to 3500 in winter, with a large proportion resident). The most attractive species include Great White Egret, Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, Marsh Harrier, Spotted Eagle, Osprey and Caspian Tern. The area can be viewed from around the perimeter adjacent to the main roads to Hatta and Al Ain. This site has been declared a Wildlife Sanctuary (the country’s only one so far) by Dubai’s Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, whose interest in the high numbers of Greater Flamingos occurring throughout the year encouraged him to build a breeding island in the centre of the lagoon. The area is patrolled by the police to prevent disturbance to the birds and you may be asked to leave. This restriction may not be enforced if they see and understand you are simply watching the birds. Passes can be obtained from Nad al Sheba police station.

Further up the coast in Umm al Quwain, an even bigger expanse of mudflats at Khor al Beidah hosts the country’s largest wintering flock of Crab Plovers (up to 500 birds between September and February), often in the company of the even rarer Great Knot, which until recently was believed to winter only in the Far East and Australasia! These two species are good crowd-pullers for attracting visiting bird-watchers. The extensive khor is also a favoured site of Greater Sand Plover, Whimbrel and Terek Sandpiper. The complex of sheltered intertidal mudflats, islands and mangroves is bounded inland by sabkha (salt flats) and rolling dunes, which host several breeding species of larks, including Black-crowned Finch, Lesser Short-toed and Hoopoe Lark. In winter, Isabelline and Desert Wheatear, Desert Warbler and Tawny Pipit are common. Access to this remote area is by several unofficial dirt tracks.

The spectacular lagoon at Al Jazeerah Khor, south of Ras al Khaimah, where the Arabian Gulf is guarded on the land side by a high bank of red sand dunes from where the observer can get a wonderful view of the mudflats and its bird population.

EAST COAST BEACHES AND MANGROVES

At Khor Kalba on the border with the Sultanate of Oman, is situated the country’s (and possibly Arabia’s) oldest forest of black mangrove, Avicennia marina. This area, one of the jewels in the itinerary of visiting naturalists, hosts, amongst other creatures, an endemic sub-species of White-collared Kingfisher. At certain times of the year, turtles (green,
United Arab Emirates

Birdwatcher at lake shore.

loggerback and hawksbill) may enter the khor to feed, while the nearby coastline is favoured by eight species of tern and six species of gull, which roost on the black sandy beach or feed on dead fish lying discarded on the beach. The mangroves are alive with the calls of Clamorous Reed Warblers, Booted Warblers and Purple Sunbirds for most of the year, while Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters roost in spectacular numbers in autumn. The mudflats are teeming with small crabs, the staple diet of several species, including the White-collared Kingfisher and occasionally Crab Plover, Greater Sand Plover and Whimbrel.

The remainder of the eastern coastline teems with gulls, terns and skuas, plus, at the northern end, the occasional Audubon’s Shearwater, Wilson’s Storm-Petrel or a ‘skem’ of Socotra Cormorants. Sooty Falcons are regular migrants along here, where the Hajar Mountains form a spectacular backdrop. One is likely to find a variety of birds of prey, including Lappet-faced and Griffon Vulture, Bonelli’s, Spotted and Short-toed Eagle adjacent to the dark, apparently featureless hills. There are very few hotels along this coastline, and because of the area’s increasing popularity, the two most popular ones, the Fujairah Hilton and the Oceanic are regularly full. There are also three smaller hotels, and work is going on to build at least two more large hotels, which may be finished by the end of 1996. This is bound to open up the area further for visitors.

DESERTS AND DUNES

A visit to Arabia would not be complete without a trip into the ‘desert’. Most visitors are intrigued by the giant sand dunes, reached after less than a 30 minute drive from Dubai. The red sand dunes in the northern Emirates (the most dramatic are found on the Dubai to Hatta road) are small compared to those found further south in the Empty Quarter, but are always worth exploring for signs of life. The most common bird resident is the Hoopoe Lark, while in winter small areas of scrub are likely to attract Desert Wheatear and Desert Warbler. The unique stands of glut trees (*Prosopis cinerarea*) characterize the UAE desert and provide a magnet for birds, the most common resident being Great Grey Shrike. During the cool season the trees attract several species of Sylvia warbler (Orphean, Menetries’Warbler and Desert Lesser Whitethroat), while in summer they provide nest sites for Yellow-throated Sparrows.

Qarn Nazwa: Qarn means a ‘horn’ of rock; in this case a limestone outcrop set in the middle of an expanse of red sand dunes half way between Dubai and Hatta. The outcrop is undeveloped and remains dramatic in appearance in spite of some old quarrying and two roads which dissect the site, providing convenient viewing for the site’s well-watched Eagle Owls. The area is important for several rare migrant birds, including Eastern Pieed and Red-tailed Wheatear and Hume’s Lesser Whitethroat. The caves and cracks in the rock surface support a good vertebrate fauna including red fox and free-tailed bat. The site is fenced from the Dubai-Hatta main road, although easy unrestricted access is available from the road to Margham which branches off here.

THE HAJAR MOUNTAINS

The area around the mountain village of Masafi, which lies at an altitude of 600 metres, has a number of sites worth visiting, particularly on the road to Dibba, where one passes through a range of pale foothills and on to Tayibah plain. The region is quite unspoiled away from the towns and there
there are lots of wadis to explore. Shale foothills divided by gravel plains with scattered \textit{Acacia} and \textit{Zizyphus} trees are set amidst a dramatic mountain landscape comprising one of the most natural, unspoilt and beautiful environments in the UAE. Resident bird species include Bonelli’s Eagle, Sand Partridge, Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse, Desert Lark, Hume’s Wheatear (easily identified by contrasting back-and-white plumage) and House Bunting. Winter visitors, Red-tailed Wheatear, Desert Lesser Whitethroat and Plain Leaf Warbler are regular.

Most of the mountains are best explored by four-wheel-drive vehicle since walking can be quite difficult. The mountains were formed by tectonic plate movement against the Indian subcontinent and have volcanic origins deep beneath the seabed of the Gulf of Oman. These dark ‘ophiolitic’ mountains support resident Sand Partridge, Pale Crag Martin, Scrub Warbler and House Bunting, while Indian Roller, Yellow-vented Bulbul and Little Green Bee-eater are found in the shaded, more cultivated wadis. The key birds for bird-watching visitors occur in winter and include species such as Eastern Pied & Red-tailed Wheatear, Desert Lesser Whitethroat and Plain Leaf Warbler.

OTHER AREAS

Mushrif Park lies in a sheltered dip amongst rolling sand desert about 12 km from Dubai Airport. It is a natural \textit{ghaf} (\textit{Prosopis cineraria}) forest although now developed for day visitors, containing an extensive road system and leisure facilities. It supports a healthy population of Bruce’s Scops Owl, which are often conveniently found at night under the street lamps. A number of other interesting species occur, including Orphean Warbler and Eastern Black Redstart. Yellow-throated Sparrow and Hoopoe nest in the park. The Ethiopian hedgehog is widespread. The entrance fee is Dh5 ($3) per car and the gate timings are 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m.

A bird-watching visit to the Emirates is not complete without touring the numerous golf courses, city parks and agricultural areas. Recommended are the Emirates Golf Club course (where special permission is required), Safa Park and the grass fields around Dibdagha and Hamramiyah, south of Ras al Khamiah. In addition there are a number of other sites, less known for their beauty, though teeming with birdlife. These include Ramtha (sewage) lagoons, a place which holds the country’s greatest variety of wetland species.

Colin Richardson

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Group of birdwatchers.
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