Meneties Sylvia mystacea, Blackcap Sylvia atricapilla, Desert Lesser Whitethroat Sylvia minula and Willow Warblers Phylloscopus trochilus. All at their first resting post crossing the Rub al Khali from the south. Palm Doves were present in all settlements, but only two House Sparrows were found near the Liwa T-junction.

The second most common species was Indian Silverbill, a surprise, and an indication of its nomadic character to have colonised such a remote place. It occurred in small parties, up to 15 birds, in all the cultivations. Brown-necked Raven was present even in the remotest of sand dune areas between cultivations. Probably resident, one Great Grey Shrike was seen at Namla cultivation (UA23), 40 km from Liwa village, at a time when its mate was probably at the nest. (This reinforces my understanding of this species, which has always been recorded in every habitat visited in the U.A.E. and appears to be even more widespread than Brown-necked Raven!)

Swallow was seen everywhere though in small numbers. Only one each of Sand Martin Riparia riparia and House Martin Delichon urbica were found, near the Liwa T-junction.

The Masafi area, U.A.E.

There has been no organised ornithological study of the northern section of the Hajar range in the near-present United Arab Emirates since the early springs of 1970 and 1971 when Michael Gallagher led expeditions to observe, record and collect specimens of the region's natural history. EXERCISE TAYUR WATCH from 31 Jan-10 Feb 1970 and EX LAPWING from 20-31 March 1971, sponsored by Headquaters Land Forces Gulf were centred on the village of Masafi (WA27), an area which has greatly changed in the last ten years. I was interested very briefly the footsteps of the members of these expeditions and recorded all birds found in a 24 hour period 3-4 March 1988.

Masafi lies in a pass at about 400 metres, in the centre of the Hajar mountain range which form a barrier between the western facing desert Sulhins of the Arabian Gulf and the fertile coastal belt of the eastern U.A.E. which faces the Gulf of Oman (see Fig 4). The area covered during this study encompasses the bases of Wadi Ham and Wadi Siji (which continues as Wadi Nakh north of Masafi). The surrounding mountains are dark, bare and rugged, mostly igneous rock, although there are outcrops of hills consisting of a pale cretaceous shale, which supports the greater number of species. The little vegetation is mostly goat-grazed acacia but during my visit there was evidence of considerable new growth following heavy rains in mid-February.

The dark ophiolitic barren peaks bounding the course of Wadi Siji from Siji village yielded few birds. However the calls (yelps) of Desert Lark were heard continuously and small groups were observed in most locations on the broken stony hillsides and adjacent gravel plains. Palm Doves were common throughout and appeared to be nesting. Black-headed Bulbul was seen amongst the few trees in the deep wadi and on the upper level of level of gravel plains dotted with stunted thorn. Up to seven birds were observed together and much chasing from tree to tree was taking place. Purple Sunbird were here too, the male in glossy breeding plumage. A pair of Sand Partridge were disturbed on the lower hill slopes.

Raven flying over in a northerly direction, and a number of Pale Crag Martin, B in all, sailed over the valley. The previous evening at dusk I had seen a number of Pallid Swifts feeding, their nesting colony probably nearby. Along a narrow, winding and uninhabited V-shaped wadi on the east side of the valley I found the ubiquitous Desert Lark Rubigone in pairs, and numerous interesting non-residents. Two Red-tailed Wheatears Oenanthe xanthopyrynga were still present and one male Black Redstart Phoenicurus ochruros was perched on a thorn tree on the nearby slopes. Both are winter visitors and likely to be gone by the end of March. Two fine male Rock Thrush Monticola saxatilis sat on a ledge about 10 metres above my head. Movement in a small acacia alerted me to a Plain Leaf Warbler Phylloscopus neglectus, a scarce winter visitor, and often overlooked due to its similarity to the more common wintering Chiffchaff. Apart from its 'plain' grey plumage its calls include a distinctive harsh 'chick'.

Above me a single bird, which by its undulating flight and outline I took to be a pipit, landed high up on the mountain-side. Its back was light-brown and its underside was even paler with no distinguishing markings. It was too far off to see clearly but it resembled a Tawny Pipit. I could not gauge its size, nor see the size of its bill but I concluded it must be the elusive Long-billed Pipit. As I approached to get a better look, it flew off and was never seen again.

I found a whole different range of avifauna in the cultivated lower valley of Wadi Nakh adjacent to the old village of Masafi. Graceful Warblers were calling everywhere and a pair of Indian Rollers displayed above the palm groves. It was surprising to find Grey Francolin roaming freely in one densely overgrown garden. This species is unusual so deep in the mountains and may have been introduced. Similarly 'introduced' a Ring-necked Parakeet flew noisily over a few minutes later. A Little Green Bee-eater was hunting from telegraph wires in the village.

About 5 miles north of Masafi on the road to Dibba the road crosses Tayibah gravel plain, situated at the head of Wadis Tayibah and Asimah. Pied Wheatear were perched prominently on many acacia trees - I counted 14 males and 1 female in 4
hours, indicating major passage taking place. For European Wheat eaters Gezz Deserti, there were also present.

Those trees which did not host a wheatear were bristling with House Bunting. Over twenty were counted, but probably three times that number occurred on the plain that day. The plain was divided partially by Wadi Asimah at one side and here I found another pair of Sand Pratincole and a male Rock Thrush Monticola solitarius. A female Rock Thrush was perched amongst the foliage of a small tree, and a party of five very vocal Arabian Babblers played follow-me-leader with no apparent sign of pairing. Another Plain Leaf Warbler was seen and amongst the surface layer of broken stones two Tawny Pipit Anthus campestris were feeding.

Stangely coy, normally widespread resident species House Bunting, Scrub Warbler, Great Grey Shrike and localised breeder Indian Silverbill were not recorded. Shy, localised and unobtrusive, sandgrouse were not chanced upon, nor were owls and larger birds of prey.

The Harrat al Harrah Reserve, Northern Saudi Arabia

The Harrat al Harrah reserve, in the extreme north of Saudi Arabia (mainly squares EA39, EB39, EB38, FA38 & FA37) is a bleak and inhospitable region of arid plains and low or level desert sand. It covers some 17,000 sq km and is managed by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development which employs a permanent guard force to protect it. Although completely treeless in the rest of northern Arabia, it is unique for its rich coverage of small shrubs, grasses and herbs, which is the result of a policy of exclusion of livestock and their flocks, over the last two years. This exclusion of stock and the good vegetational cover have created optimum conditions for many species of ground dwelling birds. In turn, the abundant population of small birds and rodents makes available ample prey for several predatory species. The Harrat al Harrah reserve region was one of the last places where the Ostrich occurred in Saudi Arabia - it has been extinct since about 1930. It is one of the few places that the HOBURA breeds in the Kingdom. Altogether there are some 24 species of birds currently breeding in the reserve and a further 10 species which may be categorised as probable or possible breeding birds. This is, of course, the richest of any comparable zone in northern Arabia.

In addition to the diversity of bird species, the abundance of individual individuals is generally greater in the reserve than anywhere in the surrounding regions. The most prominent family represented in the reserve are the larks, of which there are so many that it is certain that the avifauna of the reserve will continue to improve and enlarge. If, however, these policies are relaxed, even for a short time, the vegetation will rapidly be degraded by livestock and the reserve will quickly revert to holding only the impoverished avifauna which is found elsewhere in northern Arabia.

M.C.J.

Farasani Islands, Red Sea, Saudi Arabia

The Farasan Islands lie some 80 km off the Saudi Arabian mainland opposite the Banban site 16°20' and 17°10'N and 41°30' and 42°30'E (mainly squares HB10 and IA10). The archipelago is comprised of dozens of named islands and innumerable islets and sandbars. There are 20 islands, four of which have settled villages. All the islands are covered with a substrate of brownish sand. Of these, two large islands have a very broken terrain of small hills, gullies and craggy coastal cliffs, although there are also subkha tidal flats and mangrove thickets on the coast. In many places there is dense scrub with acacia and euphorbia thickets. Agriculture activities and date cultivation are minimal, the main traditional occupation being fishing.

I was able to visit the Islands for just two days in March 1985. The following account has added several land bird species to the known list of birds resident or breeding on the islands. My observations, plus a few records gleaned from diverse published sources and some unpublished reports (including from ABBA files), have now been published (Jennings, 1988, Fauna Saudi Arabia 9: 457-467). The breeding list at that time had 9 seabirds and 11 land birds, including seven passerines. The seabirds and shore birds include Brown Booby, Red-billed Tropicbird, Sooty and White-eyed Gull and seven terns.

One of the most interesting observations of my own trip was that of Pink-backed Pelican nesting in Rhizophora mangrove on the coast. The commonest bird of prey on the Farasan Islands is the Egyptian Vulture and there were probably in the region of