A month later, on 3 July, another adult male was seen 50 km south, but apart from these records and another sighting of a probable female in spring 1989, records of lesser kestrels in the region seem to be very few and far between. (John Norton, c/o National Conservation Bureau, 136 Kingfisher Court, Newbury, Berkshire, RG14 5SJ.)

The lesser kestrel is a common summer breeding visitor to parts of the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Asia, although it has undergone declines in many countries in recent years. It is a social falcon, inhabiting open, arid country, but has adapted to using nest-sites in old buildings in urban areas.

John Norton, c.o National Conservation Bureau, 136 Kingfisher Court, Newbury, Berkshire, RG14 5SJ.

**0841 CORACIAS GARRULUS European roller**

The status of the European roller in the United Arab Emirates is much the same as that recorded throughout the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. It occurs regularly on spring and autumn passage, in transit during its rather extravagant seasonal migration between the warm temperate zones of Europe and Central Asia and its African wintering grounds. It is most likely to be found in the Emirate from mid May and Sep to October. Some occur in March and August, and it is exceptional to find any from late May to mid July.

Its 1990 spring passage was healthy, with a number of reports of one and two seen throughout April and usually May, whilst parties, of up to six together were reported from 10-25 April at Dubai, Asab in the western desert and in the expanding fodder fields of Digdaga, in the far north of the country.

Digdaga (VB28) near Ras al Khaimah has been a source of ornithological discoveries in recent years. It is the only large open grassland in the country, which provides excellent breeding habitat for the European roller for Arabia. The roller was present for the first time in 1989. This year the fields have been expanded further over the gravel plains, and indigenous Ghaf trees have been carefully retained wherever they stand in and around the new fields. This has created a marvellous landscape of mature trees and grassland; ideal for Indian rollers, which breed in the area.

European rollers were recorded on all visits from early April 1990, and nine birds were found on 25 May, when passage was especially well and there were many present. They seemed at home perching on irrigation spray heads, many of which were already occupied by Indian rollers, and surprisingly the two species appeared to be co-existing quite happily. They were still present in June, and on 4 July, I found five birds, including at least one juvenile. This young bird had buf edges to its blue wing coverts and very pale face and throat (mainly due to creamy pale feather tips). The brown to the back was pale and indistinct. Nearby, a pair of adults were chasing in what appeared to be a half-hearted display. Juvenile birds were later recorded on several subsequent visits to the fields, which are considered to hold several hundred hectares. This habitat appears to have supported several pairs of European rollers this year.

This is the first breeding record of European roller for Arabia. More conclusive breeding evidence will be sought in 1991 when their presence at Digdaga will be monitored more closely.

Colin Richardson, P.O. Box 2825, Dubai, UAE.

**NB** The European roller breeds throughout much of Iran, in Iraq at the head of the Arabian Gulf and probably in Jordan. Ed.

**WHEATERS OF THE Oenanthe Lugens Complex (MOURNING WHEATEAR) IN ARABIA**

Mike Jennings recently (1989, Phoenix 6:48-50) expressed the view that South Arabian mourning wheatears Еrogenе " lugentoides " should be considered a separate species from O. lugens. Hollom et al. (Birds of the Middle East and North Africa, 1989) also followed this course. In this note I aim to present evidence which suggests that it would be preferable to continue to regard South Arabian wheatears as a group of subspecies of the mourning wheatear O. lugens.

Wheatear taxonomy has been confused by the high liability of plumage colouration to the genus, and wheatears include an unusually high proportion (for birds) of polymorphic species, species with a range of plumage types within the same sex of a single subspecies. Wheatears and the Middle Eastern subspecies are differentiated by variations on two themes, of black-and-white or sandy plumage, but many species are polymorphic in one or more of crown, throat or belly colour. Also, the degree of sexual or age dimorphism may vary between races of single species. Characters involved in polymorphism or sexual dimorphism in subspecies are sometimes responsible for possible formal differentiation in others and for distinction between yet other full species. I recently reviewed the relationships of wheatears in an attempt to sort out this confusion (Tye, A. 1989, Bonn. zool. Beitr. 40: 165-182) and came to the following conclusions regarding mourning wheatears.

This species has more geographical races (eight) than any other wheatear. The races are eight isolated populations, in North and East Africa and the Middle East, including Arabia. These races are often divided into three groups. The "Lugens" group comprises three dark plumage races, possibly four, which are sexually dimorphic subspecies: O. lugens, 0.1. lugubris, 0.1. vaurie1 and 0.1. schalowi. These are isolated, montane subspecies, found in Ethiopia, Somalia and possibly NE Arabia. The "Jugentoides" group is what Hollom et al. (1988) and Jennings (1989) refer to as "South Arabian wheatears"; it consists of two sexually dimorphic subspecies: 0.1. lugens of SW Arabia and 0.1. boscaiweni of the extreme south. The "Jugs" group has three subspecies: 0.1. lugens breeds in the Middle East from approximately the extreme south to 0.1. persica breeds in Iran and possibly NE Arabia; these two are sexually dimorphic. The third, 0.1. halophila of North Africa, is from Morocco and very sexually dimorphic. The "Jugs" group is partially migratory, overlapping with other races in winter.

The three subspecies groups, and even some of the individual subspecies, eg 0.1. schalowi, are

* Scientific names of all species included in the project and their reference numbers are given on Form 2: 'Birds of Breeding Birds of Arabia' and are (except for major towns) are suffixed by the national atlas square reference and these can be seen on the maps in this issue. Bibliographic references are kept to a minimum and are given in abbreviated form. All articles are attributed to the Editor unless otherwise shown.