Sooty gull

We found this species to be the most widespread on the island. We found nests in a variety of locations, but mostly the scrapes were made on open ground, amongst stones, or on sandy areas and sometimes adjacent to a small shrub or larger rock, but always well spaced. Many scrapes were still without eggs. Of nest with eggs we found laying was quite advanced with about 30% of all nests found to have the usual complement of three eggs. 40% had one egg, and 30% had two eggs.

The population appeared to be greater than when last recorded in 1984 (Foxall 1985) when the winter number of 100 increased to 200. We estimated that there were 400 birds on the island. The species feeds its young almost entirely from the tern colonies which we noted were beginning to form, though not yet laying.

Qarneyn Island is one of only three known breeding sites of the sooty gull in the Arabian Gulf, and is therefore critical to their survival in the area. The other island sites of Sirku and Sir Abu Nair (UA27) are already being developed. Our concern over the increase in numbers over the last few years, and their prospective increased predation on the tern colonies, was balanced by a concern for their nests and their exposed siting. The nests were likely to be regularly flattened by the increasing use of vehicles on the island. Tyre tracks were in place on many vehicle tracks and the nests were not go. We feel strongly that the use of vehicles should be limited and restricted to set routes where possible. A possible reason for the increase in numbers of sooty gulls this season (compared to 1984) is that they have been driven away from other island sites. This puts the onus on the protector of this island to retain this site as one of the last breeding grounds of sooty gull in the Gulf.

Crested (swift) tern

We found only small numbers, about 250 counted (often mixed with the lesser crested tern roosts), involving in noisy courtship chasing around the northern rocky shorelines. They appeared to form separate night roosts, although at times it was difficult to separate them in the flight. There were two areas of low rocks situated above high water, about 20 m from shore, on the north-west and north-east sides, adjacent to two of the peaks favouring the tropbirds. We noted that there were often three or four birds engaged in high level chasing, in pairs, and were very vocal. Colonies had not yet formed.

We understand from Ian Foxall, who was on duty at the radio station, that in 1984 they joined together in tight, though distinct, colonies with lesser crested terns laying simultaneously in early or mid May. Crested terns were outnumbered by lesser crested in 1984, and appeared to be so in 1989, by a factor of about 5:1.

The fact that this species was greatly outnumbered by lesser crested terns was unfortunate, as we understand this species suffered total losses in 1984 due to egg-collecting. The feralness of the terns in their breeding behaviour, putting the species’ future on the island at risk. With the combined effect of egg-collecting and predation by sooty gulls, this species is now endangered as a breeding site on the island. There are only four other nesting sites in the UAE which are also at risk.

Lesser crested tern

This was the commonest species on the island. We found 1,300 birds present, mostly at two noisy roosts, a night time and morning roost on some offshore rocks to the north-west, and a similar roost in the afternoon on the north-east side. Egg-laying had not yet commenced but from numbers already present this was clearly one of the largest colonies of this species in the Gulf. In 1984 egg-laying commenced on 18 May (Foxall 1985).

White-cheeked tern

No white-cheeked terns were recorded. In 1984 numbers were present in late April (Foxall 1985). Perhaps in 1989 we were too early, or there may be fluctuation in their arrival each year and missed by food. We felt that nests were being taken by sooty gulls. We did not know where the colony would be located, but undoubtedly the position of the newly built house would influence their choice, as it overlooks most of the level areas nearby, which would be ideal nest sites. Human disturbance can cause havoc in the colony (Foxall 1985) and it is also proposed that no approach be made by man or vehicle to the birds during their nesting period, as they may desert, and eggs would be taken by sooty gulls.

The major threat is human disturbance, by walking or vehicle approach, and by careless misuse of the existing tracks. Driving should be restricted to set and fenced routes, wandering around the colonies by workmen or staff must be prohibited.

Bridled tern

This species is a visiting breeding species from the southern oceans and has different nesting habits to the other tern species already present on the island. It is also a one of the most threatened seabird species of Arabian shores. We found several hundred birds were already roosting at night on the island but we only saw one colony of lesser crested terns laying simultaneously in the southern end of the island on the tops of low shrubs. Their alarm call was a loud grating-like “drrrr rrr” and quite eerie at night.

This species nests all over the island, including amongst the boulders and in the sandy scrub. In 1984 they paired up immediately on arrival, dispersing throughout the island but we only saw one colony of lesser crested terns laying simultaneously in the southern end of the island on the tops of low shrubs. Their alarm call was a loud grating-like “drrrr rrr” and quite eerie at night.

Similar threats apply as with other breeding terns especially the problem and control of human disturbance.

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

KHOR KALBA (UA27) AND SURROUNDING AREA,
UAE EAST COAST

The following ‘site of interest’ is taken verbatim from Colin Richardson’s recently published book The Birds of the United Arab Emirates (see review later). The sketch and map, Fig 5, are typical of those illustrating Colin’s site guides, but are shown here half of actual size.

“Khor Kalba is 12 kilometres south of Fujairah, facing the Gulf of Oman. By far the most interesting site along this stretch of coastline, it is unique in many ways; not least of which is its area of extensive mangroves which thrive in the slack tidal flow on the upper reaches of the khor beyond the natural harbour.

This is the home of the White-collared Kingfisher, generally rare and localised in Arabia, and here belonging to distinct sub-species found only in the Kalba mangroves. Best seen at low tide when it ventures on to the exposed mudflats of the inner lagoons, hunting from exposed perches on the southern side of the mangroves. No more than about twenty birds have ever been counted, so it is undoubtedly threatened, and measures must be taken soon to preserve its habitat.

Little Green Heron, Clamorous Reed and (probably) Booted Warbler breed in the mangroves too, their calls echoing amongst the thick vegetation, and competing with the screeches of the kingfishers.

The sheltered khor hosts a number of other
interesting wintering species, including Indian Pond Heron, Little Egret, Great White Egret, Greater Sand Plover, Whimbrel and Terek Sandpiper. European Kingfishers are likely to be seen on low perches along the length of the Khor, while Osprey and Marsh Harrier may hunt over the breakwater at the harbour mouth. An Indian Skimmer occurred here in January 1988, a first record for the country.

Inland, at the edge of the gravel plains, are a series of pools. This is good habitat for Temminck’s Stint, Common Snipe, Redshank, Greenshank, Green, Wood and Common Sandpiper from August to April, with a good mixture of additional passage waders in spring and autumn including Collared Pratincole, Ruff and Spotted Redshank. Stone Curlew is a regular autumn visitor. In addition Citrine Wagtail, Water Pipit and Desert Wheatear have wintered amongst the adjacent scrub. Red-wattled Lapwing nest here from March to June and Black-winged Stilt raised young, recorded for the first time in 1988.

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The savannah plains adjacent to the foothills often provide a whole batch of different species. Little Green Bee-eater, Indian Roller, Pale Crag Martin, Yellow-vented Bulbul, Arabian Babblers, Purple Sunbird, Great Grey Shrike and Indian Silverbill are resident, while Pallid Swift, Black-crowned Finch Lark and House Bunting are present for most of the year, breeding when favoured conditions prevail. Breeding was proven for Arabian babbler and palm dove. African collared dove are on the edge of their range here but the European collared dove have not yet reached the area, although they almost certainly will do so in the near future or when Blackstart and Yellow-vented bulbuls, scrub warbler, house bunting and several more common species also occur.

The value and interest of Wabbah crater is that it holds probably all the common resident birds of central Saudi Arabia in one small site. It is a scenic site that would make an ideal study centre for Arabian biologists. Its natural protection from predators and hunters would also make it an ideal site for the release of larger wildlife such as gazelle in a natural environment.

M.C.J.

RECENT REPORTS

Some reports received are especially interesting on account of the species, location, habitat, period of breeding or the number of birds involved. The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unexpected or unusual records received within the last 12 months (some relate to earlier years). Records of unusual birds are often seen that reported by more than one observer and although care is taken to credit records as appropriately as possible, it is regretted if the original finder of a rare bird is not identified here.


Greater flamingo. 150 building mud nests south of Jedda in August 1989. The nests were later washed away by high tides (P.Symens).

Lappet-faced vulture. 35 birds seen in one square north of Hanakiyah central Arabia May 1990, including 22 together at a dead sheep (MCJ).

Golden eagle. Several records in central Arabia May 1990, including a just fledged chick in HB29 (MCJ).


Great green-backed sandgrouse. Several records from the Gulf coast of the UAE (VB24, TB25 and VB27) during March-June 1990 were the first records from these areas (Emirates Bird Report No.12, 1990). At the other extreme of their Arabian range they were found in May 1990 inland at the western Arabian highlands near Medinah (GA26, GA25 and GB25) all new localities for the species (MCJ).

African collared dove. Heard near Aff (IB25)