botanic garden is growing well, and the business community have assisted in the impressive display of a monster sperm whale skeleton and of a 260 million old fossil tree...

Omanis, many with entire families, now form the majority of the visitors, and the policy of opening without charge seven days a week, including two evenings, undoubtedly helps them to come to enjoy this small, compact exhibition. Most visitors to the Sultanate come first to this museum, eager to get a preview and 'feel' of the country before starting their tour. For most visitors this will be their only opportunity to see Oman's animals, for many are shy, nocturnal and scarce and some are still in danger. The successes of the Sultan's plans for saving this heritage for future generations, the subject of a special exhibit called "Conservation in Action", are already well known, but the real meaning of "the Environment" and "Conservation" in Oman becomes clear during a visit to this thriving natural history museum.

M.D. Gallagher, P.O. Box: 668, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.

OSME SURVEY OF SOUTH YEMEN IN 1992

The Ornithological Society of the Middle East is becoming recognised as a Society that can plan and mount important ornithological surveys. Its first expedition was to North Yemen (previously the Yemen Arab Republic) in 1985 and it is currently planning an ambitious survey in Turkey in 1991 in conjunction with local groups. Its third survey will be to South Yemen (formerly the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, but now unified with the YAR as the Republic of Yemen) a corner of south west Arabia which is still very poorly known ornithologically. The Conservation Research Committee of the Society is now formulating plans for an extensive 2 month survey, from February to April, 1992. It is seeking a team of 12 members to be led by Richard Porter, whose own experience and knowledge of Middle East birds and migration is unsurpassed. The survey will pay special attention to raptor migration, look very closely at the ecology of endemic species of Arabia and carry out detailed studies of the various bird habitats available in the country. In addition, specialists within the team hope to look into other ornithological issues including the problems caused by large numbers of Indian house crows in the Aden area. The survey will plan to include Socotra Island in its itinerary, which has its own endemics, and a shipborne examination of coastal and marine birds. Those OSME members who are interested in joining this survey for a month or more should contact Richard Porter, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, U.K.

REPORTING PROCEDURES

Still the biggest problem in processing ABBA report sheets (Form 3) is the date column (Col. 5) being incorrectly completed. What is needed in this column is a precise numerical date arranged in the order day/month/year which can be easily computerised. However several observers cannot resist a more literary expression of the date and show for example "March/May 1990" or "Spring 1990" or something similar. In these circumstances it is necessary to pick a representative date for the record before it can be computerised. In both the cases above this could be, for example, 20.03.90. However, choosing a date like this for say, eggs in the nest, would create errors and so the cautious compromise might be to call the date 00.03.90 indicating an imprecise date in March 1990. If the observer merely recorded "1990" only 00.00.90 can be computerised, i.e. a date and month unknown in 1990.

Very often close examination of the report reveals that the observer was quite aware of the full date but has attempted to indicate the period of occurrence in the date column. It cannot be over-emphasised that only a single date can be shown in this column and all observers are urged to add any comment about the period of observations in the appropriate remarks column (Col. 6) or on the reverse for more extensive notes. If there are, as is often the case, a number of observations of a particular species in one square during a single breeding season the observer should record the date which is most representative of the highest breeding evidence code achieved. If for example a pair of hoopoes were observed courting, nest building, laying eggs, incubating and then feeding young, the highest code would be 16 and the most appropriate date might be the date the eggs hatched. However in the comments section the observer should record the dates of all other activities to give a full picture of breeding.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION: WHERE DO DEAD SEA SPARROWS GO IN WINTER?

When the Dead Sea sparrow was first discovered by H.M. Uppcher in 1864 its world population was thought to consist of only a few isolated colonies at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Twenty years later, Canon Pristram could still only write that "the bird is the most limited in the world in its range and scarcity in numbers of individuals..." Further populations were later found in the Iran-Afghan border (1888) and south west Iran (1904), but these did little to dispel the idea that this was a rare bird, the widely dispersed populations suggesting

(Continued on page 19)
Figures 10 and 11 show the current distribution maps of two Arabian endemic species. The Arabian red-legged partridge (Fig 10) is now known to occur further north in western Saudi Arabia than previously thought. Its distribution in Oman is wider than known only a few years ago. Distribution in South Yemen will probably turn out to be more extensive than present records suggest. Similarly the Arabian serin (Fig 11) is now known to occur 500 km further north west than was suspected 10 years ago.
a relict species on its way to extinction.

There was apparently little change in 1910 when Capt. Carruthers found only the same isolated colonies at the south end of the Dead Sea; yet less than a decade later Col. Meinertzhagen reported it occurred commonly in the Jordan valley north of the Dead Sea, anticipating the explosive expansion that was to occur so that by 1980 it had spread south to Eilat, at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, and north up the Jordan valley to Emeq Hula and almost to Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. Contemporaneously a similar spread of the Mesopotamian population occurred up the Tigris-Euphrates valley into Turkey and finally west to Cyprus by 1980.

The majority of the Near East population disappears from its breeding quarters in the winter but little is known of where they go. I have, however, to five mostly the following observations in the published literature, though no doubt there are others I have overlooked:

1. Small numbers near the Dead Sea: near Ain Fashkha (31°43'N 35°27'E) in December 1987; the Wilderness of Jedah in February 1956.
2. ca. 50 in the Ain Zarbi valley near El Ruseifa (32°01'N 36°02'E) in February 1965.
3. Late winter (January) visitor to Eilat (29°33'N 34°57'E) and a regular passage there from late February to April (1977 and 1978).

In an attempt to obtain more information, Dr Mark Boyd put a note on my behalf in OSME Bulletin No 24 requesting records of sightings outside the breeding season. This resulted in the following responses:

2. Two flocks, each of about 20 birds, near Eilat in early November 1989.
3. 50+ in cultivated land, South Shona, Jordan (31°34'N 35°36'E) on 15 December 1989; 250+ at the same place in late January 1990.

These observations, though few in number, have added materially to our knowledge of the winter distribution of the Dead Sea Sparrow, suggesting a wide dispersal into cultivated land. It would be nice, however, to five more; either published information I have missed or unpublished records. In addition, I should like to ask observers to keep an eye open for this species in the future and let me have details of any sightings outside the breeding season.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank Dr Mark Boyd for publishing my initial request in the OSME Bulletin and also I J Andrews, A D Hawkins, E Hirschfeld and J L Swallow who responded and provided the information summarised above.

J Denis Summers-Smith, Merlewood, The Avenue, Guisborough, Cleveland, TS14 8EE, England.

THE GAIA QUEST TRUST

The Gaia Quest Trust is a charity formed to facilitate marine biological and oceanographic research in the shallow waters of the world, especially the Indian Ocean including the Red Sea and southern coast of Arabia. Operations will be from a purpose designed 21 m catamaran Gaia Quest II. This vessel follows Gaia Quest I which operated for a number of years in the Indian Ocean until 1989. Gaia Quest I was a veteran of numerous surveys including seabirds and shorebirds studies and censuses of turtles. The trust aims to provide the vessel at subsidised rates which will provide a cost effective base for surveys by up to 12 scientists.

Further details are available from Richard Speir, Gaia Quest Trust, c/o Geology Department, Imperial College of Science and Technology, Prince Consort Road, London SW7 2BP.

DATA PASSED ON

Due to the extended period over which information for the Atlas is being collected it is important that its data bank should be available for use by all who may need it. Information, including draft maps and other breeding data, in respect of individual species, groups of species or the birds found in particular areas can be provided on request and indeed enquiries are welcomed. Enquiries have come from ABBA contributors wanting historical records to "write up" the birds of their local area; researchers from around the world, working on groups of species occurring also in Arabia and those interested in general aspects of Middle East ornithology. Information passed on recently in response to enquiries have included the following. To Birds of the Western Palearctic for species dealt with in the remaining volumes, Arabian warbler, Arabian babbler, buntings and finches; J Erikson, Oman Bird Group, little green bee-eater; P Symens, NCWCD Riyadh, sandgrouse, partridges and cream coloured courser; F S Hameed, NCWCD Riyadh, kestrel; R Martin (UK) (Zimbabwe), Vultures and C Pilcher (Kuwait), Indian house crow; F Mundy (Kenya), Rose- ringed parakeet; Rares Hudon (Oman), Cuckoos; C Ryall (Kenya), Indian house crow; P Mundy (Zimbabwe), Vultures and C Pilcher (Kuwait), buntings. Individual items of information have been provided to many other correspondents.

Information that can be supplied at present is limited only by the manual record system in operation. When the information bank is fully automated in 1991 a much more comprehensive information service will be available. Contributors provide records to the project on the understanding that their records may be passed on to anyone who has a legitimate use for them. However, the facility does exist for contributors to place an embargo on individual records e.g. if they wish to protect a rare breeding species or where they intend to publish their own information exclusively.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The 1991 OSME AGM will take place at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, London on