FIRST BREEDING RECORD OF SANDWICH TERN IN ARABIA

While surveying the Saudi Arabian coastline of the Arabian Gulf for birds killed by the oil spills that had occurred earlier in the year, a small colony of Sandwich terns Sterna sandvicensis (ABBA No 611) was found at Tanageeb Bay (DB32) on 28 July 1991.

The colony was located on a very small island, some 100 m offshore, that was partly covered by halophytic vegetation, surrounded by a wide open sandy area. Approximately 60 pairs of white-cheeked terns S. repressa were breeding on the island and the breeding Sandwich terns were associated with this colony.

During the first visit on 28 July, at least five Sandwich tern chicks were being fed by adults and at least 20 adult birds were observed on and around the island. Chicks were between two and four weeks old. On a second visit to the site on 16 August, six chicks were observed, three were already flying and another three were close to fledging.

The Sandwich tern is a scarce winter visitor to the Arabian Gulf coast in Saudi Arabia from November to February, but isolated birds have been recorded in April, June and July. Previously, these summer visitors were believed to be immature birds (Bundy et al, 1989, Birds of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia). Larger numbers are believed to winter well offshore in the Arabian Gulf. Further south, in the UAE, the species is common throughout the year and many spend their first summer in that region, often collecting into groups at inshore sites from May to early September, although breeding has never been indicated (Richardson, 1990, The Birds of the United Arab Emirates). The closest known breeding grounds are along the southern and eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and along the northern coastline of the Black Sea. Wintering birds in the Gulf are believed to come from the Caspian Sea (Harrison, 1985, An Atlas of the Birds of the Western Palaearctic).

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FIRST BREEDING RECORD OF SQUACCO AND NIGHT HERONS IN ARABIA AND OTHER INTERESTING BREEDING RECORDS FOR NEAR RIYADH SAUDI ARABIA

After the bulk of northern migrants had passed through in spring there seemed little excitement left until the return autumn migration. How wrong we were. On 25 April 1991 two pairs of ferruginous duck Aythya nyroca were seen on the pool below the al Hair dam (MB25), one pair with five chicks. A first breeding record for central Arabia.

A whiskered tern Chlidonias hybridus in partial summer plumage present from 4 April on one of the pools on the Wadi Hanifah 'river', south of Riyadh (MB26), was joined by a second bird in full plumage by 24 May. These two birds remained on or about the same pools until 7 June, but then disappeared. The number of summer plumaged terns of various species visiting for prolonged periods in recent years leads one to suspect an attempt at breeding might be made in the near future.

After apparently being absent, or unusually scarce, during winter and early spring, squacco herons Ardeola ralloides (ABBA No 108) gave us a surprise. On 24 May two birds with bright blue bills and orange-red legs were observed in dead tamarisk above the dam at al Hair. The following week there were at least eleven birds displaying and nest building in a group of dead tamarisk below the dam. Two nests were easily visible from the high banks of the wadi as was a purple heron Ardea purpurea sitting on its nest only 3-4 m from the squaccos. At this time there were at least 10 pairs and possibly up to 20 pairs of purple herons within a kilometre stretch of the river.

On 6 June there were five squacco nests and by 14 June seven nests, with birds sitting. The colony was watched intently and on 4 July seven nests were occupied, with nestlings in a further three.

By this time two pairs of night herons Nycticorax nycticorax (ABBA No 104) had appeared and were displaying and also nest building in the same trees as the squaccos. Equally interesting were a pair of cattle egrets Bubulcus ibis found 300 m down the wadi from the heronry which were also displaying and nest building! Alas they were not seen after this occasion.

On 12 July seven night herons nests were identifiable and probably more were out of sight. Annual leave interfered with further observations on my part during August, but David Middleton and Bill Sawyer continued the watch and noted eggs in two night heron nests on 9 August. By 12 September the heronry count was 13 adult and juvenile night herons, some juvenile purples, but no squaccos were to be found anywhere in the wadi.

These are the first proven breeding records for night and squacco herons in Arabia, the first central Arabian breeding of purple heron and the first central Arabian attempted breeding by cattle egret.

All the excitement however was not at al Hair. Ten kilometres further south on the river on 6 June a 'reed' warbler's nest was found on the edge of a phragmites bed. The nest was situated on the river side of the bed slung between two phragmites stems about 40 cm above the water that was about 25-30 cms deep. The initial differential diagnosis was reed or moustached warbler but no more than a brown micro-second glimpse was obtained of the adult bird. However by dint of the exceeding tightness and neatness of the nest, we deemed it to be reed warbler Acrocephalus scirpaceus. (The reed warbler has bred at Tabuk, Phoenix 6: 3, 7 & 8, Ed.) The nest with two eggs in it was photographed on 14 June. No more eggs were laid and the two young completely filled the nest on 4 July and by our visit on 12 July they had, as expected, flown.