hours, indicating major passage taking place. Five European Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe were also observed. This was not the only occurrence as the plain was divided partially by Wadi Asmar at one side and here I found another pair of Sand Partridge, a Red-tailed Wheatear and a male Blue 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-my-leader with no apparent leader in sight. 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 Hume's Wheatear, 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.

Colin Richardson.

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 ancient lava flows and low basaltic cliffs. It comprises some 17,000 sq km and is managed by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development which employs a permanent guard force to prevent poaching through continual patrolling of the rest of northern Arabia. It is unique for its rich coverage of small shrubs, grasses and herbs, which are the direct result of a policy to exclude bedouin 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 once the徘徊山 which is now in Saudi Arabia - it has been extinct since about 1930. It is one of the very few places that the Houbara 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. The avifauna of the reserve is by far the richest of any comparable zone in northern Arabia.

In addition to the diversity of bird species, the abundance of birds is generally quite 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 over 20. A dozen species are breeding in the reserve and have bred there in the last several years, probably the only place it regularly does so in Saudi Arabia. Population levels are very high, and with a total of perhaps only one or two dozen breeding females. However, provided its protection from hunting is kept unenforced, such isolation makes it possible for populations to gradually build up and there seems no reason why it should not become common within the reserve in years to come. From the arrival of the Greater Flamingo, which was proved to breed in March 1988, Long-legged Buzzard, Kestrel, probably Barbary Falcon, Eagle Owl, Little Owl, and Hume's Owl have been recorded. A small number of breeding Hoopoe Larks can be heard on the rocky plains and a few Sand Partridge can be heard more rarely seen - on the jebeles. White-crowned Black Wheatear are relatively common but Rock Dove, Brown-necked Raven and Trumpeter Finch which might be expected to be more common are generally scarce. Hoopoe Larks do not breed on the only two buildings in the reserve - the Portacabins of reserve Headquarters and guards' accommodation.

The category of possible and probable breeding birds for the reserve include the Chukar Partridge, Desert Wheatear and perhaps the desert (which, although not known as a breeding bird anywhere in Arabia, has been seen in pairs and singing in Spring). Pale Rock Sparrow and the scarce and local Desert Finch.

The treelessness of the reserve accounts for the complete absence of saw and rarity of others, for example Great Grey Shrike and Scrub Warbler are only present in very small numbers and those species usually associated with acacias are absent altogether, e.g. Babblers, Blackstart and Yellow-vented Bulbul.

In winter the reserve has been shown to be an important wintering area for the Houbara and has also been recently identified as a wintering zone for the Dotterel Charadrius morinellus, the only known site for the nesting of this species in Arabia! Although the good vegetational cover has, during recent winters, attracted many hundreds of Black-tailed Godwits Limosa limosa, Pectoral Sandpiper Calidris melanotos and Terek Sandpiper Xenus cinereus, these summer species being previously almost unknown in Arabia.

If the policy to exclude stock animals and the ban on hunting continues, and disturbance by outsiders is kept to a minimum (for example, a particular problem is posed by bedouin truffle gatherers!), then it is certain that the avifauna of the reserve will continue to improve and enlarge. If, however, these policies are relaxed, even for a few months, vegetation will 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.

Farasan Islands, Red Sea, Saudi Arabia

The Farasan Islands lie some 80 km off the Saudi Arabia mainland opposite Bizan between 17°10'N 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. Birds are only two of any large size and the rest are Farasan Kebir and Segid, both of which have settled villages. All the islands are low-lying with a substrate of fossil coral. The two largest islands, Kebir and Segid, are a chain of small hills, gullies and craggy coastal cliffs, although there are also subha tidal flat 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. During those two days I 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 divers who published their accounts and some unpublished reports (including from RABBA files), have now been published (Jennings, 1988, Fauna of Saudi Arabia 9: 457-467). The breeding bird list at that time had already identified 34 birds: 18 land birds and 16 shore 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 in 1985 was the discovery of about 20 pairs of Masked Plover Charadrius Albicollis nesting in Rhizophora mangrove on the coast. The commonest bird of prey on the Farasan Islands is the Egyptian Vulture and there were probably many in the region of
65 pairs present there in March 1985, a concentration which far exceeds population levels of the first few years, in areas on the northern mainland. Also very common, and also an important scavenger, was the Brown-necked Raven. There appears to have been nothing known of passerines on the islands until my visit. Others found were Black-crowned Finch Lark, Hoopoe Lark, Crested Lark, Black-capped Bulbul, Black Bush Chat and Graceful Warbler. The latter two species were especially numerous. The Graceful Warbler was interesting on account of its harsher call and much heavier bill, possibly a new race?

Peter Symens was able to visit these islands in April and June 1988 and added several more species to the breeding and resident list. These include Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, which was first recorded only in March 1985 (whereas they were common on the nearby mainland at that time), Little Owl, White-browed Coucal andNamaqua Dove, all of which I missed but had expected. Peter also found a few House Sparrow, which I had specifically searched for but had not found. He also saw a Black-shouldered Kite, which is very rare anywhere in Arabia, and proved breeding of Purple Heron. This makes four breeding herons on the Islands, the others being the Reef Heron, Goliath Heron and the Green-backed Heron.

M.C.J.

RECENT REPORTS

Some records received for the Atlas stick out as being of great interest and importance for various species, location, habitat, period of breeding or the number of birds involved. The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unrecorded or unusual records received within the last 12 months (some relate to earlier years).

Records of unusual birds often get 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. Special thanks are due to David Foster and contributors to the Oman Central Record for the many records from Oman received over the last two years, some of which are featured here.


Egyptian Vulture Two nests DA30, one with two young April 1987 (M. Elwonger). A rare breeding record from the Eastern Province of KSA.

Cock Young seen on Jagoon south of Riyadh June 1987 (D.James, A.J. Stagg). First Riyadh breeding record.

Grays Francolin Seen in coastal region of central Oman (KB17) Sept 1986 (Oman Central Record). Southernmost record.

Houbara Two were seen to fly into each other and were killed north of Al Alija (XAl6) in central Oman July 1987 (T. Tear in Oman Bird News 3).


Fins-tailed Sandgrouse Many flocks, made up of pairs of birds, extreme northern Saudi Arabia (FA01) March 1988 (M.C.J.).

European Collared Dove At Khamsin (KB17) June 1988 and Affif (IB24) July 1988 (M.C.J.). New areas in KSA. NB The sight record of this species from the Omani Tyana, mentioned in Phoenix 4, p.3, has been withdrawn.


Tawila Dove Common Layla (MB21) Shudayq (IA17) and JAZ2, central KSA June & July 1988 (M.C.J.). New possible breeding areas. Also bred in UAE (VE27) June 1988 (C.Richardson).

Palm Doves in southern Hai, 110 km S.E. of Hail, KSA, more than 400 km from the nearest possible records at Tayna (M.C.J.).


Scops Owl Otus scops


African Eagle Owl Very young birder, can square YA24, Jebel Akhdar, northern Oman (Oman Central Record). A new area for this species.

Bar-tailed Desert Lark Nestled Bahrain, although young not noted, April 1988 (Birds of Bahrain, Nature History Society). No previous breeding record for the island.

Black Bushchat New areas for this bird are southern Nafud (IB30) March 1988 (M.C.J.) and Kumdah (LA17) June 1988 (M.C.J.).

Nightingale Luscinia megarhynchos A male singing for long period 1st day 17 May 1988 near Dubai, UAE (C.Richardson).

Black-headed Bush Shrike Two individuals seen at 1700m & 2060m at GB18 & HA17 respectively, southern Hajar, July 1988 (M.C.J.).

Purple Heron Breeding record from the coastal region of central Arabia which has not yet been observed two broods (T.Nightingale).


Arabian Waxbill Four in Wadi al Saham, southern Hedjaz (HA17) at 1700m July 1988 (M.C.J.).

Northern Mockingbird First record from Bahrain 1987 (Bahrain Natural History Society). First breeding record for the island.

PROGRESS SO FAR

Brown-necked Raven

Probably the most widespread bird in Arabia, the Brown-necked Raven, is found on some offshore islands, at the top of the highest mountains and in the desert region of northeastern Arabia. Records from showing range, records collected for this species give a good indication of the coverage so far achieved in the project. The up-to-date position for this species can be seen at Fig 5. A good number of squares have been blanked in and others upgraded since the similar map which appeared in Phoenix 4, but there are still large parts of Arabia which have not yet been touched by recorders. If there is no Brown-necked Raven record for a square then the chances are that there are very few records from other localities. Active recorders should, therefore, make special efforts to get to the blank squares and report their findings.

Although widespread and common in places, and movements of the Brown-necked Raven are still poorly understood in many respects. One aspect of behaviour which has not yet been studied is its inclination to congregate near settlements in summer and early autumn, often in many hundreds. Why do they do it? Food easier to come by at this time when conditions in the desert must be at their harshest? Do the rigours of the scorching sun drive them to seek places of water and ease like this? Or like the Sooty Shearwater (A.D.SMith) which lay their eggs in the desert, making for the nearest town or is there a general drift southwards, or northwards, or in any other direction? One thing is sure that the density of different species of central Arab birds is a product of the Brown-necked Raven in summer. For example, in July 1988 in central Saudi Arabia only one single pair were seen in the 500km of desert between tails (1A22) and Shagra (LA27), except for one congregation of 40 at Dawadimi (pers.obs.)

Egyptian Vulture

A not-quite-so-widespread species in Arabia. Compare distribution (Fig 6) to the records collected during the Atlas project for the Brown-necked Raven (Fig 5). Note especially the general absence of this vulture from northern