

Dhofar, Oman (update September 1992)

Erik Hirschfeld

This is meant to replace the general information in my trip report and update from 1990 and 1991 respectively and is based on visits to the Salalah region July 27-31 (for non-birding purposes) and there 1-6.9 1992.

Best time to visit

For seabirds, and summer breeders, any time between the end of May and September is worth a visit. The seabird migration has been poorly explored at other times but it is likely that the visible migration of terns and gulls can be good then and October has seen good numbers of Wilson's Petrels. Winter visitors sometimes include Abdim's Storks and during late autumn and spring migrating Amur Falcons can be seen in good numbers. Other Afrotropical species that have occurred include African Spoonbill, Allen's Gallinule, Wattled Starling, Banded Martin etc and basically anything can turn up on migration.

Visas

Compulsory, check with the nearest embassy. Normally, a three-week tourist visa with one entry is issued. In Bahrain it takes only three days, and there are no problems for unmarried couples to obtain one. This might vary locally though.

Hotels

Still a shortage of hotels, the Hamdan Palace about to open in 91 has apparently been turned into offices and a shopping centre (the Holiday Inn, seemingly, has monopoly on licensed hotels and restaurants in Salalah). Holiday Inn, which is situated on the beach some distance from the town centre, is c. GBP 60 for a double per night and is a charming hotel, but the personell are not always up to normal Holiday Inn standard. It also has a bar and a very nice "near-gourmet" restaurant (sometimes with belly-dance!). Can be booked through any travel agent.

Redan Hotel charges GBP22 for a double, and is adequate for a birder. The standard is the same as for a GBP10-a-night hotel in e g Tunisia or Turkey (thus overpriced, surely because of the high demand for rooms and lack of hotels in Salalah). The address is Redan Hotel, P O Box 18957, Salalah, Dhofar, Oman. Tel. 292266 or 292255, fax. 290491 and it is situated in the town centre. Either of these hotels should be booked well in advance as Salalah is a popular destination among locals during the monsoon.

It is apparently possible to rent furnished flats in Salalah but I do not have any details on that.

Camping should be possible, but remember that it is very humid during the monsoon.

There is no accomodation in Mirbat or Khaysa to my knowledge. Both are small villages with Khaysa being the smaller. There is one basic food shop in Khaysa, but several in Mirbat.

Restaurants and drinks

The Holiday Inn restaurant and bars, and another one halfway to Rasyut and operated by them, are the only ones serving alcohol. They serve French, European, Indian and Arabic food and also have nice seafood. A number of smaller restaurants serving Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and Arabic food with good value for money are located in town. The Garzeez Restaurant next to Hotel Redan is very nice and priceworthy as well as clean and calm. It is not possible for tourists to buy their own alcohol in Salalah, but it is apparently allowed to bring in a bottle or two into the country.

Transport Muscat-Salalah

Oman Aviation operates several times a day from Muscat and the price is c. GBP 82 return. Reconfirm the tickets at least 72 hours before travelling and preferably once again as the flights are often fully booked and the service from the company not always up to western standards (the same applies if you fly Gulfair to Muscat). The flight lasts 1 hour 10 minutes.

There are also buses several times a day (including one evening departure from both cities) Muscat-Salalah (1000 km) which take 12 hours, and cost GBP15 return. These buses stop at Muscat Seeb airport and seats should be reserved beforehand.

It is possible to rent a car in Muscat (but the road to Salalah is probably boring unless you have never seen desert before) and you can take rent cars from the UAE into Oman. In my opinion it is not worth the time (c 12 hours drive) to drive all the way to Salalah.

Local transport

The roads around Salalah are good and I don't think there is a need for four-wheel drive unless you really want to explore a certain, inaccessible area. The seawatching point Ras Janjali is accessible with a normal sedan, but the last kilometres are very rough and you need to empty the car to make it over the last 500 metres.

Small rent cars (type Renault 9, seats five without problems) are c. GBP 27 a day unlimited mileage, CDW and insurance. Budget and AVIS are represented and function quite well (the cars are very worn though) but book and pay from Europe and be sure to reconfirm your booking a day or two before you travel. There are not many cars available and they seem to be used most of the time. Four-wheel drives (Nissan Patrol or Pajeros) are c. GBP 58 a day with Budget, with only 150 km free, add GBP 0.1 a day per km for excessive mileage (you are likely to drive 250 -300 km a day if you are going off-road). There is currently a local deal (at Budget) for Thursday to Friday rent of four-wheel drive at GBP 96 incl. 300 km (I negotiated it to 400 km) free. Budget are currently the most reliable of the two international companies in Salalah and their office is at the Holiday Inn. Cars can apparently not be delivered to Salalah airport (but taxis are readily available there).

At least three local car rental companies are now located next to Redan Hotel but as they are only GBP 1.5 - 3 cheaper a day than Budget or AVIS and they do not give a very reliable impression (no English-speaking personnel for example), it might be advisable not to use them. However, Al Mustashar Enterprises (P O Box 19519, Dhofar, Salalah, tel. 295615) have four-wheel drives (Daihatsu and Koreando jeeps, inbetween Discovery and Suzuki in size) for GBP 35 a day unlimited mileage if you want to go off-road.

Petrol is available around villages and is c. GBP 0.2 a litre.

Flocks of camels, cows and donkeys have little respect for cars and roam the plains and mountains. If you hit one you are likely to be in bad trouble so be very careful.

International drivers licence is compulsory, but licenecs issued in GCC countries are also valid.

Maps

Still no good ones available, the one attached here should be sufficient for navigating to Ras Janjali. I also used an aviation map, with outdated road information but good information on topography which was of great help in finding interesting places. Budget had one copy to lend customers, but it should be available from aviation specialist shops in Europe.

Climate and dress

During the monsoon, normally from July to September, there will be drizzle during nights and mornings, whereafter it will stop but remain overcast and misty (sometimes with the sun breaking through and temperatures soaring) during the day. The temperatures are around 25 C. The rest of the year it is hotter and sunny with occasional heavy rainshowers during winter/early spring. The north slopes of the mountains have typical desert climate even during the monsoon with temperatures up to and around 40C during the day.

Rainclothes are needed if you plan to sit still for a long time during the monsoon (e g seawatching), but I have not found wellingtons necessary. Do not walk around town in shorts, in the countryside people shouldn't bother too much (if you meet any at all) about it.

Malaria etc.

Paludrin and Chloroquine is recommended as there are malaria mosquitos in the area but check with your doctor to be sure. Apparently locally working expats have stopped taking malaria profylax as the area has been declared free of malaria. An insect repellent is also advisable, especially at Ain Hamran where there seems to be lots of stick insects. Nothing else apart from the usual innoculations (tetanus etc) should be necessary.

Litterature

"Birds of Oman" by Gallagher & Woodcock should be studied as it contains essential information on the status of different species. The "Oman Bird Lists" update that information (published by the Oman Bird Records Committee, PO Box 246, Muscat, Oman). Sandgrouse 2:56-85 has a paper on the status of the birds of Dhofar and 7:29-42 on the seabirds off Mirbat. Ibis 108:224-264 has a useful paper on seabirds off southwestern Arabia. "Birds of the Middle East and North Africa", "A Field Guide to the Rare Birds of Britain and Europe" and "Seabirds" are the obvious identification guides to bring.

Local birders

Ian Brown and Bill Simpson can be contacted at P O Box 18929, Salalah, Oman for updates on what is around. The Oman Bird Records Committee, P O Box 246, Muscat will want to hear about your observations.

Seabirds

The pelagic species can apparently be seen at any time of the day and I cannot find that they peak in the early mornings, but more investigation is needed. Afternoons always seem to be good. A paper on them is being prepared and will likely appear in Sandgrouse or the OSME bulletin during 1993. If you want to count seabirds and contribute to the knowledge of their occurrence off Dhofar, please count in 15-minute periods and note flight direction and ages if possible. Also estimate wind strength, visibility and if possible measure temperature and QNH (atmospheric pressure at sea level, but remember to add 3 mb if you measure from Ras Janjali (20 m above sea level). The results should be sent either to me on the address below, or to the Oman Bird Records Committee.

Birding sites

The south Arabian forest specialities can seemingly be seen anywhere in the mountain forests; Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Grackles also on the plains and sunbirds, weavers and African Silverbills even in Salalah itself. Therefore I will not detail all the species I have recorded at each site. A visit each to e.g. Wadi Hinna and Ain Sahanawt should have produced all the Afrotropical and endemic species, except for perhaps Golden-winged Grosbeak which is difficult to find. Arabian Red-legged Partridge can be difficult to see, but are regularly heard calling (barking like dogs) from the hills at Ain Hamran. Usually very early mornings are best around the "ains" (=waterholes) when the birds come in to drink. The ains are usually crammed with picnicking locals during Thursdays and Fridays and can then be quite disturbed. I have not explored the desert much but Dunn's Lark and various Sandgrouse occur there.

Ras Mirbat is c 80 km east of Salalah (50 minute drive in the dark from Salalah). The headland (=Ras in arabic) is southeast of the village. Navigate through the village towards the east, encounter an unpaved dual carriageway which you follow south for c. 50-100 meters depending on where you come out of the village, and then take east on a track that passes south of a few newly constructed buildings. After c 400 m you approach a factory-looking house on a hill, take right down to the beach where there are a couple of roofed picnic sites. This is the "traditional" sea-watching point but as it is at sea level you are likely to miss some birds (and be busy cleaning the salt of your telescope every 15 minutes). Instead, drive to...

Ras Janjali which is 30 minutes east of Mirbat on a very bad road (see map). This is the point that sticks out most into the sea on this part of the Dhofar coast and also where the coast changes direction slightly. You are also 20 m above sea level and have excellent views of the surface and will not be affected by the salt. Sea Turtles were regularly seen there in September as well as two huge Humpback Whales. A very tame Hooded Malspolon (a mildly toxic snake) was residing at the observation point.

Some wadis on the way to Ras Janjali can hold migrants during migration, as well as interesting snakes (e.g. the endemic Thomas' Snake) and lizards.

Wadi Hinna is west of Mirbat and can easily be reached from there if the seawatching is poor. Take the road from Mirbat towards Salalah. It runs over a plain and then there is a steep hill upwards (with a picnic site by the coast just before the hill). After you have climbed the hill a gravel road to the right is signposted "Tawi Attair". Drive it up into the mountain (and stop and bird on the way up) and c 300 m after the base of the mountain a small track goes left while the road bends sharply right. Park there and follow the path down into Wadi Hinna. Golden-winged Grosbeak has been seen quite regularly here and the first described nest of the species was found here in spring 1992. I did not see any in September though. We had good views of Arabian Red-legged Partridge along the road up to the mountain.

Ayn Hamran (also transcribed as Ayn Homran) is signposted on the Mirbat road c 20 km east of Salalah. Walk around the foothills. I have seen Bruce's Green Pigeons on virtually all my visits here and they can be found in the trees next to the road just at the beginning of the vegetation as you drive uphill. This is the only place where I have seen Golden-winged Grosbeak, a species which presumably normally occurs at greater heights. Good place for Didric Cuckoo and White-headed Kingfisher, and even a few records of Jacobin Cuckoo.

Khor (or Khawr) Sawly C. 30 km east of Salalah on the Mirbat road. We saw a Pheasant-tailed Jacana there in May 1991 and Painted Snipe was recorded in August 1990.

Khor Ruri A couple of kilometres east of Taqah village. Signposted from the main road. A large and undisturbed Khor where Pheasant-tailed Jacana was claimed to have bred in 1992 and from where there is a breeding record of Spotted Thick-knee. An interesting and generally undisturbed place.

Ayn Sahanawt (or Sahanoot) is signposted to the east c. 15 km north of Salalah on the Muscat/Thumrait road, just where the mountains start. Extremely beautiful place where Spotted Eagle Owl has been recorded. Rob Morris had Arabian Red-legged Partridge on the flat ground above the well there in autumn 1991 and South Arabian Wheatears are regular in the same place. Also holds the usual mountain species and I have seen African Paradise Flycatcher on almost every visit.

Ayn Jazir (or Jazrir) is east of the Nabi Ayoub/Ayun road (contra to my earlier reports!). Nice scenery and same birds as above.

There are many other Ayns to explore, but a visit to one or two of them should be enough to produce all the speciality species, except for perhaps Golden-winged Grosbeak, Spotted Eagle Owl and Senegal Scops Owl for which harder work is needed.

Mughsayl is a khor c. 60 km west of Salalah that holds some waders and waterbirds. I haven't explored the western parts of the Salalah region much as I have seen what I wanted in the northern and eastern part, but Verraux's Eagle apparently breeds in a very remote wadi close to the Yemen border.

Raysut is a steep cliff to the west and the best place to get good views of Red-billed Tropicbirds as they breed in the clifface. Drive to the top through the residential area (to the west of the harbour) and walk on the paths viewing the sea. The tropicbirds seem to be present at any time of the day, at times they can be away for 15-20 minutes but then they suddenly appear in small flocks.

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Address:

Erik Hirschfeld
P. O. Box 2411
Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates