



BIRDING OMAN & UNITED ARAB EMIRATES SOME NOTES ON A DECEMBER 2007 VISIT

Petri Hottola

Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies (FUNTS)

The following short report has primarily been written to compliment another one made by Roni Väisänen and Vuonokari, in Finnish (*Oman 12.-23.11.2006*, with great bird photographs). Most Finns being able to read English, and many others unable to understand Finnish, I thought it was a good idea to provide my update for a wider audience. Hopefully, most of the information will make sense without the Väisänen & Vuonokari report. I am also going to make a few references to the main bird-tourism guidebook for Oman, the splendidly useful *Birdwatching Guide to Oman* by Hanne & Jens Eriksen and Panadda & Dave E. Sargeant, published by Al Roya in 2001. The forthcoming terms “Eriksen & Sargeant”, “the Oman guidebook” and “the guidebook” will indicate this publication.

There are good road maps for the UAE and Oman available in the Internet, to compliment the more detailed site maps of the above-mentioned guidebook. Google Earth is also a practical reference for these Arabian Peninsula nations. Each of the locations and their access roads may be observed beforehand by enjoying the satellite image option, in order to learn the conditions in advance. For example, the Dreamland water recreation park is easily spotted east of Umm al Quwain, with a few kilometers of shorebird flats on each side of the park, around the lagoons and inlets.

In this update report, I will mainly provide information in regard to sites, access, roads and accommodation. Only some the best bird and mammal records will be mentioned, selectively out of the list of over 230 bird species. Also the photographs of the report will mostly be of rarities, the shots being of pocket camera (Lumix DMC-DZ2) digiscoped quality. A few shots may be of exceedingly bad quality, but nevertheless useful as documents of unusual bird records. The comments on road conditions, accommodation quality and other services will be both subjective and temporally limited, based on the situation in 2007, as seen and experienced by the author on a two week visit between 17th and 31st December. In the text, OMR indicates Omani rial, equivalent of 2 euros in January 2008, and AED United Arab Emirates dirhams (€ 0.19).

For a Scandinavian visitor, Dubai with its economic air connections is the gateway to Oman. All in all, I have seldom traveled in a country as pleasant as Oman, with its exceptional degree of safety, organization, good infrastructure, diverse nature and welcoming, hospitable and polite people. It was an eye-opener to visit such an Islamic nation, after some previous negative experiences of the larger, less well-to-do ones. Next to Europe, one hardly is able to find an equally attractive destination for a birdwatching holiday. I fully recommend people to visit this traditional yet tolerant and progressive nation, and experience the best of Arabia!

DUBAI

Airport

Unlike Finnair, SAS flies to terminal one, with 24-hour car rental counters and their parking (A2) conveniently located in the same building. Do not expect Avis to have your documents (e.g. insurance) ready, even though they may have promised that. I had to wait two and half hours for the road insurance papers, as the company opened by 8 AM. They do, however, listen to your requests on car models. I chose between a Peugeot 307 (my request, instead of the undesirable Ford Focus), with 70 000 km under its belt, and a brand new Nissan Tiida (730 km). The Tiida consumed about 5,5 l/100 km and was quite adequate for my needs, the only weakness being a slight vulnerability to strong side winds. Petrol being 20 c/l, I spent € 11 per 1000 km, a rather reasonable rate, to say the least, in comparison with € 115 back home!

It is possible to exchange Omani rials already at Dubai arrivals hall, one of the banks had them for a surprisingly competitive rate. In fact, they accidentally (?) sold the rials without commission, at the flat official rate! At arrivals, reserving a hotel room proved to be impossible as both the tourist information and room reservation service bluntly turned me down, the three star hotel in case not being located in Dubai. As they openly said, they do not bother with other emirates (they should, officially!) and less than five star hotels (with high commissions). Fortunately, Avis helped me to do the reservation.

Leaving the airport was a bit complicated, as Avis followed a universal but strange policy of not providing their customers instructions (a simple photocopied map would do) on how to leave the airport, and could not even explain on which side of the airport the terminal was. As usual, they said leaving the place was very straightforward, and kindly draw me a map. I could not get lost, they said. Needless to say, I got lost within few hundred meters, after encountering ramps which were not supposed to be on the "straight" road! Desperately trying to learn the functions of an unfamiliar car, tired after the overnight flight, I drifted into the Dubai morning traffic, following signs to Abu Dhabi and avoiding Deira and Sharjah at all cost. Eventually, a petrol station was spotted, and directions to the Hatta road received from a helpful petrol pump attendant, the always reliable source of road information abroad. I left UAE within hours, instinctively knowing that Oman would be far more pleasant than the huge, dusty construction project I had arrived in.

Accommodation

When visiting Dubai, birders would often prefer to stay somewhere out of the busy urban area, with its complicated network of streets and heavy traffic. Roni Väisänen and his companions complained about spending three hours in their search of the reserved Deira hotel, with three confusingly contradictory maps. Unfortunately, there are hardly any hotels on the fringe of the urban zone, with one exception I managed to discover while surfing the net. Sharjah International Airport Hotel is a rather good deal, but difficult to contact. As usual in UAE and Oman, their email account was full, and my messages bounced back. Consequently, I opted to phone them on arrival (at Avis office). Hopefully, they will fix the email (airhotel@emirates.net.ae)!

By doing this, I secured a comfortable place to sleep for the last night, within 30 minutes drive to the Dubai airport. There are several petrol stations on the way, but do not wait too long before filling the tank up. Traffic jams may complicate your return to the preferred lane in central Dubai. In December 2007 the basically simple route from Sharjah airport to Dubai airport was also hampered by road construction (several detours), which should, however, be completed in the near future.

The Sharjah International Airport Hotel is located in front of the Sharjah international airport, but it is difficult to spot unless you have detailed information. At the airport roundabout/junction, turn right (driving from Dubai/coast), and then immediately left. On the right of the correct junction, there is a large white mosque and few small shops. Within hundred meters or less, there is an entrance to the left, down to a courtyard where hotel coaches often are parked. If you miss this, you will soon see the high wall of the Sharjah National Park (on the left), and the park entrance by the end of the street. Do not expect a hotel sign on the building. Incredibly, there is nothing there, not even above the main door, which leads to a spacious lobby with reception and dining hall. Great buffet meals are served there, for a rather inflated rate of AED 50, plus AED 7.5 service tax (€ 10.8 for a three course dinner and tea). The room in this motel style one store establishment was AED 263 (€50), a good rate for Sharjah and Dubai. Their telephone number is +971 (6) 5581110.

The close by Sharjah National Park (a park, not a national park) could be good for birding if it was open during the day. Checking the canopy and walls in the afternoon, several **White-cheeked** and **Red-vented Bulbuls**, and other birds were easily observed.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Hatta to Oman

Obtaining a departure stamp at the UAE border post took less than five minutes, the officer laughing as he noticed that I had just arrived, and was already leaving. The Omani vehicle control post was relatively easy to spot, but I almost missed collecting the necessary piece of red tape, as the guys were just sitting there, under the shade. They did, however, wave me down at the last moment, and provided the precious piece of paper. After several kilometers, the Omani border post appeared; a posh building on the left. In there, one needs to park and walk into the building. I spent around 10 minutes queuing for my free, otherwise hassle free visa. They did not check the car or belongings. After the Omani border post, the vehicle check point form was duly collected, and I was free to start my visit in Oman.

Khatmat Milalah to U.A.E.

I spent three minutes in crossing the border at this less than busy checkpoint. Unexpectedly, had to pay OMR 2 for the departure, the officer enquiring why I had decided to cross here, rather than Hatta, if I was on my way to Dubai? "I plan to visit

Khalba”, was my reply. At customs, I was requested to open the trunk, but that was it. I was free to continue.

Ras al Khaima to Musandam

The mother of all border hassles can be expected here, the Ras al Khaima border (Tibat) being infamous for deliberately delaying tourist traffic to Oman. If there are five persons on your lane, expect to stand between 2 to 3 hours to receive your departure stamp! Never in over 70 nations I have visited has crossing the border been equally slow, and that includes the former Soviet Union! Fortunately, I was the last person to be served before the queue was stalled for another hour long coffee break, and escaped the hassle after 1,5 hours. Expect delays here, and let one person to handle all the passports in your group. Doing this, things will proceed faster and most of you are able to relax outdoors.

The Omani checkpoint was much faster (10 minutes), but also involved a surprise visa fee (visas should be free for us Finns) of OMR 6, and I had to fill a form to apply for this. Apparently a person is not allowed to receive more than one free visa per month/year?! Leaving Musandam, crossing the same Tibat border post took a total of 10 minutes, mostly spent for waiting the many goat trucks to pass, and no departure fee was collected (had extra OMR 2 in my pocket). Entering UAE for the third time was also free. Each of the border posts appear to have somewhat different procedures.

OMAN

CAPITAL AREA

AL ANSAB LAGOONS

Locating the place was a bit time-consuming on the first time, because road construction had changed the access route (cf. Eriksen & Sargeant, and the Internet update). At the moment, turn inland at the As Seeb International Airport junction, and continue right to the first roundabout, turning left (south; the road will not pass the Novotel Hotel). From there, continue for two, three kilometers or so, passing a petrol station on the right, and arriving in a four way junction with a Shell station on the left (about 100 m). Turn right and you are on the route portrayed in the Oman guidebook.

After a short drive, turn right, and left after 300 meters, driving straight for 1,9 km, following a right hand curve up to the sewage plant road, on the left after another 300 meters. Personally, I just followed the wastewater trucks. Arriving at the plant, with many more queuing trucks, pass the entrance, continue left (side road), and look for a track to the right (after 300 m or so), which enters the construction site through an open gate in the fence which surrounds the plant. The situation changes here as the construction advances, be ready to do some exploration. Find your way though the area, the workers will not mind as long as you are polite, and be sure to not block their way.

Some of the pools were dry and empty (e.g. C), and new ones were built, but the main ones (A, B) had water and birds in December 2007. Among the best birds seen here were two **Intermediate Egrets**, and an **Indian Pond Heron**.



Fig 1. Al Ansab Lagoons in December, pond A.

AL BATINAH

RAS AS SAWADI

As Sawadi Beach Resort Hotel is an easy to visit place, if you wish to see a **Red-vented Bulbul** in Oman. I simply drove in to the hotel grounds, and left after seeing one bulbul within five minutes. Great scenery with an impressive island and fort, and probably a very nice place for a beach vacation.

SOHAR

The peaceful Green Oasis Hotel is a great alternative to the two more expensive options along the main highway. A perfectly adequate double was ORM 30, and a luxury one ORM 50 in December 2007. Driving from Shinas, the hotel is well signposted (several signs before the actual junction) on the right, four kilometers inland, close to the New

Sohar Hospital. The correct roundabout is the one just before the “globe roundabout” by LuLu Hypermarket (a great place for buying provisions, with a good variety of take away food, see <http://www.luluhypermarket.com/>), or the first one after it, if you arrive from Muscat.

They have a small restaurant with nice food (dinners are around ORM 1,5) and room service, and a parking lot in front of the entrance. The hotel has an Internet home page with a number of versions of their email address, none of which work. The page has not been updated for years. Consequently, making a reservation is not an easy task, at the moment. Sending a letter might be a solution. At the time of my visit, there were many vacant rooms to choose from.

The access to Sun Farms has not changed, and the place is easy to find. For example, take the inland service road at LuLu, and continue south to the gate, on the right. The cattle sheds, fields and buildings are well visible from the service road, soon after a Shell petrol station. My best birds here included a lone **Blyth's Pipit** (discovered earlier by others), and two **Oriental Skylarks**. A party of 12 **Cream-colored Coursers** was also a welcome sight, as well as a lone **Pale Rock Sparrow** and a **Namaqua Dove**. Returning to Sohar is easiest via the “palm trees” roundabout. The names of the roundabouts refer to the statue-like decorations in the center of them.

LIWA

An easy to access mangrove site which I used for a picnic lunch stop. **White-cheeked Bulbuls** were common there, and a **Syke's Warbler** was also observed.

SHINAS

Was a rather disappointing, time-consuming site to visit because new roads have changed the Omani guidebook information quite a bit, and the place was anyway dry and empty. A spectacular car accident occurred at a highway junction, amazingly and fortunately without casualties.

KHATMAT MILALAH

Again, finding the correct site was more complicated than I had expected, as a consequence of recent road construction on the highway (now 4 lanes + 2 service roads), and the many gravel tracks crisscrossing the area. Arriving from Sohar, I took the first signposted inland turnoff (as suggested by Eriksen & Sargeant) to Khatmat Milalah, arriving in the village! Beyond the village, I prospected the tracks to north, going off road, and eventually arrived on a second one, and a third parallel gravel road, the second probably being the one cited in the guidebook. Following it towards the coast, I arrived at the highway about 200 hundred meters north of the first turnoff to the village, concluding that the track really was the correct one.

Nevertheless, with the many side tracks and shallow wadis, it proved to be impossible to locate the recommended spot for **Striated Scops Owl**, my main motivation to visit the site. To be able to hear the owl, I camped on the site, and eventually heard one calling

briefly (four times) at 8.40 PM. Off road driving (along the tracks) was no problem for a sedan here (did my best to not harm vegetation). The terrain is easy for walking, as well. My other good birds included a **Plain Leaf Warbler** (just one!), **Ménétries's Warbler** and an **Orphean Warbler**, two **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouses** and up to six **Eastern Pied Wheatears**.

CENTRAL DESERT

NIZWA

Nizwa has been included under Central Desert Region, because it is a gateway to and from the desert region, a full day's drive (900 km; 120-160 km/h) to and from Salalah.

In regard to lodging, the Majan Guesthouse probably is the best accommodation deal available in town. Single rooms are OMR 15 per night, and I managed to get a double on my second visit for OMR 16, without breakfast (normal rate OMR 20 for a double). The rooms are nice, and for this rate it is no wonder that the place is often fully booked. Their television had over 500 channels to check out, including apparently most Arabic channels in the world. It was culturally interesting to check out all the variety, the channel of Al Aqsa Brigades being the most interesting one. It is a very hard reality these people have to live in, as I also have personally witnessed on the West Bank.

Väisänen & Vuonokari state the guesthouse being located "close to the highway ramp to Nizwa", but it really is not. It is about 3 kilometers from the ramp! Approaching from Muscat, one arrives in the main highway junction, with right hand turn to Nizwa, and left to Salalah. Going right, one goes straight for a kilometer or so, passing many shops on the left, and enters another junction, a roundabout at Firq (this is the old main junction portrayed at most road maps). From there, the turn to left, to Nizwa, takes you to the guesthouse, which is on the right, roughly two kilometers further on.

Alternatively, one could turn right at Firq, and find another accommodation option recommended by Väisänen et. al., the Safari Hotel. I saw a **Hume's Wheatear** by the road there, next to a petrol station.

The Nizwa Pizza Hut was not really a good option for a meal, unless you desire to pay five times more than in a proper Omani eatery, and eat food inferior to local dishes. The pizzas are not bad, just of mediocre fast food quality. Extra taxes etc. will be added to your bill in the end. On the plus side, they have oregano, the key ingredient of a proper pizza, so often missing from the American substitutes. Majan Guesthouse also serves quite adequate meals, for lower rates, and has room service.



Fig 2. A single room at the Majan Guesthouse, with the green “arrow to Mecca”. The room looks cramped in the photo, but only 10% of the space is shown.

WADI SAMIT ROAD

I had some spare time on the first afternoon at Nizwa, and decided to visit the close-by mountain range to test the climbing abilities of the Nissan Tiida. Passing Nizwa to the north, towards Al Buraymi, a signposted road (right) to Wadi Samit was discovered. Following the tarmac (and soon gravel) track for about 15 kilometers, birds were observed along the road. Not that much to see, but at least **Hume’s Wheatears** and **Sand Partridges** were common.

Only on the very top, on a rough and steep side track past the Wadi Samit settlement, the tire grip of Tiida started to fail. Nice sunset views from the high ridge, and gentle, welcoming people on the road.



Fig 3. On the track above Wadi Samit.

NIZWA - HAIMA

Noticed a green spot by the highway, looking good for **Desert Warblers**. Three individuals were discovered in few minutes, as well as other desert birds. If there is time available, it is a good idea to check out places with vegetation. The motel garden at Al Ghabah was too dry, a lone **Sand Martin** being the best discovery.

HAIMA PLAYGROUND

Few of kilometers east of Haima, towards Nizwa, a gated but open playground is located on the north side of the road. There are water taps available for washing or filling one's washing water bottles (for camping in the desert), and toilets. I stopped there twice, and saw a fine **Corn Bunting** on the second visit.



Fig 4. A “green spot” by the Salalah highway, oil rig on the background.

AL GHAFTAYN

The motel appeared to be the most popular stop over for cars and buses alike, being conveniently half way between Nizwa and Salalah. The poor guy in charge of the petrol station was exhausted, and simply was not able to serve all the people requesting for petrol! Al Ghaftayn is also a good place to have lunch and cold drinks, for a less than OMR 1 per plate. The garden behind the motel was good, but relatively empty in late December; just the usual **Chiffchaffs** (*tristis* and *abitienus*), and a lone **Song Thrush**. Be sure to check out the two fenced enclaves (a large tree, bushes) on the desert side, as well. The wall is easily crossed by the motel parking lot. Väisänen et. al. saw a record number of **Red-breasted Flycatchers** here in November 2006.



Fig 5. The Omanis appreciate trees more than some of us Finns do, to say the least! A tree at Al Ghaftayn.

MUNTASAR OASIS

The signposted eastern access road (from Al Ghaftayn) was fine at the time of my visit, the western one (from Qatbit) being more eroded in a washboard style. Nevertheless, both roads were passable by a sedan. The oasis itself was almost dry at the time of the visit, but with surprising birds. To start with, a party of 50 (7 adults, 43 juveniles) **White-fronted Geese** appeared on arrival, to my great astonishment. Just like birding at home, where tens of thousands of geese frequent the fields of North Karelia in autumn!

These birds must have gone lost over the Arabian Desert, barely making it across the Rub al Khal (“the empty quarter”), and finally found refuge at Muntasar. Not seeing anything but sand for hundred kilometers or so, they were reluctant to continue, even though there is not much water or grass available. The birds spent the hot hours of the day under the shadows of the reed bed, and did occasionally fly around the oasis, apparently looking for greener pastures.



Fig 6. "Welcome to Muntasar, our northern brother!" **White-fronted Geese** at Muntasar.



Fig 7. Prospecting for a way out...



Fig 8. Just enough water and grass for the rest of the winter?

Camped by the oasis, sleeping in the car. What a luxury of complete silence and Milky Way in its full glory. Only resident **Golden Jackals** broke the serene Arabian dream, with their occasional contact calls. It was a bit cold at night there, especially towards morning, and sleeping bag was really needed to keep the body warm.

The main reason for overnight camping was, however, a plan to check out whether **Egyptian Nightjars** winter in the oasis, Muntasar being an ideal habitat for the species, and seldom visited by night. As the dusk set in, I was armed with binoculars and a Brinkmann Spot/Flood 200 000-400 000 candela light.

First a very pale, long-eared **pipistrelle** appeared above the water and reedbeds. As nothing else was seen for a while, I was almost ready to give up, contemplating on sleeping in the car, rather than risking it on sand so close to a water source. Suddenly, a pair of nightjars appeared above the water, and could repeatedly be observed with the help of the floodlight! One of them was a female **Egyptian Nightjar**, and another apparently a male (could not see the underside of its tail well), because I heard it calling the species's distinctive song. What a successful confirmation of a theory!

Other good birds discovered at Muntasar included a winter male **Black-eared Wheatear**, two **Grey Hypocoliuses** (best seen late in the afternoon, by the water), two **White-breasted White-eyes** (far away from their usual habitat), and a lone **Rose-colored Starling**. A **Mallard** and **Teal** somehow managed in the unforgiving environment.



Fig 9. **Black-eared Wheatear**, a winter male at Muntasar.



Fig 10. Desert moon witnessed the display of **Egyptian Nightjars** at Muntasar.

QATBIT

Did not stay at the Qatbit Motel, which apparently is not a very good deal at the moment. Met the owner when passing by, and he did his best to market the place. “Pekka Komi! Annaika!”, the man listed his Finnish customers, “Annaika” probably referring to Annika Forsten? The garden around the motel was by far best along the desert highway, and definitely worth a stop. A lone **Red-wattled Plover** was my best discovery. Chicken biryani (OMR 0.8) and other good meals were served at a small roadside restaurant by the entrance. The close by oasis was easy to access by a sedan, contrary to the Oman birding website update information. The last 100 meters had been flooded some time ago, but this stretch was fine in December. Nothing special at the oasis in mid-afternoon.

DAWKAH

Visited the date palm thicket at the settlement junction, which had some water on the ground. Nevertheless, a rather dry place with hardly any birds.

AL BEED FARM

Easy to access, but some deep sand around the green fields. Got almost stuck there with the sedan, and dusted the car properly when trying not to do so. Do not keep your windows open when circling the fields! Some birds, but not too many at the time of my visit, the best being an **Indian Roller**, far away from its normal distribution. **Sandgrouses** were distinctly few both here and at Muntasar in December (dozens rather than hundreds).



Fig 11. The well signed and constructed desert highway.

DHOFAR

THUMRAIT

As the Nizwa-Salalah highway passes the Thumrait Air Base, just before the town proper, a fenced wastewater tank can be spotted on the right, close to the road. In there, the water overflows to and beyond the highway, and attracts a good variety of birds, including rarities. Observation is easy from the road, the base area being naturally out of bounds. The Air Base probably is the place in Thumrait with a large wintering party of **Grey Hypocolius**, and other recent goodies such as **Thick-billed Warbler**, all of which are reserved for birders working for the Omani air force.

A lone **Western Reef Heron**, far from the coast, was see here, and I also recorded dozens of **Rose-colored Starlings** and **Pale Rock Sparrows**. The only **Pied Wheatear** of the trip, a female, was standing on the fence, as well as a **Common Starling**. This is also a good site for **Nile Valley Sunbirds**, four (one male) were seen together on an early morning visit. A female **Amur Falcon** was a surprising bonus.

I also visited to the Thumrait landfill site, but there were hardly any eagles present, because the garbage was on fire. No changes with the access road.



Fig 12. Thumrait landfill site, a scene of destruction fit for the next Mad Max sequel.

SALALAH

Descending down to the coastal plains, beware of the many camels on the road, and continue all the way (through few roundabouts) to the Salalah - South Dahariz roundabout (on the right, the extensive fields of Jarziz farm end by this junction), turning right. Continue right, until arriving in another roundabout with an impressive tower with green “windows” as a landmark. On the right is the airport access road, the forward road being the northern by-pass of Salalah (to Raysut and Al Maghsayl), and the street to the left entering the East Center of Salalah, a convenient base for exploring the coast.

Just before the first lights, there is a LuLu hypermarket with provisions. Turning right at the lights, one enters a main street, and discovers possibly the best accommodation deal in town, the inconspicuous Hotel Al Hanaa. It is located on the left, at the first corner of the second block, the entrance being along a side street, about 20 m from the main one. The upper floor of the building belongs to the hotel, with dozens of rooms. They charge OMR 10 per night, in a pleasant single room. Parking is on the side street, in front of the hotel entrance, with 24-hour surveillance. There are many small restaurants in the general area, the close-by grilled chicken joint (continue along the main street, on the left) being a very good deal: OMR 1 big meals with delicious chicken, fast and friendly service, and no problems with hygiene.

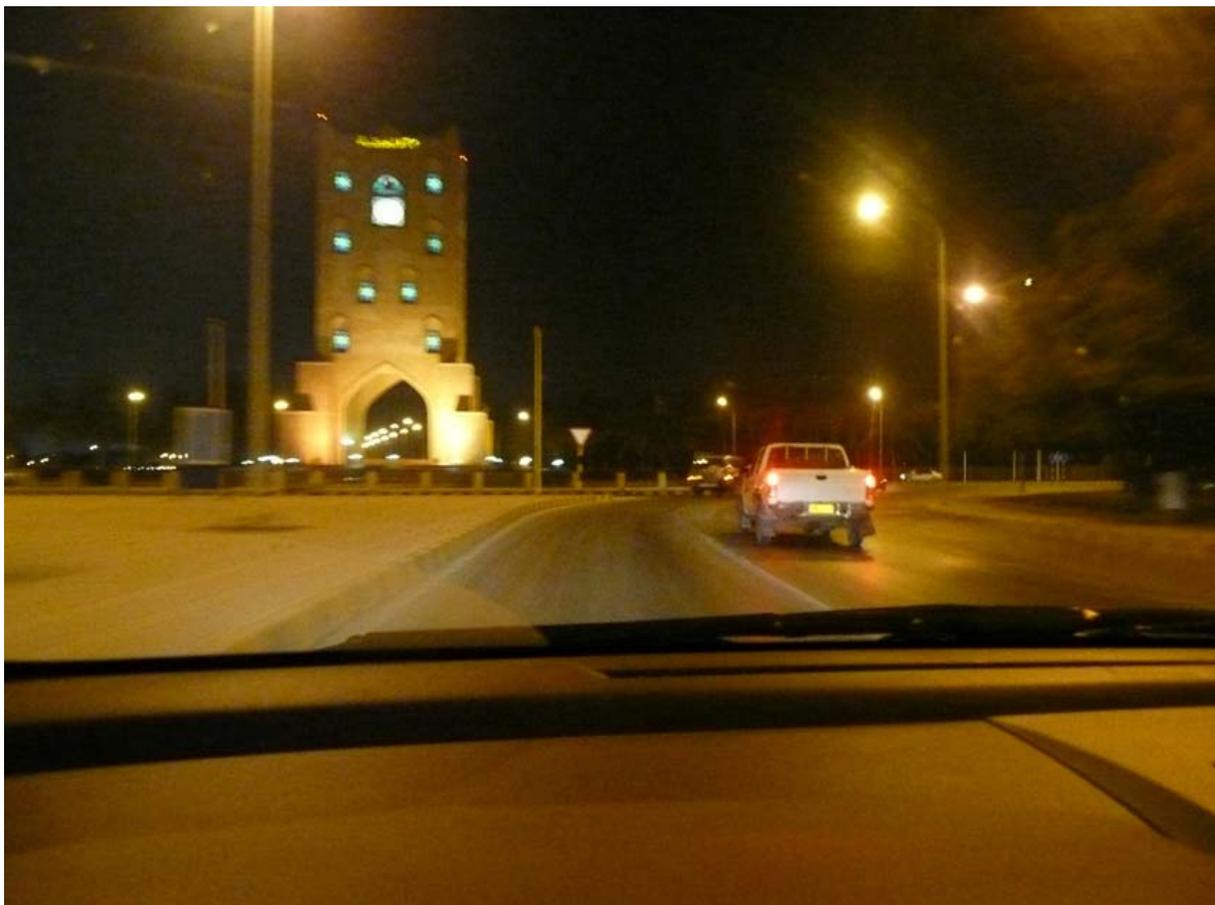


Fig 13. The “green windows tower” roundabout, Salalah, at night. Airport on the right, East center on the left, Raysut and Al Maghsayl forward.

On the opposite side of the above-mentioned “green windows” roundabout, a straight street lined by palms goes to the Salalah Airport (cf the map at Eriksen & Sargeant, p. 123). It is a very convenient place to change money, also when the exchanges in the center are closed. There is a currency exchange booth indoors with good rates for the euro, and instant service. In front of the airport building, free parking is available. For such a short occasion one may park even if the lot happens to be full, as long as other cars are able to pass.

In order to reach Raysut and Al Maghsayl, return to the tower roundabout, and turn left, continuing straight past the West Center. To the sites east of Salalah, turn right at the roundabout, continue to the Salalah - Thumrait - South Dahariz roundabout, turn again to the right, and left towards Dahariz in the next one. After a while, one reaches another roundabout with a petrol station (Shell, on the right), where turning right provides access to East Khawr, and driving straight on is the way to all of the eastern coast sites: Ayn Razat, Ayn Hamran, Khawr Sawli, Taqah, Khawr Rawri, Wadi Darbat, Tawi Atayr, Wadi Hanna, Ras Mirbat and Ras Janjari.

The fact that most of the Dhofar coast sites are located in the east of Salalah is another argument for staying at the East Center.



Fig 14. **Sooty Gull**, one of the most abundant birds of the Dhofar coast.

JARZIZ FARM

No problems with access and permit, but there were hardly any fallow fields in December 2007. Consequently, not much was seen there, and certainly no **storks**.

EAST KHAWR

A very productive, easy to access site. Unfortunately, there is also regular disturbance by 4x4s and quads, at the (best) seaside end. The gravel access from Dahariz (north), next to the roundabout Shell petrol station, is a bit difficult for a sedan in the beginning. Be careful when negotiating the rough part.

A lone **White Pelican** was the star of the khawr in December 2007, together with **Ferruginous Ducks**, a lone **Indian Pond Heron** and a **Whitetailed Plover** (scarce in Dhofar).



Fig 15. An adult **White Pelican** at East Khawr, December 2007.



Fig 16. 4x4 disturbance at East Khawr, at the seaside end. The road is too close to the shore.

AYN RAZAT

The fenced park is closed till 4 PM, but can readily be observed by walking around the enclosure, or even better, with a telescope from the eastern side, where good observation points can be found next to the circle road. There are more birds along the bushy eastern and northern perimeter than the fenced greens, anyway. I put my scope in front of a bush with a nice rock to sit down, rising sun behind my back, and waited. Between 9 and 10 AM, bird activity went down. There is not as much shade here as in Ayn Hamran. Arrived at sunrise, and the place remained peaceful till 9 AM, when the first picnickers arrived, fortunately staying by the stream, on the other side.

Bruce's Green Pigeons were there, but difficult to spot. Eventually, an actively calling male gave superb scope views, calling from the tall "cedars". Two other individuals were feeding in a fruiting fig tree. Dozens of **Arabian Partridges** arrived to drink early in the morning, and could be observed walking, or flying around, scared by a **Sparrowhawk**. **Rüppell's Weavers** were common, at least 120 birds. Two **Golden-winged Grosbeaks** crossed the valley on one of the visits, actively calling. An **Arabian Warbler** visited the perimeter. The star species of the place was, however, a noisy **Long-tailed Shrike** (Central Asian subspecies *erythronotus*).



Fig 17. The park of Ayn Razat; a fruiting fig tree on the left, with skulking pigeons.

AYN HAMRAN

At first sight, not quite as pleasant a place as Ayn Razat. There is neither fencing nor restrictions on access, and the many picknickers leave a lot of rubbish, and a scent of urine, all over the place. Additionally, a noisy generator was on the first time I went there, with a lot of unidentified banging of metal against metal in the same direction.

Nevertheless, a great place for birdwatching. The only **Red-breasted Flycatchers** and a **Ménétries's Warbler** were seen here. **Rüppels Weavers** were common, with around 200 individuals present. An adult **Verreaux's Eagle** was briefly seen circling by the cliffs. A short sunset visit on the 22nd December produced two **African Scops Owls**. The star species was, however, a **Forest Wagtail**, a vagrant in Oman, first spotted by British birders. It was shy and wary, but seen regularly by the stream flowing through the park.

Mammals observed at the site included a lone **Nubian Ibex** and a pair of brown **pipistrelles** which have not yet been identified.



Fig 18. **Forest Wagtail** at Ayn Hamran, a conspicuous but elusive bird.



Fig 19. The little devil knew exactly where to stand to spoil my documentary photos, flying up into the trees the next second!

KHAWR SAWLI

The place was bone dry in December 2007. Some birds in the dry reed beds, but otherwise empty. Could easily be accessed by a sedan (4x4 recommended by Eriksen & Sargeant), driving on the tracks.

TAQAH

The khawr was almost empty and the beach had only the most common gull species. The ruins of old fort, on the cliffs by the eastern end of the town, was a good place for observing the interesting local subspecies of **Black Kite**.

A party of **Socotra Cormorants** was probably the best discovery here. All in all, not the most interesting site in December, even though a relatively attractive seaside town, and definitely worth a quick check on the way to east or west.



Fig 20. The Taqah beach, with thousands of **gulls**.

KHAWR RAWRI

An extensive site with plenty of potential. First, explored the northern end by climbing a ridge and walking across a hot plateau to shoreline, spotting **Blackheaded Tchagra** and others on the way. Second, entered the khawr proper through the Sumharan archeological site entrance (OMR 1 fee per vehicle) on two occasions, exploring the khawr by car and foot.

There was always a good assortment of hawks and eagles at Khawr Rawri, **Long-legged Buzzards** being regular, as well as wildfowl, terns (up to 7 **Caspian**, 1 **Saunders's**) and shorebirds. By the sea, few seabirds were noted, including **Persian Shearwaters** and an immature **Red-billed Tropicbird**. One of the tracks goes behind the Sumharan ruins, towards the bottom of the khawr. In there, I saw no less than 7 **Black Storks** on the 25th December, 1 adult and 6 juveniles.



Fig 21. Seven **Black Storks** at Khawr Rawri, with Grey Herons.

WADI DARBAT

Very dry in December, and not really worth the visit. There was a good amount of water in the river itself, and ponds, but hardly any green vegetation on the fringes, as a consequence of overgrazing. A plenitude of camels and donkeys occupied the place,

having also eaten the lower branches of trees. Quite a few passerines were hiding in the canopy of the numerous trees, but the birds were difficult to observe. The roads were all tarmac, no problems with a sedan.



Fig 22. Camels are very common in Dhofar, including Khawr Rawri.

TAWI ATAIR

The access to the sink hole from the small parking lot by the barns (cf. Eriksen & Sargeant) may a bit somewhat difficult to tackle, if you have a walking disability. There are no regular paths, just tracks between the plenitude of stones. Follow the upper route to the northern side, where reasonable observation points can be discovered. I had to cut some bush branches down to clear a good view for the scope. It was peaceful there, the other tourists preferring the more obvious tower side, and dozens of **Yemen Serins** were easily spotted down in the hole, **Bonelli's Eagles** and other birds of prey being observed from a close distance.

No **South Arabian Wheatears** by the sinkhole, or along the gravel access road. Continuing along the main road, towards Jabal Samhan, three individuals were discovered, right next to the road. Quite distinctive body structure, if compared with **Mourning Wheatear**, not to mention the other differences.

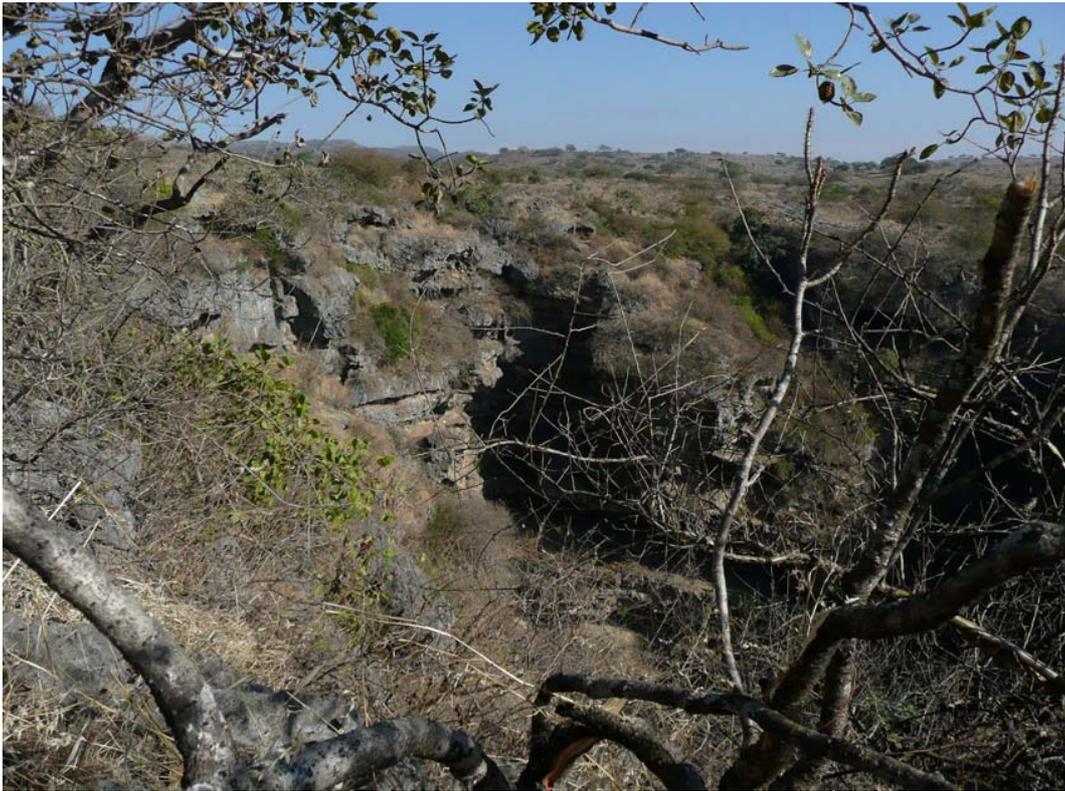


Fig 23. Tawi Atayr, a massive sinkhole and the haunt of **Yemen Serins**.



Fig 24. **Bonelli's Eagle**, Tawi Atayr.



Fig 25. One of the stocky **South Arabian Wheatears**.

WADI HANNA

Some potentially dangerous land slides have recently occurred around Wadi Hanna, especially along the steep southern access road (the short one from Taqah - Ras Mirbat highway). Consequently, there is construction work going on, in fact all the way from the village of Tawi Atair to the highway. The road will probably be upgraded into tarmac in the near future.

At the moment, access discouraged on both sides of Wadi Hanna because of the risks involved (no go signs). Nevertheless, the place could be visited from both directions in December 2007, and I was not the only one there. Proceed with caution!



Fig 26. Wadi Hanna, with many Baobabs, underlining the African aspect of the Dhofar wildlife.

RAS MIRBAT

Eriksen & Sargeant recommend observation from the low headland by the southern edge of the town of Mirbat, close to a small mosque. I tried this site, but immediately noticed the main headland on the left, across a bay, where closer views of the passing seabirds could clearly be had. Moreover, there was a picnic shelter over there, and people could be seen driving in with sedans.

The access route was soon discovered. Arriving from the direction of Salalah, turn left at the Shell station, just before the village proper, and turn right at the next junction, as suggested by the guidebook. Continue till the last four way junction before the seashore road, and turn left here. Soon afterwards the tarmac ends, becoming gravel by some tall buildings on the right.

Follow the tracks towards a large, walled building by the sea, passing it closely on the right, and continue to the headland. Find a good observation point, e.g. a small hill with stones well above the shoreline (no sense in going down to the shore), and put your scope here.



Fig 27. Ras Mirbat, sunrise at the “new observation point”.

On my fourth visit, I had the bad luck of being approached by a police officer, who enquired whether I had the ministry permit to use such a powerful lens (my scope!) for photography in Oman, also pointing out that there are some sensitive government buildings around. Not being as fluent with English as most Omanis are, he requested the local football team (practicing close-by) to help with translation. They happily agreed, commenting they would defend me!

Well, somebody had probably got worried seeing me with the telescope, observing the sea hour after hour, on four occasions. Eventually, it became established that telescopes are not for photography, and the superiors of the officer confirmed by phone that watching the sea with a telescope is quite ok in Oman. I used the fifteen minutes to educate the others on birdwatching, bird-tourism, guidebooks and the status of Ras Mirbat as a seabird observation point. In the end, we shook hands, and the policeman apologized for disturbing me, and welcomed me to stay there as long as I wished!

Ras Mirbat was an excellent sea-bird observation point, with hundreds of **Persian Shearwaters** and **Red-necked Phalaropes**, many **Masked Boobies**, a few **Socotra Cormorants** and **Saunders’s Terns**, single **Brown Booby**, **Bridled Tern** and **Pomarine Skua**.

The star birds were, however, the obliging **Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels**, single birds seen 23rd and December, in both occasions soon after 7 AM. Hundreds of **Pantropical Spotted Dolphins** and a lone **Humpback Dolphin** were observed passing Ras Mirbat.

WEST KHAWR

Not one of my favorite places, as the observation points could be better, but nevertheless a site with more wildfowl than average. The access mapped in Eriksen & Sergeant was a bit rough for a sedan, but provided views to some birdy sections not otherwise visible, and 4 **Cotton Pygmy-Geese**.

The most convenient access is by tarmac streets, from West Salalah, and along the long seaside street named after the khawr, if I remember correctly. Driving from Raysut, turn right at the Al Awqdayn roundabout, and after some driving, try a seaside junction to the right.

I forgot to make detailed notes on this one, but it is a small place, and the correct street (long, direct, seaside) should be easy enough to identify.



Fig 28. **Short-toed Eagle**, a rather pale individual, seen by the West Khawr.

RAYSUT

The general area can be seen in detail by Google Earth. Do not bother with the busy and sensitive harbor area. The access is closed for tourists. Instead, focus on the stony beach and fishing harbor recommended by Eriksen & Sergeant. The access has changed a bit. It is not necessarily a good idea to bypass the Power Station on the right hand side anymore, as the gravel track is a rough one for a sedan. It was passable, but slow. Instead, turn left in front of the station and go around the buildings, into the seaside fishing harbor. Driving through, it is possible to enter the rocky beach from that direction, with no risk of damaging the car.

Both the beach and the harbor have a very good variety of birds. This appears to be the favorite local haunt of **Ospreys**, **Oystercatchers**, **Terek's Sandpipers**, **Lesser** and **Greater Sand Plovers**, and many others in Salalah. The most interesting discovery was a roosting party of 210 **White Storks**, on the 24th December.



Fig 29. Foraging **gulls** at the Raysut fishing harbor.



Fig 28. Some of the roosting **White Storks** at Raysut, about half of the flock.

AL MAGHSAYL: KHAWR AND BLOWHOLES

A **Trumpeter Finch** (possibly two) was observed by the road from Raysut to Al Maghsayl, by sunrise. The restaurant by the scenic Al Maghsayl blowholes had more than 30 **Arabian Partridges** early in the morning, quite tame and approachable. The blowholes had great facilities (benches etc.) for an extended seabird watch, but the sea did not deliver that much in December.

Surprising numbers of winter **Common** (800+) and **White-cheeked** (50+) **Terns** were, however, observed, as well as 4 **Persian Shearwaters** and 7 **Brown Boobies**. A **Humpback Dolphin** was the only mammal record.

The Khawr of Maghsayl had more variety. The best observation points were on the main road (park, and use your car as a hide, minding the traffic) and by the specifically constructed observation hide on the eastern side, each place being visited several times.

Few days before, there had been a female **Falcated Duck** at the khawr, but it had disappeared soon afterwards. Instead, 10 **Cotton Pygmy-Geese**, 10 **Ferruginous Ducks**, a **Little** and a **Baillon's Crake**, and a winter **Reed Warbler**. The ponds by the highway had a lone **White-fronted Goose** (juv), an **Intermediate Egret**, an **Indian Pond-Heron** and the only **Pheasant-tailed Jacana** of the trip.



Fig 31. Al Maghsayl blowholes, a nice vantage point for seabird observations.



Fig 32. Khawr Al Maghsayl, southern end, as seen from the hide.



Fig 33. An **Intermediate Egret** at Khawr Al Maghsayl roadside ponds.



Fig 34. A lone **White-fronted Goose**, Khawr Al Maghsayl ponds.

MUSANDAM

ROAD TO KHASAB

Impressive sceneries, perfect road, peace and cleanliness...Therefore, a major improvement in comparison with Ras al Khaima. Great views across the Strait of Hormuz, the mountains of Iran visible in the horizon. Hundreds of **Socotra Cormorants** (also on shore) and two Arctic **Skuas** were observed between the border and Bukha, but not afterwards. Very few passerines were seen in the dry, impressively barren environment.

Going in, I was stopped by a heavily armed military checkpoint, the soldiers checking the documents, including my international driver's license (the first and only time I needed this expensive piece of red tape). Going out, there were no random checkpoints.



Fig 35. The Bukha Fort, on the road to Khasab.



Fig 36. **Socotra Cormorant** and **Grey Heron**, greeting one another.

KHASAB

Not much to see in the town in December. The seashore has been filled with gravel, and consequently of little interest for a birdwatcher, or anybody else, the mud flats having gone. A lone **Crag Martin** was seen there. The residential area had one **Bank Mynah**, among the common ones. The small fields (cf. Eriksen & Sargeant) had nothing special. Also the ponds above the dam in the upper valley were dry. Instead, I drove a bit further towards the Sall Ala turnoff, exploring the few fenced plots in the gravel filled valley, and discovering a lone **Eastern Red-tailed Wheatear** and a pair of **Red Foxes** (Arabian Peninsula subspecies, with their black bellies and ear-tips).

Khasab is a place for lodging, meals and petrol, and a gateway to Sayh and Sall Ala, not much else. The small eateries of the town center had good food at the usual rate (around OMR 1), and a convenient currency exchange. Locally caught fresh fish was available at restaurants, unlike in Salalah.

There apparently are no good accommodation deals in Khasab, and camping on the mountains may be the best option. I stayed at the Khasab Hotel, which charged a whopping OMR 45 for its double rooms, quite a lot if you are traveling solo. They were not ready to provide a “without breakfast rate”, even though I was not able to have the breakfasts at the late time they suggested. Furthermore, they failed to produce breakfast packages, despite promises to do so.

Customers appeared to be make complaints all the time at the reception, with very strong words, as neither the standard of service nor the attitude was on par with the room rate. Nevertheless, the room was ok, almost as good as the rooms of the Majan Guesthouse (OMR 15), with an above-the-average bathroom and satellite television (500+ channels). The conveniently close-by petrol station had a good selection of groceries and snacks.



Fig 37. The center of Khasab, with a variety of services.

SALL ALA

Made one late afternoon visit to Al Khalidiyah, the valley campsite surrounded by trees. A few campers there, and also quite a few birds, even though not a single **Plain Leaf Warbler** was recorded. On the other hand, the timing of the late afternoon visit was nothing but ideal.

On the opposite side of the road, a private road goes into a some sort of dwelling. Birders are warmly welcome there, as well, according to the most hospitable landowners.

On the way to Sall Ala, the viewpoint of Khawr an Naijd is worth a visit, for the great scenery. Unfortunately, I did not have time to drive down to the seashore. That would have been an interesting drive, especially the uphill return trip! Do not stop between the Sall Ala valley and the scenic point, as this is a sensitive point, birders with optics being easily misunderstood.



Fig 38. Khawr an Naijd; a well known scenic point.

SAYH

Having checked the gravel road to Sayh with the help of Google Earth satellite images, I expected the road to be drivable, perhaps with difficulty, by a sedan. The whole visit to Musandam was based on this assumption, Khasab not being worth the trouble otherwise. In reality, the road proved to be much better than I had anticipated, much like any average gravel road in rural Finland, which are mostly driven by 2x2s. It would have been possible to drive a Ferrari up to Sayh, slowly, not to mention the Nissan Tiida!

Only once, going up, there was a freshly fallen rock on the road requiring a special move to pass by without denting the car. After rains the situation may be completely different, and the road downright dangerous, but in dry weather I had no problems. Having said that, some sections of the road were quite steep, and on my way down I went slowly to maintain tire grip, and stopped twice to cool down the breaks. After rains, or landslides, even having a 4x4 does not guarantee access.

Most of the roads stated to require a 4x4 in Eriksen & Sargeant can be driven by a 2x2, if you have the confidence and experience to face the risks involved. They have understandably been labeled 4x4 to keep all the readers out of trouble.



Fig 39. The road to Sayh, a steep section, with the “lush” slopes of Musandam.

I arrived at the plateau by 7 AM, perhaps half an hour too early, as the sun had not yet reached the valley bottom, Sayh being completely surrounded by high ridges. Parked the car on the main road, in a wide spot roughly 200 meters after the valley entrance (signposted), and started the long walk around the plateau. At this point, the sun began to warm up the eastern end, the west remaining under shadows and mist. It took at least an hour before the west cleared up. Therefore, do as I did and circle the plateau clockwise, starting from the east (Khasab access).

Plenty of birds, and welcoming, polite people. Military helicopters disturbed the valley twice, making enormous din in the confined space. **Eversmann's Redstart** was the key target species in Sayh, and 3 males and 2 females/juveniles were eventually located. Not all the date palm groves could be explored, and strong wind made birds to hide in the afternoon. Therefore, I suspect that twice as many **Eversmann's** may well winter at this site.

Black Redstarts were numerous (over 60), as well as **Hume's**, **Eastern Redtailed** and **Eastern Pied Wheatears**. **Chukars** called on the ridges, and a single **Plain Leaf-Warbler** was seen in the easternmost fenced garden. Other goodies included a single winter **Rock Thrush** (in addition to **Blues**), a **Brambling** and a **Corn Bunting**.



Fig 40. The entrance to Sayh, the plateau on the background.



Fig 41. **Hume's Wheatear** at Sayh, with its large head and strong bill.

UAE SITES

Leaving Oman, some time was spent birdwatching in the UAE, which has impressive concentrations of shorebirds, not far from the Dubai airport.

KHALBA MANGROVES

Locating the mangroves was straightforward, but seeing the star subspecies, the *kalbaensis* **White-collared Kingfisher** was not. With luck, one individual was spotted sitting on top of a tree for two minutes, before it disappeared again in the mangroves. The **White-collared Kingfisher** complex is taxonomically interesting, and splits may be pending.

Otherwise, not much to see there. Could not find the road to Dubai in Khalba (just like Väisänen & Vuonokari), but continued to Fujairah, where a signposted junction was easily spotted, and drove to Manama, Ras al Khaima and Musandam. It was interesting to see all these emirates and sheikdoms, so familiar from my boyhood stamp collecting.

Be careful when driving in the UAE. The condition of roads is more variable than in Oman, there is a lot of heavy traffic, and also many people of South Asian origin in the traffic, following their own traffic culture codes. Consequently, you may expect cyclists proceeding against the traffic, for example, and other similar surprises.



Fig 42. Fujairah.

RAS AL KHAIMA

The RAK is a dusty, run down emirate/construction site in the north of the UAE, with little interest for visiting birders on their way to Khasab, Musandam, or back. Beach access was difficult due to privatized, gated zones, and the ever present construction work.

The public beaches visited had only few birds, with the exception of hundreds of **Socotra Cormorants** at sea, and heaps and boulders (!) of decaying rubbish. By far, the least attractive place encountered *en route*.



Fig 43. One of the Ras al Khaima beaches, after a few picnics...

UMM AL QUWAIN

Half a day was spent checking the lagoons and mudflats around the Dreamland water amusement park, especially on the east side (towards Ras al Khaima). Access could be had from the coastal highway, along several informal tracks, some of them quite good but others treacherous with mud and tidal waters seeping from underground. Keep your eyes open!

This is an excellent area for shorebird observation, tens of thousands of birds being present on the highway side. Peaceful surroundings, not that much rubbish, and great views. The most notable birds recorded included a **Great Knot**, a **Long-toed Stint**, a **Broad-billed Sandpiper**, dozens of **Terek's Sandpipers**, 260 **Crab Plovers**, and a single **White-cheeked Tern**.

East of the Dreamland park, a brand new road connects the coastal highway with the Emirates highway; a convenient shortcut if you are on your way to Sharjah or Dubai airports.



Fig 44. Winter birdlife at the Dreamland mudflats, a paradise for shorebird lovers.

Many thanks to Roni Väisänen, for information and delivering my almost daily sms rarity reports to Jens Eriksen in Muscat, by email.

Let us hope a second, updated edition of the Oman guidebook will come out sooner or later. Things have changed and information has accumulated since the original publication.