

emirates

bird

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Aspinall, S.J. 2003. *The First Records of Sooty Shearwaters Puffinus griseus in the United Arab Emirates*. Emirates Bird Report 20:312-313. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORDS OF SOOTY SHEARWATERS *Puffinus griseus* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Simon Aspinall

1st. UAE record: One off Kalba, 30 April 1995

(S.J. Aspinall, T. van der Have, G. Keijl et al.)

The first UAE record of Sooty Shearwater *Puffinus griseus* concerned a single bird seen well for several minutes off Kalba beach, Sharjah, on the Gulf of Oman coast, on 30 April 1995 (SJA, TvdH, GK et al). During a seawatch the following day, 1 May, an individual was seen passing Ras Dibba, Fujairah, some 65km to the north (TvdH, GK et al.). It is conceivable that the same bird was involved in both of these observations and also in a third sighting, off the Fujairah Hilton on 11 May (S.L. James). In the first and last sightings, under 5km apart, the bird was seen splash-landing on the sea, then taking off again and flying a short distance before either splashing down once more or circling back close to its start point and resettling. At Kalba, this took place from no more than 30-40 metres to 80m from the beach during a feeding frenzy involving many tens of Sooty Gulls *Larus hemprichii* and miscellaneous terns *Sterna* spp., mostly Common Terns *S. hirundo* and Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*.

Description: All dark sooty-brown above and below, with contrasting silvery underwing linings. Legs dark, protruding beyond tail-tip. Head relatively small, bill all dark. A number of photographs were taken (see Emirates Bird Report 20 (2003)).

There have been two additional sightings since:

2nd. UAE record: Three off Fujairah, 15 May 1997

(S.J. Aspinall).

Two separate birds were seen simultaneously sitting amongst Sooty Gulls loafing on the sea close to shore (<100m) off the corniche mid-morning, with a third, very heavily worn bird, being seen settled on the surface down to just 3m from a boat immediately outside the entrance to Fujairah port in the mid-afternoon.

3rd. UAE record: One passed westwards at Umm Shaif oilfield, Abu Dhabi, at 1030 on 16 April 2001

(S.J. Aspinall & R. Loughland).

This oilfield lies some 140 north-west of Abu Dhabi city, 25km east of Das island; this sighting constitutes the first record of Sooty Shearwater for the Arabian Gulf. There is a single published record for Oman, this being of a long-dead tideline corpse found at Al Azaiba, northern Oman, on 23 June 1982. Elsewhere in the region, the species is known latterly as an almost annual vagrant to the northern Red Sea (Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba), with confirmed records from there in April, May and June in recent years. There are no known records for Pakistan or Iran.

It seems that Sooty Shearwater may be more regular in the N.W. Indian Ocean than was hitherto supposed. The early summer dates of all records provide a pattern that would seem consistent with the dispersal from the Southern Ocean breeding grounds during the austral autumn (March/April). Moulting apparently takes place in the winter quarters. Although the appearance of the species close inshore amongst loafing Sooty Gull flocks seems odd behaviour, it may be where to look to find further records. Observers should be aware of the similarity of Short-tailed Shearwater *P. tenuirostris*, which has been recorded from Pakistan (single specimen collected 1899), but not, as yet, from Arabian waters. This species differs from Sooty Shearwater in appearing dark-capped with a white chin/throat in winter and in having a less contrasting underwing. The bill is also shorter and the forehead steeper – features obviously appreciable only at close quarters.

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Aspinall, SJ & D Diskin. 2003. *The First Records of Intermediate Egret Egretta intermedia in the United Arab Emirates*. Emirates Bird Report 20:313-314. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORDS OF INTERMEDIATE EGRET *Egretta intermedia* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Simon Aspinall & David Diskin

A quick visit to Ramtha lagoons, Sharjah on 23 December 1994 turned up the country's first Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia*. It was not seen again for over a week and it was then that the initial identification was confirmed as having been correct.

On the morning of 23 December 1994, Simon Aspinall arrived at Ramtha lagoons to look for a Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* reported there the day before by Colin Richardson and was driving to the southern part of the area when he noticed a collection of egrets and flamingos feeding close to the western shore. Stopping to scan with binoculars, he picked out a yellow-billed white egret feeding close by a group of Western Reef Herons *Egretta gularis* that contained the usual imbalance of light and dark morphs. The "yellow-billed" egret was comparable in size to the Western Reef Herons, with a dusky bill tip and dark tarsi, the tibia being at least in part pale yellowish. The bird in question was beginning to look distinctly interesting. Surely it was overall too small, the neck not so long and flexible looking, and bill shorter and paler yellow for it to be a Great White Egret *Egretta alba*, even of the small *modesta* race?

Views obtained subsequently through a telescope showed the dark gape line to end beneath the eye, not extending to its rear as in Great White Egret. Field-guides give this as the cast-iron characteristic for separation of these two species Intermediate Egret, predicted as likely to occur here, was finally about to make its way onto the UAE list. A visiting bird tour group from Sweden, led by Erik Hirschfeld, found the bird again several days later, and many other observers, some hitherto somewhat sceptical, thereafter made the trip to see this bird for themselves. It remained to beyond the year-end, being seen by many observers until at least 13 January 1995.

The small *modesta* race of Great White Egret occurs sparingly in the Gulf, although apparently only very rarely on the western and southern shores. The length of the gape line is the best way to separate it from Intermediate Egret, otherwise apparently being almost identical in size. Both *modesta* and nominate *alba* Great White Egrets were present in Safa Park, Dubai in the winter of 2000/2001 and the size difference when they stood side by side was appreciable (Steve James *pers. comm.*).

The second UAE record came only a recently as the summer of 2001, when David Diskin located an individual in breeding plumage with a dark-tipped bill at the pivot fields adjacent to the Wimpey pits, Dubai on 25 June. This bird also proved to be a long-stayer and was seen by several observers up until 30 July.

DISTRIBUTION

Discontinuous and patchy distribution in sub-Saharan Africa, and in Asia from India west through China and Japan, and southeast through Philippines and Sunda Archipelago to Australia. (Hancock & Kushlan 1984; Cramp & Simmons 1977). In the Middle East it is a vagrant to Jordan but is a regular winter visitor in small numbers to Oman, particularly to the khors around Salalah in Dhofar (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000).

Many authorities (e.g. Hancock & Kushlan 1984; Cramp & Simmons 1977) recognise three distinct subspecies: nominate *intermedia* in Asia, *brachyrhyncha* in Africa and *plumifera* in Australasia. However, Robson (2000), following Inskipp et al (1996) considers the species to be monotypic and genetically distinct from other egrets, placing it in its own genus *Mesophoyx*. Taube & Grylle (2001) consider there are no reliable field characters to establish the geographical origin of Intermediate Egret because of contradictions in the birding literature. They cite Zimmerman et al (1996) who states that the bill-tip is black in African birds but also note that other authors state that a black tip is diagnostic of Asian birds.

However, the literature does seem to agree that an adult in full breeding plumage with a dark-tipped bill would be attributable to the nominate race *intermedia*. Therefore, the second UAE record is considered most likely to be of that form. The first record is not definitely attributable to any race, although on geographical grounds is perhaps most likely to also have involved a bird of the nominate form.

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THE FIRST RECORD OF LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE *Anser erythropus* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Markku O. Tunturi, Ilkka Lehtinen, Risto Nieminen and Kari Raulos

November 20th 1996 was the second day of our second birding tour to the United Arab Emirates. In the morning we had visited the coast at Umm al Quwain and Khor al Beidah, and at 14.40 hours we arrived at Umm al Quwain dump and parked in front of the first area of mud and water. After getting out of the car, RN noticed the head of a goose rising above the vegetation bordering the mud. We all looked at the bird's head and pink bill and initially assumed it was a Greylag Goose *Anser anser*, as we had seen a flock of ten birds of this species just a day before at Al Wathba camel track. However, on closer inspection we noticed that the bill was remarkably small and the head was beautifully rounded. There was a prominent, bright yellow orbital ring, which clearly identified the bird as Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*. The lack of a white forehead blaze indicated the bird was in its first calendar year. Suddenly another goose raised its head above the vegetation; the new bird actually was a Greylag Goose and the difference in bill size between the two birds was striking. We viewed the birds from a distance of 30-40 feet through telescopes. The following description was made:

The Lesser White-fronted Goose was a dark brown goose with a small and beautifully rounded head. The length of the pink bill was clearly less than the depth of the head and thus very tiny for a goose. The nail on the bill was black or near-black. In comparison, the Greylag's bill was huge and the nail was white. The Lesser's forehead was very dark, almost blackish brown, contrasting with other parts of the head.

The Lesser's neck was very dark in comparison with the Greylag's light grey neck. The same difference in colouration could be seen on the flanks of the birds when the birds stepped clear of the vegetation. In full view, the size difference was strikingly apparent. When MOT walked towards the bird taking photographs, both of them took flight. Again the size difference was most striking, with the Lesser White-fronted Goose appearing not much longer than a Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, though bulkier. In flight the upperwing coverts of the Greylag were silvery grey, while the Lesser's wings were much darker and quite uniformly coloured above. The bird remained at Umm al Quwain dump until 5th December, when it was relocated at Ramtha; it remained at this site until 14th March 1997.

DISTRIBUTION

Breeds across Arctic Europe and Asia, from northern Scandinavia eastwards to northeastern Siberia. Winters primarily in south Caspian lowlands, with declining numbers in southeastern Europe, the lower Euphrates (Iraq/Iran), Kazakhstan and in lowland eastern and southern China (Madge & Burn 1988). Dramatic decrease in breeding range and population size since mid-20th century. In the Middle East, accidental in Syria, Turkey, Israel, Kuwait and Egypt (Snow & Perrins 1998). There is one record from Oman (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000).

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Emirates Bird Report 20:316-317. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORD OF SHIKRA *Accipiter badius* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Joakim & Elisabeth Djerf

At 3 p.m. on April 9th 1996, we were birdwatching at Zabeel water treatment plant when we found a hawk sitting on a branch in the north-western corner of the area. We observed the bird from 20 metres away and after studying it and seeing that it was an unusual looking "sparrowhawk", we decided to try and photograph it. Unfortunately, the hawk took off and flew towards the adjacent palace; we observed it in flight for about ten seconds before it disappeared from sight. We did not see it again.

DESCRIPTION:

A very pale-looking accipiter with a very obvious white throat dissected by a narrow, vertical dark stripe. The bird lacked a white supercilium and white nape-patch. The visible upperparts – head, folded wings and back – were a uniform, light blue-grey, reminiscent of male Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. The visible parts of the primaries were a noticeably darker grey. The underparts were pure white with fine, light buffish barring on the breast. The legs/feet, cere and base of bill were yellow, and the irides were orange-yellow.

In flight, the silhouette was very much like Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, consisting of short, broad wings with blunt, rounded wing tips, a small head and a long tail. The appearance was different from Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* – a species we have experience of from Israel – which is more falcon-like, with more pointed wings. When we saw the bird flying away, we noted that the primary tips were darker than the rest of the underwing, but not so black and contrasting as in male Levant Sparrowhawk. The rest of the underwing was very light, but not so pure white as in male Levant Sparrowhawk. The undertail pattern was not seen well, but it was definitely darker than the rest of the underparts. The upperwing, back and uppertail were all of the same blue-grey colour, except for the outer primaries which were dark grey. The overall appearance in flight was of a very pale bird.

At the time we agreed that the bird was not a Levant Sparrowhawk, and considered it to be an unknown (to us) pale race of Sparrowhawk. Our experience of Shikra was zero. It was only when we consulted the literature at a later date that we came to the conclusion that this bird must have been a male Shikra because of its Sparrowhawk-like form and its very pale plumage. The yellow-orange iris colour is also a distinctive feature in separating this species from male Levant Sparrowhawk, as the latter's eyes are always dark red-brown.

DISTRIBUTION:

A polytypic species found in Afrotropical and Indomalayan regions. In the Arabian peninsula there is a resident population in southwest Arabia and western Yemen, but this population is attributable to the African subspecies *A. b. poliopsis*. In Oman, it is regarded as a vagrant with seven records to date (Eriksen & Sargeant, 2000). All of these records have been from south Oman or Masirah Island and perhaps refer to wandering individuals of *A. b. poliopsis*.

The subspecies we are concerned with, *A.b. cenchroides*, breeds from Azerbaijan across northern Iran eastwards to Kazakhstan and south to northwest India. Some adults remain around southern Caspian in winter but most migrate to Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia. However, Ferguson-Lees and Christie (2001) also state that some appear to migrate to Arabia and possibly even Africa. Elsewhere in the Middle East, there has been one occurrence of *A. b. cenchroides* in Israel in spring 1987 (Shirihai, 1996).

STATUS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Since the Djerfs' initial observation in April 1996, Shikra has been observed with increasing regularity in Dubai's parkland areas and breeding is now suspected to occur at Emirates golf course. However, there have been no confirmed observations in the UAE away from these areas, which suggests that the small population has originated from released or escaped birds. The Zabeel palace area, where the Djerfs' observation was made, is well known for its number of captive species, some of which are free-flying.

However, it should be noted that Shikra is a potential vagrant to the UAE. An adult was seen on Qeshm Island, Iran on 27 April, 2001 by Colin Richardson and David Diskin, a distance of only 130 km from the UAE mainland.

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Emirates Bird Report 20:318. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORD OF AMUR FALCON *Falco amurensis* FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Simon Aspinall

It was 9th July 1995, finals day at Wimbledon and 450C in Abu Dhabi, where nothing but mad dogs and English birdwatchers stirred. Why ever a visit should have been made to Al Wathba camel racetrack on this day no one will ever know; perhaps it was nothing more than force of habit. Whatever force was afoot, one can only say how serendipitous fate sometimes happens to be.

It was approaching 5 p.m. when I was driving up the main track through the fodder fields to leave Al Wathba, having seen very little up until that point, when what was clearly a very small dark falcon left a sprinkler head and flew over and behind the car. The first brief view was sufficient to realise that it was not a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, a species that might have been expected, or at least possible here at this time of the year. The bird settled once more on another sprinkler head no more than four rows out into the field and a stunned observer immediately got on the phone to Colin Richardson and Steve James. One predictably was watching the tennis and already drinking, the other equally predictably was getting ready to go out for a few drinks. Badgered into coming and returning in time for his dinner, Steve James arrived within 45 minutes, saw the bird within two more and returned to Abu Dhabi hot and sweaty but grateful for a tick the day before leaving for two month's summer break. Colin (who lived 150 km. away) had to sweat the night through but arrived at dawn in the morning to see a long awaited first for the UAE. Several observers saw the bird thereafter until at least 24th July.

Although it was obviously a "red-foot", no observer was immediately aware of the plumage features to be able to distinguish a first-summer male Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* from a similarly aged and sexed Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*. 'I know it is a red-foot, but how do you tell a Manchurian red-foot from a Western red-foot?' I asked CR. Simple, you photograph it and send the pictures to Dick Forsman. Dick duly confirmed the bird as a second-calendar year Amur Falcon on the basis of the 'black streaking and the underparts (pale rufous brown in *vespertinus*) and contrasting black underwing barring' (Forsman *pers.comm.*).

Description: A small, dark and slender falcon, with an almost cuckoo-like flight. When perched, the closed wings could be seen to reach to just beyond the tail tip.

Soft parts: Cere and eye-ring looked yellow at a distance, but seen to be more orangey at close range. Legs salmony-pink; claws pale horn.

The head and mantle were dark slaty grey (bluer on lower back). A faint pale cheek patch visible at close range was a juvenile character being progressively lost (replaced) A similarly faint 'moustachial' stripe could also be seen, depending on the range and bird's attitude.

Underparts: White background from mid-breast to belly with thickset black streaking, including on the flanks. Upper limit on mid-breast poorly demarcated. The chin and throat were whitish but 'smudged' light grey and matched the ear coverts. Some mid-grey, adult-type feathering was noted on the underparts, this being paler than the upperpart colouration.

Primaries ashy, but worn and bleaching to brown. The chequered underwing pattern was black and vanilla-white barring. The underwing coverts were similarly patterned, and were retained juvenile feathering. Most of the upperwing coverts were 'old generation' and browner than those already replaced. The central tail feathers were replaced, grey adult-type; the old (juvenile) outers were barred and tipped buffy. The undertail was seen to be cleanly and clearly barred.

Considering the time of year, the moult of this particular bird was rather retarded. It was also an odd date to appear, given known passage dates in neighbouring Oman, where it is an uncommon spring migrant mid-March to late May and rare autumn migrant mid-October to late December. There are only three or four records in northern Oman (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000). The delayed moult, coupled with the slight injury observed to the crown, may have been responsible for its arrival, or at least for its presence in the UAE in mid-summer (as it may easily have been present here, or not far away, for some weeks prior to it being found).

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Emirates Bird Report 20:319-320. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORD OF LITTLE GULL *Larus minutus* FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Michael Dryden (Compiled by DA Diskin, Secretary, EBRC)

[On the morning of March 11 1996 Harald, Helwig and Holger Haag were photographing terns on a sandbank at Khor Kalba when a Little Gull *Larus minutus* flew in and sat beside the terns. The Haags photographed the bird and later submitted a short description to the EBRC, describing the bird as a small gull with a white head with dark markings, a grey back and a black-tipped white tail. In flight it showed a typical black band on the wings. The bill was small and black, the legs red. They saw the bird later in the evening at Kalba gravel pit. The bird remained in the Kalba area until March 28 and was seen by a number of observers, including Michael Dryden on March 15. Michael Dryden submitted the following rarity report – *Dave Diskin, Secretary EBRC*]

*“At 16.50 hours on March 15th 1996 I was watching a large group of gulls and terns feeding on the surf line at Kalba beach just north of the two breakwaters, when a small gull flew past along the shoreline only 30 metres away from me. I immediately recognised that it was a Little Gull *Larus minutus*, a species with which I am very familiar. The bird continued northwards up the beach and was lost from sight behind the large number of gulls closer to my position.*

DESCRIPTION

*Size: Much smaller than Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus* present; about the size of Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*.*

Head: Small and rounded, with short bill which appeared black. Colour white, except for a partial dark cap similar in appearance to that of winter Common Terns. Eye dark.

Body: White below. Pale to mid-grey on back and rump. Slim shape.

*Wings: Short for a gull, quite narrow and rounded. Above - pale grey with a dark carpal bar joining up to dark leading edge on primaries which opened back to a narrow wedge shape on outer primaries; the overall effect was of a ‘W’ shape, with a break where the grey of the mantle ran through the wings, similar to a juvenile Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*. The flight feathers seemed very worn, giving the bird a “tatty” effect. Below – pale grey, not dark as in adult. From this wing pattern, combined with the head pattern, I took the bird to be a 1stwinter, possibly in moult to 1st-summer.*

Tail: Short and heavily abraded at the tip, which gave the whole tail a spiky effect. A small amount of dark colouration visible on some feather tips, but overall the tail appeared white.”

This was the first record for the United Arab Emirates. Since then there have been three other records accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee:

- One 3 May 1996 near Sila Harbour (S. L. James, P. Sharman).
- One 13 November 1997 off Fujairah beach (J. Reynolds/Birdquest).
- One Kalba corniche beach 15 October 2000 (C. Richardson).

In addition, two records of single birds from spring 1998 are currently under consideration by the Emirates Bird Records Committee. This spate of records suggests that Little Gull may be a rare migrant to the United Arab Emirates.

DISTRIBUTION

Breeds across northwest and central Palearctic; mainly migratory and dispersive, wintering across central and western Palearctic; in western Palearctic chiefly west and south Europe, Mediterranean basin, Black and Caspian Seas, and reaching North America and central Atlantic. In the Middle East regular in eastern Mediterranean and Nile Delta lakes: uncommon migrant and scarce to fairly common winter visitor to Israel (Shirihai 1996); a very rare migrant to Jordan (Andrews 1995); rare or vagrant Arabian Gulf (Porter et al 1996).

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THE FIRST RECORD OF COMMON NODDY *Anous stolidus* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Steve L. James

John Buxton and the author realised the potential of finding new seabirds on the east coast of the United Arab Emirates in 1993 but circumstances prevented us from conducting sustained sea watches there until the summer of 1995. In late May and throughout June, we conducted prolonged sea watches every Friday, often for up to fourteen hours at a spell.

The 16th June 1995 was one such day: we had been sea-watching for seven and a half hours off Ras Dibba, when JB said he thought he could see an immature Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* flying north just offshore. SLJ quickly picked out the bird and realised it was a first year Common Noddy *Anous stolidus*. We both transferred from binoculars to telescopes and enjoyed good views as it flew north along the coast.

The following description was taken:

Size of Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* or Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*. All dark brown with distinctive 'noddy' shape, i.e. elongated head; long neck; long drooping black bill; long forward pointing, angular shaped wings; long broad tail with slight fork. Much bigger than Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*, with a fatter body shape. The upperparts were all dark brown, with a slightly paler panel down the centre of the wing. The crown and the mantle were slightly paler brown, although this was only noticeable at 40x magnification. The broad, paddle-like tail appeared black. The underwing coverts were dirty grey, and the grey extended onto the secondaries. The rest of the wing was black or dark brown. The dark brown throat and chest turned to dirty grey on the lower belly and undertail coverts. The tail notch was seen when the bird was parallel to us and when it was flying away. The bird was a 1st-summer, lacking the pale grey forehead and crown of adult birds.

It is rather surprising that this species had not been recorded in UAE waters before, as it is a fairly common summer migrant breeder to neighbouring Oman, with the first birds arriving in late March and the odd bird being recorded until the middle of November. (Eriksen and Sargeant, 2000). Indeed, one of the major colonies is off the Musandam Peninsula, barely a hundred kilometres north of our sea-watching point of Ras Dibba. However, scarcity of observers in the UAE, combined with this species rather pelagic habits have previously prevented detection.

Common Noddy breeds and ranges widely in tropical and sub-tropical Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Oceans. There are five races currently recognised:

- *A. s. ridwayi* on islands off Western Mexico and Central America.
- *A. s. galapagensis* on the isolated Galapagos Islands.
- *A. s. stolidus* in the Gulf of Mexico; Caribbean Sea and tropical and sub-tropical Atlantic Ocean.
- *A. s. plumbeigularis* in the Red Sea Islands.
- *A. s. pileatus* on islands in the Indian Ocean, off Australia and the greater part of the Pacific Ocean.

This species shows a tendency for long distance wandering (Watson, 1910); however its precise dispersal/migration throughout the world range is poorly known (Harrison, 1983). Some island colonies, for example, on the Galapagos Islands are present throughout the year, but others such as the one off the Musandam Peninsula are much more seasonal and after breeding birds head south and return north for breeding. The individual off Ras Dibba was a first-summer bird, presumably returning late to the colony, as it was not yet sexually mature and ready for breeding. Subsequently there has been one further record in the UAE - two birds, an adult and an immature, were seen at Ras Dibba on 20 April 2001 (P. Bourdin, D. A. Diskin).

It would appear that regular watching on the east coast of the UAE would produce more records. Indeed, it would not be surprising if this species was annual in small numbers on its way to the breeding colony in the Musandam Peninsula.

SLJ would like to thank John Buxton for being his companion on many long hot days perched on top of a cliff without shade, in temperatures often reaching in to the middle forty degrees Celsius!

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Emirates Bird Report 20:323. EBRC, Dubai, UAE

THE FIRST RECORD OF DUNN'S LARK *Eremalauda dunnii* FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Harald Haag (Compiled by DA Diskin, Secretary EBRC.)

On March 27th 1996, Harald, Helwig and Holger Haag were birdwatching at Umm al Quwain when they discovered a Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii*, a new species for the United Arab Emirates. The following notes are taken from the "Rare Bird Report Bird Form" submitted by Harald Haag and his brothers to the Emirates Bird Records Committee:

"We noticed that there were a lot of wheatears *Oenanthe sp.* in front of and top of the small wall that divides the beach and the land. Suddenly Helwig noticed an unfamiliar pale lark that was not immediately identifiable. We took the following description:

General impression: A pale, sandy lark with a strikingly big bill, unlike any other lark we had seen before in the Emirates.

Size: Smaller than Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*; similar in size to Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* which we could see beside the bird.

Upperparts: Sandy brown, little streaking.

Underparts: Whitish with dark streaking on the breast.

Head: Very strong bill; conspicuous facial markings with a white eye-ring and distinctive malar stripe.

Tail: Brown, with black outer tail feathers visible in flight."

The bird was photographed by the Haags and it was largely on the basis of the photographic evidence that the record was accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee.

DISTRIBUTION

This species has a disjunct distribution involving *E. d. dunnii* in the southern Sahara and *E. d. eremodites* in the Middle East. *E. d. eremodites* is a widespread breeder in northern and central Saudi Arabia; it is a rare and nomadic breeding resident in interior parts of south Oman with irregular post-breeding movements (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000); it is an erratic breeder in Jordan (Andrews 1995) and a local nomadic visitor and rare casual breeder to Israel (Shirihai 1996). It has occurred as a vagrant in Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait and Yemen (Porter et al 1996).

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THE FIRST RECORD OF WIRE-TAILED SWALLOW *Hirundo smithii* IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Steve James

On 20th February 1996, S. L. James, P. Hellyer, R. Quedsted and A. Twyman were birdwatching at a small marsh next to the extensive Al Wathba lake, when SLJ spotted four swallows circling the marsh. One was smaller and had a different flight to the others. He recognised it immediately as a Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii* and alerted the other observers. All had good views as it passed close by. The following description was taken:

The bird was smaller than Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* with very triangular wings i.e. broader at the base, shorter in length and more pointed than Barn Swallow. Wing beats were faster than Barn Swallow's with lots of swoops and 'looping the loop'.

The whole of the crown and forehead were bright chestnut. All of the upperparts were bright electric blue. On close observation – down to 20 metres – small black lores were visible. The underparts were completely white with prominent dark blue/black triangular points at either side of the breast extending onto the flanks. There was a prominent dark band (black?) across the abdomen, slightly broken in the middle. The tail was deep-clefted but the points were broader than on Barn Swallow; it lacked the long tail streamers of summer-plumage adults. This was a first-summer bird coming into adult breeding plumage.

This was the first substantiated record for the United Arab Emirates. Since that date there have been three records accepted by the Emirates Bird Records Committee:

- One 14th – 26th January 1998 at Emirates Golf Course (D. A. Scott and C. Richardson).
- One 7th February and 2nd April 1998 at Al Ain camel track (S. J. Aspinall/ Naturetrek).
- One Al Wathba camel track 18 March 2000 (S.J. Aspinall, S. L. James).

Distribution

Wire-tailed Swallow is a widespread species throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa and southern and south-east Asia. In many regions it is extending its range and breeding in or under man-made structures like road culverts and bridges. It is a regular visitor to reservoirs and dams, often in farming areas.

Two races are recognised: *Hirundo smithii smithii* in Africa and *Hirundo smithii filifera* in Afghanistan, Baluchistan, most of India, then east into south-east Asia. In the tropical part of its range it is largely resident (though subject to local movements). In the more temperate parts of its range, for instance in Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India it is a summer visitor and a strongly migratory species.

It would seem likely that the UAE records are of the slightly larger Asian *filifera* migrating Barn Swallows moving south-west on a broad front over Pakistan to winter in sub-Saharan Africa. Much smaller numbers of Barn Swallows also winter in Arabia.

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