

AN ARABIAN ADVENTURE

Report of a GBC/Oriole Birding trip to the UAE

Through Club member Neil Donaghy's (Neil D) Oriole Birding tour company, and in co-operation with Club member Neil Tovey (Neil T) who has lived and worked in Dubai for 5½ years, a very interesting itinerary was put together, covering all the major sites in this part of the Middle East. So it was that 5 Club members (myself, Chris Hodgson, Chris Bamford, Fiona Grant, Neil D and also an extra, Peter from Yorkshire), set off with great expectations, on an extremely comfortable Emirates flight from Gatwick on 4th February. We arrived in Dubai at 20:35 local time, and were met by NT with the minibus and just had time to introduce ourselves, have a meal and a (pricey!) beer before getting to bed in preparation for an early-ish start in the morning.

5th Feb

As we prepared to leave the hotel at 7 a.m. it was immediately clear that it wasn't going to be as warm as we expected and NT accused us of bringing Welsh weather with us! It was unusually cool and overcast. Today was spent visiting the key sites within easy reach of Dubai itself. First up was the so-called Pivot Fields - basically these are in a nursery where palm trees and decorative plants are grown, but there are three large circular fields which are irrigated by huge gradually rotating radial sprinkler systems. The area is famous for the number and variety of birds it turns up. Neil T's personal list for this site alone is impressive - 182 species! Lifers for most people were soon clocking up. Two delightful Little Green Bee-eaters greeted us on the fence at the entrance and amongst the key birds seen here were 6 White-tailed Lapwing, 6 Red-wattled Lapwing, a fem Pallid Harrier, Red-throated Pipits, some approaching summer plumage, a Tawny Pipit, 2 Isabelline Shrike, 2 Citrine Wagtails and a collection of Yellow Wagtails including some smart *feldegg* Black-headed subspecies, Purple Sunbird, Graceful Prinia, Bluethroat, and common birds such as White-cheeked Bulbul, Common Myna, Red-vented Bulbul, a couple of the scarcer Bank Myna, and the first of many Marsh Harriers seen during the week. A few familiar waders included a Eurasian Golden Plover, Kentish-, Little Ringed- and Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper and Snipe. A sweep of the largest 'pivot' which had much long grass eventually had us watching two Small (Oriental) Skylarks which obligingly called and showed the distinguishing features.

Next stop was at Al Warsen lakes, a series of pools by an unfinished development (a common sight). These proved quite productive and revealed amongst commoner birds, 6 Ferruginous Duck, a Purple Heron, Grey-headed Swamphen, 3 Western Reef Egret, many Caspian Gulls, a Heuglins Gull, 1 Caspian Tern which dropped in briefly, Black-crowned Night-heron and a Clamorous Reed-warbler which frustrated some observers by not staying in view for long enough.

We then moved on to the Ras al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary which is a huge wetland area lying beside one of the main highways outside the city centre. Being a Friday and thus a day of rest here, it was not open so we had to satisfy ourselves with viewing from the roadside lay-by. Scopes however gave us good views of hundreds of Greater Flamingo, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Eurasian Spoonbill and many Little Stint. Star birds here tho' were up to 4 (Greater) Spotted Eagles circling around above, and an Osprey dropping in to fish. We also saw our first Indian Roller - what a fantastic bird - we were to have even better views of this later in the day.

Nearer the city centre Neil T took us to Safa Park, a huge a pleasant public park in Dubai city. Being a public holiday it was very busy but nevertheless provided some good birds. Most obvious on entering were the Indian House Crows, but we were soon on to the target bird, a Hume's Leaf Warbler, which had been present for a while and which sharp eyed Chris B spotted in one of the trees which Neil T told us it had been favouring. This is a duller but nonetheless attractive eastern version of our more familiar Yellow-browed Warbler. Purple Sunbirds were very common and among the Rose-ringed Parakeets flying over we soon picked out a few of the larger Alexandrine Parakeets with their orangey shoulder patches. An Indian Roller sitting on the lawns was very approachable and gave good video opportunities, especially of its iridescent blue wing panels when it flew. A group of 4 Pied Mynas fed on the grass and under some trees and group of 5 Olive-backed Pipits were relatively unaffected by the hubbub.



Safa Park

We then moved further out of the city to another public park - Mushrif Park which was rather like one of our country parks. Finding a quite an elevated spot here we were looking for raptors. It was late afternoon and nothing much seemed to be doing on that front, although a Spotted Eagle was seen. In the scrub, Southern Grey Shrike, a few Arabian Babblers, Little Green Bee-eaters, lots of Pallid Swift and commoner birds were found. We wandered into a more densely vegetated area with small trees in the hope of a Striated Scops Owl, but instead we were treated to the sight of 2 Oriental (Crested) Honey-buzzards coming in to roost and also excellent views of a Shikra and a Sparrowhawk for comparison. A good close to the first day.

6th Feb

Slightly warmer today although still quite overcast. We headed out of Dubai to a recreational area called the Green Mubazzarah where there are small villas/cabins, camping areas etc. A dry Wadi leading off the main area was birded and gave us Desert Lark, our first gorgeous Hume's Wheatear, Plain Leaf Warbler which does exactly what it says on the tin - a totally featureless tiny dull olive warbler, but cute nevertheless! Other new birds here were a pair of Barbary Falcons over the adjacent crags, Striolated (Mountain) Bunting - a recent split from House Bunting, Red-tailed Wheatear, African Rock Martin, a Sand Partridge sat atop a ridge, a couple of White-spectacled Bulbuls, and after some searching an obliging and striking male Hooded Wheatear. Four Egyptian Vultures circled overhead - 3 adults and an immature. We had a pleasant lunch in the sun which had now emerged, outside the small café.



Green Mubazzarah wadi

Next up were the Darira Camel fodder fields. What? you may well ask. Good camels are much cosseted here (for racing) and special grasses are grown to feed them. There appear to be camel stud farms rather like the equine stud farms in the UK. The fields where the grasses are grown attract larks and the like. Upon arriving we were swoon watching a good number of Black-crowned Sparrow-larks ('Sparrow' often being replaced by 'Finch'). Accompanying these smart birds was a (Greater) Short-toed Lark, and in among the bales of fodder we found a small group of diminutive Indian Silverbills (tiny finches). A fine male Desert Wheatear also showed and in the low scrub we were soon on to another new small bird, an Asian Desert Warbler, a tiny mouse-like warbler which spends a considerable amount of time running around on the ground. A Brown-necked Raven circled in the distance.

Skies darkened as we reached our next site, the not very inviting sounding Al Ain Compost Treatment plant! The red sand here was very impressive as was the black sky which soon produced lightning and some heavy rain which got us all pretty wet - a pretty unusual event according to NT. A number of waders in shallow pools outside the works included 50+ Temmincks Stint, a Common Sand, Ruff, Green Sand, and ducks included Teal and Shoveler. The main attraction was a huge flock of hirundines which were mainly Sand Martin and Barn Swallow but after diligent searching of the swirling cloud we eventually managed to sort out the larger Plain Martins (aka Brown-throated Martin) and then one or both of the Neils got on to a larger Swallow - type which had us all bamboozled. Dark metallic blue seemingly all over the upper parts, not too deeply forked tail and white underparts, and what appeared to be two small white dots either side of the tail base. Things like Tree Swallow were being mooted, then Neil T suddenly twigged - it was a first year Wire-tailed Swallow (i.e. no long thin tail streamers) - one of only a handful of records for the UAE. Neil put the news out. The light was pretty poor and we were unable to see a rusty crown, which is what caused the confusion, but a visit during the next few days by locals resulted in some excellent photos which were conclusive. To top the excitement an Eastern Imperial Eagle circled low above us giving excellent views.

With evening approaching we moved on to the impressive crag Karn Nizna outside a village called Margham. After patient waiting serenaded by locals dune riding on quad bikes, we had excellent views of a huge Pharaoh Eagle Owl sitting up on the crag and eventually taking of a flying along its length. The end of another fantastic day. We headed off to a new hotel inland. On arrival we were told the entire 3rd floor had flooded so we were transferred to a luxurious Marriot round the corner - there were no complaints!

7th Feb

Again the day dawned cloudy and quite windy. We headed south from Dubai to Ghantoot and a plantation where traditionally, Grey Hypocolius overwinter. Sadly only a couple had dropped in a left this winter,

and none were present despite diligent searching. However a good number of by now common species were present and we found our first Desert Lesser Whitethroat, a Song Thrush (a wintering bird in low numbers). Grey Francolins (a species of Spurfowl) were present and a Cream-coloured Courser was on the adjacent polo field together with Hoopoe, Tawny Pipit and 2 Common Starling.

We then moved further south and west, bypassing Abu Dhabi, and visited Al Wathba Lakes, a private reserve which NT had arranged access to for us. There was a slight hiccup at the gate where the combination lock, to which Neil had been given the code, had been changed for a large padlock! A phone call soon had us being let in by the on site warden. An excellent list of species was accumulated here and everyone eventually had good views of one or more of the many Clamorous Reed-warblers present. Marsh Harriers were everywhere as were a good selection of waders, new species added being Redshank, Wood Sandpiper, 2 Red-necked Phalarope, 3 Marsh Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Dunlin, and Curlew Sandpiper. A single Glossy Ibis increased the larger water bird list, and Egyptian Goose was added to the waterfowl. A Menetries Warbler singing in a bush eventually gave itself up. This was an excellent site and would take too long to do justice to in words so these are just the highlights.

Final visit of the day was to the Al Wathba Camel Race track. This is something else - a 10 km long, yes 10 kilometres, circular track to which access is freely available to the central area which is basically scrub. Neil T had this earmarked for dusk views of Egyptian Nightjar but despite driving round and around with a high powered lamp we failed, probably due to the strong gusty wind. We did however have excellent views of quite a number of Bimaculated Larks, Short-toed Lark, and 100's of Sky Lark feeding on the racing track itself. Out in the central scrub we also saw several Arabian Hare and an Arabian Fox - paler versions of our own equivalents.

8th Feb

Weather has changed back to normal!. Today we moved off to the east coast, travelling across the interior desert and through the eastern mountain range. We eventually arrived a Khor Kalba, an excellent area with coastal mangrove, beach, and tidal inlets. First target bird here, was in the mangrove, in the form of Sykes Warbler, one of the Hippolais family. After some patient searching we eventually had excellent views of a bird in the mangrove branches across a narrow channel. Also found here was Collared Kingfisher which I think I am correct in saying, is a subspecies (*kalbaensis*) of which there are only 24 left all of which are in this small area of Mangrove. New waders were soon added here, with Whimbrel, Barwit, Curlew, Greenshank, Grey Plover, Greater and Lesser Sandplover. Other star birds here were the striking Sooty Gulls, numerous Slender-billed Gulls, some of which were incredibly pink, an Indian Pond Heron, Swift Tern and Lesser-crested Tern, 4 Lesser Short-toed Lark, and as we drove across the sand, 37 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse. From the exit bridge over the creek we saw a few Green Turtles just below the surface of the clear water.



Kor Kalba

Leaving this delightful site we moved just down the coast to Fujairah and our superb beachside hotel, the Hilton Fujairah. Once checked in we had lunch at the beachside restaurant and seawatched. Around 6 Arctic Skuas chasing distant gull and tern flocks and 5 White-cheeked Terns were successfully identified. However there was not really much sea movement and we failed to find any hoped for Persian Shearwaters.

The evening was earmarked for visiting a wadi just in the coastal mountains for Lichtensteins Sandgrouse. We set off and on arrival at Wadi Helo eventually found an off road route suitable for a minibus that allowed us to park within reasonable distance of the pool without danger of disturbance of these wary birds. After patient waiting and just as dark was falling, birds were heard calling, and then sudden shapes dropped in like stones seemingly from nowhere. We scanned around and found the birds on the ground by the waters edge and due to the adjacent mountain road and some street lighting we had excellent views of 7 birds, being able to make out all the plumage features - a rare treat.

9th Feb

Heading north along the east coast we stopped off at Bidya Harbour for some more sea watching but again no Persian Shearwaters - just the by now familiar gulls and terns.

Further on we reached the next important site - the Fujairah National Dairy Farm. This is a large site with cattle sheds, crops, ditches, stony areas, and large irrigated wet grass areas. Stars of the show in the cattle sheds were Masked Wagtail including some stunning males. Although a sub-species of White Wagtail (*M. alba personata*) they are so distinctive and stunning that they surely deserve separate species status. Out in the stony area we found Desert and Isabelline Wheatear and Tawny Pipits. Also clinched was another sought after species - Long-billed Pipit, which showed very well. We then tramped across the huge area of irrigated long grass, putting up plenty of Common Snipe. One main target species here was Pintail Snipe, fairly good flight views being need to confirm the lack of thin white trailing edge on the wing and the uniformly dark underwing. We eventually managed to clinch 4. Also seen were 2 Richards Pipit perched up on a fence, showing their very ling hind claws. Indian Rollers were everywhere. Outside the farm proper was another stony area where we drove a track for a while and then stopped and scanned and were soon watching a Variable Wheatear. Whilst watching this key bird I turned round to see a low circling raptor which turned into a superb Bonellis Eagle. We finally moved over to the north west coast and found our second beachside hotel in Ras Al Khaimah - the Bin Majid Resort. We chilled out for a while. The 2 Chris's went for a dip and I lounged on the beach and saw several very large Green Turtles coming up for air. We then headed off for Hamraniyah Fields to the north east where NT hoped for Egyptian Nightjar again. Having obtained permission to drive around the farmed area we birded until dusk. The usual birds were seen including 6+ Arabian Babblers rushing around on the ground in typical fashion, and as dusk fell we began to hear the distinctive krok krok krok call, like a distant old 2 stroke engine. One bird was frustratingly close but not showing. We moved back along the track and then Neil D who was i/c lamp, spotlighted a bird flying and we all piled out of the bus and good views of it hawking across a field.

10th Feb

First site today was a NW coast site called Khor Al Beida. This is a beach area with a large tidal inlet and threatened by a huge hotel development. However this is only partly built (a common sight) and the site is still an excellent one for the stunning Crab Plovers which use it. We saw a flock of around 200-300. A little away from the half built buildings (which serve as useful hides) we came upon a huge flock of waders and gulls. The others had been watching these for a few minutes whilst Fiona and I had been filming the Crab Plovers. I moved over and joined the others and started scanning with my scope. Rather excitedly I remarked "hey there's a Terek Sandpiper here" - the answer, from Neil D ... "Yeah, there's about 100 John!" Doh! What a sight tho', all mixed in with Greater and Lesser Sandplover, Temmincks Stint, Curlew Sandpiper etc etc. Amongst the more distant waders Neil T picked out Great Knot, another lifer, and we soon had 5 birds, one of which was showing signs of summer plumage. Another new bird here was Socotra Cormorant, characterised by its long slender bill. The number of birds here was phenomenal and the large gulls gave cause for lengthy discussion - sorting out Heuglins, Steppe, Caspian etc is a real headache. Amongst the gulls, about 50 Gull-billed Terns were new for the list. Just before we left a Greater Hoopoe Lark appeared on the sandy hillocks behind us and gave excellent views.

A rather littered sandy beach nearby (apparently used for illicit drinking of alcohol judging by the discarded bottles!), produced large numbers of Lesser Sandplover but also 6 impressive Pallas's Gulls (aka Great Black-headed Gull), and also Sanderling for the by now impressive wader list. Also from this beach we watched thousands upon thousands of Socotra Cormorants strung out in huge skeins flying offshore.

We then headed off back down to Dubai and called in again at the Ras Al Khor reserve which was now open. There is only one hide but it allows comfortable viewing. There was nothing new here but still a great variety of birds to see. A bonus was another Imperial Eagle which flew over low. A Danish birder in the hide told me he had seen Blyths Pipit at the Pivot Fields so I relayed this to the others. Predictably this was our next port of call and soon after arrival we had excellent views of both Richards and 2 Blyths Pipits, giving an excellent opportunity to compare the relevant features of this confusion pair. A couple of 'ringtail' Pallid Harriers put on a good show and a further star was a full summer plumaged Red-throated Pipit. A slight down side was that we couldn't find any Streaked Weavers which breed here, although Neil T did have a very brief fly-over. We spent the night in our first hotel - the Arabian Park.

11th Feb

My birthday and 20 deg C (in fact since the 8th the weather had been gorgeous). This day had been kept as an 'options' day rather than pre-planned. We had all enjoyed the east coast so headed off to Wadi Al Helo and drove quite some way up the dry Wadi and birded the scrubby areas. The familiar Wheatears were noted including Red-tailed, plus a pair of Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Lesser Whitethroat, Plain Leaf Warbler, the rufous bellied eastern race of Black Redstart, a male Blue Rock Thrush, a couple of Desert Larks and after some diligent searching Chris B put me on to a couple of small active birds with sticky up tails, which were the main target, Scrub Warbler. Soon everyone was having great views of what was clearly a pair on territory.

We then moved on to Fujairah Beach to sea watch again , but again no movement and thus no Persian Shearwater. An odd gull at the edge of a large gull flock on the beach was passed of as an odd looking Black-headed despite a comment that it looked a bit like a Kittiwake.

Chris B then requested the need for a loo so Neil T took her off into the town to find one (and unbeknown to me, to look for some celebratory comestibles for my birthday that evening). During this interlude the rest of us stayed put, and then Neil D noticed that the odd gull had moved off from the flock and was sitting by itself - it WAS a Kittiwake - a mega for the UAE! - and Neil T was still in town. Fiona and I managed to get some decent pix, even after it had moved further down the beach. Locals twitched it later and we subsequently learned that it died a couple of days later - it did look in a pretty poor state.

For lunch we decided to return to the delightful Hilton Fujairah to use their beachside restaurant and we were made very welcome.



Seawatching at Fujairah Beach

After lunch we revisited Khor Kalba which had been so much enjoyed on 8th. The tide was higher but many familiar birds were present. A nice surprise as we arrived and drove along the access track, was a Striated Heron flying into a small lone tree by the edge of the creek. We soon had excellent views of this bird as it crept out of the tree and hunted for fish along the waters edge. Another Collared Kingfisher was also seen very well. These feed on small crabs which they will pounce on from the ground. A smart adult Pallas's Gull flew by here.

Dinner that night was most enjoyable and I was surprised by the production of a birthday cake with a candle lit '62' adorning it, plus a plateful of Arabian pastry goodies. Just a couple of beers to celebrate with (too expensive at £5 for a bottle of Corona or a pint of lager for much more!). Many thanks to the effort put in to get the cakes organised with the hotel - not an easy task understand.

12th Feb

We were due to fly out today but not until 2:40 p.m. Hence an early start and a quick dash down to Ghantoot was agreed to try again for Hypocolius, but sadly none still there, but more of the now familiar 'common' birds. We then shot up to the Pivot Fields again to try and get Streaked Weaver but again no score. However a Clamorous Reed-warbler showed very well in the open.

We then made our way to the airport, handed back the minibus and bade our farewells to Neil Tovey who had made the trip so successful. A cracking trip with 187 species seen in 7 days and for me 56 lifers. Too long to put a full list here but I will post this and a full list on the web site.

We saw a number of interesting butterflies, of which those I have been able to identify are, Plain Tiger, Swallowtail, Lesser Millet Skipper, Desert Babul Blue and Blue Pansy.

Many thanks to Neil D and Oriole Birding, and Neil T, for organising an excellent trip, and further thanks to Neil T for all the driving on those terribly confusing roads around Dubai!



Blue Pansy

John Wilson

Sorry no bird stills - all taken on video.