

OMAN

13-17 December 2015

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I visited Oman for a short filming trip for an upcoming wildlife series in December 2015, travelling south to the Dhofar Mountains by internal flight from Muscat. Oman has the feel of old Arabia, and especially in the Dhofar, traditional camel-herding ways of life continue and villages still co-exist, to a greater or lesser degree, with wolves, leopards and species vanished from other parts of the Middle East such as Verreaux's Eagles. The diversity of landscape is impressive, from azure seas and lagoons to vast desert mountains and canyons, and totally surprising tropical forest oases.

Shirhai proposes that the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula should, logically, be covered within the Western Palearctic. Oman, currently, is not, and the south of the country sits right at the margin between desert and tropics – between true desert species, and exotics such as African Paradise Flycatcher. It is a fascinating region and most certainly, when the Western Palearctic does formally expand with the publication of Shirhai's books in coming years, it is to Oman that many birders will visit, as it would seem to be one of the richest countries for birds in Arabia.

Given my extremely limited time here and even less devoted to observing birds, I was impressed to record 90 species, with the undoubted highlight being a bird I've wanted to see from childhood – an adult Verreaux's Eagle, mobbed by Fan-tailed Ravens just feet below me. Notable species from the trip are outlined below. In addition, we recorded a number of exciting mammals including Indopacific Dolphin, off Salalah, a herd of nineteen Nubian Ibex, and the prints of Arabian Leopard.



Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*

At least one adult past Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) on 13 December during a very productive seawatch. The species is regularly encountered off this stretch of coast.

Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*

Small numbers of 80-100 birds past Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) on 13 December; the species breeds off Oman but commutes vast distances to fish from colonies, so it is not known if these were from an active colony or non-breeding birds.

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*

Two of these were flushed from the rich small lagoon of Khawr Awqad, Salalah (16.990177, 54.034789) on 13 December. The species maintains a regular wintering presence in the south of the country; initially I hadn't realized this and mistook the species for Squacco Heron until the second took flight.

Indian Reef Heron *Egretta (gularis) schistacea*

One on the beach at Al Qurm, Muscat (23.623700, 58.476850) on 17 December.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*

A pair seen over Wadi Darbat, Dhofar Mountains (17.099382, 54.517737) on 15 December.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

Good numbers of birds seen throughout, especially around Tawi Atayr, Dhofar (GPS). Oman holds most of the world's wintering population, and these are the same birds that subsequently migrate north through Eilat as early as January, where, a month later, Henry Cook and I encountered them as they passed through here in January 2016.

Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*

Commonly seen throughout trip, including juvenile birds over Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) and across the Dhofar Mountains, perhaps 8-10 sightings in all, including a very smart adult pair. Considerably more common than in Israel, where smaller numbers are seen in the Negev in winter.

Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii*

There are believed to be up to ten pairs of this magnificent eagle resident in the hyrax-rich escarpments of the Jebel Samhan, in the Dhofar Mountains, possibly the most important site for them in Arabia and the Middle East. Single pairs may remain in the Jordanian Deserts, the Sinai Peninsula and the Red Sea Mountains in Egypt. The females were incubating during this visit, according to seasoned cameraman and expert Mateo Willis, and as males often power away from the nest to hunt, finding birds was hard. We were filming on the Jebel Samhan when a magnificent male appeared below us, mobbed by Fan-tailed Ravens, on 15 December. In spite of being close to three active nest-cliffs across the range over the filming period, we had no further encounters with this amazing bird.

Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus*

One seen on roadside close to Tawi Atayr, Dhofar Mountains, on 16 December.

Sand Partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*

Covey of six seen whilst driving across rough rocky terrain in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*

Small numbers present at close range on the beach at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275)

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

Small numbers present at close range on the beach at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275)

Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichii*

Extremely large numbers of this attractive species off Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275)

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

Small group over coast, Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275)

Siberian Gull *Larus heuglini*

One adult at very close range on the beach of Al Qurm, Muscat (23.623700, 58.476850) on 17 December.

Swift Tern *Sterna bergii*

One close offshore at Al Qurm, Muscat (23.623700, 58.476850) on 17 December.

White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa*

Present offshore and on beach in small numbers at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275).

Saunders's Tern *Sterna saundersi*

One or more probable individuals on beach at close range at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) but very difficult to identify with certainty in non-adult plumage given my unfamiliarity with the species.

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*

Seen in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains on 16 December.

Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Seen in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains on 14 December.

Singing Bush Lark *Mirafra cantillans*

One song-fighting overhead at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275).

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Common and present around Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275).

African Rock Martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*

A couple seen around the high escarpments of the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Spectacled Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*

Common around vegetated areas in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Blackstart *Cercomela melanura*

Excellent views of this iconic desert species in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Seen in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*

Seen on roadside wires in Tawi Atayr, Dhofar Mountains.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

Common and very confiding in gardens around Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275).

Red-tailed (Persian) Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopygna*

Excellent views of one male in a parachuting display on the top of Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*

Excellent views of singing male high on escarpment in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

Asian (Streaked) Scrub-warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*

Pair seen in typical low spiky bush habitat in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains.

African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*

A 'wow' species, changing the Middle Eastern feel to neo-tropical. The lush valley of Wadi Darbat, Dhofar Mountains (17.099382, 54.517737) is one of the most important ornithological sites in Oman and its lush green woods have a feel almost closer to a Welsh oak wood in summer, with a few small changes; the camels, baking heat and, of course, the birds. We found 2-3 superb males, with their improbably long tails, holding territory in one of the groves here alongside tame White-breasted White-eyes, Ruppell's Weavers and African Rock Buntings, on 15 December. Darbat is an incredible place, the first incursion of the tropics into Arabia, and we barely scratched the surface here.

Nile Valley Sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus*

Excellent views of a female foraging in the garden palms of Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) on 13 December. The species is widely encountered in southern Oman but less so in northern Oman.

Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*

One of the most casual first encounters ever, a smart female making her way through trees outside Starbucks in Mina al Fahal, Muscat (23.617054, 58.497484) whilst we were meeting with officials there on 17 December. The species is abundant in the north of the country.

Palestine Sunbird *Nectarinia osea*

Two or more males seen glowing in barren habitat with bushes in the Jebel Samhan, Dhofar Mountains on 14 December.

White-breasted White-eye *Zosterops abyssinica*

Another neo-tropical species present commonly in the groves of Wadi Darbat, Dhofar Mountains (17.099382, 54.517737). These must be one of the region's most instantly likeable birds, showing no fear of people and dropping down to land on us and forage right beside us.

Daurian Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

One female found wintering along a line of scrub at Khawr Awqad, Salalah (16.990177, 54.034789) on 13 December.

House Crow *Corvus splendens*

This invader present commonly in and around Salalah as in many towns of the Middle East and North-east Africa.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*

Small group seen near Salalah Airport on 13 December.

Fan-tailed Raven *Corvus rhipidurus*

Typically common species of the dry desert mountains in Jebel Samhan, most memorably seen mobbing a Verreaux's Eagle and spiraling around croaking in the early morning mists rising off the mountains.

Tristram's Grackle *Onychognathus tristramii*

Common and often sympatric with the Fan-tailed Ravens and common across the Jebel Samhan, their early morning whistling calls characteristic of the place.

Ruppell's Weaver *Ploceus galbula*

Small numbers gave excellent views in the groves of Wadi Darbat, Dhofar Mountains (17.099382, 54.517737) on 15 December; this population is wild and within the natural range of the species; it has been introduced elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula, such as in Green City, Kuwait.

Indian Silverbill *Euodice malabarica*

Excellent views of a pair of this naturalized species at Al Qurm, Muscat (23.623700, 58.476850) where a nest had been fully constructed within a lamp-post. By contrast the African Silverbills in the south of Oman are native.

African Silverbill *Euodice cantans*

Good views of flocks of 15-20 individuals around the watered lawns at Samharam, Salalah (17.033751, 54.388275) from 13 December.

African Rock Bunting *Emberiza tahapisi*

Excellent views of singing male in the groves of Wadi Darbat, Dhofar Mountains (17.099382, 54.517737) on 15 December.