

## Oman & United Arab Emirates. Southbound.

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Starting and finishing in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, this entire trip was done in the comfort of a hire car. With good roads throughout, bar a few sandy moments here and there and some rough tracks in the mountains, my standard 2WD was quite ample and the trip of almost 6000 km went like clockwork. In short, this section of the report covers the first half of the trip, a route that took me from the U.A.E. to northern Oman and thereafter down to the fantastic tidal flats at Barr Al Hikman, before crossing the vast deserts to reach Dhofar, the endemic-rich southern district of Oman.

### 12th December - Dubai

Arrived in Dubai at dusk, picked up the car and was soon cruising along the super highways of the United Arab Emirates. Useless signposts from the airport didn't help, but remarkably I found myself on the correct road. Destination for the night was Kalba, a small town on the coast just north of the Omani border. Saw no birds, but just before Kalba saw one Red Fox and one Praying Mantis, plus a strange small cat-like thing. Camped in a wadi that seemed surrounded by high mountains.

### 13th December - Khar Kalba and northern Oman

As the sun rose at 7.00 a.m., I was already awake, looking over the arid mountainscape that I found myself in. A few acacias dotting the wadi, then my first bird - an Eastern Pied Wheatear, what a super bird to start the trip on! Overhead African Rock Martins circled, adjacent a Southern Grey Shrike peered down from wires.

The trip had started! Soon I would enter Oman, but first I was keen to try and find one of my main targets on this voyage. Easier to find in the mangroves of Khawr Kalba than in Oman, the bird was the globally-endangered kalbaensis form of White-collared Kingfisher. With the population limited to just Khawr Kalba and a couple of nearby localities across the border in Oman, I arrived on the tidal inlet with great hope. Parked and began to walk along the mangrove edge - two Striated Herons flew out, a Clamorous Reed Warbler grated in the bushes, an Isabelline Shrike popped up. Western Reef Herons paddled the muddy waters, Siberian and Caspian Gulls mixed with a few Black-headed Gulls. A kingfisher shot out of the mangrove and zipped across the water ...unfortunately a Common Kingfisher, very nice but not the desired species. Then another Common Kingfisher, then another, hmm very common! House Crows and White-cheeked Bulbuls crowded the wasteland behind the mangroves, Indian Silverbills fed underfoot, a Syke's Warbler put in a brief appearance. Walking around what looked to be the best area of mangrove, I completed a full circuit and had yet to see my desired bird. I returned to the car, then strolled down to a small patch of mangrove I had neglected ...two minutes later, 'Oo blimey, there's one!' Sitting quietly, minding its own business and catching the morning sun, there was a White-collared Kingfisher, fantastic. A most engaging character, it barely looked up and I sat myself down and admired this cracker, fishing and returning to the same perch.

After a few photographs of the kingfisher, onward I decided to wander. Checking the map, I noticed another creek running a couple of kilometres to the south. Drove to the far end, then slowly made my way back - loads of Whimbrel, a surprise Wryneck sat on top of the mangroves, one Purple Heron and then another White-collared Kingfisher!!! Rather more distant than the first, but I wasn't complaining, there it sat in the morning sunshine. Just before leaving, another Isabelline Shrike appeared, a most approachable one, posing nicely for photographs.

With that, I drove the few kilometres to the border and moments later was sailing off towards my first birding stop in Oman - Khatmat Milahah, just two kilometres from the border post.

Birding at Khatmat Milahah was super. Under a pleasantly hot sun, wandering through stunted acacia woodland, birds were popping up everywhere - Little Green Bee-eaters, an Orphean Warbler, Purple Sunbirds, more White-cheeked Bulbuls and the first eastern Black Redstart of the trip. I however had two 'specials' to track down, namely Plain Leaf Warbler and Eastern Pied Wheatear, though I'd already seen the latter over the border in the U.A.E. The warblers proved easier than expected - I encountered a flock of Arabian Babblers and then, as I watched them, suddenly two Plain Leaf Warblers appeared, their most distinctive little sparrow-like chirp alerting me. The wheatear was rather harder - after an hour of wandering, with two Desert Wheatears under the belt, then a Red-tailed Wheatear, I thought I was not going to see one. Then just as I was leaving, low in a tree, there sat a female Eastern Pied Wheatear, very nice and a good compliment to the male earlier in the day.

Onward, next stop Sohar, location of the best birding in northern Oman. Extensive irrigated grasslands attracted many birds, both on the fields themselves and around the farm buildings and cattle sheds. Isabelline Wheatears, Desert Wheatears, Black-crowned Finch-Larks, Tawny Pipits and Crested Larks, the most numerous birds on the fields, but clouds of Indian Rollers following a tractor were rather more impressive, as were the Pallid and Montagu's Harriers quartering and the Barbary and Peregrine Falcons that appeared in close succession. A Hoopoe flitted up, several Little Green Bee-eaters sat on a fence, Grey Francolins went scuttling off through the scrub, all was good birding.

At the cattle sheds, amongst absolutely incredible numbers of Collared Doves and House Crows, a multitude of wagtails, including Yellow Wagtails of several races, plus White Wagtails and one very smart Masked Wagtail. Also more Indian Rollers, flocks of Common Mynahs, plus a single European Starling, the only one to be seen in Oman! Just behind, the excellent birding continued at the settling pools, small concrete tanks holding effluent. Rather stinky, but a very good wader collection - both Temminck's and Little Stints, several Red-wattled Plovers, a good number of Black-winged Stilts and a scatter of Palearctic winters.

As dusk fell, not wishing to head into Muscat, I decided on a night drive. Filled up with petrol, a pleasantly cheap thing to do (petrol costing about 30 cents, U.S.), then hit the road ...in the early hours, some 550 km or so further south-east, I pulled off the road and camped in the desert. I was just 30 km from one of the best birding localities in the entire Middle East.

14th December - Barr Al Hikman

Amazing locality, I had drooled over this place when reading about it, and now I was here.

The extensive tidal mudflats of Barr Al Hickman support wintering populations of waterbirds that run into the hundreds of thousands, clouds of birds at every turn. Much of the area is remote sabkha, treacherous salt-encrusted mud that traps the unwary car, not a prospect I fancied encountering, but fortunately two of the best areas are readily accessible with a little care. My exploration began at Filim, a small village overlooking the bay of Ghubbat Hashish. Thousands of Siberian and Caspian Gulls lounged around, as did a few Desert Wheatears.

I arrived at dawn and was fortunate with my timing - though birds were still distant, it was clear the tide was coming in, soon the birds would be pushed towards me. A glance towards the bay I did a quick scan - jeepers, thousands upon thousands of Greater and Lesser Sandpipers, all mixed together and scattered across the mud as far as the eye could see! And in amongst them, the first Terek Sandpipers, and waders of many a description. I walked over to a small rocky outcrop, Saunder's Terns worked nearby channels, several Western Reef Herons climbed into the air and four Spoonbills roosted just off the point. Setting up the scope, amongst the Greater Flamingos and quadrillion waders off yonder, there sat a tight flock of distant black and white blobs ...mmm, I licked my lips, Crab Plovers! Not just one or two, but at least 250 of them - and soon the tide would be bringing them straight to me! More intriguing, far far off, almost on the horizon, a sand bank was covered from end to end in cormorants, a black mass that had to number at least 1500. Squint as much as I could, I could not be sure, but I do believe they were Socotra Cormorants ...or at least the two that flew closer were!

A hundred metres across the mud, I spotted what appeared to be an island, the top of which would remain dry at high tide, it seemed the perfect place to wait - if all went according to plan, the tide would bring the birds right up to my feet! Sloshing through the mud somewhat, I went out and made myself comfortable. Two Ospreys appeared, circled and vanished, a Marsh Harrier did much the same, but now the tide was edging in, slowly slowly birds were heading my way, first a few Greater Sandpipers, then some very obliging Terek Sandpipers. Greenshanks came and went, Grey Plovers sauntered in, flocks of Little Stints joined the growing numbers. Curlews, Whimbrels, Common Redshanks, all getting closer. A blur of black and white, the stars were flying in, the first two Crab Plovers landing a few hundred metres to my right. Then more, about thirty also touching down in the same area. A Western Reef Heron plodded right past me, casting a wary eye in my direction, yet more Greater Sand Plovers and Terek Sandpipers wandered close. I slunk low in a little nook, the mud in front of me was now full of Crab Plovers, my chance to get photographs had come. Amazing

birds, two in particular caught my attention, an adult with begging youngster in tow. Straight towards me they strutted, chomping small crabs with great regularity, very impressive. Further out, a flock of calidrids landed, so I scoped them too. Hmm, about 40 Dunlin, plus ten Curlew Sandpipers. I continued to pan to the left ...some Kentish Plovers, three Avocets, several Oystercatchers, then another bird that is always nice to see - two Broad-billed Sandpipers, very nice.

An hour or so more of this magic and the tide began to turn, the show was over. Just as the birds had slowly edged ever closer, now they began to drift off, returning to mud once again becoming exposed. A last Lesser Sandplover strolled close, then I slipped and slithered back across the mud. Found a Red-throated Pipit near the village, then returned to my car. It had been an excellent morning!

Shimmering salt pans, vast expanses of sabkha and remote beaches, eighty kilometres to the east I reached the ramshackle settlement of Shannah, a tea shop, a cluster of fishermen's shacks, moored dhowls and small dock for ferry over to Masirah Island. For all the starkness of its remoteness, however, the place was absolutely teeming in birds, mudflats packed with gulls, terns, waders and flamingos, tens and tens of thousands of birds - a true spectacle. Beyond fishermen mending nets, Siberian and Caspian Gulls, Slender-billed Gulls, dozens of Sooty Gulls, an assortment of terns from Caspian to Saunder's. Paddling the shallows, Greater Flamingos and Western Reef Herons mingled, but it was for the waders that the coast really stood out.

As far as the eye could see, masses and masses of waders - thousands of Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, hundreds of Little Stints, countless Dunlins and immense flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits. Hmm, Bar-tailed Godwits ...in amongst them would be my target bird - the enigmatic Great Knot, much desired yet none too easy to pick out. Having caught the rising tide at Filim, here I was watching a falling tide - the birds were rapidly dispersing across mudflats that stretched kilometres, my chances of finding a Great Knot were low and views would be distant. I decided to not bother, hoping for luck on a return visit later in the trip. Instead, I settled down to admire the spectacle in front of me - for a couple of hours, I sat and admired the clouds of birds everywhere, the 350 Crab Plovers scattered across the bay, and the Terek Sandpipers and Kentish Plovers still close by.

A wonderful place, but soon it was time to move on - I had thoughts of meeting dawn at one of the desert oasis, 350 km away in the heart of the Central Desert. As dusk approached, I left Barr Al Hikman and began my drive. A few kilometres to the west, a sudden stop ...birds were flying over. Out I jumped, ten Crowned Sandgrouse, three Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, nice.

Two hours later, off into the desert I went, camping spot for the night.

#### 15th December - The Central Desert

Oo er, it was foggy, didn't expect to wake to that! Needless to say, once the desert sun got going, it didn't last long.

A quick stop in the stunted gardens behind the Al Ghaftayn hotel, where a bunch of House Sparrows, two Chiffchaffs and a Black Redstart were just about the only birds present, then it was back to the desert - another hour or so cruising southward through open, totally barren landscapes. Hundreds of kilometres, barely a sign of life - five Desert Wheatears and 16 Brown-necked Ravens, the totality. Further south again, I happened upon a patch of 'greenery', 100 metres square of mesquite providing a scant ground covering that might just harbour another species I hoped to see. Ten minutes of walking back and fro and then up popped the bird - my first Desert Warbler in a proper desert! A real smart individual, but very active, running from bush to bush at a good rate of knots, never flying.

Another hundred kilometres, as birdless as the preceding ones, and I arrived at the Qatbit oasis, things were about to get much better. Three distinct areas within a few kilometres - the Qatbit Oasis itself, the extensive irrigated gardens behind the Qatbat hotel and, 40 km to the north-west, the legendary Muntasar Oasis.

All amazing in the migration seasons, mere hints of the glory are present mid-winter. Leaving Muntasar till late afternoon, I began my birding in the hotel gardens - not a bad selection, amongst the Laughing Doves and Black Redstarts, one Menetries Warbler, one Desert Lesser Whitethroat, one Rose-coloured Starling and one Song Thrush. The nearby Qatbit Oasis was almost deserted - a lone Bluethroat and a long-dead European Scops Owl!

So, next stop was Muntasar - Oman's premier oasis. Oozing sulphur waters trickling from luxuriant reed growths, palms and acacia, a handkerchief of greenery in an otherwise parched land of barren sands and rock. Thousands of birds pass through annually on migration, but for the birder in winter, the attractions lay in the possibilities of a Grey Hypocolius coming to roost, the mixed sandgrouse flocks coming to drink just after dawn and a chance visit by an Egyptian Nightjar.

All would require a night stop. The actual oasis was barely a couple of hundred metres from end to end, but beyond

stunted thickets and trees stretched further, all attracting birds. Black-crowned Finch Larks, one Short-toed Lark, an Isabelline Shrike, all easy enough to find. Desert Wheatears numbered at least six, one with a Desert Warbler, the two birds faithfully staying together. A lone Sand Martin accompanied the single Barn Swallow overhead, two Corn Buntings flitted up into the phragmites, a Green Sandpiper shared a small pool with two Water Pipits, birds were about, if not numerous. For Grey Hypocolius, my best chance would be just before dusk. My wait began.

A Bluethroat appeared atop a palm, full song. A Marsh Harrier quartered the wet fringes, the sun began to drop. No Grey Hypocolius, it seemed this winter there were none. Brown-necked Ravens came and went, the sun dropped to the horizon. Another half an hour and silence, no Egyptian Nightjars cutting through the darkness. With a spotlight, I wandered round the oasis, little activity - then a flash of wings, across flew a Spotted Thick-knee, a bonus indeed.

With that, it was time for sleep, another night under the stars.

16th December - The Central Desert

A moderately chilly night, up at dawn, a quick trot around the oasis notching up many of the birds as on the day before - the Desert Wheatears, the singing Bluethroat, the lone Marsh Harrier and a Black Redstart. A few additional birds, the best being an extra Desert Warbler, two being seen this morning, both travelling in close company with Desert Wheatears! Good chums these fellows, rarely more than a metre or to apart!

Then it was time to wait for the sandgrouse. Just short of 9 a.m., a swoosh of wings, in came the first flock, a quick drink then off to the desert they went. A hundred metres out, there they huddled down for the next hour, every so often a few more appearing and joining the slowly swelling flock. Seventy-nine birds by 10 a.m., all Spotted Sandgrouse. I left them to their peace, time to hit the road again, ever southbound.

Endless horizons, a featureless road, kilometres rolled by, yet again barely a bird to stir the sands - four Brown-necked Ravens, another 15 Desert Wheatears, the first Hoopoe Lark of the trip, a super bird running along the road's edge.

140 km south, another pause - Al Balid Farm. Green cultivation on parched sands, the irrigated fields were a little island, super for assorted wagtails, wheatears and larks. Rallying the sandy tracks, trying not to get stuck, I spent a good couple of hours here under a scorching sun - really super, no less than 16 Hoopoe Larks strutted their stuff around the field edges, backed by a minimum of 35 Desert Wheatears, four Isabelline Wheatears and 15 Black-crowned Finch Larks. Marsh Harriers also quartered, and wagtails clocked in at over 45 White Wagtails and eight Yellow Wagtails.

Next up, Thumrayt, another 120 km south and the last site I would be visiting in the central deserts, beyond lay the bird-rich Dhofar, my ultimate goal. For now though, my pleasure was to be satisfied at a most unlikely setting, a large landfill site, the rubbish tip for Salalah, another 50 km to the south.

Known for its large eagles, I was rather disconcerted to arrive to find none on the dump. Three Tristram's Grackles, plenty

of African Rock Martins, a Southern Grey Shrike and a few Black-crowned Finch Larks, but not a single eagle on the ground. Or rather not a single on the ground in the dump - scanning surrounding hills revealed plenty sitting on crags. In landscapes reminiscent of cowboy country, slowly the numbers added up - about 30 Steppe Eagles and two Imperial Eagles, none offering the photographs I had hoped for, but flight views very good.

A few kilometres to the south, the desert came to an abrupt end with a chain of mountains that spelt the beginning of Dhofar. Rolling hills, dry grasslands and trees aplenty, what a contrast to the previous 1000 km! And immediately my first new bird - a male South Arabian Wheatear, a real smashing individual.

By now, almost sunset, it was time to find somewhere to camp. Right on cue, a splendid male Pallid Harrier went cruising over, disappearing beyond a grassy outcrop into a deep wooded valley. Campsite found! Put up the tent, two African Rock Bunting hopping about, a pair of Fan-tailed Ravens overhead. As darkness fell, the calls of an African Scops Owl echoed around the valley.

17th December - Dhofar

A big day of birding, starting at the Salalah Farms, then travelling eastwards across the Dhofar coastal plain, calling in at Ayn Razat in the mountains and the coastal lagoons of East Khawr, Khawr Taqah and Khawr Rawri.

Salalah Farms

After two Singing Bush Larks and six Fan-tailed Ravens at my campsite, I had high hopes for some excellent birding at the two farms north of Salalah City.

First stop, Jarziz Farm, problem number one, I was refused entry! The guard on the gate said visitors without prior permission were no longer permitted. A couple of phone calls later and permission was granted, the gates opened and the birding began.

Raptors overhead - three Imperial Eagles, one Long-legged Buzzard, plus Marsh Harrier and Common Kestrels. Along field edges, the first of the Dhofar specials - a flock of Ruppell's Weavers and, replacing Indian Silverbills, the first African Silverbills of the trip. Plenty of Yellow-vented Bulbuls, several Isabelline Shrikes, plus Graceful Prinias and Little Green Bee-eaters. On the fields themselves, Cattle Egrets amongst a scattering of Desert Wheatears and White Wagtails, one Richard's Pipit too. Plenty of Crested Larks, but no Singing Bush Lark here, nor any waders or storks, overall a little quieter than expected.

With that I drove the few kilometres to the neighbouring Sahnawt Farm - entered without problem and birds by the bucketload - hundreds of Yellow Wagtails of many races, many dozens of White Wagtail too. A Greater Spotted Eagle soared, another perched on an irrigation pipe. Off yonder wandered a lone White Stork. Enjoying all the action, I then found a small pool much favoured by drinking birds - hundreds of Collared Doves competing with the wagtails. Four Red-throated Pipits flitted in, one Citrine Wagtail wandered close.

And then, just as I settled down to take a few photographs, up roared a white pick-up truck and out jumped an irate expat manager! 'Out of this farm' he ordered, not believing I had actually been given permission to enter. And so off I went, it seems the days of birding these superb sites are over!

East Khawr

A small coastal lagoon, with a reputation for producing surprises. No surprises on my visit - instead I found it rather disappointing, not least for the absence of an African Spoonbill that had been frequenting the area! Only spent about 30 minutes here, had a quick gander at the Greater Flamingos, scanned through the Kentish Plovers and admired the few herons and egrets that congregated at the southern end, but then it was off further east to better birding.

## Ayn Razat

A super little place - a popular picnic site at the foot of the Dhofar mountains, boasting a spring and wadi. I arrived in the heat of the day, not perhaps the best of ideas, but the birding was excellent - opposite the car park, three Bruce's Green Pigeons in fruiting figs, the stars of the site. Then a Blackstart by the picnic area and, on a short walk up the wadi, an African Paradise Flycatcher, another Blackstart and a flock of very active White-breasted White-eyes. A hundred metres or so back down, around the small ornamental garden, loads more White-breasted White-eyes, plus Ruppell's Weavers in abundance, both Shining and Palestine Sunbirds at the flowering shrubs and, on a carefully manacured lawn, a Long-billed Pipit prancing about. Easy birding, scenic locality.

Three Imperial Eagles flew down the valley.

## Khawr Taqah

Another small coastal lagoon, I paid only a brief visit to this place, but very nice it was. Twenty Grey Herons, one Purple Heron, four Squaccos, two Little Egrets, one Great White Egret, all on a single pool. Also a Glossy Ibis, three Garganey, a few waders and a Greater Flamingo. A little further down, two Greater Spotted Eagles sat on a stump. More pleasing though was a flock of Pacific Golden Plovers, 30 roosting on an area of marsh.

The seafront in the neighbouring town was amazing for its gulls - amongst fishermen tending their catch, thousands of Sooty and Caspian Gulls loafing about, a few dozen Swift Terns too.

## Khawr Rawri

The finale to the day, the north end of Khawr Rawri. Ruppell's Weavers by the dozen coming into drink, Clamorous Reed Warblers grating in the reeds, a couple of Temminck's Stints at the water's edge. Parked under an acacia, began a short walk - Wood Sandpipers, an Osprey, a Citrine Wagtail.

A short wander down the lagoon and almost immediately I bumped into an Indian Pond Heron, one of my target birds. Very good was that, but with the camera in the car, very soon I was trotting back again! Got back at the car just in time to see a Baillon's Crakes scampering across an open pool. Hmm, what to look at? Forgot the Indian Pond Heron for a while and sat upon a rock to hope the crane would emerge again ...and soon it did! Cracking little bird, creeping around the reed edges, darting back into cover every now and then. Soon there were two more, three Baillon's Crakes out in the open, what a treat.

Later, after more great views of the Indian Pond Heron, I settled down to watch the many birds coming to drink - flocks of Rose-coloured Starlings, loads of Ruppell's Weavers, African Silverbills, Yellow-vented Bulbuls, non-stop action. Plus three Bluethroats hopping about on grassy banks.

Camped here, a good place.

18 December - Dhofar (Khawr Rawri, Tawi Atayr)

First birds of the morning - four Great Spotted Eagles hanging over the cliffs of Khawr Rawri, soon joined by a Bonelli's

Eagle and a Marsh Harrier, a good start. I then walked the entire circuit of Khawr Rawri, an excellent three-hour stint.

Really fantastic birding from start to finish - flocks of waterbirds including Spoonbills, a dozen Garganeys, Ferruginous Duck, five superb Pheasant-tailed Jacanas and a rich assortment of waders. Also the Indian Pond Heron was still about and raptors included three Ospreys and a Black Kite. Bluethroats again, plus Clamorous Reed Warblers. On the arid slopes, as well as ever-present Desert Wheatears, both Long-billed Pipit and Blue Rock Thrush appeared and, around the historic ruins, Tristram's Grackles numbered at least 120. All very nice and quite a stunning backdrop to bird in. One Red Fox too.

Next stop was Tawi Atayr, a cavernous sinkhole, the sidewalls dropping several hundred metres into an abyss said to contain a lake. For the birder, there is one reason to visit - Yemen Serin, a population found here in 1997, a full 1000 km east of its usual range. The birds were said to favour the trees and bushes clinging to the cliffsides, so finding a vantage point, I settled down and began to scan - White-breasted White-eyes skittled through, both Shining and Palesine Sunbirds fed on flowering shrubs, African Rock Buntings were commonplace. I had prepared myself for a long wait, but within ten minutes, I was in for luck - landing on an exposed branch right in front of me, a Yemen Serin presented itself!

Wow, I thought, what luck. Then dozens of them arrived, Yemen Serins everywhere! A flock of at least 60 had flitted up from within the sinkhole, the lip of the cavern now alive with the finches, very nice. One of my main targets now well and truly seen. Twenty minutes later, they all flew off, away from the sinkhole to feed on the arid slopes. A Blackstart and several African Rock Martins filled their shoes, but I was off - one more bird to find in the area. This too proved easy - some kilometres beyond Tawi Atayr, my quarry popped up onto roadside wires, three South Arabian Wheatears, a stunning male first, then a pair.

By now early afternoon, I decided next place to visit would be Wadi Darbat, a very attractive, relatively green plateau perched atop a cliff. I'm sure it would have been excellent for birds too, but an incredible wind had picked up, funnelling down the valley, whipping up sand. Birding proved hard, better to shelter under a tree and watch the camels wander by! Still, a few birds did pop up - one African Paradise Flycatcher, two Tree Pipits, a Grey Wagtail. A Short-toed Eagle went sailing over, but overall birding was never going to be very productive, so instead I decided to drive further east.

No let up in the wind, I camped out in the desert just north of Ras Mirbat, dawn would see me on the headland, hopefully watching some nice seabirds!

19 December - Dhofar (Ras Mirbat, Ayn Hamran)

Ras Mirbat, 7.00 a.m. start to seawatch, one incredibly distant Brown Booby, streams of Red-necked Phalaropes heading west, many flocks of 60 and more. Otherwise a slow start, the first 90 minutes producing just two Socotra Cormorants, a steady trickle of Swift Terns and, the highlight, several Green Turtles loafing just offshore.

Then, at 8.30 a.m., two distant white dots approaching! Closer and closer, in they came, two dots metamorphosing into Masked Boobies, cracking birds - eventually passed directly in front, sweeping off to the east, another target bird under the belt. The Red-necked Phalarope passage began to slacken, a good thousand birds having passed, but then more Masked Boobies appeared, a total of about five in all.

As mid-morning approached, I was on the point of leaving when a final scan revealed a very distant Persian Shearwater, yippee! Decided to stay a little longer - a good move, the next ten minutes produced two more Persian Shearwaters much closer and, sandwiched between them, a Jouanin's Petrel, also close! Then I did leave, but stopped a while in the nearby harbour - plenty of Sooty Gulls and another Socotra Cormorant, this one resting on rocks.

I then headed for Ayn Hamran. Brief stops en route revealed a Black Stork near Khawr Rawri and an Indian Pond Heron at Khawr Taqah, but then I hit a surprise ...from nowhere, an absolute mega sandstorm!

As sandstorms go, this was a monster - not only could you barely stand up, but visibility frequently dropped to zero. Twice I went off the road as the world turned an unearthly dark orange-brown, the only clue being the sudden change in noise as I left the asphalt. Camels stood and suffered, I wondered what to do. Clearly birding was a non-starter in such conditions, but still I decided to go to Ayn Hamran, a wadi tucked up against high cliffs. Arriving, with the car rocking violently in the wind, I left it and climbed to the slightly sheltered upper part of the wadi, right under the cliff face. Surprisingly productive, I actually had an excellent few hours. In the depths of acacia stands, two African Paradise Flycatchers flitted out of the canopy, then a Hoopoe, then the first speciality - a male Arabian Warbler. Upward I climbed, White-breasted White-eyes moving through, African Rock Buntings abundant, eventually I reached the cliff itself. Glancing down to the plains below, great clouds of sand obliterated all, but looking upward, there were treats for the eyes - first a Short-toed Eagle, then the best of them all, a stunning adult Verreaux's Eagle, hugging the cliff, soaring from right to left. A super raptor by any measure. With that, I clambered back down into the wind and the storm. Five Arabian Partridges went scuttling past, a flock of Black-crowned Finch-Larks did their best to stay on the ground. At the car, the storm was every bit as powerful as ever, Laughing Doves were buffeted sideways, a Blackstart crouched in the lee of a palm. I got into the car and went for a drive, suicide it seemed. I managed to reach the town of Taqah, had dinner and watched a brave flock of White Wagtails attempting to settle into a roost. As dark fell, rather early due to the sand, I returned to Ayn Hamran. The storm continued, no owls of any description murmured, I parked the car at an angle to the wind. No tent this night, I slept in the car, honestly wondering if it might turn over! 20 December - Dhofar (Ayn Hamran, East & West Khawr, Raysut, Al Mughsayl) Dawn saw my car still upright, the wind beginning to slacken. Back to birding. I fancied a photograph of the Verreaux's Eagle, so clambered back up the cliff, finding a perch high on a crag that should afford me super views should one venture past again. Up there I sat for quite some hours, the Short-toed Eagle an early returnee, hopefully to soon be followed by its bigger cousin. A Bruce's Green Pigeon came and went, loads of Tristram's Grackles and Yellow-vented Bulbuls entertained as the time crept by, no sign of my desired eagle. Then three small birds flitted in and landed just adjacent ..blimey, Yemen Serins! I really did not expect these at this locality and are possibly the first recorded here, a rather nice bonus. Deciding the eagles weren't going to play ball, I began to climb back down the cliff and just as I maneuvered a particularly challenging section of rock, I glanced up to see a large raptor drifting overhead. Eeks, holding on with one hand, photographing with the other, I clicked off a few shots, puzzling slightly over what the raptor had been - a rather blotchy thing, but massive, it really could only have been one thing. Having safely ascended, I checked my mystery bird - indeed it was what I had suspected, an immature Verreaux's Eagle! Goal achieved, albeit at the very last minute! Back to the car, a quick look round the bushes adjacent revealed a grand total of five African Paradise Flycatchers, 30 African Silverbills, five Ruppell's Weavers, 15 African Rock Buntings and another Arabian Warbler, this time a female. Then westward I went, a tour of various coastal wetlands, all en route to Raysut and Al Mughsayl beyond. East Khawr, West Khawr, Salalah Nature Reserve, I popped into them all, each offering a few special birds. Amongst the highlights, four White-cheeked Terns at East Khawr (along with Common, Sandwich, Gull-billed, Swift and Caspian Terns), 35 Glossy Ibis and 30 Pacific Golden Plovers at Salalah and, all at West Khawr, an immature Great Black-headed Gull, three Cotton Teal and an Intermediate Egret. Then it was further west again, next stop Raysut. An unpromising locality, essentially a busy port and industrial zone, I was to be surprised. First, a pleasant half hour atop the high cliffs - no less than 110 Socotra Cormorants, an inshore Bridled Tern and a flock of many hundreds of terns far offshore, presumably Common Terns, maybe with White-cheeked amongst them. Next, I decided on a whim to search for the city dump - up through the industrial units, dusty and none too pleasing to the eye. But overhead, eagles. Lots of eagles! Following their general drift, soon I arrived at the dump ...and wow, what a spectacle awaited me!!! This was a dump with a difference - line upon line of White Stork, eagles everywhere, absolutely amazing! Manovered the car into the heart of the tip, piles of rubbish to one side, a truck trundling off yonder. But, sat just metres away, a feast for the eyes - massive Steppe Eagles looking fantastic. To say the place was staggering is an under-statement, the numbers were astonishing - about 350 Steppe Eagles, no less than 1380 White Storks and, for good measure, one Great Spotted Eagle, two Black Kites and a few Cattle Egrets. Tristram's Grackles, Fan-tailed Ravens and House Crows completed the picture. And hour or so here and then I headed for my last destination of the day - the remote Al Mughsayl wadi. Arrived late afternoon, got the car stuck the sandy wadi bed, then took a walk - three Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse flushed, four Long-billed Pipits strutting about. As night fell, I'd reached my destination - the narrow rocky gullies favoured by Hume's Tawny Owl. A bird of almost mythical standing, my chances of seeing this denizen of the wild desert were next to nothing, and sure enough I did not. Still, an hour and more of walking the night were enthralling. Back at the car, I camped out. 21 December - Dhofar (Al Mughsayl) After camping in the high wadi, I returned at dawn to the coast, enjoying a most pleasing seawatch at the very scenic Al Mughsayl Blowholes. A most pleasing way to start the day - ten Brown Boobies in the bay, Swift Terns galore, an Osprey overhead. On the cliffs



above, dozens of Tristram's Grackles, a couple of Blackstarts, a few African Rock Buntings. Just adjacent, the small khawl also held a few birds. Paddling the shallows, a single Intermediate Egret and 21 Glossy Ibises, whilst in deeper parts, five Ferruginous Ducks were tops of the ducks. It was now only mid-morning, but my days in Dhofar had come to an end - I got in my car and began the journey north, part two of my trip was about to begin![Click here to read part two.](#)