

## Oman & United Arab Emirates. Northbound.

Contributed by Jos  
Last Updated Thursday, 09 April 2009

The manic second half of my trip to Oman and the U.A.E., journeying from Dhofar back to the superb Barr Al Hikman, this time finding the Great Knots, before travelling to the Al Hajar mountains and onward to the fantastic Musandam enclave. After Eversmann's Redstarts, Trumpeter Finches and loads of wheatears, I then returned to the U.A.E. for a few days in the Dubai area, an amazing finale with flocks of 47 Cream-coloured Coursers and 52 White-tailed Plovers, along with a Grey Hypocolius, a vagrant Brown Shrike and a Red-tailed Bluetail, the latter a first for the Arabian Peninsula!

### 21 December - The Central Desert

Mid-morning in eastern Dhofar, my journey north was about to begin.

Crossing the Central Desert in one sitting, my route took me 875 km in the single day, a few extra kilometres added to include Wadi Rabkut, an area on the southern edge of the desert, sometimes home to Houbara Bustard. Arriving in the midday heat, birds were few and far between in this hot and arid land - Yellow-vented Bulbuls here and there, a Southern Grey Shrike atop a dead tree. Wandering a few kilometres, slowly the species tally began to rise - a flock of 40 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, one Palestine Sunbird, a single Desert Warbler. Naturally, no Houbara Bustard, but just as I turned to retrace my path to the car, I happened upon the highlight of the day - two Arabian Gazelles shading under a palm, my first and only sighting of this animal on my whole trip. They bounded off, a flock of Black-crowned Finch-Larks flitted up. I returned to my car, a Hoopoe Lark ran across the sands.

Two hundred kilometres north, I also popped into the Muntasar oasis again. Bar the ever-present Desert Wheatears and an Isabelline Shrike, the area seemed rather devoid of birds. Hazy ideas of spending another night here evaporated, I pushed ever further north. Several hours later, way into the night and just a few kilometres short of Barr Al Hikman, it was enough for one day, I pulled off the road into the desert and went to sleep.

### 22 December - Barr Al Hikman

Great Knot, attempt two!

I arrived at 7.00 a.m., high tide, waders off to roost. Not ideal, I would only have the falling tide - flocks would be descending onto the appearing mudflats, becoming ever more distant. I settled into a likely position, already a few Redshanks and Greater Flamingos paddling the shallows. All too soon, the action kicked off, several hundred more Redshanks landed, Dunlin too. Scanning revealed plenty of Little Stints and a few Greenshanks. No Bar-tailed Godwits yet, the harbingers of Great Knots. The tide edged out, then whoosh, wings hurtling over and ploughing down on to the flats, Bar-tailed Godwits in their thousands. All landed some hundreds of metres to the right, I scanned through. Grey Plovers, more Redshanks, some Curlew Sandpipers. Whoosh, more and more birds spun overhead and landed, Bar-tailed Godwits again. Most landed distant, a hundred or so just in front of me. Not wishing to be a martyr to identification challenges, I opted for the closer birds, but they spooked. As they wheeled round, I felt sure I glimpsed a Great Knot amongst the flurry of wings. Down they landed, I scanned through again ....pow, a Great Knot standing at the front! Then two more! Three Great Knots, my main Oman target bird, paddling about just in front of me. Whoosh, more wings and more godwits dropped out of the sky. My Great Knot count went to five.

Over came a Marsh Harrier, up went my birds! It was 8.00 a.m., the mudflats were appearing and birds were flocking down in their thousands. Two Marsh Sandpipers, a few Terek Sandpipers and the first Great and Lesser Sand Plovers amongst the highlights. Another flock of Bar-tailed Godwits, hundreds strong, straddled a sand bar. And amongst them, 11 more Great Knot!!!

By 9.00 a.m., with the tide dropping fast, perhaps 30,000 birds now stretched as far as the eye could see. The godwits, with their prize draws, were now becoming distant dots. It was time to just enjoy the spectacle. 250 Crab Plovers had slunk in, a Broad-billed Sandpiper probed nearby. Two Caspian Terns flew over, cormorants darkened the horizon.

The quest for Great Knot was over.

With success at Barr Al Hikman, I decided to push further north, covering another 550 km by late afternoon. Destination was the Al Hajar Mountains, home to a few specialities, particularly Hume's Wheatear and Sand Partridge. First stop, Wadi Al Muaydin, on the road to the Sayq Plateau. Stunning mountain backdrops, steep wadi, good birding - Hume's Wheatears were easy to find, sitting on roadside wires and jumping about on old stone walls. For the other birds, I needed to walk the wadi - five Grey Francolins in an area of rough cultivation, at least four Plain Leaf Warblers, a couple of dozen Laughing Doves, plus three Purple Sunbirds, two Desert Larks, a Menetries's Warbler and a pair of Long-billed Pipits. Birds had not been plentiful, but the going was most enjoyable.

I had not seen a single Egyptian Vulture, common in these mountains, nor, more importantly, a Sand Partridge ...but I still had a chance. As late afternoon approached, I took a trip up the exceptionally steep winding roads that climb to Jabal Shams, a high mountain some distance to the west of Wadi Al Muaydin. The sun was beginning to drop, Brown-necked Ravens circled overhead, another Hume's Wheatear appeared on wires, I stopped to take a wander. An Eastern Red-tailed Wheatear scrubbed about under a bush, then, in an explosion of wings, three pale gamebirds went hurtling off down the slope, landed over a nearby ridge. Down I scrambled, over the ridge I peered and there they were, three Sand Partridges trotting off over the rocks. Very nice end to the day. Darkness fell, I travelled another 70 km or so and camped out in the mountains, morning would take me back to Sohar.

23 December - Sohar & Khatmat Milahah

A day revisiting the two best sites on the Al Batinah coastal plain, Sohar and Khatmat Milahah.

At Sohar, I spent five hours slowly circling the pivot fields, exploring the settling pools and sniffing round the cow sheds, the latter producing two Masked Wagtails and billions of Collared Doves! On the fields, though distinctively quieter than ten days earlier, the birding was good - wheatears, wagtails and pipits by the bucketload, including all the usual species, plus a rather odd pipit (pictured right) that could only have been a runt Tawny Pipit (much smaller than accompanying individuals). Also one Booted Eagle, one Purple Heron, and all the regular Little Green Bee-eaters, Indian Rollers, Common Mynahs and other colourfuls. A Steppe Shrike joined the Southern Grey Shrikes and, amongst the warblers, a Desert Warbler, an Orphean Warbler and Graceful Prinias.

Ninety kilometres west, it was the turn of excellent acacia woodlands at Khatmat Milahah. I arrived at 2.30 p.m. and stayed till dusk, camping thereafter in the hope of finding a Striated Scops Owl. Super birding throughout the afternoon - hyper-active Arabian Babblers in flocks, at least three Eastern Pied Wheatears, a Great Spotted Eagle overhead and both Desert Warblers and another Plain Leaf Warbler. I had secret hopes to find a roosting Striated Scops Owl, but that was

over-optimistic - several Ring-necked Parakeets peering out of holes and squawking, quite a few Common Mynahs, even Grey Francolins scuttling through the dust, but no owls of any description.

Darkness fell, I drove round for a couple of hours, still no owls. I called it a night and camped out ...4.30 a.m., I awoke - a Striated Scops Owl was calling from the very tree I was camped next to! Clambered back into life, sneaked round to see it, off it flew, not a glimpse I got!

## 24 December - Khor Kalba (UAE) & the Musandam Enclave

Christmas was approaching, I had to get somewhere nice! The perfect destination would be the Omani enclave of Musandam, a wild mountainous region at the northern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, separated from the rest of Oman by the United Arab Emirates.

So it was, this morning saw me leaving Oman to transit the U.A.E. I called in again at Khor Kalba, the east coast mangroves barely a kilometre from the border. Loads of birds, I spent a good few leisurely hours here. Managed to miss the White-collared Kingfishers this time, but with a lower tide, other birds were plentiful - Indian Pond Herons and the mirror image Squacco Herons, a Striated Heron, plentiful Western Reef Herons, all very nice. Lots of waders, most notably Kentish Plovers and both Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers. Also a couple of Whiskered Terns, three Slender-billed Gulls and, the only one of the trip, a Black-necked Grebe. In the waters adjacent, heads of Green Turtles kept popping up, whilst in the mangrove edge two Syke's Warblers appeared and dozens of White-cheeked Bulbuls entertained

However, for me, it was time to leave. I hoped to make Musandam by early afternoon.

The north of the U.A.E. was a shock to the system. After the beauty of Oman, the contrast could not have been greater - it was simply a disgusting slum of a place, a mish-mash of construction, heavy congestion, litter and suburban sprawl, I would not be sorry to see the back of this dump. The roads were also of dubious quality and I failed to see anything that I could even suggest was appealing!

At midday, I reached the Omani border. With immigration formalities a breeze, I entered Musandam and immediately stepped into another world - stunning fjord-like scenery, quiet roads and plenty of birds in the adjacent seas. The bay at Khasab was most impressive - Socotra Cormorants galore, at least 250 in a single flock, plus an estimated 2500 gulls, about a fifth of them Slender-billed Gulls, the rest Black-headed. A short stop added Western Reef Herons and a Striated Heron, whilst a wander in fields behind Khasab town revealed Indian Roller, Red-wattled Plovers and a couple of Ring-necked Parakeets.

Then it was time to head into the mountains - my goal for Christmas Day was the As Sayh Plateau, an exquisite location high in remote mountains and hopefully home to Eversmann's Redstart, a bird almost of mythical status - rare on the Arabian Peninsula, essentially known from this single location, where it was sometimes found wintering in very small numbers. For this day though, my destination was the Sall Ala plain, a lightly wooded valley in the low mountains. I had hopes of some good birding, but little had I expected that my very first bird would be a male Eversmann's Redstart, my much-desired main target!!! I was amazed, I had been ready for a long trudge the next day to find one, but here was a superb individual hopping about on the ground under the trees exactly where I had chosen to park! After half an hour, he suddenly vanished and search as I did, I could not relocate him for the rest of the day. Still, many other birds to entertain - two Eastern Pied Wheatears, four Hume's Wheatears, two Eastern Red-tailed Wheatears, at least six Plain Leaf Warblers, what a pleasant way to spend Christmas Eve.

It was time to put up my tent. Black Redstarts jumped about, a Little Green Bee-eater hawked from a tree nearby. Darkness came, Santa Claus failed to show for yet another year, best I could do was a Little Owl! A superb place to camp on this festive night.

25 December - As Sayh Plateau

Happy Christmas, it really was!

Oo er, a sign post warning of the perilous state of the road! Two kilometres later, another sign saying the same. I'd read reports suggesting the road up to As Sayh might be unpassable in a standard two-wheel drive, but I reckoned otherwise. Up I went, and indeed it was up - very steep dirt roads, narrow with numerous hairpin bends. Occasional boulders blocked the way, but up I crawled, occasionally spinning the wheels as the gradient got a bit heavy-going. Stopped to admire the views a few times, then topped a ridge and saw before me the greenery of the As Sayh Plateau, the route had been easier than expected.

It was rather chilly at this high altitude, I'd arrived just as the sun was creeping above the mountain peaks, but there was certainly little warmth in the early rays! However, as for birds, there were everywhere! Just minutes after leaving the car, I was watching the first Chukar Partridges racing across the short turf or legging it up the rocky slopes adjacent. Desert Larks were flitting up all over the place and, in the little fenced palm groves, Black Redstarts and Yellow-vented Bulbuls were common. As the sun began to warm the northern end of the plain, it was here that I began my birding - Plain Leaf Warblers flitted out as the sun touched their shrubbery, a couple of Song Thrushes launched out from cover, whilst the open expanses of grass were simply covered in birds - Hume's Wheatears in abundance, Eastern Red-tailed Wheatears also. Amongst the many Desert Larks, seven Trumpeter Finches were found, then the first of two Blue Rock Thrushes. Amazing birding, and it didn't stop - I slowly walked the entire plateau clockwise, numerous birds non-stop. Added both Desert Wheatear and Eastern Pied Wheatear to that family's tally, plus extras such as Stonechat and Indian Roller.

By mid-morning, approximate totals had reached an amazing 230 Chukar Partridge, 50 Desert Larks, at least 45 Black Redstarts and over 40 Hume's Wheatears, plus minimums of 10 Red-tailed Wheatears and 12 Plain Leaf Warblers. Not a bad haul for a Christmas Day walk!

There was, however, a certain omission to the list - the target bird Evermann's Redstart! Though I had encountered one the day before, this bird was still very much on my Christmas wish list, so on I searched. African Rock Martins circled over, a Sparrowhawk cruised down the valley, I was beginning to think I would not find my quarry. Early afternoon, right at the very southern end of the plateau, my luck went up another gear - in acacia trees up a side wadi, I bumped into my first Evermann's Redstart of the day, then another, then another! Three all in the same little patch, two males and a female, very nice indeed. By now, however, a wicked wind was beginning to pick up, whipping down the valley, leaving birds crouching for cover. I wandered back to the car and returned to Sall Ala.

The drive down was a test of nerves, one slip and the car might not look quite the same. Did several of the steep hairpins in first gear, gently edging round, maintaining tyre grip at all times. Back at Sall Ala, I relocated the Evermann's Redstart of the day before, then did a little general birding.

As dusk approached, I returned to Khasab, then onward to the border. My last few days would all be spent in the United Arab Emirates.

26 December - Khawr Al Baydah & Ghantoot

Hmm, I woke in the north of the United Arab Emirates to fog, I didn't expect that! My morning destination was to be the 'Dreamland' mudflats at Khawr Al Baydah, just north of Umm Al Qaywayn. However, on arriving I found I could not even see the sea, let alone any birds!

This being the Persian Gulf, soon the sun was burning through. By 8.00 a.m., I was looking across blue waters and ready to begin the birding. Next problem, it was high tide and there were no birds! Somewhere there had to be a roost, so off I went, trying tracks at random to access viewpoints. Worrying slightly that I might sink the car in the quagmire that the tracks sometimes turned into, I found a very nice vantage point that overlooked a bay full of birds. I got out my telescope and enjoyed a spectacle that, whilst not on the scale of Barr Al Hikmann, was most impressive - a few thousand waders that included no less than 570 Crab Plovers all huddled together, an awesome sight. Other feasts for the eyes, 150 Kentish Plovers, 40 Lesser Sand Plovers, a couple of Greater Sand Plovers, 1500 Common Redshanks, 160 Terek Sandpipers and, amongst 320 Bar-tailed Godwits, three Great Knots, super. Passing Marsh Harriers flushed the lot, the

sight of all those Crab Plovers whirling in the sky most memorable. Also 25 Gull-billed Terns, a few Slender-billed Gulls and, overhead, seven Pallid Swifts, presumably early migrants already returning.

Next came a drive north, past Dubai and its skyline of cranes and skyscrapers, then along the coast to Ghantoot. I was here for two birds in particular - Cream-coloured Courser and Grey Hypocolius, the first regular on the lawns of the local polo club and the latter frequently roosting in an adjacent plantation. Would I be in luck? It didn't take long to find out! I arrived at Ghantoot Polo Club, had a quick chat with the friendly guard on the gate, then wandered in and sat next to the immaculate lawns - and there, strutting about, were Cream-coloured Coursers and Pacific Golden Plovers from one end of the lawns to the other! Quite amazing, this single lawn had 12 Cream-coloured Coursers, some just metres away. At the other end of the club, it was even better - two large lawns had even more birds. A slow scan brought the totals to an incredible 47 Cream-coloured Coursers and 16 Pacific Golden Plovers, backed up by a few Kentish Plovers and a small flock of Ruff. I later heard there was supposed to be a Sociable Plover there too!

'Well, that was good', thought I, 'Now for the Grey Hypocolius'. Barely a hundred metres from the polo grounds, a plantation of toothbrush trees was a favoured sleeping place for this rare bird. Having missed them at Muntasar, this really was my last chance, I supposed. I settled onto a conveniently-constructed hill that overlooked the plantation and waited. And waited. A lot of White-cheeked Bulbuls, my first Red-vented Bulbuls of the trip, quite a few Ring-necked Parakeets, but no sign of Grey Hypocolius. The sun began to set, the birds would appear at any moment, several Hoopoes were having a squabble, Little Green Bee-eaters hawked from a fence, the sun slipped beyond the horizon, no Hypocolius came to roost.

Ever the optimistic, I decided to camp in the plantation, maybe the birds had sneaked in and would appear at dawn!

#### 27 December - Ghantoot & Dubai Pivot Fields

Dawn came, still no Grey Hypocolius. I walked the length of the plantation, then wandered over to the nearby luxury hotel and its very green gardens. Highlights of the morning included at least 120 White-cheeked Bulbuls and 40 Red-vented Bulbuls, along with an Orphean Warbler, Isabelline Wheatear, Corn Bunting and four Water Pipits. However, in the absence of the Grey Hypocolius, I decided it was time to head back to Dubai.

Next destination, the famous Pivot Fields just east of the Dubai city. Large irrigated fields, small reedbeds and scrubby hedgerows, the locality offers some of the best birding in the U.A.E., it was very easy to spend the whole day here. Within minutes of arriving, under a nice hot sun, I was watching my main target bird, White-tailed Plover. Not just one or two, but an impressive 52 of them feeding on the short turf! Stunning birds, complemented by about 60 Red-wattled Plovers, a single vagrant Lapwing and a host of other waders, including Black-winged Stilts, Temminck's Stint and Wood Sandpipers. Walking round each of the fields, soon I added Yellow and Citrine Wagtails, Water Pipits and loads of Hoopoes - at least 18 of them! Also Collared and Laughing Doves by the dozen, two Indian Rollers and quite a few Grey Francolins, usually scuttling off into the grass. Marsh Harriers quartered, a Great Spotted Eagle lumbered over, four Glossy Ibis flew in.

As evening approached, I sat between the pivot fields and the small reedbed and just watched the comings and goings, a Bluethroat popped out of the reeds, two Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse flew over, 35 Pallid Swifts appeared in the skies. Slowly the White-tailed Plovers wandered in close, one of the Citrine Wagtails too, plus a few Common Snipe. Then the birds exploded into the air, a large falcon came hammering in, scattering birds as it went. Right into the centre of the pivot, then it landed - one Saker Falcon. White Wagtails seemed a little surprised, but close inspection revealed jessies, some Sheik had lost his prize falcon! With that, as the sun set and the Glossy Ibis returned to the meadows, I left and headed back out into the desert for the night.

#### 28 December - Ra's al-Khor & Safa Park

Dubai roads, what a nightmare! Ra's al-Khor is a pretty good wetland right in the heart of Dubai, but whoever designed the road system that surrounds it needs their head examined! Getting to the first hide, midway down the lagoon, was relatively easy - and once there, it was a treat. Early morning fog again, but several dozen Western Reef Herons

assembled right outside the hide, plus 45 Spoonbills off yonder and a fairly impressive assortment of waders - at least 1800 Little Stints, 600 Dunlin, 150 Kentish Plovers and small flocks of Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and, rather distant, Pacific Golden Plovers. As the morning mist lifted, a towering skyline of Dubai city appeared, rising beyond the marshes - dramatic if not appealing, it was certainly a spectacular backdrop to the Greater Spotted Eagles now rising on the morning thermals! By 10.00 a.m., the Greater Spotted Eagle total was five in the air together, plus about six Marsh Harriers, one of which swooped to grab a Kentish Plover! One Sacred Ibis appeared, waddling up the creek adjacent to the hide. Common and Bank Mynahs fed on the road verge, 30 White-cheeked Bulbuls too.

Next came adventures amongst the cars, enjoying the madness of the multilane freeways and mindboggling junctions that seemed designed to fling you off into the wrong direction! A short stop at Ra's al-Khors's second hide added a good 600 Greater Flamingos, but then I was off across town to try and find Safa Park. This should be fun, I thought, I didn't actually know where it was - I had not planned to visit this site, but I'd just met a birder who said there was a Red-flanked Bluetail in the park, the first ever for Arabia!

Miraculously, I stumbled upon the park with relatively little difficulty, finding how to turn into the parking was another question altogether! I eventually dumped the car in a shopping place opposite and ran across the road to enter the park. Half of Dubai's population seemed to have entered the park too - enjoying the public holiday, the lawns were littered with families having picnics, playing ball or simply sleeping! Hmm, birding here was not exactly sampling the wilds of Arabia! Past candifloss and sweetcorn vendors, past the boating lake, I only had the vaguest directions to the bird I hoped to see. Indian Rollers swooped about, Laughing Doves zigzagged between the families, a Citrine Wagtail ran alongside an ornamental duck pool. I found the woodland that was host to the bluetail - quickly found five Olive-backed Pipits, a very nice bonus for the trip. One Grey Wagtail followed them about, but try as I might, searching the woodland floor all around, I could not find the Red-flanked Bluetail.

After about three hours in Safa Park, I then made the wrong decision to sample Dubai's shopping centres ...arrgh! For some insane reason, a move I regretted immediately, I turned into this monster of a place. Like the rest of Dubai nothing is finished, the mall is a semi-constructed effort which strives to be the biggest in the world. Hell would have been pleasant in comparison to this place, mildly amusing was the 60 metre indoor Christmas tree that had lights flashing in beat to the music, less amusing the labyrinth of shops that spewed off in all directions, each individual outlet an overpriced replica of any similar store in any other city in the world. Finally overcome by the urge to leave (about three minutes after arriving, but lost in the entanglement of aisles, floors, sections and escalators and lifts, the reality being nearer an hour), I fled to the car park to retrieve my car. And then to leave ...who the hell designed that car park?! Up two floors, down, round, past new construction, up floors again, round and round, I swear I drove almost 2 km under that sodding store before I saw the light of day again, took me hours to regain a degree of sanity, not that I had much to start with.

Birding tip # 264. Never never, on the way back from Arabia's first ever Red-flanked Bluetail, think 'OO, I'll just pop in to buy a souvenir for those back home'.

29 December - Dubai Pivot Fields & Safa Park

My final day, but what a fantastic ending it was - three U.A.E. rarities, plus one Grey Hypocolius!

The day started at the Pivot Fields - watching White-tailed Plovers and admiring rather tame Grey Francolins. Then I spotted another birder - U.A.E. resident Tommy Peterson, this turned out to be most fortunate. Not only did he inform me

there was a Moustached Warbler no more than 100 metres from where I stood, but there was also a Brown Shrike about 300 metres away! Amazing, both are U.A.E. rarities and both would be very nice birds to see. He also added that the Red-flanked Bluetail in Safa Park was almost certainly still there and recommended I tried again.

So began the crazy last day. Standing at the recommended patch of reeds, I pished to the best of my abilities ...a ruffle in the reeds, out jumped a Bluethroat. Hmm, wrong bird! Another pish and another ruffle, out popped another bird. Ah ha, very much the right bird this time - one super Moustached Warbler, brilliant. Also, in the same general area, one Reed Warbler and one Clamorous Reed Warbler.

Next up, a wander over to the Brown Shrike hedgerow - six Rose-coloured Starlings, loads of Common Mynahs, 15 Pallid Swifts overhead, but no shrikes of any description. Time was ticking away, so I decided to brave the traffic and cross the city to Safa Park. Now a work day, the park was near deserted - the omens were good. Zipped up to the woodland and almost immediately found the Olive-backed Pipits again. No sign of the Red-flanked Bluetail though! However, I was now better informed - this bird, rather untypically for the species, had a fondness to stay in the trees, flitting to the ground only to snatch a morsel. I slowly began to walk the woodland, carefully scanning the lower limbs of the acacias. Chiffchaffs by the bucketload, but my search was going nowhere - an hour later, I had looked at every single tree and still not found my bird. I was just contemplating my departure, rather glumly, when a flick of a tail and there was the beauty, one Red-flanked Redtail sitting on a branch adjacent. Where it had appeared from I do not know, but down onto the ground it dropped, flitting back into the trees almost immediately. The wait had been worthwhile, I was now watching the first ever Red-flanked Bluetail in the Arabian Peninsula and what a superb bird it was. Rather mobile, it covered ground at an alarming rate, repeatedly changing trees, occasionally feeding on the ground. Twenty minutes later, it suddenly vanished again, cue to return to the Pivot Fields!

It was now early afternoon, I had barely an hour left before before I needed to go to the airport. Arriving back at the Pivot Fields, I again walked the hedgerow - an Isabelline Shrike sat in a dead tree, I carefully scrutinized it, but it was most certainly not a Brown Shrike. I walked another 50 metres and the shrike was now in another tree ...oo er, no it wasn't, there sat the Brown Shrike!!! I did a double take, behind me the Isabelline Shrike was still there, and here was the superstar Brown Shrike, a very nice juxtaposition. 'Well, that was an excellent ending to the trip', thought I, as I walked back to the car ...but it was the ending, absolutely mindblowing, in the very same hedgerow, a Grey Hypocolius suddenly appeared! I had missed them at Muntasar, I had missed them at Ghantoot, and now here was one, sitting atop a tree just minutes before I was due to conclude the trip's birding!

An amazing ending to an amazing trip. I got in my car, paused to watch Snipe feeding by the track and then motored off to the airport. At 5.55 pm, I was airborne. Just before midnight, I was back home in Vilnius, trip over.