

Jordan 2010-2011.

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Having travelled extensively in the Middle East before, this mid-winter break to the Middle East was very much the result of a desire to seek out just two species of bird - both elusive denizens of wild remote wadis and mountain top, neither particularly easy to find. The birds in question, Syrian Serin and Hume's Tawny Owl, the first an endemic to the highlights of the region and the latter a localised resident of remote desert wadis and canyons across the Middle East. Thus, this my third visit to Jordan, would see my two weeks in the country concentrate initially on the Dana and Petra areas, stunning mountain landscapes at the lip of the Rift Valley, favoured localities for the two target birds. Thereafter, I would enjoy the rest of the country at leisure - travelling south to the dramatic Wadi Rum and then the Red Sea at Aqaba, before looping north through Wadi Araba to the Dead Sea, then to the Jordan Valley and Northern Highlands, before a final push which would see me crossing the Eastern Deserts to reach the Azraq oasis and habitats around. Unlike its better-known neighbour, relatively few birders visit Jordan, fewer still in winter - the result being a trip of discovery, finding your birds and turning up surprises here and there. On my trip, these included quite a number of species previously unrecorded in winter, including Masked Shrike, Common Redstart and Whiskered Tern, plus several birds that would be classified as national rarities, including Sociable Plover, Woodcock (perhaps third record for Jordan) and Ruddy Shelduck. As a country, Jordan is impressive - a land inhabited by exceptionally friendly people, blessed by natural beauty and architectural wonder unrivalled in the region and rich in birds throughout. An ideal country for a short winter break, the weather rather kind too. 18 December. 16.30 Vinius airport, minus 14 C, heavy snow. Eight hours later, via a transfer in Riga and short stop in Beirut, touchdown in Amman, Jordan. 6 C, clear skies. Cleared customs, picked up a hire car. 2.00 a.m., time to hit the roads, dawn would see me at my first destination. 19 December. Wadi Dana. One of Jordan's jewels, Wadi Dana is a jagged slash in the world's crust, a dramatic wadi cutting deep into the limestones that mark the edge of the Great Rift Valley. And perched high on the crags overlooking this wadi is the quaint Dana Village, a cluster of stone-built cottages, one of which is now the Dana Hotel, home for the next two nights. Dana Village however would wait a few hours, my first port of call was Barra Forest - land of the Syrian Serin. Stunted pine and juniper woodlands dotting the high slopes, dramatic landscapes indeed. Reports however spoke of the bird being not so easy to find. Arrived pre-dawn, had a couple of hours kip in the car, then it was time for the birding to begin. Coveys of Chukar exploded off rocky slopes all around, the flutey trills of Spectacled Bulbuls announced it truly was dawn, high time I was out and wandering. At an altitude of over 1500 metres, 't'was rather chilly up here - still a mere 6 C and mighty breezy too! Wolf whistles and ee-oors carrying on the morning winds, flocks of Tristram's Grackles arriving from roost, a good 120 or so swooping down, circling around. Pink pink pink, Chaffinches next up, an abundant bird wintering in these parts. Indeed they were, as I began my walk, Chaffinches everywhere on the slopes. However, a wind now buffeting did little for my attempts to find the Syrian fella - three hours I walked, the tops of this vast canyon none too sheltered. A flock of Rock Sparrows made for a nice pause, five Griffon Vultures hanging low over the ridge impressive, but almost no hint of anything I could possibly construe as a Syrian Serin. Almost no hint! A fenced compound some kilometres down a small road held a most juicy wad of fine habitat. Round the fence I went, two Scrub Warblers alarming, flocks of Great Tits here and there, plus one mystery songster stubbornly refusing to budge from its chosen perch deep in a tall juniper. Through the fence I peered, changed angle many times, thought I could out sit it ...but I blinked before it chose to show! One possible Syrian Serin singing, hardly a conclusive find. Gave up and decided to try the lower slopes - the serins do disperse in winter, perhaps they would be in the gardens and wadi bottoms near the village. Checked into the cosy Dana Hotel, sat atop its roof a while, sipping Arabic chai and admiring views. Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstarts hopped about on an adjacent roof, Tristram's Grackles most showy, very vocal and bouncing around everywhere. Pretty warm by now, the mid-morning sun most welcome, onward the hunt for Syrian Serin. From Dana Village, a small path runs parallel to the slope - a most merciful thing, the wadi itself plunges a thousand metres and a half to Wadi Araba far below, a hot sandy plain below sea level. With springs feeding the gardens, plenty of lush vegetation ...and in it plenty of birds. Spectacled Bulbuls by the bucketload, Chukars in their hundreds launching into space at every turn, plus wintering Robins, a couple of Blackbirds, more Chaffinches and a bevy of locals - Palm Doves, two Rock Buntings, a few Sardinian Warblers and some rather smart Spectacled Warblers. No serins of any description. Still, more good birds to follow - a cracking flock of Arabian Babblers doing their stuff, my second flock of Rock Sparrows of the day and, from a damp patch amongst the gardens, a Woodcock. Nice I thought, didn't expect that. Only later did I discover this might actually be only the third record for Jordan, the previous two being in 1968 and 1979. More tea, then back up to Barra Forest for an afternoon session - a long pleasant walk, a flock of Woodlarks to kick off, several Scrub Warblers with their bob tails along the way, but mighty birdless it seemed overall. Thankfully it was nice and sunny though! By 3 p.m., with barely any birds seen in the previous hour, I happened upon a little flurry of birds dropping down to water, a temporal rock pool the result of storms a week earlier. Greenfinches, Linnets, but was that something else? A smaller thing flitting through with yellow flashes on the tail? Maybe just hallucinations, undoubtedly a Greenfinch. Squeezed through a gap in the rock to reach the pool ...then bam, there it was, one cracking male Syrian Serin perched on the boulder directly opposite! What a little corker, yellow face and all. Quickly grabbed the camera, a quick few snaps followed, then down to the water he dropped, out of sight. No sooner had he descended, then so too did two more, females this time. Most splendid, three Syrian Serins to round off the afternoon. Target number one under the belt. Back to the hotel, a well-deserved night of rest to follow. 20 December. Wadi Dana. Dana, day two. My eyes were bigger than my legs - from the top, peering into the cavernous Wadi Dana, a stroll down its precipitous drops seemed a most wonderful idea, the scrubby wadi bottoms no doubt a haven to delights such as Palestine Sunbird and Blackstart. And how easy it all seemed, shimmying down scree slopes, Chukars parting in my wake, the whistles and yodels of Tristram's Grackles a pleasing backdrop for the ear. By 10 a.m.

however, sitting atop a huge boulder drinking coffee and surveying the world around, doubts began to surface as to the sanity of the descent ...for every easy metre down, it was going to be one hell of a slog up! Way up above, the cozy retreat of the village now stood as testament to how far I already had to climb. And what is more, bar the oh so numerous Chukars and ever-present Spectacled Bulbuls, I was actually seeing very few birds, the arid slopes basically devoid of life. Change of plan required, a little admiration of small yellow crocus flowers emerging from the sun-baked sands, then upward, and upward ever more. Thermos totally empty by the time I reached the gardens, the bird list hardly padded out at all - a couple of Black Redstarts, a few scrawny Sardinian Warblers bleating their scratchy songs from tussocks, and that was about that. Back at hotel, over and above the stunning landscapes, I actually realised there was little reason to stay much longer at Dana - the winter bird community is sparse, and its star, the Syrian Serin I had already seen. It was decided, next morning I would leave, but that still left time for second helpings on the Syrian Serin front. Back to Barra I went, a small detour taking me via the nearby town to sample again the felafal munchies, a pause on the high plateau adding the first Finsch's Wheatears of the trip. So it was another afternoon on the rolling slopes of juniper forest, again largely devoid of birds, but enjoyable all the same - Scrub Warblers quite common, little gems they are, but little else. Ended up at the drinking pool, and then right on cue, 3 p.m., in came the Syrian Serins again, this time just two females. Very nice. Hiked back to the car, and there waiting for me, a flock of six! And, stone me, another kilometre up, a further three by the roadside. Like London buses, you wait all day, then they all come at once!!! For evening entertainment, a little night drive - perhaps a few critters of the dark out and about. One Red Fox sauntering across the road, a small flutter and there atop a post, a most engaging Little Owl. Stunning views, he just sat there, mere metres from the car. I began to dream, 'wouldn't it be good if Hume's Tawny Owl choose to show so well...'. Mind you, it was blowing a right hooley, it was as much as the Little Owl could do to just sit tight! 21 December. Petra. Petra requires little introduction, the fabled city of the ancient Nabateans, towering monuments and temples carved into a sea of sandstones, their reds swirling in a sensual mix of shade and hue. Truly one of the world's outstanding sites of beauty, Nabatean hands and two millenia of nature in harmony. For all its allure however, I would not spend the whole day at Petra. Some kilometres to the north, in wild contorted wadis, a very special bird lurks - the be all and end all of my trip, the mystical Hume's Tawny Owl, its very name almost magical for me. With a little afternoon planning, identifying likely wadis and choosing my route, I had hope that the hours of darkness would bring my goal within reach - all of that however was still many hours into the future. Here I was now, 8.00 a.m., beginning the dramatic walk down the narrow Siq, an awe-inspiring cleft through the mountains barely three metres wide, but 150 metres deep. The sky above barely visible, the walls of the canyons reds and oranges, a 2 km stroll, eyes constantly on the look out for Sinai Rosefinch, frequently seen on this route. None seen, but already I had encountered superb Mourning Wheatears, flocks of Desert Larks and a Blue Rock Thrush. And then, as the gorge spills out into the lost city, Petra opens before your eyes, the imposing Treasury like a slap in the face, greeting you with the power of its position, 40 metre high grandiose, Rock Martins circling its upper ornaments. Not my first visit here, but even for me, a self-confessed history ignoramus, I had to just sit a while and take in the spectacle. Not too long mind you! Petra is a massive place, so having bought a two-day ticket, today would see me hurrying through the main city, past its amphitheatre and along its colonnaded street, then beginning the long hot trek up to the Monastery, the furthest-flung, hardest-to-get-to, but most impressive monument in the whole complex. And it is a right slog to reach - a steep narrow path twisting up through wadis and cracks in the cliff face, near an hour in temperatures a pleasant 24 C, frequent pauses to enjoy the views and birds, a couple of Blackstarts, my first Sinai Rosefinch of the trip, a smart male, and yet more Mourning Wheatears (the whole city actually littered with these). With the sun beating down, the final steps taken, you can then turn and admire, the Monastery not visible until you round a rock face ...and then there it is, even bigger than the Treasury, a stunning piece of work. And dead good for birds too! All around, Desert Larks scampering about, Scrub Warblers in little tussocks, Rock Martins overhead and both Black Redstart and Blackstart hopping across boulders, White-crowned Black Wheatear too. What a perfect place, coffee time. Much scrambling down, back across the paths and through the Siq, it was time to explore the wadis ten kilometres or so to the north. With sunset still three hours away, I quickly found the wadi that seemed just top notch - now inhabited by a mere Mourning Wheatear and a couple of scrawny dogs, hopefully dark would reveal a ghostly shape upon the boulders and ledges that towered above. Time to kill, I ventured on a couple of kilometres, happened upon a small patch of irrigated land - a teeming oasis in this arid land, truly bustling with birds. Only had a short time to explore, a very quick look around revealing Chiffchaffs by the dozen, large flocks of Spanish Sparrows and, hopping along the field edge, Bluethroats most royal. However, the sun was now edging towards the horizon, it was time to relocate! 6.30 p.m., near total darkness, the sun long gone, a full moon yet to rise. A pack of dogs howled a manic welcome as I crept back through the wadi to my chosen wait point. Boy I hoped those dogs would shut up - my only hope to locate these owls would be if they chose to start calling, something I was by no means sure they do in late December. I sat on the sands beneath an enormous boulder and waited for the dogs to calm down, cliffs looming above in the darkness, not a breath of wind to stir the night. The dogs quietened, an eerie silence befell the valley ...a total silence, not a hoot of a bird, not a whimper of an animal. I waited, time ticked by. A full moon appeared over a jagged crest of rock, then far in the distance, not in the wadi I sat, an oo-oo-oo carrying on the air. Hume's Tawny Owl, excellent, one in the area. Ten minutes later, I was in the wadi the calls had seemed to emanate. Total silence, hmphh! And then the calls started again, back in the wadi I had been sat earlier!!! Dogs started up again as I plodded back, but the owl was still active as I returned, me sitting back beneath my boulder to listen to its call. Not wishing to startle the bird, I thought it prudent to locate by ear before turning on any lights ...it seemed to be right in front of me, perhaps 40 or 50 metres up the cliff opposite. On with the spotlight, sweeping the rocktops and ledges, the bird not even pausing in its calls. There it was, one Hume's Tawny Owl in all its glory, a sandy beaut on a small ledge, calling and peering around at the wadi below. Having only the in-camera flash, this was way too high for any chance of a decent photograph, but the bird was just sitting there, bird of the year in an instant. Then into the air he launched, right over my head and onto the cliff behind me, still about 40 metres up. With possibilities to scramble a little closer, I thought it a good

idea to check all was set with my camera, down I crouched, fiddling with the dials in the dark, the spotlight off. I then almost jumped out of my socks - the owl had moved again, it was calling right behind me! Afraid to move, I gently turned and switched on the spotlight ...stone me, it really was right behind me, literally sat on the boulder I was crouching beneath! Raised my camera, click click, the bird just four or five metres away. Christmas had come early, I watched him a while, then back up to the cliff he went. Cheers, Hume's Tawny Owl, you made my night. Left him in peace, back to Petra for felaful and celebratory tea. 22 December. Petra. Glorious sunshine, temperatures up in the mid-20s, today was set as an easy-going day, wandering the ruins of Petra, trying to get a few photographs and generally enjoying the birds and scenery. Took my stroll down the Siq at 7.00 a.m., the tourist hordes still hours away. Quiet contemplation at the Treasury, then on to find birds around the main complex - soon found Mourning Wheatears, Blackstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes, all most photogenic, Sparrowhawk and Rock Martins also present. Too much relaxation and too little sweat, so mid-morning took the hike up to the 'High Place of Sacrifice', a 40 minute climb to one of the most picturesque of localities in the whole Petra area, the highpoint a rock platform sitting atop cliffs 170 metres high. Reportedly the setting of human sacrifices in eras long past, it today is the essence of tranquility - the only distraction to stir the blood, a flock of Sinai Rosefinch, little corks in their own right. From the High Point, the route back was a long scramble down to Wadi Farasa, home to assorted temples, curious camels and my first Fan-tailed Ravens of the day. Petra in the 21st Century is also rather well-populated by tourists, coach loads of them arriving as the morning wears on, the vast bulk of them however not venturing much further than the Treasury. For me though, fully dosed on the temples, took their arrival as cue to depart, I quite fancying further investigations of the irrigated lands beyond Little Petra. Seem to recall a little more felaful and tea went my way, then over the hills I went, arriving at the fields early afternoon. And what a good afternoon was to follow, abundant birds at every turn, a mix of wintering passerines and residents. Amongst the best, my first Palestine Sunbird of the trip, my first Corn Buntings, a small flock of Indian Silverbills and, mobbed by Fan-tailed Ravens, a splendid Bonelli's Eagle overhead. Also Spectacled Warblers, Sardinian Warblers, Bluethroats and at least 40 Spectacled Bulbuls, all in all a very nice afternoon. 'Hmmm, not long to sun down, wonder if I could get lucky again', thought I, 'not that I could beat the escapades of the night before'. Oh how wrong I was! Pondered not bothering to try to find the owls again, there was simply no way to better the views of the night before, or at least so I thought. Arrived a little after dark, quietly made my way back into the wadi, settled down beneath my boulder. Dogs yelping away again for a while, then all quiet. Just as the night before, about twenty minutes after I got there, a Hume's Tawny Owl starts calling in the distant wadi. Brief calls, then all quiet. Ten minutes later, up it started on the cliff opposite again. Quickly picked the bird up, sitting at almost exactly the same spot, midway up the cliff, hooting away like there was no tomorrow. Further up the wadi, however, strange noises. I simply could not place it, 'what on earth was it?' I asked myself. Watched the owl more, a second owl called somewhere, but still occasional noises up the wadi. 'Hmmm, something is up there.' Scrambled up a line of boulders, then sat again. Flicked on the spotlight and scanned ...two intensely bright eyes staring at me!!! 'Oo er, what the heck is that?' Kept the light on it, focussed the binoculars ...'Bloody hell, really what the hell is that?' A relatively small pale face, two very prominent eyes and atop the lot, two enormous very triangular ears! Clearly a mammal, clearly a predator. Halfway up the cliff face, not a fox, too big for a mongoose (and nothing like one anyway). I was totally flummoxed, something was niggling away though. Then it turned and walked along the ledge, long sleek body, pale sandy. It still took time to dawn upon meI was watching a mammal I had not even imagined I might encounter on this trip. Despite near three years on the African continent, it was an animal I had yet to see, and there it was, sauntering along a rock ledge, Hume's Tawny Owl to the right, me in the middle and one super sleek, big-eared, cracking Caracal on the left. Er, wow! 23 December. Wadi Rum. Onward with the desert roadshow. A mere hour or so south of Petra lie the stunning landscapes of Rum, surely amongst the magnificent of desert vistas in the world - dramatic mountains rising 800 metres sheer from flatlands of soft red sands, a positive feast for the eyes. Not half bad for birds too - an abundance of wheatears, one of the top spots for Sinai Rosefinch and a good chance of Trumpeter Finch too. For me however, my main quarry in this arid land was Hooded Wheatear, an elusive species throughout much of its range, generally an inhabitant of wild desolate slopes, rarely an easy species to find. And so it was, a pre-dawn exit from Petra saw us arriving a little after the sun began to rise - a couple of Finch's Wheatear en route, a few Mourning Wheatears to greet us, but the new dominant kid on the block was the smart White-crowned Black Wheatear, two a penny adorning roadside boulders, village edge and wild wadi alike. Rolling into Wadi Rum, a visitor centre appears mid-stage, the towering massifs of Jebel Rum and Jebel Umm Ashreen flanking like sleeping giants, a grand entrance. Hopped out from the car, ducked the guides that immediately pounce with offers of jeep safaris into the deeper yonder and camel rides to churn your stomach, a fate I had no wish to endure. Somewhere beyond the guides, a short drive into exquisite lands, would hide Hooded Wheatear, eager I was to continue. Needed to nip into the ticket office however, the whole of the Rum area now a protected reserve. I had pranced barely two steps though and a quick double take was in order - there atop the arch over the road was a Hooded Wheatear!!! And a male at that, even better! Boy, that was easy, I had envisaged scrambles up the rock faces for this little fella, I have to admit feeling a tad cheated at the ease of this sighting! And to make matters worse, I then spotted a dripping tap just adjacent ...and flocking down to drink, birds by the dozen. I settled down to admire the gathering flocks - Desert Larks aplenty, a couple of Blackstarts, even occasionally the Hooded Wheatear, but swamping them all, loads and loads of Trumpeter Finches, the little corks dropping down in flocks of ten and fifteen, drinking a few sips, then huddling up on sand banks nearby. Super, I'd been at Rum just half an hour and I'd already seen most of the birds I'd come to see ...and I'd not even exercised my legs! Still, the lands of Rum are vast, so after picking up the entrance ticket, we continued the few kilometres to the small village of Rum, where a small tent would be home for the next night. Black Redstarts, Brown-necked Ravens and Tristram's Grackles all common in the immediate surrounds. Time for a walk - pleasantly warm, 24 C, nice and sunny, just perfect for a loop of eight kilometres. Bar a few Scrub Warblers and two Desert Wheatears, eight near birdless kilometres it has to be said!!! Humph, enough of that. Returned to the visitor centre for a few photographs, then did a 'cultural tour' up to Lawrence's

Spring, a waterhole supposedly much favoured by the legendary Lawrence of Arabia on his treks with his Arab armies. Many steps, nice views and a flock of five Sinai Rosefinch, no complaints from me. Chai and falafel in the village, then a last wander of the day, hiking up into the small Wadi Sbakh behind Rum village - small withered gardens home to a few migrants, Chiffchaffs and the like, and then the surprise of the day, a first-winter Red-backed Shrike atop a fence, a rather nice bird and certainly not a species I expected two days before Christmas! Peaceful night in the tent, no hoots or critters scurrying past. 24 December. Wadi Rum & Disi. Christmas Eve, sunny and 25 C, just what Santa ordered. Rising early, today was day of the desert trek - the idea to hike a few kilometres round Jebel Umm Ashreen, then find a route back through one of the few canyons that dissect the sandstone massif. Easier said than done, I hoped my memory of a route I followed some fifteen years ago would serve me well! At this point, I should wonder why anybody ever voluntarily travels with me, perfectly pleasant places have a nasty tendency of turning into tests of physical endurance under my guidance ... day after day!!! Hour one, enduring the chill of dawn but otherwise doing nothing too strenuous, produced very few birds - a flock of 18 Brown-necked Ravens, a few Desert Larks here and there, four Sinai Rosefinch on boulders at the base of Jebel Umm Ashreen. Ahead, punctuating the startling reds of the desert floor, the first rays of the sun, the Jebel having till then left us in a deep shade. A couple of White-crowned Black Wheatears topped a pile of rocks, a Mourning Wheatear too, but the true glory of the day fell to the scenery around - truly a stunning 360 degree panorama. Off yonder, a line of red dunes, seemed a nice spot to stop for coffee and take a few photographs. Trudged out and sat in the sands, enjoying the warmth now generated by the rising sand - I took a glance at my companion, not entirely sure they saw the rationale for being dragged out of bed pre-dawn to walk across the desert. However, what I saw rather stunned me, they seemed to be swatting a fly, flicking their hands over their heads. 'Eeks', I said, 'stop, I want a photo!' ... this was no fly bothering them, but a superb male Hooded Wheatear trying to land on their head!!! Supposedly an elusive bird of rocky habitats, here he was, atop a sand dune and trying to land on our heads, incredible. My friend refused to sit still, so no photograph of bird on head, but then off the wheatear went, hopping across the dunes, me in hot pursuit. Some cracking photographs as the bird fed on the dune ridges, quite tame and rarely caring how close I approached. And then up he flitted, the darn thing landed on the end of my telephoto lens!!! Incredible, Hooded Wheatear at 10 centimetres! Busy I was with the bird when I noticed another bird flit by, a small sandy bird sporting a long tail. 'Oo, I know what that is, a little corker', thought I. And yes it was, one splendid Desert Warbler, a bird with surprisingly few records in Jordan - a fact I can only assume relates to the relative lack of birders that have ever visited in winter. However, as Desert Warblers are amongst my favorite birds, I was certainly happy. And then I got even happier - from one of the many small burrows in the desert, out popped a Fat Sand Rat, a right cutie and a mammal I had hoped to see. What a good twenty minutes, I retired to the dune top for my well deserved coffee. Another couple of kilometres, the sun now becoming hot, a Long-legged Buzzard looking like a midget against the towering cliffs and then we reached another ridge of dunes, again most scenic. This was where I had planned to take the short cut into the canyon to hike through Jebel Umm Ashreen. As I remembered, this did involve a certain degree of climbing, a few tight squeezes, but nothing terribly impossible. The walk began, a lizard scurrying away, a few Tristram's Grackles whistling as we went. Almost immediately, the path became an assault course - a rocky rise with squeezes through a narrow crevice and the need to crawl under boulders! And then it became rather tough, climbs up a rock face, a balancing act over some rather deep holes and a perilous requirement to do the splits over a cavernous drop, legs braced on rock walls either side, arms seeking grips in case the legs slip. I do not recall seeing any birds at all along this stretch, I do recall an exasperated expression upon my friend's face, a clear suggestion that they were not entirely enjoying my chosen route. And then it got not so funny - I tried to plead we were almost over when they virtually froze on one horrible rock wall. I skipped up and they didn't quite do the same, sliding prostrate on the rock, peering up at me with a quizzical look. I dragged and pushed them and somehow they got to the top. All to no avail, a few hundred metres further and we reached a sheer drop, a thirty metre overhang with seemingly no way down. I fumbled around a while, tried this way and that, but there was no way - a complete dead end. Oh how I hate returning the same way, so off up side canyons we went. Sheer drop in all directions, an hour and more, then I had to admit defeat. 'Maybe this wasn't the way I came all those years ago', I offered. I am not sure my words were very welcome. The long and short of it, we had to hike all the way back, then a long hot walk back through the desert. Arrived back at the village of Rum early afternoon, tea now very welcome indeed! Refreshments duly consumed, it was time to depart - the evening would be spent in Aqaba on the Red Sea. Still a couple of hours to spare however, so leaving Rum (seeing again the visitor centre Hooded Wheatear), I turned east and drove the few kilometres to Disi, a small area of irrigated farmland. Had hopes of assorted wheatears and larks on these fields, but found them almost barren - a bustle of human action harvesting tomatoes, a few White Wagtails in their midst, but otherwise not a lot. Travelled on a couple of kilometres, then took a left. Got me to a dead end, but in the distance I could see more fields, irrigated circles of alfalfa, watered by giant central pivots. Behind a gated entrance, I negotiated entrance and continued on the way - what a good move, the fields had plenty of birds! Only had a short time before the sun set, but upon the first two pivots a nice selection - one female Pallid Harrier quartering, Desert Wheatears and Black Redstarts common and, just as the sun began to nudge the horizon, a small flock of Lapwings. Got out of the car to count them - 29 birds ... but only 28 were Lapwings! The other bird was an adult Sociable Plover, a major turn up for the books. According to Ian Andrew's 'Birds of Jordan', Sociable Plovers occurred in Jordan in the 1870s, but since that day have been basically unrecorded - despite birds now wintering in Syria, the only documented record in Jordan is of seven birds in 1969. Here, however, one was happily strutting his stuff, even departing from the Lapwings and flying up to where my car was parked. Sneaked back to the car and photographed him over the roof, a most pleasing end to Christmas Eve. An hour later, in the warm airs of evening Aqaba, lights twinkled over the soft waters of the Gulf of Ababa, the streets thronged and for a meal we went. 25 December. Aqaba. Christmas Day, up at the crack of dawn, off to celebrate ... and where better to do it than at the Aqaba Bird Observatory, a.k.a. the water treatment works or, simply put, the sewage farm. So that's where Christmas Day started, but mighty a fine place it is - located right on the Israeli border,

the water treatment works (along with similar on the Israeli side) are just about the only freshwater habitats available to birds for hundreds of kilometres, arid deserts otherwise stretching off in all directions. Access to this fragrant oasis, now turned into a bird reserve, has not always been so straightforward - abutting the border and thus located in one of the most sensitive military zones in the Middle East, historically both a military permit has been required and you needed to pass through a military checkpoint. Certain restrictions on which parts of the reserve you could visit were also enforced. However, to the best of my knowledge, all of that had been swept aside in 2010, contacts in Aqaba telling me a permit was no longer required. So there I was, predawn driving towards the South Araba border crossing, a military checkpoint looming, me none too certain I truly did not need a permit. A soldier atop a tank waved me through, no hassle whatsoever. A couple of hundred metres further, literally as flags of the opposing countries appeared in front of me, I turned off the road and into a grove of mature acacias, their very existence due to irrigation from the water works. A fantastic little plot of woodland, Bluethroats hopping about beneath the trees, Chiffchaffs and Spectacled Bulbuls abundant in the foliage, a pair of Little Green Bee-eaters hawking from its edge. One could only imagine how good this place would be during the migration periods. In winter however, though the number of birds was going to be far lower, the riches would lie at the pools themselves, a few minutes to the south. I wandered over that way, then stopped in my tracks ... a mumbled voice gargled over a walkie-talkie, I looked up and there above, an observation tower, a soldier inside clutching a machine gun and watching the border most intently, a mere 30 to 40 metres distant. Rather too close I thought to be walking about with optics and long telephoto lenses! Gently I backed up, no great wish to upset the military so early in the morning. The pools adjacent looked excellent, large and full of birds. Retrieving my car, I decided to drive round the pools rather than walk - less disturbance to the birds, easier to get photographs and, my identity as a foreigner concealed, less likely to be evoked any curiosity amongst the border guards. So onto the pools I trundled. And the first bird I saw? Amongst a group of Spur-winged Plovers, my second Sociable Plover in 24 hours!!! Again an adult, this one peered over the concrete rim of the first pool, a super find to begin the day. And on I went, a magnificent collection of waders feeding aside all pools - Little Stints and Ruff common, Black-winged Stilts and Spur-winged Plovers also, plus a scattering of others, Ringed Plovers, Snipe, Green and Common Sandpipers. Ducks too in no short supply - Teal and Shoveler the most abundant, a female Ruddy Shelduck the highlight. However, for sheep grandiose, the birds of the morning however were the impressive Greater Spotted Eagles, four of them perched in eucalyptus, every so often soaring across the pools, putting the wind up every last duck and coot! Also a Marsh Harrier, several Indian House Crows, a big bunch of Spanish Sparrows, a small flock of Indian Silverbills and a small assortment of gulls that included Heuglin's Gull and a Common Gull, the latter a rare bird in Jordan apparently. Having not dragged my friend round the sewage farm, late morning back to Aqaba I went, a coffee to celebrate Christmas and some rather nice pies freshly baked. Then off for a stroll along the seafront, numerous Jordanians enjoying the weekend, the beach pretty packed. Just in front of the beach, sandwiched between the promenade and the bustle of town, lies a string of small allotments, shaded by palms and bright in green, young vegetables sprouting. What a little oasis this was too - despite the hordes of people either side, birds aplenty. Chiffchaffs, more Bluethroats, Ring-necked Parakeets, Indian House Crows by the dozen, but the star, hunting from palm fronds, a totally unexpected Masked Shrike, probably the first-ever winter record for the country. Driving down to the border with Saudi Arabia, shallow seas an azure blue over corals unseen, there were many stops to scan for possible seabirds - no boobies or other species particularly unexpected, but 12 White-eyed Gulls were a welcome addition, all roosting on the beach at the protected marine reserve. And with that, I decided to return to the water treatment plant for an afternoon session, my friend this time accompanying me. Birds much the same, a higher number of gulls now present, a couple of Graceful Warblers appearing, plus my first Hooded Crow of the trip. An hour round the pools and then I decided to leave the car and take a short wander, my friend opted to remain in the car, reading a book to while the day away. Out through the acacias, up to the first pool, the Sociable Plover still at the water's edge. All very peaceful and rather idyllic. And then it wasn't. Darn, I was rather close to the observation tower and a rather enthusiastic border guard had spotted me, clattering down the steps and shouting, over he came, running and telling me to stop. I duly obliged. 'Passport, passport', he demanded. Non-existent English, but clearly he was not too impressed by my presence. Less so by the optics, he clearly indicating he wanted me to hand over my camera. There was no way I was handing over my camera to anybody, so with a smile I refused and got marched back to the tower as a result. Much chatter on the radios, a few minutes later up pulls one military jeep with four guys aboard. All most cordial, one speaking English. Pawing through my passport and repeatedly settling on the page with an Iranian visa, the questions began, 'What are you doing here?' That was easy to answer, 'Watching birds!', the reply raising a smile. 'This is a restricted military zone, you can't be here, there is Israel'. I just said I was visiting the bird reserve, which is ironically signed in English 'Welcome to Aqaba Bird Observatory', not 'Please Keep Out'. Then talk turned to my non-existent military permit. More exchanges over the radio, another jeep arrives, a captain. Same questions, more looks at my passport, one page in particular, back to the military permit, then adamant I did require it, me saying I had enquired and had been told it was not necessary. 'Don't worry' said the guy in English. With a laugh, 'no, no, no, tell him do worry' added the captain as a joke. Seven Shelduck flew over, my only ones recorded on the trip, a Greater Spotted Eagle swug low, no objections by any of the military to me using binoculars to watch either. More talk on the radio, they said they needed the regional commandant. Yet more jeeps, two of them pulled up. It was beginning to get a bit crowded, I protested and pointed out there were signs in English welcoming you, telling you where to park, which way to go for the nature trail and even signboards with pictures of all the birds you might see, yet not a single sign mentioning permits, restricted access or the need for a permit. 'Yes, yes, but you needed a permit'. And then one suddenly asked, 'How did you get here?', 'Er, by car'. Raised eyebrows, 'You are with car, you should have told us, where is it?'. 'Eeks', thought I, 'not good if they go to the car, they will find my companion!'. Once they knew it was in the car park, they wanted me to take them to see it. All still jovial, so I objected 'Yes, but you have my passport, I am not going all the way over there and then come back again'. They sent a soldier instead, him running off into the acacias. Oh dear, I thought with a wry smile, what a surprise my

friend is about to get. A few minutes later the radios came alive again, eyes swung my way. I shrugged, 'You never asked me if I was alone'. Our whole merry band relocated to the car park, my friend now accompanied by another jeep. 'Er, think we have been arrested' I offered. Twenty minutes more and the verdict was announced, 'Happy Christmas, you can leave!'. With big desires to return the next day, I immediately went into plea mode and after a few minutes of talks, pointing out the permit office would be closed, I finally managed to wangle an agreement that I could return for two hours on strict condition I left my passport at the military checkpoint. Cheers for that, good folk the Jordanian army, off we went back to town for evening meals. Just beyond the military checkpoint, a Hooded Wheatear sat atop a fence adjacent to the airport, I decided against stopping to watch it. 26 December. Aqaba & Wadi Araba. Risking the wrath of the army, I decided against leaving my passport at the military checkpoint (I think it would have entailed yet more hassle) and so sneaked onto the pools to enjoy a second morning of birding at this excellent locality. Carefully avoiding the observation tower, again both the Sociable Plover and Ruddy Shelduck obliged, so too most of the other birds of the day before, Great Spotted Eagles lumbering out of the eucalyptus, waders and ducks paddling around in the sewage broth and Bluethroats hopping out from cover left, right and centre. A few additions to the bird list, one Smyrna Kingfisher belting out from acacia thicket, a Moustached Warbler emerging from the depths of a reedbed and, flying out most vocal, a Eurasian Curlew. Kept checking the observation tower with binoculars, the soldier did not seem too alert, so a few hours in, having photographed Spanish Sparrows and Little Green Bee-eaters, I departed and returned to Aqaba town. My companion, who had wisely opted to forgo another potential run-in with the military, did not expect me to return a free man! A short drive down the coast, the highlights being a Caspian Tern, a Kentish Plover and a splendid flock of 43 White-eyed Gulls, and then it was time to head north - up through the scenic Wadi Araba all the way to the Dead Sea, some 230 km distant. Sensitive border zone virtually all the way, big signs clearly declaring 'No Photo, Keep Away', ideal habitat for Hoopoe Larks and Bar-tailed Desert Larks most of the way too, but did not find a single of either unfortunately. 120 km north, just as you approach a military checkpoint, a road swings to the east, away from the immediate environs of the border and to the lightly wooded desertscapes of Fidan, a sometimes haunt of Arabian Warblers. Didn't see this bird either, but a good few hours nevertheless - loads of Blackstarts, plenty of Desert Wheatears, a few Mourning and White-crowned Black Wheatears too, along with one Isabelline Wheatear, a flock of Arabian Babbler, dozens of Rock Martins and a half-dozen Palestine Sunbirds, good birds all. As the sun began to drop, and not a single Sardinian Warbler metamorphasizing into an Arabian Warbler, I left the site to continue the journey. A Great Grey Shrike sat atop an acacia, Palestine Sunbirds mobbed, the sun went down, soon it was dark. An hour or so later, to the shores of the Dead Sea we arrived - 430 metres below sea-level, still pleasantly warm even on this mid-winter's night - dug out a sleeping bag, slept on the sands beside the car. 27 December. The Dead Sea and Jordan Valley. Beach holiday time, one of us taking a quick dip in the saline waters of the Dead Sea - a much over-rated pastime. Ten minutes just about did that, Tristram's Grackles watching on, two coveys of Sand Partridge adjacent, a Smyrna Kingfisher on a small inlet stream, a vagrant Oystercatcher optimistically probing for life. For all its lack of aquatic life, the area around the Dead Sea is rich in birds - starting at the inlet of the small stream at Minab, we slowly worked north, stopping here and there - all the expected birds, Desert Larks two'a'penny, Fan-tailed Ravens on a road kill, Palestine Sunbirds and Little Green Bee-eaters in vegetated wadis, Blackstarts and Spectacled Bulbuls abundant. A little to the north, just beyond the confluence of the River Jordan, lies the baptism site of Jesus Christ - supposedly a lush valley full of reeds and dense vegetation, an assemblage of churches and just about the only access point to the whole of the Jordan River, security concerns leaving the rest off-limits. Dead Sea Sparrows are said to be numerous here ...on arrival however, I discovered it was official tours only, a bus around the various spots, a compulsory guide at all times. Not my style, so departed and headed off to explore the fertile farmlands to the north instead. Good move, stacks and stacks of birds - an important wintering area in the country, random stops kicked up Skylarks and Calandra Larks, Hoopoes, numerous Barn Swallows and a male Hen Harrier, all new birds for the trip. Also several Great Grey Shrikes, plenty of Palestine Sunbirds, the odd Bluethroat or two, plus abundant White Wagtails, Spectacled Bulbuls and, on a small irrigation tank, the first Pied Kingfisher of the trip. Biggest surprises however were a Namaqua Dove, further north than I was expecting, and a male Common Redstart, the first winter record for the country as far as I can ascertain. Somewhere in this general area, via a maze of small farm tracks, there were reportedly two reservoirs, seemed a good idea to seek them out. Finding them was a different question. Round and round and then on the point of giving up, upon the first I stumbled - Kafrayn Reservoir. Surrounded by arid slopes, this relatively large pool looked rather devoid of birds on first inspection (two Little Grebes and three Coot), but the shallows at the far end were rather better - as well as both Common and Pied Kingfishers, a gang of long legs paddling the waters and adjacent shore! Five Cattle Egrets, 26 Little Egrets, 18 Great White Egrets, four Grey Herons and five Spoonbills, the latter another bird very rarely recorded in Jordan. A nice collection, and then overhead a Black Kite, again a bird supposedly unrecorded in winter! Finding the next reservoir was no easier - but upon arrival, Shuna Reservoir also threw up a couple of bonus birds. Again little on the water, but unexpected birds were first the sudden arrival of four Alpine Swifts to swoop down and drink, then the appearance of two Jackdaws amongst a large flock of Spur-winged Plovers nearby. I had not expected either of these species on this trip. With that, exit time from the Jordan Valley, up and north, the next destination being the Northern Highlands, a destination in winter that can be snowbound and cold. Arrived at the small town of Ajloun just before dark, a real chill bite to the air. A quick wander round town, then into the Qal'at al-Jabal hotel for the night, nice place. 28 December. Dibbin and Samra. The Northern Highlands - cool, pleasantly green, a mosaic of scenic pine and oak forests topping the hills, olive groves on the rolling slopes in between. At the heart of the region, Dibbin Forest sits as an oasis of birdlife, a European flavour very much influencing this quarter of the Middle East. Summer specials such as Masked Shrikes and Olivaceous Warblers long gone, my winter's wander was a peaceful affair, the occasional birds including not just Blue Tits and Chaffinches, along with Song Thrushes and Blackbirds, but also the two targets of the day - gorging on acorns, smart Syrian Woodpeckers and the distinctive atricapillus race of Eurasian Jay, the latter a very nice bird. A couple of hours here, then onward to the rather less scenic - and fragrantly challenged -

Samra Water Treatment Plant. A large site, but all but two pools basically birdless - these two pools however were an absolute delight: quite unexpected, almost 1000 waders of fifteen species, plus several Water Pipits and a female Hen Harrier, plus an out-of-season Yellow Wagtail. With a certain pong on the air, to the waders I turned my attention - impressive totals for mid-winter: over 350 Little Stints, 185 Ruff and 125 Common Snipe for starters, with Wood Sandpipers also logging in at 42 and Green Sandpipers at 45. Also good numbers of Spur-winged Plovers, Lapwings, Ringed Plovers, Greenshanks, Black-winged Stilts, Common Redshanks and Dunlin, with added extras in the forms of five Temminck's Stints, a solitary Marsh Sandpiper and four Kentish Plovers. Truly not what I was expecting at this locality. And with that, eastward we continued, arriving at Azraq a little before dusk. Checked into the very cheap Al-Zoubi hotel, quickly popped into the wetland centre, then headed to Shaumari for sundown - at least five Pallid Harriers into roost, one Long-eared Owl calling, then departing to hunt over the neighbouring desert, one Red Fox. Next day would see full exploration of these areas. 29 December. Azraq and the Basalt Desert. Azraq is an environmental tragedy. A mere 20 years ago, a vast oasis sat at this locality, kilometres and kilometres in extent, waters many metres deep, hundreds of thousands of wintering wildfowl, a summer buzz of breeding herons and waterside birds. Cool waters, shaded palm groves, an abundance of greenery. And then they turned the pumps on, diverting water from the underground aquifers to water projects and to the growing city of Amman a hundred kilometres across the desert. In less than ten years the aquifers had been bled dry, the lifeline to the wetlands cut. And all too soon the oasis was gone, the waters evaporated, the water buffalos dead and the birds departed - a birdless dustbowl replacing the paradise. Undoubtedly, one of the single greatest environmental losses in the Middle East in recent years. Conservation efforts have kicked in - Jordan's Royal Society for Nature Conservation establishing a wetland reserve at the former springs, pumping in water to recreate a little of the former glories. But truly it is little - a sad fragment, a couple of small pools with water trickling into a withered reedbed beyond. Major changes are required to ever reclaim this jewel back, though time is probably ticking - the depleted aquifers, their pressure greatly reduced, are suffering increased salinity, salt deposits nearby infiltrating. No rosy future here. For the birder, there are still reasons to visit - perhaps not for the wetlands themselves, but for desert birds in the neighbouring area. And that is how this day was to start, dawn back at Shaumari, hoping for raptors rising from roost, then a trek to find desert larks as the morning progressed. I was not going to be disappointed. No sooner had I arrived, the sun just peeking above the horizon, and the first Pallid Harriers were quartering, one of the males catching a small rodent and then devouring it at close range. As they drifted off, to a shallow wadi I turned my attention, the low dunes and scrubby vegetation looking most promising. By desert standards, birds everywhere - a splendid flock of about 40 Temminck's Horned Larks most active, scurrying across the sands, rooting about at the base of tussocks. And in their midst, the second of the morning's target, a pair of Hoopoe Larks, most stately individuals. Dust on the horizon, a jeep approaching - half wondered if I was going to get arrested again (a military airbase is just adjacent), but a friendly wave and off they went again. Crested Larks joined the lark flock, several Desert Wheatears sat atop straggly twigs, two Finsch's Wheatears too. A Great Grey Shrike flew through, Spectacled Warblers flitted off on three occasions, never stopping long enough for fantastic views. The sun was now high, time to retire to Azraq town and take a quick look at the wetland reserve - very friendly staff at the centre, and a population of White-cheeked Bulbuls in the surrounding scrub, but the pools take all of five minutes to wander round - the tally of birds not really requiring great effort to count: single Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, a Water Rail darting along the reed edge, plus a Smyrna Kingfisher and a Common Kingfisher, along with a dozen or so Coots. Hardly reminiscent of the days gone by, the totals then in the tens of thousands. One big surprise however - podding about with White Wagtails on the boardwalk, one cracking Citrine Wagtail, a most unexpected find for mid-winter! Again, probably the first winter record in Jordan. Edging in from the south, high cloud appeared, the first time we'd seen anything but blue skies - it appeared a front was approaching. Having seen most of what we wanted in the Azraq area, we decided to try and squeeze the rest of our planned excursions in this area into the afternoon - not very difficult, the first was exploring the desert castles around Wadi al Butm, the two castles we visited being barely larger than a tablecloth (!) and the total birdlife three Desert Wheatears and one more pair of Hoopoe Larks! A long cross-desert drive added nothing, bar a Red Fox. I did have one final target bird in this remote quarter of the country, the so-called Basalt Wheatear, a bird whose taxonomy is not completely understood - restricted to the arid deserts of black basalt, this bird is now generally considered a dark morph of Mourning Wheatear, but it may just be a completely new species. Either way, the way to find it is to head towards Iraq, a long lonely road inhabited by occasional Iraqi trucks, even rarer signposts spitting out the distance to the border with Iraq. Birds occurred at a rate of about one per ten kilometres, desert birding at its most productive! And for our efforts, the final result for three hours crawling along, scanning rock tops, a total of four species - several Desert Wheatears, two dark morph Desert Larks, a super flock of six Bar-tailed Desert Larks and one false alarm with Basalt Wheatear - a dark wheatear looking just perfect in a rocky wadi. saw it flit up as I drove by, then spent 20 minutes to relocate it ...and then as it flew, the distinctive tail pattern - a juvenile White-crowned Black Wheatear, drat! Back in town, the cloud seemed to be gathering. Time for felafel and an early night in the hotel. 30 December. Southbound, Return to Petra. 5 a.m. lying in the dark, an unfamiliar sound - rain pattering against the roof. My hunch had been right, a depression moving in from the south, it was now torrential rain outside! A quick peep through the door revealed conditions I had no wish to take desert strolls in, so with my planned itinerary now completed anyhow, we opted to try and beat the weather by driving all the way back to the south of the country. Up we got and departed, dawn still an hour away. Arrived in Amman, still raining, stopped for breakfast, still raining. Began the long journey down the Desert Highway, diverting east a little south of the International Airport to search for wintering larks on extensive agricultural plains. Still raining and somewhat slippery as we slogged along muddy tracks, expecting to get stuck at any minute. Birding by car at its best - though failing to locate huge numbers of larks, it was surprisingly good for the conditions, notching up not only a good range of species, but also two new for the trip. Corn Buntings in excess of 120, Finsch's Wheatears dotted about, Black Redstarts and Stonechats, a second Black Kite of the trip slowly quartering a field. At the end of one particularly slippery track, with rain rather heavy, we found the best spot of the day - overgrowing

and abandoned, an old farm building in ruins surrounded by grass and weeds. Full of birds - one Spectacled Warbler, an unseasonal Tawny Pipit and, best of the lot, a large flock of mixed finches, the bulk of which turned out to be Desert Finches, 90 at this site alone, with another 40 not far off. Two Hoopoes too, plus Crested Larks, Meadow Pipits and assorted others. From here, we continued south, taking the fast Desert Highway all the way - few birds seen, but two great hulks perched on roadside pylons made for an impressive stop, Steppe Eagles both ...looking rather miserable in the gloom! Early afternoon, with the skies finally beginning to clear, we arrived back at Petra - just enough time to check into a hotel and then have a couple of hours in the irrigated lands at Little Petra. Good numbers of residents and migrants as before, Palestine Sunbirds and Bluethroats, a big flock of Chaffinches, more Hoopoes and ever present Chiffchaffs. A couple of additions to the previous tally - my one and only Dunnock of the trip, plus a very nice flock of pipits feeding on a watered meadow ...settled down to enjoy, at least 15 Water Pipits and, in a variety of plumages, at least 18 Red-throated Pipits, most smart birds. As dusk approached, it seemed only right to try for owls again - no Hume's Tawny Owl at the original locality, but soon located yet another a few kilometres along the road. One Green Toad completed the night's tally. Clear skies above, good weather expected for the next day. 31 December. Little Petra-Wadi Araba-Aqaba. Dawn on the 31st, crazy rally drive through the town of Wadi Musa ...two large raptors flying over the town, me trying to catch up with them. Swung down the hill, veered right onto the road to Little Petra, birds overhead - one pair of Bonelli's Eagles, nice birds to start the day. After a final look round Little Petra, finding a flock of 16 Palestine Sunbirds emerging from roost, I decided to take the 'back road' down to Wadi Musa - a tortuous track spilling over the lip of the Great Rift Valley and plunging downwards in serpentine bends of ever rockier standard. Rock Martins, Mourning Wheatears, a large flock of Desert Larks, one stunning male Sinai Rosefinch, but large sections of the road were basically barren birdless rockscapes, impressive views but nothing to distract eyes from the corners ahead. And eventually it opened out, the boulders giving way to pebble plains and sandy dunes, the descent taking me back into the vast Wadi Araba - the floor of the Rift Valley, the route from the Red Sea to Dead Sea. Second and last chance to root out an Arabian Warbler - abandoned the car and walked many a kilometre, following the line of a dry wadi, occasional acacias marking the route. Plenty of birds - Blackstarts bobbing their tails, Palestine Sunbirds buzzing, a flock of Arabian Babblers in noisy complaint. Search as hard as I did however, I was to find no Arabian Warbler - a few Sardinian Warblers flirted, flicking from bush to acacia canopy, doing their best to offer a tantalising view, just enough to confirm sylvia, not enough to rule out Arabian! With Little Green Bee-eaters and three Griffon Vultures overhead, plus the ever present Desert Wheatears on tussock tops, I finally decided I really did not want to see an Arabian Warbler this trip! Onward we cruised, 120 km south, an appointment to meet New Year's Eve on the Gulf of Aqaba, warm and sunny, 24 C, very nice. A quick walk along the sea front, pottering through the allotments beneath the palms - still the Masked Shrike was in place, a Bluethroat hopped out, so too a Desert Wheatear. Dozens of House Crows present, a Ring-necked Parakeet flew over, a Greater Sand Plover plodded the beach a little further along. Did my best to string two Little Egrets into Western Reef Herons, failed miserably - despite their desire to the coastal waters, they really refused to be anything other than Little Egrets. As dusk arrived, and thoughts turned to a celebratory meal, flocks of White Wagtails descended to roost in a hotel garden, my last birds of 2010. 1 January. Aqaba & Disi. New Year's Day, up at dawn to see if I could match Christmas Day and again annoy the Jordanese army! Really I would have no excuse should I be caught, but off to the Aqaba water treatment plant I went, not bothering to try and organise a military permit. A tad quieter than a week before, duck and wader numbers were both a little lower, the Sociable Plover had departed, so too the Ruddy Shelduck. But plenty to keep me happy on this first day of the year, Great Spotted Eagles soon launching into the air, Bluethroats emerging from bushes all around and a selection of birds not seen here the week before - two Great White Egrets, a couple of Pintails and, hawking the pools, one Whiskered Tern, another new species for the trip. Overall, good birding, the morning's species list was climbing nicely, Spanish Sparrows, Palestinian Sunbird and a flock of Indian Silverbills taking it ever higher. And then I saw a car heading directly for me ... 'oops' thought I, here we go again! Fortunately, it was just curious water authority workers, a friendly wave and they were on their way. A glance over to the military watch towers suggested all was well there, so I continued my birding. Three Moustached Warblers in a reedbed, a Marsh Harrier overhead, plus a few more birds, I was now on 39 species for the morning, not a bad tally, time to scarper before the military got their hands on me! Back in Aqaba town, House Crows and Ring-necked Parakeet in my wake, the seafront allotments had had a mini influx - loads of birds, not just Chiffchaffs, Spectacled Bulbuls and Bluethroats, but also good numbers of White Wagtails, a flock of 15 Red-throated Pipits and, rather pleasing, a single Desert Finch, a little corker of a bird. Also Stonechats, Sardinian Warbler, driving along the south coast a little, flocks of White-eyed and Heuglin's Gulls, a Caspian Tern and plenty of nice blue waters lapping up over the corals of the reefs just offshore, a pleasant way to start the year. T'was now early afternoon, 48 species under the belt. A short stop in Aqaba town, then we decided an afternoon excursion to the deserts of Rum would be nice, or to be more exact to the irrigated lands at Disi, a few kilometres east of Rum. My quick visit to this area on the 24th had suggested a site with much potential, so I was keen to have a rather longer gander, the rest of the afternoon seeming most apt. Mourning and White-crowned Black Wheatears en route as we travelled through the impressive landscapes adjacent to Rum, Rock Martins and a Great Grey Shrike appearing as we arrived. Managed to negotiate entry once again and then we were there, beginning exploration of the first pivot. A most comical group of Cattle Egrets accompanied us for half an hour, flying adjacent to the car and feeding every time we stopped, never letting the car get more than a few metres from them. Other birds equally interesting - this locality's Sociable Plover had also departed, but several Isabelline Wheatears, plenty of Desert Wheatears and a male Hen Harrier made for a good first circuit. Leaving the Cattle Egrets behind, with Brown-necked Ravens now overhead, I ventured up to a couple of more distant pivots, both also productive for birds - several Bluethroats, White-crowned Black Wheatears on a fence line, but best of the lot, a large mixed flock of passerines in the weedy grass, scans revealing an impressive minimum of 45 Red-throated Pipits, four Tawny Pipits and 15 Desert Finches. What a grand finale to the afternoon. And it was the finale, not only was the sun beginning to set, but a farm manager

spotted us and politely pointed out that we really shouldn't have been allowed entry. 60 species for the day. Ah well, off we went, a dying sun, a Mourning Wheatear bathed in the ambers of last light, 23 C, end of New Year's Day. Little over twelve hours later, after a 300 km drive and a flight of several hours, dawn broke to a raging blizzard, snow near a metre deep, several degrees below zero. Welcome home, White-backed Woodpecker on the feeders. *** Photographs and systematic list to follow ***