

Kuwait

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Participants

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Basra Reed-warbler

One doesn't visit Kuwait for the scenery. It combines endless flat sand and stone desert with a totally rebuilt Kuwait City replete with massive skyscrapers. The road network is excellent; the road signage comprehensive and in both Arabic and English; the driving frenetic and fast. From a birding perspective, all sites are easily reached within a 90 minute drive from Kuwait City. Cost of petrol and food is extremely cheap. Everyone we met was both courteous and friendly but it has to be mentioned that the indiscriminate shooting of birds at several locations was both extensive and distressing. In fairness, the shooters are relatively few in number and this does not represent the true culture of the Kuwaiti people, nevertheless it can only stain our memories of an otherwise excellent, successful and enjoyable tour. We found between us a total of 158 species with almost every one of our special targets being seen, and seen well by all. We further found five different and visually distinct sub-species. Daytime temperatures were certainly lower than expected. Early mornings, especially in the desert were decidedly chilly but by mid-morning and through the middle of the day, we were usually in the low to mid 30s Centigrade. With no humidity whatsoever, the heat was never a birding restriction. However when the wind blew, sand air pollution often meant very hazy and overcast conditions.

Day 1 Overnight flights to Kuwait.

Day 2 Our individual overnight journeys meant a staggered morning arrival with Thomas flying from Stockholm via Istanbul; Bernard and Frederic from Lyon via London and the remainder of us from London via Doha. On arrival in Kuwait, the visa application system had obviously been streamlined and was both straightforward and relatively swift; immigration, baggage reclaim and customs were smooth and without any difficulties. Pekka was there to meet us and after collecting our rental vehicle we quickly checked into our Kuwait City hotel and hit the ground running. With much of the country now at midday prayers, we spent an excellent couple of hours working the fields at Jahra farms. The site is a large network of small crop fields bordered by raised dried mud banks, each not much bigger than a soccer penalty area. These are interspersed with stands of tamarisk and palm trees on the outskirts of the city and it is a magnet for migrants. To be fair, this site is living on borrowed time. There is rumour of landslide and subsidence that is allegedly threatening neighbouring buildings. Electricity has been withdrawn from the site which means no water is being pumped into the fields. Pride of place goes to at least three and possibly five pristine breeding-plumaged Semicollared Flycatchers – a much wanted new species for several tour members. Additionally, there was a quality back-up list including a couple of Isabelline (Daurian) Shrikes and some Ortolan Buntings whilst the exotic was represented by our first White-cheeked Bulbuls and Bank Mynahs and our only Ring-necked Parakeets of the tour. Eurasian Hoopoes seemed to be forever on view

whilst both Common Redstart and Willow Warblers were found in number. Following a quick refreshment stop, we made our way onto Doha Spit. This is an area of sand dunes and scattered scrub just behind the shoreline – an obvious resting place for tired migrants. Wheatears were in abundance with probably 10 Pied, a couple of Isabelline and a fine male white-throated *melanoleuca* Black-eared. A Common Quail tried to play hide and seek amongst the low vegetation and the award for the most out of place find went to a pair of Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes. The main attraction of the spit is the high tide roost of shore and seabirds – and the numbers were truly breathtaking. With the late afternoon sun behind us and no heat haze whatsoever in front of us we feasted our eyes on at least 500 Lesser Sandpipers, many of which were in full breeding plumage. Careful scanning allowed us to find no less than five Greater Sandpipers amongst them. Equally numerous as Lesser Sandpipers were Curlew Sandpipers whilst both Terek and Broad-billed Sandpipers were seen in double figures. The stars of the shoreline however were two magnificent Crab Plovers. The gull and tern flock were just as impressive. At least 50 Great Crested Terns sat alongside twice that number of their diminutive Lesser Crested relatives whilst rosy-tinged Slender-billed Gulls gracefully swam in the shallows. At one point, a flock of around 50 Greater Flamingos glided over whilst a female Montagu's Harrier drifted the other way. Added to this were good numbers of common shorebirds such as Grey Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Ruddy Turnstone with a scattering of Sanderling, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers together with a single Little Stint. My one regret is that, due solely to tide timetables, this was to be our only visit to this site – it really was spectacular. Our final stop further down the coast, at a site of tidal mudflats mysteriously called Manchester Club, added to a large degree more of the same. Additionally over 70 Grey Herons sat out on the shoreline together with a breeding plumaged Cattle Egret that was particularly yellow underneath – could this be the eastern race *coromandus*? All in all, a magnificent start to the tour. Several key shorebirds had been found without any of the problematic heat haze that so often hinders the shoreline. We celebrated in style with a superb Indian buffet at the hotel's Darbar restaurant and had a most welcome early night.

Day 3 A personal comment: this morning was one of the most rewarding and successful times I have ever had birding in the Western Palearctic. Yesterday's rather cool and unusually wet weather in the west of the country had produced a phenomenal fall of migrants at a farm close to the south western border with Iraq – our obvious target for today. Skies had cleared overnight and we hoped we wouldn't be too late! A 4.30am start had us driving out of Kuwait City before turning west into the desert. The final 10kms of our journey was off-road across flat sand and stone desert before finally arriving at the isolated farm of Al Abra. This is an extensive area of irrigated farming fields and many trees, an oasis totally surrounded by featureless desert. We arrived at sunrise and over the course of the next five hours we amassed an exceptional list of our most wanted target species – and what is more satisfying, we all saw them well. Two of Kuwait's real specialities are Hypocolius and Basra Reed-warbler. We saw six of the former including a fine adult male, and four of the latter, all perched up right out in the open in small trees to the delight of our photographers. High on anyone's must see list is White-throated Robin and Ménétries's Warbler. We found three exceptionally confiding male robins feeding under various shrubs with drooped wings and cocked tail – the latter a feature shared with a pair of warblers hopping around in a sparsely vegetated bush. If you add into the mix a Shikra seen by some of the party, half a dozed Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, another six grey-mantled *syriacus* Rufous-tailed Scrub-robins, a couple of Eurasian Wrynecks plus singles of Eastern Olivaceous, Upcher's and Eastern Orphean Warblers, this really was a magical morning. Out in more open cultivated fields we found our first Pale Rockfinches and a displaying adult male Dead Sea Sparrow, a rare bird in Kuwait. All of this against a backdrop of many hundred Willow Warblers; at least 40 each of Common Redstart and Blackcap and perhaps 10 each of Woodchat and Masked Shrikes, it really was hard to tear ourselves away. I understand that yesterday morning the White-throated Robin total alone was 75 – if only...! We used the early lunchtime period to drive back eastwards towards Jahra. Perhaps the low point of the day was lunch at McDonald's but in fairness, there is very little choice in rural Kuwait and at least the coffee and ice-cream is good! Even as we walked from the car park to the entrance, a small flock of European Bee-eaters were hawking insects over our heads. Early afternoon was spent walking the raised pathways at a newly found set of working farm fields close to Qasr. Many of the birds found were repeats of earlier in the day however we had particularly good views of both Ortolan Bunting and Red-throated Pipit, four more Semicollared Flycatchers and our first dazzling *lutea* Western Yellow Wagtail. New for the tour, and much appreciated, were a couple of stunning White-throated Kingfishers. The final few birding hours were spent at nearby Jahra Pools Reserve. In shallow reed-fringed pools we found at least 10 Little Crakes and four Spotted Crakes, all quietly feeding right out in the

open. On larger mud-fringed lakes, a myriad of shorebirds included some 50 Marsh Sandpipers, 60 Red-necked Phalaropes and 75 Wood Sandpipers together with smaller numbers of Little and Temminck's Stints. More Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters perched up on fenceposts and a delightful pair of White-winged Terns gracefully quartered the ponds. Smiling but tired faces enjoyed another curry care of the 9th floor of our hotel.

Day 4 A clear night made it inevitable that fewer birds would be around today. Nevertheless we hit nearly all of our targets, made some welcome additions to our ever growing trip list and found a number of repeat star birds. An early start saw us driving north along the main road towards Iraq. Our first stop was at an isolated area of date palms and tamarisk in the middle of the desert called Matla-a. Hunting is prohibited here, the only harassment that birds endure would be from the roving feeding sheep flock. Whilst the majority of passerine migrants on view were Willow Warblers and Blackcaps, we also found two each of Eurasian Wryneck, Semicollared Flycatcher, Rufous Scrub-robin and Pale Rockfinch. Some of the party found a Basra Reed-warbler whilst all enjoyed a stunning adult male Eurasian Golden Oriole sat right out in the open. In the dense foliage, we came across our first Great Reed-warblers whilst beyond the trees, a light-morph Booted Eagle sat atop a thorny bush out in the sand. From here we drove further north before stopping for a breakfast of cheese and onion omelettes at a trucker's café. Nearby lays Rawdatayn bottling plant, a small industrial warehouse type complex which is bordered on all sides by a narrow grove of trees. They are actively planting new saplings and have a small stream trickling through. Amongst the more common fare here, we found a pair of White-throated Robins together with yet more Semicollared Flycatchers and our first Ortolan Bunting of the day. Our principal target species for the day was found still further north amongst the date palms at Abdaly Farm. This is an extensive area to cover and in the past has taken several hours' hard slog. Added to this, we arrived in the heat of the late morning. However shortly after alighting from the vehicles, a fluty whistle heralded the presence of Afghan Babbler, the rather pallid race *huttoni* of Common Babbler, considered by many authorities species status in its own right. It did take us another 20 minutes to track the bird down, After it initially played hide and seek behind a palm tree trunk, it proceeded to feed in the dust, right out in the open and appeared totally oblivious of our presence. White-cheeked Bulbuls were everywhere but all other species were playing hard to see. Time for ice-cream. Our palates cooled, we began to retrace our steps south, seeing our first Long-legged Buzzard perched on an electricity pylon beside the road. At Subiyah, we worked another small area of farmland. It was midday and birds were conspicuous by their absence. Sadly we didn't find the Namaqua Dove seen here during the previous week, but compensation was had in the form of another fine male White-throated Robin, some Ortolans and a few Red-throated Pipits. Our lunchtime sandwiches were taken at Jahra Outfall, accessed by a complicated maze of tracks through what appeared to be a major construction project. This is a waste water outfall bordered by an extensive stand of very tall reeds, adjacent to a large area of salt marsh. Western Yellow Wagtails were particularly numerous. As usual, most were of the race *beema* with blue-heads, white supercilium and pale ear coverts but we also found three yellow headed *luteas*, some black-headed *feldeggs* and some black-ear-covered *thumbergi*. A number of Whinchats perched up on isolated bushes and several Common Quail flew up from our feet, one of which scuttled around on the open mud for some while. Scouring the shoreline, we found our first Great Egrets and Pied Avocets. A thin line of wading birds included Greater Flamingo, Slender-billed Gulls and Ruffs. Frederic came to the fore pointing out a white-morph Western Reef-egret to several of us, alongside a couple of Little Egrets. Much of the rest of the afternoon was spent once more at Jahra Pools Reserve. Crake numbers were similar to yesterday but we did add a couple of Glossy Ibises and, from an elevated hide looking out over the tops of the reed beds, flying Little Bitterns and a Purple Swamphen. Our final destination was the fishing boat harbour on the Kuwait City waterfront (situated conveniently adjacent to a large supermarket where numerous breakfasts and lunches were acquired). A swirling mass of seabirds included around 75 Slender-billed Gulls and 50 Lesser Crested Terns with just a few Sandwich Terns alongside. Another full day; more excellent curry for some whilst the others opted for milder dishes in the ground floor restaurant.

Day 5 We began our morning at an ornamental park called Green Island. This is an artificially constructed peninsula on the Kuwait City seafront and is the easiest site in the country to find Red-vented Bulbul. It took us just 10 minutes. Otherwise passerine migrants were few and far between. One particular "bottle brush" flowering tree held at least half a dozen Blackcaps and the lawns and flowerbeds produced just an Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike, four Common Redstarts and three Ortolan Buntings. Sadly only Thomas, Pekka and myself glimpsed a Namaqua Dove flying behind a grove of trees and Pekka alone saw an Eastern Orphean Warbler. We then drove

steadily south to Fahaheel and walked the tracks in the Town Park. This is a public park and so the overzealous employee who attempted to charge us admission was politely totally ignored – actually Pekka sent him packing with a flea in his ear. Whilst the grounds held no surprises, we couldn't complain at finding four Eurasian Wrynecks, two Rufous Scrub-robins and two Semicollared Flycatchers. The next hour was truly bizarre birding – but great fun. Who would expect an important birding site's access to be through a particularly up-market and probably extremely expensive shopping mall replete with numerous security guards who gazed upon us with a mixture of surprise and disbelief. Whilst we were to brunch in the Food Hall, there was serious birding to do first. Via a pedestrian bridge we ascended a rather ornate viewing tower to look out over the bay. Over the course of the next 45 minutes we found five juvenile Socotra Cormorants feeding around an off-shore buoy and two pairs of White-cheeked Terns, one of which flew lazily around in front of us. Brunch was a relaxed celebratory affair as we had found our two main targets with minimal difficulty. The focus for the remainder of the day was to drive south to the Raz Asser peninsula for an afternoon's seawatching. En route, we stopped at a reedbed with adjacent scrubby fields where we found both Spotted and Little Crakes together with both Green and Wood Sandpipers; a couple of Red-throated Pipits and a Pied Wheatear. Access to the oil refinery at Port Zour, our seawatching site, is understandably very controlled, but thanks to Pekka's local contacts and armed with appropriate health and safety literature we drove carefully, strictly obeying all traffic regulations (a novel concept in Kuwait!) to the beach headland. Facing due east, with the afternoon sun behind us, we spent a superb three hours with the most unexpected and diverse species list imaginable. It started very slowly – indeed we saw virtually nothing for the first 45 minutes and then two juvenile Socotra Cormorants flew south just beyond the tide line. It is impossible to know how many cormorants were actually in the area. Groups of two or three passed on several occasions in each direction but there were probably only five or six birds involved. Without doubt the two highlight events were fly pasts by a party of 10 Glossy Ibises heading north in a perfectly straight line shortly followed by an incredibly mixed flock comprising five Purple Herons and seven Little Egrets with single Squacco Heron and Cattle Egret all tightly bunched and flying within 100 metres of the shore. A group of eight Curlew Sandpipers and two pale-phase Arctic Skuas were a little unexpected; two close breeding plumaged White-cheeked Terns being more anticipated. The remaining totals included 140 Whimbrels (we were to subsequently learn that this is the largest daily passage total ever seen seawatching from Kuwait), 51 Slender-billed Gulls, 15 Grey Plover, five Little Terns and a couple of Lesser Crested Terns. Driving back into Kuwait City after dark in extremely heavy and fast moving commuter traffic was best described as challenging, but fortunately incident free.

Day 6 Today we were to spend all morning in the Sabah Al Ahmed Natural Reserve – an extensive tract of desert comprising 320 square kilometers of stony desert and rocky ravines accessed by a network of sand or gravel tracks. There is one artificial lake, surrounded by irrigated trees and a reed bed plus two other shallow water lagoons without bordering vegetation. The desert varied between flat featureless stone and sand plains some with scattered low scrub bushes plus one area of steppe grassland. Throughout the morning we were flicking Ortolan Buntings, Red-throated Pipits and Crested Larks from in front of us. At the artificial lake a thorough search of the surrounding trees and bushes revealed at least three White-throated Robins, three more Basra Reed-warblers and both Daurian and Turkestan Isabelline Shrikes. Unfortunately Pekka was the only person to inadvertently flush a European Scops-owl that we were unable to relocate. The area of steppe grassland covers just two square kilometers yet it was extremely busy with a feeding flock of perhaps 120 Pale Rockfinches plus numerous Red-throated and Tree Pipits. A group of 20 or so European Bee-eaters were alternately hawking flying insects or sitting out in the sand. All this commotion drew the attention of a fine adult male Lesser Kestrel who at one point sat out next to the bee-eaters and a short while later a ring-tail Pallid Harrier flew in to see what the fuss was all about. Frederic, who seemed to always focus his binoculars much further out than the rest of us, picked out a pratincole sat beyond the grass in an area of sand and small scrubby bushes. Upon closer inspection, one turned into nine Black-winged Pratincoles which, at one point when feeding, flew quite close to us. On the walk back to the vehicles, several Tawny Pipits scampered around in the open. A little further on we came to a large shallow lagoon replete with covered observation area, welcome shade for some. Alongside a smattering of common waders, two pratincoles sat side by side. At rest, leg length, tail length and lower mandible colour, whilst in flight under-wing coverts colour proved that we were looking at one each of Collared and Black-winged. Whilst all this was going on a dazzling White-winged Tern lazily hunted over the water. By 11.00am, heat shimmer was restricting viewing distance. We drove on just a short way to another smaller natural spring with a thin lake and low shoreline vegetation. Whilst the lake held good numbers of Ruffs, Wood Sandpipers, Little Stints and Red-

necked Phalaropes, much of our time was spent walking the surrounding plains dotted with stunted bushes. Sadly the hoped for Asian Desert Warblers failed to materialise but some of us had exceptional views of an adult male blue-throated *magna* Bluethroat. Thomas briefly got onto a large pipit which he strongly suspected was Blyth's but sadly it flew strongly away all too quickly. From here we motored on for several kilometers across endless stone plains. Fortunately our principal target was extremely co-operative as a fine Greater Hoopoe-lark ran around close to the track, to then fly across in front of us before landing and standing right out in the open. If only the Bar-tailed Lark seen all too briefly just beforehand had been so co-operative. That effectively ended our visit to the reserve. It was time for coffee and ice-cream – another visit to McDonalds. Much of our stay at Jahra Pools Reserve during the afternoon was an unsuccessful attempt to find Baillon's Crake. Whilst we cumulatively amassed totals of 15 Little Crakes, four Spotted Crakes and two Water Rails, it would appear that Baillon's are late arriving this spring. The dominant wader on the lagoons was Wood Sandpiper – we must have seen at least 250. Other notable sightings were three Glossy Ibises and a Little Bittern. Both Savi's and Moustached Warblers were heard but kept their heads down in the now blustery conditions. An early evening visit to our supermarket for tomorrow's breakfast supplies ended proceedings for the day with exceedingly fast frenetic traffic that really tested our concentration.

Day 7 We decided to spend another morning at Al Abra, arriving shortly after 6.00am. Whilst the sheer volume of birds was nowhere near our previous visit, the species diversity produced more than a few new birds for the tour. Windblown sand and the resultant restricted visibility was to be a feature of the day. Highlights during the morning included our first sub-adult Barred Warbler, adult male Red-backed Shrikes, an adult male Siberian Stonechat and an immature male Yellow-throated Sparrow whilst Thomas was the only person to see a confiding Corn Crake hopping through the date palms. Specialities of the area were still present. Perched high up on open snags were five Hypocolius including a cracking adult male. There were at least six White-throated Robins, several Upcher's Warblers, four Rufous-tailed Scrub-robins, two female Ménétries's Warblers and a particularly tame adult male Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush. Added to the mix were a Long-legged Buzzard, at least a dozen Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, our first Common Cuckoo, three Eurasian Wrynecks, our only *samamiscus* Common Redstart and three Isabelline (Daurian) Shrikes. By 11.00am, a strong wind had picked up with much sand in the air making visibility difficult. Ensuring our return off-road drive went incident free, we left and retraced our steps back to the highway with just a little relief at finding tarmac once again. Following a lunch and coffee stop, we attempted to bird an area of woodland and stagnant pools near Sulaiyah with limited success. Bernard and Frederic, ever vigilant in their quest for Baillon's Crake, managed to find one each of their more common cousins, Little and Spotted. Elsewhere it was a case of raptor controversy with varying names being suggested for an individual that glided quite close but always against the sun. Photographic evidence subsequently confirmed that this was a dark-phase Long-legged Buzzard. A short distance away an area called the Pivot Fields is a known excellent birding site. Unfortunately, this year birders have no access whatsoever inside the farm but it is possible to look in from the perimeter fence. The sand-blasted wind however did everything it could to thwart us – most certainly any Namaqua Doves present were keeping their heads down. We did, however, manage to watch at close quarters a sub-adult male Pallid Harrier gliding low over a crop field. Cutting our losses, our final port of call was another afternoon visit to Jahra Pools Reserve – here we were guaranteed lots of birds. Unfortunately our time was severely restricted by me and the rental SUV having an argument with a muddy and sinking soil edge to the track. Nevertheless, we all still managed to see three Glossy Ibises, our only Garganey and Whiskered Terns of the tour and an enchanting flock of 35 White-winged Terns. Some of the group also had a flyover by 75 Black-winged Pratincoles and a flock of 14 Black-crowned Night-Herons. After eventually freeing our vehicle from the mud we were behind schedule. Pekka had arranged to take Thomas, Bernard and Frederic to be interviewed by an environmentalist magazine and gave me specific directions on how to find our way back through Kuwait City to our hotel. The directions failed at the first junction, but not before we found our first thermal of 24 Black Kites and so we took a rather circuitous route back. Thanks in no small part go to the map reading prowess of Graham and Julian we got home in the end.

Day 8 During the course of today we drove almost the entire coastal length of the country. Whilst yesterday's strong wind had been replaced by a gentle on-shore breeze, there was still a lot of sand in the air. Firstly we headed north for an hour or so, making a repeat visit to Matla -a farm. Amongst the numerous Blackcaps, Willow Warblers and Common Redstarts, we found a lazy Purple Heron still dozing atop a date palm, at least three Turtle

Doves, small numbers of both bee-eater species and several Eurasian Wrynecks. Whilst no longer a new species for us, we enjoyed exceptionally close views of both male and female Hypocolius. Frederic had tantalising glimpses of a *Locustella* warbler that may well have been River Warbler, whilst many of us had several flight views of another, typically skittish Eastern Orphean Warbler. Without doubt the star birds of the morning were at least three (and maybe as many as seven) Yellow-throated Sparrows including at least one full adult male. We journeyed further north to our trucker's cafe – omelettes again breakfast. Being close by, we made another brief stop at Rawdatayn bottling plant. Again we walked the perimeter trees finding both Great Reed-warblers and Semicollared Flycatchers and upon retracing our steps not only did we find a female Ménétries's Warbler but, much more unexpectedly, chanced upon a Corn Crake, initially running around in the open before flying up into dense cover. There then followed the long drive south via a roadside McDonald's for coffee and ice-cream. Pekka had obtained permission once again to enter the complex at Port Zour and spend the afternoon sea-watching. Frederic and Bernard plumped to divert to the reedbed close to the highway for one last chance for their nemesis Baillon's Crake. Condition for seawatching seemed superb – an on-shore breeze with visibility of about two kilometers – shame no one told the birds. Little was moving, and most of what did was a long way out in the murk. Nevertheless copious house-points and gold stars go yet again to Thomas who found our target species. A pair of Bridled Terns had perched atop a floating piece of polystyrene tile. Initially they were pretty far out but gradually drifted shorewards and ended up no more than 200 metres off-shore before being flushed by a couple of US Navy helicopters overhead. Our appointment with this species had undoubtedly started an hour earlier. At least six long-winged dark terns had flown north on the edge of the haze. They were, by elimination of possible contenders, obviously Bridled Terns but it was impossible to note any specific plumage detail. Three other birds were also seen flying significantly closer but by now our attention was fixed upon the floating pair. The only other notable species seen were 10 Socotra Cormorants, again all juveniles including a flock of eight, a pair of White-cheeked Terns and a Caspian Tern on the beach. All the while the Baillon's Crake hunt sadly did not come to fruition, again with just Spotted and Little Crakes making their way into the notebook together with Isabelline (Turkestan) Shrike and Ortolan Bunting. Before leaving Port Zour we were invited in for refreshments by a colleague of Pekka's who had kindly made all of our access arrangements. Effectively this brought to a close Birdfinders' visit to Kuwait. All that remained was to endure commuter traffic madness on the way back to Kuwait City and a final meal together before our staggered departures on Friday morning. Sincere thanks are due to Pekka not only for his friendship and bird identification skills but for putting together a varied programme. There is no question but that most of the sites visited could not have been made without either his local knowledge or his administration through restricted entry processes. Additionally, whilst it is not uncommon for several members within a tour group to be eagle-eyed observers, our gratitude is also due to both Thomas and Frederic who between them found a number of our important target species.

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