

Kuwait

Winter

29 November–7 December 2017

Participants

Nick Baker

Colin and Jo Gould

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Leaders Pekka Fagel and Peter Lansdown

Any birding trip has its highs and lows and in this respect Kuwait was quite normal, but the fact that one experienced birder gained 12 life ticks made this tour exceptional and our appreciation for Pekka and Peter enduring the frustrations of Kuwait bureaucracy was undeniable. In advance of the trip Pekka, equipped with our passport details, obtained permits enabling us to enter a number of important sites without hindrance. Some places remained out of bounds but this in no way diminished our successes or enjoyment so we are indeed indebted to Pekka for his hard work before we arrived.

Day 1 The flight from Gatwick to Istanbul went smoothly and we caught the overnight flight to Kuwait City.

Day 2 Our first task was to obtain an entry visa to Kuwait – not quite as straightforward as it could have been, but fortunately the queue was short and eventually we cleared immigration and met Pekka. Then we hired a vehicle to use in addition to Pekka's own car. The problem was that the one we were given was only for the first day! A drive to the hotel, knowing that we could not obtain our rooms straightaway but just drop off our hold luggage, revealed another problem: we did not all have rooms! So, having extracted our gear, stored our main bags and discovered that it was a National Holiday in Kuwait, we made our way to our first birding site somewhat bleary eyed! On the drive to the hotel we found that the city was crowded with **Rock Dove/feral pigeon** and amongst them were **Eurasian Collared-doves** and **Laughing Doves**, **House Sparrow** and **Common Myna** - our first target bird. Just across the road from the hotel was Al Saheed Park – a fairly easy drive to underground parking. Birds came thick and fast: both **Common** and **Lesser Whitethroat** were plentiful and were joined by **Barred Warbler**, a strange-looking *Acrocephalus* with a deformed bill, **Blackcap**, a **Eurasian Reed-warbler**, a **Rufous Scrub-robin**, a few **Song Thrushes**, both **Masked** and **Red-backed Shrikes**, but not our target birds. A **Common Kestrel** was seen and a bonus was a **Eurasian Hoopoe** that fed on the grass while being stalked by one of several feral cats. The next destination was Green Island, an artificially-constructed park protruding out from the east coast. As we arrived early we quickly got tickets and entered but already there were several rather noisy visitors, some of whom were carrying

barbeque equipment, which made us a little worried. These worries were misplaced because almost immediately we spotted a small flock of **Slender-billed** and **Black-headed Gulls** plus several **Great Cormorants**. We gave these scant attention, however, because of the noisy calls and views of **White-cheeked Bulbul** and a very obvious group of about 50 **Hypocolius**. Although the birds were easy to watch in flight and in the bushes and trees, getting an unobscured photograph was an altogether different matter. Pekka then pointed out some small trees which held several **Rüppell's Weavers'** nests but we could not see a weaver until a loud, unfamiliar call alerted us to a brightly-coloured male on a lamp-post; the bird immediately flew into a nearby tree and disappeared. A few minutes were spent trying to relocate it without success but then it returned to its lamp-post perch and everyone was able to see it. So three of the Green Park specialities had been seen and the fourth was next on the menu. A walk to the other side of the park followed and there was more searching until at last we all had views two or three dark-headed **Red-vented Bubluls** partly obscured in high trees. By now hunger was kicking in so we stopped for lunch at Fahaheel – a quick burger under the “golden arches” was the first of many. This was convenient but not helpful to the vegetarians amongst us as few suitable alternatives were available. We intended to visit Fahaheel Park but news of special birds prompted a change of plan and we drove to Jahra Pools Reserve (JPR), which enabled Peter to develop his “Lewis Hamilton” skills as he attempted to keep up with the speedy Pekka in multi-lane carriageways and to be in the correct lane – a practice not attempted by the locals whose use of the correct lanes and indicators was entirely optional. Access to JPR required a sheaf of permits; these seemed to do the trick and we were waved in for the first of many visits. That morning, three Pale Martins and a Grey-throated Martin, which had been found nearly a week earlier, had returned! **Barn Swallow** was found straight away and we could see past the numerous **Little Egrets**, **Grey Herons** and **Great Egrets** onto the shore and realised that ducks including **Mallard** and **Eurasian Wigeon**, numerous waders including **Eurasian Oystercatcher** and **Eurasian Curlew**, various gulls and **Greater Flamingos** were present at long range. **Greater Spotted Eagle** and **Western Marsh-harrier** glided over the reeds stirring up several **Siberian (Caspian) Stonechats** while **Water Rails** squealed unseen. The **Grey-throated Martin** (*Riparia chinensis*) was spotted fairly briefly but by only two or three of the group. A bundle of barbed wire which was half-buried in the mud provided a convenient loop for hirundines to use as a perch and, finally, a **Pale Martin** (*Riparia diluta*) flew in and landed there giving all of us telescope views. Other birds present were the ubiquitous **White Wagtails**, **Common Snipes**, **Eurasian Moorhens**, a single **Dunlins** and a few **Little Stints**. We also saw a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, a **Pallid Swift**, **White-throated** and **Pied Kingfishers**, a **Daurian Shrike**, a **Great Reed-warbler** and **Water Pipit** at the site and heard **Common Greenshank** and **Graceful Prinia**. Birding light had all but gone by 16:00h so we returned to the hotel.

Day 3 Pekka's friend Basil joined us today (complete with his photograph of a Basra Reed-warbler, which we had failed to locate at JPR the previous day) and we set off to Jahra then headed north-east to Subiyah Farm. Birds were scarce there but we added a **European Robin**, a western **Black Redstart** and a non-red **Red-breasted Flycatcher** to our tally before we discovered a party of **Common Chiffchaffs** that contained a **Mountain Chiffchaff**. Also of interest were a number of dragonflies thought to be Scarlet (Broad) Darter, plus a Painted Lady butterfly. The journey back from the farm involved a slow drive along the Saad Al Abdulla Al Subiyah Road looking for birds on the fenced-off desert. **Isabelline** and **Desert Wheatears**, a **Steppe Eagle**, a **Long-legged Buzzard**, a couple of **Steppe Southern Grey Shrikes** (*Lanius pallidirostris*) and a number of **Crested Larks** were seen together with **Asian Desert Warbler** before the main target species: a **Red-tailed (Persian) Wheat-ear** (*Oenanthe chrysopygia*). Next, after a short drive, we turned off-road and drove past a quad bike

hire place and up to a small ridge at Jal Alzour where a male Eastern **Mourning Wheatear** (*Oenanthe lugens persica*) was on view despite the noise from 4x4s driving around the area. After lunch we returned to JPR, adding **Little Grebe**, **Northern Pintail**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Tufted** and **Ferruginous Duck**, **Pallid Harrier**, **Eurasian Coot**, **Northern** and **White-tailed Lapwings**, **Common Kingfisher**, **Sand Martin**, **Meadow Pipit**, **Citrine Wagtail**, **European Starling** and **Spanish Sparrow** to our list as well as a lovely **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** to finish the day. The elusive Grey-throated Martin flew past just once; again it was not seen by the whole group.

Day 4 We began at Sulaibiya Pivot Fields (east at Al Abdulkareem farm) and soon located a few **Common Wood-pigeons** (scarce elsewhere in Kuwait), a **Black-shouldered Kite**, Black-eared **Black Kite** (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) and hundreds of Western **Cattle Egrets** following a harvesting machine. Next we visited the west side of the inaccessible and vast pivot fields to look for an Indian Roller which had been present for a little while. We found fine a male **Hen Harrier**, a (Steppe) **Common Buzzard** and **Eurasian Skylark** there and, through the most powerful of our telescopes, some of us could just make out the bright blue of a hugely-distant perched roller, a sighting which was clearly inadequate. With so much suitable habitat, we would clearly need to be lucky to see the roller well. Driving further, to KISR (Kuwait Institute of Scientific Research) at Kabd, Pekka produced the necessary permits and we were admitted. We drove a long way up onto a plateau and soon found our target species, **Black-crowned Sparrow-lark**, but little else. The drive back produced a very silvery-grey coloured Arabian Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes arabica*) and a **Tawny Pipit**. Amongst some horticultural buildings and plots we saw a **European Stonechat** and a **Finsch's Wheatear**. After lunch we returned to the west side of the Pivot Fields but, despite much scanning, there was no sign of the roller. We did, however, have excellent views of a fine **Imperial Eagle** and a Jerboa was excavating a burrow.

Day 5 First we visited Mutla'a Ranch, where we saw our first **Bluethroat** and more Hypocolius, then a second KISR site, at Al Layira (Liyah), but very few birds were present in the desert there. Next on our itinerary was the excellent Sulaibikhat Bay, where we stopped firstly at a car-park in Doha and secondly at the Manchester Club. The retreating tide had exposed large mudflats, which were covered by waders almost in separate groups: **Crab Plovers**, **Pied Avocets**, **Bar-tailed Godwits**, and a large mixed flock of **Grey Plovers**, **Broad-billed Sandpipers (50+)** and **Lesser Sandpipers**. Also present were **Whimbrels**, **Common Redshanks**, **Terek Sandpipers** and **Kentish** and **Ringed Plovers**. A mix of gulls and terns included **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** (both *heuglini* and *barabensis* races), **Caspian** and **Armenian Gulls**, **Gull-billed** and **Whiskered Terns** and a single **Caspian Tern**. Western **Reef Egret** and **Common Shelduck** were also new for the tour. We finished the day close to our hotel with a visit to Al Saheed Park, where we saw **Ring-necked Parakeet** and, for some only, a **Bank Myna**.

Day 6 Our trip to the distant Abdaly Farms was almost a disaster as the following car lost sight of Pekka's within Kuwait City and missed the turn-off. While Pekka returned to the hotel, Peter eventually found the correct road but, by this time, the two vehicles were too far apart for radio contact. Both cars continued to the pre-agreed café but at different times and both leaders decided to continue to Abdaly Farms. The farms complex is very large and we were looking for a specific spot but, with some weaving about the local roads, Peter was first to arrive. Apparently the place was called Bodai Farm. With no real conviction, Peter attempted to radio Pekka, a call that surprised Pekka as much as the reply surprised Peter, as did Pekka's immediate appearance at the site. Shortly afterwards we were

watching nine **Afghan Babblers**. Also present was a rather beautiful yellow butterfly (a female Large Salmon Arab, *Colotis fausta*). It was a very happy group that returned in convoy to Sulaibiya Pivot Fields (west), where the **Indian Roller** was unfortunately seen only by two of the group as it quickly flew off as the cars drove in. At Jahra Farms the whole group finally caught up with a large flock of Bank Mynas. Another visit to JPR added four new species to our growing list: **Purple Heron, Common Teal, Common Pochard** and **Grey-headed Swamphen**. That evening, over our fifth consecutive curry, a list of our top ten most wanted birds was drawn up and the decision was made to try for terns in the morning.

Day 7 After heading south and visiting some coastal sites, eventually, at Abu Hasania, we found some terns and waders including new species: **Great Crested (Swift), Lesser Crested** and **Sandwich Terns, Greater Sandplover** and **Sanderling**. Almost inevitably, we returned to Pivot Fields (west), again failing to find the roller. We drove further along the fence-line and were successful in finding **Namaqua Dove** and then, from the same spot, a surprise, the very smart Indian Roller, which at last lingered long enough for 'scope views to be enjoyed by all! We had now seen five of the species on the top-ten list. Once again we ended the day at JPR, where **Black-necked Grebe, Gadwall, Marsh** and **Green Sandpipers, Great Black-headed (Pallas's) Gull** and **Moustached Warbler** with the last two taking our top-ten target species seen to seven.

Day 8 Our last birding day began with a long drive west across the desert to Al Abraq, ending in 4x4 mode. Initially the cold wind meant little bird activity but eventually we found **Brambling**, two **Eurasian Penduline-tits**, and two **Dark-throated Thrushes**, which only gave several brief views. We drove back across the desert and on to JPR for one last attempt to get everyone on the Grey-throated Martin – success! That made eight out of ten. The old campus of Kuwait University gave us **House Crow** near the students' dormitories and our ninth and final top-ten target bird, **Indian Silverbill**, near the students' carpark while interesting aircraft flew overhead. At the same complex, we searched flamingos in the bay near the maternity hospital and Al Razi Orthopaedic in case the regular Lesser Flamingo had arrived but without success (it was reported to be present two days later!). In failing light, we drove back to the hotel and said our thanks and goodbyes to Pekka.

Day 9 We made a very early start. A taxi took three of us to the airport while the other three followed in convoy. Eventually, after loads of checks at the airport, we all flew to Istanbul, tired but happy. After a wait, we flew on to Gatwick. Could the tour have gone better? Well, we could have seen a Shikra and had closer views of Pallid Swifts. Could it have been worse? Yes, very easily, but thanks to Pekka and Peter it wasn't. The group interacted well and shared some amazing encounters; we saw a total of 139 species with only a few left for the spring trip! A full checklist appears on the website.

A personal account by Andy Lansdell E&OE.

{Taxonomy IOC version 7.3 used - which is slightly different to the KOC nomenclature}.