

United Arab Emirates

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Participants:

Louise Ash
'Scrubby' Bush
Barry Bye
Elizabeth Fish
Bob Groom
David and Sue Hall



Greater Hoopoe-lark

Leaders: Vaughan and Sveta Ashby

Day 1: Overnight flight from London Heathrow to Dubai via Paris.

Day 2: Leaving the airport, we headed south to Ghantoot where we spent some time 'peering' through the gates of the polo club looking at the birds on the lawn. As you would expect at the beginning of a tour, new birds came 'thick and fast'. White-cheeked Bulbuls were particularly common with Red-vented Bulbuls being only slightly less so. A Graceful Prinia moved through the scrub whilst Little Green Bee-eaters and Eurasian Hoopoes gave a wonderful splash of colour. Ring-necked Parakeets flew overhead in small parties and Grey Francolin eventually gave everyone good views. On the lawns themselves up to 12 Cream-coloured Coursers were the first of our day 'target' birds, together with several Pacific Golden-plovers, Ruff, Red-wattled Lapwing and hoards of Kentish Plovers. Eurasian Collared-doves and Laughing Doves were everywhere whilst smaller passerines included Crested and Sky Larks and a Tawny Pipit. Common Mynas were exactly that, common, and both a wonderful male Desert Wheatear and a rather drabber Isabelline Wheatear showed well. Moving on, we left the motorways and buildings to head into the true desert, much of which is still untouched. We made several stops for Southern Grey Shrikes on the wires and a Brown-necked Raven before we literally had to screech to a halt for a wonderful Greater Hoopoe-lark at the side of the road. This was a bonus as we were about to head 'off road' to look for them! As it was lunchtime however, we decided to head 'off road' anyway and as we stopped amongst the vast rolling sand dunes we ate our lunches listening to the wonderful song of a distant Greater Hoopoe-lark. After eating, we decided that it would be nice to look for this bird as well and we were not disappointed enjoying fabulous, prolonged views of a displaying male. Moving on, it only took us about an hour-and-a-half to get to Al Ain (the garden city), our base for the next two nights. As we were checking in to our very nice hotel, there was still enough light to look at Pale Crag-martins and Pallid Swifts around the building. The evening meal was taken at a wonderful local Lebanese restaurant, giving everyone the opportunity to enjoy superb Arabic food.

Day 3: Leaving the hotel after a very civilised breakfast, we headed to Green Mubazzarah, an artificial oasis between the desert and Jebel Hafeet. A gentle walk around the lawns gave us wonderful views of both the regional endemic Hume's Wheatear and Red-tailed (Persian) Wheatear. Cattle Egrets strode around the lawns but then a splash of colour was added when an Indian Roller was spotted sitting on a lamp post. It gave fantastic views as it dropped onto the ground and later was even seen displaying in its characteristic 'rolling' fashion. A Blue Rock-thrush was, unfortunately, only a female but nevertheless a nice addition to the list. A scattering of White Wagtails and Common Mynas added to the diversity. Green Mubazzarah is a very popular spot for families at weekends so as the crowds started to roll in, we headed up into one of the wadis. On the way a Common Redstart was seen and a number of Desert Larks gave close views. In fact, the Desert Larks were as tame as sparrows here! As we headed up into the wadi a pair of Sand Partridges was spotted and, although they quickly ran off, we enjoyed good views of them creeping amongst the bushes of the wadi. We were watching a small flock of Tawny Pipits when two Egyptian Vultures were seen flying low up the wadi but they disappeared before everyone had good looks. Checking the Acacia trees in the wadi is always exciting as you never know what you will see and sometimes it was difficult to concentrate with several endearing Little Green Bee-eaters catching insects around us. Several Yellow-vented Bulbuls completed our bulbul list and a House (Striated) Bunting was seen briefly. Lesser Whitethroats and Common Chiffchaffs skulked in the trees but eventually we found our target bird, Plain Leaf-warbler. The first view was all too brief with a single bird flying past us back up the wadi. The amazingly small 'Goldcrest' size is a good pointer to its identification. Eventually, however, another individual gave good views, flicking from tree to tree and even perching in the open a few times. A pair of Common Kestrels soared around the spectacular cliffs whilst Pale Crag-martins dipped down to drink from the tiny reservoir. By now it was getting hot so we decided to move on but our fuel was getting low so we headed for a garage to fill up. Unfortunately, to his eternal embarrassment, our leader proceeded to put diesel in a petrol engine and the rest is history. Fortunately, due to local knowledge and contacts, the vehicle was towed away, the diesel drained and the vehicle returned in less than two hours of which one hour was spent eating a picnic lunch so very little time was lost. After this excitement, we decided to go to Zakher Pools in the afternoon and, after a short drive 'off road', we were confronted with a host of new species to look at. Little Grebes were abundant and some even had young already. Good numbers of Mallard were present but the five Eurasian Teal soon disappeared when an off road vehicle drove around the lake on the sand dunes. A flock of eight Tufted Ducks had been present all winter but a surprising sight was six Western Reef-egrets so far from the coast. Several Little Egrets were also present for comparison together with a number of Grey Herons and a Great Egret. Another surprise was a Squacco Heron, which is rare in winter here. Two Western Marsh-harriers constantly patrolled the skies with one even sitting on the sand dunes to give good 'scope views. Several Eurasian Coots were on the far side of the lake but waders were scarcer than normal here. Eventually after scanning the entire lakeshore, we came up with semi respectable totals of single Little Ringed, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, two Red-wattled Lapwing, approximately 50 Little Stints, two Temminck's Stints, a single Ruff and four Common Greenshank. A single Black-headed Gull flew overhead just before a small flock of hirundines appeared comprising four Red-rumped Swallows and three each of Barn Swallow and Sand Martin. Several Water Pipits patrolled the shore together with two Citrine Wagtails, one of which was a good-plumaged male. A nice Bluethroat joined the Citrine Wagtail and in the reeds behind, both Clamorous and European Reed-warblers were seen well. In fact, the Clamorous Reed-warbler was a real exhibitionist, uncharacteristically singing high in an open tree. Having exhausted our new bird possibilities at the site, we headed back the short distance to a 'stake out' for a couple of more target birds. Leaving the minibus, we walked through a lightly vegetated desert area and within minutes, were watching 2-3 extremely confiding Asian Desert Warblers. As usual, their presence was given away by their habit of following wheatears. In fact they chose three different species at this location, Desert, Isabelline and Red-tailed. It is a symbiotic relationship that mainly benefits the warbler and they gain the protection of the wheatears perched higher up. As we walked back to the minibus, Arabian Babblers were spotted several hundred metres away but they perched up well for everyone to get decent 'scope views. Back at the minibus, a couple of Indian Silverbills were found together with several wonderful Purple Sunbirds. With better

views of the babblers still wanted by some, we drove to the edge of the park, played the tape and hey presto, four sat up in the open barely 20 metres away for all to enjoy! After an incredibly rewarding day bird-wise and entertaining logistic-wise, we headed back to the hotel.

Day 4: After breakfast, we headed up to Jebel Hafeet to look for the last remaining speciality of the area, Hooded Wheatear. As we headed up, the views became more spectacular and soon we could look over the whole city of Al Ain as well as Burami and large parts of Oman. Hume's Wheatears and Desert Larks were common and a male Blue Rock-thrush gave stunning views in the sunshine just yards from the minibus. Eventually we got to the car park at the top but sadly no sign of Hooded Wheatear, just Brown-necked Raven and more Hume's Wheatears and Desert Larks. After spending 10 minutes admiring the view we started to head back towards the minibus when suddenly our target flew in, a fine male Hooded Wheatear. We spent 10 minutes watching it at very close range feeding around the café and posing for all to photograph. Heading back down, and feeling very pleased with ourselves, we had brief views of a Sand Partridge before we arrived at the Mercure Hotel. We spent around half an hour in the gardens seeing Indian Roller, more Hume's Wheatears, Black Redstarts and enjoying a fly past of Egyptian Vulture and eye level views of Pale Crag-martins. Unfortunately, the bird we had come to search for was a leader only seen bird, Brown Shrike. Leaving the Jebel, we headed back to the hotel for everyone to pack and left Al Ain mid morning. After only just over an hour of driving, we arrived at Qarn Nazwa where we enjoyed another picnic lunch. Variable Wheatears had been rather thin on the ground this winter and usually leave in February so we relieved to see the first winter male found by the leaders three weeks previously was still present. Walking up a wadi, we inspected some roost sites where Desert Eagle-owl has been found in the past but although there were fresh droppings, unfortunately no bird. The Acacia trees harboured a single Lesser Whitethroat whilst an Asian Desert Warbler true to form followed a Red-tailed Wheatear around. A surprise was flushing a Chukar, an introduced bird here. Moving on, we drove over the spectacular east coast mountain range on the new motorway and eventually dropped down to Kalba on the coast. Deciding not to check in to the hotel as there was daylight left, we scanned the estuary and were rewarded with a number of new birds including 30 Lesser Sandplovers with a solitary Greater Sandplover in amongst them, Grey Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Eurasian Oystercatcher, and Common Redshank along with many Sooty Gulls amongst the numerous Black-headed, Slender-billed and Herring 'type' Gulls, many Lesser Crested Terns, smaller numbers of Crested Terns and best of all a couple of White-cheeked Terns. Jared then spotted some Persian Shearwaters far out to sea so we quickly drove across the bridge to Khor Kalba to get better views. A couple more Persian Shearwaters obliged at mid range and our first Socotra Cormorants flew past. With the hotel only minutes away, we checked into our rooms and ordered our evening meals in the restaurant opposite at the end of what had been a very productive day.

Day 5: Before breakfast we headed off across the bridge to Khor Kalba again. Within minutes we were watching several Indian Pond-herons at their regular wintering site as well as numerous Western Reef-egrets and 14 Greater Flamingos. A Common Kingfisher was seen in flight several times before our main target bird, Collared Kingfisher, was found sitting quietly in the mangroves on the other side of the creek. This is a very rare and highly threatened sub-species only found in mangroves here and the adjacent coast of Oman. Driving along the stony beach, we enjoyed excellent views of two of the 'steppe' form of Southern Grey Shrikes before heading back to the hotel. After breakfast, we headed north along the coast towards Dibba, making a number of stops en-route. Our first stop was only shortly after leaving Kalba as a cormorant was spotted swimming close inshore. As we had only seen Socotra Cormorants flying past yesterday we were hoping that it was one and we were not disappointed with excellent views. Our next stop was where large numbers of gulls and terns were roosting on the beach. A couple of superb summer-plumaged Great Black-headed Gulls gave excellent views amongst the numerous Black-headed, Caspian, Heuglin's, Slender-billed, Sooty and Steppe Gulls but the really exciting find was a Saunders' Tern. Saunders' Tern is extremely difficult to tell apart from Little Tern, particularly in winter plumage but this bird gave outstanding views down to as close as 10 metres so all the salient features were seen including more extensive black primary shafts and the grey rump. Gull-billed Terns also gave good views. Moving on, we stopped at one of the few

sites with remaining coastal habitat looking for Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse but without success although Eurasian Curlew was new to the list. One particular stony plain looked very promising and although we didn't see any sandgrouse, we did find a large flock of House (Striated) Buntings together with four newly arrived Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes. On our way back to the main road we enjoyed close views of a party of Arabian Babblers. We arrived at Fujairah National Dairy Farm in time for another picnic lunch before entering the complex. An initial brief view of a Bluethroat eventually turned into excellent prolonged views of at least three adult males. New birds included a pair of Siberian Stonechats perched up on the sprinkler heads for all to see and a single Yellow Wagtail plus more Indian Rollers, Eurasian Hoopoes and Isabelline Shrikes were seen. A large flock of Indian Silverbills was found as we searched without success for 'Masked' White Wagtails and as we headed back to the minibus up to nine Bank Mynas were picked out from the Common Mynas. Arriving back at the minibus, we discovered that several members of the group were missing and, as we headed back to look for them, we were informed that they had found several 'Masked' White Wagtails. This is the only place in the UAE where this central Asian form can regularly be found and we enjoyed prolonged views of up to five of these very attractive birds. Leaving the farm, we headed back south to Kalba arriving in plenty of time to wash and change before dinner at the end of another successful day.

Day 6: Before breakfast we once more crossed the bridge to Khor Kalba. Once again the Greater Flamingos and Indian Pond-herons were present but this time we found a pair of Collared Kingfishers that gave excellent views. A large raptor was seen briefly flying over the mangroves, an immature Eastern Imperial Eagle, excellent! A few common waders were present but there was very little on the sea so we turned our attention to the gravel plains. Crested Larks were abundant and a flock of about 40 larks turned out to be Lesser Short-toed Larks. Eventually one of the two species we were still looking for, Black-crowned Finch-lark, was heard singing and we located a male and two females. They played cat and mouse with us amongst the vegetation before finally giving themselves up just before flying off. Later we were to find two more females. Heading back to the hotel for breakfast, Sveta wandered off to look at the estuary to report back that a flock of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse had flown over her to Khor Kalba. After breakfast we headed back over the bridge again. It didn't take us long to relocate the sandgrouse and we enjoyed excellent views of up to 21 birds. We had now seen all the speciality birds of the area so we packed up and headed off back across the coastal mountain range again to Masafi Wadi. Immediately on getting out of the minibus we heard a warbler in sub-song, which we were surprised to see, was a Lesser Whitethroat type. Realising that it was not a regular Lesser Whitethroat type song we played Hume's Whitethroat song and it immediately responded, an excellent bird! We enjoyed prolonged views of the bird as it flitted around the acacia tree noting all its features. Desert Larks were everywhere and we saw what turned out to be our last Plain Leaf-warbler of the tour. As we walked up a side wadi, we found three Sand Partridges together with several House (Striated) Buntings but no sign of our target birds: Long-billed Pipit and Scrub Warbler. Ironically, Sveta had returned to the vehicle early and found Long-billed Pipit but despite an extensive search, we were unable to relocate it. As it was pretty hot by now, and it was lunchtime, we left the wadi and headed back towards the east coast. The UAE has a wonderful motorway network with numerous service areas but we managed to find the only stretch without one so it was a late lunch! As we arrived back on the west coast with some light left, we headed north into Ajman and stopped at a tidal inlet. Small numbers of waders were around the shoreline and we added Sanderling, Dunlin and two Curlew Sandpipers to our ever-growing lists amongst the Grey Plovers and Little Stints. A particularly nice find was our first Terek Sandpiper. With light fading, we headed back to Sharjah to find our hotel for the last three nights of the tour. What an ordeal that was; the whole west coast has major traffic problems and added to that there were roadworks and road closures!

Day 7: The major cities in the UAE have chronic traffic problems and even 16-lane motorways haven't done much to reduce them. And so it was again this morning as we crawled out of Sharjah and headed north to Ras al-Khaimah. Arriving at the ruler's palace, we headed off-road to Khor al Beidah. The Khor was literally stuffed full of birds and it didn't take us long to find our main target, the highly sought-after Crab

Plover. Eventually we counted a total of 62 of these wonderful waders. Western Marsh-harriers were constantly in view and a couple of Ospreys were our first of the trip. There were numerous common waders we had seen before but new were Bar-tailed Godwits and Ruddy Turnstones and better views of a number of Terek Sandpipers was nice. There were no sign of Great Knot however, a scarce passage migrant and occasional over wintering species. Around 100 Great Flamingos were scattered over the bay together with three Eurasian Spoonbills and a scattering of terns and gulls. A Blue Rock-thrush was a surprise find, presumably a migrating bird. Leaving the area mid morning, we picked up lunch from a motorway service area before visiting Dubai Pivot Fields. One of the star birds here is White-tailed Lapwing and we were not disappointed with a total of 41 of them some showing as close as 3–4 metres! Huge numbers of Common Snipes were present and with perseverance we picked out one Pintail Snipe. Numbers of larks and pipits were quite low but we did find several Meadow and Red-throated Pipits together with plenty of Water Pipits and Yellow Wagtails of various races and some very obliging Eurasian Hoopoes. A full adult male Isabelline Shrike gave stunning views and although not particularly noteworthy, we saw our first Common Moorhens! A couple of Little Ringed Plovers gave excellent close views and because of the weather, large numbers of small gulls were roosting on the turf, periodically rising when a Western Marsh-harrier went over. Wheatears were represented by single of Desert, Isabelline and Red-tailed whilst a Siberian Stonechat put in an appearance. Driving round the fields, all we noted were numerous doves until we stumbled on a group of the increasing scarce Bank Myna. A single Red-vented Bulbul was the first we had seen for four days. Finally, mixed in with a flock of Common Starlings flying overhead was a single Rose-coloured Starling. Unfortunately, although most of the Common Starlings turned and landed on the turf again, The Rose-coloured Starling wasn't one of them. The return journey was slightly better as tomorrow is Friday!

Day 8: What the difference a day makes! With it being Friday, we experienced almost no traffic as we left this morning heading south. We continued for around an hour passing Dubai before stopping at a motorway service area (more like a duty free shop!) to buy lunch. Reaching Abu Dhabi, we headed east towards Al Ain and then came off the motorway to visit the Al Wathba Camel Track. Although a shadow of its former self now they have stopped watering the fodder fields in the middle, it still has some decent habitat. It was also fun to watch how seriously they took the camel training with camera crews and large numbers of 4 × 4s following every session. The former fodder fields weren't very productive although we did have excellent views of Asian Desert Warbler, many Desert Wheatears and a couple of Isabelline Wheatears. Seeing some reeds on the edge of the complex, we decided to check them out and were surprised to find a new lake in the desert. The only ducks present were Mallards but waders included Temminck's Stint and both Green and Wood Sandpipers, which were new for the list. Quite a few pipits and wagtails were also present including a Red-throated Pipit and Citrine Wagtail and two female Black-crowned Finch-larks flew in to drink. Just as we were leaving, a raptor was spotted circling overhead and we were extremely pleased to enjoy wonderful views of a pale-phase Booted Eagle. Leaving the Camel Track, we stopped on the side of the road to view Al Wathba Lake. Although the shoreline was rather distant, we firstly picked out a Long-legged Buzzard feeding on something and then spotted a large flock of Pied Avocets. Huge numbers of Kentish Plovers were on the dried mudflats and we picked out two Common Swifts obviously passing through on migration. Good numbers of ducks were present although it took some time to identify some of them through the heat haze, as tripods were unsteady in the wind. It was worth the effort however, as we eventually added Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail to our lists as well as a couple of Eurasian Teal. What looked like a pink haze in the distance was made up of Greater Flamingos and when the haze relented a little Bob counted 324! Moving to another viewpoint we were bemused to be asked in perfect English by a local who stopped next to us if we spoke Arabic and then when we replied he just said thanks and drove off. Life is full of mysteries! A careful scan of the lakeshore here revealed a flock of Black-tailed Godwits and our only Marsh Sandpiper of the tour. Moving on, we headed back to Ghantoot to finish our tour full circle where we had started. The Polo Club fields gave us more views of Cream-coloured Coursers, Pacific Golden-plovers and Red-wattled Lapwing. The bird we were really looking for, however, was a Sociable Lapwing that has been present on and off for several weeks; eventually we found it at the very back of the field. We had to wait for

it to move into an open spot but everyone had good telescope views of it. Mission accomplished so we headed across the road to the plantation. As usual, we were warmly welcomed in and commenced our search for the near mythical Grey Hypocolius. Unfortunately, many more birds are now wintering in Bahrain and those that are found in the UAE are generally only during migration time with fewer wintering now. We spent some time scouring the plantation seeing Grey Francolin, Southern Grey Shrike, numerous Red-vented and White-cheeked Bulbuls and the occasional Lesser Whitethroat but no sign of the Hypocolius. None had actually been reported since the turn of the year and our hopes weren't high. Some of us were rewarded with views of the tour's only Ménétries's Warbler. We left Ghantoot behind, headed back to Sharjah, enjoyed our final dinner and packed up ready to leave the next morning.

Day 9: With a midday flight, we could take a more relaxed breakfast as we didn't have to get to the airport until 09.00 and it was Saturday so there wouldn't be much traffic! We arrived back at the airport in double-quick time and the flight took off on time. Although there was only a short transfer time in Paris, it went very smoothly and we arrived back in London at the end of the tour on schedule.