

السنقاء
the PHOENIX

Number 17 December 2000

Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Even more new breeding birds

The rate at which new breeding species are found in Arabia does not seem to be slowing down at all. In this issue the breeding of four more breeding birds are recorded. The great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus* almost bred last year and has succeeded this year; the white-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* has been proposed as a future Arabian breeding birds and has now been successful and two others are added to the list which have probably always bred but were not detected until recently. See following pages for details.

In addition confirmed breeding evidence for the greater sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii*, is presented for the first time. Other new breeding species on national lists are mentioned and as usual there is a miscellaneous gaggle of range extensions, unexpected occurrences and interesting data under Recent Reports (page 18). There are still large gaps in knowledge of a number of Arabian breeding birds but we now know a little more about the nesting of the Asir stonechat *Saxicola torquata felix* (page 23) and the purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* (page 12). A number of squares still have no ABBA records (page 21). Prizes of free five year subscriptions to *Phoenix* are still on offer to those who can report on these squares.

There are now two centres of birding activity in Kuwait. The Kuwait Ornithological Records Committee (KORC) has been in existence for some time but a new group, the Ornithological Society of Kuwait (OSK), has recently been formed. Information about each group and contacts are provided at page 14. Two or more national groups in countries where there is a large number of birders usually works quite well, because different groups often have different objectives and cater for a variety of membership. In the case of a small country with a very few bird people two groups seems unnecessary and could be divisive. If two groups continue in Kuwait it is to be hoped that they can cooperate on common interests. Birding is essentially an interest that defies regulation and probably especially so in Arabia. In other parts of Arabia there have been various territorial claims, where groups or individuals have felt they had a right to control birding or recording. Unfortunately this has often lead to the stymied enjoyment of local birds by some and others have become disaffected. I personally hold the view that Arabia is big enough for everyone to enjoy its birds, whatever group they support. The policy of the ABBA

project has always been to work with everyone interested in Arabian birds and also to share information on the ABBA database with them. Kuwait records held by ABBA have already been made available to both Kuwaiti groups.

Michael Jennings

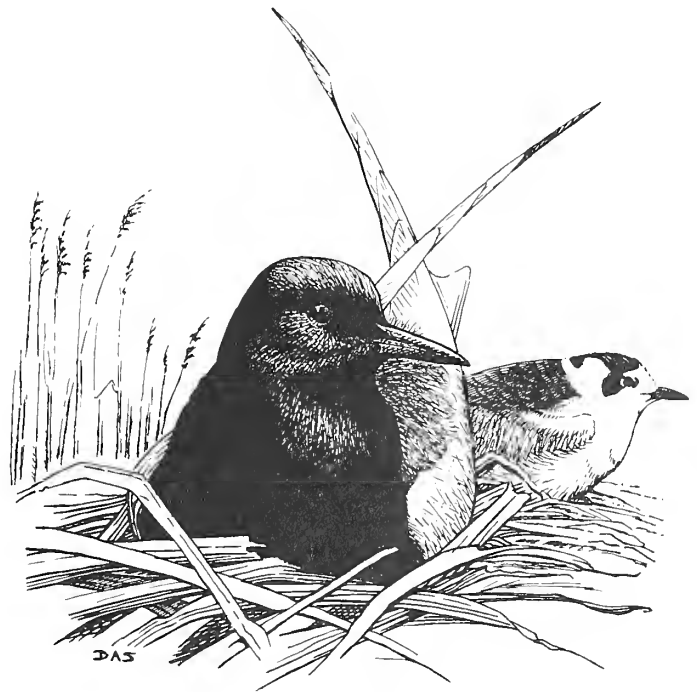


Fig 1. White-winged black tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* a new breeding species for Arabia - see page 2.

Sponsored and Published by the
National Commission for Wildlife
Conservation and Development (NCWCD)
P.O.Box 61681, Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



الإشراف والنشر بواسطة
الهيئة الوطنية لحماية الحياة الفطرية
وإنماها.
ص ب ٦١٦٨١، الرياض،
المملكة العربية السعودية

Sites of Interest:

This column aims to provide details of the variety and diversity of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative birds to be found in each. The series of site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not meant to be a "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or as large as a whole mountain range.

The following site report is an extract from *Directory of Important Bird Areas in Egypt* by Sherif M Baha el Din. Reprinted here with the kind permission of the author. The format has been amended slightly to avoid use of keys elsewhere in the book. The Tiran archipelago is comprised of a number of islands the largest of which are Tiran (AB32) and Sinafir. The islands belong to Saudi Arabia but have been administered by Egypt in recent years, apart for a period when they were occupied by Israel.

Tiran Island

Location: 27°56'N 34°33'E
Size: 31 km²
Governorate: South Sinai
IBA criteria: A1 (regularly holds globally threatened species) & A4i (>1% of regional populations of waterbird species)

■ PROTECTION STATUS

Protected. Part of the Ras Mohammed National Park, declared by Prime Ministerial decree 1068/1983, adjusted by Prime Ministerial Decree 2035/1996.

■ DESCRIPTION

A large, crescent-shaped island situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. The northern part of the island is flat, while the southern part is fairly hilly and contains the highest point of the island, 524m. A fairly large mangrove *Avicennia marina* stand is found on the northern shore of the southern part of the island. Extensive coral reefs fringe the island on the north and east, while the western shore overlooks the Straits of Tiran.

■ IMPORTANCE FOR BIRDS

Seven bird species are known to breed on Tiran Island: Reef Heron, Green-backed Heron, European Spoonbill, White-eyed Gull, White-cheeked Tern, Lesser Crested Tern and Caspian Tern. In addition, Osprey is a widespread breeder. Tiran's population of this species (15-20 pairs) is the largest in the country. Three or four pairs of Sooty Falcon also breed on the Island (Goodman & Meininger 1989).

■ IMPORTANCE FOR OTHER SPECIES

Reptiles: Green Turtle (endangered) has bred on the island (Frazier & Salas 1984).

Mammals: The shallow waters east of Tiran are said to have sea grass beds that are important grazing habitat for Dugong (vulnerable) (Omar Hassan, Manager, Ras Mohammed National Park, pers. comm.).

■ SIGNIFICANT CONSERVATION ISSUES

Oil pollution from passing vessels is a serious threat to the birds of Tiran, particularly during the breeding season, when chicks of White-eyed Gull and other seabirds typically congregate along shores where they become exposed to contamination by floating oil. Growing tourist activity in the vicinity of Tiran is threatening to increase disturbance on the island and to degrade its habitats. However, the presence of land mines on some parts of the island deters many from visiting. Military personnel stationed on the islands are reported to have introduced feral cats that could potentially prey on fledgling seabirds (Michael Pearson pers. comm.).

AI GLOBALLY THREATENED SPECIES

Vulnerable

White-eyed Gull Common breeding resident

A4i 1% OR MORE OF POPULATION

White-eyed Gull At least 50 breeding pairs

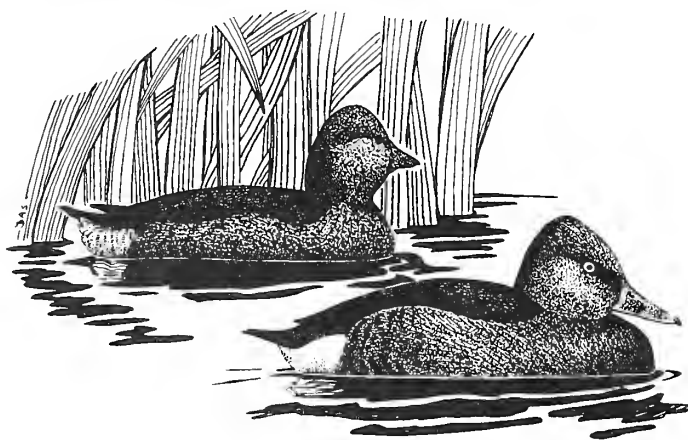


Fig 13. A pair of ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca* with five ducklings were seen near Dharan (QA29), Eastern Province on 4 May 2000 (T Waddleton).

Black-necked Grebe - New Breeding Species for the UAE

On the 10 July 2000 between 0930 - 1230 hrs at the Al Wathba Wetland Reserve (formerly called Al Ghar Lake, UB25) Abu Dhabi, UAE, we were counting greater flamingoes *Phoenicopterus ruber*. During the survey, when temperatures reached 43°C, a family of black-necked grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*, comprised of two adults and three young, were observed. The chicks were not so young as to be dependent on the adults but were diving on their own. This is the first breeding record for the UAE.

The reserve is a manmade wetland habitat situated 40 km. southeast of Abu Dhabi city and is administered by the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA). The adjacent Mafraq Water Treatment Plant supplies the water coming into Al Wathba Wetland Reserve. There are three water inlets to the reserve, one supplies salt/freshwater and the other two freshwater only. The freshwater inlets supply water to two marshes where vegetation such as *Phragmites australis*, *Tamarix* sp., *Zygophyllum mandavillei*, *Lamanea* sp., *Juncus* sp., *Sporobolus spicatus* and *Pluchea dioscoryides* thrive, forming

dense communities. The lake water varies in salinity from time to time but generally remains brackish.

The lack of disturbance and the protection the site offers undoubtedly contributed to this breeding success. No nest was observed, the nest was probably concealed by reeds and waterside vegetation close to where the birds were sighted.

The black-necked grebe is a regular and localised winter visitor to the UAE from September to April, sometimes in large numbers. On 16 January 1998, 239 were counted at Al Wathba Wetland Reserve.

Other breeding birds at this site include moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* and greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*.

Abdulkhakim M. Abdi & Christopher R. Drew, *Terrestrial Environment Research Center, ERWDA, PO Box: 45553, Abu Dhabi, UAE. Email: <aabdi@erwda.gov.ae>*.

Squares Without Records

Anyone managing to get records from the remaining 44 squares (outside of the core Empty Quarter) gets a free five year subscription to *Phoenix*.

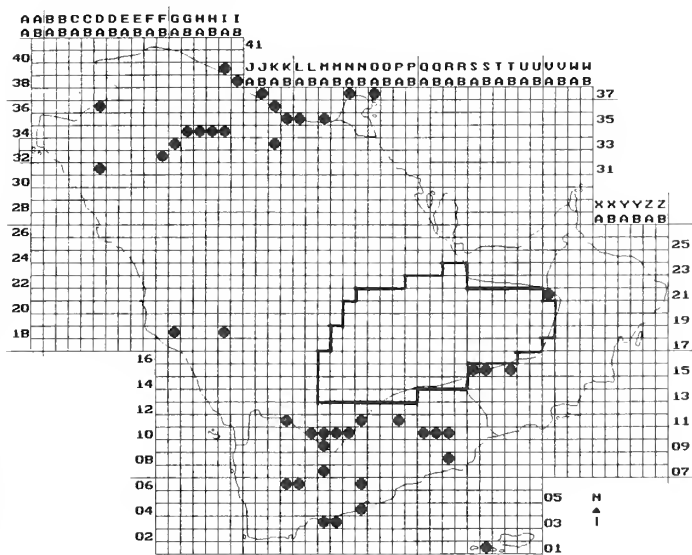


Fig 14. The squares shown with a blob above have no records of any kind on the ABBA database. The area bounded by the bold line is the core Empty Quarter where the majority of the squares are still unatlassed.

Journals, Reports and Other Publications

The following notes list some of the more interesting papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various Arabian natural history society newsletters and in other reports etc in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

Tribulus, Bulletin of the Emirates Natural History Group (ISSN 1019-6919)

Vol 9.2 (Autumn/Winter 1999), contains eight articles (34 pages); two on archeology and two on sites of interest with particular reference to birds, and single papers on mammals, invertebrates, plants and geography. The sites papers look at Al Wathba lake (formerly known as al Ghar) and the Taweela coastal area. Al Wathba shot to fame when flamingos hatched young there in 1993, the first time ever on the Arabian mainland. This site is now well protected which has paid off this year with another species breeding in the UAE for the first time and no doubt others will join the list in years to come. Vol 10.1 (Spring/Summer 2000), has 11 main articles (30 pages), four on archeology/history, two on birds and single reports on mammals, reptiles, fish invertebrates and plants. The bird interest concerns papers on the Namaqua dove in the UAE and its spread through Arabia since 1975 and the use of burrows by hoopoe larks. The Namaqua dove story perhaps epitomises the spread of a species in Arabia due to the development of agriculture. Agricultural development has presented the species with suitable habitat in many new areas where often only desert existed before. The article is accompanied by three maps showing the range exploding from a few records in the SW of Arabia up to 1974, the position in 1989 and at the present time. The present day range is compared to where pivot irrigation can be found in Arabia today. The species first bred in UAE in 1997. The use by desert birds of animal burrows, especially large reptile burrows has only recently received attention. They appear to use burrows as cool refuges on hot summer days and possibly also for temperature protection during cool nights and in winter. Plenty of opportunity for further research there.

Available from the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi) P O Box 2380, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Zoology in the Middle East (ISSN 0939-7140)

Two volumes are published each year. Vol 19 (1999) is the first to include a colour cover and at 134 pages is larger than usual. It is dedicated to herpetology in the Middle East. The 13 papers include two directly relevant to Arabia. One on the effect of substrate on nesting success of green turtles in the Arabian Gulf and the other on the reproductive biology of the spiny tailed lizard (*Dhub*) in western Saudi Arabia. One paper by the well known Egyptian birdman Sherif Baha el Din describes a new gecko for science from near the Nile in southern Egypt. At the end of this issue is a listing of all papers on reptiles and amphibians that have appeared in the 19 volumes of ZME to date. Vol 20 (2000), is comprised of 21 articles (144 pages), 11 concerning vertebrates. Main articles concerning Arabian fauna are on the artiodactyles of Yemen, the reproduction of the Arabian leopard, the distribution of the cape hare in Abu Dhabi and turtles in Kuwait. The only ornithological paper concerns the DNA based sex identification of falcons and the use of this technique in wild studies and captive breeding.

Available from Kasperek Verlag Monchhofstr. 16, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. <Kasperek@t-online.de>. Price 37 DM. ISSN 0939-7140.