

INTRODUCTION

Despite being subjected to such a hot, arid environment, the city of Abu Dhabi has a surprising and constantly changing variety of bird species. Whilst a few of these are abundant and obvious, most are subtle or inconspicuous, requiring careful searching and may be present only for a week or two each year as they briefly pause on migration. The lure of migrating birds, and the presence in the UAE of a number of species virtually restricted to Arabia, draws many birdwatchers each year to the country. However, the non-specialist with eyes open and a little patience can still find rewards, even in the heat of summer.

OUTLINE

The information presented here aims to allow the casual observer to identify the commonest species they are likely to encounter during a short stay in Abu Dhabi. In addition, some background details on behaviour, breeding habits, range outside the UAE and, where appropriate, migration routes are also provided. The species chosen have been selected predominately on the basis of their abundance and conspicuous nature but also to illustrate the diversity of origins of birds that occur in Abu Dhabi: indigenous resident species (for example, House Sparrow and Osprey), exotic arrivals introduced from the Indian subcontinent in recent decades (bulbuls and parakeets), long distance trans-equatorial migrants that cover tens of thousands of miles annually (Ortolan Bunting and flycatchers) and shorter distance migrants that come here only for a few months in mid-winter (Black-headed Gull and White Wagtail) all feature.



Pied Wheatears - Photo by Oscar Campbell

Most Pied Wheatears feed on open lawns and low bushes in the desert. This exhausted individual, a typically sheltering under trees and allowing a very close approach, has battled through the desert to Abu Dhabi en-route from East Africa to the mountains of Iran.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GREENERY

Situated in an inhospitable desert, many species thrive in the UAE as a direct result of man's activities. Destruction of natural habitats is an ever-increasing problem both in this country and elsewhere and is to the detriment of many species. However, the development of green parklands and lawns in cities, although far from an adequate substitute, has been to the benefit of others. Many resident species in Abu Dhabi have populations today that far exceed what they would have been a century ago. Furthermore, many migrant birds, exhausted after a long flight through hostile terrain now have a better chance of finding food and shelter than they did in the past. The Emirate's Palace grounds, in common with all parks in Abu Dhabi, undoubtedly act as a vital refuelling stop for many individuals that would simply not have otherwise survived their arduous migration. Different species have different requirements: a mixture of lawns, taller trees (especially if native and hence food-rich, for example Ghaf or *Ziziphus*) and thick ground cover in, for example, flowerbeds thus attracts a range of species. The presence of water, even an ephemeral leaking pipe, can make all the difference to a dehydrated migrant. Of course, resident breeding species also rely on food, thick cover to conceal nests and access to water.



Cattle Egret - Photo by Oscar Campbell

Cattle Egret is a species that has benefited from the greening of the city. In winter they are often seen on feeding on roadside verges and roundabouts.

THE MAGIC OF MIGRATION

To keen birdwatchers, no aspect of their hobby invokes such a feeling of spine-tingling awe as migration. The fact that a bird weighing rather less than a small bar of chocolate can successfully endure and navigate through thousands of miles of unforgiving desert with unerring confidence and accuracy seems nothing short of miraculous. Migration combines clockwork regularity (many species arrive each year within a day or two of the same date) with the ever-present possibility of the unpredictable and novel. It is this, plus the fact that many of its precise details are still only slowly being resolved, that makes the phenomenon so exciting.



Blue cheeked Bee-eater - Photos by Oscar Campbell



Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are amongst the most glamorous migrants to visit Abu Dhabi each year. Small groups stop to refuel for up to several weeks each September, feeding over the Palace lawns.

MIGRATION THROUGH THE UAE

The large number of migrant species that appear in the UAE is primarily due to the country's crossroads position on a major migration flyway. The Middle East quite literally links Africa to Asia and Europe. Every autumn millions of birds squeeze through, departing vast breeding ranges that may stretch from central China westwards into Europe. Many species travel round the Persian Gulf via Kuwait or concentrate at the narrow sea-crossing of Hormuz, rather than cross the Gulf on a direct north-south axis. Birds crossing at Hormuz may then follow the coastline south and west. This naturally brings them through Abu Dhabi. At some point almost all turn southwards to battle through one of the largest and harshest deserts in the world. Whilst some may pause in southern Oman or Yemen, the majority cross into Africa, mostly where the Red Sea narrows as Yemen pinches into Ethiopia. From here they spread through eastern and southern Africa. Some species remain as 'close' as Ethiopia and Kenya but others continue all the way to South Africa to enjoy an abundance of food in the hot and wet southern hemisphere summer. Here they may stay just a few short months before fattening up for the return journey and departing northwards again for their breeding grounds, taking them back through the UAE again en-route back to Eurasia.



Common Myna - Photo by Tommy Pedersen

Introduced from the Indian sub-continent, the adaptable Common Myna has become very numerous everywhere in the UAE.

THE STRAINS OF MIGRATION

Migration is a most arduous and risky adventure and this is especially true through the gruelling deserts of Arabia. The vast majority of species using the UAE migrate at night to avoid the heat of the day and stop to seek food and shade when the sun rises. This nocturnal migration is very hard to study as only the tip of the iceberg is detectable during daylight from the ground. It is only relatively recently that surveying using radar has shed some light on it. Results from such studies in the eastern Mediterranean are staggering: densities of 4000-5000 individual birds per km per hour have been detected in autumn! This equates to thousands of millions of birds passing through the Middle East every year. Spring densities are approximately 40% of autumn values (as many birds do not survive the autumn migration, winter or the spring return) but, conversely, spring migration is often much more conspicuous on the ground: coming through the desert, birds have invariably had a long and draining journey and many arrive exhausted

to the limits of their physical capabilities. They may be forced to spend days recuperating anywhere they can find food and shelter before continuing. It is at this time, especially, that the parks of Abu Dhabi may fill up with dehydrated and hungry travellers, all desperate to push northwards and reach their breeding grounds but temporarily constrained by the need to refuel. In contrast, birds in autumn departing Iran and surrounding countries have been able to rest and feed in nearby and relatively food-rich areas. They are often strong enough to fly over the southern Gulf coast and autumn numbers refuelling and resting in Abu Dhabi are somewhat lower and less predictable.

FIND OUT MORE

Hopefully this information will enable you to appreciate and identify some of the fascinating birds you may see even on a short stay in Abu Dhabi. For those wishing to find out more, there are a number of possibilities.

The Emirates A Natural History is a beautifully illustrated, comprehensive and readable book covering all aspects of the UAE's natural environment, whilst *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East* allows easy identification of many species. Both are available in many of Abu Dhabi's specialised bookstores.

<http://www.uaebirding.com/index.html> is a mine of further information on birds and bird watching in the country, including recent sightings and discussion forums.

The Emirates Natural History Group <http://www.enhg.org/> runs field trips and publishes *Tribulus*, a journal detailing natural history and archaeology discoveries in the UAE.



The elegant White-cheeked Tern migrates into the Persian Gulf from the Indian Ocean to breed. It is common in coastal waters around Abu Dhabi from March to August.

White cheeked Tern - Photo by Oscar Campbell

GUIDING

Several very enthusiastic and knowledgeable local birdwatchers offer guiding services locally in Abu Dhabi and further afield across the UAE. Note that work commitments mean that such services are generally only available at the weekends or, sometimes, after 3.30 pm during the week. Enquires are welcome at all times and, for further information, please look at <http://www.uaebirding.com/uaeguiding.html> or contact:

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The Emirates Palace would like to formally declare its sincere gratitude to the local Abu Dhabi birding community for its invaluable contribution in bringing this document to life. In particular the efforts of Oscar Campbell and Andrew Ward are to be acknowledged.

Without their dedication and superb photography this fascinating and now public aspect of the Emirates Palace landscape would not have been made possible.