

Abha, Tanoumah & Jazan, south west Saudi Arabia

16th – 21st August 2022

Oscar Campbell, David Darrell-Lambert and Simon Lloyd



This short report covers a five-day trip to the Abha, Tanoumah and Jazan areas of south-west Saudi Arabia in August 2022. This may seem a counter-intuitive time to visit Saudi Arabia, but, in the far south west of the country, it is actually really good time for a visit as the whole area (i.e. both the Asir mountains around Abha / Tanoumah and Tihama plain around coastal Jazan) are green and lush following rains. Temperatures in the mountains were similar to those in March / April (i.e. very pleasant) whilst Jazan was actually a little cooler due to more cloud (although still pretty humid). We saw quite a lot of standing water on the Tihama, had quite a lot of mist billowing over the escarpment at Abha and Tanoumah and on one afternoon skirted the edge of what was clearly an enormous thunderstorm but we saw little real rain and were not hindered at all by conditions. In all, we racked up 171 species between us including almost all those targeted. Some of the key species we found easily are only present in the summer (late April to October) so not available on winter / spring trips. As well as the breeding birds, we had masses of migrant shorebirds along the coast and some early but interesting early autumn passerines in the wadis and mountains.

This trip report should be read in conjunction with one from March / April 2022 (see [this link](#)), which covers many of the same sites and has far more details on logistics etc. Many of the grid references provided here are taken from the same report, with a few new ones added for new sites visited.

Miscellaneous logistics and related stuff

We had five full field days, of which two (the third and fourth) were spent in Jazan and the other three were based in Abha (including a full day trip to Tanoumah, approximately 120 km north). This division was about right, as conditions were much more pleasant in Abha and it was nice to return there for the last full day to revisit a few sites, as well as take in a few others.

Flights were with Saudia from the UAE to Abha, via either Riyadh or Jeddah and were afternoon / evening (incoming) and early morning (departure) giving five full field days for six overnights. One-year, multiple entry visas were available online at

<https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/about-e-visa> as before and Covid restrictions were virtually nil, which was very different to the UAE. As before, we rented a car from Yelo (<https://www.iyelo.com/en>), which again required a 1500 SAR deposit. Credit cards are not nearly as widely accepted in Saudi as might be expected (e.g. many petrol stations won't take them) and Yelo insist on paying the deposit back via bank transfer; have your IBAN and full account details handy and expect to lose some of it in the transfer, which they don't cover.

For comments on driving in Saudi, see the earlier report; suffice to say that in the course of 4½ months, standards have not improved. In fact, driving in Abha was even less pleasant, as the town is totally rammed with holiday makers in July–August. As a result, the traffic, especially in the afternoon and all evening, is nerve-wrackingly exhausting, with lots of congestion. It would be worth bearing this in mind if you are generally faint-hearted, or when booking car rental and accommodation, which is best done well in advance. Jazan was much, much less busy (but still typically chaotic) and, despite the temperatures and humidity, many families were visiting Al Saad lake the afternoon we visited. It is hard to imagine going anywhere and meeting people more delighted to see you and welcoming than Saudi families out in the countryside. Expect to be greeted heartily and continually, and invited for nearly infinite cups of coffee, when birding in such areas. However, such crowds (at a few sites only) in no way diminished the birding, as the **Rufous-capped Larks**, singing on the hills near Al Habalah amongst crowds of picnickers can attest.

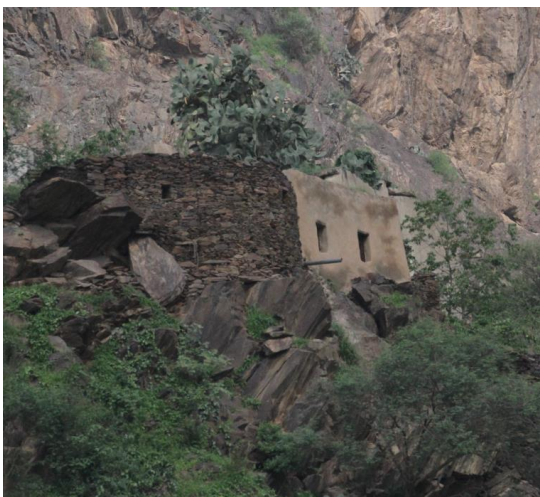
Accommodation

As before, we stayed with a friend in Abha, but one night spent at the interestingly named but perfectly adequate [Beauty Rayan 2](#) in Jizan. We got a warm welcome here (they remembered OC from April!) and it was no problem checking in rather late (2000) and checking out quite late (c1400 the following afternoon) after a long, sweaty morning of birding.

Acknowledgments, online resources, and records and media from us

Most of all we are again very grateful to our good friend Jacky Judas and his family, who put us up for four nights, gave us a loads of good suggestions with regard to places to visit and joined us in the field for the first morning. We also are extremely grateful to Gregory Askew (<https://www.saudibirding.com/>) for a terrific website that provided a lot of useful practical information and excellent trip reports. Jem Babbington's website (<https://www.birdsofsaudiarabia.com/>) was very useful for forward planning and Jem, who had been in the same areas in July, gave pin-point information for several key species that really helped us find them.

All birds seen were logged in eBird and the trip summarized as a trip report at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/72209>. This includes a full systematic species list and all checklist made can be accessed chronologically. Many images were taken and are uploaded there, some of those are also included in this trip report. Sound recordings are also available via the eBird link, with others on Xeno-Canto [here](#) (OC) and [here](#) (DDL). Note that these links include recordings made by us on previous trips to Saudi as well as the present trip.



Afrotropical Wadi Shanaka (OC), Rojal Alma'a (OC), Yellow Spendour (OC)

Birding

Overall, we did very well, having a great time with a lot of birds in fantastic, near-tropical surroundings, all very different from the normal images of Arabia. It was interesting to note some clear differences from visits to the same area in late March / early April; whilst a few resident species were missing (notably **African Paradise-Flycatcher**; clearly finished breeding and dispersed) other rather more significant ones (e.g. **Plain Nightjar**, **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Rufous-capped Lark**, **Arabian Pipit**, **White-throated Bee-eater**) were back and easy to find. Being very early autumn, there was of course a lot less migration than during spring, but the species mix was totally different and included, for example, abundant **European Bee-eaters** and **White-throated Robins** as well as **Semi-collared Flycatcher**. Coastal areas, as in spring, were crammed full of shorebirds, herons and terns, the latter including **Saunders's Terns** which were not seen on the previous trip and, moreover, were in their highly distinctive non-breeding dress, a plumage that is rarely seen, at least in eastern Arabian waters.

Sites and highlights

Note that only key birds and highlights are noted below; a lot of globally notable birds including Arabian endemics (e.g. **Yemen Thrush**, **Yemen Linnet**, **Olive-rumped (=Arabian) Serin**) and SW Arabian / NE African specials (e.g. **Dusky Turtle** and **African Collared Doves**, **African Palm Swifts**, **Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks**, **Black Scrub Robin**, **Little Rock Thrush**, **Rüppell's Weaver** etc.) are common and easily found in the right habitat. They, and common migrants such as **European Bee-eaters** and even **White-throated Robins** (yes! – total 28 found, all in the highlands) are generally not mentioned hereafter.

1 Abha area – **A** to **D** below are all within 30mins of Abha, **E** to **H** are c1hr driving away, although not all in the same direction.

A Abha Dam Easily viewed from [18.210345, 42.487782](#). **Hamerkop** (up to three, including birds mating) was a key species here (otherwise only seen briefly at Al Saad Lake) but we also saw a long-staying **Red-knobbed Coot** on our second visit. As well as a good introduction to common Asir birds, we also found **Arabian Waxbill** and **Osprey**.



Abha Dam & Soudah Waterfall: Hamerkop (DDL), Arabian Eagle Owl (OC), African Stonechat (OC), Arabian Partridge (OC), Cinnamon-breasted Bunting (OC)

B Soudah Waterfall Note that access to this wonderful site is now a lot more complicated than it was in March / April 2022 if indeed it is possible at all; to deter noisy groups who leave masses of litter, there is now a police presence at the layby at [18.225182, 42.424974](#) with the express purpose of preventing entry. So the waterfall track can no longer be accessed without special permission (which we had). However, the small, lower fields can still be viewed from small lanes in the nearby area and are full of birds. We had a great time here over two visits. Asir specials such as **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Yemen Thrush**, **Yemen Warbler** and **Brown Woodland Warbler** (although the latter three were all far less noisy and conspicuous than in spring) were all about and we also, again, found **Arabian (Spotted) Eagle Owl** roosting and had brief views of two **African Olive (= Rameron) Pigeons**. Other interesting species included **Short-toed Eagle**, **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, **African Stonechat**, **Arabian Warbler**, **African Pipit** (in the lowest fields on the second visit), **Arabian Waxbill** (few, but seen both visits) and **Dideric Cuckoo** nearby (brief flight views).

C Soudah Forests [18.286932, 42.365441](#). This site is also totally closed to general access to prevent disturbance and littering from tourists; we were fortunate to be able to make a short visit thanks again to special arrangements. There is lots of quite good quality juniper forest here; our first **Gambaga Flycatcher** came fairly quickly. Other species included a high-flying raptor that seemed to be **Crested Honey-Buzzard** and **White-throated Robin** – we promised not to mention them but the one here was the first of the trip...

D Wadi Reema / Reema Dam This site (park at about [18.352991, 42.387645](#)) and explore the wadi downhill and along the bottom towards the (dry) dam, and the less vegetated hillside on the other side) was not visited in March / April 2022. However, it was terrific value this time round, mainly for **Rufous-capped Lark** which were common and easily found. Reema, c20mins from Soudah Waterfall, is much closer to Abha and far more convenient than Al Habalah (see below) and, being far lusher, has a much wider range of other interesting species too. On our two visits the back-up cast included **Short-toed Eagle**, **African Pipit** (a pair, with **Long-billed** seen also), **Red-breasted Wheatear**, **Gambaga Flycatcher**, **Arabian Warbler** and **Scrub Warbler**. There was also **Dideric Cuckoo** (again very brief) and a faintly heard **Plain Nightjar**.



Wadi Reema: White-throated Robin (DDL), Rufous-capped Lark (SL), Red-breasted Wheatear (SL)

E Al Habalah ([18.047422, 42.842344](#) is the Rufous-capped lark hotspot). This site of barren, rocky hills very rapidly produced lots of **Rufous-capped Larks**, in complete contrast to a 2–3hr search in spring. Birds were at the pin linked above, singing and feeding happily amongst the hundreds of families out with picnics. We also visited the escarpment edge by the old village itself (at about [18.027314, 42.875285](#); a site for Yemen Serin, at least sometimes) but soon departed, on account of the enormous numbers of visitors and thick mist that was billowing up over the rift below. An early morning visit could solve both these problems. Other species seen included the only **Brown-necked Ravens** of the trip and the fairly common **Arabian Wheatear**. En-route, we stopped at some nice looking fields at [18.090011, 42.850162](#); the roadside bushes here yielded **Gambaga Flycatcher** (right – OC)



F Al Muruba'a National Park This site is nothing special but perfectly pleasant and is only c15mins from Al Habalah. It was visited at the end of the day; African Pipit has been reported here (we didn't find it, but it was late and over the other two days we had in the highlands we saw this species at multiple sites). It is a large, rocky recreational area, with lots of families. Despite a short, late (1800) visit, we had a nice time and saw a few birds by getting away from the crowds at about [18.106376, 42.868652](#). Birds included **Arabian Wheatear** and the first of three migrant **Woodchat Shrikes**, of the distinctive eastern subspecies *niloticus*, of the trip.

G Rojal Alma'a Heritage Village ([18.213263, 42.273535](#)) and adjacent **Wadi Shanaka** (we took the track uphill and away from the highway from the parking spot at [18.195180, 42.275699](#)). It was only at the last minute, on the last afternoon, that we decided to make a visit to these two sites, which lie in close proximity along the main road down some very steep switchbacks from the escarpment near the Al Soudah forests. It is worth considering the weather and the number of other tourists before making this journey as it wouldn't take much to close that road. We had no such problems (despite a lot of thunder at the bottom and some mist on the return ascent) and the area actually proved a very nice spot and well worthwhile to visit, getting us a different mix of birds in marvelously lush wooded habitat. Wadi Shanaka in particular was amazing, full of spectacular butterflies and verdant woodland. The main species of interest were **African Grey Hornbill** (common and easy here; we only saw it once – rather poorly – at one other site) and **Grey-headed Kingfisher** (also obvious and numerous locally). **Pied Cuckoo** also put in a strong performance, almost taking SL's head off when he was so reckless as to try to tape one in, as did **Shining Sunbird** (quite scarce away from these foothill areas); in addition we had our final **Gambaga Flycatcher** of the trip.



Marabah Dam, Rojal Alma'a & Wadi Shanaka – White-throated Bee-eater (OC), African Grey Hornbill (OC), Grey-headed Kingfisher (OC), Shining Sunbird (SL)

H Marabah Dam (easily accessed from Abha to Jizan road, 1hr downhill from Abha). Turn off the highway at [17.891007, 42.383906](#) and follow the graded gravel track round the south side of the dam, and up the wadi beyond – we went c7 km from the main road in total; the road was fine – with care – even for saloon cars to at least there. But if it starts raining heavily, get out quick, least rockslide closes the road by the dam. We made two visits here, first at dawn travelling to Jazan and at dusk the following day on the way back. As for Rojal Alma'a, this is an accessible place to reach some Tihama foothill habitat and the road can be followed for an awful lot further than we went, with good habitat and birding all the way (see [March / April 2022 trip report](#)). The dam itself had very much more water (and a lot fewer birds) than in spring but the wide wadi running upstream was interesting. **White-throated Bee-eater** was a big deal at the time (although they are common on the Tihama; we saw loads; sorry about that, Ted!); we also enjoyed **Pied Cuckoo** (at the very start), **White-browed Coucal** (common on voice), **Little Bittern**, **Bonelli's Eagle**, a flyby **African Grey Hornbill**, **Arabian** and **Upcher's Warblers** and **Nile Valley Sunbird** (pretty common from here onwards towards the coast).

Perhaps the best bird of all came on our evening visit. We had terrific views of a **Plain Nightjar** female (and brief views of a male) on the road by the south side of dam, just before you leave the dam behind – the co-ordinates are at about [17.903812, 42.374959](#). The bird fed unfazed in the headlights for almost 15 mins, giving amazing views.

2 Tanoumah Area (c1hr:20 mins from Abha)

A Wadi Danah As before, we parked at [18.900485, 42.205118](#) and walked down the slope, to cross the bridge and up the other side for c1.5 km or so. This wonderful place was great fun in March and great fun again in August, were all the key birds were soon on show, despite a relatively late arrival (we were on the job by 0830). The star cast comprised **Philby's Partridge** (seen on right hand side about 200m above the bridge), **Asir Magpie** (heard calling, and eventually seen, perching on the buildings where we parked the car) and the first **Arabian Woodpecker** of the trip, flying in and perching near the start of the walk. The back-up cast included **Brown Woodland Warbler** and the only **Long-legged Buzzard** (two) and **Red-backed Shrike** of the trip, amongst a ton of other good stuff. After this we proceeded about 1 km further up-wadi, to some grassy fields where **Arabian Pipit** was display-flighting and, eventually, seen quite well on the ground.



Wadi Danah – Long-legged Buzzard (OC), Asir Magpie (SL), White-throated Robin (DDL)



Mehfar Pak – Brown-Woodland-Warbler (SL), Yemen Warbler (DDL), Little Rock Thrush (OC), Semi-collared Flycatcher (OC)

B Mehfar Park [18.963716, 42.131463](#) and **Al Wahdah Woods** [18.957333, 42.144595](#). These two similar and nearby sites, comprising open juniper woodland, small fields and lots of rocks, again produced the goods, despite a slow start and lots of mist billowing over the escarpment. Mehfar Park, despite being a bit run down, attracts lots of families to picnic; going here late afternoon in tourist season is not advisable; it was getting busy when we left (c1330). Al Wahdah was very quiet, with nobody about on our visit. Our notable species here included, at Mehfar, **Brown Woodland** and **Yemen Warblers**, **Semi-collared Flycatcher** (the only one of the trip; sparring with **Gambaga**!) and **Yemen Serin** (again, the only ones of the trip; this species is scarce – be sure to check all 'Arabian' Serins, especially if they are in the vicinity of large boulders). At Al Wahdah, we there was the trip's sole **African Shikra**, plus **Arabian Woodpecker**, **Arabian Partridge** calling distantly and a lot of **Yemen Linnets** (*right, SL*).



C Around Bihan As in March 2022, we made a stop at [18.666618, 42.231794](#) to try for more magpie action. Despite dense, damp mist causing on and off white-out conditions, we had a lot of success and again met some very friendly locals who were very keen for us to walk all over their land and look for birds, which they were clearly very proud of. **Asir Magpie** (three) were no problem, calling and soon seen and we also scored a biggest tally of **African Pipits** (at least eight; six – adults and juveniles in one stubble field; *right, SL*). Again, birding was good generally, despite the conditions, and variety came from migrants such as **European Roller** and **Masked Shrike**.



3 Jizan Area (c2hrs:45 mins from Abha, via Marabah Dam and Sabya)

A Around Sabya We tried the orchards at Al Hajariah ([17.128828, 42.644785](#)) and, twice, the bigger, more expansive and open fields at Salhabah Farms [17.146348, 42.665342](#). Arabian Golden Sparrow was a faint hope and not realized, but despite over-exposure to the sun (it was late morning and mid afternoon when we visited) we did ok, especially at Salhabah. Species included the first **African Palm Swifts** and **Abdim's Stork** of the trip (there were plenty more of both to come), **Pied Cuckoos** and **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, the only **Black-winged Kites** of the trip (as in April 2022) and no shortage of **bee-eaters** (**Green** and **White-throated**). **Abyssinian Roller** was viewed on distant wires and Black Scrub Robin were much more obvious (*right, SL*).



B Sunbah Farms (Pivot Fields) Easily visited and viewed from a handy, although not especially quiet, road that goes close along the south and east side ([17.013149, 42.654497](#)). Early morning is by far the best, before heading to the shoreline south of Jazan (see below); this site would be a tough gig when the sun gets properly up as there is no shade at all. **Harlequin Quail** were calling everywhere and much easier to see than in April, with multiple birds seen flying and two rather briefly walking along the edge of a rank pivot. **Singing Bushlark** was also straightforward; other species included **Montagu's** and **Marsh Harriers** and lots of **sparrow-larks**. **Abyssinian Rollers** were absent from the booms (where they'd been a slam dunk in April), but we eventually found one, along with **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, from the road running back to the highway on the Sabya side of the site.

C Al Saad Lake This large, complex lake is a must-visit site in the Jazan area, lying c45 mins to 1hr inland, via Abu Arish. Lake levels were very high during the time of our visit, making access to the eastern side proper impossible, at least without a lot of local information. The wadi at [17.042328, 42.990468](#), compacted dust in April, was impassable in August, being under at least three feet of water. No shoreline to speak of was present and most of the waders, terns and all the African Openbill Storks from April had departed or, perhaps, dispersed into small surrounding wetlands where they were much harder to find. Despite all the above, we saw a lot of birds. Key areas were [17.030551, 42.991864](#) to scan the south end of the lake, some wet fields and marshes at [17.030594, 43.000950](#), viewable from the roadside and the west side viewpoint, from low cliffs at [17.055860, 42.964431](#). Species logged included very large numbers of **Glossy Ibis**, **egrets** and **herons** (mainly **Cattle** and **Squacco**, but also one **Intermediate Egret**), a few **Pink-backed Pelicans**, a single **Hamerkop**, **Red-eyed Doves** and scattered swifts, waders and terns. **Zitting Cisticola**, **Singing Bushlark** and **Abyssinian Roller** were also about, as were three flavours of bee-eater and **White-browed Coucal** finally seen well.

We also took in the track running north at [17.020035, 42.986117](#), which leads down to the lake. This might well be an ok place to scan the lake but we visited just before dusk to mainly try for **Nightjars**. We got very lucky with **Nubian**, a male appearing on the track to mob a cat in the half-light but had very poor views only of what was probably **Plain**. Both species were heard singing but not a lot and did not seem very active, despite the humid, buggy conditions. Almost 100 **Abdim's Storks** were in the area, mostly coming to roost on pylons a short way east of the track along the main road.



Al Saad Lake & Jizan – Nubian Nighthjar (SL), Saunders's Tern (OC), Pink-backed Pelican (DDL), Sooty Falcon (DDL)

D Shoreline south of Jizan city – Heritage Centre to Sea Park (beyond the water treatment plant). This strip of shoreline essentially functions as one unbroken site, but we made three eBird checklists, for the Heritage Village area itself ([16.826055, 42.618411](#)), for the shoreline to the south (at about [16.808461, 42.643939](#)) and for the water treatment plant area (flamingoes the worst of the smell at [16.784933, 42.674919](#); also worth visiting the shoreline at [16.771760, 42.677835](#) if the tide is not too far out). Even in late summer, this area was well worth a visit; we spent a bit of over 3hrs covering it. Waders were present in very large numbers and variety; most notable during our visit were **Crab Plovers** (albeit fairly scattered and in rather low numbers), **Curlew Sandpipers** (many), and the odd **Terek** and **Marsh Sandpiper**; we found one **Greater Sand Plover** amongst the **Lessers** and a few **Spur-winged Lapwings** (breeding at the water treatment plant). Terns were also prolific (10 species) including **Bridled** (further out) and **White-cheeked** (on the shoreline) and we had large numbers of herons, and a few pelicans. **Lesser Flamingo** were found very easily and although we only briefly heard one **Mangrove Reed Warbler** singing (Heritage Village), we had several others calling (shoreline to the south). Our most notable find was a **Sooty Falcon** moving south along the beach, panicking all the *Calidrids* and *Sternula* terns. On proper inspection of the latter, we found both **Saunders's** and **Little** present and spent quite some time on the former, getting images and sound recordings. There is still a lot to be learnt about relative numbers of each *Sternula* species in the Red Sea.

E Jizan North Corniche Park Again, the centre of the park at [16.917386, 42.548719](#) was the place to concentrate on for both gulls and migrants. This was visited at the end of a hot morning but **White-eyed Gull** were no problem at all. Indeed, they were much more numerous than earlier in the spring, with almost 300 seen, albeit none being breeding adults. Amongst the White-eyed Gulls we also had some interesting first-cycle **Baltic Gulls**, whilst the **Abdim's Storks** from April had not gone far and we picked up a few migrants (mainly warblers, including **Upcher's**) in the bushes.



Jizan North Corniche Park – White-eyed Gull (SL), Sooty Gull (OC), Baltic Gull (OC)

Superlative SW KSA scenery; clockwise from top right – Al Soudah Waterfall, Marabah Dam, Al Mehfar Park, Wadi Shanaka (all DDL)

