

Southwestern Saudi Arabia

Abha, Tanoumah and Jazan

March–April 2022

Oscar Campbell & Ted Burkett



Asir Magpie – Saudi Arabia's sole endemic bird species

Introduction

This report details an 11-day birding trip to southwestern Saudi Arabia, undertaken in March–April 2022. The areas visited were Abha and Tanoumah on the plateau, Jazan (Jizan) on the Red Sea coast (including the Farasan Islands) and Tihama farmlands and foothills inland including Al Sadd Lake. We found Saudi Arabia to have terrific birding, with a fascinating and prolific mix of southwest highland endemics, northeast African specials, widespread Arabian residents and Palearctic-bound migrants. Arrangements were surprisingly easy to make, food and hotels were good value, and, quite a lot of the time, the landscape and scenery was superb.

Logistics

Flights

We flew into Abha via Saudi Airlines, which flies Abu Dhabi to Riyadh and then onto to Abha. We returned via Jeddah, OC from Abha and TB a few days earlier from Jazan; either way, Jeddah was a bit more convenient as going through Riyadh involved taking the (free) bus from the international to domestic terminal – not tricky, but it took a while, once the waiting around was factored in. Flights were reasonable at about 1500 dirhams/ \$400 US round trip from Abu Dhabi.

Visas and COVID-19 stuff

The visa was pricey, but getting it was not a problem at all – we filled in the online form at <https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/about-e-visa> and had a Visa in about 15 mins, sent as a pdf via email. The cost was approximately USD 125, but it lasts for a year and includes some health insurance for COVID related issues. We also completed the health form online and printed out a version of this to show to anyone who asked us, along with vaccination certifications. We were asked about the latter, once (at Abha airport as we departed) but never the former. We also attempted to download the national COVID App ‘Tawakkalna’ as we initially thought that we wouldn’t get anywhere without. As it turned out, nobody was the slightest bit interested and we were never asked about it, which is just as well as we didn’t have it – it seemed to have caused a serious crash on one Android phone we tried to put it on, and we never did get it to properly work on another phone, nor an iPad. It also seems to be totally reliant on permanent internet access, i.e. data.

Car rental and driving

Renting the car was easy – we used local company Yelo (<https://www.iyelo.com/en>) who had an office at the airport (turn right when you come out of arrivals at Abha). It proved straightforward to get things set up, having booked a week or so in advance. Yelo were quite happy with a UAE Driving License, but we are not sure what the response would have been had we turned up with a non-GCC license; in that case having an International Driving Permit for Saudi is probably a good idea. The included mileage was limited to 200km per day, with additional km charged separately. We brought the car back about 50km over, and got charged for it, plus for the front hubcaps, which had gone missing somewhere en-route. The cost of 2200AED for 11 days included full insurance which was a definitely a good idea, as driving standards in Saudi are unquestionably the worst in the world, bar none. The roads themselves are bad enough, being big, wide and mostly dual carriageway – this seems fine but lots of the U-turns are blocked off, forcing everyone to turn at particular intersections. Then, there are a surprising number of potholes, whilst lane markings are often non-existent. It is not clear if the lack of these is a consequence or cause of the total lack of lane discipline amongst local drivers, or, indeed for that matter, any sort of discipline at all. Driving standards varied from casually apathetic to criminally murderous with the mean somewhere around semi-suicidal; there are loads of police on the road but clearly maintaining any sort of safe driving standards is not part of their remit. In a desperate bid to reduce speeds, there are lots of speed-humps, but some of those are at least as dangerous as the drivers, often being poorly marked (or not marked at all), rarely lit and in the middle of nowhere. The state of the driving is reflected in the state of cars; we hereby challenge you to find a single car on the road today in Saudi that is not dented, chipped or scratched, in quite a few cases to the extent that would render it illegal in most countries.

Navigation would have been tricky without the frequent use of Google Maps (which is not always 100% reliable) – only the biggest road signs had any English and this was not reliable, whilst road layout reflected the usual lack of planning typical in much of Arabia. With sat nav everything became much more bearable, although for some reason the usually (formerly?) reliable maps.me application failed to work completely (on several devices), so we were very reliant on Google Maps. This meant the need for data, which TB arranged. Although normally shunned by OC, both on birding trips and in general, a lot of the birding spots required very precise directions, so being able to access eBird for finding hotspots etc. on the road was very handy and overall having this saved a lot of time and messing around.

Bureaucracy

Amazingly little. Everyone we met, including army guys manning Farasan ferry security, various policemen at road checks (those that weren't asleep) and certainly everyone in the small shops and restaurants we frequented were extremely obliging and friendly. Although very few people spoke good English, all seemed genuinely delighted to have tourists visiting and we got loads of friendly waves, and invitations for tea or meals (and some totally perplexed stares) whilst birding in the highland countryside. All birding sites, perhaps apart from the road through Raidah Protected Area (see below) were easily accessible, and we soon forgot to worry about carrying bins or cameras around, or having them in the back seat of the car.

Accommodation and food

All four hotels we used were booked on www.booking.com and all were very reasonable compared to UAE standards and prices. As well as staying in Abha for four nights with friends, we used the establishments detailed below. Standard Saudi practice is for hotel rooms to be mini apartments - i.e. to come with some basic catering facilities and two bedrooms, so each room came with a small kitchenette, fridge, small cooker, kettle and, sometimes, a few pieces of cutlery or glassware (although the latter cannot be relied on; seemingly locals bring their own). This was handy for early mugs of tea as we headed out pre-dawn and for snacks or meals during the day (important during Ramadan). There were plenty of reasonable and very good value restaurants in Abha and Jazan; it was slim pickings in Tanoumah however. Everywhere we went there were plenty of small mini-markets selling snacks and lunch fare.

- **Tanoumah** (2 nights) at [Aze Hotel Apartments](#). Very nice, fully kitted-out place; in fact the best we stayed at. A basic but tasty Turkish restaurant was 50m along the road, handy for a short walk for dinner. Other eateries weren't too obvious.
- **Jazan** (5 nights): First three nights at [Beauty Rayan 2](#) then two at the nearby [Swiss Blue Hotel](#). The former was ok, but a bit dingy and dark with flakey Wi-Fi; the latter was much better. [Tamarind Restaurant](#) (Indian) a short walk from Beauty Rayan 2 was great and got plenty of business from us.
- **Abha** (1 night): We stayed one night at the [Quartz Executive](#) on the way back. Close to the airport and in a quiet part of town, but not much to eat close by if you arrive late after iftar. But a very comfy room and decent facilities.

Ramadan

On day seven of our visit Ramadan started. This would generally be a good time to avoid Saudi, for obvious reasons, but if we wanted to visit during spring break (which we did), avoiding Ramadan would have meant a delay of this year and the next two so we decided to risk it. It actually wasn't too bad all, although required some planning ahead to buy provisions for breakfast and lunch the night before (although many shops were open during the day). Places we visited in the countryside during the day were really quiet and the roads were probably a bit quieter too, other than during the hour or two before iftar when everyone, starved and totally dehydrated, goes crazy to try and get home in time. Whilst diminishing normal driving standards hardly seemed possible, you can rest assured that this did it.

Equipment

We each brought scopes, bins and cameras, long lenses and sound recording gear. The scope and bins raised a few very brief questions at airport security but no more than is normal in the UAE, and certainly a lot less than you can expect in Jordan or Israel; we were soon on our way. Scopes were definitely useful along the coast for scanning waders, terns etc. Birds of the Middle East 2nd Edition (2010) was perfectly adequate for ID and the only book we took. And we have reasons to believe that the currently-under-preparation 3rd Edition will be even better!

Timing

Being teachers, we chose to visit during our spring break, as the other options (July-August) and December were rather less appealing for various reasons. April is just prior to the start of the main breeding season in much of south west Saudi so overall our timing seemed good for most of species and for general birding; we missed a few summer visitors that were clearly not back (e.g. Grey-headed Kingfisher, White-throated Bee-eater and, most notably Gambaga Flycatcher – rare before early May?) but others were present in good numbers (e.g. Violet-backed Starling and Sooty Falcon on the Farasan Islands). There was a very nice selection of passerine migrants everywhere, and masses of shorebirds along the Red Sea coast. One species we didn't see, Arabian Golden Sparrow, was missed by a tour group earlier in March too, but was last seen in February; we are not sure if this species would be easier earlier in winter.

Weather

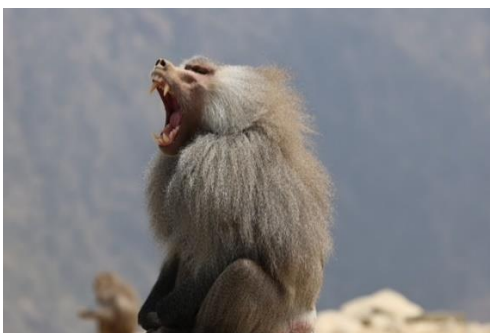
Really nice in the highlands – crystal clear blue skies, really fresh and pleasant; never too hot, and decidedly cool at dawn, when down to about 14°C. Much hotter along the coast – about 26°C at dawn in Jazan but soon rising to 35°C or more and, on days with no breeze, feeling humid and heavy. Quite oppressive at times and definitely good to take a break back indoors for an hour at midday before heading out again. Inland and a bit higher up, e.g. at Fayfa, and Wadi Lajb, it was definitely a lot fresher; up to 32°C but not at all humid.

Acknowledgments, online resources, and media

Most of all we are very grateful to our good friend Jacky Judas and his family, who put us up for four nights, gave us a load of good suggestions with regard to places to visit and joined us in the field on several days, most memorably for a terrific full day run from the top of the escarpment at Raidah to the Tihama of Marabah. We also are extremely grateful to Gregory Askew (<https://www.saudibirding.com/>) for both a terrific website that provided a lot of useful practical information and excellent trip reports, useful before and during the trip, but also lots of gen whilst we were on the road, sometimes in real time. Jem Babbington's website (<https://www.birdsofsaudiarabia.com/>) was also great and very useful, as were Jem's various papers in [Sandgrouse](#) on species such as Asir Magpie, African Pipit etc. As usual, eBird was a very useful resource too although, coming from the UAE, Saudi is extremely poorly covered. We have done our best to add to it, putting pretty much every bird we saw into a checklist and suggesting dozens of personal locations as hotspots that will hopefully make things easier for others coming afterwards. We completed c65 checklists in all, and these are all available online along with hundreds of images. Images are also available directly at [this link](#) (TB) and [this link](#) (OC). OC made many sound recordings during the trip – 68 of these are archived on Xeno-Canto at [this link](#). We have included summary links for checklists arranged by site in the following pages but the sightings from the entire trip are summarized as an eBird Trip Report in the link below:

E-bird Trip Report (maps, images and species lists): Recommended to view

<https://ebird.org/tripreport/57159?welcome=true>



(Hamadryas Baboons - a common sight around Abha and Tanoumah; Sinai Agama and Ghost Crab)

Birding spots

Highlands – Abha and Tanoumah

Birding in the highlands was terrific, in some of the most pleasant weather and finest landscapes in all of Arabia. Common resident birds, fairly easy to find all over the place, included species such as **Fan-tailed Raven**, **Arabian Babbler**, **Abyssinian White-eye**, **Yemen Thrush**, **Arabian Wheatear**, **Yemen Linnet**, **Palestine Sunbird**, **Tristram's Starling**, **Rüppell's Weaver** and **White-spectacled Bulbul**, whilst common migrants, at least during the time of our visit, included various hirundines, **Pied Wheatear** (and smaller numbers of **Northern** and **Isabelline Wheatears**), **Common Redstart** (including *samamisticus*) and **Common Chiffchaff** (interestingly, the latter two were both much commoner in the highlands than on the coast). Also common and widespread were **Pale Crag Martins**, many doing very good impression of Eurasian Crag Martins and causing quite some confusion although we are pretty sure we did not see any Eurasian Crag Martins; that species is likely to be pretty uncommon (at best) in SW Arabia. The aforementioned species are generally not logged or discussed hereafter.



(Top - White-spectacled Bulbul, Palestine Sunbird, Rüppell's Weaver;

Middle - Arabian Wheatear, Yemen Thrush, Common Chiffchaff;

Bottom – Tristram's Starling, Arabian Babbler, Yemen Linnet)

1. Around Abha

A. Abha Dam

Easily accessed and viewed from the parking lot above the lake on the west side – at [18.210345](#), [42.487782](#).

This site was very close to where we were staying in Abha and a great place for a quick introduction to the wonderful birding of the southwest Arabian highlands, having a nice mix of common residents, migrants and lingering winter visitors. Particularly notable records here included **Arabian Waxbill** (seen several times here and at other highland sites; apparently this species can be much harder earlier in the spring and winter), **Olive-rumped Serin**, **Spur-winged Lapwing**, **Hammerkop** (latter two species on far side; rather poor views) and a reasonable selection of wagtails, herons and a few passerine migrants, including **Eurasian Wryneck**. A single **Black Stork** and **Little Swift** were present on one visit, whilst at least one **Red-knobbed Coot**, found a few weeks earlier by Jacky, was present throughout and sometimes gave very good views.



(Arabian Waxbill, Wryneck)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105786546>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904040>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106469415>

B. Al Soudah Waterfall

Easily accessed from a parking layby at [18.225182](#), [42.424974](#). From here is worth exploring both up the track to the mini 'waterfall' and down the wadi on the other side of the road and into the small terraced, scrubby fields. We really liked this place; terrific Arabian birding just 15 mins out of Abha. Well worth visiting more than once.



This was a great place to spend a few hours; we made three visits in all, with lots of song and activity early morning. Most notable species here was **Arabian Eagle Owl**, but the back-up cast was terrific as well: **Yemen Warbler** were quite common in the area, and easily seen right at the pull-in on the road where **Brown Woodland-Warbler** were also noisy, flyover **Hammerkop** was seen each visit (large nest just down-wadi of the pull-in) and we also easily, and repeatedly found **Arabian Partridge**, **Dusky Turtle Dove**, **Little Rock Thrush**, **Arabian Waxbill**, **African Paradise-Flycatcher**, **Long-billed Pipit** and **Violet-backed Starling**. On single dates **Shining Sunbird** (all other records were about 500-1000m lower), **Bruce's Green Pigeon** and a migrant male **White-throated Robin** were seen (latter right on the roadside). The scrubby fields on the lower side of the road easily yielded **Arabian Woodpecker** on two dates and very close, fine views of **Red-breasted Wheatear** on one date.



(Top - Brown Woodland-Warbler, Arabian Eagle Owl, Yemen Warbler;
Bottom - Little Rock Thrush, Long-billed Pipit, Hammerkop)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105786545>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904041>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106412079>,
<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106412143>

C. Raidah Protected Area to Raidah Village

Starting point: [18.207662, 42.409634](#)

Our day here was, in some ways, the best day of the trip, and essentially a line transect from temperate Arabia down the rift into Africa. We started at 0530 and descended off the escarpment and kept heading downhill, arriving at Marabah Dam, well into the Tihama foothills at 1700. Total distance was not too excessive (c50km in all) and we spent plenty of time walking, particularly from dawn until 1000 on the higher slopes of Raidah. There is a barrier at the top of the road with traffic discouraged from the very steep hairpins in the descent; Jacky had arranged permission for us to take this route; I am not sure what the arrangements would be if you turned up unannounced.

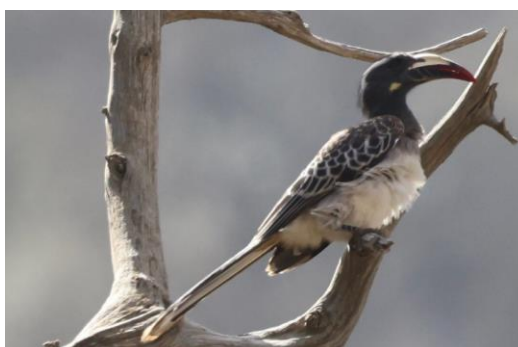
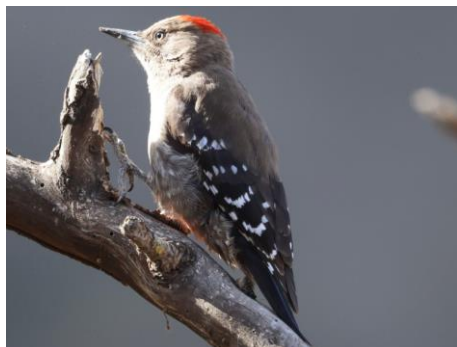




We started a bit before dawn at the very top; within 1km of the barrier we could hear **Arabian Scops Owl** (two or three individuals) and a single **Abyssinian Nightjar** calling, although we failed to see either. Once it got light, species seen easily included **Brown Woodland-Warbler** and **Little Rock Thrush**, both singing everywhere. A particularly productive spot was a lush, vegetated gully below a small area of previously farmed fields (easily found, the only such farmed area between the barrier and Raidah village down in the foothills); walking to the abandoned farmstead soon produced **Arabian Partridge**, **African Paradise Flycatcher** and **Dusky Turtle Dove**. Even better was a prolonged stop at the bottom of the gully where there is a small pool where the gully meets the road. This produced **Yemen Linnet** coming down to drink, **Yemen Warbler** singing and a pair of **Arabian Woodpeckers**; a second pair were a little further downhill as well as several migrants. Raptors were surprisingly sparse (both here and generally in south west Arabia), with only a brief flyover **Bonelli's Eagle** logged; further downhill on the approach to Raidah village we caught up with **Shining**

Sunbird, **Arabian Wheatear** and a single **Long-legged Buzzard**, a nice black morph bird.

The old village of Raidah, obvious on the right at the bottom of the hill, was well worth exploring and we climbed up around the old fort just above the village. Species seen included more **African Paradise Flycatchers**; also **Blackstart**, **Shining Sunbird**, **Violet-backed Starling**, **African Grey Hornbill** and **Bruce's Green Pigeon**. Native desert roses were also wedged into the rocks.



(Top – African Paradise Flycatcher (male), Yemen Warbler, Dusky Turtle Dove;
Bottom- Arabian Woodpecker, African Grey Hornbill, African Paradise Flycatcher (female))

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105785831>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105785857>

D. Wadi Marabah and Marabah Dam

Wadi Marabah runs for c45km from Raidah Village ([18.207668, 42.409634](#)) to Marabah Dam ([17.901806, 42.377681](#)) from where the main road from the coast back uphill to Abha can be joined. The road was mostly well-graded gravel; we drove slowly and made short stops anywhere that looked good, or when we saw something to check. This was our first foray into the Tihama lowlands and, although it was hot, dusty and slow in places, we saw many great birds in the end. Highlights included the only **Sand Partridge** and **Arabian Grey Shrike** of the trip, **Desert Lark**, **Bruce's Green Pigeon**, **Arabian Grey Hornbill**, a total of three **Arabian Woodpeckers**, **Violet-backed Starling**, **Black Scrub Robins** (including two mobbing a **White-browed Coucal**), our first **Masked Shrikes** (a delightfully common migrant in south west Saudi, away from the highlands), plenty of **Shining Sunbirds** and our first **Nile Valley Sunbirds** (another species common in the lowlands).



The wadi ends at Marabah Dam, a fairly small but bird-rich wetland. We found 49 species here with little effort, including a selection of dabbling ducks, freshwater waders including **Spotted Redshank** and **Marsh Sandpiper** and passerine migrants such as **Citrine Wagtail** and various wheatears. Notables included **Whiskered Tern**, **Pink-backed Pelican** and one of only two **Eastern Black-eared Wheatears** on the trip.





(Top - White-browed Coucal, Masked Shrike, Black Scrub Robin; Middle - Violet-backed Starling (m&f), Nile Valley Sunbird; Bottom - Arabian Grey Shrike, Pink-backed Pelican, African Grey Hornbill)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105785535>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105785948>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105786203>

E. Rojan Heritage Village (also called Rijal Almaa) and nearby Wadi Shanakah

We made an afternoon visit here, after spending the morning at Al Soudah waterfall; Rojan was about 1 hour away, down many steep hairpins. This got us into lower hills. Despite being a well-known tourist spot, it was slim pickings with regard to food; we only found a couple of over-priced coffee and cake shops for lunch. As it was rather warm, birding was quite slow, although we easily found **African Grey Hornbill**, **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting**, **Shining Sunbird** and **Little Rock Thrush**, around the village ([18.213263](#), [42.273535](#)). We had a look around there, and at the small park between the village and the main road.



However, the best area was the nearby Wadi Shanakah ([18.195180, 42.275699](#)) which we had seen on the left from the main road a little below the tunnels before we turned right on the final approach to Rojan. A short walk here at 1700 was great, producing the likes of **Arabian Partridge**, **Bruce's Green Pigeon**, **White-browed Coucal** and large flock of **Arabian Waxbills** mixed up with a few **African Silverbills** (a scarce species on this trip).



(Top - African Grey Hornbill, Little Rock Thrush, Blackstart; Bottom - Shining Sunbird; Bruce's Green Pigeon, White-browed Coucal)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105786544>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105786543>

F. Al Habalah

This site was visited once in search of the tricky and patchily distributed Rufous-capped Lark. It is a well-known tourist site in a spectacular position on the edge of the escarpment about 45mins south each of Abha. Because of Ramadan, it was not possible to even get to close to the 'hanging village' on the slope below, and views were not improved by a massive and ugly fence. The lark is not numerous and proved initially tricky, and then non-existent, although an afternoon visit was probably not the best tactic; the arid, undulating hills were very quiet overall, although temperatures were pleasant. We had a prolonged mash around on foot from about [18.047422, 42.842344](#) and then lots more looking en-route to and around the escarpment. Best birds were **Yemen Serin** (on the ugly fence) and a few **Red-breasted Wheatears** (out of five species, including **Arabian**) and a few rather confusing **pipits** that I eventually had down as **Long-billed** (worn) and **Tawny**, much as I wanted them to be African. There is a very nice *Acacia*-choked wadi at [18.071236, 42.854068](#) that would surely repay a closer look (**Arabian Warbler** found easily in a short stop) and a nice village and fields a little further back up the road that would be worth exploring.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106412347>

2. Tanoumah area

This site lies just under 1.5hrs north of Abha, on an easy drive along the escarpment. Many of the birds were broadly similar, but this was the only place that we saw **Asir Magpie** (easily and repeatedly) and **Philby's Partridge** (with rather more difficulty). All sites were fairly close and easy to find; Al Mehfar was quite spectacular, being on the edge of the scarp and with a steep drop off below whilst Wadi Dahna was terrific morning birding, so good that we returned for more the same afternoon. Birding the lush juniper forests and fields of Mehfar, Wahdah and Sharaf Parks amidst a spectacular jumble of rocks in the early morning was a brilliant Arabian experience with monster and range-restricted birds common and conspicuous in a stunning setting. (Cloud over the escarpment edge, Tanoumah - photo from the hotel wall.)



A. Around Bihan (c41 km south of Tanoumah; c77 km north of Abha)

We made a couple of stops here, first on the way north from Abha as advised by Jacky and then an enforced stop as we headed from Tanoumah to the coast, taking road 2452 running west of Bihan down the escarpment. Both stops were the result of **Asir Magpies**. Jacky put us onto a spot (see [18.666618, 42.231794](#)) where easily found them; we then found another group at 40kph on the roadside not too far away at [18.64546, 42.240549](#) (with **Red-breasted Wheatears** in the same field). Additionally, as we headed down the escarpment, we found finally found a nest at about [18.655654, 42.220802](#). Views were great over a prolonged period and we got plenty of photos and some sound recordings. Even without the magpies, birding was good generally and very pleasant along the fields and lanes. For example, we had several encounters with **Arabian Woodpecker** and also stumbled into **Black Redstart** and **Grasshopper Warbler**, the latter unaccountably rare as a migrant just about everywhere in Arabia.



(Top - Asir Magpie, Asir Magpie with nest, Arabian Woodpecker; Bottom - Northern Wheatear, Black Redstart, Red-breasted Wheatear)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904037>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098310>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106099492>

B. Al Mehfar Park



A stunning site ([18.963716](#), [42.131463](#)) that is an easy visit from Tanoumah, and just 10 minutes from our accommodation; we made three visits in all. The views from the escarpment are totally amazing but even better was the diversity of birds in the highland forests. These included abundant **Yemen Thrush**, **Yemen Warbler**, **Brown Woodland-Warbler**, **Little Rock Thrush** and small numbers of **Arabian Warblers** and **African Paradise Flycatchers**, whilst higher up we had **Little Swift** and a passing **Griffon Vulture**. **Arabian Scops Owls** were moderately vocal from about 1845 and again up until 0545 but not very inquisitive to playback; we also faintly heard **Abyssinian Nightjar** and what was almost certainly **Arabian Eagle Owl** calling far off in the distance. **Arabian Partridge** showed up in the morning.



(Griffon Vulture, Violet-Backed Starling, Little Rock Thrush)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904039>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105906077>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105969141>

C. Al Wahdah Woods

This site is very close to Al Mehfar and easily visited en-route or afterwards at [18.957333](#), [42.144595](#). We made a late afternoon visit to the fields and spent an early morning in the sunny open forests below the cliffs. Both were quite good; in addition to commoner species, the fields got us **Scrub Warbler** whilst the forests in the early morning yielded both **Philby's** and **Arabian Partridges** (brief views however), **African Shikra** and plenty of **African Paradise Flycatchers**; as at nearby Mehfar a few **Griffons** floated over and swifts included quite good looks at a flock of **Alpine Swifts**.





(Streaked Scrub Warbler, Fan-tailed Raven, Arabian Wheatear)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904038>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105969546>

D. Al Sharaf Park We made just one visit here, making a short walk starting from near [18.948545](#), [42.149820](#) in the middle of the day. Broadly similar to the previous two sites, but we were pleased to fall in with a small group of **Yemen Serin** here (seen at only one other site on the trip; this species is far scarcer and more localized – to rocky cliffs and their immediate environs - than Olive-rumped Serin) and we heard **Arabian Woodpecker**.



(Yemen Serin)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904031>

E. Wadi Dahna & Wadi Dahna Waterfall

Wadi Dahna was a terrific early morning site, being a rugged wadi with lots of scrubby fields and boulders. We parked near [18.900485](#), [42.205118](#) and spent a lot of time scanning the ridges just to the north. In all, we spent nearly three hours between here and the nearby waterfall site (ok but much less interesting overall) in the morning and had such a good time we went back for another look in the afternoon. One key target was **Philby's Partridge**; they were quite vocal but distant in the morning and it took a lot of scanning and quite some luck until we finally saw one appear on the ridge. We also had at least one **Arabian Partridge** here; later in the afternoon we had two more **Philby's** flying. The back-up cast



was tremendous, with the likes of **Arabian Babbler**, **Warbler** and **Wheatear** all common, a couple of **Arabian Waxbills**, very good look at **African Shikra** at the bridge, **Long-billed Pipit**, **Brown-necked Raven** and both **Arabian Woodpecker** and **Asir Magpie** found without trying (both in the morning only). Also in the morning, in a small field by the bridge, we found **Eastern Cinereous Bunting**, whilst the same spot in the afternoon yielded a male **White-throated Robin** and high flock of migrant **European Bee-eaters**. The waterfall was a lot less productive and we only made two short stops for a quick look but still had three species of swifts, **African Paradise Flycatcher** and a heard-only **Arabian Woodpecker**.

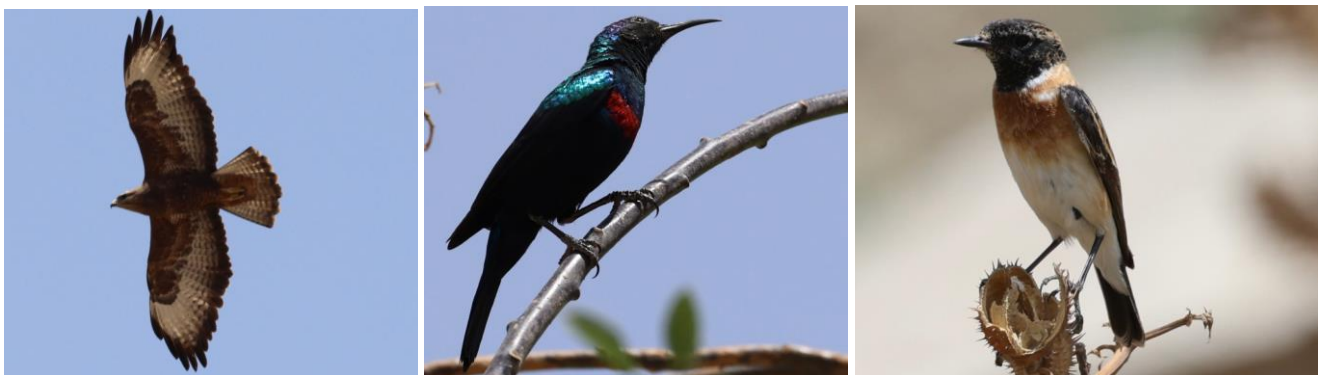


(Top - Philby's Partridge, African Shikra, Arabian Partridge; Bottom – E. Cinereous Bunting, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, African Paradise Flycatcher)

Wadi: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904035>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904030>
 Waterfall: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904033>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098311>

F. Wadi Tarj

The dam and wadi below are at [19.040041](#), [42.215930](#). We tried a few hours in the afternoon to visit some hotter, drier, *Acacia* dominated wadis and hillside i.e. **Shining Sunbird** territory. The journey from the main road just south of Tanoumah was quite fun, soon involving the likes of **Steppe Buzzard**, **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear**, **Arabian Warbler** and migrant **Green Sandpiper** and **Willow Warbler** sharing a tiny muddy puddle below a **Hamerkop's** nest (see image right). This wadi was pretty dry, as was the one below the dam but both would be very interesting when wet. At Wadi Tarj, we climbed up to the dam, which had water but few birds bar **Barn Swallows**. The area below the wall had lots of irritating stonechats; be sure to write and let us know if you can confidently assign them to African (far more likely?) or Siberian.



(Steppe Buzzard, Shining Sunbird, African Stonechat – probably...)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S105906076>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S105904032>

Coastal areas

Overall, the coast was hot and steamy and being a lot busier, with sprawling ‘development’ and a lot more traffic, a lot less fun. One exception to this would be the Farasan Islands where we made a day trip; this was pristine and relaxed and would have warranted an overnight stay. However, everywhere the birding was terrific and access to the beach and shorelines was surprisingly easy in many places where there were numerous swimming and picnicking facilities available but not being used. Species such as **African Palm Swift**, **African Collared** and **Namaqua Doves**, **Yellow-billed Kites**, **Pink-backed Pelicans**, **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** and **Black-crowned Sparrow Lark** were all locally common and easy. Shorebird diversity was superb, as was that of gulls and terns, whilst passerine migrants easy to find too.

1. Al Birk area

We made just one visit here, spending about four hours in all on the afternoon en-route from Tanoumah to Jazan. Our first stop was Ameq beach ([18.376521, 41.447511](https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098309)), found by chance pretty much as soon as we hit the Red Sea. This gave an immediate indication of the fun to come, as we had a nice selection of close waders, with **Crab Plover** second up (following **Kentish**) and very close. We then followed the coast round and out the Al Birk peninsula pretty much as far as we could go (starting at [18.266144, 41.510215](https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098308); total distance there and back c15km). Although we failed to get into any good mangroves to look for reed warblers or white-eyes, we did scan plenty of shoreline and had a good selection of waders, very easy **Greater Hoopoe-Larks** (a common species locally), a scattering of migrants in the beachside park and **African Collared Doves** right at the end. **Brown Booby** giving good views offshore was more of a surprise, but we saw another off Jazan (and then loads on the Farasan ferry).



Of more academic interest, we found our first *Sternula* terns, and having a rather deep interest in these from recent work in the UAE, we were interested to establish that the one we saw well was **Little Tern**. This is not what the books would have suggested (Porter & Aspinall 2010 don't map Little for the southern Red Sea) but in fact all *Sternula* we confirmed on this trip (c33 birds in all out of c45 *Sternula* seen, most in the Jazan area but also on the Farasans) were **Little** and we didn't certainly see, or even get a faint whiff, of Saunders's at all. This is contrary to some other reports; which may involve IDs based on the proposed distribution rather too literally. One failure of our own was with Goliath Heron here, and everywhere else around Jazan too; this species clearly requires some better gen than we had and it cannot be relied on to simply bumping into one.



(Crab Plover, Greater Hoopoe Lark, Brown Booby, the first Little Tern)

Ameq Beach <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098309>, Al Birk peninsula <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098308>

2. Jazan area

A. Heritage Village area

An easy to access and birdy estuarine / mangrove site 10 min south from the town centre. Several rare African herons (Black-headed and Black) had been reported here in late winter but, we failed to find them on three visits. Bird numbers were quite low at high tide, but there was a lot more at low tide. One key target here was the mangrove inhabiting subspecies of **Eurasian Reed Warbler**; this was common and easy to hear and see in the early morning. Other species included **Crab Plover** seen well every time, easy **Pink-backed Pelicans**, a good selection of terns (seven species; the only site with good numbers of **White-cheeked Terns** repeatedly), **Brown Booby** offshore and a few migrants here and there including **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, **Barred Warbler** and **Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin**.



(Reed Warbler (Mangrove), another Little Tern, Pink-backed Pelican)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098304>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106242590>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106312845>

B. Water Treatment Plant

This smelly but birdy place was further down the road from the Heritage Village (10 mins); en-route there was a lot of mud and mangroves well worth scanning for rare herons (we failed to find any). The main area is the outflow from the WTPP marked by hundreds of **Greater and Lesser Flamingoes**; pull in at [16.784933, 42.674919](#). Lesser Flamingo is an extremely local visitor to Saudi but has made nests here in the past (they were nest-building in Feb. 2022 but had given up by early April). Other than the flamingoes, wader numbers and variety were excellent, including **Marsh Sandpiper** and **Spur-winged Lapwing** very close; there were also plenty of **White-winged** and **Whiskered Terns**. **Mangrove** (and **Clamorous**) **Reed Warblers** were easily audible (and moderately visible) in along the raised track (a possible spot for white-eyes too, but we didn't see any). **Greater Spotted Eagle** and **White-throated Robin** were also here and we found a lot more shorebirds a few km further south to Sea Park (view from road and bench area at [16.771760, 42.677835](#)). This was visible in the haze from the flamingo area but great close up, although birds are quite distant and hazy if the tide is low or the heat of the day severe. Here we had the only **Greater Sand Plover** and **Broad-billed Sandpiper** (at least 50) of the trip, plus good numbers of **Caspian Terns**, **Little Terns** (flock of 24, all carefully checked), and amidst a nice range of other stuff, we had a passing **Brown Booby** and **Brown Noddy** (the only one away from the Farasan island ferry).



(Lesser Flamingo, Spur-winged Lapwing, African Collared Dove)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098303>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106312885>

C. North Corniche Park

Despite being a relatively sterile grassland with limited shade from many isolated palm trees, this proved an excellent place for migrants. It is a large area and, at least during the day and early mornings of Ramadan, not disturbed at all. However, it is also a tricky place to find certain migrants; warblers are good at hiding in the palm trees, for example and rarely showed well. Stuff that perches out, e.g. shrikes, or on the ground, e.g. robins, were much easier. Although migrants were scattered over the whole park, the best bit proved to be a line of little bushes lining a central pathway in the middle of the park (exactly [16.917386, 42.548719](#)), and the palms nearby. This area proved a magnet for **White-throated Robins** and **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robins**, which reached 8 and c15 respectively. **Shrikes (Masked and Turkestan)** and a few wheatears and wagtails were also scattered over the place each visit, whilst other stuff included single **European Nightjar** and **Wryneck** and a handful of **Barred Warblers**, **Eurasian Reed Warblers** and, especially, **Blackcaps**. A single **Abdim's Stork** was present each visit too, as were a few **Black Scrub Robins** (not clear if these were resident or migrant, but they weren't singing). The park was also excellent for **Baltic Gulls** (several present on the lawns in the early mornings) and **White-eyed Gulls** (easy to find a few on the rocks off the seawall, along with a few other gulls, terns, and the odd wader and pelicans).



(Top- White-eyed Gull, Abdim's Stork, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin;

Bottom- African Silverbill, White-throated Robin, European Nightjar)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106098302>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106276475>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106312840>

D. Farasan Islands

Getting there and other logistics – this looked like being the tricky bit as we could find very little information online about getting there. In the end we went along to the ticket office (at [16.889051, 42.541148](#)) between the main port area and Turk Castle (twice –closed first time round) and, once in, easily booked a ticket for the next day (bring passport) including for the car (have the paperwork from the rental company). The ferry is completely free; however, the car was not guaranteed; it was first come first served. We were told to turn up at the port the next day between 0530 and 0600 for the 0700 sailing (which finally left 0715). The port is accessed at [16.894342, 42.539972](#). There are a lot of security checks and messing around before boarding the ferry but the army guys were friendly and everything worked out. The ferry was rather slower than

expected and there was some more faffing about at the other end, so it was 0915 before we were free on the island. Coming back, the only ferry leaves at 1530 and we were advised to be back by 1430 to be sure of getting onto it. Thus there was a lot of hanging around for just over five hours on the island. However, the islands were great; very quiet and beautiful, and we saw quite a lot, despite being there in the middle of the day and it being a bit of a whistle stop tour. Staying overnight would be far preferable and late afternoon and early morning would surely be very pleasant indeed. There are a couple of hotels in the main town, but we couldn't find any way of booking them and were not sure what would happen if we just turned up, so stuck to a day trip. As it was Ramadan, we didn't try to find somebody who would could take us out to the smaller islands via a boat for some snorkeling and we didn't try to use any shops; we brought all water, breakfast and lunch with us, bought in Jazan the night before.

Birding and stuff – the islands are low, arid and very sparsely populated and vegetated. They were also pretty hot and more or less shadeless, although not too humid as there was a reasonable breeze. The coastline was pristine with loads of nice beaches, intertidal mud, small islands and sandbars and, in places, areas of mangroves. We covered quite a large distance in the car, cruising around and stopping at a few nice beaches and anywhere we saw a something from the road. We also visited the (closed) heritage village (at Al Qessar) between the town and port on the way back. Overall, even without being able to visit the small outer islands or finding anything good really unusual from the beaches we visited, the place was well worth seeing and coupled with a lot nice seabirds from the ferry, a day well-spent, although we did wish we had more time. We failed to find Goliath Heron and did not find any nesting seabird colonies (both probably hard or very hard with limited time and by sticking to the main roads) but we saw pretty much all the seabirds we could have expected well from the ferry (bar Red-tailed Tropicbird), a reasonable number of waders and gulls on the shorelines, a nice selection of migrants scattered around about and an eclectic but interesting selection of resident birds. And they were islands, which are always nice to visit anywhere. The total number of bird species recorded on the island and ferry was 58.

Birds along the shorelines and beaches included a reasonable range of waders at low densities, but including frequent **Crab Plovers**, small numbers of **Pink-backed Pelicans** and **Western Reef Egrets**, **Osprey**, **Sooty Gulls** (plenty; just two **White-eyed**) and a small number of terns, including two **Little** confirmed and a few more distant *Sternula*. All migrants were incidental but included a scattering of wheatears and shrikes (including **Masked**), a female **White-throated Robin** with a male **Common Redstart** in one of the few acacia clumps I examined closely, passing hirundines (including a few **Red-rumped Swallows**) and odd **Yellow Wagtails** and **Red-throated Pipits** on any grassy areas. Less expected was **Steppe Eagle**, soaring over the heritage village at Al Qessar. Resident breeding landbirds are not common but we saw masses of **Black-crowned Sparrow Larks**, **Crested Larks** and a few **Greater Hoopoe Larks**. Interestingly flocks of sparrow larks were seen gathering on wires at Abu Twoq at the north end of the ‘north’ island. We also had a few **Black Scrub Robins**, clearly breeding locally and even **Egyptian Vulture**, an otherwise very hard species in Saudi, at least in the southwest. One of the few **Brown-necked Ravens** of the trip also appeared.

The ferry there and back had many birds almost all the way. There was no outside access on the ferry; just get a seat by the window. Four species of tern included **Bridled** and **White-cheeked** and also lots of **Brown Noddies** whilst **White-eyed** was the commonest gull (also numerous in the port at Jazan). **Brown Boobies** were the most common of all and gave great views whilst a particular highlight and nice finale was three (early?) returned **Sooty Falcons**, easily seen on the islets just off the Farasan port on the return trip – you want to sit on the right hand side as you leave to look for them.



(Egyptian Vulture, Pink-backed Pelicans, Black-crowned Sparrow Larks and Crested Larks)

Ferry journey and back	https://ebird.org/checklist/S106176952 , https://ebird.org/checklist/S106176890
On the islands	https://ebird.org/checklist/S106177065 , https://ebird.org/checklist/S106177151 , https://ebird.org/checklist/S106177262

Lowlands areas inland of Jazan:

A. Sabya Farms area



We made two visits to this general area, an afternoon one followed by an early morning return, in a vain search for Arabian Golden Sparrow. We tried [17.146348, 42.665342](#) first (producing the first **Singing Bushlark** and only **Black-winged Kite** of the trip) but found the small fields and *Zizyphus* orchards at Al Hajariah ([17.128828, 42.644785](#)) rather more fun. Species seen included **Nile Valley Sunbird**, lots of **African Collared Doves**, **White-browed Coucal** (common by voice), and plenty of **Arabian Babblers** and **Masked Shrikes** amongst other species. Several *Pernis* were hard to view but smelt like **Crested Honey-Buzzard** and the one that was seen a bit better looked like it too. Best of all, however, was a fabulous late evening flock of **Hypocolius** coming in to roost and giving splendid views in the treetops, almost managing to bring a tear to the eye of three battle-hardened UAE veterans; for anyone who hasn't spent many years in the Middle East, that is going to be one of the moments of the trip. There is a site ([17.167920, 42.693009](#)) for **Nubian Nightjar** not far away – we heard them singing distantly here and had poor views of one flying close by.



(Singing Bush Lark, Hypocolius, Nile Valley Sunbird)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106021052>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106060135>
Al Hajariah: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106021189>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106060122>

B. Highway 55 Pivot Fields (Sunbah Farms) between Jazan and Sabya

These large pivot fields, easily visible on the right hand side of the highway, approximately halfway between Jazan and Sabya (not far after the massive, 3D green 'Jazan' sign on the roadside) are easily birded from a handy road that goes close along the south and east side of them ([17.013149, 42.654497](#)). We stopped here both in the afternoon en-route to Sabya and the following morning. Harlequin Quail was easy to hear at dawn by walking into a large, half-cut field; multiple birds were singing and we eventually saw one. **Singing Bushlark** and, to a lesser extent, **Zitting Cisticola** were also quite common here, along with the expected



pivot field migrants such as **Yellow Wagtails**, **Red-throated Pipits** and **European Bee-eaters**; we also had a terrific flock of 40 **Lesser Kestrels** on the afternoon stop, with a handful left next morning. Other raptors were rather few, however, bar a few **Steppe Buzzards**. Things like **Nile Valley Sunbird**, **Rüppell's Weaver** and **Black Scrub Robin** were all common residents and the field favored by **Lesser Kestrels** also yielded a very nice pair of **Abyssinian Rollers** that gave close views when we walked in.



(Abyssinian Roller, Zitting Cisticola, Lesser Kestrel)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106021519>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106060086>

C. Jazan Dam (Al Saad Lake)

This superb site was visited twice, both times in the afternoon. It was still hot and hazy at 1500 on the first day, but by 1700 had cooled off nicely. We viewed from the southwest and southeast ends; the former ([17.055860](#), [42.964431](#)) provides a good panorama and there is a small waterside park ([17.058893](#), [42.962501](#)) nearby with limited shade and facilities but latter ([17.051220](#), [42.974508](#)) allowed us to get much closer to things and walk around and explore more; as the sun went down the light became very nice.



This was the most species-rich site we visited in Saudi; two visits were sufficient reach almost 80 species. These included some good ones, not least a long-staying group of **African Openbills**, part of a remarkable influx into Arabia in summer 2021 before which the species was unrecorded on the peninsula, but which saw birds reach Dhofar and the UAE, and even west India. Wetland birds were well represented generally, and included small groups of **Abdim's Storks**, flocks of **Eurasian Spoonbills** and small numbers of **pelicans** (**Great White** seen once), with a plenty of **marsh** and **Gull-billed Terns** and a nice selection of freshwater waders (including **Collared Pratincoles**, multiple **Spotted Redshanks** and the only **Pacific Golden Plovers** of the trip). The scrubby areas and damp grassland fringing the lake on the east side were quite good for migrants, particularly **Masked Shrike** (plenty) and **doves**, including **Red-eyed** and a few **Dusky Turtles** (the only ones we saw in the lowlands) and, on the second visit, produced a nice view of **Helmeted Guinea fowl** (others heard calling). The only **Abyssinian Rollers** at or near this site were seen on the road from Fayfa to the lake, where they were abruptly obvious on the wires for a short stretch. Species like **Arabian Waxbill** (large flock), **White-browed Coucal**, were also about, with the likes of **Desert Lark** and **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting** on the more rocky areas on the west side. The most controversial bird of the trip was a potential Lesser Moorhen (see photo below) seen only by TB; however, as this would have been the first country record and there was a lack of consensus among experts consulted, it has been recorded as Moorhen sp. Additional expert opinion is welcomed.



Another reason for visiting the east, however, was around (specifically just beyond – i.e. on the lake side) the dusty mesquite wadi you need to cross (easy even in a saloon car) a km or so before the lake; this had several calling **Nubian Nightjars** each evening just before proper darkness and flying birds weren't too tricky to see; Spotted Thick-knee is surely likely here too; we had a *Burhinus* sp. flying but it was too dark to sort out.



(Top - White-browed Coucal, African Openbill, Arabian Waxbills;
Bottom - Pink backed Pelican, White-winged Tern, mystery Moorhen)

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106099494>, <https://ebird.org/checklist/S106272278>

D. Fayfa area

This sprawling hill village was visited in an attempt to see somewhere new and get away from the heat of the day in Jazan. We certainly managed that; the area is about 8°C cooler with a nice breeze and no humidity at all. It is also a handy place to spend a few hours in the middle of the day and then make a visit to Al Saad lake, which is not too much of a diversion on the way back to Jazan. Being somewhat unsure about exactly where to go, we drove to the highest point we could (exactly where isn't totally obvious on an online map...) and spent a while slowly walking the lanes and admiring the view. Birding was slow, but included great views of **Red-rumped Swallows** and the only **Booted Eagle** of the trip plus a few migrants including **Steppe Buzzard** and both **Little** and **Alpine Swifts**. The flowery edges and gardens supported lots of butterflies.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106275546>

E. Wadi Lajb

This spectacularly steep, sheer and well-vegetated wadi was visited en-route from Jazan to Abha; this added about 100km to the journey. Roads were good and we parked at [17.592425](#), [42.928474](#) and walked down the canyon. Driving, even in a low saloon, would have been possible but walking was a lot more fun. Once we got to the pool where the water trucks were filling up, we turned sharp left and clambered and waded upstream for perhaps 1km. It was a really nice place, although, at least in afternoon, not too birdy (see checklist). However, by far our most authentic looking Hamadryas baboons were here, the pools were full of fish and Odonata, **African Grey Hornbill** showed nicely and it looks a good bet for Desert (Hume's Tawny) Owl at night. After leaving here, en-route to Abha and on the roadside west of Al Fatiha (see checklist below for approximate location) we lucked onto our only **Dark Chanting-Goshawks** of the trip, on roadside poles well after sunset.

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S106411770>

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