

Oman – Arabia's Finest Birding

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly overnight to Muscat
Day 2-4	Batinah Coast & Al Hajar Mountains
Day 5	Quiryat, Sur & Khawr Jirama
Day 6	Barr Al Hikman
Day 7	The Empty Quarter & Al Ghaftayn
Day 8	Muntasar to Salalah
Day 9-12	Salalah area
Day 13	Fly to London

Departs

November and February

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy walks, but in a hot climate

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code OMN02).

Highlights

- Exceptional birding
- Search reliable sites for Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, Yemen Serin & Crab-Plover.
- A pelagic for Persian Shearwater, Jouanin's Petrel & Sea Turtles.
- A host of other excellent birds on the eastern and western limits of their range.
- Led by a Naturetrek leader and a local guide.



From Top: Crab-plover, Omani coast & Grey Hypocolius



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Introduction

Oman, with its golden deserts, framed by the shimmering Arabian Sea and the Al Hajar and Dhofar Mountains, together with its rich and intriguing history and welcome winter warmth, is becoming an ever-more popular birdwatching destination. Alongside specialist desert birds, its location on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula ensures a rich mix of other European, African and Asian species, including a wide range of passage migrants and large numbers of overwintering eagles, storks and waders.

Along with all of the land-based birding, we will also have a couple of boat trips out to sea. One, from Muscat, will take us around the offshore island of Al Fahl which is a known site for the highly sought-after Sooty Falcon until mid-November. (Please note that this species will not be seen on February trips). The second trip, from Mirbat in the far south, will give us the opportunity to see Persian and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Jouanin's Petrels and a range of other seabirds plus, hopefully, some sea turtles or cetaceans.

In the middle of the tour, we'll traverse the length of the country from Muscat in the north to Salalah in the south, an epic three day journey of 700 miles or so, which we undertake in comfortable vehicles, making lots of interesting stops along the way. The holiday ends with a five night stay in one comfortable hotel in Salalah, giving us ample time to explore this exceptionally rich birding area.



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

London

We depart London Heathrow for a direct overnight flight to Muscat, Oman, with Oman Air.

Day 2

Batinah Coast

On arrival at Muscat airport in the early morning, we will be met by our local driver and guide, and drive the short distance into Muscat city to check in to our hotel and enjoy a bit of breakfast. Suitably refreshed, we'll set out for a gentle first day.

We'll first visit a bird-rich estuary in town, where we can expect to find Terek Sandpiper, Greater and Tibetan Sand Plovers and other waders, plus our first Delicate Prinias, Indian Rollers and raptors.

We'll then head north along the coast to the low-lying, beach-fringed headland of Ras As Sawadi, with its hinterland of lagoons, sandflats, farmland and scrub covered dunes. This interesting area will provide a great introduction to Omani birding. We can expect to find a wide range of waders, gulls and terns, including Kentish Plover, Slender-billed and Sooty Gulls, and Greater Crested Terns. There's likely to be an Osprey or two fishing, while around the rocky islands offshore we'll need to keep a sharp eye open for Socotra Cormorants or a lingering Sooty Falcon (Oct/Nov only). In the scrub, dunes and farmland, we will look for Desert Wheatears, Grey Francolins, Indian Rollers and parties of Arabian Green Bee-eaters.



Arabian Green Bee-eater

Overnight: Muscat

Day 3

Muscat

After a welcome night's sleep, we'll head north out of Muscat and inland into the Al Hajar mountains, to an area called the Al Ghubrah 'bowl'. Surrounded by spectacular mountain peaks, we'll explore the plains, wadis and canyons of this excellent area, and search for such exciting species as Arabian Babbler, Long-billed Pipit, Hume's and Red-tailed Wheatears, Menetries's and Plain Leaf Warblers, Streaked Scrub Warbler and Striolated Bunting. With luck, we may find a covey of Sand Partridges, or even some exquisitely-marked Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. Keeping our eyes on the skylines, we'll look out for raptors which could include Eastern Imperial, Greater Spotted and Bonelli's Eagles, or a mighty Lappet-faced Vulture.

After lunch in the nearby town of Nakhal, where we will visit both the hot springs and the magnificent restored fort, we'll return to Muscat and explore Qurum Park, where we can expect to find Indian Rollers, Ring-necked Parakeets, all three local species of bulbuls, Purple Sunbirds, and perhaps some wagtails and pipits foraging on the irrigated lawns, or a shrike or two in the trees. Qurum Park has a proven track record for passage migrants, and more or less anything could turn up here, so we'll be keeping our eyes open! The estuary here is always worth a look too, and with luck we'll find Western Reef and Little Herons, plus an exciting range of waders, gulls and terns.

Overnight: Muscat.

Day 4

Muscat

We'll start the day with a visit to the Al Ansab lagoons, just a short drive from our hotel. The lagoons have been formed by pumping surplus water into settling ponds, creating a varied landscape of reedy wetland, trees and pools. The water company has worked hard to develop the area as a nature reserve and educational resource, and it has become an excellent place for birds.

The reeds and scrub hold Clamorous Reed Warblers, Delicate Prinias and Indian Silverbills, while colourful Citrine Wagtails forage along the marshy edges. The pools themselves should provide us with many other wetland species, with possibilities including (Grey-headed) Purple Swamphen, Purple Heron, Garganey, Black-winged Stilt, Red-wattled Lapwing, Pin-tailed Snipe, Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpipers and Temminck's Stint. Meanwhile, Whiskered and White-winged Terns are often seen hawking for insects above the ponds, Western Marsh Harriers and Ospreys regularly hunt over the area, and we have a good chance of finding a Greater Spotted Eagle. Whatever happens, there will be plenty to see!



Sooty Falcon © Chris Griffin



Spinner Dolphins

Later, we will head out into the open waters of the Gulf of Oman in search of a number of pelagic species, and during the right time of year, Sooty Falcon. Al Fahl Island, where the falcons nest, will be our target, but along the way we will look out for a range of seabirds, potentially including Red-billed Tropicbird, Red-necked Phalarope, Bridled Tern, and Persian Shearwater. Cetacean sightings are likely too, and may include Common, Spinner or Bottlenose Dolphins, which often bow-ride alongside the vessel, or even a Bryde's Whale. The boat trip will last between two and three hours, but please note this may change due to local weather conditions or sightings on the day.

We'll finish the day a little inland in the arid canyon country around the village of Yiti, where we might find Egyptian Vulture, Desert Lark, Sand Partridge, Asian Desert Warbler and have a very good chance of seeing the very smart Humes's Wheatear. We have even found Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse in the past here.

Overnight: Muscat

Day 5

Quriyat, Sur and Khawr Jirama

Today we will start with a short visit to the Grand Sultan Qaboos Mosque. Those who wish can venture inside to fully appreciate this magnificent building, a quintessential piece of Omani culture, which contains the world's largest chandelier, and the world's largest single-piece carpet! Outside, the formal gardens provide habitat for Purple Sunbirds, bulbuls, Laughing Doves and a variety of other common bird species.

We then bid farewell to Muscat and start heading east. Having driven along the new coastal highway past some dramatic mountain scenery, we'll stop to explore the estuary at Quriyat. The mudflats here support an impressive range of waders and herons, while the gull and tern flocks on the beach are worth checking for Pallas's Gulls and Caspian Terns, both of which winter here in good numbers. This is a famous spot of Egyptian Vultures too, and we are likely to see a number, both in the air and on the ground, while other raptors might include Osprey, and either of the regular *Aquila* eagles: Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial. The nearby salt pans may attract Greater Flamingoes and Black-necked Grebes, and in October 2025 our group saw a first for Oman: Red-necked Grebe!



Crab Plover

From Quriyat we travel on through Sur where traditional dhows are still built to Khawr Jirama. If we are lucky with the tide, this lovely spot, a small intertidal basin, will bring us some excellent birding. We're likely to find a host of waders including frenetic Terek Sandpipers racing around in their characteristic mad-cap fashion and both Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers, plus a nice range of gulls and terns. Beyond these excitements though, it is here that we hope to find our first Crab

Plovers. There are usually at least a few of these extraordinary and charismatic waders here so we'll keep our fingers crossed and our eyes open.

From Khawr Jirama it's a short distance to our overnight accommodation in a comfortable hotel in Assilah. After dinner, we'll round the day off for those that wish to, with a visit to a nearby beach to see Green Turtles coming in to lay their eggs.

Overnight: Assilah

Day 6

Barr Al Hikman

After a brief early morning look around our surroundings at Assilah which may well produce the likes of Desert and Isabelline Wheatears, Tawny Pipit and Southern Grey Shrike, we'll continue our journey. Our principal destination is the legendary Barr al Hikman some three hours' drive south. Our route takes us through some interesting desert scenery and it's always worth keeping a look out for exciting roadside birds like sandgrouse, Hoopoe Larks or Cream-coloured Coursers.

Barr al Hikman is a vast intertidal basin that supports enormous numbers of wintering and passage birds. Indeed, it is the most important wetland for birds in the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. Its sheer size makes it a daunting place for birders and in our short visit we'll inevitably only scratch the surface but we will get a clear impression of the scale of the place and the fantastic numbers of herons, gulls, terns and waders present. We'll see vast flocks of birds stretching away into the distance and amongst them we hope to see Crab Plovers in good numbers and to find some of the Great Knot that winter here, usually in association with large flocks of Bar-tailed Godwits. When we're finished at Barr Al Hikman we'll head on towards the industrial port city of Duqm another couple of hours further south. En-route, time permitting, we'll stop at one of a number of attractive wadis where we have a good chance of finding Menetries's Warblers, Red-tailed and Arabian Wheatears and a range of other exciting species.

Overnight: Duqm.

Day 7

The Empty Quarter and Al Ghaftayn

In the morning we'll visit a freshwater wetland along the coast a little south of Duqm which is a noted spot for Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse coming to drink and often holds a nice range of wetland birds which can include Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Caspian, Gull-billed and Saunder's Terns, Pacific Golden Plover, Temminck's Stint and Broad-billed Sandpiper. The acacia lined wadis en-route sometimes hold Spotted Thick-knee and the open desert is good for Cream-coloured Coursers, Hoopoe Larks, Black-crowned Sparrow Larks and both Desert and Isabelline Wheatears.

In the afternoon we head inland and into the famous Empty Quarter, a vast, flat, featureless, stony plain where Brown-necked Ravens are often the only visible wildlife. Our destination is the remote desert guesthouse at Al Ghaftayn. Once a formidable oasis for birds with its irrigated gardens and trees, Al Ghaftayn is now somewhat neglected, a shadow of its former self. Nevertheless what vegetation remains is always worth a look and our recent visits have turned up Red-breasted Flycatcher, Isabelline Shrike, Oriental Turtle Dove and even the legendary Grey Hypocolius.



Grey Hypocolius

Overnight: Al Ghaftayn

Day 8

Muntasar to Salalah

After an early breakfast at Al Ghaftayn we'll head off into the desert dawn. Our destination, about an hour further south, is the oasis of Muntasar. Fed by underground springs, Muntasar is an important water source for the local people and their livestock and there is an extensive area of date palms and other trees plus some marshy pools with varying levels of water depending on the season. The whole area is inevitably excellent for birds and is especially noted as a drinking place for sandgrouse, particularly Spotted but also Crowned and Chestnut-bellied. Our visit is timed to give us the best chance of seeing some of these wonderful birds as they fly in and assemble to drink but we'll also hope to see a good range of other species. These may include Long-legged Buzzard, Pallid Harrier, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Isabelline and Red-tailed Shrikes, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Bluethroat and Citrine Wagtail. There are often waders such as Temminck's Stint and Pin-tailed Snipe to be seen too and rarer species like White-breasted Waterhen. Indeed, we should expect the unexpected!

After Muntasar we continue our drive south across the Empty Quarter. Time permitting we'll stop en-route at an area of irrigated fields at Al Bilid which can be very good for harriers and eagles, larks, pipits, wagtails and wheatears. Once again, almost anything could turn up here and we'll be keeping a good lookout. Another potential stop is at the refuse dump outside the desert town of Thumrayt. This can be excellent for raptors, especially Steppe Eagle, which can be present in some numbers.



Steppe Eagle



Verreaux's Eagle

Finally, just when you start to think that the Empty Quarter will never end, the ground begins to rise into hills, a little sparse vegetation appears and all of a sudden we breast the ridge of the Dhofar Mountains and see, far below, like a mirage, the lush coastal plain and the city of Salalah. Dropping rapidly into the welcome greenery we'll make a last stop at one of the well vegetated wadis en-route. Here an exciting range of new species may well include Abyssinian White-eye, African Paradise Flycatcher, Arabian Sunbird, Blackstart and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting.

Overnight: Salalah

Days 9 – 12

Salalah area

During our four full days in Salalah– a particularly bird-rich area – we will visit a number of sites in the hope of adding a superb variety of birds to our already impressive list.

Each morning, we awake to the sound of lapping waves on a beach covered with gulls and waders. Gulls here will include the attractive Sooty Gull, and the keen-eyed amongst the group can try to differentiate Steppe, Heuglin's and Caspian. Where there are gulls, terns are usually close-by and Caspian, Gull-billed and even White-cheeked are possibilities here, whilst flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes or a passing Masked Booby can also sometimes be seen.

We'll set off each day after an early breakfast, sometimes returning to the hotel for lunch and a short siesta and sometimes staying out all day. Our program will be flexible but places we are likely to visit include:

Ayn Hamran

The natural springs here have a truly African feel to them. Species such as Didric Cuckoo, Black-crowned Tchagra, Blackstart, Abyssinian White-eye, African Silverbill, Ruppell's Weaver, Arabian Sunbird, African Paradise Flycatcher and Cinnamon-breasted Rock Bunting can all be present and the first of the specialties, Arabian Warbler is also likely. This race is endemic to south-west Arabia, although the species itself also occurs in parts of northern Arabia too. The crags above the Ayn (spring) are excellent for Tristram's Starling and raptors including Booted, Bonelli's and Short-toed Eagle.



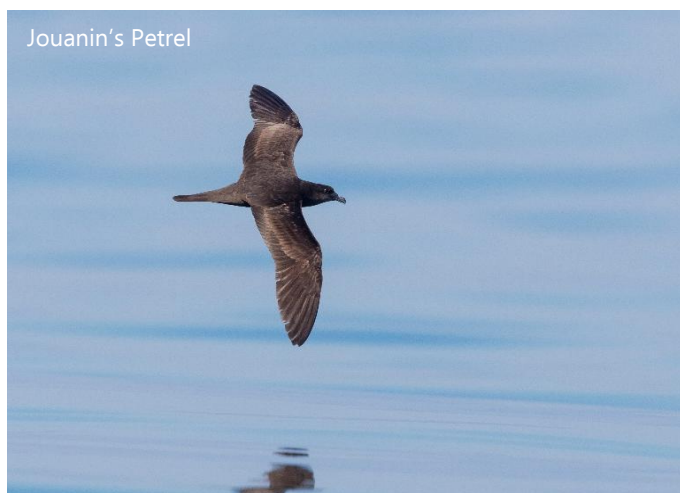
Ayn Razat

Another beautiful, lush valley with spring-fed pools. The birds are similar to Hamran but this is also a particularly good site for Bruce's Green Pigeons and at times, Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl. The surrounding hills are favoured by raptors, with Eastern Imperial and Bonelli's Eagles regularly seen.

Al Mughsayl

This beautiful area to the west of Salalah comprises a coastal lagoon (or Khawr), a broad sandy beach and spectacular cliffs with wave-cut platforms and dramatic blowholes. The Khawr attracts the usual rich and varied range of herons, waders, gulls and terns that we can expect in Dhofar and is always worth a careful look for something unusual. Flocks of Socotra Cormorants can often be seen offshore and the whole area is good for raptors including Barbary Falcon and Bonelli's Eagle. A rugged wadi that heads inland is a noted spot for Arabian Wheatear, Long-legged Buzzard, Verreaux's Eagle and, after dark, Desert Owl.

Mirbat pelagic



On one of our mornings we'll take a spin across to the fishing village of Mirbat for a pelagic trip out into the Arabian Sea with an expert local boatman. On this excursion we can expect an interesting range of seabirds which may well include Flesh-footed and Persian Shearwaters, Jouanin's Petrel, Bridled Tern, Masked Booby and lots of Sooty Gulls. More unusual species are frequently seen on these trips; one of our groups recently saw a Swinhoe's Storm Petrel; and there is also a very good chance of seeing some sea turtles with Green and Olive Ridley being the most likely.

Tawi Atyr

This huge and spectacular sinkhole, the result of a roof collapse of what must have been a mammoth cave system, is also noted as being the place in Oman to see the localised Yemen Serin. We'll search for these rather drab little fellows in the scrubby hinterland and look out for other species including Arabian Partridge, Arabian Wheater, Black-crowned Tchagra and both Arabian and Palestine Sunbirds. Tawi Atyr is also a great place to see Bonelli's Eagles, a pair of which traditionally nest in the sink hole.

Jebel Samhan

A viewpoint at the top of the mountains with breathtaking views out over the coastal plain far below. This is an excellent place to observe Tristram's Starlings and acrobatic Fan-tailed Ravens and gives us our best opportunity to see a Verreaux's Eagle as it patrols the slopes looking for Rock Hyrax, its principal prey.

Khawr Rawri

Another coastal wetland with lots of potential for seeing a wide range of birds. A marshy stream here is good for Pin-tailed Snipe, Temminck's Stint, Citrine Wagtail and even Little Crake, whilst Short-toed Eagles are often seen hunting along the adjacent rocky slopes and flocks of Forbes-Watson's Swifts are sometimes seen overhead.



The scrubby hinterland holds shrikes, bee-eaters and a rich variety of small birds, and lower down the Khawr broadens out into an area of saltmarsh and mudflats where we may find Greater Flamingos and a rich variety of wetland birds. Recent visits here have produced Broad-billed Sandpiper, Jack Snipe and White-cheeked Tern. Also here are the remarkable ruins of the ancient city of Samurhan, which those who wish to will have the opportunity to visit.

East Khawr

One of several coastal wetlands in the Salalah area and a great place to see a diverse range of waterbirds. The possibilities here are huge but regularly include Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Squacco and Purple Herons, Glossy Ibis, Red-knobbed Coot, Greater Spotted Eagle and various waders, terns and gulls.

Wadi Darbat

A broad mountain valley with a chain of lakes and flanked by steep wooded hills and cliffs, Wadi Darbat is a prime spot for raptors and an excellent site for Dhofar specialities including Bruce's Green Pigeon, Didric Cuckoo, Grey-headed Kingfisher, African Paradise Flycatcher, Blackstart, Arabian Warbler, Abyssinian White-eye, Black-crowned Tchagra and Ruppell's Weaver. Rarities are regularly found in the wadi. A particular highlight will be an adventurous drive down into the upper wadi, where we will seek out the highly-prized and challenging Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, one of the region's most sought-after birds, at a regular drinking spot.

Overnights: Salalah

Day 13

London

An early morning flight from Salalah to the UK, via Muscat, will see us land in the early afternoon.

Grading

Grade A/B. During this holiday, we won't be walking more than five miles each day, although some short walks maybe on loose gravel or down some ravines, so please be prepared for this. Please note that daytime temperatures are likely to exceed 30 Celsius, therefore, please consider your own capabilities. Every attempt will be made to avoid the heat of the day, but on some occasions this will be unavoidable.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday. We will be staying at five different hotels/guesthouses. On travel days, stops will be made at cultural or key birding locations. Lunches and dinners will be eaten at local restaurants or at the hotel.

Flights and Extensions

On the outbound, flights from London are direct to Muscat. On the return leg, we'll fly from Salalah via Muscat back to London. There are no set extensions, but if you do wish to extend your stay, this can easily be arranged by our office team.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting flights, at the time of booking.

