

# Oman – Arabia's Finest Birding

Naturetrek Tour Report

15th – 27th February 2024

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African Paradise Flycatcher



Spinner Dolphin



Levantine Leopard



Jouanin's Petrel

Report compiled by Simon Woolley. Special thanks to Nigel Peace for lepidoptera ID and photo, and to Terry Laws for bird photos.

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Tour participants: Simon Woolley (leader), Qais Albalushi (local leader/fixer) and six Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

This was a simply fabulous tour of Oman, taking in the Muscat region, the north-eastern and eastern coasts, the desert interior and the Dhofar region in the far south. We encountered a wonderful array of landscapes and enjoyed not one but two offshore boat trips, racking up five dolphin species and several highly-prized seabirds, such as Flesh-footed Shearwater, Jouanin's Petrel, Red-billed Tropicbird and both Brown and Masked Boobies.

Around Muscat, we enjoyed both migrant waterbirds and desert inhabitants, and scored with the localised Hume's Wheatear. Further east, we encountered the legendary Crab Plover, and started to see numerous desert specialists, such as Desert Wheatear and Desert Lark, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Asian Desert Warbler, Cream-coloured Courser and (notably) all four regular Omani sandgrouse species. Scarce winter visitors like Pacific Golden Plover and Pintailed Snipe were found. Migrant/wintering passerines included interesting birds like Menetrie's Warbler, both Isabelline and Red-tailed Shrikes, and Masked Shrike.

Birds of prey featured heavily, with six species of eagle, Crested Honey Buzzard, Black-winged Kite and others. The very special region of Dhofar in the south (around Salalah) turned up almost all of the regional endemics and highly localised species we could have asked for: highlights included Bruce's Green Pigeon, Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak, Yemen Serin, (South) Arabian Wheatear, Spotted Thick-knee, Abdim's Stork, Socotra Cormorant, African Paradise Flycatcher and Arabian Sunbird. Omani rarities in Dhofar included Cotton Pygmy Goose, Spur-winged Lapwing, Red-knobbed Coot and Intermediate Egret.

We made a special trip on the last day to a remote oasis and were successful in our quest for both (Grey) Hypocolius, at perhaps their only regular Omani site, and Nile Valley Sunbird. This made for a spectacular end to a simply wonderful trip, and one thoroughly enjoyed by all!



Citrine Wagtail and (South) Arabian Wheatear

## Day 1

Thursday 15th February

The group successfully met up at Heathrow's Terminal 4 for the 18:55 Qatar Airways flight to Doha, which left only slightly late.

## Day 2

Friday 16th February

We arrived in Doha at some ungodly hour, and had a three-hour layover where we did our best to wake up as little as possible! The connecting flight left at 08:35 local, arriving in Muscat at about 11:30. Here we went smoothly through the airport, met up with our local fixer, Qais, and drove some thirty minutes to our hotel in central Muscat for lunch (via a Greater Spotted Eagle, and Glossy Ibises, Common Mynas and Laughing Doves on the verges) and a chance to catch our collective breath.

Around 15:00, we headed out to the west of Muscat, along the Al Batinah coast, to Ras as Sawadi, a headland with beaches, tidal creeks and rocky islands offshore. Here, we got an excellent introduction to some Omani coastal birds. Gulls and terns were extremely numerous, with several thousand "large white-headed gulls" of three forms/species to work through: Steppe, Heuglin's and Caspian in descending order of abundance. (Note: Steppe and Heuglin's are currently treated as forms of Lesser Black-backed Gull, as reflected in the systematic list, but the latter at least is a very good candidate for being treated as a distinct species) To our delight, in among them were up to twenty Pallas's Gulls, almost all adults in full breeding plumage – a major target for many achieved at the first attempt! Numerous Sooty and Slender-billed Gulls and a few Black-headed Gulls completed the larid line-up. Greater Crested was the most abundant of the terns, with a few Sandwich, Lesser Crested, Caspian and a single Little Tern mixed in. Waders were rather few, but included Greater Sand Plovers and Kentish Plovers, Greenshank and Common Sandpiper, and a hunting Osprey kept the flocks turning over nicely. A couple of Western Reef Egrets (of both colour phases) were present, and Pallid Swifts were surprisingly numerous here.

An exploration of a small patch of trees turned up White-eared and Red-vented Bulbuls and several vocal Purple Sunbirds, and a brief stop in an area of scrubland towards dusk produced Grey Francolin, Red-wattled Lapwing, many Crested Larks and (in the gloaming) our first Indian Roller. We were all objectively shattered, so it was back to the hotel for dinner, and a much-needed night's sleep!

## Day 3

Saturday 17th February

This morning we headed out to the Al Ansab water treatment works/nature reserve, just south of the airport. This series of pools and streams is a famous Omani birding site and has attracted a huge range of species over the years. We were hardly disappointed with our own brief visit! There were plenty of ducks present (mostly Shoveler and Pintail), along with Greater Flamingoes, a nice range of waders including Red-necked Phalarope, Marsh Sandpiper, Little and Temminck's Stints, Ruff, Kentish and Ringed Plovers, and Red-wattled Lapwings in the drier areas. Two Whiskered Terns were in winter plumage, but a resplendent White-winged Tern had acquired almost full breeding plumage and was much appreciated. A few Indian Pond Herons were joined by three Black-crowned Night-herons, as well as some Cattle Egrets. Apart from waterbirds, we enjoyed Arabian Green Bee-eaters, many Delicate Prinias, White-cheeked Bulbuls, a couple of Clamorous Reed Warblers, numerous Purple Sunbirds, a Siberian Chiffchaff, and a smashing Isabelline Shrike right by the gate as we left.

Next, it was on westwards and then inland to the town of Nakhl for a Yemeni lunch, and on to the “Al Ghubrah Bowl” an elevated area of rocky desert and acacias set within towering mountains. Bird activity was a little low given the warmth, but brief explorations turned up some very good birds, notably a Hume's Wheatear carrying food (so clearly nesting already), Blue Rock Thrush, Red-tailed Wheatear, Desert Lark, a noisy band of Arabian Babblers, and several Lesser Whitethroats (of the central Asian form *halimodendri*). We found a heavily-flowering tree awash with several species of butterfly, and with upwards of a dozen Purple Sunbirds sharing the nectar feast.

Quite tired in the hot conditions, we dropped back down to Nakhl, and briefly visited both the hot spring and the adobe fort, picking up good views of Indian Roller on the way out. We made our way back to Muscat on the motorway, arriving just as the sun was setting to enjoy a final half hour of culture around the magnificent and atmospheric Sultan Qaboos Mosque. It had been a day packed with both great wildlife and some fine cultural highlights.

## Day 4

## Sunday 18th February

The first item for today was an offshore boat trip from the Bander Al Rowdha marina, just east of Muscat. The harbour was full of Sooty Gulls and Greater Crested Terns at close quarters, and once at sea we soon encountered plenty of rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes. Birds were not *very* abundant, but we secured some good quality in the form of two Persian Shearwaters, one extremely close to the speeding boat, and two sub-adult Masked Boobies, one very close as it attempted to swallow a rather large fish. We were also entertained by perhaps 40 Bottlenose Dolphins in various pods, some of which rode the bow wave and gave great views. We spent some time drifting around Al Fahal Island, which had a pair of apparently territorial Ospreys, an Egyptian Vulture and a (Barbary) Peregrine Falcon, plus several migrant Whimbrels. We returned to the marina after a thoroughly enjoyable morning for an early seafood lunch.

Next it was on to explore some wadis close to the village of Yiti, just a little further east. It was pretty hot and activity was intermittent, but we had good views of Arabian Green Bee-eater and Indian Roller, as well as a couple of Sand Partridges, and two more Hume's Wheatears to add to the one seen yesterday. The top moment was undoubtedly when a pair of Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse flushed from our feet, and gave two more rounds of flight views as we carefully approached. Brown-necked Ravens and a further eight Egyptian Vultures entertained in the skies above, and a late raptor flourish came with an adult Eastern Imperial Eagle and a Short-toed Snake Eagle in the sky together (along with a Common Kestrel). Exciting stuff indeed!

To complete our day, we visited the very pleasant Qurum Park in central Muscat (via a Whiskered Tern feeding over a busy roundabout!), enjoying numerous tame, common birds such as Delicate Prinias, bulbuls...and Common Sandpipers and Whimbrels! A banded water snake was a further highlight, but top billing went to a Black-winged Kite, a very rare bird in Oman. As dusk drew in, we drove round to the bridge over the estuarine, mangrove-fringed river channel and had an excellent session with various waders and waterbirds. New for the trip were Great Egret, Common Kingfisher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Turnstone, (Tibetan) Lesser Sand Plover mixed 50/50 with Greater Sand Plovers and a cracking pair of Terek Sandpipers. We departed as the sun set, and returned for our final night at the Platinum Hotel, ready for dinner and to get packed up for the start of our odyssey south tomorrow.

## Day 5

## Monday 19th February

We transferred to our new vehicles, a pair of Landcruisers driven by Samir and Tamr, and set off from Muscat at 0800. We crossed a range of hills and were soon out into rocky, semi-desert terrain, before dropping in at the estuary at Quriyat, where we enjoyed a nice session with various waders, herons and other waterbirds, plus many gulls, including yet more stunning Pallas's Gulls. We followed the coastal track for a short while, enjoying views of the Gulf of Oman in quite breezy, hazy conditions – again, abundant gulls and terns amused us along the beaches.

Our second morning stop was at Sur sewage treatment works (a little smelly), whose settlement ponds held a small selection of good birds, some of them new for the trip (Citrine Wagtail, Red-rumped Swallow and two extremely smart White-tailed Lapwings), and others not, but still good to see again, such as Glossy Ibis, Clamorous Reed Warbler and Temminck's Stint. We had yet another slap-up lunch at a beachside restaurant in Sur, with lots of gulls, terns and a few waders for company, and then briefly visited Sur itself, walking over the estuary's suspension bridge and admiring some *dhows* in the harbour – this is the last place in Oman where these traditional Arab cargo ships are built. An Arabian Green Bee-eater put on a good show right by the road, and a few Lesser Crested Terns spiced up our short walk.

Time was moving on, and we pushed ahead to Khawr Jirama, a huge tidal inlet very close to Rass al Hadd, the easterly tip of Arabia. We drove through a rather ramshackle village and found a good spot to scan from on the edge of very sticky, salty mud. It was clear that there were plenty of waders about, but that they were a little distant ... although the tide was rising, and things progressively got closer. We didn't actually have to wait long to see our #1 target bird, however: Crab-plovers! We quickly found six of these amazing, remarkably localised birds, and were able to enjoy a family party of three for the entire time we spent here. (Crab-plovers are unique among waders in that the adults care for and feed their young for many months after fledging – junior was certainly being very demanding of his/her parents today!) Also here were quite numerous Terek Sandpipers, Greater Sand Plover, Curlew (of the Asiatic form), Bar-tailed Godwit (again of an eastern form) and Kentish Plover, plus a few Grey Plovers too. Spoonbills, egrets and herons also entertained, along with Caspian Terns, yet more Pallas's Gulls, an Osprey and a Siberian Stonechat.

Given our evening plans, we left in good time to reach our comfortable hotel a little down the coast at Assilah. Some took a stroll to the sea and back, via a smart male Desert Wheatear, and found a few common shorebirds and rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes offshore, while others rested up for a while before dinner.

Our post-dinner outing to the Rass al Jinz Turtle Reserve was, very sadly, a bust. February sits right in the middle of the low season for egg-laying, and while it was reckoned we had a 50/50 chance, the wardens found no turtles coming ashore this evening. A disappointment, but one which we just had to take on the chin!

## Day 6

## Tuesday 20th February

We spent a short while in the rough ground opposite the hotel before our 08:00 departure, finding the same male Desert Wheatear for all to enjoy, with the added bonuses of an Isabelline Wheatear and a Tawny Pipit. Then it was away at pace along the coast road, past what would be our last Indian Rollers. We had some kilometres to cover today! Birds were few and far between as the desert got ever more arid, but our next destination was the famous Birr al Hickman sabkha and estuarine mudflats.

Sadly, and unavoidably, the tide was poor (within an hour of low) and while there were literally thousands of birds present (waders, herons and egrets, Greater Flamingoes, gulls and terns), the majority were very distant. We did have Clamorous Reed Warblers in the mangroves, and good views of Curlew Sandpipers, Terek Sandpipers, Bar-tailed Godwits and a few other waders quite close, however, and we thoroughly enjoyed both the spectacle of the vast flocks of birds, and the extraordinary hyper-saline mudflats which we drove through (and at one point across!). A migrant male Northern Wheatear was a nice surprise here.

After a tasty lunch in Mahout (and a sighting of Citrus Swallowtail butterflies), we tried our luck on the western side of the peninsula, overlooking an immense tidal bay from the fishing village of Filim. The story was similar: many, many birds, but at an awkward distance for the most part. It was sad to see no fewer than three Green Turtle carapaces washed up on the intertidal mud.

We still had a couple of hours driving to cover, so it was soon time to hit the road south once more, through rocky plateaux and scattered dunes. We made two stops at contrasting wadis. The first was a natural oasis, which was rather quiet, but did turn up an incongruous hunting Sparrowhawk (good luck chum!) and an exciting butterfly, the desert-specialist Levantine Leopard. The second wadi was much drier, but had a nice scattering of acacia trees, which held several *halimodendri* Lesser Whitethroats. Also here were a cracking male Desert Wheatear, and a pair of our fourth wheatear of the day, the much-prized (South) Arabian Wheatear, the male resplendent with a white cap and apricot undertail coverts. This was the undoubted highlight of what had been a long day on the road. Arrival in the fast-growing town of Duqm was most welcome!

## Day 7

## Wednesday 21st February

A brief check of the hotel “gardens” produced Indian Silverbill, White Wagtail and a showy Bluethroat. But we were away at 0800 for the hour's drive south to the coast at Khawr Dhurf, a brackish lagoon fed by a permanent spring. On arrival, we were delighted to see numerous Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse wheeling around as they departed from the morning drinking session – there were probably upwards of 200 birds present. Desert Wheatears put on a good show, and our first Common Chiffchaff fed in the mangroves, but waterbirds stole the show. New for the trip were two Wigeons, looking very out of place in the harsh desert sun, Little Ringed Plover, and two excellent waders: Pin-tailed Snipe and Pacific Golden Plover. Also here were many Dunlin and Little Stints, plus a few other common waders, a roost of Caspian, Greater Crested and Sandwich Terns, an Osprey, a Glossy Ibis, some Greater Flamingoes, and finally three Tawny Pipits just as we were leaving. We had had a most enjoyable couple of hours exploring this site.

The drive back towards Duqm was interrupted by a Cream-coloured Courser crossing the road and then giving telescope views, and soon afterwards a pair of Greater Hoopoe-Larks very close to the road, the male serenading us with his haunting song. A stop in a fractionally-vegetated wadi turned up an Isabelline Shrike and, even better, a party of slightly elusive Black-crowned Sparrow-larks.

By lunchtime we were a little west of Duqm, and then headed north to try our luck around the Arabian Oryx Reserve – alas, we were unable to gain access, but the road in and out turned up much better views of Black-crowned Sparrow-larks, plus Desert Wheatears and Brown-necked Ravens.

We had a solid 250km to cover in the afternoon, and blasted west through the ever more arid Empty Quarter – truly lunar landscapes flew by. We reached our hotel (the Al Gaftayn Guesthouse, some 100km remote from any



other real vestige of civilisation) with some daylight to spare, and a quick inspection of the acacia thickets produced a couple of Barn Swallows, but much better, three Menetries's Warblers, which made for an excellent end to a long travelling day, after a bird-filled morning.

## Day 8

## Thursday 22nd February

We made a crack-of-dawn start, and were away for the hour's drive to the Muntassar oasis, miles from anywhere out in the desert of the Empty Quarter. Immediately on arrival, we picked up some small flocks of Spotted Sandgrouse flying in, but they dropped and vanished in the distant desert scrub. We decided to play it cool and see whether more would appear later on.

The pools, surrounded by lush grass and some substantial trees, produced a nice selection of migrants/winter visitors, highlights being two Indian Pond Herons, a Black Redstart, several Water Pipits and a single Red-throated Pipit, plus Northern Wheatear and an Eastern Orphean Warbler. Resident desert birds included Desert Wheatear and Asian Desert Warbler (performing their fascinating commensal 'feeding dance' together!) and a Great Grey Shrike. Our patience with the sandgrouse paid off, and we had several close fly-bys of substantial flocks, totalling perhaps 70 birds. As we packed up to leave, they dropped in right by the pools, ready to take on water and fly back to their nestlings.

The next stop was about 45 minutes south, through yet more empty desert, at the Al Beed farms, a series of centre-pivot irrigation fields and ploughed strips. A brief stop here was productive, with two Cream-coloured Coursers, several Short-toed Larks and Black-crowned Sparrow-larks, more Desert and Northern Wheatears, and a couple of Common Kestrels. We also encountered our first Frankincense tree.

After a quick lunch at a roadside restaurant, we powered on, the kilometre counts to Salalah dropping rapidly. A short side-trip to the Thumrayt rubbish dump was somewhat smelly, but highly entertaining: some 250 Steppe Eagles (and a single Black-eared Kite) were wheeling about, presenting a truly impressive spectacle. One client was lucky enough to see our first "Dhofar special" too: a Tristram's Starling.

Very soon, we crested the hills north of Salalah, and dropped down into a wooded, much more humid landscape. What a difference from the hyper-aridity of the Empty Quarter! We had plenty of time to make an extended visit to the spring at Ayn Razat, which made for an excellent introduction to Dhofar's commoner "special" birds. As well as Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles overhead, we saw Tristram's Starling, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Abyssinian White-eye, Rüppell's Weaver, African Paradise Flycatcher, Bruce's Green Pigeon, a whole family of Blackstarts, two Citrine and a Grey Wagtail, African Silverbill and numerous Arabian Sunbirds.

As the sun began to set, we checked in to our beach-front hotel, thankful that (at last!) we had multiple nights settled in the same place, ready to enjoy the delights Dhofar has to offer.

## Day 9

## Friday 23rd February

Up early and away to East Khwar, where a plethora of Slender-billed Gulls greeted us on the beach! We were soon enjoying great views of many waders and other waterbirds, with new species in the shape of four Cotton Pygmy Geese (from India), Red-knobbed Coot (from Africa), and Wood Sandpiper and Garganey (migrating to Eurasia)

– the Dhofar area really is a birding crossroads! A Greater Spotted Eagle watched on from the mangroves as Citrine and Yellow Wagtails zipped about, mingling with Ruff, Black-tailed Godwits and more. A great start!

Next it was on to Wadi Kheesh (via small flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and Black-crowned Sparrow-larks), a site which local gen suggested might be productive. Alas, we arrived a bit late (after the local goat herders) so the site was too disturbed to be very good, but we did see lots of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings, African Silverbills, Rüppell's Weavers and Arabian Sunbirds.

We moved the short distance to Ayn Hamran next. It was somewhat drier than we had expected, but careful work in the building heat produced some excellent new species: Long-billed Pipit, Black-crowned Tchagra, Arabian Partridge (frustratingly heard only!), Arabian Warbler and best of all a very brief but superb Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak.

We had time before lunch for a flying visit to Khawr Taqah, which produced almost 100 Pacific Golden Plovers, various waterbirds including a Spoonbill, and on our exit, a brilliant view of a low-flying Crested Honey Buzzard, a once vagrant species which is becoming more regular in Arabia. Lunch and a siesta back at the hotel now called!

At 1500, we set out once more, west this time, with a first stop at Raysut water treatment ponds. We didn't need to try and get in, as we could see our target species from the road! About 100 magnificent Abdim's Storks (another primarily African species) were loafing about with similar numbers of White Storks – a fantastic sight. A surprise here came in the form of two Spur-winged Lapwings, a species which is still a rarity in Oman, although increasing. We also saw Green and Wood Sandpipers.

Onwards, onwards to Mughsayl, with a screeching stop by the beach for a raft of 300+ Socotra Cormorants just offshore – and some passing Brown Boobies! At Khawr Mughsayl, we were greeted with a romantic vision of camels up to their bellies in the fresh water, plus a nice selection of waterbirds, including Striated Heron, Whiskered Terns, more Garganey and two Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, yet another primarily Indian species for our transcontinental list. A Short-toed Snake Eagle soared high overhead.

Our final stop for the day was at the entertaining Mughsayl blowholes, perched below towering limestone cliffs, with gulls, terns and boobies offshore, and a tame pair of Tristram's Starlings in attendance of the picnicking weekend visitors. It really had been a packed and rather excellent day!

## Day 10

## Saturday 24th February

This morning we made an early return to Wadi Kheesh, successfully beating the arrival of the camels and goats at the drinking trough, but sadly not finding any Grosbeaks to upgrade our brief sighting from yesterday. An Isabelline Shrike made for some compensation, along with the other now 'usual' Dhofar specialities. Next it was on to Wadi Darbat, a truly spectacular site perched high above the plain behind a vast rock wall, which flows as a waterfall in very wet years. We quickly enjoyed something of a mini-raptorfest, with several Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles low overhead (including a pair of the former displaying), plus a very satisfactory circling pair of Bonelli's Eagles. Fan-tailed Ravens and Tristram's Starlings called and tumbled about over the cliffs.

Further up the valley, we found a Citrine Wagtail feeding among some cattle, numerous African Paradise Flycatchers and a surprise Red-breasted Flycatcher in a row of trees, and watched a Greater Spotted Eagle drinking



from the river. Another unusual sighting here was of a first-year Purple Heron, along with our first Squacco Heron of the trip. What might have been a surprise actually wasn't a complete shock: a Masked Shrike by the car park was surely the same individual seen by the last Naturetrek tour here in November. This is a very scarce wintering species in Oman.

After a round of ice creams, it was time to make our move, and via a flock of 32 White Storks circling and pitching in some fields, we made the descent back to the plain, and sped back for lunch and the now traditional siesta.

The afternoon session took us to Khawr Rori, which is actually the estuarine lagoon downstream from Wadi Darbat. Here, we started on the west side, which was rocky, and found Long-billed Pipit, Eastern Imperial Eagle, two Isabelline Shrikes, Blackstarts and others, including another little bonus in the form of a flock of Rosy Starlings. A little later, we transferred to the east side of the Khawr, where a check of the lagoon produced a few nice birds, including Terek Sandpiper and Little Tern. We spent the last hour of the day in the little museum of the Sumhuran archaeological site, and exploring the ruins themselves. This was once a major port in the Indian/Arabian/Red Sea trade route, specialising in the supply of frankincense from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE. It was a truly spectacular place to watch the sun set over Salalah to the west.

## Day 11

## Sunday 25th February

Pelagic day! We set off early from the hotel and reached the port of Mirbat about an hour later, in good time for our 0800 departure with the famous Hatem, the birding boatman. We started brightly with a non-bird: an Olive Ridley Turtle in the harbour! Followed by scores of Sooty Gulls and various large white-headed gulls (mostly *barabensis* Steppe Gulls), we motored offshore, and quickly encountered the first of perhaps 40 Persian Shearwaters, some of which fed happily right next to the boat. A single Flesh-footed Shearwater made a much briefer visit to Hatem's chum slick, but gave us good views. Perhaps a dozen each of Brown and Masked Booby were seen, and a few terns were about, both Greater Crested and our first Common Terns of the trip. A big highlight came in the form of quite numerous Jouanin's Petrels, a scarce seabird rarely seen anywhere other than Oman and the UAE: we saw perhaps over twenty. Two Red-billed Tropicbirds gave only distant and rather brief views. About a dozen Red-necked Phalaropes skittered about and fed on the sea. Bird activity was really high throughout, on account of substantial Yellowfin Tuna schools, which in turn were attracting feeding cetaceans: we saw hundreds of dolphins. Hatem expertly pointed out Common, Striped, Pantropical Spotted and Spinner Dolphins. The last were a real treat, leaping high and performing double barrel rolls! As we returned to port, we saw further Olive Ridelys, and several pretty huge Green Turtles too, which made up for having missed them at their nesting beach last week. And on the beach were about 100 Abdim's Storks, along with a few White Storks. It had been an excellent trip!

After a welcome and quite lengthy lunch by the harbour in Mirbat, we set off once more, and headed uphill past Wadi Darbat to Tawi Atayr, a famous site indeed! This spectacular limestone sinkhole echoed to the sound of singing and calling Cinnamon-breasted Buntings, Tristram's Starlings and Fan-tailed Ravens, and the resident pair of Bonelli's Eagles put on a great show, flying about mostly below eye-level. But the real stars here were the most unassuming of the entire trip, and one of the most sought-after of Omani birds. We all managed to get brief and distant, but good views of Yemen Serin: this is their only Omani site, and several hundred kilometres east of their main range in Yemen and south-western Saudi Arabia.

The road wound further uphill, via a couple of Eastern Imperial Eagles and a Greater Spotted Eagle, and we reached the cool and lofty heights of Jebel Samhan, some 1300m above the Dhofar plain. It was a truly spectacular

spot, where we enjoyed incredible views, Dragon's-blood Trees, (South) Arabian Wheatears, Long-legged Buzzard and extraordinary views of two Peregrines blasting past us at full speed. Sadly, the cloud rolled in and whited us out before any Verreaux's Eagles could show up, but you can't have everything, and we chose to finish on a high, and return to base.

Fully divested of all optics and cameras, we drove a short way to the souk for a spot of frankincense shopping. Mission completed, on the way home the sharp-eyed leader hauled everyone to a sudden stop on a busy main road: there were two Spotted Thick-knees under some bushes! It was so frustrating having no bins and no cameras, but luckily we were able to approach very close without disturbing them, and had superb views of a sometimes difficult-to-find species.

## Day 12

## Monday 26th February

Off at dawn once more, this time for the 90-minute drive up the escarpment (shrouded in dense fog – and with roadside Arabian Partridges for those in one of the vehicles), back to Thumrayt in the desert, and then west to the tiny oasis village of Mudayy. We had some very special target birds here, and fortunately we connected with them rather quickly. First up was a male Nile Valley Sunbird, a very scarce and hard-to-find species in Oman, resplendent with his yellow belly and long tail. Next, a shrike-like shape in a distant bush caught the leader's eye, and a quick scope view confirmed that we had successfully found the near-mythical Grey Hypocolius! All had decent views, and then both the original male and female flew across to an acacia tree and gave themselves up for all to enjoy. A new bird for every client! Also around the oasis were a couple of coveys of Sand Partridges, and a very smart Red-tailed (or Turkestan) Shrike.

We drove fast back to Thumrayt, and stopped for a cold drink at a service station, where large numbers of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse had decided to do the same, albeit from a leaky water tanker out on the desert flats behind! Perhaps 250 birds entertained us on the ground and in flight. A male (South) Arabian Wheatear was also seen here.

We dropped back down the escarpment, and made a quick stop at Ain Sahlounout, a lovely little permanent pool surrounded by tufa-covered cliffs. While we added nothing new, we enjoyed Abyssinian White-eyes, Arabian Sunbirds, African Paradise Flycatcher and Cinnamon-breasted Buntings for perhaps the last time, before returning to the hotel for lunch. We congratulated ourselves on our rather high-risk gamble with our Mudayy jaunt having paid off so very richly!

After an extended siesta/break to allow for packing time, we headed off for a little final local birding, starting at Al Sa'adah Park. It was quiet, frankly, but we did see some smart (Sykes's) Yellow Wagtails, a Grey Wagtail, and even a new bird for the trip in the form of not one but two Booted Eagles, one light morph, one dark.

Finally, we returned to East Khwar, where despite lots of people enjoying the beach, there were masses of birds again present. In addition to the local "rarities" of Cotton Pygmy Goose, Red-knobbed Coot and Intermediate Egret all present and correct, we enjoyed Marsh Harrier, perhaps 400 Glossy Ibises, numerous gulls and some terns (including two very close Caspians), Temminck's Stint, both godwits and our final new bird for the trip: Common Coot! Returning to the hotel, we said our farewells to our local guide and drivers, and got ready for our final evening meal together.

## Day 13

Tuesday 27th February

The transfer bus collected us at 02:30 (ugh!) and we were soon at Salalah airport, ready for the early morning shuttle to Doha, a short layover, and the onward flight back to Heathrow, arriving just after lunchtime.

This had been an action-packed, bird-filled tour, with many great birds and wonderful experiences of mountains, deserts, oases, wetlands, estuaries and the open ocean. We had racked up an above-par species total of 188 bird species, securing many of Oman's most special birds. Food and accommodation had been excellent throughout, and of course we had been superbly looked after by our local fixer Qais, and our two main drivers, Samir and Tamr. Last but not least, I should like to thank the excellent Naturetrek clients on this trip, who contributed so much, showing patience, a positive attitude and enthusiasm for all this lovely country had to offer.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, I = Introduced)

		February 2024											
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
Cotton Pygmy Goose	<i>Nettapus coromandelianus</i>												
Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>								6			4	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		50	5	6		1		5			3	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		6										
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		30				1		2			2	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		25						2				
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>												
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		5						4			11	
Grey Francolin	<i>Ortygornis pondicerianus</i>	2	1	1									
Sand Partridge	<i>Ammoperdix heyi</i>			2								17	
Arabian Partridge	<i>Alectoris melanocephala</i>								H			1	
Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles exustus</i>						25		5			25	
Spotted Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>							75				0	
Crowned Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>						2						
Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles lichtensteinii</i>			2									
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		1	10	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>		20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bruce's Green Pigeon	<i>Treron waalia</i>							1		2			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		5	1	2				4	2		4	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>											2	
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>								1			1	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		5	1					11			2	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		25		2	40	30		40			6	
Spotted Thick-knee	<i>Burhinus capensis</i>										2		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	7			2								
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		20		10				30			10	
Spur-winged Lapwing	<i>Vanellus spinosus</i>								2				
Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	5	15	20					1				
White-tailed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus leucurus</i>				2								
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>				1		2		90				
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				10	✓	2		2	1			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		5	2						1			
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>						1		2				
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	3	3	40	40	✓	10			2			
Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>			60	10	✓	1			1			
Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	2		60	30	✓							
Pheasant-tailed Jacana	<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>								2				

		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			20	5	✓	1					
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				2				1	1		
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			2	4	✓						1
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		2		1				8			10
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			2								
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		30		1	✓			15			1
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>					10						
Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>		1		1							1
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1		2		✓	50		1	2		
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		12		2	5	20		3	5		1
Pin-tailed Snipe	<i>Gallinago stenura</i>						2					
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		10						1			
Terek Sandpiper	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>			2	20	2						
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		1	10	0						10	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	4	20	15	✓	10	2	10	6		6
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2						2			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1	1	2	✓	1		5	1		15
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>		2			1				1		1
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>								2			1
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1		1	2	✓	1		10	3		2
Crab-plover	<i>Dromas ardeola</i>				6							
Cream-colored Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>						1	2				
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	15		1	20		2		30	5		✓
		0							0			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	10										2
Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus</i>	20			25	20						
Sooty Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus hemprichii</i>	40		10	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
				0								
Caspian Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	5			2							
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>			1	12	2				2		
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	2			4	1	44		1			2
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	10		50	50	25	5		✓	6	15	1
		0										
Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	10		1	5				1	1		
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	30					3					
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>	1								1		
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>										5	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		2	1	1				20	20		10
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>		1									
Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>										2	
Flesh-footed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna carneipes</i>										1	
Persian Shearwater	<i>Puffinus persicus</i>			2							25	
Jouanin's Petrel	<i>Bulweria fallax</i>										20	
Abdim's Stork	<i>Ciconia abdimii</i>								10		10	
									0		0	

		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>								10 0	32	3	
Masked Booby	<i>Sula dactylatra</i>										8	
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>								10		6	
Socotra Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax nigrogularis</i>								30 0			
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	40	50	10 0	✓	✓	10	✓	✓		1
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	10		1	1		1	50	25			40 0
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				3		3		3			
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		3					2				
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>			2					1			
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>									1		2
Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>		4	1				2	2	2		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		10					15	10 0			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3	3	6	50	✓	15	1	30	10	1	10
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>									1		
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1	25	✓	1		1			
Intermediate Egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>								1			1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1		1			1	4	5		
Western Reef Heron	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	2		3	10	✓	20		20	10	5	2
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1		2	2		1		5	2		
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			1								
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			9	4	1						
Crested Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>								1			
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			1					1			
Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga clanga</i>	1			1			2	1	5	1	2
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>											2
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>								25 0			
Eastern Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>			1				1		4	5	
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>									2	2	1
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					1						
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1		1		1	1	1	1		1
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>							1	1			
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>										1	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2							2			
Indian Roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	1	5	6	2	10	1					
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1								
Arabian Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops cyanophrys</i>		3	2	1							
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			1				3	3	4	4	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1							2	
Alexandrine Parakeet	<i>Psittacula eupatria</i>			2								
Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	10		25				3	✓		1	2
Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>								3			
Isabelline Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>		1				1			3		

		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Red-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius phoenicuroides</i>											1
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>							3	1			
Masked Shrike	<i>Lanius nubicus</i>									1		
African Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone viridis</i>							2	2	10		2
House Crow - I	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	1	1	4	4	8	10	10				
Fan-tailed Raven	<i>Corvus rhipidurus</i>							5		30	10 0	30
Grey Hypocolius	<i>Hypocolius ampelinus</i>											2
Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>						2					
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>		1	2								
Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark	<i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>						15	4	6	10		2
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	20	15	4	20		2	2	2	2	2	
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>							4				
Red-vented Bulbul - I	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	1	10	20								
White-eared Bulbul - I	<i>Pycnonotus leucotis</i>	1	20	10	10	6						
White-spectacled Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthopygos</i>		1					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	1										
Pale Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne obsoleta</i>		10	5	1			10	10	4	15	5
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						2	3	10			1
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				1							
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1				1			1		
Clamorous Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>		2		H	H						
Graceful Prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>							1	5	2		H
Delicate Prinia	<i>Prinia lepida</i>		20	4	2							
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Curruca curruca</i>		5			5		1				
Arabian Warbler	<i>Curruca leucomelaena</i>								3	2		
Eastern Orphean Warbler	<i>Curruca crassirostris</i>							1				
Asian Desert Warbler	<i>Curruca nana</i>							2				
Menetries's Warbler	<i>Curruca mystacea</i>						3					
Abyssinian White-eye	<i>Zosterops abyssinicus</i>							✓	✓	✓		5
Arabian Babbler	<i>Argya squamiceps</i>	2	20									
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	25	✓	✓	✓	2				2		2
Rosy Starling	<i>Pastor roseus</i>									15		
Tristram's Starling	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>							3	12	30	70	20
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>						1					
Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>									1		
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>							1				
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1									
Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola maura</i>				1							
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					1		2	4	2		1
Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>					1		1				



		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>				1	8	6	10	4	3	1	
Blackstart	<i>Oenanthe melanura</i>							5	2	10	2	
Hume's Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe albonigra</i>		1	2								
Arabian Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugentoides</i>					2					2	1
Red-tailed Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe chrysopygia</i>		1									
Nile Valley Sunbird	<i>Hedydipna metallica</i>											1
Arabian Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris hellmayri</i>							15	20	15		1
Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	4	30	20	10	1						
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rüppell's Weaver	<i>Ploceus galbula</i>							15	✓	✓		10
Streaked Weaver	<i>Ploceus manyar</i>		1									
African Silverbill	<i>Euodice cantans</i>							2	6	10	8	5
Indian Silverbill	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>		6	20			1					
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		H			H		1	4			5
Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>				1			2	2	1		
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>							1		1		1
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		3	H	1		1	20		1		15
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>					1	3					
Long-billed Pipit	<i>Anthus similis</i>								1	1		
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>							5				
Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>							1				
Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak	<i>Rhynchostruthus percivali</i>								1			
Yemen Serin	<i>Crithagra menachensis</i>										5	
Striolated Bunting	<i>Emberiza striolata</i>		1									
Cinnamon-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza tahapisi</i>							10	30	25	20	2

## Other vertebrates

I=Introduced, D = Dead		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
<b>Mammals</b>												
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops aduncus</i>			40					5			
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>										✓	
Pantropical Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>										✓	
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>										✓	
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>										✓	
Nile Rat	<i>Arvicanthis niloticus</i>									1		
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>								1			
Wild Donkey - I	<i>Equus africanus asinus</i>			✓			✓		✓	✓		
Arabian Gazelle	<i>Gazella arabica</i>											1
small bat sp.									✓			
<b>Other vertebrates</b>												

I=Introduced, D = Dead		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Green Turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>					3 D					4	
Olive Ridley Turtle	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>										3	
Snake sp.				1								
Carter's Rock Gecko	<i>Pristurus carteri</i>					✓	✓					
Yellowfin Tuna	<i>Thunnus albacares</i>										✓	
Pipefish sp.				✓								

## Invertebrates

		February 2024										
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
<b>Crustaceans</b>												
Fiddler Crab	<i>Uca sp.</i>				✓	✓						
<b>Lepidoptera</b>												
Lime Swallowtail	<i>Papilio demoleus</i>					✓		✓	✓			✓
Citrus Swallowtail	<i>Papilio demodocus</i>								✓			✓
Caper White	<i>Belenois aurota</i>		✓							✓		
Small Salmon Arab	<i>Colotis calais</i>									✓		
Scarlet- (or Red-) Tip	<i>Colotis danae</i>								✓			
Sulphur Orange-tip	<i>Colotis aurora</i>								✓			
Desert Orange-tip	<i>Colotis liagore</i>		✓									
Desert White	<i>Pontia glauconome</i>			✓								
African Emigrant	<i>Catopsilia florella</i>		✓									
Common Grass Yellow	<i>Eurema hecabe</i>							✓				
Levantine Leopard (=Tawny Silverline)	<i>Apharitis acamas</i>					✓						
Small Cupid	<i>Chilades parhassius</i>									✓		
Zebra Blue (=Lang's Short-tailed Blue)	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>								✓			
Balkan or Mediterranean Pierrot	<i>Tarucus balkaniscus/rosaceus</i>		✓	✓								
Grass Blue sp.	<i>Zizeeria sp.</i>											✓
African Monarch (=Plain Tiger)	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Pearl Charaxes	<i>Charaxes varanes</i>								✓			
Yellow Pansy	<i>Junonia hierta</i>		✓									
Blue Pansy	<i>Junonia orithya</i>		✓	✓								
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓						✓		
Common Three-ring (=African Ringlet)	<i>Ypthima asterope</i>							✓				
One-pip Policeman (=Giant Skipper)	<i>Pyrrhiadess anchises</i>		✓		✓							
Crimson Speckled (moth)	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>				✓					✓		
<b>Odonata</b>												
Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓	✓								
Lesser Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax parthenope</i>		✓	✓								

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024										
		16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Scarlet Darter	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>		✓									
"purple-tailed skimmer"			✓									
Hooktail sp.	<i>Paragomphus sp.</i>				✓							
Violet Dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>							✓				
<b>Other insects</b>												
Desert Locust	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>			✓								
<b>Notable plants</b>												
Frankincense Tree	<i>Boswellia sacra</i>							✓	✓			
Desert Rose	<i>Adenium obesum</i>				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓