Oman

Arabian Birding Adventure



Grey Hypocolius by Adam Riley

There is little that can compare to the industry and mystery of forward-thinking Arab nations such as the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman. They exemplify and tout man's ability to master the harshest of terrain; while maintaining an utterly unique culture and proud history in the process. In the case of these countries, this is accomplished with an ease and grace that has gained the attention and marvel of the entire world. It will be our privilege to enjoy all this as the stage or backdrop for a relaxed, yet nonetheless exciting, birding adventure. While enjoying average daily temperatures of 25-32 Celsius and low humidity, migrant species from throughout the Western Palearctic and Central Asia take advantage of easy foraging and prolific groundwater at farms and oases. Eagles flock to local carcas dumps and waterfowl languish in the khawrs near the ocean and at freshwater pools in wadis. From the possibility of Grey Hypocolius to the wonders of sandgrouse flocking to drink at a remote oasis, fascinating birding experiences abound on this very relaxed and highly recommended tour!

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Dubai**
Day 2	**Dubai area - Wamm Farms, Mushrif NP & Qarn Nazwa**
Day 3	**Dubai to Al Ain, via Ra's al Khor, Qudra Lake and Zakher Pools**
Day 4	**Al Ain area, including Mubazzarah, Jabal Hafeet and Zakher Pools**
Day 5	**Al Ain to Sohar and Khatmat Milahah (Oman)**
Day 6	**Sohar to Jebal Akhdar, Owling at Wadi Muaydhin**
Day 7	**Al Hajar Mountains & Wadi Tanuf**
Day 8	**Jebal Akhdar to Duqm via Bar Al Hikman**
Day 9	**Duqm to Wadi Qatbit via Arabian Oryx Reserve**
Day 10	**Muntasar & Wadi Qatbit Oases**
Day 11	**Qatbit to Salalah via Central Desert farms & Mudday**
Days 12 & 13	**Salalah & the Dhofar Mountains**
Day 14	**Salalah & final departure**



Birding sites in detail



Cream-colored Courser by Clayton Burne

Dubai area - Mushrif NP & Qarn Nazwa. As one may imagine, many birders have moved in and out of this burgeoning region over the years, discovering a myriad of wonderful birding opportunities, easily accessible from the city. These sites encompass a staggering variety of habitats and allow access to the region's most precious commodity: water. We will most likely start by spending time at Mushrif National Park as an introduction to many common birds of the region, such as White-eared and Red-vented Bulbuls, Southern Grey Shrike and the stunning Arabian Green Bee-eater. Mushrif is also one of our best opportunities to see three very special birds of the region. The noisy and gregarious Arabian Babbler is a year-round resident in the scrubby areas of the park, while both Plain Leaf and Eastern Orphean Warblers call this home during the short winter months.

Dubai area - Wamm Farms. Our next birding site is relatively new to the scene, though it has quickly become regarded as one of the best sites to bird on the whole peninsula, during winter months and migration. Wamm Farms started up several years ago and has been growing ever since. Their operations include vegetables and fodder grasses, and hay for livestock. This huge operation, easily seen from high altitude satellite imagery, shines out as a green beacon to passing migrants, and holds plenty of forage for over-wintering shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, sandgrouse, wheatears, wagtails, pipits, and more. Birds flock here by the hundreds (if not thousands) in migration, and many spend the Wintering months in the fine climate.

Dubai area - Qarn Nazwa. We will head to Qarn Nazwa at dusk for nocturnal birds, with Pharoah Eagle-Owl being the highlight seen here in the past few years. This is one of the few reliable sites for this beauty!

Ra's al Khor. Ra's al Khor is best for viewing when the tide is in, and the light is at our backs. A stunning variety of shorebirds and waterfowl forage the banks and rivulets around the mangroves; while Black Kite, Greater Spotted Eagle and waders of a huge variety roost in the trees themselves.

Safa Park. We may opt for an early morning in Safa Park. Being a public park, Safa fills up later in the day with families and visitors, but the vast lawns, tree plantings, gardens and water features are attractive to a great



Isabelline Wheatear by Forrest Rowland



Pallid Scops Owl by Adam Riley

many migrant passerines. Common Whitethroat, Barred and Willow Warblers and Red-breasted Flycatcher are a few of the oddities we've noted there in past years, while Black Redstart, Alexandrine Parakeet, Eastern Orphean Warbler and Western Barn Owl are regular.

Qudra Lake. Leaving Dubai, we head south towards Abu Dhabi and then east towards Al Ain. Nearing the junction of the two main highways in the UAE, known as Saih al Salam, or Qudra, new collecting pools and fodder fields for racing camels are a great habitat for shorebirds - with Common and Spotted Redshanks, Common Greenshank, Marsh, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Little and Temminck's Stints, and several species of plover having been found here.

Zakher Pools. The main attraction on our approach to Al Ain is the Zakher Lake. Zakher Pools, as they were formerly known, have been opened to the public. The wellsprings and flats that form its centre offer some great birding. Pin-tailed Snipe is not uncommon, while Common Snipe are abundant. Beautiful Desert and regal Isabelline Wheatears are numerous and Clamorous and Great Reed Warblers inhabit the reeds. A march through the scrub has on several occasions in the past, even flushed the odd nightjar!

Al Ain. We end the day driving amongst the red sand dunes and gardens to beautiful Al Ain. If the group is feeling more adventurous, this area is one of the herpetological highlights of the World. The red, Aeolic dunes are home to some incredible geckos and lizards, with the odd chance for the enigmatic Sand Boa!

Sohar. We will be among the first to cross the border today, as we make our way to Sohar on the shores of the Gulf of Oman. Otherwise known as the Batinah Coast, the flat plains that run from the base of Hajar Mountains to the Gulf are rich for farming and have a few remnant expanses of open forest. Before we cross the UAE/Oman border, into the Batinah, we might make a quick stop at the broad wadi at the base of Jabal Hafeet. Short-toed Snake-Eagle frequents the skies, Desert Whitethroat, Plain Leaf Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, and Wheatears of various makes frequent the wash of this beautiful, rocky, wadi. With huge luck, we might come across our first Menetrie's Warbler of the tour!



Sand Partridge by Forrest Rowland



Crowned Sandgrouse by David Hoddinott

Al Hajar Mountains. The spectacularly scenic Al Hajar Mountains are home to the recently described Omani Owl. The rocky plains at the base of the unimaginably steep mountains before us are home to Long-billed Pipit, the monotypic Streaked Scrub Warbler, and it will provide our best opportunity to luck into the gorgeous Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. We head out in the evening to search for both the elusive Omani Owl and Pallid Scops Owl.

We'll take a drive from Birkat al Mawz on one of the most spectacular drives in the Middle East, up into the high Hajars, reaching 10 000ft! Most of the day will be spent amidst this most spectacular of vistas, as we search for Lappet-faced and Egyptian Vultures, Common Wood Pigeon (a scarce local race that has the potential for future species status), Streaked Scrub Warbler, Hume's and Red-tailed Wheatears, and any one of several over-wintering migrants possible. In years past, these have included Black-throated and Mistle Thrushes, Ring Ouzel, Eurasian Siskin, Pied Wheatear, and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Striolated Bunting, Long-billed and Tawny Pipits, and the mountain form of Desert Lark are all regular here at high elevations, and Sand Partridge is often encountered lower down.

At the base of the southern Hajars, we may decide to visit the well-wooded and very birdy Wadi Tanuf in search of Plain Leaf Warbler, Striolated Bunting, or the other odd migrant. Interesting ruins are situated at the mouth of the canyon, and a permanent spring-fed reservoir is a huge attraction for many species, including Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and South Arabian Toad.

Depending on our successes with Pallid Scops Owl and Omani Owl the previous evening, we may wish to linger here after dark, as both species can be found here.

Bar Al Hikman. One of the most recent marvels of civil engineering in the Sultanate is the completion of the Coastal Highway spanning from Muscat to Duqm, the new major port under construction. This will be our route South to Duqm with a stop at Bar Al Hikman. This is a famed staging area for tens of millions of shorebirds, including Great Knot, Crab Plover, Terek Sandpiper, and the occasional Caspian Plover (rare). Single-site count totals (estimating from one scope site) conducted in the mid-1990's exceeded 850 000 individual shorebirds!

Arabian Oryx Reserve. There are a few choice wadis and plains to explore as we travel from the coast inland, where we will be sure to check for Bar-tailed and Dunn's Larks, as well as for the endangered Arabian Oryx, for which the



Arabian Oryx by Forrest Rowland



Asian Desert Warbler by Adam Riley

massive Arabian Oryx Preserve was established. Inside the reserve, water features in the breeding pens of Sand Gazelle and Arabian Oryx attract an incredible show of sandgrouse. A typical morning, depending on recent precipitation (less is better) might see upwards of 800 sandgrouse of 3 species coming to drink. In the driest, hottest, times of the year, the sandgrouse are utterly fearless and may number in their thousands! By aiming to be at the watering holes at peak viewing time, we can expect fine views of Chestnut-bellied, Spotted, and Crowned Sandgrouse.

Arabian Oryx Reserve to Wadi Qatbit. Otherwise dubbed 'The Empty Quarter', the wide, eastern portion of the Rub al Khali occupies more than 40% of Oman's land mass. We enter it from the East, before veering south, farther into the sands. It is truly impressive to travel across, replete with travelling Bedouin clans and Camel Trains 1000's of camels deep. An amazing sight indeed!

Wadi Qatbit. This site is a must-stop for any birder, as no better migrant trap exists on the tour. The lush green groves and the small oasis attract a staggering variety of birds! Though the likes of Hume's Leaf Warbler, Asian Koel, Masked Shrike, Eurasian Scops Owl, and Menetries's Warbler would be enough to warrant a lengthy visit, Qatbit has become the most reliable place in the Middle East to see the enigmatic, beautiful Grey Hypocolius. We have yet to miss this wonderful species here! En route to Qatbit, we will also stop at Ghaftayn, which has produced some surprising species for the area, from Woodchat Shrike to Eurasian Wryneck.

Muntasar Oasis. The oasis of Muntasar first gained the attention of birders as a wintering site for Grey Hypocolius and watering hole for hundreds of sandgrouse. Early in the morning, Crowned Sandgrouse takes the stage, and, by mid-morning, Spotted Sandgrouse has begun to filter in from the surrounding desert. The flat, featureless, pale vista from which this spot of green arises makes the whole scenario quite surreal. A morning at Muntasar is quite an experience, for sandgrouse aren't the only visitors for a drink. Bluethroat, Red-breasted Flycatcher and the sought-after Asian Desert Warbler are frequent visitors to the oasis, along with wagtails, pipits, redstarts, and warblers. Little Bunting and Whinchat are among the vagrants we have found here. There will be no shortage of camels, either, as many Bedouin lead their purveyors to water



Bar-tailed Lark by David Hoddinott

here and Cream-colored Coursers often follow the camels, foraging in their wake.



Tristram's Starlings by Forrest Rowland

An evening visit to Muntasar can be great for mammal watching, and almost guarantee a Scops Owl! Past visits have yielded great views of Ruppell's Sand Fox, Arabian Golden Jackal, and, on one occasion, Small-spotted Genet.

Central Desert farms & Mudday. New and extensive farms crop up annually in the area, with the Shisr and Al Baleed Farms being the best known at present. These large, irrigated fields are wonderful for birding, given the distance between water sources. Long-legged Buzzard, Peregrine (Barbary) Falcon and other prize raptors are regularly seen over the fields, as well as one of the most prized birds in the desert – the enigmatic and rare Dunn's Lark. A stop at Mudday, as we near the Dhofar Mountains, is always fascinating.

With a mix of Dhofari species, and deep desert species, it's a bizarre meeting place of two distinct avifauna. Aside from the fact that Nile Valley Sunbird is one of the most numerous species at the Mudday Oasis, Grey Hypocolius are generally in good number, African Collared Dove have set up an odd colony here, and we should see our first Blackstarts of the tour here too. With any luck, we may spot the head of a basking *Uromastyx* atop a rock! Confined to Arabia and the African Far North, Oman is one of the best countries to look for these Spike-tailed Lizards, some species of which grow up to 4ft in length!

Before we descend the steep face of the Dhofars into Salalah, we may stop at the Frankincense Museum, where visitors are given both historical and natural information about this iconic tree. We may be able to convince a friendly attendant to allow us to smell the sap and walk through some of the oldest groves of Frankincense Trees on Earth.

Salalah & the Dhofar Mountains. Being affected by warm trade winds and the tropical influence of the Indian Ocean, the Dhofar is much more akin to Africa in both climate and vegetation. Many African species occur here, and this is by far the most diverse stop on our tour, both in terms of culture and habitat. According to both Islamic and Christian historical texts, Salalah is a site of major significance. Archaeological sites and museums are numerous, though outnumbered by the many wooded canyons, lush springs and coastal Khawrs on which we will focus our efforts and attention.



Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak by Forrest

Some of the more widespread species we will search for at the various birding locales here include Jouanin's Petrel, Eastern Imperial, Verreaux's and Bonelli's Eagles, colourful Bruce's Green Pigeon, Singing Bush Lark, Blackstart, Arabian Wheatear, Shining and Palestine Sunbirds, Tristram's Starling, and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. Range-restricted and near-

endemic species we can expect include the *percivali* subspecies of Black-crowned Tchagra (probable future split), Arabian Warbler, Abyssinian White-eye, the extremely localised Yemen Serin, and the handsome Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak. Sporadic and more difficult species we might hope to encounter include Abdim's Stork, Yellow-billed Egret, the showy Pheasant-tailed Jacana, and the goggle-eyed Spotted Thick-Knee.

We will make at least two nocturnal outings in search of the recent split of Arabian Scops Owl, Arabian Eagle-Owl, Desert Owl, and Spotted Thick-knee, as well as mammals which have included the likes of Small-spotted Genet, Arabian Golden Jackal and Striped Hyena!

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Moderate to comfortable. Suitable for most birding / wildlife interest levels. Some long drives & hot weather.
Birding Ease		Moderate to easy. Mostly open desert birding & migrant 'traps' of oases & farms.
Accommodation		Mostly comfortable to very comfortable, one lodge is simpler but has private facilities.
Walking / Trails		Mostly short walks & birding from the vehicles. Some moderate walks in the higher mountains & on uneven ground.
Vehicles / Roads		4x4 vehicles, some twisting, winding roads into the high mountain's, very good, asphalted roads along the coastal highways, some off-road driving.
Photography		Worthwhile to good. No dedicated hides.
Annoyances		Hot to very hot weather. Salalah can be humid.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour;
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Special gratuities;

- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- It is important for you to be aware that although it can get quite hot in Oman, we have set this tour up to coincide with the coolest time of the year. However, daytime temperatures will still be in the high 20's C (high 70's, low 80's F) and the humidity is generally quite low. Rain is more likely at this time of the year but, as it is an arid climate, this should not hamper us too much.
- Much of our time is spent in vehicles, as we do have to cover some long distances to get to the best areas for birds and animals. The more luggage you pack the less room there is in the vehicle, so it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not overpack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.
- Accommodation throughout the tour is comfortable. There is no camping on this trip.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour begins in Dubai on day 1 with an arrival dinner and concludes after breakfast at Salalah Airport on day 14.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Dubai International Airport, United Arab Emirates (IATA: DXB) and Salalah International Airport, Oman (IATA: SLL) are the main ports of entry and departure for this tour.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.