

Socotra

2024 Trip Report



Socotra Scops Owl © Michael Mills

Text and photographs by Michael Mills

SUMMARY

As one of the oldest islands of continental origin, the avifauna of Socotra boasts a high degree of endemism, with ten endemics and specials to attract world birders. Although politically part of Yemen, in practice it has little to do with its violent chaos, instead being a safe and relaxed place to visit. The spectacular scenery and unusual plant forms have given rise to its advertising slogan of "The Most Alien Place on Earth", and make for an fascinating birding destination which few have been privileged to visit.

During our week on the island we had ample time to explore its avian highlights, and had notched up all the endemics within the first 48 hours. On the first evening we tracked down a pair of confiding Socotra Scops Owls in a grove of tall palms. Early the next morning we made our way to the highlands of Dixem, pausing en route for a roadside Socotra Buzzard. On arrival at our destination we quickly found two Socotra Buntings foraging quietly among some rocks, before enjoying a field breakfast. A wider exploration of the area then turned up Socotra Starling, Socotra Warbler and Socotra Sparrow, before we lunched along a steep sided wadi and visited the famous Dragon's Blood Tree forest. Our return to Hadibu and the coast produced Somali Golden-winged Grosbeak as we wend down the mountain pass, and we rounded off our first full day with a visit to some coastal salt marshes where Socotra Cisticola was numerous. Our second morning found us in the spectacular surrounds of Wadi Ayhaft National Park, where we quickly found our final endemic, Socotra White-eye. During the rest of the time we worked on improving our views of the endemics, but had ample time to visit some of the more

spectacular parts of the island, and do some snorkelling and swimming.

Besides the endemics, we found various other breeding land birds such as Long-billed Pipit, Cream-coloured Courser, Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Pale Crag Martin, White-browed Coucal, Forbes-Watson's Swift, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Bruce's Green Pigeon, Brown-necked Raven, Great Grey Shrike and hundreds of Egyptian Vulture, the latter a ubiquitous presence at field lunches. We also spent a significant amount of time watching waterbirds. At sea we found Persian Shearwater, Jouanin's Petrel, Red-billed Tropicbird and Brown Booby. And the various coastal lagoons or khors held an impressive variety of species, with local rarities including Pin-tailed Snipe, Yellow Bittern, five Pheasant-tailed Jacana and five Cotton Pygmy Goose. Other birds of note included Pacific Golden Plover, Red-throated Pipit, various subspecies of Western Yellow Wagtail, Kentish Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Temminck's Stint, Common Snipe, Sooty Gull, Caspian Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Whiskered Tern, Socotra Cormorant and Indian Pond Heron.



BIRDS RECORDED

Anatidae

Cotton Pygmy Goose *Nettapus coromandelianus*—One seen at Khor Sirhin and four at Khor Quryah (*coromandelianus*)

Apodidae

Forbes-Watson's Swift *Apus berliozii*—Seen in small numbers on most days (*berliozii*)

White-browed Coucal *Centropus [s.] superciliosus*—Good views of one along the north coast (*superciliosus*)

Pteroclididae

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*—Excellent views both in the day and at night (*lichtensteinii*)

Columbidae

Rock Dove or Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*—A few feral birds

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*—Common throughout (*senegalensis*)

Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia*—Several seen well at Wadi Ayhaft, plus two more in the east

Rallidae

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*—Seen at several khors (probably *chloropus*)

Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*—Large numbers and Khor Sirhin and Qadab, and several elsewhere

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus [r.] ruficollis*—One at Khor Sirhin (probably *ruficollis*)

Recurvirostridae

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus [h.] himantopus*—Common at various khors

Charadriidae

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*—Four at Khor Sirhin on our last visit

Grey Plover | Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*—Good numbers at Khor Quryah, and smaller numbers elsewhere (*squatarola*)

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*—A few seen (*tundrae*)

Kentish Plover *Charadrius [a.] alexandrinus*—Small numbers at various wetlands and beaches (*alexandrinus*)

Jacanidae

Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*—A pair at Khor Sirhin and three at Khor Quryah

Scolopacidae

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius [p.] phaeopus*—Moderate numbers at various wetlands (probably all *phaeopus*)

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*—One at Khor Qadab (ssp. uncertain)

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*—One at Khor Quryah (probably *limosa*)

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*—Moderate numbers at various wetlands (*interpres*)

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*—Moderate numbers at various wetlands

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*—Seen in small numbers at various wetlands

Pin-tailed Snipe *Gallinago stenura*—Excellent views of one at Khor Sirhin, plus several more in flight

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*—About ten at Khor Sirhin (*gallinago*)

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*—Regular at wetlands

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*—One for John

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*—Regular at wetlands

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*—Rather common

Glareolidae

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*—A trio was seen well near Hadibu (*cursor*)

Laridae

Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*—Common

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*—One at the beach at Deham

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*—Heuglin's Gull (*heuglini*) was rather common, and one Steppe Gull (*barabensis*) was seen at Khor Sirhin beach

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon [n.] nilotica*—One at Deham (*nilotica*)

Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*—Good numbers along the coast (*velox*)

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*—The most numerous tern (*bengalensis*)

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*—Four at Khor Sirhin beach (ssp. uncertain)

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*—One at Khor Sirhin (*hybrida*)

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*—About 10 seen off the north coast (*indicus*)

Procellariidae

Persian Shearwater *Puffinus [bailloni] persicus*—Five on the pelagic (*persicus*)

Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax*—About 10 during the pelagic, but all were fairly distant

Sulidae

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*—Seen at Qalansiyah and Dimhari (*plotus*)

Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*—Regular sightings along the coast

Threskiornithidae

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*—Several at Khor Sirhin and Khor Quryah

Ardeidae

Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*—One at Khor Sirhin

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*—One juvenile bird at Qalansiyah, and 15 at Khor Quryah (*nycticorax*)

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*—Several seen at three different khors

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus [i.] ibis*—Small numbers

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*—Seen at several wetlands (*cinerea*)

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*—Three seen (*purpurea*)

Great Egret *Ardea alba*—Seen at several wetlands (*alba* or *melanorhynchos*)

Little Egret *Egretta [g.] garzetta*—Seen at several wetlands (*garzetta*)

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*—Fairly common in coastal areas (*schistacea*)

Pandionidae

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*—One on the eastern tip of the island and one at Khor Quryah (*haliaetus*)

Accipitridae

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*—Abundant (*percnopterus*)

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*—One female at Khor Quryah (*aeruginosus*)

Socotra Buzzard *Buteo [buteo] socotraensis*—About five excellent sightings

Strigidae

Socotra Scops Owl *Otus [senegalensis] socotranus*—Brilliant views

Falconidae

Common Kestrel *Falco [t.] tinnunculus*—Seen several times (*archeri*)

Peregrine Falcon *Falco [p.] peregrinus*—Brilliant views at Dixem (ssp. uncertain)

Laniidae**Great Grey Shrike**

Lanius excubitor—Seen regularly in small numbers (*uncinatus*); sometimes split as Socotra Grey Shrike

Corvidae**Brown-necked Raven**

Corvus ruficollis—Regular in small numbers

Alaudidae**Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark**

Eremopterix nigriceps—Good numbers in coastal areas (*melanauchen*; has been split as endemic ssp. *forbeswatsoni*)

Hirundinidae**Pale Crag Martin**

Ptyonoprogne [fuligula] obsoleta—A couple seen at Dixem (*arabica*)

Cisticolidae

Socotra Cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus*—Excellent views at Deham

Socotra Warbler

Incana incana—Seen well at Dixem

Zosteropidae**Socotra White-eye**

Zosterops [abyssinicus] socotranus—Great views, first at Wadi Ayhaft

Sturnidae**Somali Starling**

Onychognathus blythii—Abundant

Socotra Starling

Onychognathus frater—Seen well at Dixem and Himlil

Muscicapidae**Desert Wheatear**

Oenanthe deserti—One female seen just east of Hadibu (ssp. uncertain)

Nectariniidae**Socotra Sunbird**

Chalcomitra balfouri—Rather numerous and seen very well

Passeridae**Socotra Sparrow**

Passer [i.] insularis—Abundant

Motacillidae**Western Yellow Wagtail**

Motacilla flava—Seen at Khor Sirhin and Khor Qadab (one *lutea*, some *thunbergi* and *beema*)

Long-billed Pipit

Anthus [s.] similis—Rather common (endemic ssp. *sokotrae*)

Red-throated Pipit

Anthus cervinus—Several seen well at Khor Qadab

Fringillidae**Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak**

Rhynchostruthus socotranus—Brilliant views at Ditwah, and seen twice more

Emberizidae**Cinnamon-breasted Bunting**

Emberiza [t.] tahapisi—Seen near Wadi Ayhaft (*tahapisi*)

Socotra Bunting

Emberiza socotrana—Good views at Dixem, on two occasions





Socotra Warbler, Socotra White-eye and Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse © Michael Mills





Cream-coloured Courser and Socotra Buzzard © Michael Mills



Socotra Cisticola and Socotra Bunting © Michael Mills





Socotra Sunbird, Socotra Starling and Peregrine Falcon © Michael Mills





Perasian Shearwater and Glossy Ibis © Michael Mills



Long-billed Pipit and Common Kestrel © Michael Mills

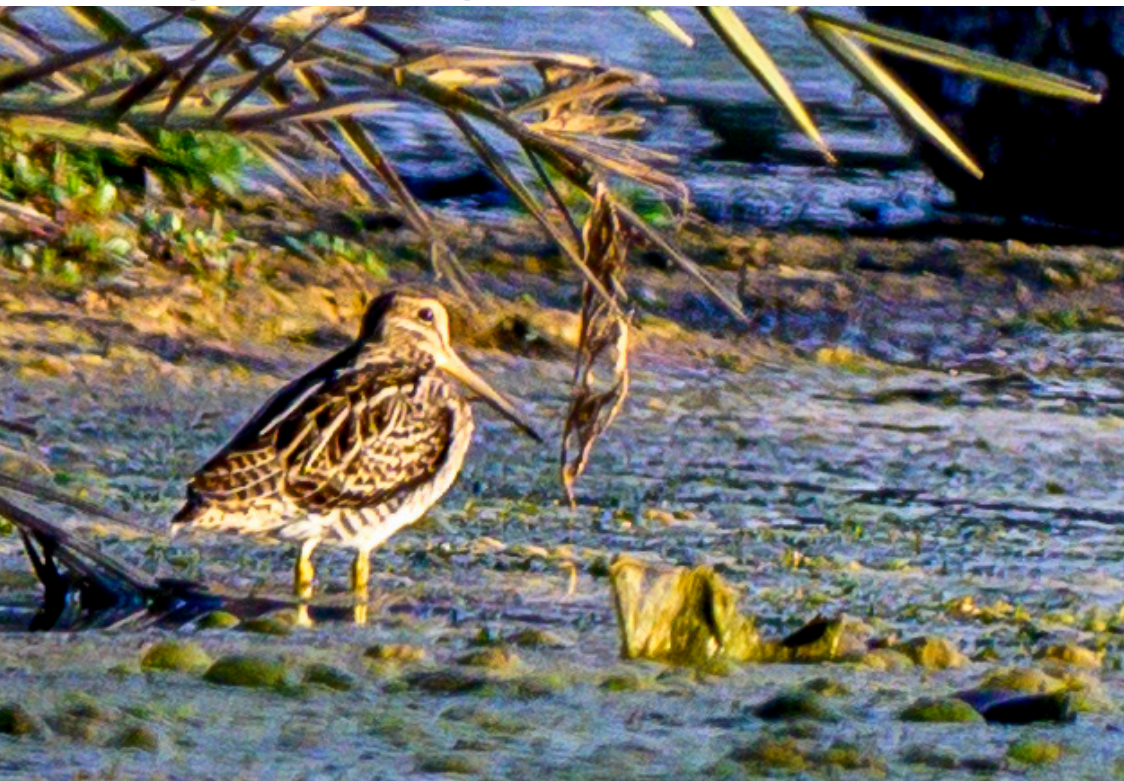




Red-billed Tropicbird and Pin-tailed Snipe © Michael Mills



Cotton Pygmy Goose and Pheasant-tailed Jacana © Michael Mills





Spectacular mountains are a feature of Socotra © Michael Mills



Other-worldly Dragon's Blood Trees © Michael Mills





Socotra Sparrow and Socotra Buzzard © Michael Mills



Kentish Plover and Socotra Chameleon © Michael Mills





Somali Starling, Egyptian Vulture and Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak © Michael Mills





Desert Rose with an Indian Ocean backdrop © Michael Mills