

SOCOTRA TOUR REPORT 2024

15 - 22 October 2024

by Hannu Jännes

This, our fifth expedition to the remote island of Socotra, positioned far off the Horn of Africa in the Indian Ocean, proved highly successful. All 10 endemic bird species were seen plus numerous endemic reptiles and plants, and some great sea birding brought us thousands of Persian Shearwaters, hundreds of Socotra Cormorants, few Jouanin's Petrels and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, one Masked and many Brown Boobies and, as a complete surprise, two Christmas Island Frigatebirds that were only the second or third record for Africa! In addition, the coastal khors held a good selection of terns, gulls and waders to add to our enjoyment. In total this special fauna and flora amid breathtaking landscapes all add up to make Socotra a much sought after birding destination. Unfortunately, our plans to visit the even more remote island of Abd-al Kuri to see the Abd-al Kuri Sparrow, was cancelled shortly before the start of the tour as the island was closed to foreign visitors! The present-day Socotra, although part of the country of Yemen, is administered by a separatist government and the island is effectively occupied by the United Arab Emirates. This strange situation makes it a peaceful place that is easy and safe to visit.

After landing at Socotra International Airport and clearing customs and immigration we were met by our excellent local guide Ruslan and two vehicles with drivers. We headed off to our hotel in the capital of Hadibo, through the arid coastal lowlands, but soon took a short stop at a 'khor' (a brackish lagoon), where several birds, including tens of Red-knobbed Coots, various common waders, two Tree Pipits and the only Collared Pratincoles of the tour, were on show. A further stop was necessitated in an area where massive numbers, we estimated 3000, of Persian Shearwaters were swimming and feeding in dense flocks and Sooty Terns, Brown Noddies, and even a few Flesh-footed Shearwaters, were part of the melee. Close to Hadibo, the second vehicle had a brief encounter with two unidentified frigatebirds sailing high above the coastline. After checking in to our comfortable hotel (the best in town) and lunch, we visited two more khors close to Hadibo, where we saw a number of wetland birds which included a single Spotted Crane and a few Indian Pond Herons and Little Grebes. After dark we visited a nearby palm grove, where we had great views of the endemic Socotra Scops Owl.

The next morning, we drove to Dixem plateau and the Wadi Meshuri, an excellent area to try some of the trickier endemic bird species. On the way we had our first encounter with the iconic Dragon's Blood Trees looking even more special in the early morning light. At the edge of the impressive Meshuri gorge we could hear a couple of Socotra Buntings singing down the steep slopes, but just couldn't tease them to show. However, a short walk to another site and we soon had great views of several buntings feeding on the short grass around a Bedouin house. Other good birds here included the endemic Socotra Sparrow, a few Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeaks, a noisy pair of Socotra Buzzards, the endemic subspecies of Long-billed Pipit, Pale Crag Martins,

Cinnamon-breasted Buntings and two Blue Rock Thrushes. It was also great to see, and hear, good numbers of Forbes-Watson's Swifts flying past us. On the way back there was a single Western House Martin flying around, but this was seen by the leader only. Later we spent some time in wadi Zeriq, where, whilst waiting for our lunch to be prepared, we found a rather skittish Socotra Warbler, a few Socotra Sunbirds, the endemic subspecies (*uncinatus*) of Great Grey Shrike and several splendid Somali Starlings. We also had our first decent views of the endemic Socotra White-eye, a species we had only glimpsed earlier. A special feature of this place, a popular picnic site, is the number of extremely tame Egyptian Vultures, which watch your every move, and fearlessly patrol around waiting for scraps of left-over food. The endemic Socotra Starling took some time to find and identify, but in the end, we had good views of a pair with Somali Starlings. After lunch we visited a very scenic area with a magnificent vista over the Meshuri gorge and a distant forest of Dragon's Blood Trees and delighted in more Socotra Starlings eating the fruits of Dragon's Blood Trees. In the afternoon we spent time looking for the Socotra Warbler but had to make do with some photogenic Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeaks. On the way back to our hotel we saw again the two frigatebirds seen the day before, and this time we and our cameras were ready. From the images taken these birds were later identified as Christmas Frigatebirds, only the second or third record for Africa! After sunset we spent time searching for the scarce Nubian Nightjar, but only managed to find Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and Cream-coloured Coursers in the process.

Another early start to reach the town of Qalansiyah at sunrise. Whilst on the beach readying for our boat trip we saw two migrating European Nightjars arriving over the sea and then disappearing amongst the houses. The plan was to board a local fishing boat and visit the islet of Saboniya, about a two-hour boat ride away. To cut a long story short, the sea that was supposed to be calm and flat, was anything but, and we had to turn back before we even reached the halfway point of our journey. Soaking wet and disappointed we returned to the beach seeing Jouanin's Petrels (an important bird for Ola), a single Masked Booby (even more important bird for Sue), many Brown Boobies, Socotra Cormorants, good numbers of Great Crested Terns and many Persian Shearwaters on the way. Back in Qalansiyah we checked the gulls loafing on the beach and identified many Heuglin's Gulls and also noted a few Steppe Gulls. A walk through a palm grove produced a couple of Golden Orioles, but little else. We then visited the beautiful Detwah lagoon (a World Heritage site) and enjoyed a good lunch on the beach. On the way back to our hotel we checked the two khors in the Ghubbah area and found a number of new birds including Little and Saunders's Tern, Grey Plover, Greater Sand Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, Western Cattle Egret, Gull-billed Tern, White-winged Tern and a handsome Crab-plover, a self-found lifer for Jeff. The coastal scrub nearby held three Socotra Cisticolas, the last of the ten endemic bird species seen.

On our third full day in Socotra, we headed for the spectacular Ayhaft National Park, where we spent the first half of the day. This beautiful wadi was totally different in character from the other places we had visited on the island and held an interesting flora. The fruit bearing trees attracted many birds including Bruce's Green Pigeons, a new bird for us, Socotra white-eyes, Socotra Sunbirds and Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeaks. We also had good daytime views of a pair of Socotra Scops Owls and had acceptable views of a group of three Socotra Warblers. In addition, Sue found us a Socotra Racer and some interesting lizards. A late afternoon visit to our home khors produced Northern Shoveler and White-browed Coucal as new birds, before we headed again for the dry country for another try for the Nubian Nightjar, which we again failed to find.

The new day began with quick visits to our home khors, before driving east to Wadi Homhill through a breathtakingly beautiful arid mountain landscape with large stands of Bottle Trees and large Frankincense Trees. At Homhill we walked to a natural pool, with a Grey Wagtail present, at the end of the wadi and admired the beautiful vista that opened before of us. On the way back to our vehicles, we saw Spotted Flycatchers, a first-winter Barred Warbler, well spotted by Ola, couple of Socotra White-eyes and, best of all, a very confiding pair of Socotra Warblers. On the way through the semidesert, we found a couple of Isabelline Wheatears, a new bird for the tour, and six or so Black-crowned Sparrow-larks all in full song-flight mode. After lunch in Tormer and a short visit to Qaryah lagoon, we took a short break before yet another unsuccessful try for the Nubian Nightjar.

During the first half of the next day, we visited a number of khors, including some new ones and others we had birded before, enjoying once again an interesting mix of waders, terns and even passerines that were on offer. New birds for the tour included Spotted Redshank, Terek Sandpiper and Ruff. In the afternoon we visited Wadi Shiqen and did a short, but unsuccessful night drive for the nightjar.

For our last full day on Socotra, we returned to the Dixem plateau and Wadi Meshuri, the Shabhen area and Wadi Zerig, which combined form perhaps the most impressive and enjoyable area to visit on the whole island. Our visit didn't give us any new avian surprises. but we enjoyed repeated views of some of the interesting birds we had already seen. A new creature for the tour was the endemic Socotra Chameleon found by Brian. For the final nightjar chase we headed west towards a promising looking area around Zetmoh, where we found two European Nightjars, but once again no sign of the hoped for Nubian Nightjar.

Then it was time to say our goodbyes to this beautiful island and our excellent ground crew and to thank everyone for their excellent company during such a memorable trip.

BIRDS OF THE TOUR

1st Socotra Bunting

2nd Socotra Warbler, Crab-plover & Jouanin's Petrel

5th Socotra Scops Owl

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g., it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

The species names and taxonomy used in the bird list follows Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P. (Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)**.

Where the subspecies seen is/are known, these are often given in parentheses at the end of the species comment.

BIRDS

Garganey *Spatula querquedula* Small numbers were noted on six days.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* Singletons were noted on two days.

Forbes-Watson's Swift ♦ *Apus berliozi* Noted on three days.

European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* Two birds on migration on 17th October and another two were spotlighted on 21st. No previous records of this species from Socotra on eBird.

White-browed Coucal *Centropus superciliosus* One at Khor Sirhin.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* Two sightings of this palearctic migrant.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse ♦ *Pterocles lichtensteinii* Small numbers were seen on five days.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*

Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia* About ten in Wadi Ayhaft.

Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* Two at Khor Sirhin.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Red-knobbed Coot (Cresated C) *Fulica cristata* Numerous at Khor Sirhin and especially so at Khor Qadub.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Two singletons.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

Tibetan Sand Plover *Anarhynchus atrifrons*

Greater Sand Plover *Anarhynchus leschenaultii*

Kentish Plover *Anarhynchus alexandrinus*

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* One at Khor Gubbah.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* One at Khor Qadub.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Ruff *Calidris pugnax* A single bird was seen at Khor Gubbah.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* A singleton at Khor Gubbah on two days.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Crab-plover *Dromas ardeola* A single bird seen at Khor Gubbah on two days.

Cream-colored Courser *Cursorius cursor* Up to ten (including a bird on eggs) were seen on our night drives SE of Hadibo. Also, a daytime observation of flock of four birds.

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincole* Two at Khor Qadub on our first day was the only record.

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* Small numbers (2-4 birds) at sea on three days.

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*

Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* Two were noted.

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* A singleton seen at Khor Gubbah.

Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi* A singleton at Khor Gubbah.

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* Two sightings.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* One single juvenile at Khor Gubbah.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*

Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* Up to three at Khor Gubbah.

Sooty Gull ♦ *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* This was the commonest form of Lesser Black-backed Gull in Socotra, with up to 50 birds a day.

Lesser Black-backed Gull ♦ (Steppe G) *Larus [fuscus] harabensis* This form, with a total of three birds, was scarce in Socotra.

Flesh-footed Shearwater *Ardenna carneipes* A few were seen on our first day circling the big flocks of Persian Shearwaters.

Persian Shearwater ♦ *Puffinus persicus* Thousand and thousands!

Jouanin's Petrel ♦ *Bulweria fallax* Two on our boat trip.

Christmas Frigatebird *Fregata andrewsi* Two frigatebirds were seen near Hadibo on 15th, 16th and 20th of October and later identified from photographs as Christmas Frigatebirds! This was apparently the second or third record for Africa!

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* Common around the steep cliffs at the western end of the island.

Masked Booby ♦ *Sula dactylatra* Great views of a single bird on our boat trip.

Socotra Cormorant ♦ *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* Common around the steep cliffs at the western end of the island.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Western Reef Heron (W R Egret) *Egretta gularis*

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* Small numbers were noted.

Western Cattle Egret *Ardea ibis* A singleton at Khor Qubbah.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* Very common and tame.

Socotra Buzzard ♦ *Buteo socotraensis* Endemic. Small numbers were noted in the higher mountains.

Socotra Scops Owl ♦ *Otus socotranus* Endemic. We had great views of this cutie.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus pelegrinoides* A few seen. Ssp *pelegrinoides*.

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* A total of eight birds.

Great Grey Shrike (Socotra G S) *Lanius [excubitor] uncinatus* This endemic subspecies was relatively common.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Small numbers daily.

Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* Relatively common in the arid lowlands.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* A singleton was noted on four days.

Pale Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta* Small numbers on Dixem plateau.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Commonest Palearctic migrant on the island with up to 50 birds per day.

Western House Martin *Delichon urbicum* A singleton on Dixem plateau. Leader only

Socotra Cisticola ♦ ***Cisticola haesitatus*** Endemic. Relatively common and easy to find in the coastal scrub.

Socotra Warbler ♦ ***Incana incana*** Endemic. Small numbers, with some brilliant views, on the bushy mountain slopes.

Barred Warbler *Curruca nisoria* A first-winter bird at Hamhil.

Socotra White-eye ♦ ***Zosterops socotranus*** Endemic. Fairly common and widespread.

Somali Starling ♦ ***Onychognathus blythii*** Common and widespread.

Socotra Starling ♦ ***Onychognathus frater*** Endemic. Rather scarce. Only noted in the more remote mountain areas.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* A few were noted.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* Non-leader. Two birds were seen at Dixem plateau.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* A total of six birds.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* Rather common and widespread.

Socotra Sunbird ♦ ***Chalcomitra balfouri*** Endemic. Fairly common in the more mountainous areas.

Socotra Sparrow ♦ ***Passer insularis*** Endemic. Common and widespread.

Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* A handful of birds were seen

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Three birds in total.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* A singleton at Khor Sirhin.

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* The endemic subspecies *socotrae* is fairly common.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* Two birds.

Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak \diamond *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* Endemic. Relatively common and easy to see in the more mountainous areas.

Cinnamon-breasted Bunting *Emberiza tahapisi* Small numbers in the more mountainous areas.

Socotra Bunting \diamond *Emberiza socotrana* Endemic. Small numbers were noted along the edge of Wadi Meshuri.

MAMMALS

Small Indian Civet *Viverricula indica* Several nocturnal encounters with this introduced species.

Desert Long-eared Bat *Otonycteris hemprichii socotranus*

REPTILES

Socotra Racer *Hemerophis socotrae*

Socotra Chameleon *Chamaeleo monachus*

Socotra Rock Gecko *Pristurus sokotranus*

Socotra Skink *Trachylepis socotrana*

Blanford's Rock Gecko *Pristurus insignis*