



Oman Trip Report December 29, 2009 to January 9, 2010

by: Karl Overman
Farmington Hills, Michigan
USA
e-mail: martineoverman@earthlink.net
webpage: www.karloverman.com

December 29, 2009

Christmas in Marseille with the family and my in-laws. I thought of a number of options for a birding trip after Christmas--Canary Islands, West Africa, Israel but I settled on Oman. In hindsight I still liked the choice. Oman has a superb infrastructure, a stable government with friendly people and excellent birding gen. Besides, now that I am addicted to bird photography as well as world listing, the prospect of day after day of sunny weather further tipped the scales toward Oman. Plus with Dave Sargeant's et. al., excellent birding finding book for Oman, second edition, out last year, it seemed an ideal time to go to Oman. The die was cast.

I left Marseille on December 28th at 6:40 am, flying to Muscat via Amsterdam and Abu Dhabi. My flight arrived in Muscat at 9:15 p.m. Relatively few people at the airport and it was easy to get a visa, change money and get through customs upon my arrival. I rented a compact Honda from Europcar. Not cleaned, lots of kilometers on the car and the tires were not great but it held up through all the hard driving I did, some 5000 kilometers. All I had to do was fill the front driver's side tire 3 times with air. I felt wide awake so I decided to get busy and start driving rather than spend the night around the airport. My first birding destination would be the Al Batinah coast in the north of the country. I left the airport at 10:20 p.m., and arrived in Sohar, the largest city on the Al Batinah coast, at 1 a.m. The road was excellent with the speed limit 120 km/hr. Traffic lights are very scarce in the country with roundabouts efficiently keeping traffic moving well. I stayed at the Al Wadi Hotel. Hotels are expensive in the country whereas gas is cheap--.12 rials per liter, about 35 cents a liter. I paid 44 rial for the room or about \$123. It is a fine hotel which did take credit cards. The breakfast was excellent at the hotel.

There was no crack of dawn departure for me this morning. I did not look out the hotel window until 8:15 am. Sunny of course. The first bird alas was **Common Myna**, abundant along the Al Batinah coast. Looking around the swimming pool of the hotel my second bird was a **White-spectacled Bulbul**, oddly the only one today. Walking briefly around the grounds of the hotel, I picked up **Graceful Prinia**, **Laughing Dove**, a pair of **Red-wattled Lapwings**, **House Sparrows** (abundant), a **House Crow** (abundant) and a **Purple Sunbird**. I saw Purple Sunbirds frequently today, all being in eclipse. I drove north to Liwa, which has a small patch of mangroves. In the sliver of water adjacent to the mangroves I had **Common Sandpiper**, **Common Redshank** and **Green Sandpiper**. I quickly found a **Collared Kingfisher**, the specialty of this location. I had at least four of them there. A **Common Kingfisher** on the edge of the mangroves surely completes my kingfisher list for the trip. I walked out to the beach. Nothing close. Distantly I saw singles of **Curlew** and **Whimbrel**. **Sooty Gulls** occasionally flew by. I had the first of many **Desert Wheatears** in the crude parking area. A pair of

Crested Larks also there which proved to be a common bird in the country. I drove north to Shinas. **Indian Rollers** were common roadside birds. It was fairly well wooded around Shinas. I reached the mangrove area to the south of Shinas. No waterbirds in the narrow band of water by the mangroves. Passerines useful though. They seemed to be attracted to pishing, namely 5 **White-cheeked Bulbuls**, a couple **Purple Sunbirds** and a **Syke's Warbler**, a bird I did not expect to get. I went north a few miles and drove into Shinas proper to get near the waterfront. I found a shallow lagoon on the south side of town with a nice assortment of waterbirds--30 **Gray Herons**, one **Great Egret**, a dozen **Western Reef Herons**, 12 **Eurasian Spoonbills**, a **Pacific Golden Plover**, 4 **Terek Sandpipers**, a couple **Curlew**, 4 **Bar-tailed Godwits**, several **Greenshanks**, one **Temminck's Stint**, a **Sandwich Tern** and a **Caspian Tern**. On the dry expansive fringe to the lagoon, four **Greater Sand- Plovers** and a **Kentish Plover** were present. Feral dogs roaming the flats. I noticed a single **Rock Martin** (Clements nonmenclature) flying around buildings adjacent to the open salt flats. A **White Wagtail** was on a street in Shinas. My day's **Indian Silverbill** was in an open wooded area outside of Shinas with a **Greater Spotted Eagle** soaring overhead, the only raptor of the day. **Little Green Bee-eaters** fairly common in the acacia scrub around Shinas. I spent several hours along a gravel track through the well wooded area of Khatmat Milahah near the U.A.E. border. It was quite birdy. I had several small bands of **Arabian Babblers**. They were often on the ground under trees. Goats prevalent too unfortunately so there was no undergrowth. Twice I saw **Tawny Pipit** pairs on the stoney ground. Unfortunately I could not come up with Eastern Pied Wheatear. The only wheatears I saw were several **Desert Wheatears** and a female **Red-tailed Wheatear**. I did succeed with the other key bird of this location, **Plain Leaf Warbler**. I saw at least 3 of them. Strangely they were easy to pick out in flight given their very small size. I went all the way to the base of the desert mountains. The only bird I picked up for that effort was a **Brown-necked Raven** flying along the ridge line. The only **Collared Doves** I recall seeing today were in this area. Several **Rose-collared Parakeets** flew over. **Hoopoes** were common here but nowhere else on the trip. On my return visit to the locale on January 7th I had 8. **Little Green Bee-eaters** conspicuous. I saw several **Lesser Whitethroats** including the desert form. Other birds included **Graceful Prinia** and **Southern Gray Shrike**. I flushed **Gray Francolin** several times, totaling 8 birds. I ended the birding day back at Liwa. Ten **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** flew in and landed on the salt flats near the road. Driving into town, people out now that it was late afternoon, especially young men and boys playing soccer. When driving through small towns in the middle of the day, you see very few people out and about and most of the stores are closed. However these towns are alive with activity at 10 p.m. I looked over Gulf of Oman near the harbor entrance

in Liwa. A lone **Great Cormorant** flew by. A buoy off shore was loaded with **Great Crested Terns**. A flock of 70 **Slender-billed Gulls** and more **Great Crested Terns** were on the shore near the channel.

December 30, 2009

Birding was confined to four hours at the Sun Farm in Sohar, arriving at 8:45 a.m. and leaving at 12:55 p.m. The rest of the day was devoted to driving as deep into the Empty Quarter, the vast central desert, as I could. The guy at the gate at Sun Farms signed me in. No big deal. Driving in, the first thing you come to is the cattle feedlot. Staying in the car was the prudent course of action to keep out of the way of farm equipment and to have a fine blind for photographing the numerous birds in the cattle feedlot area. I rolled up to the first cattle feed lot and found a tiny pool of putrid water next to the fence just a few feet away from the car. A **Glossy Ibis** was there, one of at least 15 in the feedlot area. Shorebirds included **Wood Sandpiper**, a couple **Black-winged Stilts**, several **Little Ringed Plovers** and a **Common Sandpiper**. This was great. The feed lot was a soupy mess (actually well maintained though). You could see a mass of tiny insects about 2 feet off the ground over the feedlots. I moved the car another 80 feet to another puddle by the fence. More shorebirds, this time including a **Temminck's Stint** and a couple **Little Stints**. **Red-wattled Plovers** were numerous around the cattle feedlots. Turning the corner, there were a few more puddles with shorebirds in attendance. This time the dominant species was **Ruff**, many of which roamed far away from the puddles over the feedlot. Approximately 60 **Ruffs** were in the feedlot area. A **Dunlin** was also present. **White Wagtails** were abundant--several hundred-- but I only saw around 10 **Yellow Wagtails** and 5 **Citrine Wagtails**. **Cattle Egrets** were picking insects from the heads of the dairy cows as well as rifling through their feed looking for bugs. **Little Green Bee-eaters** liked the cattle feeding area. There was an incline up to 3 sewage ponds so I drove up, flushing a host of birds lining the sewage lagoons. A couple ducks were present--2 **Mallards**, 2 **Eurasian Wigeon** and a male **Common Teal**. A couple of **Common Snipe** were hunkered down in a corner of a lagoon. A trio of **Curlew Sandpipers** were on a dike. Three **White-winged Terns** put in a brief appearance over the ponds. One **Squacco Heron** was on the edge of a lagoon. Down below at the base of the incline, a small wet area (dry on my return visit on 1/7/2010) was also attracting birds including a **Lesser Sand-Plover** and a **Green Sandpiper**. I left the cattle feedlots and drove around on the dirt farm roads through desert scrub that periodically is irrigated I surmised. A covey of four **Grey Francolins** ran through the desert scrub near the feedlots. Raptors were few today-- a couple **Marsh Harriers**, 2 or 3 **Eurasian Kestrels**, a female type **Montagu's Harrier** and that was about it. One common bird in the open areas of the farm was **Black-crowned**

Finch-Lark with over 50 of them. Also widespread was **Tawny Pipit** though never in flocks. **Southern Gray Shrikes** were in two widely separated areas of the farm. **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** were regularly being flushed by me. There were 100 plus today and 300 plus on my return visit to Sun Farm on January 7th. They were very skittish and if a few of them took to the air, dozens followed. The number of **Collared Doves** on the farm was breath-taking--10,000 I would guess. I found seven **Namaqua Doves** around irrigation equipment in a cultivated field. I never saw that species away from large farms. **Indian Rollers** were numerous with sometimes six being visible at once where fields were being watered. In the back areas of the farm there was an expanse of desert bushes reminding me of creosote. Both today and on January 7th I saw **Asian Desert Warbler** in that low growth. I had eight **Rock Martins** over that back area, one of the larger groups of that species I saw on the trip. Forty **House Buntings**, often separated as Striolated Bunting in Oman trip reports, were on a dirt track in the back. I saw both **Isabelline** and **Desert Wheatears** frequently on the farm. A flock of six **Skylarks** took flight from desert scrub, showing their white trailing edges to their wings. I picked out one **Red-throated Pipit** and three **Richard's Pipits** on the ground. Only one small area of grass was being harvested which surely limited the number of species present. After spending four productive hours at the farm, I could not see what else would keep me on the Al Batinah coast other than Eastern Pied Wheatear which I was hoping to get on an excursion to Musandam at the end of the trip. That conclusion led to the decision to drive south, skirting the capital area and driving into the central desert. I was intrigued that virtually from the U.A.E. border, there were signs announcing the direction and distance to Salalah at the extreme southern end of the country, say 1100 kilometers away. I ran into some rush hour traffic in the greater Muscat area, but it was manageable. The road signs in the country are excellent which was critical to a guy like me who did not have a map of the country. Once in the desert past Adam, it was a two lane road but a very good one. Quite a few trucks on the road at night in the desert. I saw essentially no birds along the way before nightfall. I stopped driving at 9 p.m. and stayed at the Hamrah Motel (15 RO). Like almost all hotels in the Oman below the international hotels, no credit cards allowed. The town is also spelled Hayma.

December 31, 2009

I left in the dark at 5:30 am, heading south across the Empty Quarter. Not surprisingly, no traffic. One annoying feature of my Honda rental was that it beeped if you went over 120 kph, something you are want to do on such an empty stretch of road. It was just getting light when I pulled into the fuel stop/guest house at Al Ghaftayn. No birds of note. Still another 85 kilometers to the turnoff to Muntasar, a key stop on this trip. Once off the main road onto the desert track to

Muntasar, you are in featureless terrain with frequent side tracks that go who knows where. I would not want to navigate this area at night without a GPS unit (it was available at Europcar Rental but I declined it). The road surface was not bad, unlike the nasty washboard road from Muntasar to Qatbit that I would take later. I followed the directions in Sargeant's book explicitly and arrived at the oasis of Muntasar at 8:40 am. What a lonely spot on earth. No sounds but those of sandgrouse flocks coming in to drink from the sulfurous waters of the oasis. Camel tracks around but no camels this morning, Several species of dragonflies were present which I photographed. The first sandgrouse that I scoped on the ground turned out to be a group of six **Crowned Sandgrouse**. Flocks of **Spotted Sandgrouse** were coming in for the entire three hours I was there, say 400 of them. Tall stands of phragmites blocked the view of much of the oasis. A couple dozen small date palms were there which I checked thoroughly for Hypocolius but came up empty. Passerines were scarce. A couple **Water Pipits** were in the grass adjacent to the closest water area. I was disappointed that there were no really off the wall birds at the oasis. I saw a few **Chiffchaffs**, a **Eurasian Kestrel**, **Desert Wheatears**, a skulking **Eurasian Reed Warbler** (at least that was my best guess) in the base of a date palm on the edge of the water. A Golden Jackal was conspicuously trotting around the oasis, no doubt with sandgrouse on its mind. Finding no Hypocolius and little else of interest, I pushed on to Qatbit on the main road to Salalah. This oasis has numerous trees and is well irrigated. **Laughing Doves** numerous including a dark phased bird. A lone **Red-wattled Lapwing** was present. I found two **Black Redstarts**, a male and a female. A couple **Brown-necked Ravens** were soaring overhead. The best birds were in the relatively luxurious vegetation in front of the guest house--three **Nile Valley Sunbirds**. None were in breeding plumage. I viewed this as a great find as most birders miss this species in Oman and it is not always present at Qatbit even though the bird finding book does list it as a possibility at that locale. A male **Menetries Warbler** was in bushes near the ground in front of the guest house. More **Desert Wheatears**. Between Qatbit and Thumrayt, there are farms out in the desert, most well away from the main road. In the Dawkah area, I went north on a paved road and came to a farm complex with paved farm tracks around the farm. Unfortunately the only guy around, not likely a supervisor, would not let me bird the area. In Thumrayt, I thought I would check the town to see if Hypocolius might use ornamental plantings in town since I knew the species was at the air base there which of course was off limits. This strategy was thwarted by the fact that private homes and government complexes had high wall around them with the vegetation inside the walls normally. In the mountains of Dhofar before the dramatic drop down to the coastal plain and the city of Salalah, **Fan-tailed Ravens** became numerous. I had no map of the area and only the directions in the bird

finding book yet I had no trouble finding my way at night to the Salalah Beach Villas which is as advertised, right on the wide, sandy beach of the Arabian Sea. Per usual, I had no reservations. The place was filled with European tourists and, yes, they had a room for me tonight, but not for any further nights. I took it. 25 RO for a very basic room. No TV, no bathroom other than one down the hall. Still it is a fine place to stay for a birder as you have easy access to the important birding locations in Dhofar, most of which are on the east side of Salalah as is the hotel.

January 1, 2010

I did not leave at the crack of dawn and but I did leave before the meager breakfast at the Villas was ready. The hotel is in the Ad Dahariz neighborhood and this is on the eastern edge of Salalah. It did not register what my first bird of the year was. I drove east to Ayn Hamran which is well signed though the spelling is slightly different. I arrived at 7:30 am. No one around. Large fig trees lined the tiny watercourse leading downslope from the fenced in spring. I birded there until 10 am when I had to be back to see if there was a room opening at the hotel (there wasn't). It was very birdy and great fun to bird in an environment totally different from northern Oman. You had the feel of Africa with the dry forest on the steep slopes and the varied avifauna. Appropriately the first bird I saw once out of the car (I parked well above the spring) was a female **African Paradise Flycatcher**. Alas, I never saw a male on this trip. I noticed a bird hopping around boulders under tree cover on the side of the wadi--a **Black-crowned Tchagra**, the only one I was to see on the trip. Flocks of **White-breasted White-eyes** moved through the canopy. I recurrently heard **Arabian Partridge** in the upper portion of the wadi but did not see them. I was pleased to come across a pair of **Arabian Warblers**, a bird I painfully missed in Israel almost 30 years ago. I was surprised to see an **Isabelline Shrike** in the relatively thick vegetation of this wadi. **Graceful Prinias** common. Two **Rock Martins** were overhead. **Laughing Doves** numerous. **White-spectacled Bulbuls**, **African Silverbills** and **Cinnamon-breasted Buntings** were abundant. Moving down to the fenced in spring, a large overhanging tree was filled with the nests of **Ruppell's Weaver**. I saw some of them as well in their dull nonbreeding plumage. Overhead a **Short-toed Eagle** was soaring and way up along the edge of the cliff was a magnificent soaring **Verreaux's Eagle**. Africa without malaria pills. I carefully checked the fig trees at the bottom of the wadi, across from a very nice residence. Sure enough I found 3 **Bruce's Green Pigeons** hiding in the canopy. The large residence across the road had numerous fruit trees and large palm trees and a male **Shining Sunbird** flew into the top of one of the tall palms. A couple of water loving species were at Ayn Hamran--singles of **Common Sandpiper** and **Gray Wagtail**. On the following day there was even a **Gray Heron** there. Leaving Ayn Hamran and

driving out into the open coastal plain, I noticed small birds flitting over the overgrazed land--**Black-crowned Finch-Larks**, say 400 of them. At 10, I went back to the Beach Villas to see if a vacancy had opened up. On my way there, I stopped at the Sahnawt Farm. I had heard that they no longer allow birders on the property for fear of contamination so I looked through the fence. Birds distant but I saw a pair of **Southern Gray Shrikes**, 80 **Pacific Golden Plover**, a pair of **Steppe Eagles** and an **Amur Falcon**. Back at the Beach Villas, I learned there were still no vacancies so I checked out, expecting to sleeping in the car somewhere. There were some tame shorebirds on the beach in front of the Beach Villas--**Eurasian Curlew**, a couple **Greenshanks**, a couple **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, 15 **Sanderlings** and four **Black-tailed Godwits**. Gulls numerous--**Sooty Gulls** predominated but there were also several hundred **Caspian Gulls** and large numbers of Baltic/**Lesser Black-backed Gulls**. Small numbers of **White-cheeked Terns** and **Saunders's Terns** were being flushed by beach goers. I stopped by East Khawr on my way east. It is right on the edge of town with the actual sign for the place being "Khor ad Dahariz. This lagoon is separated from the ocean by a narrow band of sand with a street across it. When I first arrived at the ocean side of the Khawr, I noticed a car pulled off the road and right next to the Khawr, looking at a **Demoiselle Crane**! The crane was very tame and did not mind the close proximity of the car. I thought the car would be of birders but they were not. After that car left, I pulled into their spot to ogle the crane. I birded East Khawr for three days in a row and the birds present varied considerably from day to day. It was a superb place to photograph birds. Besides the Demoiselle Crane, a **Gray Heron** and a dark phased **Western Reef Heron** were wading in the water. Three **Common Teal** were hugging the shoreline of the Khawr. Several hundred plovers were seemingly roosting there and you had to kick them out of the way as you moved along the edge of the Khawr. The largest number were **Lesser Sand-Plovers** (130) but there were also **Greater Sand-Plovers** (30), **Ringed Plovers** and **Kentish Plovers**. A herd of camels moved in and started feeding on the edge of the khawr. Camels were very prevalent on the coastal plain of Dhofar and you quickly picked up from other drivers' flashing lights if there were camels or other domestic animals in the road ahead of you. The one **Little Green Bee-eater** I saw in Dhofar was at East Khawr. With difficulty, I stopped at Khawr Sawli near Ayn Hamran. It is no longer on the main road but on a parallel road which was blocked with construction. I picked my way around the construction but it was not worth it. The phragmites had almost obliterated the open water visible from the north. I did see 4 **Coot**, the only ones for the trip. I drove east to the khawr at Toqah which is right on the main road. Birds in the open water skittish. This included five **Common Moorhens**, an **Intermediate Heron** and a presumed **Squacco Heron**. I had at least six Squacco/Indian Pond Herons at

Toqah. The trip's **Purple Heron** flew over. There was a tiny inlet on the ocean at Toqah with a **Common Shelduck** hauled out of the water along with a **Black-bellied Plover**. Four **Greater Flamingos** in the inlet. A dozen **Glossy Ibis** were on the back site of the Khawr. Twenty **Gray Herons** there plus a **Little Egret**. Two **Isabelline Shrikes** at Toqah. Four **Tristram's Grackles** were in the thick brush across the road from Khawr Toqah. I headed further east, stopping at the ruins at Khawr Rawri. It is rocky, hilly desert with the very large Khawr well below you at first. There was an admission charge of 1 RO as I recall. This is a place where you need a scope. Once I got down to the shoreline, there was plenty to look at: 90 **Greater Flamingos**, five **Eurasian Spoonbills**, several **Great Egrets**, distant **Black-winged Stilts**, 15 **Shovelers**, 8 **Garganey**, 7 **Glossy Ibis** on the shoreline and **Osprey**. A **Pheasant-tailed Jacana** was feeding on floating vegetation. Nine **Greylag Geese** on land in the distance (I was reasonably sure they were Greylags and not White-fronted at the time because I anticipated they would be White-fronted. When I returned to Michigan I noticed a posting that there were 11 White-fronted Geese at this location 3 weeks after I was there). Two **Great Cormorants** were on the far side. That was a species I saw very few of in Dhofar. I continued east to Mirbat and picked my way through coastal boulders to an overlook of the sea. This is a key seawatching location. The time of day was poor given the setting sun but I still managed to see 15 **Persian Shearwaters** and 5 **Masked Boobies**. Two **Socotra Cormorants** flew by, an adult and a juvenile. A couple of **Whimbrel** were at this rocky promontory. I waited for dark at the back side of the Khawr Taqah which looked perfect for crakes. Alas did not see any. Eight **Marsh Harriers** seemed to come in to roost. A male **Stonechat** and a **Citrine Wagtail** put in appearances. **Clamorous Reed Warblers** worked the reeds down to the edge of the water. A **Pin-tailed Snipe** flew in. Now that it was dark, I needed to think about a place to sleep. I tried one potential "campsite" for sleeping in the car on road to Ayn Hamran but too much traffic for my taste. I then thought I would try once again at the Beach Villas and even if they were full, the beach there might be a good place to sleep in the car. When I got to the Beach Villas, the Indian owner gruffly told me I was a lucky man as just minutes earlier a man checked out saying he would rather stay at the nearby pricey Crown Plaza Hotel. The Indian owner told me even if the guy came back he would be out of luck and the room was mine. About 20 minutes after I checked in, sure enough, the guy came back, asking for his old room back because the Crown Plaza was full (I could have told him that--I had checked that out yesterday--forget dropping in on New Years Eve and Day) and the Indian owner told him he was out of luck as he had already given the room to someone else. That would be me.

January 2, 2010

Yesterday had been a beautiful day, like most I experienced in Oman. Today was the only unpleasant weather day and that was due to high winds and the resultant dusty conditions. I started the day at Ayn Hamran, looking for Arabian Partridge. I parked further up the wadi than yesterday. I quickly found two **Blackstarts**, a bird that strangely eluded me yesterday. I looked toward the less vegetated side of the wadi, and there stood a covey of 15 **Arabian Partridge** which I was able to study at my leisure. I ran into a French birding couple who said this was their third birding trip to Oman. I took that as an endorsement for birding in Oman. A **European Sparrowhawk** was soaring over the upper reaches of the wadi. I went over to Ayn Razat. It is a beautiful little park. It was very birdy but I spent little time there due to the high winds. I was initially concerned to see a man carrying an automatic weapon inside the fenced in park but I deduced it was because they were using prison labor to clean the park. I saw a **Blackstart** on the rocky slopes as well as **Shining Sunbird**. On the side of the park where the stream is, which has warnings that the water is dangerous because of schistosomiasis, bird activity was high. **Palestine Sunbirds** were feeding on large yellow flowers along the walkway up to a cave. A flock of a dozen Bruce's Green Pigeons flew into fig trees lining the stream. A pair of Tristram's Grackles was on the railing of the walkway. A group of five Finnish birders pulled in. They mentioned their major effort to see Hypocolius at Muntasar, including an overnight stay to barely see it in flight early in the morning. They also had a Malachite Kingfisher yesterday at Khawr Mughsayli near the Yemeni border. I ventured back to East Khawr. I was expecting to see the Demoiselle Crane. What I found were white-caps in the Khawr and no crane. Instead there was a flock of **Greenshanks** with a couple **Common Redshanks** hunkered down in the wind. In the afternoon, another significant change in birds at East Khawr. Then it was terns that dominated with seven species: **Lesser Crested (2)**, **Great Crested (20)**, **Gull-billed Tern (1)**, **Caspian Tern (1)**, **Sandwich Tern (1)**, **Saunders's Tern (4)**, **White-cheeked Tern (4)**. Also a flock of 50 **Ruff** was present. Five **Curlews** were photogenic like all the birds at that site. A single female **Eurasian Wigeon** and six Garganey were slightly off shore. I drove east and up the mountains to Tawi Atayr. The sinkhole was impressively deep. Looking for the Yemen Serins was a challenge as you could not get close to vegetation on the sides of the sinkhole. I was there three hours and saw 3 **Yemen Serins** distantly. **Cinnamon-breasted Buntings** abundant in the rocky land around the sinkhole. I saw Palestine Sunbirds in that area. Birds seen at the sinkhole included **White-breasted White-eyes**, **African Silverbills**, **Tristram's Grackles** and **Rock Doves**. I did not see Bonelli's Eagles like most birders seem to see there. I drove down to Wadi Darbat. By now I was honing in on the one bird I really needed in Dhofar that was likely (unlike Spotted Eagle Owl, or Spotted Thick-knee) and that was South Arabian Wheatear as it is

generally referred to in trips reports on Oman although Clements still views it as a subspecies of Mourning Wheatear. The Wadi proved to be well vegetated but highly overgrazed with hundreds of camels present plus lesser numbers of donkeys and cattle. I drove to the end of the road and there below me, between the parking area and the water, was a pair of South Arabian Wheatears. I really should have worked the extensive shoreline for butterflies and dragonflies but once I saw the wheatears, my birding drive left me it seemed. Wadi Darbat was good for raptors--2 **Steppe Eagles**, singles of **Great Spotted Eagle** and **Imperial Eagle** plus a **Long-legged Buzzard**.

January 3, 2010

Early in the morning I saw 2 **House Crows** flying through an urban setting near the beach in Dahariz. I also saw a **Tristram's Grackle** and a couple **Common Mynas** on wires in that community though that was about it for the Mynas I saw in Dofar. I briefly tried looking for pelagics from the beach at the Beach Villas but that was futile. I checked East Khawr again. Four **Greater Flamingos** and a male **Pintail** were new for me at the locale. Looking back toward the Arabian Sea as I parked at East Khawr, I saw an adult **Masked Booby** close to shore. I decided not to bird west of Salalah and instead bird the Jarziz Farm and then head back north into the desert to try for *Hypocolius* again at Muntasar. At Jarziz Farm, I did stop at the administrative offices but when I was directed to the guy in charge he just waved me in once I said I was birding and I did not have to sign in or out. The cattle pens were very dry with few cattle and no birds. Not a good start. I drove the perimeter fence to the north, coming across an **Isabelline Shrike** and a lone **Rosy Starling**. The farm was good for raptors. I saw seven or so **Great Spotted Eagles** plus **Imperial Eagles**, a light phased **Booted Eagle**, a juvenile **Pallid Harrier** and **Long-legged Buzzard**. Looking over the fence to the north, there was an irrigated field. I picked out a flock of 14 **Sociable Plovers** in that field with a male **Amur Falcon** over the field. Eagles liked to rest in that field. The northern fence line was lined with Lantana which attracted numerous butterflies including a number of *Colotis danae* and *Hypolimnna misippus*. **African Silverbills** were abundant on the farm. The plowed fields were of course covered with thousands of doves, mostly **Collared Yellow Wagtails** were abundant but I never picked out the black-headed variety. Much of the farm was planted in maize. I picked out at least three **Singing Bush Larks** skylarking over the maize. **Crested Larks** common as well. A pair of **Red-wattled Lapwings** were in a field, evidencing that this Asian species has colonized the Ethiopian region. At least a hundred **Whiskered Terns** were working the fields. One **Namaqua Dove** flew by the main complex of buildings. This farm was the one place on the trip I saw good numbers of swallows. The hundred plus **Barn Swallows** I suspect were

wintering there. Other swallows present were 6 **Bank Swallows** and a dozen **Rock Martins**. **Rose-collared Parakeets** singly or in pairs would regularly fly over the farm. I left Salalah at noon, heading north into the central desert. I did not stop, other than for gas, until I reached Qatbit. Not much around at mid-day. I located one **Nile Valley Sunbird**, a male in eclipse plumage, feeding on white flowers. I took the unpleasant road from Qatbit to Muntasar, reaching there at 3:40 p.m. Initially I parked on the west side of the oasis so the light would be at my back. I walked around the oasis futilely looking for Hypocolius. During the hike, I came across two male **Desert Wheatears** in breeding plumage, attended by two **Asian Desert Warblers**. The wheatears would perch in low bushes/shrubs and the Asian Desert Warblers would run around on the ground. When the Wheatears flew, the Desert Warblers followed in tow. Other birders have commented on this unusual inter species relationship but it still was enlightening to see it first hand. There were virtually no birds in evidence at the oasis. I was committed to sleeping in the car to try to see Hypocolius in the early morning. Dave Sargeant said the best chance was before 7 am and this was corroborated by the experience of the Finnish birders I had met at Ayn Razat. I decided to park my car for the night on the east side of the oasis so the light would be best in the morning. I pulled into an obvious campsite, right in the tallest, densest vegetation. After 15 minutes being parked there, it occurred to me that if I backed up some, I could see more of the date palms to the east (at least I think that was the direction) so I backed up 20 feet next to a somewhat isolated tree. There I was sitting in my car, waiting for dark. Well I didn't have a long wait as it turned out. Within 5 minutes, a male **Hypocolius**, flew in front of my car and landed about 4 feet up in a large tree on the side of the obvious campsite. What luck! If I had parked anywhere else, I would not have seen this stellar bird. I busied myself taking photos of the bird, first in the car, and then out of the car. Once out of the car the bird seemed to spook a bit as it moved up to the middle of the tree and then to the top and finally it flew off a long distance to the northeast. I was ecstatic of course. Immediately my mind was in motion, rescheduling the trip. I still hoped to go to Musandam, allotting three days for that. Previously I thought I would not have time to go to Masirah and still do Musandam so I had planned on trying for Crab Plover on the northeast coast. Time to recalculate. If I drove through the night, it was like gaining an extra day so I could do Masirah. So off I drove through the night across the central desert. To say the least, it was a lonely drive, up to Hayma and then driving east to the coast. I finally called it quits to driving when I reached Ad Duqm. I saw a sign for the Duqm Tourist Guest House, so I pulled in. The place was dominated by orientals. For example the guy behind the desk was from Nepal. This looked like a very temporary facility with the rooms being in what looked like cargo containers for ships. For 25 RO is was Ok and besides, I was not in

condition to drive any further. Once inside the room, I was pleasantly surprised how nice it was--micro wave, refrigerator, big flat screen TV, nice bed and a full sized desk. Three hundred plus channels on the TV so you could watch the likes of TV Sudan or TV Yemen, all through the night. That motel was the best bang for the buck I had in Oman. A huge port is being built nearby which explains the existence of the guest house.

January 4 2010

I still had a long drive ahead of me to get to Masirah. When I reached the turnoff to Al Khaluf, I thought I would take a short cut to Hijj. Bad idea. I started down the road, noticing there was some wind blown sand on the road. In short order, the road was completely covered with sand with just one set of tire tracks through it. I almost got stuck before turning around and making tracks back to the main road. Once in the vicinity of Bar Al Hikman beyond Hijj, the vistas were vast flats on both sides of the road. I saw an island in the distance. When I scoped it, it proved to be alive-- mass of shorebirds tightly grouped together. Unfortunately they were too distant to ID. Very few shorebirds near the road. Once I reached the ferry landing at Shannah for Masirah, I waited with a group of Europeans for the ferry. My cash reserves were low in this country where credit cards are not widely used. Fortunately I had enough for the ferry crossing--8 RO each way. If you had an SUV it was 10 RO. The ferry was not full going to the island but on the following day it was full coming back. It was already mid-afternoon when I got on the island under overcast skies. I drove south with only Crab Plover on my mind. Along the way I saw an **Egyptian Vulture** low over the shoreline. When I reached Sur Masirah on the west side of the island, I was confronted with a large expanse of mudflats without an obvious place to have access, I tried various tracks once I drove through the primitive village. Masirah was the one place in Oman I visited where prosperity is still over the horizon. Very hard to get near the birds without getting stuck. The shorebirds were very distant on the flats by in large. **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Oystercatchers** were numerous. This was the only place I saw **Ruddy Turnstones** on the trip. An hour past and still no Crab Plovers. How embarrassing to be at a world stake out for a species and not see it. Eventually I took a track on the north side of the village, out to some beached fishing boats and this proved decisive. I watched 19 **Crab Plover** fly in and land on the edge of the mudflats. Still not close but easily viewable through a scope. I'll take it.

January 5, 2010

I slept in the car in the middle of Masirah. It is a large island with mountains and extensive arid plains. I never ventured to the east side of the island. I went to the mudflats on the west side of the island and from the same vantage point on the

north side of the village, I again found **Crab Plovers**, today 89 of them. **Marsh Harriers** common along the reedless shoreline of this arid island. Driving north, I stopped to view a **Hoopoe Lark** on desert flats. Further north I noticed palms and acacias well off the road to the west so I followed tracks over to them. It appeared to be vegetation around abandoned dwellings. A **Wryneck** popped into view. Walking around I found the first of 5 **Great Reed Warblers** today. Also **Chiffchaffs** and a **Lesser Whitethroat**. I found my way north to the town of Hilf and went to the sewage treatment plant which abuts a fenced in orchard. Not a sign of a person. I tried driving around the fenced perimeter of the orchard in hopes of seeing something in the orchard. Two **Bank Swallows** flew over. When I reached the main road, I walked to try to see inside the fenced area. An old Arab man walk toward me from inside the orchard. I asked if I could come in and without hesitation he opened the gate and let me drive in. This orchard is a famous migrant trap. Even though early January is an unlikely time for migrants, a well wooded area in a desert is always worth checking out. Much of the ground under the trees was covered with leaf litter. I found a pair of **Koels** at a fruiting tree. Where irrigation water was running off under the trees, there was a **Common Sandpiper** and the first of 4 **Indian Pond Herons** I kicked up in the orchard, a strange number for such an unlikely habitat for them or any heron. A **Yellow Wagtail** was walking around. Two **Great Reed Warblers** were singing away (I saw one). I saw what I thought was an odd looking redstart on the ground under the trees so I photographed it. After studying the photo and consulting with others, it proved to be an immature male **Rock Thrush**. On the edge of the orchard I stepped through a tiny patch of grass and flushed a **Quail**. The runoff from the orchard into the sea is a place I should have checked yesterday and earlier today. I saw five sandgrouse sp. there as I first entered the orchard. When I finally checked out the run off, I found my only **Starlings** of the trip, 11 plus a **Gray Heron**, 5 **Greater Flamingos**, and a **Glossy Ibis**. I did not pay a lot of attention to larids on the island but terns included **Great Crested Tern** and **Sandwich Tern**. I was rushing things again, something I would later regret, so I wanted to get to the ferry in a hurry. Shortly after leaving Masirah the ferry went through rafts of **Red-necked Phalaropes**, say 250 of them. Once back on the mainland, I did consider trying to look for shorebirds. I found the guesthouse at Shannah but it was closed and the tracks behind it looked deeply rutted and thus too dangerous for me in my sedan to attempt so I just started driving back toward Muscat. I had another **Hoopoe Lark** on the mainland as I drove north of Hij. My first **Indian Roller** on the drive north was in a town near Sinaw. Once back in the Muscat area, I went to the airport to see about going to Musandam. There were daily flights there now but none of the car rental places at the airport had an office in Kabala, the main city in Musandum. Checking the internet for car rental at Kabala on Orbitz, the

response was rent one in the UAE, not a realistic alternative for me. So I gave up on going to Musandam which meant I had a lot of time to bird in an area I had already birded. I stayed at the Holiday Inn in the capital area. Hotel was expensive, as were the alternatives, and placed in a strangely industrial area. Service was good and the breakfast excellent. The welcoming fruit bowl with red wine provided me food for a couple days.

January 6, 2010

Basically a non birding day. Only two likely life birds (Hume's and Eastern Pied Wheatears) to get and three days to get them so I slept in. First priority was to deal with my laptop which was critical for downloading photos. I had managed to burn up the power source. I went to the Apple Store in the Al Alraimi complex which is very close to the Al Qurum Park in the capital area. Next to the Al Alraimi complex is a slough that was actually useful for birds in this otherwise totally built up area. Birds in the reedy slough today included **Little Grebe**, **Great Cormorant**, seven **Glossy Ibis** and a **Black-tailed Godwit**. A dozen **Cattle Egrets** were roosting there by day. When I came back at 7 p.m., at night, the Cattle Egrets were feeding under lights in the nearby traffic circle. Two were still feeding there at 9 p.m. I finally got my act together to go looking for birds at 2:30 p.m., heading toward Yiti on the coast in hopes of seeing Great Black-headed Gulls. This was the one time on the trip where I could have used a map. I had a hard time finding my way to Yiti and a harder time finding my way back. The straight line distance to Yiti is short but it is all mountainous country between Muscat and Yiti and finding roads through the mountains was a challenge for me. Somehow I got on the major road to Amrat which has a lot of construction going on near Muscat. On the outskirts of Amrat I started seeing **Egyptian Vultures**, seven of them, plus a couple more in the mountains once I exited the expressway. I never went to the landfill at Amrat for vultures and raptors. I found my way down an impressive wadi (Wadi al Mayh?) where the two lane road had been chewed up by floods. A fair amount of standing water in the wadi and I even saw a Arab family group getting their picture taken in front of a mini waterfall. I had a **Lappet-faced Vulture** soar over this wadi. The other notable bird in the wadi was **Desert Lark**. Once I got to the coast at Yiti I was unimpressed. I did find six or so **Great Black-headed Gulls** in a mixed larid flock on an island in an estuary. I almost past them off as distant Caspian Terns Very few shorebirds in the area. A couple of **Brown-necked Ravens** on the beach. I was desperately searching for Hume's Wheatear which is supposed to be abundant around Yiti but coming up empty at my many stops for it. Finally as I past a housing complex (for construction workers?) on my way east along the at times precipitous new road, I spotted a **Hume's Wheatear** on a post next to the road. It quickly disappeared into

the housing complex. I pursued it by going through a hole in the fence but I never saw it again. This was at 5:44 p.m. I never saw another one. The ride back to Muscat was like a Cedar Point ride as you could see the street lights leading serpentine fashion along the chain of highways from high up in the mountains where I started, down to sea level at Muscat.

January 7, 2010

I spent the night in the car near Ras As Sawadi on the Al Batinah coast. . For the third time on the trip, the driver side front tire was dangerously low. I drove to 10, not nine, not 11, 10 gas stations with air machines and not one of them worked. I finally went to a tire repair place where a guy graciously opened up his shop for me. I drove up the coast to Sun Farms in Sohar. In the area of the cattle pens, the bird numbers were way down from my previous visit. It was much drier with most of the previous productive puddles gone. White Wagtail numbers in particular where way down. One of the few new birds for me at Sun Farms was **Pacific Golden Plover**, 10 in a newly harvested irrigated field. I stopped in at Shinas again. I did not pick out anything out of the ordinary. I photographed a close in **Whimbrel**. On to Khatmat Milahah. I was focused on getting Eastern Pied Wheatear. The terrain was like the African savannah there--very flat, hard surface and thus easy to drive everywhere and that is what I did until I bumped into a female **Eastern Pied Wheatear**. I only saw one of that species despite considerable searching. I spent the night at the Al Wadi Hotel in Sohar.

January 8, 2010

Two days to kill and I really don't have any target birds to go for. I thought I would at least explore the country some more as I was tired of birding the Al Batinah coast. Looking out my window of the Al Wadi Hotel, I noticed a **Gray Francolin** fly up into the trees as it was flushed by a dog. I drove east. I first went into the grounds of the As Sawadi Beach Resort and quickly found a **Red-vented Bulbul** in the shade trees by the parking lot. I did not linger there and I was off to the park at the end of the road overlooking the impressive nearby off shore island of As Sawadi. Numerous SUVs out on the mudflats and quite a few people enjoying the lovely sunny morning. I spotted 20 or so **Great Black-headed Gulls** on the flats along with **Caspian Gulls** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**. There were 40 **Sooty Gulls** as well keeping to themselves. A half dozen **Bar-tailed Godwits** were on the flats. A dense grove of planted trees by a parking lot held a pair of **White-cheeked Bubluls**. Driving through Muscat, I tried the Apple store again. It and all the other stores in the mall were closed as this is Friday, the muslim holy day. In the adjacent slough there was a very dirty looking **Eurasian Spoonbill**, an **Indian Pond Heron** and a **Common Kingfisher**. I set my sights on

Qurayyat on the northeast coast. It was an easy drive there, mostly on expressway. First I checked the harbor area. Thirty **Egyptian Vultures** were sitting on the beach. In fact Qurayyat was the easiest place to see that species on the trip. I found my way to Khawr Al Milh and as advertised, I found two **Avocets**. Out in the open water of the khawr were two **Black-necked/Eared Grebes**. Five female **Pintails** and a male **Gadwall** flew in. I then drove east along the ocean to the next small khawr set in a village. Nothing there. I tried finding the other two khawrs referred to in Birdwatching Guide to Oman but either they were much diminished in size or I was not finding them. I decided to take the new expressway east to Sur. It was a fine road cut along the coastal mountains, sometimes spanning impressive gorges. It must have cost a fortune to build and currently there just isn't the traffic to justify it. At one point you come to sets of six toll booths in each direction--none in operation. The expressway ends at Sur and I continued on through the night to the Turtle Beach Resort at Ras Al Hadd. Security tight which to me is never a good sign. I arrived around 9 p.m.--check in supposedly up to 7 p.m. Parking lot nearly full which was a surprise to me for such a remote place. They wanted 35 RO and would not take credit cards. Well I only had 31 RO which they grudgingly took once I said I wouldn't have breakfast. The rooms were primitive chic I suppose--bare minimum of three beds in the tiny bamboo hut. Long walk to the bathrooms. Not allowed to bring food or drink on the premises.

January 9 2010

My last day in the field and one that I would have to spend much of the time driving back to the airport. At dawn I walked to the beach inside the fenced in compound. Numerous baby turtle tracks in the sand. I watched a **Striated Heron** along on a dhor out in the harbor. I needed money, at least for gas, now that I had been cleaned out to pay for my room last night. I discovered there were no ATMs in Ras Al Hadd with the nearest ones being in Sur. In general this country is well supplied with ATM machines with them often even in gas stations. I drove around the bay there to Ras Al Hadd. Extensive mudflat but relatively few shorebirds. I photographed a **Terek Sandpiper**. Impossible to get close to sort out most of them. That proved to be even more of the case when I checked out Khawr Jirama. At Ras Al Hadd there were 8 **Great Black-headed Gulls** out on an island. **Oystercatchers** common. **Dunlin** on the flats. As was often the case, it would be plovers that would be closer in on the mudflats, here **Lesser Sand-Plovers** and **Kentish Plovers**. At the promontory at the end of the road at Ras Al Hadd, I did not see any seabirds but there were six **Black-crowned Finch-Larks** and a **Red-tailed Wheatear** there. Driving back I stopped at Qurayyat. Found an **Isabelline Shrike** in a well wooded area between the main road and the expressway east of town. I had four **Desert Larks** in an upland area southwest of Qurayyat. I looked

in vain for Hume's Wheatear to photograph in the hills adjacent to Al Amerat. I had both **White-cheeked** and **White-spectacled Bulbuls** in acacias on edge of the hills. The trip concluded with me returning my rental car to the airport and spending the night at the Muscat airport to take my early morning flight to Marseille via Dubai and Paris.