

Kuwait

A Dream Team Tour

5th - 7th May 2011



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Introduction

Oscar raised the possibility of doing a short weekend trip to Kuwait to try and see the three birds of interest to us: Basra Reed Warbler, Dunn's Lark and Afghan Babbler (a recent split). He had a good contact there who would be willing to guide us for a couple of days. After a bit of juggling, we managed to find a date which was suitable to us all and so, as they say, game on.

Logistics

These were fairly easy. We used AbdulRahman Al Sirhan a local Kuwaiti resident. He does some bird guiding on the weekends and can be contacted through his web site <http://www.alsirhan.com/>. He met us at our hotel on the Friday morning and guided us all that day and on Saturday he met us again at our hotel and guided us for half a day before taking us to the airport. Living in the UAE and with the advent of new budget airlines, flights were easy and cheap to book. In fact the timings couldn't have been better with a Thursday evening departure and a Saturday afternoon return. (The weekend in the Middle East is generally Friday and Saturday). The roads were generally good, though that could not be said about the driving which, compared even with Dubai standards, was pretty bad.

Accommodation / Food

Hotels are not cheap in Kuwait. Using a hotel web site, I found a two bedroom apartment at the Oyster Apartments for a reasonable rate. However when we tried to find it we found that the address was not correct and, even when in the correct area, nobody had heard of it. After an hour of trying we eventually made contact and were given directions. It had no sign outside and they tried to say we didn't have a booking. In the end they gave in and gave a room. It was Ok though at the end they did try to charge us 30% extra - without luck, I might add.

We found a small Indian restaurant a couple of minutes walk from the apartment and both evenings we ate there. The food was good and very cheap.

Weather

It was hotter than Dubai, with temperatures on Friday creeping up towards 40 degrees. On Saturday a wind had got up keeping the temperature a bit lower.

Sites visited

1 Jahra East Outflow

Located about 30km north of Kuwait City, the outflow is a sewage discharge pipe into the sea via a muddy drainage channel. It's the best area to see Basra Reed Warbler. A large area of reeds has grown up around the drainage ditch but AbdulRahman has cut a few reeds down so one can view the channel. As this is an open area, it's the best place to look for birds. Basra Reed warbler proved quite easy though there was a bit of tension for a while at first as Great Reed Warblers kept popping out of the reeds. We also checked out the estuary but it was low tide and birds were distant. We were somewhat put off by the locals shooting at anything that flew. A high tide visit would be better as the birds would be pushed up closer to the shore.



2 Jahra Pools Reserve

Located close to the outflow, the Pools are a reserve and entry is limited, although easy if you are with a local birder. They have a number of viewing platforms and held a good selection of waders.



3 Jahra Farm

A small area of agricultural fields close to the centre of Jahra. The fields were full of migrants and we easily spent 3 hours in pursuit of them. We had no trouble with access and it appears the locals are used to birders.

4 Abdaly Farm

This is one of a number of farms on the Kuwait / Iraq border and is the place to see Afghan Babbler. The actual correct area was not easy to find as it's a large area and all the fields look similar. Local knowledge and GPS co-ordinates are essential.

5 Pivot Fields

A very large area of irrigated fields about 20 minutes from the airport. The fields are mainly used for growing fodder which was in various states of growth from just planted to fully grown to just mown. The recently mown fields were the best. We spent the good part of the morning on the last day there, before making the short hop to the airport.



6 Kabt

A desert research area with restricted access. AbdulRahman had contacted the authorities prior to our visit and made the necessary arrangements. This is (was?) a site for Dunn's Lark but this year they had not been seen. We checked the large areas of desert without luck but the trees around the research station were full of migrants, like just about everywhere else in Kuwait.

References and Acknowledgements

Collins Bird Guide – Lars Svensson et al

Birds of the Middle East – Porter and Aspinall

Many thanks to AbdulRahman for looking after us so well and ensuring our trip was both dead easy and wonderful birding.

Itinerary

Thursday 5th May

It wouldn't be a birding trip without a bit of an airport panic. The taxi didn't turn up to take Mark and Oscar to the airport, so they hot-footed it to the metro and caught a train to Deira where Graham picked them up. Simon was already at the airport when we arrived. As it was Terminal 2, check-in was easy and we were soon through immigration and waiting for our flight to leave. The half-empty flight left pretty much on time. It was only a short flight and we landed at 2000 local time, one and a half hours after leaving Dubai. A visa was obtained on arrival for a cost of 3 Dinar at a counter located away from the Immigration Hall. It was very efficient and we were through before our bags arrived.

Outside, we located the taxi stand but the two taxis we approached didn't want to take us or didn't know where the hotel was. In the end, we were approached by a tout who agreed to take us for 15 Dinar - a lot compared with Dubai prices. Then the fun and games started. The driver didn't know the hotel and even after he had called it still couldn't find it. After over an hour of looking, we stopped at a barbers shop and a guy in there managed to call the hotel owner and write down the address for the taxi driver. In fairness, when we reached the hotel there was no sign outside and it just looked like a block of flats. We paid the taxi driver off after a debate about a broken door knob and settled in. It was then down the road to a small Indian restaurant before hitting the sack.

Friday 6th May

Up at 4.30 and by 5am we were waiting outside for AbdulRahman. Whilst waiting we saw our first migrants of the trip, a couple of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Turkestan Shrike and hirundines everywhere. Wow! Dubai this was not. We set off to Jahra East Lagoon and within thirty minutes we were parked a short walk from a muddy ditch where we lined up and started to grill every warbler that popped its head out of the reeds. After a few "Is it or isn't it a Basra?" had been directed at a couple of Great Reeds, a bird popped out and straight away we knew it was one. It just goes to prove that if you're trying to make it into one then it isn't one.

Great Reed Warbler



Basra Reed Warbler



The bird performed well giving excellent close views and posing for photos. Well pleased, we then started to explore the tidal mud flats but it was quite depressing as there were a number of guys with guns shooting at anything that flew. Also, the tide was a long way out, so views were distant. We had more fun with passerine migrants that we pitched in anywhere and everywhere we looked. After a good trawl, we returned to the car and drove the short distance to Jahra Pools Reserve, an area of natural pools surrounded by reeds and managed as a reserve. We viewed the pools from a couple of elevated platforms and which allowed good views of the numerous waders. It was getting hot by now so we decided to spend the heat of the day at Jahra Farms. Again it was only a short drive, though we did stop en route for some drinks and snacks. As soon as we entered the farm it was obvious that there were birds everywhere. We had a great three hours in the fields and were amazed at the sheer number of migrants. Views were sensational and the density and variety of migrants were overwhelming. The scale far exceeded anything like we get in the UAE. By now it was mid afternoon and time to head towards the final destination of the day, Abdaly Farms on the Kuwait / Iraq border. It took us just under an hour to get there but finding the right fields for Afghan Babbler took a little longer as they all looked the same. Eventually we pulled into a field and within ten minutes we had found a single scrabbler which was very elusive, giving only poor, brief views. Eventually we lost it. We continued the search and Mark came across two more birds which gave much better scope views but again they proved elusive and we could not find them again, hence no photos. With a couple of hours of light left we explored some more fields but we could not relocate any

babblers so we decided to spend the last hour of light in the adjacent desert. We were close to the coast and just inland from Bubiyan island. Driving around off-road produced stunning views of a displaying Hoopoe Lark and even barest, flattest desert held a merry sprinkling of migrants, clinging to any and every scrap of cover. As darkness approached we commenced the drive back to Kuwait City and were dropped off at our hotel where we freshened up and headed to the Indian restaurant for something to eat. Quite a lot to eat, actually.



Saturday 7th May

Up, packed and ready to leave at 5am and AbdulRahman picked us up. Although Dunn's Lark had not been seen recently, we felt that the done thing would be to give it a try so we headed to the Kabt Research station located about 30 minutes from Kuwait City. Access required a bit of skillful negotiation by AbdulRahman and whilst this was going on we watched a White-throated Robin feeding on the road in front of the gates. We had seen none of these beauties yesterday but soon found another three and ended up with a final day-score of ten!



Access secured we got away from the gate before they changed their minds and proceeded into the reserve and spent some time driving through the desert scanning for Dunn's Lark. As expected, we didn't see any so we returned to the main research centre building which had a number of bushes around and a small pool and spent thirty minutes checking the area for migrants. Even these few bushes held numerous

birds. Deciding to cut our losses, we left the area and drove the short distance to the pivot fields where we initially checked out a small pool before going on to explore the various fields. On one field, we found a group of 29 Collared and two Black-winged Pratincoles, giving us a useful comparison.

Black-winged Pratincole below, **Collared Pratincole** on the right:



The fields were in various states some had crops some had just been mown and some were fallow. It was a big area and we spent the next four hours birding from the car. Birds were everywhere, especially shrikes, swallows and we

had a reasonable selection of raptors. At 12.30pm, it was time to head towards the airport for our return flight. We were dropped off at the airport, check-in was very easy and soon we were heading back to Dubai, arriving just after 5pm. All-in-all, a very good trip.

Systematic List

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

One at Jahra Pools 6th May.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

One at Jahra East Outflow 6th May. Two Pivots 7th May.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

2 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May and one Pivots on 7th.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Up to fifty at Pivots 7th May; few elsewhere.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Singles at Jahra Outflow on 6th May and Pivots 7th May.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

One flew over Jahra East Outflow on 6th May.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Small numbers Jahra Pools and Outflow.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

2 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

One Jahra East Outflow 6th May and one Pivots 7th May.



Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

2 Pivots 7th May.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

One Pivots 7th May and several other ringtails seen distantly there.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

1 Jahra Pools 6th May, 3 Pivots on 7th.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

One Pivots 7th May.



Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

One Jahra 6th May.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

4 at Pivots 7th May.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

One or two seen both days.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Small numbers seen at Jahra East Outflow, Jahra East Pools and Pivots.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

5 Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

30 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*

29 at Pivots 7th May.



Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*

Two Pivots 7th May.



Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

One Jahra East Outflow on 6th May.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Small numbers Jahra East Pools 6th May.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Small numbers Jahra East Pools 6th May.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

50 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Up to 100 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Small numbers at Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May. Over 100 Pivots 7th May.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Two Jahra Pools Reserve and 2 at Outflow 6th May.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Small numbers Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*

One Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Over 100 Jahra Pools Reserve 6th May. Small numbers seen at the Pivots and Jahra East Outflow.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

10 Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Just small numbers seen in suitable habitat both days.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Five Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

39 at Jahra Pools Reserve on 6th May.



Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

One Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

A flock of about 150 gulls at Jahra East Outflow were all thought to be this species 6th May.

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

One Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*

One Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

20 at Jahra pools Reserve 6th May, one at Pivots on 7th.

Feral Dove *Columba livia*

Small numbers seen at most places.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Small numbers seen at the Pivots 7th May.

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Singles Jahra East Outflow on 6th May and Pivots 7th May.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Common throughout; seen in good numbers at most sites.

Ring-necked Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

One Jahra Farms 6th May.

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

One Jahra Farm 6th May.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*

Seen in small numbers most places.

White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

1 at Jahra Farms 6th May.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*

30 at the Pivots on 7th. Small numbers elsewhere on both days.



European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Small numbers of up to ten seen daily.

Roller *Coracias garrulus*

Up to five seen daily.

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*

One Jahra East Outflow 6th May.

Black-crowned Finch Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps*

Two in desert near Abdaly Farms 6th May.

Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Three in desert near Abdaly Farms 6th May and one at Khad on 7th May.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Small number seen at the Pivots.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Seen daily in small numbers.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Seen daily with very large numbers (many thousands) at the Pivots on the 7th May. One apparent Swallow x House Martin hybrid, showing lightly streaked white rump, shortened tail streamers and missing breast-band was seen at the Pivots also.



House Martin *Delichon urbicum*
One Jahra Pools Reserve on 6th May.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*
Over 50 Jahra Farms 6th May. Small numbers seen at most of the other sites.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*
Up to 10 Jahra Pools East. Small numbers seen at Jahra Pools Reserve, Jahra Farm and Pivots.



Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*
Good numbers seen daily especially at Jahra Farms. Mostly *beema* and *thunbergi*, with small numbers of *feldegg* and *lutea*.



White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*
Only seen at Abdaly Farms with up to ten found.

Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes*
3 Jahra Farms 6th May and 2 at the Pivots 7th May.

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*
Three Jahra Farms 6th May and two Pivots 7th May.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*
Two Jahra Farms 6th May.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*
One Jahra Farm 6th May.

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*
Five Kabt and 6 Pivots, both on 7th May .

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
Small numbers seen at all sites including the middle of the desert.



Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
Good numbers seen at all sites including the middle of the desert.



Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
1 Jahra Pools and 2 Jahra farms on 6th May. 3 Pivots 7th May.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*
Two singles on 6th May and four Pivots 7th May.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

3 in desert near Abdaly on 6th May. 4 at Kabt and 2 at Pivots 7th May.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

One in desert near Abdaly on 6th May.

Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*

Two Jahra Farms 6th May. Three Kabt and two Pivots 7th May.

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis*

Small numbers at Jahra East Outflow and Pools reserve 6th May.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

Two Jahra east Outflow 6th May.

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

At least 6 seen at Jahra East Outflow on 6th May.

Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*

One Jahra farms on 6th May, one at Kabt on 7th.

Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*

At least three Jahra East Outflow 6th May.



Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

At least 20 seen, mainly on 6th. Present in small numbers at many locations.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

12 Jahra Farms 6th May. Singles at Kabt and the Pivots 7th May.

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

One Jahra Farms 6th May.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*

One Jahra Farms 6th May. Two Kabt 7th May.

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*

Seen daily in small numbers at many locations



Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

4 at Jahra East outflow on 6th May. One at Kabt and 2 at Pivots 7th May.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

Regularly noted at several sites.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Good numbers in most places.



Afghan Babbler *Turdoides huttoni*

At least two Abdaly Farms 6th May.

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

Singles at Jahra farms on 6th May and Pivots on 7th.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Common; over 50 seen daily. One apparent (and fairly obvious) Red-backed x Turkestan hybrid, showing grey head (with faint brown tinge to crown), rather dull brown back, with rufous rump and sides to the tail was found at the Pivots on the 7th May.

Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

3 at Pivots on 7th May.

Turkestan Shrike *Lanius pheonicuroides*

10 at Pivots on 7th May. Good numbers at elsewhere.

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*

One Jahra East Outflow and 3 Jahra Farms 6th May.

Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*

One Pivots 7th May.

Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor*

Up to ten seen daily and scattered around most sites.

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*

Two Pivots 7th May.

Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus*

One Jahra Farms 6th May 8.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common; noted at most sites.

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*

2 Jahra Farms on 6th May.

Black-headed bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

One male at Jahra farms on 6th May.