

UAE 23-24th August 2014

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Crab Plover had been high on my wish list for some time, ever since I realised I could potentially seek out this rare and interesting monotypic wader on a stopover between UK and Australia. My first trip back to the UK since moving to Adelaide was for a meeting in Oxford in late August. Since my request to travel business class and arrive the day before the meeting fell on deaf ears, plan-B was activated, breaking the economy-class journey for one night in Dubai as part of my jetlag recovery strategy, and bringing a Crab Plover twitch into the equation.

August is obviously not the ideal time to visit UAE – it is searing hot, and birds are post breeding, though this would have a nice symmetry with my slightly mad but highly successful desert birding with SMR Young in Morocco in July 2012. Though another UAE specialty, Hypocolius, is winter-only there was still a decent support cast of birds available and a chance of some early autumn migration.

Because the temperatures are so unpleasant, it is not surprising that I found very few reports from August (notable and very useful exception was Johnny Wilson's blog at: <http://globalbirding.blogspot.be/2010/03/summer-birding-in-uae.html>), but Tommy Pedersen's website UAE Birding is a fantastic resource and Tommy himself incredibly helpful in replying to my RFIs and giving up-to-the-minute info.

Friday 23/8/13

Undeterred by stories of mad driving in UAE I booked a car and GPS (Budget, through carhire3000.com) which I picked up on arrival. Overall I didn't find it too bad, though I do have to admit that I was there on the weekend and was driving fairly early in the mornings, and only when visiting Ras al Khor was the traffic remotely heavy and unpleasant. The car pickup was also among the least efficient I have encountered, so although my direct flight from Adelaide landed around 5.30am, it took over an hour to clear customs and pick up my bags, and a further hour to find the rental place and get the paperwork (it was all manual) sorted. I was finally on my way well after 7.45.

I headed immediately for the Dubai Pivot Fields which I found without difficulty only 10-15 minutes from the airport. Before hitting them proper I decided to make a diversion into the partially constructed "International City" in search of a shop. Following instinct I drove through a set of apartments where I came across a small supermarket and stocked up on 10 litres of water for the

two days and some breakfast snacks. Around 8.30 I was trundling back along the road to the pivots noting my first lifers, **Grey Francolin**, which scattered from the sides of the road. Other common birds noted before I had even entered were **Collared Dove**, **Spotted Turtle-dove**, and **White-cheeked Bulbul**.

The guard at the gate informed me that they would close at 9.30, leaving only an hour on foot to explore an area that Tommy's site suggests needs four to five. Nevertheless, it was a very satisfying hour with a few lifers, a few other good birds, and a decent intro to Dubai birding. I wandered along



the track that leads west and almost immediately noted lots waders on the grassed area of the main pivot within a hundred metres of the entrance. Here my main target was **White-tailed Plover** and there were quite prominent and obliging, giving great views and making up for the rubbish distant views I had had at Leighton Moss in 2007 when I twitched the well-known vagrant that first showed up at Caerlaveroch. Other waders present were **Red-wattled Lapwing** (similar numbers), numerous **Ruff**, a few **Wood Sandpiper**, a few **Sandpipers** (species unidentified), a single **Black-tailed Godwit** and a pair of **Temminck's Stint** on a small puddle made by the sprinklers. The best bird here was one I didn't even take note of at the time. Only after reviewing my photos did I realise that a poor record shot of a presumed Greater Sandplover was far too upright and slender for this taxon. My best guess was in fact a winter **Caspian**

Plover. This ID was confirmed by Tommy when I sent him the pic a week later, when he also commented that it is a rare vagrant to UAE. Nice – but it would have been even nicer I had realised the significance at the time and bagged decent photos or digiscoped video. Even so, yet again my shoot-first-ask-questions-later policy had been vindicated by a retrospective tick, much like Ornate Hawk-eagle at Henri Pittier 18 months earlier.

Other birds noted here were **Crested Lark** and **House Sparrow**, while more colour was added by several **Hoopoe** digging away at the grass, and both **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** and **Indian Roller** gliding between sprinkler heads. At around 9am a pair of birds flew in and landed next to one of the larger puddles about 50m away. I realised from their profile that these were sandgrouse and my pulse immediately quickened. As I swung the scope into position



with the prospect of a cracking view, they sensed me and took flight. Their high-pitched quacking confirmed the ID as **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse**, but these were not the kind of views I would like

to have been ticking. I followed with bins until they seemed to settle on the far edge of the bigger pivot, far too far away for me to seek out on foot in the half-hour remaining.

Tommy Pedersen's site suggests two hours before high tide as the ideal time to arrive at Khor al Beida, the best chance site for my top target. The drive to just north of the city of Umm al Quwain took around 45-50 minutes, but the enforced early departure from the pivot fields meant I was well ahead of schedule, with high tide due at 13.30 at the peak of the day's heat. I found the road to the "newly constructed villa-area", ominously enclosed by high barriers from the main road to the complex. I drove its length and reached a guardhouse at the development, where I was refused access. With no plan-B I returned to the main road and drove further north slowly along the coast road hoping to get some kind of view down to the water, or find some 2WD-passable track. When I did see water the only identifiable birds were distant **Flamingo**. After umming-and-ahhing I carried on until I reached the slightly sad looking Barracuda Beach Resort and followed a road down to a small resort where I was able to scan a man-made channel along the coast that held a few birds: **Redshank, Wimbrel**, a few **Lesser Sand-plover** and a **Reef Egret**.



With no other obvious access, and now fearful that I'd made this trip for nothing, I decided to risk the car on sandy tracks, at least as far as the villa complex. I returned to the turn-off, but now trundled off the sealed road onto a track that appeared to run parallel but outside the barriers. Mostly it was firm under-wheel and only or twice was sand was deeper than comfort allowed, but I made it as far as the entrance to the villas, but now outside. The track from here seemed less

easily negotiated in my tiny 2WD so I parked and walked the remaining kilometre or so (in retrospect, it may have been possible to drive the paved road and duck out at the end where there was a gap in the barriers).

Mindful of the time of day and heat – it must've been pushing 45 deg -- I opted not to take my heavy camera bag, or my camera, but just my scope and a big bottle of water. As I crested the last sandbank I got a view of the tidal marsh. Though there was very little water, the tide was still coming in and a cluster of white dots to the north seemed promising so I quickly set up the scope. No, they're **Gull-billed Terns** and **Slender-billed Gulls**. Wait, that one is more upright and has black markings and a stonking great bill! I noticed a few more **Crab Plover** walking around amongst **Oystercatchers** and the gulls and terns. In a separate area I noted a group of **Black-tailed Godwit**, a few **Turnstone**, both **Lesser** and **Greater Sand-plover**, a solitary **Grey Plover** and a group of a dozen **Terek Sandpiper**. Though these latter birds were also in fact lifers I decided to try a closer approach to the Crab Plover for digiscoped photos and return to the Terek Sands later. A



spent the best part of an hour watching the tide come in getting as close as I could to the birds and ending up with some decent, if not outstanding video and pics.

Now around 1pm and close to high tide I headed back to the car, the aircon welcome relief after the desert heat. The next two hours was spent driving east towards Hatta and Fujeirah. After a small error in navigation I finally rolled up to a spot on the E102 which Tommy Pedersen had indicated to me in email held a small pond that was popular with Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse. The birds would not be present until after dark, but I wanted to check the site out in the light to be sure I could access it and find the right place. In a brief stop I added **Graceful Prinia** to the trip list, and a pair of **Common Sandpiper** potted around the edge of the water hole.

It took me about 40 min to drive from here to the Hatta Fort Hotel, my very comfortable destination for the night. Even before I had settled into my room I had noted **Indian Roller** (common in the hotel grounds), **Purple Sunbird** just outside the door, and out the front of my very pleasant, spacious room, several **Pale Crag Martin** were hawking.

I didn't stop here for long, just enough for a shower and quick rest, but then it was back in the car to make it to the water hole before sunset. I was unsure of what to expect, and what effect my presence would have, so I stationed myself a little distant from the waterhole and sat and waited for dark. I didn't have to wait for long before I heard the curious quacking and squeaking as first 4 **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** then a few more flew in and landed on the far side of the water. The light



was a lot dimmer than I expected and so the scope view, although unequivocal, was not ideal. I could just make out the double breast-band and unique black and white vertical stripes on the head of a couple of males. My caution was probably well placed because they seemed very wary. Though I had seen at least 15-20 flying over and circling at various points, only a few of the birds actually came to the water's edge. One such group scattered as soon as I put the torch on

them. I watched another group of three gradually make their way down towards the water and snapped an underexposed record shot. Overall a good experience and probably my number two target for the trip, but having bagged the record shot (and realising I would do no better) I left them in peace and headed back to the hotel for a meal and much needed rest.

Saturday 24/8/13

Part of my rationale for stopping in Dubai was pre-meeting recovery so it did not make a lot of sense to be up at sparrow-fart for more birding, even though in the desert this meant sacrificing both the best time for desert birding and also low tide at Khor Kalba (the only chance for the local endemic rcae of Collared Kingfisher). Instead I slept in, and then around 8.30 took a stroll around the hotel grounds which was very productive. In addition to the species I had seen the evening before, I found some **Little Green Bee-eater** and **Spectacled, White-cheeked** and **Red-vented Bulbuls**. I was mainly hoping for **Hume's Wheatear**, and though it took some time, I eventually scored one on a distant crag. As I walked back to my room another appeared on the roof of the hotel and then yet another



mocked my extensive walk by posing beautifully right outside my room as I returned to pack my bags. Probably the best bird seen on my walk was a **Sand Partridge**, spied in a rocky gully between two outcrops behind the hotel.

I now made my way via the main roads to Khor Kalba. Here I spent 45 mins or so at the bridge scanning with faint hopes of seeing a Collared Kingfisher, but I had arrived too late for low tide and the best birds seen were a few distant Wimbrel, some Crested Lark and a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. The barren area immediately north of the bridge had produced Black-crowned Sparrow-lark for Johnny Wilson in 2009. Again I braved the heat to walk out into a sandy, shadeless area, but within 10mins I had located a male **Black-crowned Sparrow-lark**, that proved quite confiding, sitting up on



top of a bush as I snapped photos and gradually crept closer and closer.

I now drove the 15km north to Fujairah for some sea-watching. The raised area mentioned on Tommy's website was easily found and as I scanned from the relative comfort of the car I noted numerous **Socotra Cormorant** and a pair

of very distant shearwaters, presumed **Persian Shearwater**. On the beach Sanderling and Turnstone were busy feeding along the edge the water, while various Terns loafed on the beach, including **Lesser crested**, **Common** and lifer **Saunders's Tern** and a lone **Sooty Gull**.



After picking up some lunch I began the journey back towards Dubai. My intention was to spend some more time at the Pivots, but I'd been notified that they would not open until 3.30, so I went initially to Ras al Khor and birded from 2.30 to 3.30 from the comfort of the air-conditioned Mangrove hide. It produced a good array of wetland species including **Little Stint**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Flamingo**, **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Golden Plover**, **Great Egret**, **Grey Heron**, **Striated Heron**. **Yellow-billed Stork** was a lifer, while **Greenshank** and its daintier cousin **Marsh Sandpiper** were new for the trip. A short drive around the roads brought me to the Flamingo Hide where I filled my boots with pictures of **Flamingo**, and also noted a flock of about 20 **Redshank** roosting to the south.



At 4.30 I arrived back at the pivots. I decided to concentrate on photographs and having left the scope and shed my bins I began to shimmy along the grassy on my belly hoping to get close enough to a WTP for a nice low-down photo. I was only semi-successful in this, eventually giving up on stealth (it didn't flush when I stood up. As I walked back to retrieve my scope I noticed out of the corner of my eye a small brown object on the ground. What the...! It was my wallet, obviously having been dislodged from my pocket as I snaked my way through the grass. A *major* disaster very narrowly avoided.

I was informed on entry that the gates would shut at 5.30. Between the wallet incident and closure at 5.30, I drove to the northern edge of the large pivot, as far as I trusted my dinky i10 not to get bogged. **Cattle Egret** was new for the trip, and about 20 of these, along with several hundred **Bank Mynah** were conspicuous around the arm of the massive sprinkler system. I spent the next hour using the car as hide trying to get even more improved photos of White-tailed Plover and a few other species.





My flight was not due to leave until the wee hours of the next day, so I still had the evening to kill. I drove to Mushrif Park (where **Rose-ringed Parakeet** was new for the trip) and waited until dark. And waited. And waited. And waited some more. My target here was Pallid Scops Owl that is seen regularly on the grass in front of the Mosque. I had no recording of it, and it didn't really look very hopeful when first a group of small boys set up a cricket game on the lawn under the floodlights, and then when they had mercifully packed up and gone home, at least 3 feral cats sloped out of the shadows to patrol the area. Eventually I decided to give up around 9pm. As I took my last stroll I spied a bird shape on the grass in front of the fenced area. It was too late for it to be another Mynah, so worth checking out. As I approached I lost sight momentarily and by the time I could see the spot again, there was nothing there. Still, it was worth a few more minutes. As I patrolled the narrow strip of grass in where I'd seen the shape, another small shape became apparent in a more open part of one of the trees. I shone the torch and this was surely it, but as I tried to focus my bins with one sweaty hand while holding the torch steady with the other it flew towards me, a small ghostly pale shape that had to be the owl. It landed in a tree behind me, flushed to a nearby one almost immediately and then disappeared. Ultimately, just about tickable, but firmly in the category, BVD (better views desired). Forty-five minutes later I finally gave up and headed to the airport. A sweaty, uncomfortable wait to check-in was compensated by an extremely pleasant Emirates desk chap who upgraded me to business class. Crab Plover *and* Business Class: now that's a result!