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BIRDS OBSERVED IN THE IMHOFF GARDENS OF  
DHAHRAN, AND AT RAS TANURA, SAUDI ARABIA  
1959—1962

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Dhahran is an oil town with a population of about 3,000 United States citizens, established in 1937 by the Arabian-American Oil Company as headquarters for its overseas staff. About ten miles inland from the Persian Gulf coast and surrounded by desert, its gardens have flourished by reason of the large quantity of natural, slightly brackish water obtained from wells. Gardens, lawns, hedges of mock honeysuckle, and trees, date palms, acacia, tamarisk all now grow freely as well as many ornamental plants such as oleanders and bougainvillea.

Water is used in vast quantities, especially for nearly six months of air conditioning in the settlement. All of the sewage water flows into the desert several miles to the east where it is treated and purified. Here at the Imhoff gardens several small ponds have been created, surrounded partly by cultivation, partly by rank herbage and rushes. This new environment, where only desert existed previously, has naturally altered the

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bird population radically. It was first mentioned by Ripley (1951) in his paper on a visit to Dhahran and Bahrein in the summer of 1950. It was of course totally unknown to Ticehurst and Cheesman (1925) in the only other published short paper on the area.

In winter the Imhoff gardens with their lakes become a stopping place for many migrants. In summer, the tamarisk trees and garden atmosphere provide a welcome shelter from the burning heat of the open desert, though temperatures may reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. The gardens are now surrounded by a fence which gives added protection to the bird fauna, although poachers attempt to shoot at the duck during the winter migration.

My first visit to these gardens occurred in July, 1950 accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. S. Dillon Ripley. Since then I have always visited the Imhoff gardens as well as the sand spits along the coast near Ras Tanura, the oil refinery forty miles north along the coast, whenever my husband and I visited eastern Saudi Arabia during the ensuing years. For texts I have used Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom's *Field Guide to the Birds of Europe*, and Meinertzhagen's *Birds of Arabia*, both invaluable aids. The following notes should be of interest when compared with the earlier records of Ripley, as well as Meinertzhagen's book. It is obvious that migrants as well as local resident species are able to exploit rapidly such a newly emerging favorable environment such as that at Imhoff. It is my sincere hope that the following list will encourage further observations by others in this fascinating spot.

#### Annotated List from the Imhoff Gardens\*

*Podiceps nigricollis*, Black-necked Grebe. January, 1960 and 1961, and April, 1960. Meinertzhagen (op. cit. p. 438) records this species as "scarce."

*Podiceps ruficollis*, Little Grebe. January, 1960 and 1961; November, 1960. Meinertzhagen (op. cit., p. 439) lists two sight records for the species, from Aden and Bahrein.

\*Editorial comments are by S. Dillon Ripley.



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Apr. 18, 1962 Birds in the Imhoff Gardens

*Phalacrocorax carbo*, Cormorant. March, 1959; January, April, June and November, 1960.

*Ardea cinerea*, Grey Heron. Seen commonly in January, April, May, June and November, 1960 and 1961. I thought that there were immatures among the four or more birds seen on each visit.

*Ardea purpurea*, Purple Heron. Seen once in late May-early June, 1961. The neck feathers appeared buffy; perhaps a sub-adult.

*Nycticorax nycticorax*, Night Heron. Seen only once in January, 1960.

*Ixobrychus minutus*, Little Bittern. More than two birds were seen from May 27 to June 3, 1961 in heavy reeds. Breeding?

*Milvus migrans*, Black Kite. January, 1961.

*Falco tinnunculus*, Kestrel. Seen at all seasons.

*Falco naumanni*, Lesser Kestrel. Seen migrating in March.

*Falco peregrinus*, Peregrine. April, 1960, and in late May, 1951, a very late date unless the bird was an escape.

*Phoenicopterus ruber*, Flamingo. Seen once, a single bird in late May, 1961.

*Anas platyrhynchos*, Mallard. January and November, 1960.

*Anas crecca*, Teal. January, 1960 and 1961.

*Anas clypeata*, Shoveler. January, April and November.

*Anas acuta*, Pintail. January and November.

*Aythya nyroca*, White-eye or Ferruginous Pochard. January, November and June. The June record was repeated in 1960 and again in 1961 when a pair was seen every day for a week. This is not only the southernmost record for the species in Arabia, but also seems exceptionally late in the year.

*Aythya ferina*, Pochard. Numerous in January and November.

*Fulica atra*, Coot. Common in January, April and November.



*Charadrius squatarola*, Grey Plover. January and November.

*Charadrius apricarius*, Golden Plover. April, 1960. (A valuable record, as sight records or specimens from Arabia are almost nonexistent, Ed.)

*Charadrius alexandrinus*, Kentish Plover. Resident, seen displaying in late May-early June in the Gardens.

*Charadrius dubius*, Little Ringed Plover. Seen in January, April, May-June and November.

*Charadrius hiaticula*, Ringed Plover. January, April, June and November.

*Calidris alpina*, Dunlin. January, April and November.

*Calidris testacea*, Curlew Sandpiper. Six seen in the Gardens in late May-June, 1961.

*Calidris minuta*, Little Stint. Very common in January and November. A few seen in April, and one or two still lingering as late as late May-June, 1961.

*Tringa totanus*, Redshank. January, April and May, (May 3, 1957).

*Tringa nebularia*, Greenshank. January, April and November.

*Tringa stagnatilis*, Marsh Sandpiper. January, November.

*Tringa ochropus*, Green Sandpiper. January, March, April, and late May-June, 1961. Not recorded so late in Arabia before.

*Tringa glareola*, Wood Sandpiper. January, late May-June, 1961 (a new late record for Arabia, Ed.) and November.

*Tringa hypoleucos*, Common Sandpiper. January, April, late May-June, 1961 (a new late record for Arabia), and November.

*Tringa erythropus*, Spotted Redshank. January, 1960, and May 3, 1957. (A first winter record for Arabia, Ed.)



*Calidris canutus*, Knot. April, 1960. A first record for Saudi Arabia, although the species has been recorded from Muscat.

*Limosa limosa*, Black-tailed Godwit. January, April and September in various years from 1956 to 1960. Records are scarce for Arabia.

*Himantopus himantopus*, Stilt. April, 1960. Called a "rare straggler" by Meinertzhagen (op. cit., p. 508).

*Capella gallinago*, Snipe. January, April and November.

*Cursorius cursor*, Cream-colored Courser. January.

*Glareola pratincola*, Pratincole. A single bird, late May, 1961.

*Larus argentatus* (expanded *L. fuscus* of Meinertzhagen, Ed.) Herring Gull. January, March, April, and June.

*Larus fuscus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull. March, April and November, 1959-60.

*Larus ridibundus*, Black-headed Gull. January and April.

*Chlidonias leucoptera*, White-winged Black Tern. Up to eight individuals in late May-June, 1961; also a single bird in June, 1960. Third record for Arabia *vide* Meinertzhagen (op. cit., p. 517).

*Pterocles alchata*, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Several seen in November, 1960. Rarely recorded in Arabia, but probably straggles erratically in the area.

*Streptopelia turtur*, Turtle Dove. A single dove seen in the Gardens in late May-June, 1961, Dhahran, April, 1957.

*Psittacula krameri*, Rose-ringed Parakeet. Now established at Dhahran and a new record for Saudi Arabia. (Known previously only from Oman and Muscat, see de Schauensee and Ripley, 1953, Ed.)

*Apus apus*, Swift. Several seen in late May-June. (An attempt should be made to find the Swift as a breeding species in Arabia, Ed.)

*Merops apiaster*, Bee-eater. Seen in January and May.



*Merops superciliosus*, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. March and April.

*Hirundo rustica*, Swallow. March, April, June.

*Hirundo d. daurica*, Red-rumped Swallow. A migrating flock of twenty birds seen in February, 1962.

*Riparia riparia*, Sand Martin. Commonly seen in May-June, far later than recorded by Meinertzhagen, (op. cit., p. 279-80).

*Delichon urbica*, House Martin. January, April.

*Upupa epops*, Hoopoe. Seen in March and April, as well as July (Ripley, 1951, p. 5).

*Lanius excubitor*, Great Grey Shrike. Seen throughout the year. (Subspecies? Ed.)

*Lanius minor*, Lesser Grey Shrike. May, 1957, a new spring record for Arabia.

*Lanius senator*, Woodchat Shrike. January, March, May.

*Lanius collurio*, Red-backed Shrike. Dates in late May-June are later than recorded by Meinertzhagen (op. cit., p. 171-2).

*Lanius isabellinus*, Isabelline or Pale Brown Shrike. Seen in January, 1960 and 1961.

*Galerida cristata*, Crested Lark. Seen at every month of the year; (probably *magna*, Ed.)

*Certhilauda alaudipes*, Bifasciated Lark. Seen at various seasons.

*Alauda arvensis*, Skylark. (Not unexpected in January, Ed.)

*Eremopteryx nigriceps*, Black-crowned Finch-lark. Lives on the desert fringes of the Gardens and Dhahran town.

*Sturnus vulgaris*, Starling. Seen in January and March at Dhahran.

*Oriolus oriolus*, Oriole. Three to four birds seen singing in late May-June form a most unusual record for this species which is not known to breed south of southern Iran.

*Corvus corax*, Brown-necked Raven. March, April, July.

*Pycnonotus leucotis*, Bulbul. Common in the Gardens, but now far less common in Dhahran town since heavy doses of DDT were given to the lawns to control worms. Thus even in Arabia pesticides have had an effect on the birds which are attracted by human habitation. (In spite of Meinertzhagen's doubts about this population, op. cit., p. 180, I find Dhahran birds still paler and larger than *mesopotamiae* from Iraq, Ed.)

*Muscicapa striata*, Spotted Flycatcher. Seen in late May-June and at the normal spring and fall migration dates. Are some individuals resident?

*Musicapa albicollis*, Collared Flycatcher. Seen in March, 1957.

*Sylvia curruca*, Lesser Whitethroat. April, 1960 (probably *minula* which has been taken in Oman and the Hadramaut in March, Ed.)

*Sylvia atricapilla*, Black Cap Warbler. April and May, 1957, seen both at Imhoff and in Dhahran.

*Sylvia borin*, Garden Warbler. January, April.

*Sylvia nana*, Desert Warbler. Seen in the desert in late May-June.

*Hippolais languida*, Upcher's Warbler. Seen in late May-June. Breeding?

*Hippolais pallida*, Olivaceous Warbler. Seen in late May-June. This warbler may breed in Arabia, but it is not at present known to do so.

*Hippolais icterina*, Icterine Warbler. Seen once in late May-June. A second record for Arabia.

*Phylloscopus trochilus*, Willow Warbler. January, March, April, June and November.

*Phylloscopus collybita*, Chiffchaff. January, March, April, June and November.



*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, Wood Warbler. Seen once in April, 1960.

*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*, Sedge Warbler. Very secretive, but the churring insect-like call reveals its whereabouts in the cut-over tamarisk trees near the lake. Seen in late May-June, a very late record for the species.

*Luscinola melanopogon*, Moustached Warbler. More than one specimen seen on several occasions walking over the rocks near the lake edge close to bushes and trees. The eye-stripe was very clear indicating that this was not the Sedge Warbler. Seen in late May-June.

*Prinia gracilis*, Graceful Warbler. Resident and seen at all seasons.

*Erithacus megarrhynchus*, Nightingale. Observed once in late May-June.

*Erithacus svecicus*, Bluethroat. Several seen in January and April.

*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, Redstart. January, April, late May-June, and November. (Not previously recorded from eastern Arabia, Ed.)

*Phoenicurus ochruros*, Black Redstart. January and April.

*Saxicola rubetra*, Whinchat. January, March.

*Saxicola torquata*, Stonechat. January, March and November.

*Oenanthe oenanthe*, Wheatear. Seen in January and April.

*Oenanthe hispanica*, Black-eared Wheatear. April, 1960.

*Oenanthe leucomela*, Pleschanka's or Pied Wheatear. March April records are useful as they are the first from eastern Arabia.

*Oenanthe isabellina*, Isabelline Wheatear. January, March, April, May and November.

*Oenanthe finschii*, Finsch's Chat. March, April.



*Oenanthe xanthopyrma*, Red-tailed Chat or Wheatear. Seen in November, 1960.

*Monticola saxatilis*, Rock Thrush. January, March and May.

*Turdus ericetorum*, Song Thrush. Seen in January, 1960 and 1961.

*Turdus ruficollis atrogularis*, Black-throated thrush. Two birds seen in gardens of Dhahran, February, 1962.

*Anthus pratensis*, Meadow Pipit. Seen in January, 1960, 1961, March, 1959 and April, 1960. A first sight record for Arabia.

*Anthus spinoletta*, Water Pipit. January, 1960.

*Anthus campestris*, Tawny Pipit. January and April.

*Anthus cervinus*, Red-throated Pipit. January, March, April and May.

*Anthus trivialis*, Tree Pipit. January, April and November.

*Motacilla alba*, White Wagtail. January, March, April and November.

*Motacilla flava*, Blue-headed Wagtail. March and April.

*Motacilla flava*, Yellow form or Yellow Wagtail (*lutea?* Ed.) March and April.

*Motacilla flava feldegg*, Black-headed Wagtail. Seen in April, 1960 and again a pair in late May-June. One was panting in the heat. (A late date for these migrants, Ed.)

*Motacilla cinerea*, Grey Wagtail. A single record in March, 1959.

*Passer domesticus*, House Sparrow. Extremely common especially near the horse corrals.

*Carduelis spinus*, Siskin. November 13, 1959, a flock of Siskin in the thickets of Imhoff. I am very familiar with the Siskin on migration in Lebanon and I remember that I looked up



Meinertzhagen to see what he had to say and found the Siskin not mentioned in his *Birds of Arabia*. The Bannermans in *Birds of Cyprus* (1958) call the Siskin a winter visitor and passage migrant. (New record for Arabia, Ed.)

*Emberiza calandra*, Corn Bunting. Seen in January, 1960 and 1961. (A new winter record for Arabia, Ed.)

*Emberiza hortulana*, Ortolan Bunting. April, 1960.

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