

IF YOU MENTION YOU'RE GOING TO SOCOTRA, most people look puzzled, because they've never heard of the place. But the knowledgeable few get a faraway look, tinged with more than a little jealousy. Dubbed the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean, Socotra is home to a unique fauna and flora, coupled with stunning scenery and a fascinating cultural history stretching back more than 2 000 years. For birders, the island supports at least six endemic landbirds as well as abundant seabirds. Until recently, the island was effectively off limits, but fortunately this has now changed. Ian Sinclair and Peter Ryan report. ▶

*birding an*  
**Ancient  
Land**  
SOCOTRA

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*Hadiboh lagoon offers good wetland birding in the island's capital, with the Haghier Mountains in the background.*



the archipelago. Much of the island is still semi-desert, but there are numerous springs, lush wadis and coastal wetlands. All but one of the endemic landbirds are confined to the main island of Socotra, with only the Socotra Sparrow occurring on the other islands.

Few mammals are native to the archipelago: an endemic shrew and four species of bats. As a result, Socotra has the feel of an oceanic island – one that has not been connected to a continental mainland. But this is misleading, because the island is an ancient fragment of continental landmass, with the oldest rocks in its Haghier Mountains dating back more than 650 million years. Socotra broke off from Africa as a result of block faulting some 36 million years ago, during the rifting as Africa and Arabia split apart, forming the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Geologically, Socotra bears a close resemblance to the Dhofar Region of western Oman, but its long isolation has resulted in the evolution of many endemic plants and animals.

At first glance, the most distinctive aspect of the island's biota is its vegetation. Twisted and bloated desert rose *Adenium obesum* and cucumber trees *Dendrosicyos socotrana* characterise the lower slopes, while the highlands are dominated by imposing dragon's blood trees *Dracaena cinnabari*, which resemble a kokerboom *Aloe dichotoma* on steroids. These are just the larger, more conspicuous elements of a flora comprising more



than 800 species of flowering plants, of which 300 are found nowhere else. High levels of endemism also occur among the island's invertebrates and reptiles. Of the more than 600 insects discovered to date, over 200 occur nowhere else, and nearly all of the 27 terrestrial reptiles are also endemic. Most reptile species are geckos, but there are several species of snake, and a chameleon. Historic accounts of the islands by the ancient Greeks report crocodiles and large lizards, whose flesh was eaten and the fat used as a substitute for olive oil. Sadly, no evidence remains of these more exotic species.

Socotra has a long history of human exploitation. The island has been inhabited for at least 2 000 years, having been colonised by people from Arabia, Africa and India. Early visitors were drawn by the abundance of frankincense and myrrh, as well as aloes and the blood-red sap of the dragon's blood trees. Currently, the human population (some 70 000) is concentrated in the capital, Hadiboh, as well as the former capital, Qalansiya, but many people still live in the countryside under quite primitive conditions. The native semitic language, Socotri, is spoken nowhere

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else, although Arabic is widely spoken, and it is not unusual to hear Kiswahili in the coastal villages, thanks to the many Africans who came to the island after the 1870s, when Socotra became a British protectorate.

When southern Yemen became a socialist state in 1967, the British were replaced by Russians, and it was only with the fall of communism in 1990 that Socotra once again became accessible to western visitors. Tourism to the island received a major boost in 1999, when a modern airstrip was constructed, allowing commercial flights to the island.

Nearly 200 bird species have been recorded from Socotra, but only 40 breed on the island, of which 10 are seabirds. Socotra is the easternmost island in the archipelago, lying more than ▷

*Dragon's blood trees are the plant icon of the islands. They are found only in the wetter highlands of Socotra.*

**Below** The Socotra Bunting is the rarest of the endemic landbirds, confined to the highest mountains.

**Below, right** An enigmatic, group-living species, the Socotra Warbler is probably allied to the cisticolas.

Although part of Yemen, Socotra lies just off the eastern coast of Somalia. It is an archipelago of four islands, with the westernmost, Abdelkuri, less than 100 kilometres from Cape Guardafui, the tip of the Horn of Africa. The main island of Socotra is by far the largest and most diverse. It is 100 kilometres long and 30 kilometres wide, and rises more than 1 500 metres above sea level at its highest point. This elevation is important, as the high peaks create orographic cloud during the summer monsoon, resulting in Socotra receiving appreciably more precipitation than the other, lower-lying islands in



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**Top** *The Socotra or Island Cisticola closely resembles the widespread Zitting Cisticola, but lacks that species' distinctive bottle-shaped nest.*

**Above** *A male Socotra Sparrow in the highlands. Unlike most sparrows on the main island of Socotra, this bird has a relatively small bib, barely extending onto the breast.*

**Opposite** *Egyptian Vultures are perhaps the most conspicuous birds on the island, competing with goats for scraps around towns and villages.*

200 kilometres off the African coast and nearly 400 kilometres south of the Arabian Peninsula. Its isolation results in few migrant landbirds visiting the island, other than Desert Wheatears, which overwinter here in large numbers, together with smaller numbers of Isabelline and Pied wheatears. Many other species are accidental visitors, and regular observation is bound to continue to increase the island's birdlist. For African birders, part of the attraction is the chance to see vagrants from Asia, such as Indian Pond-Heron, Yellow Bittern, Cotton Teal, Pintail Snipe, Pheasant-tailed Jacana and Indian Roller.

**A**lthough pride of place goes to the endemic birds, these are not immediately apparent. On arrival, the first bird you encounter is the Egyptian Vulture, which is common even at the airport. Unlike most populations elsewhere, Egyptian Vultures thrive on Socotra, with more than 1 000 pairs breeding in cavities on the island's many cliffs. It is affectionately known as the 'municipal bird', because it cleans up much of the organic waste, and the largest concentrations are found around settled areas. Each morning, hundreds glide down to Hadiboh from the cliffs inland to spend their day foraging among the houses or along the beaches. A few even follow fishing boats to join the gulls scavenging offal thrown overboard. In town, they compete with the ever-present goats, and will even take scraps from your hand.

Seabirds and shorebirds are equally abundant, and are easily observed along the island's coast and at the many coastal wetlands. Sooty and Heuglin's are the most common gulls, but careful scrutiny may locate Baltic, Baraba, Caspian, Common Black-headed and perhaps even a White-eyed Gull. Coastal terns are mainly Swift, Lesser Crested and Sandwich, but offshore there are large flocks of White-cheeked and Bridled terns and Common Noddies. A wide diversity of shorebirds and ducks also occurs, but they are all widespread

Palaearctic species that are likely to attract less attention than the seabirds.

Typically, tropical waters are too stratified to allow much productivity, resulting in low densities of seabirds and other top predators. However, around Socotra, the seasonal monsoons drive considerable vertical mixing and upwelling, promoting a rich marine ecosystem. Large schools of tuna and other game fish are abundant, forcing smaller fish to the surface, where they are eagerly consumed by remarkably large numbers of seabirds. Ironically, the persistence of game fish is in part due to the threat of piracy from Somalia, which keeps vessels from Spain and other major fishing nations out of these waters.

Closer inshore, coral reefs surround much of the Socotran coastline. Despite a fair amount of artisanal fishing, most of the reefs are in excellent condition, supporting a dazzling array of fish, with influences from both the Red Sea and the Indo-Pacific.

Socotra Cormorants can be seen flying out at sea in skeins, like large, rangy Cape Cormorants. They often roost on cliffs and offshore rocks, and recently have been discovered breeding at several sites. Brown Boobies also fly close inshore, while Masked Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds tend to remain further offshore. All three species breed at remote sites in the archipelago. Persian Shearwaters and the enigmatic Jouanin's Petrel also breed on the island's cliffs, but only come ashore at night. To really get to grips with these species, it's best to hire a boat and head a few kilometres offshore, where both are quite common.

**T**he Socotra Sparrow is the most abundant endemic landbird, occurring commonly from coastal *Croton* scrub to high elevations. It is only absent from the centre of the larger towns. Allied to the Great Sparrow complex of Africa and the Cape Verdes, Socotra Sparrows occur on all four main islands in the archipelago. Recent research suggests that populations on Abdelkuri, and on Samha [▷ To page 68](#)

