



birding Yemen

Probably the trickiest species to see at Kawkaban is the localised Arabian Accentor. A pair has a territory along the historic footpath leading down from Kawkaban to Shibam, but they are not easy to locate, as they spend most of their time on the ground, often under dense vegetation. If you fail here, they are more easily seen on the Sumara Pass, a few hours' drive south of Sana'a on the main road to Aden.

The final Yemen 'endemic' is the Arabian Waxbill, which occurs locally at lower elevations around Sana'a. It is easy to find along the wadi at Hamam Garaf, about an hour south of Sana'a. If you have the time to explore further afield, it occurs in many of the wadis in the foothills of the mountains leading down to the Tihama, the hot and steamy lowlands that flank the Red Sea coast of Yemen. In addition to the amazing scenery en route, an advantage of driving down to the Tihama is the chance to see the stunningly beautiful Arabian Golden Sparrow, which is confined to this region, with a small population across the Red Sea in Djibouti. Having ventured this far, it is also worth visiting the wetlands north of the sprawling city of Al-Hodaïda, where there is a wide diversity of coastal birds, including Saunder's Tern. Small numbers of White-eyed Gulls occur among the much more abundant Sooty Gulls at the fishing harbour.

This brief account provides only the most basic introduction to the opportunities of birding Yemen. The country lies along the main migration route linking Africa and Asia, and is home to an exotic blend of species from both regions. Add in the country's fascinating history, culture and remarkably friendly people, and you have a great birding destination. An ideal trip would be to spend a week on Socotra and two weeks exploring Yemen, especially during spring passage.



Above *The old city in Sana'a is a World Heritage Site, but transport can be tricky after a cloudburst, when the main thoroughfare becomes a raging torrent.*

Below *The wooded slopes around Kawkaban, less than an hour's drive from Sana'a, offer most of the region's endemic birds in an almost medieval landscape.*

Opposite, top *Arabian Golden Sparrows, the world's gaudiest and arguably most spectacular sparrow, occur in large flocks locally on the blistering Tihama plains that border the Red Sea coast of Yemen.*



The Arabian Accentor is probably the toughest to find of the south-west Arabian endemics. It is frequently missed at Kawkaban, but is easier at Sumara Pass on the road to Aden from Sana'a.

Socotra is administered by the Yemen Republic, which forms the south-western part of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by Saudi Arabia to the north and Oman to the east. Although part of Arabia, Yemen is placed in the Afrotropical zoogeographic region, given the close affinity of its fauna to that of Africa. Species such as African Grey Hornbill, Abyssinian Roller, Black-crowned Tchagra, Black Scrub-Robin and Rüppell's Weaver make African birders feel right at home. But the Yemeni highlands are also an endemic bird region, with 10 species confined to the area, which extends into adjacent south-west Saudi Arabia and locally into western Oman. With more endemics than Socotra, it makes sense to chase these birds on a trip to the island. All 10 can be seen within a few hours' drive of the capital, Sana'a.

If you have time to visit only one site, the best bet is the mountain fortress of Kawkaban, towering over Shibam, about an hour's drive north-west of Sana'a. Driving up the access road to Kawkaban around sunrise should provide plenty of Philby's Partridges, as well as the occasional Arabian Partridge. Yemen Linnets are abundant along the road, and are far more aesthetically appealing than the drab Yemen and Arabian serins that are regular along the rocky cliffs and lower slopes, respectively. South Arabian Wheatears are plentiful and conspicuous, but Yemen Warblers, Yemen Thrushes and Arabian Woodpeckers require more patience. All three are rather scarce and are confined to the few well-wooded gullies. The woodpecker and thrush are easier to see in the more extensive woodland at Al Ahjur, about eight kilometres beyond Shibam, turning left off the main road shortly after it starts to descend from the heights of Kawkaban. Small numbers of Golden-winged Grosbeaks also occur in this area.





and Darsa are quite distinct from those on the main island of Socotra, and may represent additional endemic species for the archipelago.

The most conspicuous landbird is the Somali Starling, a slender, elegant red-winged starling with marked sexual dimorphism. It is useful to get to know this species well, so that it is easier to pick out the less common Socotra Starling, an endemic species that is chunkier and more phlegmatic, with a shorter, square-tipped tail and no difference between the sexes. It is most abundant at higher elevations, where it is often seen feeding on fruiting dragon's blood trees, but it does also occur at lower elevations, sometimes joining Somali Starlings to scavenge around small settlements.

Socotra Sunbirds are common in well-vegetated wadis and hill-slopes. Like many island birds, they lack the bright coloration and marked sexual dimorphism of their continental relatives. They compensate for this relative drabness with a wide repertoire of songs and calls. Socotra Warblers are less prolific, but still fairly widespread, occurring in small groups in dense vegetation. They resemble a cisticola in their plumage, but behave more like a camaroptera, bounding around, pumping their bodies up and down, and wing-snapping.

Two endemic species are listed as Globally Threatened. The Socotra Cisticola is a greyish version of the widespread Zitting Cisticola. Its display flight and call appear identical to that of Zitting Cisticola, but its nest has a side entrance, unlike the distinctive 'soda-bottle' nest of the Zitting Cisticola. It frequents short, scrubby vegetation, mainly on the coastal lowlands, and is most common in the few areas of saltmarsh. It is considered particularly vulnerable, as a result of grazing pressure and possible development in this zone.

The other threatened species, and the most difficult endemic to see, is the Socotra Bunting. It is confined to the higher parts of the island, where it is curiously localised, with a total population of fewer than 1 000 birds. Quite why it is so localised in the highlands remains unclear. It is best sought in the Skand region of Dixem, where it can be located by its call, an ascending buzzy,



nasal 'zhee zhee zhee', which resembles that of the Cape Bunting. Its nest and eggs have yet to be discovered, but we photographed birds with recently fledged chicks in April.

In addition to the recognised endemics, Socotra supports 12 endemic subspecies, at least some of which may well represent good species. The local population of Long-billed Pipit looks quite unlike adjacent populations in either Africa or Arabia, and the Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak has recently been split from other populations in Yemen and Somalia. The Grosbeak is rather uncommon, but is hard to overlook as it swoops past in a heart-stopping flash of gold and black. Its huge beak, bold black face and glistening golden wing and tail patches make it arguably the island's best-looking passerine.

Most enigmatic are two of the island's raptors. The resident population of buzzards is clearly allied to the Common/Steppe/Mountain Buzzard complex, but they appear more slender and compact, with a strongly contrasting underwing pattern. This buzzard is tentatively treated as an endemic, as yet undescribed, species. The island's scops-owl is

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quite common, especially in date-palm groves. It has a distinctive four-part call, quite unlike that of the African Scops-Owl. It may prove to be an isolated population of Oriental Scops-Owl, or yet another Socotran endemic.

Some of the island's other breeding birds warrant a mention. Forbes-Watson Swift is a common breeding species that returns to Socotra from the coasts of Somalia and Kenya in mid-March. Large numbers descend from their highland nest sites to feed along the coast each morning. An intriguing population of White-browed Coucals is confined to the highlands. The coastal plains support healthy populations of Cream-coloured Coursers, Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse and Black-crowned Sparrowlarks, while Nubian Nightjars are localised and scarce.

Although not stunningly diverse, Socotra is a very birdy place that offers remarkable opportunities to observe an array of seabirds, migrants and vagrants, as well as the local breeding birds. □



Top The arid cliffs along the western coast of Socotra between Qalansiya and Shuab are the only confirmed breeding site for Jouanin's Petrels.

Above The specific status of the buzzards breeding on Socotra has attracted considerable debate in recent years, but remains unresolved.

Opposite Masked Boobies breed on Saboniya and Kal Farun, offshore stacks west of the main island of Socotra.

off you go...

Access to Socotra is via Yemen, with two to three flights per week via Al-Mukalla in eastern Yemen. Flights are usually full, and we strongly recommend booking through a local agent to avoid being bumped off. Yousef Mohageb from Arabian Ecotours (aet@y.net.ye) can arrange all facets of a tour, including ground transport and accommodation, both on Socotra and the mainland. Visitors from most countries will need a visa for Yemen. Some passport holders can purchase this on arrival in Sana'a, but South Africans need to apply in advance, and supply a letter of invitation or intent. A good local agent can help here too.

All the birds endemic to Socotra can be seen within a few hours drive of Hadiboh, and indeed, if you really push it, you can see all of them in a single day. However, the island is well worth exploring in more depth, and it is rewarding to spend at least a week, especially if you want to take a trip out to sea and perhaps indulge in a little diving or fishing.

Some good birding is within walking distance of Hadiboh, but you will need a car and driver for most excursions as public transport is limited. The growing ecotourism industry has resulted in the creation of several small, rustic hotels around the island, which provide a welcome change of scenery from Hadiboh. The former capital, Qalansiya, near the western end of Socotra, is arguably more attractive, and makes a sensible base for planning a seabird trip. It is close to the petrel breeding cliffs at Shuab and within striking distance of the Masked Booby colony on the offshore stack of Saboniya.

The best time of year to visit is from January to March, after the peak of the early winter rains, but before the onset of the summer monsoon. Even in winter, the climate is quite warm along the coast. By April/May it is decidedly hot, but it remains pleasantly cool in the highlands. Malaria does occur on the island, but it is seldom a problem, especially in winter.