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long-term these may be in the process of being solved (see below).

Khor Kalba is also well-known for its over-wintering Indian Pond Herons *Ardeola grayii* (see photo page 16), which are easy to find, up to 22 were located during a January survey, with three still present by late April but none thereafter, and its breeding Sykes's Warblers *Iduna rama* which are thinly distributed and very elusive. Although not specifically targeted, all Sykes's Warblers noted during our survey work were mapped. Worryingly, this produced a daily maximum of only five birds and there may be as few as four to seven territories. If this is correct, the conservation status of Sykes's Warbler may be more critical than that of Collared Kingfisher and would clearly warrant further investigation.

Recent developments at Khor Kalba

Since March 2012 Khor Kalba has been fenced off, entirely restricting public access to the site. This occurred once the Environment and Protected Areas Authority for Sharjah (EPPA) had approval from the Ruler of Sharjah Emirate, HH Dr Sultan bin Muhammed Al Qasimi, to consider the site as a formally protected area, now named "Al Qurm Protected Area" (Qurm is the local name for the mangrove). Furthermore, the nearby Acacia forest was also declared protected, under the name "Al Hafyah Protected Area". This fragile and sensitive gravel plain, comprising 3.5km², is the densest Acacia forest in the UAE and contains some trees that may exceed 80 years in age.

These protected areas form part of a wider plan, agreed between EPAA and the Sharjah Government for the area. Whilst some development is likely close to the Khor, the intention is that all projects will proceed solely on the basis of being sustainable and promoting ecotourism to the area and will only be approved subject to a strict environmental impact assessment.

Currently proposed projects are focussed on direct conservation and education. For example, Kalba Wildlife Centre will house various species from the local environment with the intention of educating local people about the area's wildlife. A proposed Birds of Prey Centre is a project to link education with entertainment as it will focus on falconry as part of the national heritage. Designated picnic areas will be open to the public on the fringes of the protected core, so giving people a chance to enjoy the local environment and learn about it through interpretation panels and displays. Henceforth public access will be strictly managed and so entirely eliminate rampant disturbance, particularly from drivers on the dunes and beach. The latter was a particularly severe problem for many years before the site was fenced off.

Local people have been hired as rangers by the EPAA, believing that they would be better placed to spread the conservation messages to the Kalba community. There is evidence that this approach has paid off. Furthermore, no less than 17 hunters and fishermen have so far been apprehended in the restricted area, for which there are penalties of up to 10,000 AED in fines or four to twelve months in jail. Other laws, including those to protect the trees, are being drawn up. As a result of surveys, some interesting recent discoveries have been made, including a hitherto unknown heritage site which indicates the broader importance of the Khor

Kalba area.

Finally, a submission concerning Khor Kalba as a wetland of international importance has been lodged with the Ramsar Convention. If successful, the site would become the most biodiverse Ramsar Site in the UAE and only the third site to gain such recognition in the country. The EPAA and local naturalists are hopeful that this will indeed be awarded as the site complies with requirement categories. With mountains, gravel plains, salt marshes and mangroves along tidal creeks, lots of beach and a rich offshore sea, Kalba is arguably the most biodiverse site in the UAE and has long merited proper protection and gazetting. Perhaps now, at last, it is finally going to get it.

Reference: Campbell, O., A. Al Ali & N. Tovey. 2012. The status of Collared Kingfisher in the United Arab Emirates, with comments on the status of Sykes's Warbler and Indian Pond Heron. *Tribulus* 20: 62-66.

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Apparent increases in Egyptian vulture populations in the Sultanate of Oman

By A. Al Bulushi, S. Al Harthi, G. Al Farsi, J. Al Araimi, and J. Al Humaidi

The Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* is the most numerous and widespread vulture in the Sultanate of Oman (Eriksen, Sargeant and Victor, 2003), but is considered to be globally endangered by Birdlife International (2012). This vulture's range extends from northern Africa and south western Europe to southern Asia and its global population, which is in decline, is estimated to be between 10,000 and 100,000 individuals (Glenn, 2006). There is a concentration of resident birds on the island of Masirah (YB18/YB17) where the most recent published information available is that about 12 breeding pairs are resident (Rogers, 1988). Masirah island is an Important Bird Area (IBA) in Oman.

In February 2012 the Environment Society of Oman (ESO) initiated a one year project funded by the Hima Fund that aimed to collect data about Egyptian Vultures within the Sultanate and to provide some training to Omani field assistants on Masirah island. The project had two phases: the first phase (February & May) aimed to estimate the size of the species' breeding population and better understand their breeding productivity on Masirah; the second phase (October) was to collect data on the distribution of these vultures at dumpsites in northern Oman and on Masirah.

The results of the first phase suggest the estimated population for Masirah island is between 65 to 80 pairs and more than 200 individuals (Environment Society of Oman, 2012). This result represents at least a four-fold increase on earlier estimates for the island. On the face of it, this result runs counter to the declining global population trend of the species. There are perhaps two alternative explanations. Firstly it is quite possible that earlier

estimates of population on Masirah may not have been as thorough or complete as the 2012 survey. Secondly, because the human population on Masirah has grown in the years since the last survey*, during which time more waste is likely to have become available which can be utilised by Egyptian Vultures, we could not entirely discount the possibility that there may have been a real increase in the number of pairs breeding. Information collected at nests suggests reproductive performance on Masirah was low in 2012, compared to studies elsewhere, with 0.46 fledglings/territorial pair being produced (n=39). The study gave good opportunities for Omani field assistants to gain experience in identifying vultures and to determine their age, which would enable them to conduct regular counts at the municipal dumpsite on the island and collect breeding information in the future.

In the second phase, Egyptian Vultures were found using five of the ten dumpsites surveyed in northern Oman and on Masirah island. Juvenile Egyptian Vultures are brown and successive moults over four years result in full adults being white, with dark flight feathers. Table 1 shows the maximum numbers of these vultures, divided into "brown" (<2 yrs of age) and "white" (>2 yrs of age) birds sighted at individual dumpsites. Information on the age of vultures feeding at the dumpsites is important because it provides some insight into population age structure. It is assumed some vultures in all age classes at these sites are resident.

Table 1: Maximum numbers of Egyptian Vultures observed at dumpsites in Oman in October 2012.

Site	Brown birds	White birds
Izki (XB22)	3	15
Manah (XB22)	14	0
Masirah island (YB18)	21	42
New Al Amerat (YB23)	50	188
Quriyat (YB23)	11	144

No Egyptian Vultures were found at dumpsites at Barka (XB24), Fanja (YA23), Jebal Al Akhdar (XB23), Nizwa (XB22) or Sumail (XB23). The largest count at the New Al Amerat dumpsite (238 individuals) was on 9 October 2012.

While the data on breeding on Masirah island and the counts at dumpsites are from only a few observations within a limited time frame, they do suggest:

- Masirah has a much larger population of breeding Egyptian Vultures than was previously known;
- Oman probably holds more than 100 breeding pairs of Egyptian Vultures;
- Dumpsites in Oman are important for resident and migrant vultures;
- The use of dumpsites in Oman by Egyptian Vultures is variable, with no vultures present at some sites that had large amounts of potential food available.

Further research is necessary to better understand the numbers of migrant and resident vultures in Oman, and the distribution, ecology and productivity of the resident population. Because the Egyptian Vulture is globally endangered and populations are declining in most of its range, Oman may be particularly important in conservation terms as a home for pre-breeding birds from across much of its eastern range, and its breeding population may be a source of new recruits into the population if it starts to recover. In addition, the Egyptian Vulture and other scavenging birds provide "ecosystem services" that benefit humans in Oman and elsewhere. ESO intends to develop a plan for research and conservation activities on Egyptian Vultures, and is actively seeking the funds to do this.

* The human population of Masirah island, of approximately 7,804 in 1988, increased to 12,304 by 2013. Source: Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information, Supreme Council of Planning.

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References: ● BirdLife International. 2012. *Species fact sheet: Neophron percnopterus*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 24/10/2012. ● Environment Society of Oman. 2012. *Conservation of the Endangered Egyptian Vulture in Oman*. Progress Report to the Hima Fund. ● Eriksen, J., D. E. Sargeant & R. Victor. 2003. *Oman Bird List*, Edition 6. Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. ● Glenn, C. R. 2006. "Earth's Endangered Creatures" *Species fact sheets: Egyptian Vulture* (Online). Accessed 12/12/2012 at <http://earthsendangered.com>. ● Rogers, T. D. 1988. *A new list of the birds of Masirah Island, Sultanate of Oman*. Oman Bird Record Committee.

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Some notes on breeding birds in Southern Oman

By A. Dixon

I spent a week in southern Oman from 30 March to 6 April 2012 in search of breeding birds. My time was divided between the Salalah coastal plain, the valleys of the Dhofar escarpment and the desert east of Thumrait (UA12).

In the desert east of Thumrait I located two nests of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* by tracking flying birds back to their nests. The first nest was located on 30 March by watching a male back to the nest site before dusk near Aftkhayt (UB12). Although I was too far away, ca. 250 m, to actually witness an exchange in incubation duty, nevertheless, it is likely that the male relieved the female from incubation and when inspected the nest was found to contain a full clutch of three eggs. At 0800 hrs (1 hr 40 min after sunrise) the following day, the male was still on the eggs and had presumably been incubating overnight. At midday on the 1 April the female was incubating at this nest. The second nest was found on the 2 April after tracking a single flying male back to an area of desert close to an asphalt road east of Thumrait. The bird, like the previous male was very wary and undertook a long circuitous walk back to its nest despite