

POSTILLA

Published from 1950 to 2004, the short papers of the *Postilla* series reported on original research by the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History's curators, staff, and research associates, and their colleagues, in the natural science disciplines represented by the collections of the Museum's curatorial divisions.

The *Postilla* series, which ceased publication with Number 232 (2004), was incorporated into the journal *Bulletin of the Peabody Museum of Natural History*, available from BioOne Complete at <https://bioone.org/>.

Yale Peabody Museum scholarly publications are archived through EliScholar, a digital platform for scholarly publishing provided by Yale University Library at <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/>.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Yale PEABODY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

P.O. Box 208118 | New Haven CT 06520-8118 USA | peabody.yale.edu

Postilla

YALE PEABODY MUSEUM

OF NATURAL HISTORY

Number 9

May 10, 1951

New Haven, Conn.

BIRDS COLLECTED AND NOTED ROUND DHAHRAN,
SAUDI ARABIA, AND BAHREIN ISLAND

S. DILLON RIPLEY

During the past summer of 1950 my wife and I spent from July 16-27 on a visit to Dhahran and its vicinity, and the following two days on Bahrein Island. We were the guests of the Arabian-American Oil Company and the Bahrein Petroleum Company. Both organizations were extremely cordial and cooperative to us and we have been most grateful for their generous hospitality. The weather at this season is hot around Dhahran but fairly dry with moderate winds from the north and northwest. Midday temperatures ran up to 110°F. in the shade. On Bahrein the temperatures were slightly lower but the humidity much greater, reaching close to saturation point at times.

Due to complications too numerous to detail here, my collecting facilities were limited during my stay. I was fortunately able to borrow guns from the authorities of the Oil Companies, although my ammunition was unsuitable for these weapons. But at least I could thus secure some specimens for positive identification. My list of species collected or observed is fragmentary compared to that of the only previous paper on the area by Ticehurst and Cheesman (*IBIS*, 1925, pp. 1-31), but it may be interesting from the fact that my observations were made during the summer whereas Cheesman's were made

during the winter months, and also the fact that considerable transformations have occurred in the desert areas along the east coast of Saudi Arabia around Dhahran. In Cheesman's time (1923) the area was largely unmapped and untraversed by a European. Today there are roads, and a railroad inland to Hofuf, and towns have sprung up along the coast such as Al Kobar, and Dhahran farther inland, with surrounding gardens and vegetation which are attracting birds and creating countless favorable opportunities for them to nest and linger over the hot summer season. Such a garden is the Imhoff garden below Dhahran town where treated organic wastes have been used to fertilize the desert and create a lush small oasis. Here is a transitional stage in a succession from desert to fertile land with shade and water, and already a number of species have become adapted to a summer residence there.

I am most grateful to the authorities of the United States National Museum and to the American Museum of Natural History for the loan of specimens in their care. My list follows.

[*Struthio camelus syriacus* Rothschild: Arabian Ostrich.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Thomas Barger of Arabian-American Oil Company for presenting an egg of this form to the collection of the Peabody Museum at Yale University. It had been purchased in the market at Hofuf in 1947 and is very weathered, but shows the smooth characteristics and remnants of the gloss mentioned by Rothschild (BULL. BRIT. ORNITH. CLUB, 39, 1919, p. 82). It measures 141 x 110 mm. Oil officials assured me that the ostrich has not been seen since 1939 along the pipeline route through northern Saudi Arabia to Jordan. In that year a bird was shot by Arabs working on the pipeline survey. Local Arab rumors are that a very small population, perhaps 20 may exist in the center of the great Nafud desert north of Hail.]

Phalacrocorax nigrogularis: Socotra Cormorant.

This species was seen sitting in small groups of less than a dozen individuals along the shore below Al Khobar, and individual birds flying in the Gulf were observed from the launch on the way over to Bahrein Island. No information was obtained on their breeding.

A large heron (*Ardea purpurea* ?) was seen in flight July 22 near the oasis of Qatif along the coast.

Haliaëtus albicilla: White-tailed Sea Eagle.

An immature bird with brownish tail flew over our launch not far from Bahrein on July 27.

Coturnix coturnix coturnix (Linnaeus): Common Quail.

A female in emaciated condition was brought to me by an Arab boy at Qatif.

Haematopus ostralegus: Oyster-catcher.

A pair circled over our launch near Bahrein the same day.

Charadrius alexandrinus: Kentish Plover.

Kentish Plovers were seen commonly along the coast, and there were young birds just on the wing at the Imhoff garden during our visit.

Charadrius mongolus: Lesser Sand-plover.

A single bird with reddish-buffy breast and a collar round the nape was seen along the strand at Al Khobar July 20.

A number of flocks of possible Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) were seen in the distance flying along the coast at this time.

Numenius phaeopus: Whimbrel.

These big curlews had arrived by July 21 and were in great numbers (up to 200 in an individual flock) all along the coast from Ras Tanura south below Al Khobar.

Limosa lapponica: Bar-tailed Godwit.

Seven godwits were seen along the shore, pairs or individuals among the flocks of curlews on July 21.

Cursorius cursor cursor (Latham): Cream-colored Courser.

Adults and possible young were seen at the Imhoff gardens and an adult collected on Bahrein. Birds were mostly in pairs and on the desert but always near trees, water or cultivation. Soft parts: iris dark brown; bill black, base of lower mandible flesh; legs white, pads yellowish. Weight 125 grams.

Larus argentatus: Yellow-legged Herring Gull.

I was surprised not to see Slender-billed or other gulls. Birds seen at Dammam and Ras Tanura all seemed to be large pale Herring Gulls.

A few Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) were seen along the beaches.

Sterna repressa: White-cheeked Tern.

White-cheeked Terns were found breeding on a sand spit near the causeway at Ras Tanura on July 22. Eggs were found in small numbers, and juvenile birds well-feathered were also seen. Possibly these eggs represented a second clutch, or perhaps the first clutch of young birds of the previous season.

Sterna anaethetus: Bridled Tern.

The race *fuligula* of the Bridled Tern breeds along the Gulf. Numerous birds swooped over us at Ras Tanura on the sand spit, and well-feathered young were noted.

"Qatar" birds (*Pterocles senegallus*?) were heard calling in the early morning on the desert south of Awali on Bahrein. It is thought that the Sandgrouse may breed there as well as on the near-by Qatar Peninsula on the mainland.

The Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) and the Little Brown Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) were both seen near gardens and cultivation at Dhahran and Ras Tanura.

The Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*), Roller (*Coracias gar-rulus*) and Hoopoe, "Hudhud" (*Upupa epops*) were all seen on Bahrein, and the latter two species were found in the date gardens and at the Imhoff garden on the mainland.

[A specimen of the Desert Woodpecker (*Picoïdes doriae*, [*Desertipicus* auct.]) was presented to us by Mrs. William A. Eddy. It had been collected at Taif, and is unknown so far from the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula.]

Alaemon alaudipes doriae (Salvadori): Bifasciated Lark.

In the desert fringe about the gardens young birds were on the wing at the time of our visit, some already in the post-juvenal moult. Although noted very scatteringly on the desert the vast majority of Bifasciated Larks were seen by us near or even occasionally in the gardens.

A male measures: wing 129.5, tail 89, culmen 28 mm. Birds of the year were also collected. Soft parts: iris light brown, eyelid yellow; bill brownish-white, upper mandible grayish or whitish horn, tomium whitish, lower mandible gray, pinkish-gray at base. The gape is orange-yellow in juvenile birds, yellow in first year birds. Legs dirty white, pads yellow. Weight, adult ♂ 46.5 grams.

Ammomanes deserti insularis, subsp. nov.

Type: ♂ ad. (No. 2005, S. Dillon Ripley Coll.) collected on Bahrein Island, July 28, 1950, by S. Dillon Ripley.

Diagnosis: This form belongs to the group of *deserti* in which the outer edges to the wing coverts and the upper tail coverts are tinged with rufous. The upper plumage when freshly moulted is of a composite color. The bases and the areas along the shafts of the feathers tend to be hair brown with a broad outer margin of vinaceous-buff thus giving an "ecru" or vinaceous tone to the outer parts of the feathers. The type is in a partial moult. It is thus possible to see that the old worn back feathers are paler, approaching pinkish-buff.

The scapulars and secondaries are externally margined with vinaceous-buff, the inner sides of the feathers dark olive-brown. The outer edges of the primaries are creamy-buff for most of their length, the inner edges and tips drab. The freshly moulted tail feathers approach clove brown with vinaceous-buff edging. The worn tail feathers are lighter, nearer sepia. Below, this specimen is pale whitish-creamy in color washed on the breast with vinaceous-buff. There are a few indistinct streaks on the feathers of the throat and upper breast, which are dark clove brown in color.

From the above description it will at once be seen that this bird bears no resemblance to *azizi*, the "Hamra" or Desert Lark of the near-by Arabian mainland, a very pale pinkish-white bird. From *parvirostris*, this form differs by being more tinged with vinaceous above and paler below. It is paler than *phoenicuroides* or *iranica*. It is a much paler bird than *saturatus* but approaches its vinaceous tone.

Measurements: type, wing 94, tail, 60, culmen 14 mm.

Soft parts: iris dull light brown; bill greenish-yellow basally, yellowish-gray distally; legs yellowish-white. Weight, 26.5 grams.

A small flock of these birds was encountered July 28 in a stone-filled wadi five or six miles into the desert south of Awali on Bahrein. I heard them first, a series of faint twittering calls and walked over from our car to investigate. The birds had hopped down into a small ditch where water was seeping from an abandoned pipeline, part of the first construction put in by the Petroleum Company. I noted, in contrast to what has been said of this species previously, that the birds were drinking or at least dipping their bills into the water of the rivulet. The flock flew off and I had a chance to secure only one specimen. After that they kept a long distance from me on flat ground.

Galerida cristata magna Hume: Crested Lark.

A scattering of these birds was seen on the desert near Dhahran and Ras Tanura and at Awali on Bahrein. Mostly they favored the vicinity of gardens presumably for water and shade. We often saw these and other larks panting with bills agape in the shade of tamarisk trees. Birds were in heavy moult at this season with fully fledged young on the wing.

Eremopteryx nigriceps sincipitalis (Blyth): Finch Lark.

The Finch Lark was seen only in and near gardens during our stay. Some specimens were in breeding condition. Young birds were on the wing. Males were still displaying, and this with their condition indicates that a second nesting occurs in this species. The male displays by a fluttering flight at a low height over the ground. The females sit below. Evidently the blackish lower plumage shows off to advantage in this way. At the same time, by being on the lower surface the heavy dark color is of no advantage to predators.*

* In this connection I agree with Armstrong (1951, p. 314), who suggests that in flight such a dark ventral surface is correlated with display, *contra* Meinertzhagen.

Measurements: wing ♂ 82, 85.5, ♀ 80.5; tail ♂ 48 (moult), 53.5, ♀ 46; culmen ♂ 12, 12.5, ♀ 12 mm. Weight ♀ 17.5 grams.

These birds seem slightly paler above, more tinted with vinaceous than birds from Aden and Southern Arabia, but this is probably due to the stage of the moult.

A swallow, rather greenish-black above and white below was seen about the office buildings at Dhahran and at Awali on Bahrein. I never had a good look at the birds. Could this be the House Martin (*Hirundo urbica*)?

Pycnonotus leucotis dactylus, subsp. nov.

Type: ♂ ad. (No. 2014, S. Dillon Ripley Coll.), collected at Dammam (near Dhahran), Saudi Arabia, July 24, 1950, by S. Dillon Ripley.

Diagnosis: From *mesopotamiae* this form differs by being paler, less smoky on the breast with a touch of drab. Ticehurst and Cheesman (*loc. cit.*, p. 15) writing of the series collected around Hofuf note that the birds are larger and grayer than the Indian race *leucotis* and with a yellow eyelid. Larger, they are (wing 86-94 versus 79-86 in *leucotis*) with proportionally longer tail and larger bill, but they are almost as pale on the lower surface as the typical Indian race. This at once sets them apart from *mesopotamiae*, which is also large, has a yellow eyelid, but is darker, smoky-gray below. In his "Birds of Mesopotamia" (JOURN. BOMBAY NAT. HIST. SOC., 28, 1922, p. 383), Ticehurst comments that he is not sure that this character of darker underparts holds good for *mesopotamiae*, and that Basra birds may be suffering from industrial melanism. Amara specimens agree with Basra birds in being dark, and I am inclined to think that this is a valid character. Nor does it seem to me likely that the Bulbul may be an introduced bird in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrein as Ticehurst and Cheesman also suggest (*ibid.*

p. 15). Unless some concrete proof is put forward in regard to these two suppositions, I would prefer to believe the evidence of the specimens which would seem to indicate that three populations recognizable by size, presence or absence of a yellow eyelid, and color of underparts are involved. The Iraq and Arabian birds are larger than the Indian form and have a yellow eyelid, and they may be distinguished from each other by the southern, Arabian bird being paler. Intergrades may well occur in intervening areas, and I have not examined specimens from Bahrein unfortunately, but they presumably fit into *dactylus*.

Soft parts: iris reddish-brown, eyelid yellow; bill black; legs grayish-black. Males were in breeding condition.

The Bulbul was seen only in the date gardens, where pairs were feeding young just out of the nest. Other pairs were singing and giving evidence of a second nesting. From local reports these birds apparently enter the newer settlements like Dhahran during the winter season, but remain in the date gardens during the summer. Dahran's growth of tamarisks and other trees is not yet heavy enough to give sufficient shade, or perhaps the lack of date palms means that the area is still deficient in insects.

Erythropygia galactotes syriaca (Hemprich and Ehrenberg):

Rufous Chat.

Pairs were seen in the date gardens at Qatif, Dammam, and on Bahrein. Nest building and singing were actively going on. Nests were being constructed in date palm fronds about five feet off the ground. All specimens were in moult and one juvenal was collected in heavy moult. The males had enlarged gonads. The only note heard was a *Prinia*-like, "tsee, tsee, tsee." One bird, alarmed, made a rather hissing, sibilant chat-like note, flying up to a low branch from the ground, and flicking its reddish tail as it landed.

Measurements: wing ♂ 82, 83.5, ♀ 81.5; tail ♂ 62, 64, ♀ 62; culmen (3) 16 mm. Weight ♂ 21 grams.

These birds are a richer, darker brown than *familiaris* from India, Transcaspia, Kenya, and Arabia and match *syriaca* from farther to the north tolerably well in color.

Prinia gracilis anguste, subsp. nov.

Type: ♂ ad. (No. 2010, S. Dillon Ripley Coll.) collected on Bahrein Island, July 28, 1950, by S. Dillon Ripley.

Diagnosis: This race belongs to the group of Streaked Wren-Warblers with sharp black subterminal bands on the tail, unlike *lepida* and *irakensis*. It differs markedly from its nearest geographic representative *hufufae*, however, by being darker and more brownish-gray above than that form, with narrower shaft streaks. The tail feathers are similarly broad and barred as in *hufufae*. From *yemenensis* this form differs by having narrow shaft streaks on the upper surface, approximately 1 mm. in width in contrast to the streaks of 1.75—2 mm. in width of the southwest Arabian subspecies. It also seems to lack the rufous tone to the plumage of the forehead found in that population. Otherwise in general coloration the upper-parts are similar to *yemenensis*. Below, *anguste* seems to be clearer white on the throat and upper breast, however.

Measurements: wing 46, tail 60, culmen 11 mm.

Soft parts: iris buffy-yellow; bill black; legs pinkish-brown. Weight 7 grams. Gonads enlarged.

I should have hesitated to describe this single bird were its characters not so different from its geographical neighbors. It is interesting that the bird of Bahrein should be so unlike *hufufae* of the adjacent mainland. Although I searched for this species in Qatif and the coastal date gardens I failed to find it. In contrast I saw several in the date gardens on Bahrein, although the birds were shy.

Passer domesticus hufufae Ticehurst and Cheesman:

House Sparrow.

Common in the gardens and the newer oil settlements around Dhahran. A male with enlarged gonads was taken July 21. The soft parts were: iris brown, bill black, legs yellowish-brown. This bird and the swallow were the only two species seen in and around these settlements except for a solitary bewildered-looking Roller, which blundered into the backyard of a house at Abqaiq during a windstorm.

Corvus corax ruficollis: Brown-necked Raven.

An odd pair were seen along the roads leading to the different oil communities on the mainland and a pair in the desert south of Awali. They frequently perch on the telephone poles or wires. They have a single low raven-like croak.