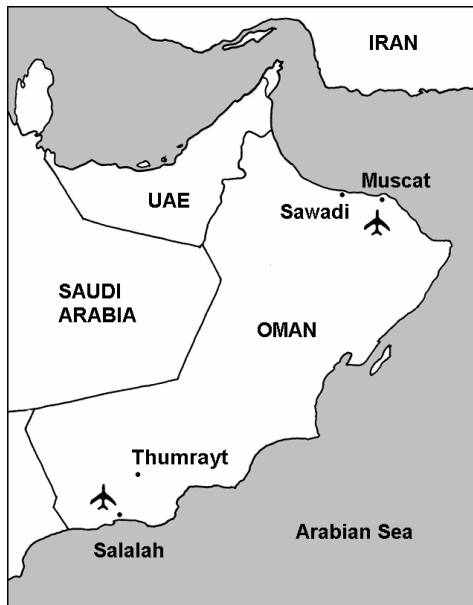
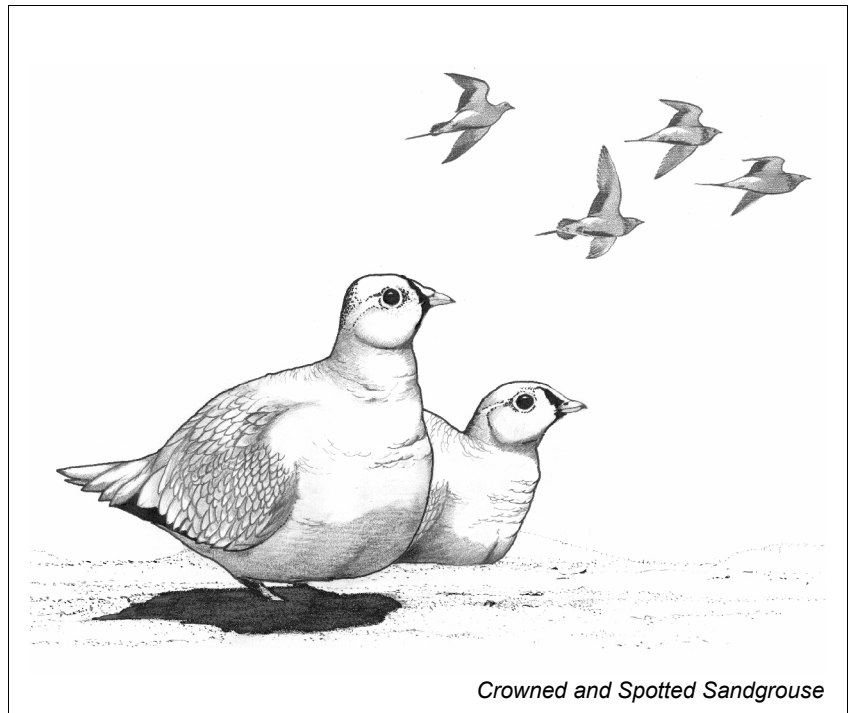


# OMAN

*where birds from Asia, Arabia and Africa meet*



Oman is a peaceful, friendly country with strong connections to the UK.



*Crowned and Spotted Sandgrouse*

It has rapidly become one of the premier birdwatching destinations in the Middle East. The bird diversity is second to none in the region and the country is full of regional specialities.

Along the north coast magnificent Great Black-headed Gulls sit proud amongst mixed flocks of Steppe and Caspian Gulls. Offshore, small colonies of Sooty Falcons occupy rocky islets. A boat trip will provide close views of dolphins and seabirds such as Persian Shearwater and Jouanin's Petrel. Irrigated grasslands host many migrant and wintering birds, which attract hunting raptors including Pallid and Montagu's Harrier. Small flocks of Sociable Plovers can be found in the crop fields.

The southern Dhofar region is influenced by the Indian monsoon, resulting in flora and fauna unique in Arabia. The birds here show both African and Arabian influences, with Bruce's Green Pigeon, African Rock Bunting and African Paradise Flycatcher, alongside Arabian Warbler, South Arabian Wheatear and, with luck, Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak. The localised Yemen Serin has become a regular sighting in the mountains here.

From Salalah we will drive deep into the desert, for a one night stay at Thumrayt, to seek out the enigmatic Grey Hypocolius, as well as Arabian and Sand Partridge, and African Collared Dove. Small drinking pools attract flocks of sandgrouse including Crowned, Spotted and Lichtenstein's.

Oman is a safe, welcoming country, if anything somewhat old-fashioned in terms of good manners and public behaviour. We always look forward to returning, and this will be our twelfth visit.

## ITINERARY

### MUSCAT

Our base in Muscat, for the first three nights, will be the Majan Hotel, situated near to the splendid Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. From here we have easy access to the best sites along the northern coast and mountains.

The verdant parks and gardens of Muscat provide a good place to start the tour and catch up with the commoner species of the area. Grey Francolin, Laughing Dove, Little Green Bee-eater, Pallid Swift, Isabelline Shrike, Purple Sunbird, African Rock Martin, and White-eared, Spectacled and Red-vented Bulbuls all occur. The Indian influence is felt by the presence of Indian Roller, Common Myna and Indian Silverbill.

One morning we will visit the old port of Muscat, with its Sooty and Slender-billed Gulls, Crested Terns and Western Reef Herons. From here we will take an inshore boat trip on the sheltered waters, where Steppe Gulls and Red-necked Phalaropes congregate around pods of feeding dolphins. Al Fahal Island is home to a colony of Sooty Falcons.

### THE DESERT AND MUDDAY OASIS

Oman is isolated from the rest of Arabia by a vast desert named the Empty Quarter. This desert encroaches into the middle of the country thereby dividing it up, roughly, into three zones: the Indian influenced north; the central desert and the African influenced south.

We will take a short flight south to Salalah then drive deep into the desert to Thumrayt, for a one night stay. The next morning we will position ourselves at a nearby desert spring. The water here attracts both Arabian and Sand Partridges. African Collared Doves call from deep in the palm groves, whilst migrant warblers flit through the trees.

This is a good place to see the attractive Nile Valley Sunbird which breeds here in small numbers.

The trees and pools at the foot of dramatic canyons attract Desert Wheatears, Eastern Black Redstarts, and Ménétries's and Asian Desert Warblers, while Hoopoe Larks often display at this time. The list of migrant birds and rarities here is amazing. Even the Grey Hypocolius has wintered recently and we have seen them on most of our visits.

Our drive back to the southern coastal region takes us through a mountain pass that is excellent for South Arabian Wheatear, Arabian Partridge and Long-billed Pipit. Our first groups of Tristram's Grackles should be seen in the frankincense trees that grow here and once provided Oman with its biggest trading resource.

### **SALALAH**

In the quiet seaside town of Salalah we will settle into the fabulous Salalah Hilton for a luxurious six night stay on the coast, with Ruppell's Weavers, Graceful Prinias and Shining Sunbirds in the gardens. Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins feed just offshore. Sightings of Ospreys are frequent, and Socotra Cormorants pass by. Brown Booby and sometimes the scarce Masked Booby can also be seen.

This region has a monsoon season, so the vegetation is quite different. Acacia and Baobab trees are found, giving the area a real African feel. African Silverbill replaces its Indian sister-species. Fan-tailed Raven is the common corvid, Verreaux's Eagle is resident and the striking African Rock Bunting is easily seen. Wooded valleys are home to Palestine Sunbird, African Paradise Flycatcher, Arabian Warbler, White-breasted White-eye and Black-crowned Tchagra. Fruiting fig trees are worth checking for the handsome Bruce's Green Pigeon. The coastal lagoons have a good range of wintering waterbirds including Ferruginous Duck, Intermediate Egret and Pheasant-tailed Jacana.

There are a couple of large farms here too, where we will look for Sociable Plover, Bimaculated Lark and Pallid Harrier, and various other migrants. Both Chestnut-bellied and Spotted Sandgrouse come to drink in the mornings, and we will visit a site where the beautiful Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse comes to drink at dusk. A small breeding population of the localised Yemen Serin has been found at a dramatic site in the hills, where Bonelli's Eagles and Striolated Buntings nest.

The sun-drenched, southern coastal wetlands are a magnet for a multitude of terns, waders, raptors and passerines, and are set against a backdrop of the splendid Dhofar Mountains. We regularly see several hundred Steppe Eagles here along with smaller numbers of Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles and Crested Honey Buzzards.

### **BATINAH COAST**

Flying back to Muscat, we will spend our final three nights on the north coast. We will visit the Ras Sawadi peninsula where the extensive beach is the winter home of Greater and Lesser Sand Plovers. Sometimes we can pick out the distinctive Terek Sandpiper amongst the more familiar species. Both Crested and Lesser Crested Terns rest up on the sand dwarfed by the 'king of gulls', the stunning Great Black-headed Gull.

Inland the scrub woodland harbours an interesting mix of resident and wintering species. The sociable Arabian Babbler lives here in small family groups amongst the low vegetation. Southern Grey Shrikes sit sentinel on the acacia trees, whilst below them Desert Lesser Whitethroats and Menétries's Warblers chatter in alarm. This is a regular wintering site for the sought after Red-tailed or Persian Wheatear.

Nearby cultivated farms hold flocks of larks and wagtails including Bimaculated and Crested Larks, White, Yellow and Citrine Wagtails. Scarcer pipits may include Buff-bellied, Blyth's or Richards Pipits as well as the commoner Red-throated. Wet areas hold less common wintering species such as White-tailed Plover and Bluethroat. Large congregations of Laughing and Collared Doves attract hunting raptors. We have regular sightings of Pallid and Montagu's Harriers as well as Steppe, Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles.

### **CLIMATE AND PACE**

Warm, sunny days are the norm, and by visiting at this time of year we avoid the very hot summer temperatures. Rain is rare at this time. The average maximum daytime temperature is around 25°C. On some days breakfast will be taken at 8am, allowing time for productive pre-breakfast walks in hotel grounds. On other days breakfast will be at 7am so that we can get into the field earlier. Basic fitness is all that is required. Short walks will be taken on level ground at a sensible pace. Full days will be spent in the field, but on hotter days we will take a siesta.

### **ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD**

Full board accommodation is provided, with three nights at the Majan Hotel in Muscat, one night at the Thumrayt Hotel, six nights at the Hilton Salalah Resort and three nights at the back at the Majan Hotel in Muscat. All hotels are of good or excellent standard, except at Thumrayt, which is simple but clean. All rooms are en suite.

### **PRICE INCLUDES .....**

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 30<sup>th</sup>, ending with breakfast on 12<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by mini-coach, internal flights and international flights.

### **WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED**

Travel insurance. Cost of obtaining a visa on arrival (£35), items of a personal nature, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

### **INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS**

Return flight from London Heathrow to Muscat using the scheduled services of Oman Air. Outbound flight departs in early morning; return arrives back early evening. Flights are also available from Manchester with Etihad Airways which fly to Muscat via Abu Dhabi.

<b>13 nights:</b>	<b>30<sup>th</sup> Oct. to 12<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2017</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>John McLoughlin</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>10 clients with one leader</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 17<sup>th</sup> July 2017):</b>	<b>£3580 per person sharing (£590 single supplement)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£3730 per person sharing</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£600 per person</b>

