Full Detailed Itinerary - Oman: Two Prized Bird Families at the Crossroads of Asia and Africa

Day 1: Arrival in Muscat

Meeting at Muscat International Airport at lunchtime, we'll take an afternoon and evening to explore the outskirts of Oman as we acclimatize and take in our first views of the Sultanate of Oman. We'll skirt the shores and a local wetland in search of shorebirds and a myriad of gulls and terns and explore city parks and the Qurm peninsula for songbirds and wintering migrants that get funneled into the few green spaces in this starkly arid land. We'll overnight near Muscat.

Day 2: Jazeerah al Fahl island to Sohar

This morning we'll take a short boat trip to the offshore island of Jazeerah al Fahl. On the short crossing, we'll likely encounter our first Persian Shearwaters and perhaps Jouanin's Petrel, as well as Osprey, Great Crested Tern and Pomarine Jaeger (Skua). The waters off of Oman are also a cetacean hotspot, and we may be lucky enough to see Indo-Pacific Humpback, Long-beaked Common, or Spinner Dolphins. As we arrive at Jazeerah al Fahl we'll marvel at the enormous colony of Sooty Falcons, interspersed with serenely gliding Red-billed Tropicbirds. This afternoon will be spent traveling northwest along the coast, stopping at a number of beaches along the way for Kentish Plover, Lesser and Greater Sand-Plovers, Terek Sandpiper, Sooty, Black-headed, Slender-billed, Caspian, Pallas's, and "Heuglin's" and "Steppe" Lesser Black-backed Gulls (potential splits), and Caspian and Lesser Crested Terns. We'll also take time to bird the inland salt flats which we'll search for Great Gray Shrike, Asian Desert Warbler, and Desert, Isabelline and Pied Wheatears. The Oriental influence at this northern end of Oman is conspicuous, and we'll likely see such eastern goodies as Indian Pond Heron, Gray Francolin, Red-wattled Lapwing, Indian Roller, Purple Sunbird, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Asian Koel and Indian Silverbill. An all-round attractive supporting cast could include Arabian Green Bee-eater, Bluethroat and White-eared Bulbul, while green and lush irrigated fields could hold common migrants such as a variety of pipits, wagtails, larks and other songbirds. The night will be spent in Sohar.

Day 3: Khatmat Milahah to Barka

This morning we will search the mangroves near the UAE border for the rare kalbaensis race of Collared Kingfisher as well as Clamorous Reed-Warbler and Sykes's Warbler, two of the other specialties in this far-flung corner. From here, heading back towards Muscat, we'll spend time in Acacia and Ghaf woodland in our search of wintering specialties, which include the handsome Variable Wheatear, Menetries's Warbler, Eastern Orphean Warbler, Black Redstart, and Isabelline and Red-tailed Shrikes. This afternoon we will arrive in Barka, our base for the next two nights.

Day 4: Al Hajar Mountains

The Al Hajar Mountains loom over the Omani coast in a series of jagged limestone ridges and endless parched wadis. We'll take two full days to explore this area and search for targets including Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse, Sand Partridge, an isolated population of Common Wood-Pigeon, Little Owl, Long-billed Pipit, White-spectacled Bulbul, Hume's Wheatear, Blue Rock-Thrush, Scrub Warbler, Arabian Babbler, Great

Gray Shrike, Desert Lark, and Striolated Bunting. We'll also look for some of the remaining few Lappet-faced Vultures and Egyptian Vultures on our travels. After dark we'll emerge into the refreshingly cool night and search for nightbirds such as the diminutive and cute Pallid Scops-Owl, but you never know what we may find in the darkness; with extraordinary luck perhaps even one of the world's best felines – the Sand Cat.

Day 5: Barka to Muscat; fly to Salalah; drive to Qitbit

This morning we'll take a short flight from Muscat to the southern city of Salalah. From here, we'll make our way deep into the heart of the superficially barren and desolate Rub al Qali, or "Empty Quarter". The name is not deceiving, this really is a land like no other, completely barren and, at first glance, lifeless. However, we will undoubtedly break our journey with stops for such desert gems as Greater Hoopoe-Lark and Cream-colored Courser, as well as a bounty of migrants at irrigated farms, before arriving at our accommodation in the remote town of Qitbit, where we will spend a single night. Here, a handful of lush oases and parched Ghaf-adorned wadis create a living heart to this barren land. We'll arrive in time to have a look around the gardens and town for wintering migrants like Common Quail, European Turtle-Dove, Common Chiffchaff, Red-breasted Flycatcher, and perhaps Nile Valley Sunbird, Asian Koel, or even Hypocolius.

Day 6: Muntasar Oasis to Thumaryt

Early this morning we'll make our way to the famous Muntasar Oasis in Wadi Mughsin, where ancient and parched Ghaf trees survive without water for years on end. Our primary reason for visiting this other-worldly spot is to watch hundreds of Spotted and Crowned Sandgrouse arriving for their morning drink at a spring. Other birds we could encounter here include Pied Wheatear, Asian Desert Warbler, Great Gray Shrike, and maybe even one of the area's resident Golden Eagles or a wandering Hypocolius. Eventually we will start to make our way toward our base for the night, Thumrayt, traversing a landscape dotted with irrigated farms. These areas of irrigation form a lush and green patchwork that is often filled with bird life, likely including large numbers of White Stork, rollers, pipits, wheatears, wagtails, and larks, including Bimaculated and Black-crowned Sparrow-Larks. We're also likely to encounter good numbers of Cream-colored Courser and Greater Hoopoe-Lark.

Day 7: Inner edge of the Rub al Qali to Salalah

We'll spend the majority of today in and around the numerous oases that lay between us and our next base, Salalah. Birds we hope to see today include Sand Partridge, White-tailed Lapwing, African Collared-Dove, Nile Valley Sunbird, and if we're very lucky perhaps even Macqueen's Bustard, which is now very scarce in Oman. We'll also hopefully add two more attractive sandgrouse to our list, Chestnut-bellied and Lichtenstein's, and enjoy a bevy of common wintering migrants. This evening we'll arrive near Salalah, our base for the next five nights.

Days 8–11: Salalah area

Situated on the Arabian Sea coast of the Dhofar region of southern Oman, Salalah sits amongst a landscape quite different to that of the north. Having felt the oriental influence in the initial days of the tour, there will now be no mistaking the African influence in this southern part of the Sultanate. White-sand, palm-fringed beaches lie against a backdrop of mottled-green 'drought deciduous woodland', punctuated by baobab and frankincense trees. We'll take a full four days to explore the area, taking in a variety of habitats as we go. We'll make a visit to the Jabal al Qara foothills a priority. Here, in what may as well be an enclave of Africa as far as the avifauna is concerned, we hope to see a mix of Afrotropical species that have spilled over the edge of the Dark Continent and onto these Arabian shores. With luck we'll find the stunning Bruce's

Green Pigeon, Dideric Cuckoo, Gray-headed Kingfisher, Black-crowned Tchagra, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Shining Sunbird, Abyssinian White-eye, Ruppell's Weaver, African Silverbill, and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. To add some contrast, we'll also search for Arabian specialties like Blackstart, Arabian Warbler, Tristram's Starling and perhaps even the scarce Arabian Grosbeak. As is the case with many mountain ranges, the Jabal al Qara holds a host of birds of prey, and we may encounter Short-toed, Booted or Bonelli's Eagles, or Eurasian Hobby. With some luck we may also find the regal Verreaux's Eagle. Adding a little European flavor, we should enjoy a range of migrants including Common Nightingale, Eurasian Nightjar, Eurasian Hoopoe, Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, and Upcher's Warbler. At night, we will also take time to look for the diminutive Arabian Scops-Owl. We'll also be sure to traverse the Jabal al Qara escarpment to reach the grasslands and wooded slopes in search of a few local specialties. We'll enjoy Arabian Wheatears on the rocky plateau before exploring an enormous limestone sinkhole in search of an isolated population of Yemen Serin, here in the only part of its range where it can safely be seen. Other new birds could include the handsome Arabian Partridge and Palestine Sunbird. Another site we'll visit is a series of brackish lagoons and creeks near Salalah, which hold a number of new species for the tour. Migrant crakes can be a big draw here, and it is one of very few places worldwide where Little, Spotted, and Baillon's Crakes can all be easy to see. Yellow Bittern is at the very edge of its breeding range here, as is Pheasant-tailed Jacana, lending an oriental vibe to the area. We'll also likely encounter a wide variety of shorebirds and waterbirds, including Lesser Flamingo and African Spoonbill, as well as a number of attractive wagtails, including Citrine, and several different subspecies of Western Yellow Wagtails. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater will add some vibrant color, and this area is known for turning up rare wanderers, which have included Cotton Pygmy-Goose, Small Pratincole, and Caspian Plover. We'll search local farms and scrubland for Namaqua Dove and Horsfield's Bushlark, and hopefully the Critically Endangered Sociable Lapwing. Following the recent closure of large dumps in northern Oman, huge numbers of birds have begun to gather around the Salalah rubbish tip. It is worth visiting for the spectacle of 500+ Steppe Eagles alone but add a supporting cast of Greater Spotted and Imperial Eagles, and large numbers of White and sometimes Abdim's Storks, and it becomes clear that this is something not to be missed. The continental shelf sits extremely close to the coast near Salalah, and it has become known as a hotspot for pelagic activity in recent years. One morning we'll take a boat trip out from Mirbat in search of offshore activity. In addition to the hoped-for Flesh-footed and Persian Shearwaters, Jouanin's Petrel, Bridled Tern, Brown Noddy, Masked and Brown Boobies, Socotra Cormorant and rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes, there is a distinct possibility of something much rarer, for example both Atlantic Petrel and Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel have both been recorded in recent times. In addition to the birds, we may also encounter Indo-Pacific Humpback, Long-beaked Common, or Risso's Dolphins, and with some luck Orca, Humpback or even Blue Whales. We'll also, of course, take advantage of the night-time opportunities here in the south. We'll make an effort to find the rare Desert Owl, Arabian Eagle-Owl, Arabian Scops-Owl, and Egyptian Nightjar, as well as a distinct possibility of Arabian Red Fox, Ruppell's Fox, or Gordon's Wildcat.

Day 12: Salalah to Muscat for Departure

After a final couple of hours birding the coast this morning, we'll take a short flight back to Muscat in the north, to connect with our flights back home.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Muscat to Al Hij & Barr al Hikman

Around midday we'll depart Muscat International Airport and make the long but well worthwhile drive to Barr al Hikman, passing through striking and varied landscapes and stopping for birds as we go. We'll make our way from the jagged mountains on the outskirts of Muscat, through the desert interior, to the idyllic Arabian shores of Barr al Hikman, where we'll base ourselves in the small town of Al Hij for two nights.

Day 2: Barr al Hikman

Barr al Hikman is a simple sandy spit on the Omani coast that is also an under-appreciated shorebird heaven. The main feature of this interesting site is the astonishing numbers of a wide variety of shorebird species, including Crab Plover (over 2000 recorded), Great Knot (up to 1000), Broad-billed Sandpiper (around 5000), Eurasian Oystercatcher (10,000+), Lesser Sand Plover (11,000+), Greater Sand Plover (4000+), Sanderling (9,000+), Little Stint (16,000+), Curlew Sandpiper (17,000+), Bar-tailed Godwit (50,000+), Common Redshank (50,000+) and records of a staggering 60,000 Dunlin, as well as a variety of other species in spectacular numbers. Other interesting waterbirds here include phenomenal gatherings of Sooty and Slender-billed Gulls, Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, and Gull-billed, White-cheeked and Saunders's Terns. Offshore we may see Persian Shearwaters and Indo-Pacific Humpback Dolphins.

Day 3: Barr al Hikman to Muscat

This morning we'll make our way back to Muscat, as always stopping for birds along the way, before checking in for our afternoon and evening flights home.

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