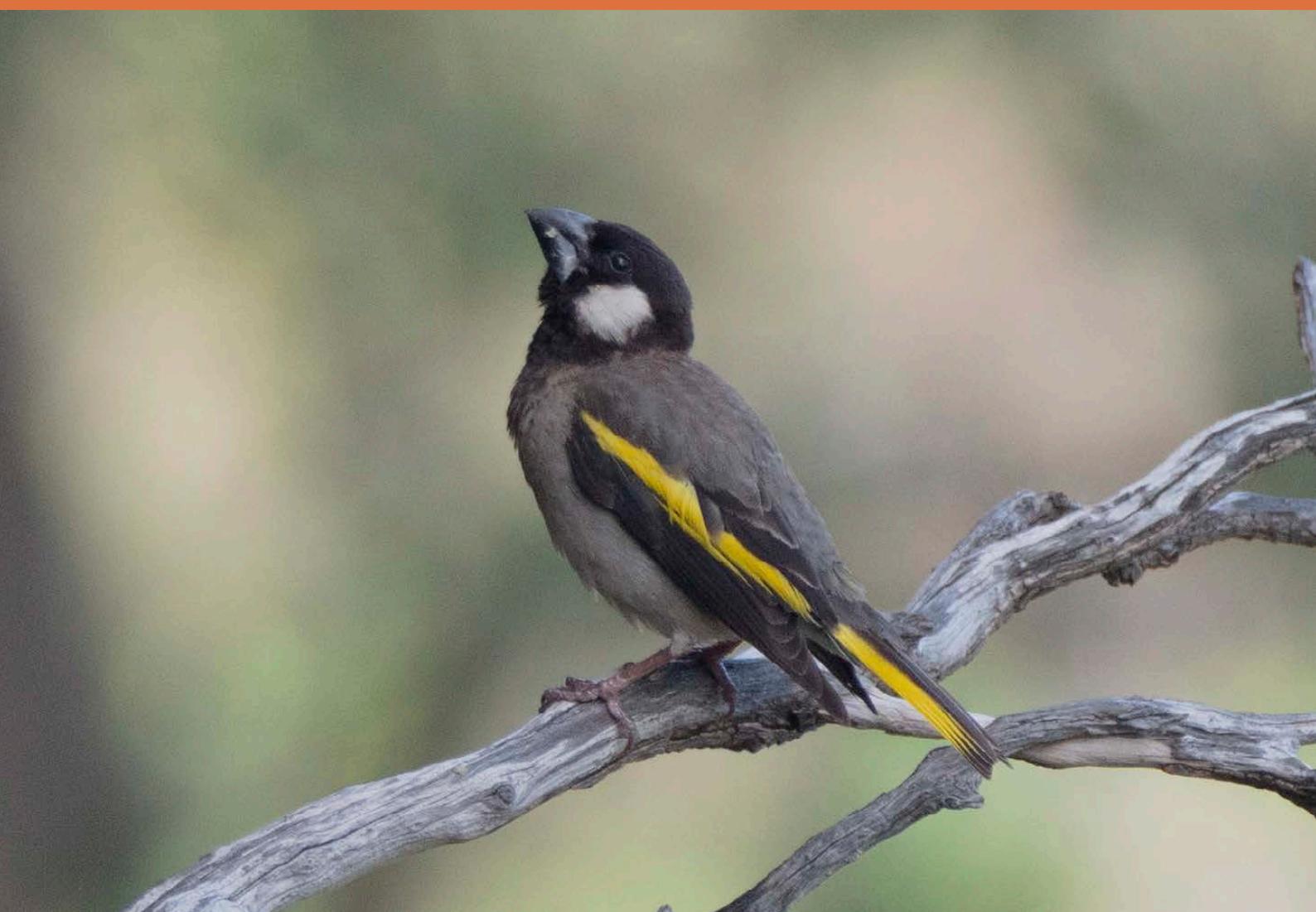




Socotra

2021 Tour Report



Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak

**Text and photographs by Michael Mills
Bird list by Nigel Redman**

TOUR SUMMARY

The iconic island of Socotra is a bucket-list destination for many nature and outdoor enthusiasts. With more than 10 endemic birds on offer, the island is of special interest to birders — although it is impressive landscapes and unusual plant life that are the main draw-card. Currently flights to and from Socotra only operate once a week from Abu Dhabi. Fortunately, from a birding perspective, seven days is the perfect amount of time to spend on the island; anything shorter would not do it justice.

This was our first trip to Socotra, and a resounding success it was. We logged just over 100 species in the week, including numerous local rarities (vagrants), although seeing the endemics and local breeding species was our main mission. We enjoyed excellent views of all breeding land-birds, a feat which has probably never been achieved by a visiting birding

group. The eleven strict endemics — Socotra Buzzard, Scops Owl, Grey Shrike, Cisticola, Warbler, White-eye, Starling, Sunbird, Sparrow, Golden-winged Grosbeak and Bunting — were the undoubtedly highlights, but we also saw specialties such as Nubian Nightjar, Forbes-Watson's Swift, Persian Shearwater and Socotra Cormorant. Our list included several African-region rarities too: Pin-tailed Snipe, Caspian Gull, Yellow Bittern, Indian Pond Heron and Citrine Wagtail. Special mention should also be made of the local population of Egyptian Vultures, which are tame and ubiquitous and a constant source of amusement during meal times across the island. Socotra is a very important stronghold for this declining species.

The pleasant weather, distinctive vegetation and varied and rugged mountain scenery made Socotra a fantastic destination for a short nature-focussed trip.

Socotra Bunting



Socotra Scops Owl

ITINERARY

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 13 Dec | Arrived on flight from Abu Dhabi. Visited the wetlands of Khor Mori and Khor Qadhab on the way from the airport to Hadibu Town. |
| 14 Dec | Full day trip to the Diksam plateau. |
| 15 Dec | Morning at Wadi Ayhaft NP. Afternoon at the wetland of Khor Sirhan and on the Qhooqa plain. |
| 16 Dec | Day trip visiting coastal scrub at Deham, Ditwah lagoon, and Qalansiyah lagoon and surrounds. Evening at Wadi Shiq, followed by night birding. |
| 17 Dec | Early morning at Khor Sirhan. Then a loop across the island visiting Wadi Zirig and Firmihin Forest on the Diksam plateau, the Noged plains, Wadi Difarhu, Qariya lagoon and Ma'abadh near Wadi Dibini. |
| 18 Dec | Early morning pelagic off Qalansiyah, followed by visits to Qalansiyah and Ditwah lagoons, Khor Sirhan and the Qhooqa plain. |
| 19 Dec | Morning in Wadi Ayhaft NP. Afternoon visiting Khor Sirhan, Wadi Shiq and Wadi Dibini. |
| 20 Dec | Depart Socotra. |

LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED (WITH THANKS TO RICHARD PORTER FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION ON THE STATUS OF MANY OF THE BIRDS WE RECORDED)

White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

One at Khor Sirhan on 15–19/12.

This species was first recorded on Socotra on 27/1/20 when a flock of 12 was found at Qariya lagoon, later moving to Khor Sirhan. By the end of June 2020, only one bird remained at Khor Sirhan, and our bird was presumably the same individual. If so, it will have spent almost two years on Socotra at the time of our observations.

Garganey *Spatula querquedula*

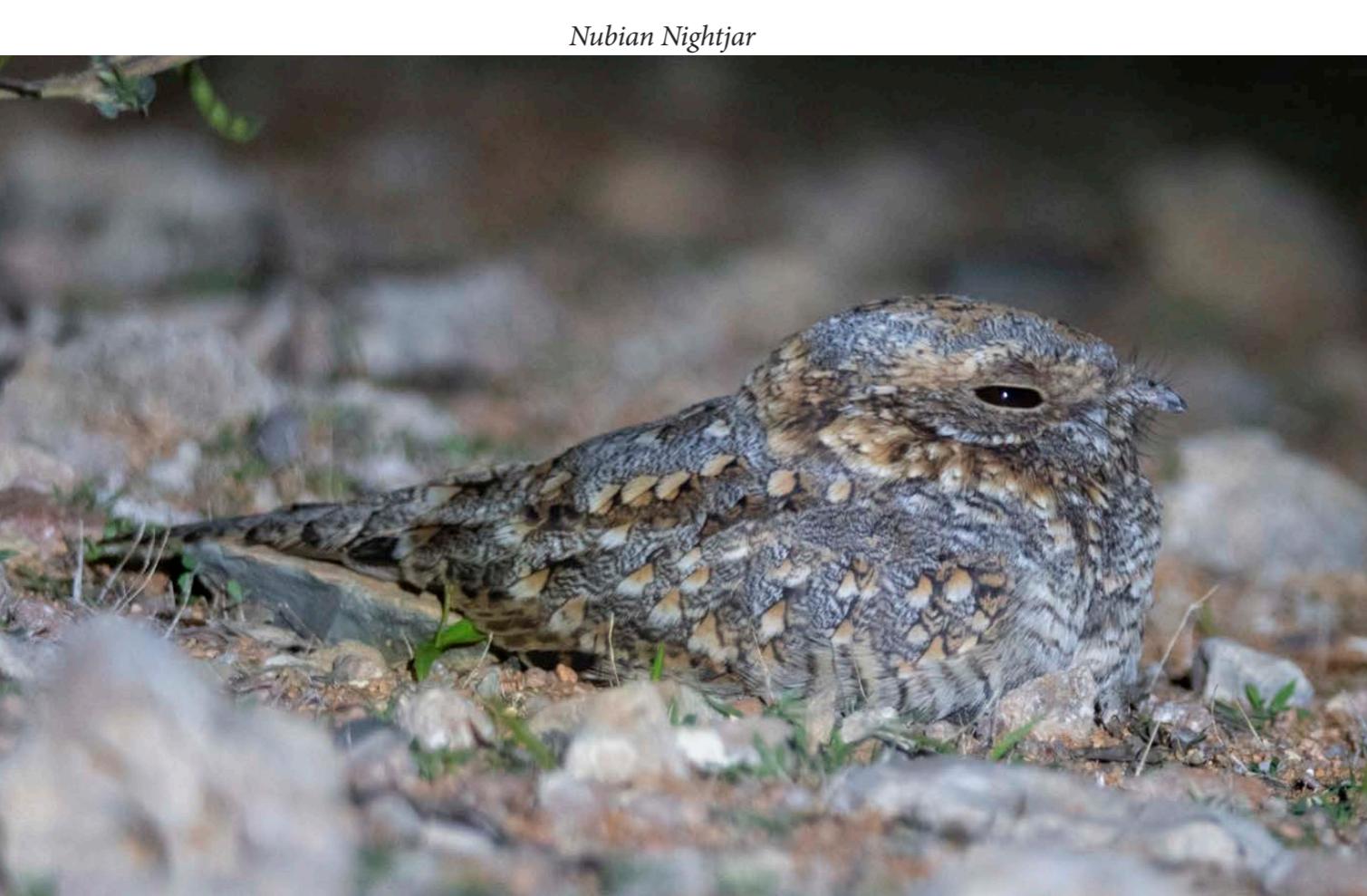
About 25 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 2 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

About 20 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 18/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 19/12.

Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope*

1 male at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12.



Nubian Nightjar

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

8 at Khor Mori on 13/12; a single male at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 8 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12; 2 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

3 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

2 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12.

Nubian Nightjar *Caprimulgus nubicus jonesi*

Endemic subspecies; one of the rarest resident birds. 1 spotlighted at night.

Forbes-Watson's Swift *Apus berliozi berliozi*

Breeding-endemic subspecies. At least 4 at dusk at Ma'abadh near Wadi Dibini, on 17/12.



Bruce's Green Pigeon

White-browed Coucal *Centropus superciliosus sokotrae*

Endemic subspecies. 2 along the north coast.

Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii ingramsi*

4 seen at night at Qhooqa plain on 16/12; 2 by the roadside during the day near Jo'oh.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia form domestica*

3 at Qalansiyah on 16/12 and 12 there on 18/12. A few others en route to Qalansiyah and in Hadiboh.

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis sokotrae*

Endemic subspecies. Commonly seen.

Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia*

12 birds seen in Wadi Ayhaft on 19/12.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus chloropus*

Up to 20 at Khor Sirhan on 15–19/12; 2 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 16/12; 4 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12; 3 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*

4 at Khor Mori on 13/12; about 35 at Khor Sirhan on 15–19/12; 10 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12. All had prominent red knobs. One bird at Khor Sirhan on 18–19/12 was building a nest, close to the road.

This species was first recorded on Socotra on 26.2.20 when no fewer than 37 were found at Qariya lagoon. Subsequently, several pairs bred successfully, and in mid-June 2020, 77 were counted at Qariya and 12 at Khor Sirhan. The nest-building we observed is likely to be the second or third breeding 'cycle' of this species on Socotra, and it seems likely that the species is now a breeding resident on the island.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra atra*

1 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12 lacked red knobs, and had pointed black feathering in front of the eye and a white trailing edge to the secondaries in flight. No Red-knobbed Coots were present at the time.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

18 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 22 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12.



Kentish Plover

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Commonly encountered at most wetlands in small numbers. Peak counts of about 30 at Khor Mori on 13/12, about 30 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 and about 30 at Ditwah and Qalansiyah lagoons on 16/12.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*

1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 and 2 there on 17/12.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

About 10 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Deham on 16/12; 1 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

6 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 5 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 2 at Deham on 16/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

4 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 2 at Wadi Shiq on 16/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 18–19/12.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

10 at Khor Mori on 13/12; at least 4 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; about 100 at Qalansiyah on 16/12; 6 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 19/2.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 6 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12; 1 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 6 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12; 2 at Ditwah lagoon on 18/12.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 and 17/12. This was the 4th record for Socotra.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

About 25 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 3 at Deham on 16/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 9 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

About 30 at Qalansiyah on 16/12.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

About 30 at Khor Mori on 13/12; about 10 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 and 17/12; 6 at Khor Sirhan on 18–19/12; 2 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12; 2 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

At least 1 at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

About 10 at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

4 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 18/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 19/12; 3 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12; 2 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Calidris falcinellus*

2 at Khor Mori on 13/12. This was the 7th record for Socotra.

Jack Snipe *Lymnocryptes minimus*

1 seen well at Khor Sirhan on 17/12, feeding with a Common Snipe. This was the 6th record for Socotra.

Pin-tailed Snipe *Gallinago stenura*

1 seen in flight at Khor Sirhan on 15/12, and another at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; up to 10 at Khor Sirhan on 15–19/12; 2 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

1 seen on the pelagic off Qalansiyah on 18/12.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Up to 10 per day at various sites on every day except 14/12, mostly singly and along the north coast.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

2 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Wadi Zirig on 17/12; 1 at Wadi Dibini on 17/12 and 2 there on 19/12.



Broad-billed Sandpiper



Cream-coloured Courser

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

4 at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Up to 3 at Khor Sirhan on 15–19/12; 1 at Wadi Zirig on 17/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12; 1 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

3 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 3 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; about 30 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12; 1 in Wadi Difarhu on 17/12; 1 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12; 40 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 18/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 19/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12; 1 at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor cursor*

12 at Qhooqa plain on 15/12; 2 en route to Qalansiyah on 16/12; 7 at Qhooqa plain at night on 16/12.

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus pileatus*

About 200 in a feeding flock on the pelagic off Qalansiyah on 18/12.

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*

2 on the beach at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 6 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12. These were the 3rd and 4th records for Socotra.

Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*

Very common on the coast, usually in flocks, with several hundred at Khor Mori on 13/12 and smaller numbers elsewhere.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

1 photographed at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Heuglin's Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini*

Very common on the coast with at least 200 at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Steppe Gull *Larus fuscus barabensis*

Several noted amongst the Heuglin's Gulls at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*

2 at Khor Mori on 13/12 and 1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*

8 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 2 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 2 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12.

Great Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*

Common on the coast, with peak counts of at least 100 at Khor Mori on 13/12 and 250 at Khor Sirhan on 19/12.

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*

Small numbers on the coast on four days, with a peak count of 20 at Khor Mori on 13/12.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

4 at Khor Mori on 13/12 and 1 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12.

Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus persicus*

A feeding flock of at least 500 birds was observed at length and at close range on the pelagic off Qalansiyah on 18/12.

Persian Shearwater





Masked Booby

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra melanops*

4 seen on the pelagic off Qalansiyah on 18/12 (three adults were seen together on the water at very close range); another was seen from Ditwah lagoon and 5 more were fishing around some fishing boats close to Hadiboh, all on 18/12.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 offshore at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 2 at Qalansiyah on 16/12; 10 birds were seen on the pelagic off Qalansiyah on 18/12 and another 5 were offshore at a roadside stop near the airport, also on 18/12; 10 were fishing offshore at Wadi Shiq and in the harbour at Hawlaf port on 19/12.

White-breasted Cormorant *Phalacrocorax lucidus*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12. Only the 2nd confirmed record for Socotra. There are more records of Great Cormorant *P. carbo* (race *sinensis*) than White-breasted (but some of the ten previous records of 'Great' Cormorants were not specifically identified).

Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*

About 50 offshore at Khor Mori on 13/12; about 40 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 2 at Qalansiyah on 16/12; 10 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 10 offshore at Qalansiyah on 18/12; 6 offshore at Khor Sirhan on 19/12.

African Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*

2 at Khor Mori and 2 at Khor Qadhab on 13/12 were almost certainly the same birds; they were seen again at Khor Qadhab on 16/12. This was the 2nd record for Socotra.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

4 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 3 at Khor Sirhan on 17–19/12.

Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*

1 at Wadi Shiq on 16/12 and 19/12.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax nycticorax*

1 at dusk at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*

At least 8 individuals in total. 1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 4 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 16/12; 1 in flight at Wadi Dibini, on 17/12; 3 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 18/12; 2 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

8 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12; 14 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 9 at Khor Sirhan on 18/12; 5 at Khor Sirhan on 19/12.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Frequent on the coast and occasional inland; up to 15 birds per day.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea purpurea*

1 immature over Qhooqa plain on 15/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12; 1 adult at Wadi Dibini on 19/12.

(Eurasian) Great Egret *Ardea alba alba*

1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

1 at Khor Mori on 13/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 and 19/12; 1 at Qalansiyah lagoon on 16/12 and 18/12; 1 at Qariya lagoon on 17/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12.

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis schistacea*

Common on the coast, with about 20 birds at Khor Mori, Khor Sirhan (coming to roost) and also at Ditwah, Qalansiyah and Qariya lagoons. Dark and white morphs were in similar numbers, but white morphs were perhaps slightly more frequent.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*

2 at Ditwah lagoon on 16/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12 and 19/12; 3 at Ditwah lagoon on 18/12; 1 at Wadi Shiq on 19/12.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

Very common throughout, with 50–200 per day.

Socotra Buzzard *Buteo socotraensis*

Endemic species. 2 on Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 2 in Wadi Ayhaft on 15/12; 2 in Wadi Zirig on 17/12; 3 in Wadi Difarhu on 17/12.

Socotra Scops Owl *Otus socotranus*

Endemic species. 4 seen well at Wadi Shiq on 16/12; 2 heard at Wadi Dibini on 17/12 and 19/12.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus archeri*

Frequent sightings, usually singly; up to 4 birds per day.

Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*

3 birds (one male and two females) at Qhooqa plain on 15/12; 1 over Wadi Shiq at dusk on 16/12 and 1 at Qhooqa plain on 18/12 were presumably birds from the group on 15/12. This was the 4th record for Socotra.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

1 at Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 1 en route to Qalansiyah on 18/12; 1 at Qalansiyah on 18/12.

Socotra Buzzard



Socotra Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor uncinatus*

Endemic species or sub-species. 5 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 2 in Wadi Ayhaft on 15/12; 1 at the grosbeak site on 16/12; 6 singles at various sites on 17/12; 2 en route to Qalansiyah on 18/12; 1 at Wadi Ayhaft on 19/12.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor pallidirostris*

1 at Qhooqa plain near Khor Sirhan on 15/12 (photographed).

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*

5 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 1 at Wadi Ayhaft on 15/12; 1 en route on 16/12; 2 on the Noged Plain on 17/12; 3 en route to Qalansiyah on 18/12; 1 en route to Wadi Ayhaft on 19/12.

Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps forbeswatsoni*

Endemic subspecies. About 50 at Qhooqa plain on 15/12; about 30 at Qalansiyah on 16/12; several other sightings of singles, pairs or small groups.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

6 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 3 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12; 2 at Qalansiyah on 18/12.

Pale Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta arabica*

About 6 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12.

Socotra Cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus*

Endemic species. About 10 at Deham on 16/12.

Socotra Warbler *Incana incana*

Endemic species and genus. 3 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 3 at Wadi Zirig on 17/12.

Socotra White-eye *Zosterops socotranus*

Endemic species. About 10 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12; 1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12; 1 at Qalansiyah on 16/12; 4 at Wadi Zirig on 17/12; 2 at Wadi Ayhaft on 19/12.

Somali Starling *Onychognathus blythii*

Common throughout, usually in pairs or small groups, with up to 50 birds per day.

Socotra Grey Shrike



Socotra Starling *Onychognathus frater*



Socotra Starling

Socotra Sparrow *Passer insularis*

Endemic species. Common throughout, in pairs or small groups, with up to 50 per day.

Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 (nominate *flava*); 1 at Khor Sirhan on 17/12 (race not determined, but different from the bird on 15/12 and possibly *lutea*).

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola citreola*

1 at Khor Sirhan on 15/12 (photographed). This was the 7th record for Socotra.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

1 on a small stream on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Common in small numbers, with up to 10 birds per day.

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

3 at Qhooqa plain on 15/12.

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis sokotrae*

Endemic sub-species. About 10 on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12; several at Deham on 16/12; many on the Diksam Plateau and Noged Plain on 17/12; small numbers elsewhere.

**Socotra Golden-winged Grosbeak
*Rhynchostruthus socotranus***

Endemic species. 1 seen and several heard in Wadi Ayhaft on 15/12; 3 seen at a roadside stop between Deham and Qalansiyah on 16/12; 3 birds seen in Wadi Ayhaft on 19/12, including a pair building a nest in a hole in the cliff-face at 200m asl.

Cinnamon-breasted Bunting *Emberiza tahapisi insularis*

Endemic sub-species. 2 singles on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12 and 2 in Wadi Ayhaft on 15/12.

Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*

Endemic species. Two pairs and a single bird showed well on the Diksam Plateau on 14/12.

Long-billed Pipit (below) and Socotra Sunbird (right)

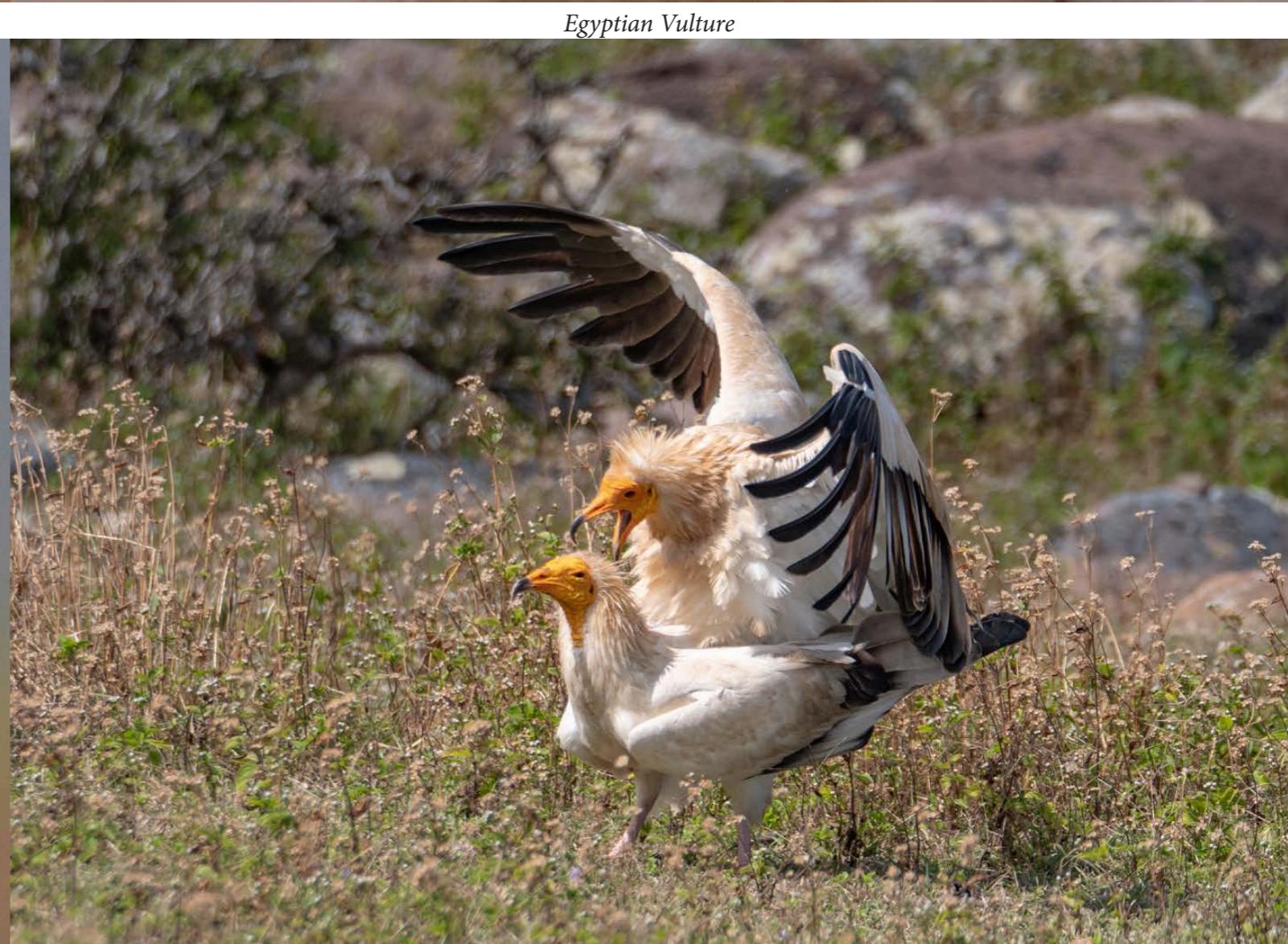




Amur Falcon male (above) and female (below)



Egyptian Vulture

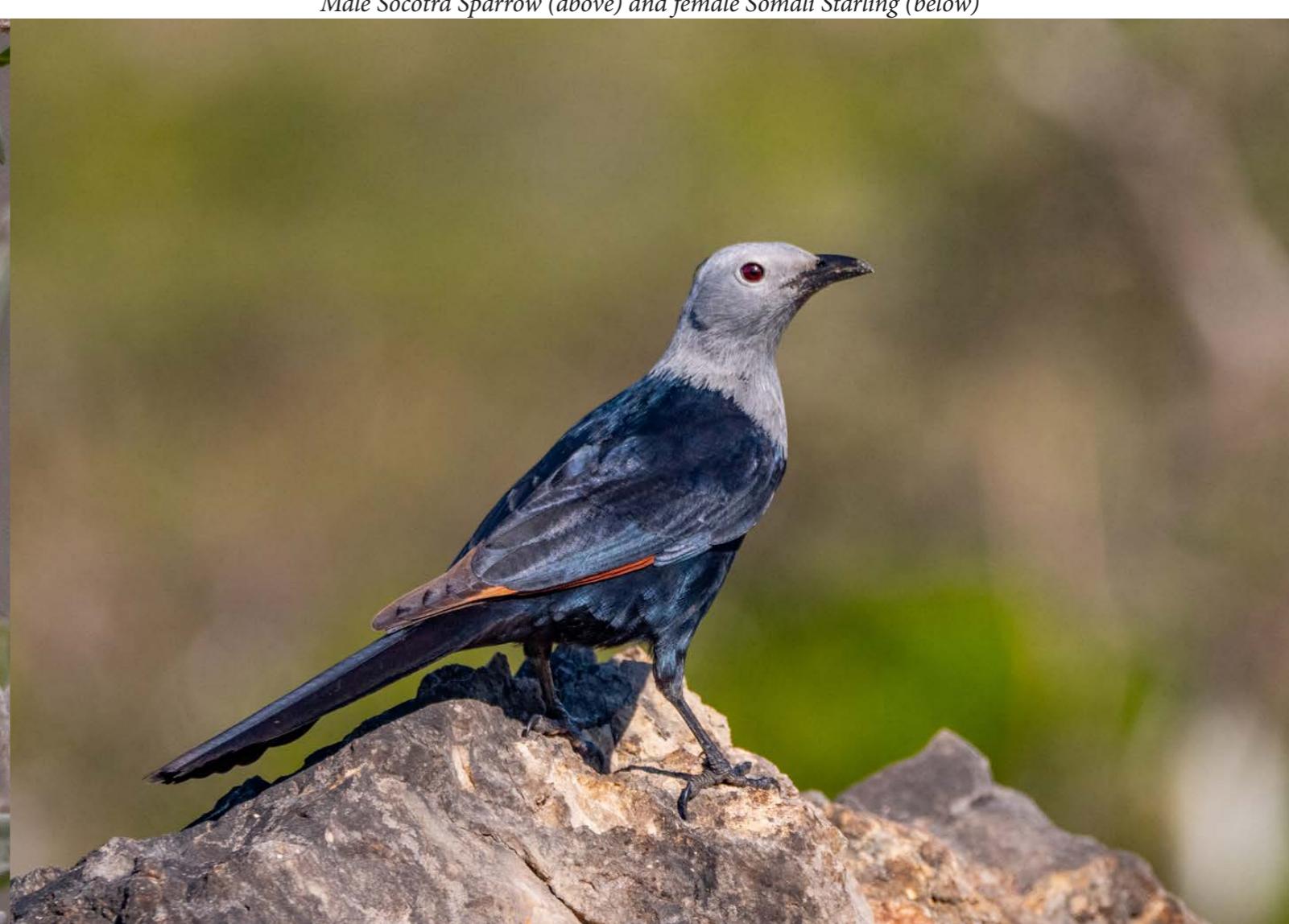




Socotra Cisticola (above) and Socotra Warbler (below)



Male Socotra Sparrow (above) and female Somali Starling (below)





African Sacred Ibis, Caspian Gull, Citrine Wagtail and Pacific Golden Plover (above)
Red-knobbed Coot, Slender-billed Gull, White-breasted Cormorant and Yellow Bittern (below)

Socotra White-eye, White-browed Coucal, White-faced Whistling Duck and Indian Pond Heron (above)
Sooty Gull, Western Reef Heron and Socotra Cormorant (below)

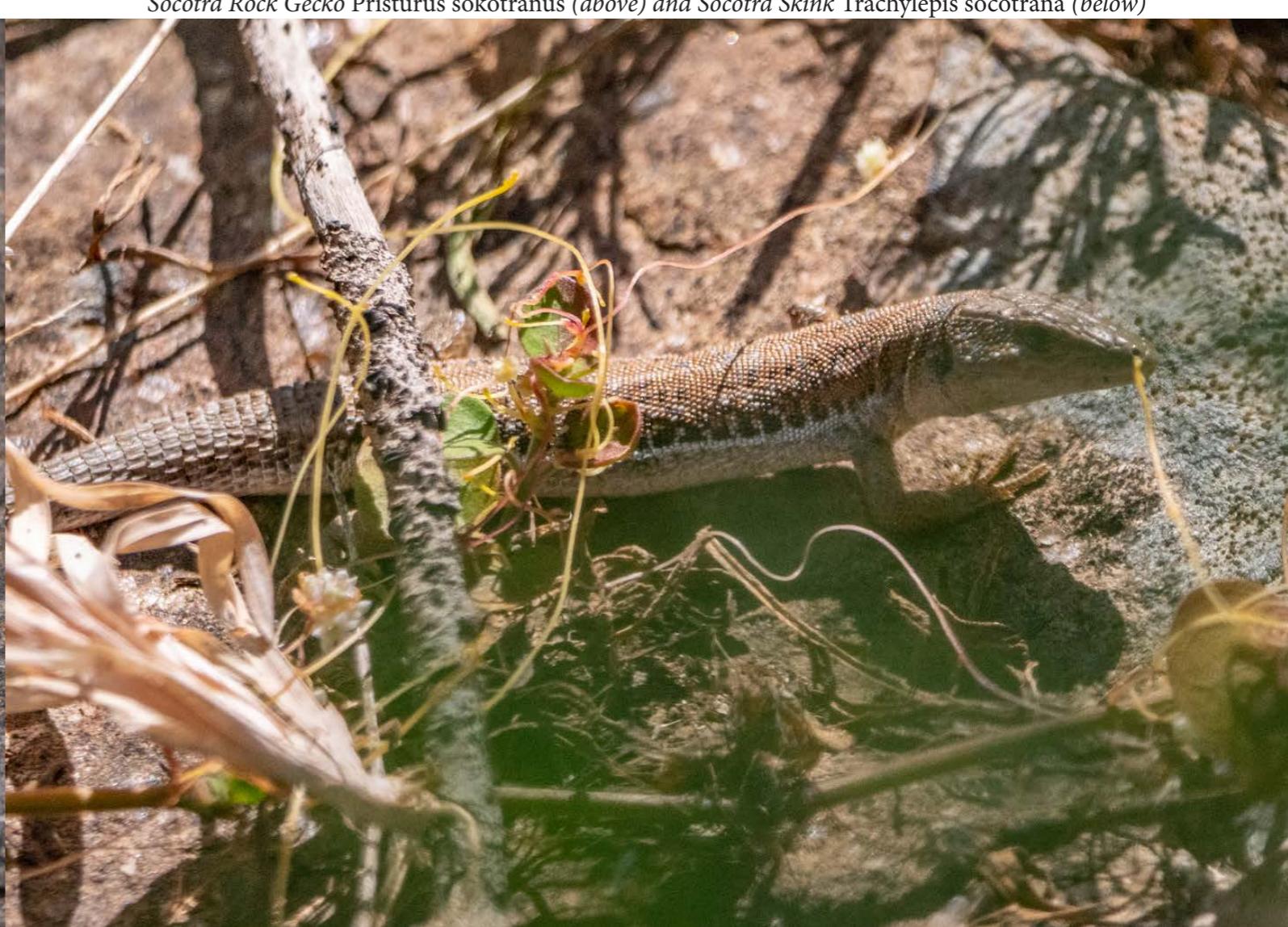
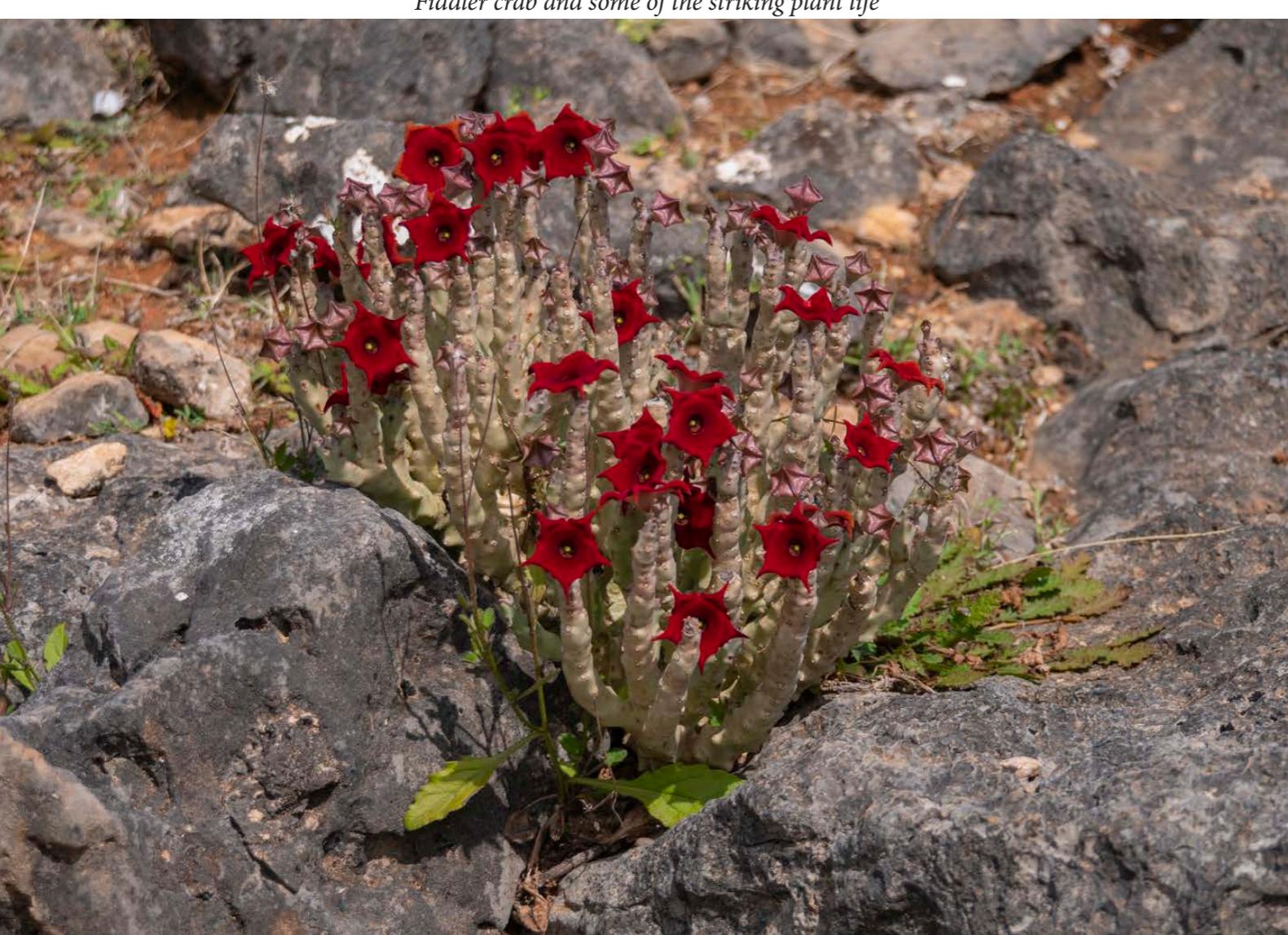




Fiddler crab and some of the striking plant life



Socotra Rock Gecko *Pristurus sokotranus* (above) and Socotra Skink *Trachylepis socotrana* (below)

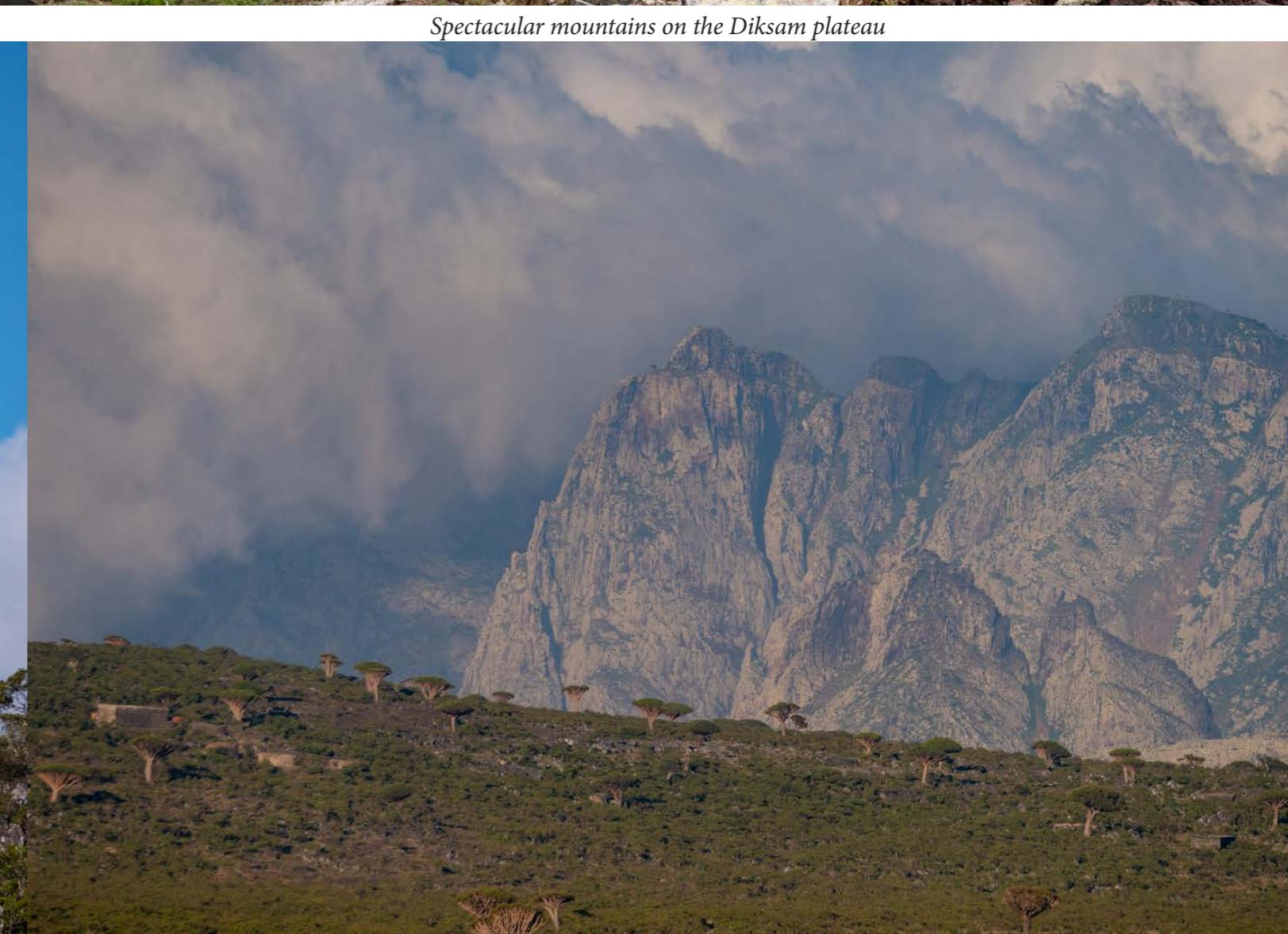
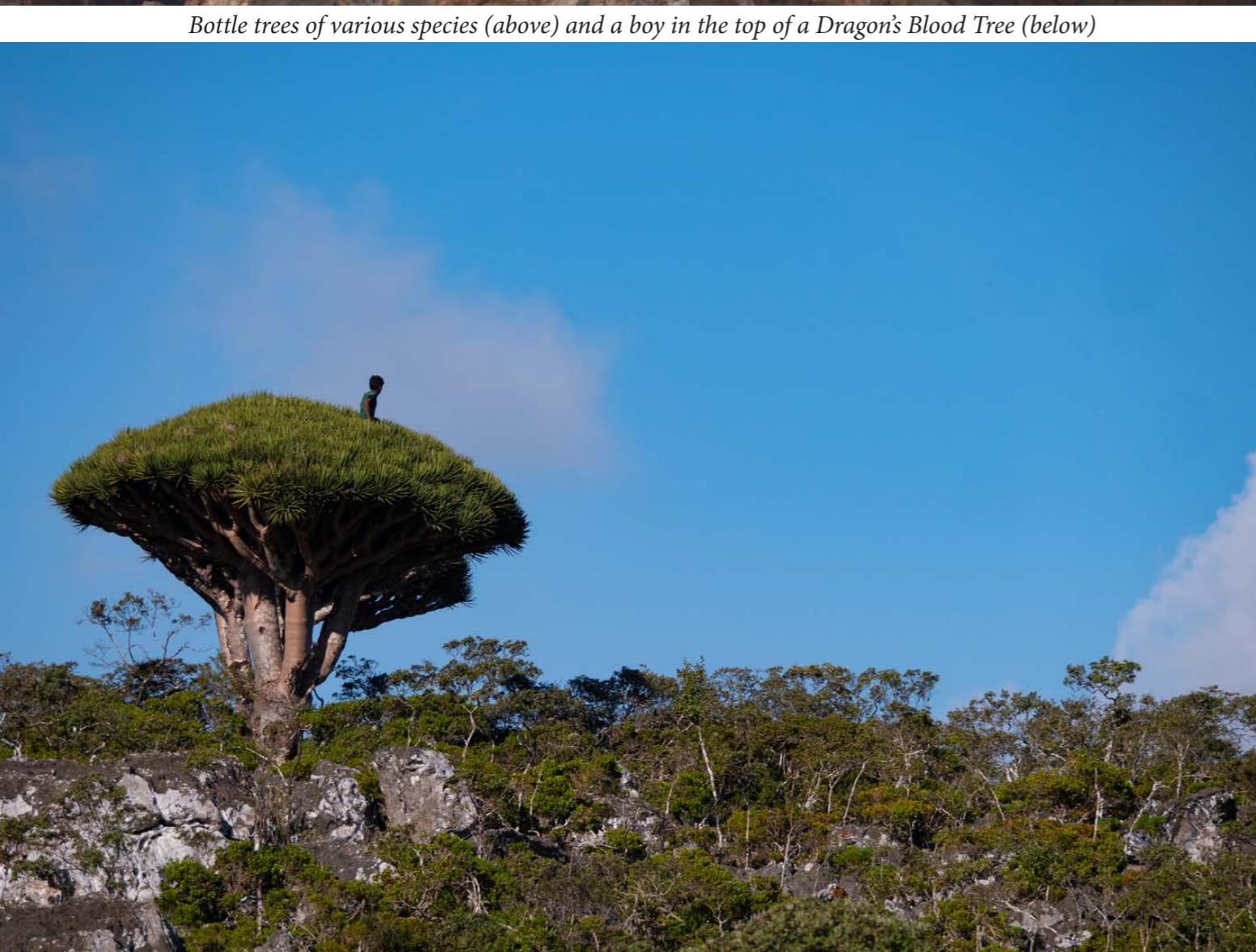




Bottle trees of various species (above) and a boy in the top of a Dragon's Blood Tree (below)



Spectacular mountains on the Diksam plateau





Picnic lunch with Egyptian Vultures (above) and a spectacular mountain pass on the east of the island (below)



Unusual plants and rugged scenery are some of the highlights of Socotra





A Dragon's Blood Tree forest (above) and scenery along the north-west coast (below)



Coastal salt bushes (above) and spectacular scenery on the Diksam plateau (below)





Dragon's Blood Trees (above and right) and enjoying the scenery of Socotra (below)

