

# First record of White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* in Saudi Arabia

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We arrived at dawn on 30 October 2009 to start bird watching at Sabkhat al-Fasl, Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The Sabkhat is a natural sabkhah (salt flat) area that has been modified with sand embankments to take sewage effluent from the nearby industrial city of Jubail. This excellent wetland site has been recognised as an Important Bird Area (Evans 1994) and its breeding birds have been documented (Meadows 2004). The site includes tall fringing *Phragmites australis* reedbeds, with several enclosed inaccessible pools. Closer to the seaward side sedges predominate and halophytic plants border the drier edges.

We arrived close to a major pipe discharge into the site. Upon driving slowly along the embankment, at c06.15 h, we had an obscured view of a medium-sized black and white waterbird within the reedbed at the opposite side of a small circular pond adjacent to the pipe discharge. One of us recognized it as a probable White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* and we decided to move our vehicle to a position that might present better views of the bird. From this more eye-level position, at c25 m range, clear views and photography were possible though we saw the bird for only about another minute before it disappeared into the reeds and did not reappear. Although the light conditions were poor, with an overcast sky, using 400 ASA camera settings produced some clear identification shots (Plates 1 & 2). The species is unmistakable (eg Porter *et al* 1996) and one of us had seen it before at Bharatpur, India.

The bird seemed to be about Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*-sized, but slightly daintier. Notable features in addition to the extensive white face and breast were yellowish legs and feet and a lemon-yellow bill with a reddish base to the upper mandible. The upperparts were dark slaty grey, with a hint of brown. A conspicuous chestnut vent was also apparent and the bird's red iris was visible even at our viewing range.

The species is largely Oriental in distribution (King *et al* 1983), ranging from India to south China and the Philippines. This first record for Saudi Arabia is significantly further



**Plate 1.** White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, 30 October 2009, Sabkhat al-Fasl, Saudi Arabia. © Philip Roberts



**Plate 2.** White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, 30 October 2009, Sabkhat al-Fasl, Saudi Arabia. © Graham R Loble

north than previous Arabian records, though it has also been recorded in Qatar. In Oman there are more than 50 records and it is considered an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor there. The United Arab Emirates has over 25 records. Its occurrence in the Arabian peninsula seems to be centred to the east, hence perhaps the lack of previous records in Saudi Arabia and just the odd record from Qatar and Yemen (J Eriksen, M Jennings pers comms).

#### REFERENCES

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