

White-faced Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna viduata* and breeding Red-knobbed Coots *Fulica cristata* on Socotra – the first records for Yemen

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Summary: This article describes multiple arrivals of White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata* and Red-knobbed Coots *Fulica cristata* on Socotra following a series of abnormal weather events, constituting the first records of these species for the archipelago and for Yemen. Several pairs of Red-knobbed Coots subsequently bred successfully. These records coincided with the arrival of several Western Baillon's Crakes *Zapornia intermedia*, a species recorded only twice previously on Socotra, which may also have bred.

Between 24 October 2019 and 10 December 2019, a cyclone, a super-cyclone and a deep depression successively hit the Somalia and north Kenyan coasts in succession and engulfed that area and Socotra with heavy rainfall. These events were accompanied by strong southerly to south-westerly winds (<https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/2019-12-05-indian-ocean-dipole-el-nino-tropical-cyclone>). Species subject to irregular rain- or food-driven pressures can erupt in movements of over 800 km, and these cyclonic events may be associated with the remarkable arrival of multiple individuals of two species new to Socotra and Yemen.

White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

On 27 January 2020, while surveying Qariya Lagoon (Fig. 1) close to the north coast of Socotra, I discovered a group of 12 ducks that were unfamiliar to me (Plates 1 & 2). They were not included in the field guide of Porter & Aspinall (2010), but they were similar in shape to the whistling ducks illustrated in that guide and I soon realised they were White-faced Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna viduata*, the first record of the species for Socotra, Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The birds remained at Qariya Lagoon in a wadi running from the lagoon near the village of Ketale, but by early March they had moved to Sirhan Lagoon close to Hadibu, Socotra's capital. At the time of submitting this paper at



Figure 1. Central northern Socotra showing the location of Qariya Lagoon and Sirhan Lagoon.



Plate 1. White-faced Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna viduata*, Qariya Lagoon, Socotra, 27 January 2020. © AS Suleiman



Plate 2. White-faced Whistling Ducks *Dendrocygna viduata*, Qariya Lagoon, Socotra, 18 February 2020. © AS Suleiman

the end of June 2020, only one bird remained at Sirhan Lagoon. The habitat occupied by the birds is illustrated in Plate 2. The Qariya Lagoon regularly attracts migratory waders and other wetland birds.

There is only one previous record of this species for the Middle East and for the OSME region, from Iraq, where at least 10 birds were recorded in the Southern Marshes on various dates between 2013 to 2017 (Salim *et al* 2020). It was not possible to conclude whether these birds had originated from captive collections or had arrived naturally, though the latter was strongly suspected.

White-headed Whistling Duck has a wide global distribution that extends over sub-Saharan Africa and large areas of South America. It is a gregarious species that in the non-breeding season can congregate in thousands in suitable wetlands (Kear 2005). When discovered on 27 January the birds appeared exhausted, suggesting they had only recently arrived on the island after a long journey. The severity of the preceding weather patterns in North East Africa and the lack of evidence of these ducks being kept in captivity in neighbouring areas of Arabia suggest that these birds arrived naturally. In December 2019 there had been much flooding due to heavy rains in North East Africa right up to the Red Sea, which would have provided suitable habitat for waterfowl further north of their usual range. Furthermore the weather systems in that area in the latter half of 2019, prior to the ducks being discovered, brought strong winds with southerly and then south-westerly components which might have driven the birds northwards towards the Horn of Africa and then Socotra. The straight-line distance from the nearest breeding area of the White-faced Whistling Duck in the Somalia/easternmost Ethiopia border region to Socotra is 900 km.



Plates 3–6. Nests of Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*, Qariya Lagoons, Socotra, 3-9 March 2020. © AS Suleiman

Red-knobbed Coot *Fulica cristata*

It is interesting to speculate on whether these same weather conditions were responsible for the arrival in late February 2020 on Socotra of no fewer than 37 Red-knobbed Coots *Fulica cristata*, a species not previously recorded in Socotra or Yemen. They were found on 26 February with Rolf Nessing. Like the White-faced Whistling Ducks, these birds were discovered on Qariya Lagoon and creek (Fig.1).

Soon after this unprecedented arrival, several pairs started to nest on the south-eastern arm of the creek and by early March seven birds were sitting on nests and one new nest was under construction. The nests were made of dead sticks of tamarisk, often with dead palm leaves and algae on the side of the nest and in its cup. Some nests were built on the old stump of a palm (Plates 3–6). Breeding was successful, and in mid-June 2020 I counted a total of 89 birds, many of them juveniles, 77 in Qariya Creek and 12 in Sirhan Lagoon.

This is only the second breeding record for the Arabian Peninsula, the first being in Oman in 2012 (Tibbett 2013); it is also a vagrant to UAE and Saudi Arabia (Porter & Aspinall 2010).

The Red-knobbed Coot is a widespread breeding bird across much of Africa, especially south of the Equator; however, it is numerous in East Africa and an isolated population occurs in northernmost Morocco and southernmost Spain (BirdLife International 2020a). The nearest breeding areas to Socotra are in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Western Baillon's Crake *Zapornia intermedia*

In April at Sirhan Lagoon I also found a number of Western Baillon's Crakes, a species recorded only twice previously on Socotra (an adult on 25 February 2006 and an unaged

bird on 5 November 2007; RF Porter in litt). I counted five birds in a small area and suspected that they had bred. If so, it would be the first breeding record for Yemen and indeed the Arabian Peninsula. The previous two records in Socotra were assumed to be migrants from a northern breeding area as the species is a widespread passage migrant in the Middle East (Porter & Aspinall 2010). However, like the Red-knobbed Coot, this crane breeds widely in Africa; it is resident in much of Ethiopia, perhaps just into northern Somalia, but the main population occurs south of central Uganda to Angola's Atlantic coast then on the eastern side south to South Africa. It also is resident on Madagascar (BirdLife International 2020b). If these Socotran birds were of African origin they may have arrived through the same weather pattern that almost certainly brought the two other species.

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