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ATLAS OF THE BREEDING BIRDS OF ARABIA: INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Introduction

The ABBA project aims to collect relevant data in order to prepare a comprehensive account of the distribution and status of bird species breeding within the Arabian Peninsula

In common with most other ornithological atlas schemes that are in progress, or have been completed in the Middle East area, the Arabian atlas has the half-degree square as its basic unit of distribution. This format has been found to be the most practical basis for large, under-recorded areas because no special maps are needed, contributors being able to work from local road maps or GPS co-ordinates. The Arabian Peninsula extends over 21 degrees of latitude and 26 degrees of longitude and as a result there are over 1100 half degree squares in the ABBA area. These squares are of relatively uniform size but the curvature of the earth does mean that at Aden an ABBA square is approximately 54 km wide and 56 km from north to south but at Kuwait a square is only about 48 km wide. The atlas squares are shown on the map at the end of these instructions in a uniform projection.

Work on the ABBA project started in 1984. Data is gathered through fieldwork by individuals and groups, taken from literature sources and also from museum specimens. As records prior to 1984 are especially valuable in the context of range and population, much attention has been given to identifying previous observers and locating unpublished records.

Advice to Potential Contributors

A valuable contribution to the atlas can be made by every ornithologists or birdwatcher resident in or visiting Arabia and by all those who have records of previous observations from the peninsula.

Each database record is built up from four main record elements: these are the species, the Breeding Evidence Code (BEC), the Square Reference and the date. There are more than 270 breeding species in Arabia and these are listed on Form 2, enclosed with these instructions. The BEC is based on the 17 point system developed by the European Ornithological Atlas Committee and now widely used by other ornithological atlas schemes. The code is slightly modified for ABBA purposes and is given below. Each atlas square has a unique Square Reference made up from the two letters from the top axis and two numerals from the left side axis. This enables easy cross-referencing to other maps the accompanying map also shows the latitude (°N) on the right and the longitude (°E) along the bottom. Note that it is the co-ordinates of the south-west corner of the square that identify the Square Reference. For example, Square LB27 is bordered on the south by 25°N and to the west by 45 ½ °E; UA25 is 24°N and 54°E; and 16 ½ °N, 41 ½ °E is HB10. Care needs to be taken with source data. Maps are usually straightforward but the increasing use of GPS (Global

Positioning by Satellite) equipment (also on some phones) has sometimes led to problems. Note that a half degree may be expressed differently depending how the GPS is set up. For example a ½ degree can be shown on a GPS, as 30' (30 minutes – there are 60 minutes in a full degree) or as .5° (half a degree decimal). Thus 24.45° N is not so far north as 24° 45' N (and would be a different square). On a GPS the minutes can be further split into seconds (") or decimals of a minute. Please be sure to make it clear which system you are using in reports.

Form 3 attached is the Observers' Report Form. Current contributors are asked to complete and return copies of Form 3 after each breeding season but many observers will only be able to report on a short visit, which is still valued. The breeding season will of course vary according to region and habitat but generally for Palearctic landbirds (the major part of northern and central Arabia) it is February to May. During this time the most useful fieldwork can be done. In some areas and for some species, breeding can occur all the year round. If observers are likely to remain in an area for any length of time it is recommended that they complete copies of Form 3 in draft each year, as information will almost certainly be updated as the season progresses. Only the highest BEC of each species square is needed actually on the Form 3 but details of nesting progress, or of other confirmed breeding occurrences of the same species in the same square, would be valued in the form of additional notes on the back of the form. A note for a single record can be as long as needed, some are over a page of text. An example of a completed Form 3 is also attached. It gives an idea of the type of extra notes that would be welcomed however the notes column can be left blank. Indeed most observers moving around only show the date and place of the record and a basic code like 'present in the breeding season' (BEC 01) or 'singing' (02) etc. Contributors may find it useful to keep copies of report forms submitted so as to avoid too much duplication in subsequent years or visits, but also to highlight which squares or species need to receive special attention in later seasons. Further notes on the completion of the report form may be found on the reverse of Form 3.

If you are unable to reproduce copies yourself of Form 3 extra forms are available on request. Please copy the papers to any friends who may be interested in the scheme. Report forms may be sent in hard copy, by fax or as email attachments. Do not send PDFs as some records need to be edited before entry on the database.

Atlas coverage

The ABBA area includes all the territories of the states of the Arabian Peninsula, including their islands and permanent oil platforms etc., in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea and Red Sea. This includes the Arabian Gulf Islands occupied by Iran since 1971, Socotra and the Abd al-Kuri Islands, and the islands of Tiran and Sinafir at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. The map attached has no political significance and it should be noted that some international boundaries are ill defined and in places disputed.

The Arabian Peninsula

Much of Arabia is arid desert but even deserts provide a rich variety of habitats. There is a rich range of other habitats including montane juniper forest, permanent watercourses and coastal mangrove swamps. In recent years a host of manmade habitats have enabled several species to breed that did not do so previously and others have been helped to extend their range through the influence of man. The avifauna is enriched further because Arabia stands at a pivotal position in respect of Old World zoogeography. The peninsula is predominantly Palearctic but there is a very strong Afrotropical influence in the south-west, whilst the east has a flavour of Oriental species. The ABBA project has added many birds to the list of breeding birds for the peninsula and will undoubtedly add more species in the future and lead to a much greater understanding of the range and occurrence of each.

Access, Co-operation and Credits

The ABBA project has involved a great many people contributing records and data over a long period. It has been a principle of the project since inception to share as much data as possible among observers and other individuals and also to groups and other organisations interested in Arabian birds. For example the project has provided information for many scientific papers by various authors and has made its database available to the *Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*, *The Birds of Africa*, *Handbook of the Birds of the World* and three Middle East fieldguides and other works in preparation. Contributors who are intending to publish their own observations can be provided with up to date details of the distribution of individual species or the birds occurring in finite areas. A close working relationship has been built up with all natural history groups active in Arabia and with their ornithological recorders, so that benefits may accrue to all parties. Information is regularly passed to such groups and individual contributors are encouraged to copy their own ABBA reports to their local group or bird recorder. All information passed on by the project does, wherever possible, credit the original observer.

The keynote of the project is therefore one of co-operation. Contributors, if they wish, can get as much information out of the scheme as they put in. Periodic summaries are published of records collected in *The Phoenix*, which also keeps contributors up to date with ornithological news and events in Arabia. Contributors may, if they wish, place any reasonable publicity embargo on their records, for example to protect the site of a rare nesting species or when they plan to publish their own work exclusively. However, undue secrecy is avoided as this can be counterproductive, for example, the publication of a species breeding outside its normal range might inspire others to seek further breeding evidence in nearby squares.

Non-bird Records!

The ABBA database also collects a range of basic data on other aspects relevant to ornithology for example, on habitats, farming practices and land use, weather/climate, feral animals and a range of conservation subjects (hunting, pollution, wildlife exploitation). Some of these subjects are coded (see Form 2) but if there is some other aspect about your site(s) which it would be useful to record, use the same forms and place your subject in the species name column, show date and describe the issue in the notes column. These notes will then be coded by the Co-ordinator and entered on the database. Please use 'BEC 99' for non-bird records.

The ABBA Breeding Evidence Code

The following Breeding Evidence Code is to be used for entries in Column 4 of Form 3.

Present

XX Highly sedentary species observed at any time (applies only to those species identified on Form 2)

0 Species observed in the breeding season.

Possibly breeding

1 Species observed in the breeding season in possible nesting habitat.

2 Singing male(s) present (or breeding calls heard) in the breeding season.

Probably breeding

3 Pair observed in suitable nesting habitat in the breeding season.

4 Permanent territory presumed through registration of territorial behaviour (song etc) on at least two different days, a week or more apart, at the same place.

5 Display and courtship (includes copulation)

6 Visiting probable nest site.

7 Agitated behaviour or anxiety calls from adults(s).

8 Brood patch on adult examined in the hand, indicating probably incubating.

9 Building nest or excavating nest-hole.

Confirmed breeding

10 Distraction display or injury feigning.

11 Used nest or eggshell found.

12 Recently fledged young (nidicolous species) or downy young (nidifugous species).

13 Adult(s) entering or leaving nest site in circumstances indicating occupied nest including high nests or nest-holes, the contents of which cannot be seen or adults(s) seen sitting on the nest.

14 Adult(s) carrying food for young or faecal sac.

15 Nest containing eggs.

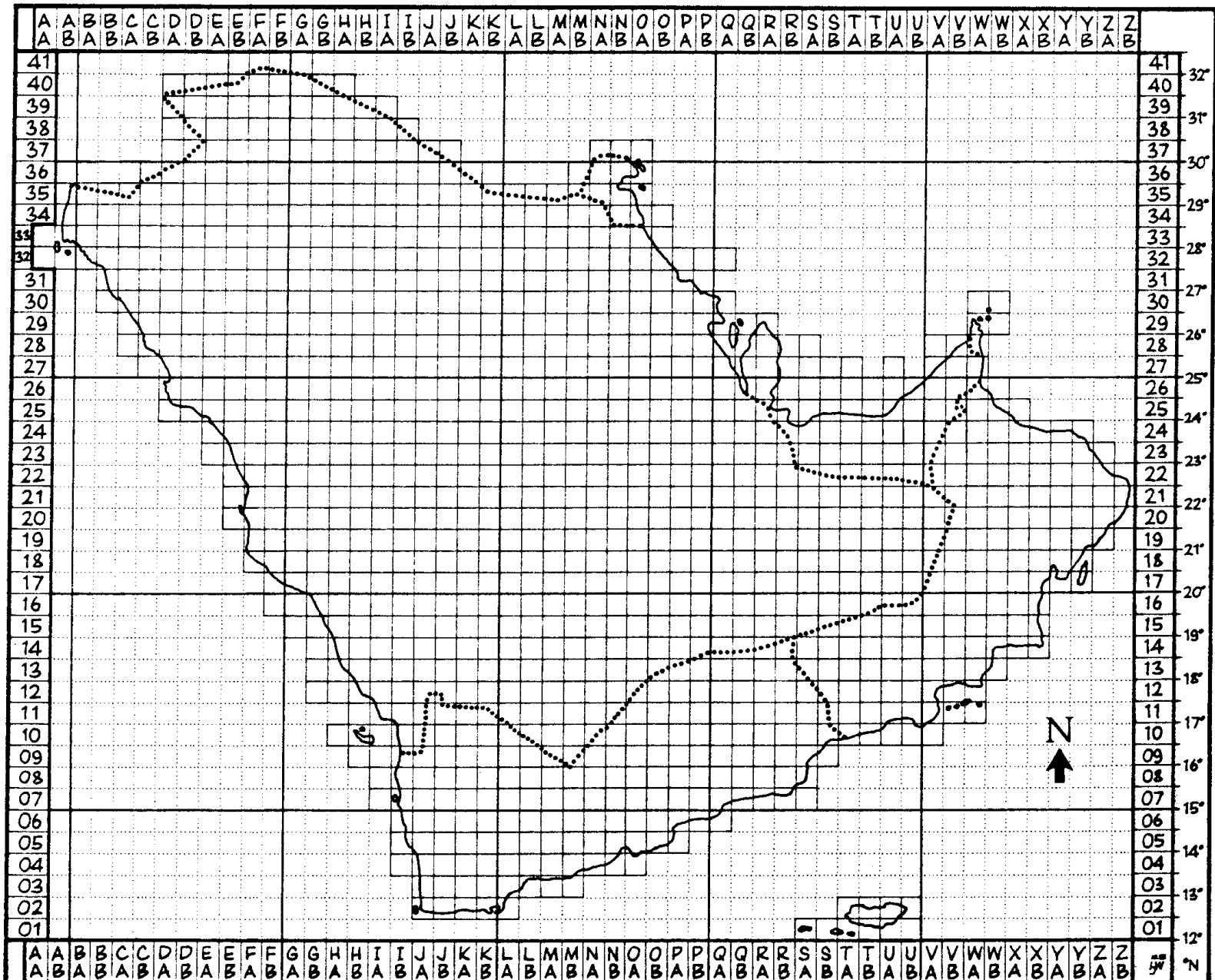
16 Nest with young seen or heard.

Special Codes

99 Bird searched for but not found in suitable habitat. (Records with BEC 99 do not show on species maps but are useful for a number of purposes).

This code should also be used for all non-bird records, e.g. on habitats, conservation or other interesting flora/fauna etc.

There are a number of other special codes only used by the Co-ordinator, for example to record reintroduced breeding or birds breeding in captivity or sheltered habitats (reserves/artificial habitats). A full list is available on request.



Finding a square To refer to a square use the two letters is the axis along the top and the two numbers in the axis on the left. These equate to the co-ordinates of the south-west corner of the square, e.g.; UA25 is the square bounded by 24°N to the south and 54°E to the west. A GPS or the largest scale map available should be consulted by contributors to identify accurately each square visited.

(It is recommended that you print off this map for reference) (NB This map is temporary and will be updated during 2011)