

Nesting, distribution and conservation of the Crab Plover, *Dromas ardeola*, in the United Arab Emirates

(Aves: Dromadidae)

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Abstract. We studied the nesting and distribution of the Crab Plover, *Dromas ardeola*, in the United Arab Emirates through regular monitoring of colonies during the breeding season and counts at other key waterbird sites throughout the country during the non-breeding season. Based on counts of active nests, we estimate 1400-1500 breeding pairs of Crab Plovers in the United Arab Emirates at the two active colonies, accounting for over 30% of the Arabian breeding population. Discovery of a newly formed colony in 2004 and abandonment of the old colony on Abu Al Abyad demonstrate the potential of expansion of colonies in other areas. With breeding confirmed at only two islands in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, from a conservation perspective this species is one of the most important breeding birds in the United Arab Emirates. Outside the breeding season, Crab Plovers congregate at few coastal sites in the country. Long-term conservation of Crab Plovers in the Emirates depends on the continued protection of the few breeding sites and urgent protection of the key sites used outside the breeding season.

Key words. Crab Plover, seabird colonies, breeding, islands, conservation, United Arab Emirates.

Introduction

Unique among waders due to its burrowing nesting habit, the Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola* Paykull, 1805) is a little-known colonial species whose breeding range is restricted to a few colonies on sandy islands or extensive coastal dunes of the north and west coastlines of the Indian Ocean region (DEL HOYO et al. 1996). Prior to the discovery of 30 nesting colonies in Eritrea (DE MARCHI et al. 2006), only nine breeding colonies were known worldwide, eight of which were in the Middle East: the largest colony of approximately 1500 pairs was reported from Umm Al Karan Island in Iran (EVANS 1994). However, more recently four nesting sites of Crab Plovers were identified in Iran, the largest with 3527 nests on Dara Island (TAYEFEH et al. 2011). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) supports two colonies: one each on Abu al Abyad and Umm Amin islands (ASPINALL 1996, RICHARDSON 1997, 2003). An estimated 4000 breeding pairs are present in Arabia at nearly 20 colonies (JENNINGS 2010). Breeding Crab Plovers have also been reported from Bubiyan Island in Kuwait (GREGORY 2005), Shagaf Island (off Masirah) in Oman (ROGERS 1988), Farasan Island in the Red Sea off Saudi Arabia (JENNINGS 1988, 2010), in the Gulf of Aden in Somalia: in addition, breeding is suspected in Sudan, Sri Lanka and northwest India (PALMES & BRIGGS 1986, URBAN et al. 1986). Crab Plovers are present in Iraq year-round, but to date no breeding has been reported. The non-breeding distribution is much more extensive, stretching from the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, south to Mozambique where it is vagrant only to KwaZulu-Natal