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Breeding of Spanish Sparrow in Bahrain

By Brendan Kavanagh, Howard King and Abdulla Al Khabi

The Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* is found from Europe and North Africa to western China and Afghanistan. This species shows complex movement patterns, some southern populations are sedentary while others are partially migratory or nomadic. North-east African birds are considered to be winter visitors from breeding populations in the east of the birds' range. Birds in the Middle East were considered to be primarily winter visitors to southern Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait and north-west Saudi Arabia (Snow & Perrins, 1998; Beaman & Madge, 1998). During the latter half of the 20th Century it began to establish itself as an irregular breeder in Arabia. It has continued to expand its range during this century with records of breeding in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates along the western coastal zone of the Arabian Gulf, while most recently two colonies were recorded from Qatar in 2007 (Jennings, in prep).

The most up date information on the status of the birds of Bahrain can be found on the website of the Bahrain Bird Recorder <http://www.hawar-islands.com/> run by HK. Up until 2004 there were only two accepted records of Spanish Sparrows. Since then two further sightings were reported, both in the valley under Riffa Fort (QB29), within 2 km of each other, one in 2005 the other in 2006.

On 11 August 2007 we caught and ringed our first Spanish Sparrow while in Badaan farm (QA29) near the west coast of Bahrain island. This bird was a juvenile male in active moult. The black barring on the breast and the chestnut brown crown were present though the first and second primaries were still unmoulted. The tail was also in active moult.

No further individuals were trapped until 2 February 2008 when four males were caught on the same ringing session. Subsequently three were caught in March, two in April and one in May. All these birds were easily identified as they were all males. None were caught in June though they were seen regularly at the farm. However three were caught on 5 July, two on 11 July, three on 15 July and three more on 18 July. These 11 birds included five juveniles and one female. In the first half of August seven more birds were caught including one adult and two juvenile females.

Spanish Sparrows have been seen consistently on the farm since February 2008. They are regularly seen in a flock amongst House Sparrows *P. domesticus* compared to which they are noticeably larger. The males are obvious and the females are becoming increasingly obvious as we are more familiar with them. They are all easily identifiable from House Sparrows when based on size, the colour and size of the bill and the colour and surface appearance of the legs. The legs of the Spanish Sparrow are neater, more in proportion to the body and not as scaly as those of the House Sparrow. In the hand the wing length is 75- 84 mm (n = 29) with juveniles slightly shorter than adults on average. Bill depth is also significantly deeper ranging from 8.2 - 9.2 (n=29) at the feather margin. House Sparrows on the other hand have wing length range 69 - 75 (n = 70) with a bill depth range 6.3 - 7.2 (n = 14). There is no overlap in bill depth and only one Spanish Sparrow had a wing length of 75 mm which is the overlap zone for this measurement. This bird was a juvenile with no active moult.

In July and August 2008 an area of mixed millet and rye grass was allowed to go to seed attracting several hundred birds. A flock of approximately 70 or more Spanish Sparrows was

present amongst several hundred House Sparrows and similar numbers of Indian Silverbills *Lonchura malabarica*. The Spanish Sparrows included adult males and females though over 50% of the birds were juvenile. This number of birds has not been recorded previously either in the farm or in Bahrain indicating that there has been an influx in July / August, supplementing the numbers previously recorded on the farm. These may be local breeding birds from neighbouring farms in the vicinity. While it is difficult to be certain it is most likely that a local breeding population exists and that this species can now be regarded as a breeding species in Bahrain.

References: ● Beaman, M & S Madge, 1998. *The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

● Jennings, M., (In prep.) Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia*.

● Snow, D & C Perrins, 1998. *The Complete Birds of the Western Palearctic on CD-ROM*. Oxford CD-ROM.

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The Brahminy Starling *Sturnus pagodarum* has taken a number of years (first record 1977) to become established in a few towns in the UAE. There are several records from isolated spots, for example, Bu Hasa (UAE) and Qitbit, Montassar, Masirah, al-Hij, Thumrait and Ras Janjari (Oman) all during September to November, which suggests seasonal wandering by individuals or post breeding dispersal.

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