

Upupidae – Hoopoe

A single species family, the Hoopoe has a striking black-tipped orange erectile crest and black, white and buff plumage. The bill is long, slender and decurved, the wings are broad and rounded, the legs are short but strong. The sexes are similar.

Hoopoe

Upupa epops

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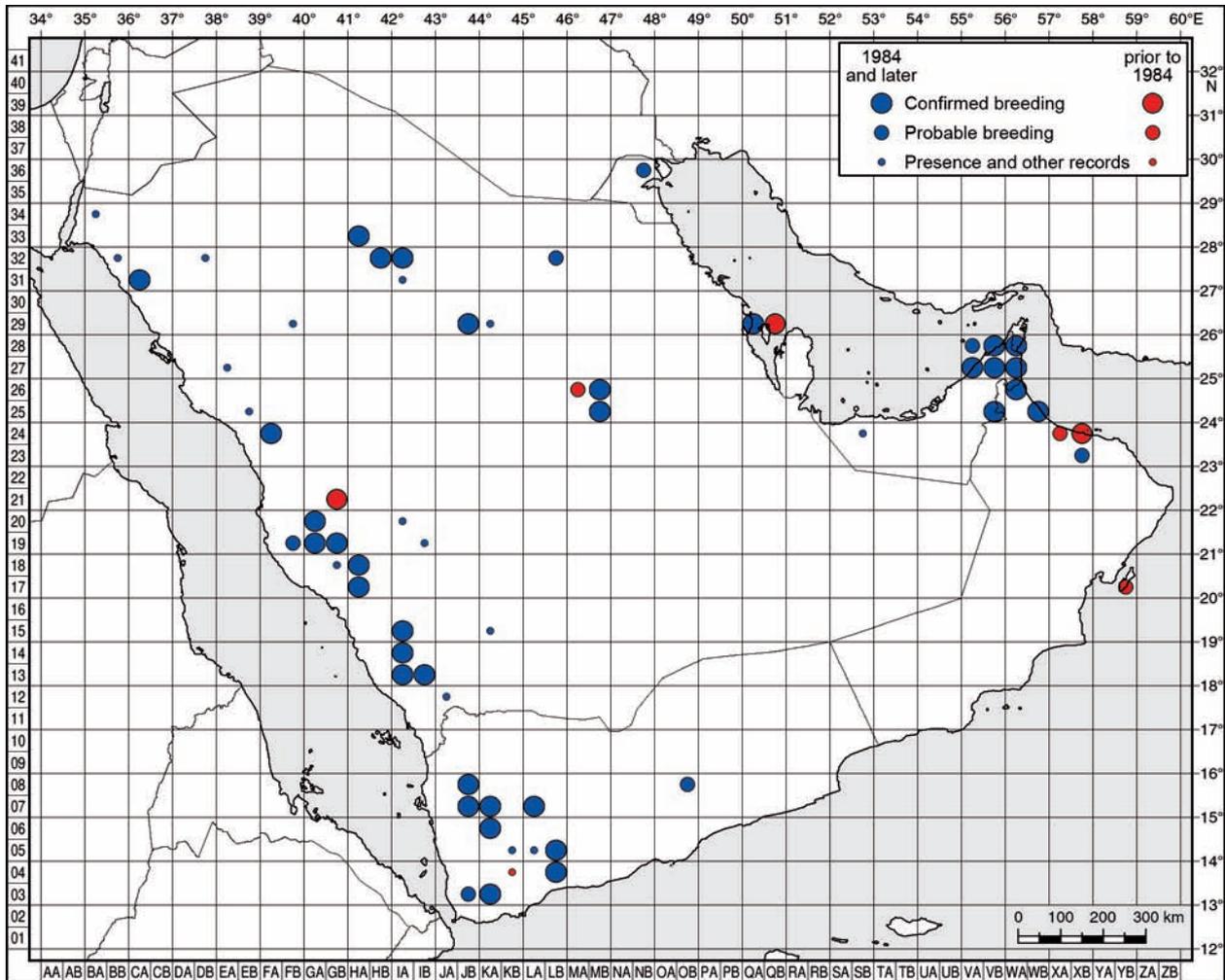
The Hoopoe is widespread in the Old World, with the breeding distribution extending from most of Africa, except the Sahara and the equatorial forest regions, and western Europe to south-east Siberia and Japan, southwards to the whole of the Indian region and South-East Asia but not Indonesia or Australasia. The northern Eurasian population is migratory, wintering mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, India and South-East Asia. The Hoopoe is regarded here as a single species with eight subspecies. The nominate subspecies, which is found from Europe to central Asia, is a common migrant in Arabia and is likely to be the breeding subspecies in eastern and central parts of the peninsula. The birds breeding in the south-west highlands appear slightly darker and may be closer to *U. e. senegalensis*, which inhabits the Sahel Zone and Somalia. The taxon *U. e. saturata* of north-east Asia (which is regarded as a synonym for the nominate subspecies) has been reported in the UAE in October and November (RICHARDSON et al. 2003).

The primary status in Arabia is that of a widespread common migrant, occurring in all states. It is also a widespread breeding bird, common in the west and south-west highlands and rather scarce elsewhere. As a migrant, it mainly passes through from February to April and from August to October. Passage is normally as individuals or small groups, but it is regularly recorded in groups of 15-20 and migration concentrations of many more are reported, once with over 70 from a Dubai park in April. The only places where it is regarded as scarce on migration are Socotra Island, where it is a vagrant, and Masira Island, where there are few autumn records and it is rare in spring. It seems to follow a

broad-front migration and may turn up in the most desolate of desert areas on passage. It has been seen coming to land at Yanbu from across the Red Sea in spring and is often recorded on board ships around Arabia, staying several hours. One migrant ringed in Ethiopia in March was recovered in Saudi Arabia in August. Increasingly, birds are wintering in all parts of Arabia, almost certainly attracted to stay by man-made habitats. Small numbers appear to have colonised parts of central and eastern Arabia, from Dhahran to the Batinah coast of northern Oman, since about the late 1960s. A large part of the latter population appears to have become resident, but others are still regarded as breeding summer visitors. It has not been confirmed to breed in either Kuwait or Qatar. It appears to be a resident of the south-west highlands from the Hijaz southwards to near Aden and possibly the Wadi Hadramaut. In order to avoid confusion between breeding range and records of migrants, the map excludes records of single birds and “pairs”, even in the breeding season, if there is no other breeding indication, but does include calling birds because the Hoopoe is not usually reported calling on migration.

The breeding stronghold is in the western highlands, where active nesting pairs near Taif have been found only 150 m apart. There is a report from the Yemen highlands of four pairs in a 3 km² site. Local concentrations are not repeated over large areas and the average population in west and central Arabia might about 1,000 pairs in each of the Atlas squares mapped, that is about 45,000 pairs. The breeding population elsewhere is small; the UAE breeding population was estimated in 2006 as 100-200 pairs or slightly more, and there is probably a similar number breeding in northern Oman. In the Dhahran area of Saudi Arabia, regular breeding of a few pairs is recorded, but breeding on Bahrain is irregular. The total population of about 46,000 pairs may well be a minimum figure, as the species' status on large irrigated farms in central Arabia is not well known and could be more than the few records suggest. All populations are probably increasing, because this species seems to prefer to exploit human-altered habitats more than natural ones.

The Hoopoe is mainly a ground feeder, probing the soil with its long bill to extract invertebrates, their larvae and pupae, from just below the surface. Throughout much of its world range, it occurs particularly in regions where traditional agricultural is practiced. This applies to Arabia, where in the



Hijaz, Asir and Yemen highlands there has been a long history of agriculture. Because of its preferred mode of feeding in slightly damp soil, it finds abundant sites all over Arabia close to human habitation, which are suitable for feeding and breeding. Both migrants and residents are most often seen in open situations such as well-watered lawns, grassed edges to roads and roundabouts, damp ground by streams, sewage lagoons and parks; woodlands are also attractive to it. One pair feeding young at a nest on an arid rocky outcrop near Dhahran visited lawns and gardens 500 m away to collect food. Mole crickets are a favourite and abound in areas with short grass. It has been seen to take a wide range of invertebrates. The stomachs of two birds collected near Jeddah contained beetles, spiders, antlion larvae, ticks, termites and seeds. One stomach was 85% full of termites. Seeds and other vegetable matter are probably not an important part of the diet. It has been seen to take locusts on the ground and in the air. In other parts of its range, small reptiles and amphibians are taken, but vertebrates are not reported from Arabia. The species can tolerate high temperatures and aridity for short periods on migration, but its preference when breeding is for rather moist environments where it has access

to open water for drinking. It probably drinks regularly and has even been noticed drinking on board a ship in the Red Sea. Although the species nests at sea level in eastern Arabia, in western Arabia the species does not breed in lowland situations, for example near to the Red Sea coast. However, it can be locally common in the adjacent foothills and the mountains. There are breeding records up to about 2,300 m in Oman, 3,000 m in Saudi Arabia and 3,500 m in Yemen.

Because of its method of feeding and its feeding habitat, it does not have any serious competitors for food resources. Once in Ras al-Khaimah, two were seen feeding harmoniously in a cattle manure area of a farm with a mixed group of birds including Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Bank Myna *A. ginginianus* and Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, all species that breed locally. It may need to compete for nest places with other species, including those just mentioned. The Common Myna has been observed possibly harassing a pair of nesting Hoopoes in the UAE. One tree nest in the Hijaz may have been an old Arabian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos dorae* nest.

The Hoopoe is a slow-flying and noticeable species, and perhaps because of this it has figured in the prey remains of