

# Birds of Somalia: new records, range extensions and observations from Somaliland

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## Summary

Due to recent political instability and unrest across the Horn of Africa region, Somaliland (the northwest sector of Somalia) is ornithologically little-known. This is despite it being a peaceful and stable state, and its avifauna being summarized in the recently-published *Birds of the Horn of Africa* (Redman *et al.* 2009). We present new information on the ranges and dates of occurrence for 71 species in Somaliland, based on our visit from 17 to 31 May 2010. These include three species not recorded before from Somaliland, namely Von der Decken's Hornbill *Tockus deckeni*, Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* and Pale Flycatcher *Bradornis pallidus*.

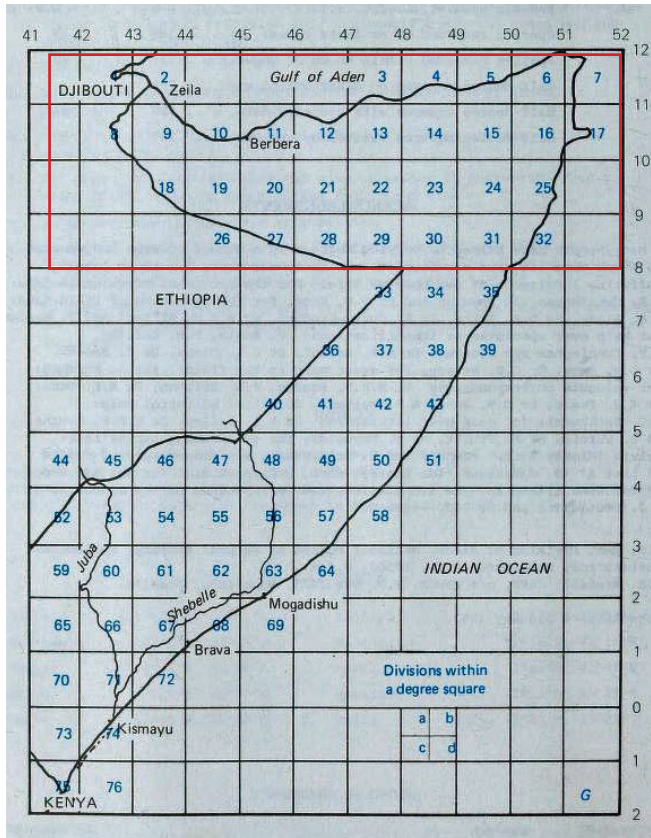
## Introduction

Shortly after independence, in 1960, the former colonial regions of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland were amalgamated into a single country called the Somali Republic (hereafter Somalia), with its capital as Muqdisho. Following the breakdown of governance of Somalia in 1991, a prolonged and on-going period of conflict ensued in the previous Italian sector of the country (hereafter southern Somalia), making the Horn of Africa region unsafe and consequently little-visited. The previously-British territory located in the northwest of Somalia (hereafter Somaliland) declared independence from Somalia in that same year and is now relatively peaceful and stable, with its own government, capital (Hargeysa) and democratic election process that saw a peaceful change of presidential power in 2010. Although not internationally recognized as being independent from Somalia, Somaliland operates as an independent state, and this stability has allowed the first recent visits by ornithologists and birders.

Prior to the onset of civil unrest in the 1990s, numerous ornithological visits to Somalia resulted in the culmination of Ash & Miskell's (1998) comprehensive atlas *Birds of Somalia* and contributed to the excellent new field guide *Birds of the Horn of Africa* (Redman *et al.* 2009). However, our two-week-long visit to Somaliland in 2010 revealed that even during such a short period it was possible to add substantially to the knowledge of this region. Here we present our general findings, which include new records, range extensions, new dates of observation for migratory species and observations of rare species. We have already highlighted the endemic and range-restricted avifauna and birding potential of Somaliland (Cohen *et al.* 2011) and are preparing a manuscript describing vocalizations of birds from the region (Mills & Cohen, in prep.).

For consistency, we discuss our findings with direct reference to Ash & Miskell (1998), using the same half-degree grid square naming procedure (a number and let-

ter, emboldened in the text; Fig. 1) and all discussion herein is with reference to Ash & Miskell (1998) unless otherwise stated. We also follow the species order of Ash & Miskell (1998), although we use the more updated taxonomy and nomenclature of Gill & Donkster (2008). Wherever possible we use the 'modern Somali' place names of locations as given in Ash & Miskell (1998), although not all sites that we visited are listed in their gazetteer; these sites are accompanied by geographic co-ordinates and altitude on first mention.



**Figure 1.** Map of Somalia showing the half degree grid system, reproduced from Ash & Miskell 1983. The area of study is highlighted within the red rectangle.

Our visit to Somaliland from 17 to 31 May 2010 coincided with the main rains and peak bird breeding season (Ash & Miskell 1998). We entered Somaliland overland from Djibouti, crossing the border at Lawyado (11.460° N, 43.258° E, 5 m; 2c) on 17 May and travelling along the coast to Saylac (2c). From here we travelled inland, south and east to Hargeysa (19a) on 18 May, crossing the Geriyaad plains (9c) en route and climbing up to the plateau. After this we first made a detour westwards to the plains surrounding the Ethiopian-border town of Tog Wajaale (18a), on 19 May. From Hargeysa we headed north-east on 20 May for c. 50 km to some rocky hills here called 'Beira Hills' (9.74° N, 44.50° E, 1150 m; 20b) before continuing east to Burco (20b). From Burco we travelled northeast to Ceerigaabo (13a) and the escarpment at Daalo (13a) on 21 to 22 May, crossing en route the Ban Cade plains (9.52° N, 46.98° E, 795 m; 21b) near Garadag (21d). At Daalo (23–24 May) we visited various sites along the top of the escarpment and travelled down the escarpment and on to the coastal plain

towards Maydh (3c), but turned c. 22 km southeast of Maydh at 10.895° N, 47.286° E (320 m; 13a). From Daalo/Ceerigaabo we retraced our steps to Burco on 25 May, before detouring to the southeast towards the Buuhoodle (28c) area on the Ethiopian border (26–27 May). We turned c. 40 km north of Buuhoodle, and observed birds for 24 h on the red sands 10–25 km north of Qorulugad (8.55° N, 46.23° E, 840 m; 28a). The final section of our journey saw us return to Burco and on 28 May visit the Aroori plains (20c), about 25 km to the southwest of Burco, before continuing to Berbera (11c) and Hargeysa, pausing c. 17 km southeast of Berbera near Busti (11c). On 29 and 30 May we again visited the plains of Tog Wajaale (18a) to search for Archer's Lark *Heteromirafra archeri* (Spottiswoode *et al.* 2013, Mills *et al.* in prep.). Finally, on 31 May we visited the Qorladey plains (9.13° N, 44.18° E, 1 200 m; 19c) c. 50 km to the south of Hargeysa, before returning to Djibouti by air.

### Notes on species

#### **Somali Ostrich** *Struthio molybdophanes*

One female was seen on the Geriyaad plains (9c) on 18 May, a new square within the previously-known range.

#### **African Spoonbill** *Platalea alba*

Two were seen at a wetland near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 29 May, a new square, with the only other record from Somaliland from 19a. However, it is common in southern Somalia.

#### **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus*

One was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square and the furthest east record for Somaliland, the nearest record coming from the northwest of this in square 20c. This appears to be the first record for May, anywhere in Somalia.

#### **Scissor-tailed Kite** *Chelictinia riocourii*

Two were seen on the plains c. 5 km south-west of Ceel Afweyn (22a) on 25 May, a new square.

#### **Short-toed Snake Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus*

One was seen and photographed near Busti (11c) on 28 May, and constitutes a new record for Somalia (Cohen *et al.* in prep.). It has been recorded subsequently (N. Borrow, *in litt.*; N. Redman, *in litt.*).

#### **Black-chested Snake Eagle** *Circaetus pectoralis*

One was seen c. 47 km north-east of Garadag in square 22a on 22 May, a new square.

#### **Bonelli's Eagle** *Aquila fasciata*

A pair was observed and photographed at Daalo in square 13a on 22 May, a new record for Somalia (Cohen *et al.* in prep.).

#### **Gabar Goshawk** *Micronisus gabar*

One was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square although it had been recorded immediately to the south (28b).

#### **Greater Kestrel** *Falco rupicoloides*

One was seen on the Ban Cade plains (21b) near Garadag on 22 May, a new square, although it had been recorded in adjacent squares to the east (22a) and south (21d).

**Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor*

One perched bird was seen c. 9 km south-west of Burco in square 20c on 21 May. Only the 14th record for Somalia and the 10th for Somaliland.

**Eurasian Hobby** *Falco subbuteo*

One was photographed in the Daalo area (13a) on 23 May, a new square.

**Orange River Francolin** *Scleroptila levaillantoides lorti*

These rare francolins were recorded on two consecutive days (22–23 May) near Daalo (13a). This taxon is confined to Somaliland and adjacent northeast Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009).

**Yellow-necked Spurfowl** *Pternistis leucoscepus*

A few were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, a new square, although recorded from the adjacent squares to the south (28b) and east (28c).

**Kittlitz's Plover** *Charadrius pecuarius*

Two were seen on the plains near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19 May. This constitutes the first inland record for Somaliland and a new square, and only the fourth record for Somaliland, although it is common in southern Somalia.

**Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus*

One was seen on the plains near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19 May. This is apparently the first record from May, although there is a single June record.

**Spur-winged Lapwing** *Vanellus spinosus*

Birds were seen along the coast near Saylac (2c) on 17 May and in the Tog Wajaale area (18a) on 19 May. The first record is new for the square, and these constitute the seventh and eight records for Somaliland.

**Black-winged Lapwing** *Vanellus melanopterus*

A total of at least 10 birds was seen on the plains near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19, 29 and 30 May, and another one was seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May. This is a rare bird in Somaliland, with only three previous records. The last record is new for the square.

**Emerald-spotted Wood Dove** *Turtur chalcospilos*

At least one bird was heard below Daalo (13a) on 23 May, a new square for the species.

**Mourning Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decipiens*

We saw and heard several in the area surround Burco (20b) on 20 and 28 May, a new square for the species and east of the previous range.

**Red-bellied Parrot** *Poicephalus rufiventris*

Recorded on both 26 and 27 May in the Qorulugad (28a) area, a new square, although recorded in the adjacent square to the northwest (20d).

**White-bellied Go-away-bird** *Corythaixoides leucogaster*

A few were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, a new square, although recorded immediately to the north (21c) and northwest (20d).

**Jacobin Cuckoo** *Clamator jacobinus*

Recorded in the Qorulugad (28a) area on both 26 and 27 May, a new square (28a), although recorded from the square to the east (28b).

**Diederik Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx caprius*

Its distinctive call was heard in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square although recorded from the square to the east (28b).

**Pearl-spotted Owlet** *Glaucidium perlatum*

Two were seen in a termite mound in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 May, in addition to similar sightings of Little Owl *Athene noctua* in the same area. This is a new square for the species, previously recorded only further west in Somaliland.

**Little Owl** *Athene noctua*

Two were seen along the roadside c. 15 km south-west of Ceerigaabo (13a) on 22 May and still in the same square as Ceerigaabo. This is a new square for the species.

**Donaldson Smith's Nightjar** *Caprimulgus donaldsoni*

Seen and heard in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May. This is a new square, although recorded from the square to the south (28c).

**White-rumped Swift** *Apus caffer*

One was seen near Daalo (13a) on 22 May, a new square to the west of the previous two records in Somaliland. This constitutes only the third record for Somaliland and the eighth for Somalia.

**Blue-naped Mousebird** *Urocolius macrourus*

The distinctive call was heard in the Tog Wajaale (18a) area on 19 May, a new square, although previously recorded from those immediately east (18b) and south (18c).

**Narina Trogon** *Apaloderma narina*

One was heard calling from a forested gorge on the Daalo escarpment (13a) on 23 May, a new square, although it had previously been recorded from the escarpment to the west and east of here. It is rare in Somaliland.

**Little Bee-eater** *Merops pusillus*

A couple were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 May, a new square.

**Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops persicus*

A group of c. 10 birds was seen on 18 May near Saylac. This record comes from marginally outside of the period 26 April–12 May reported for Somaliland.

**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus*

Two were seen flying over the plains near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19 May, slightly outside the northward passage dates of 17 April to 14 May.

**Von der Decken's Hornbill** *Tockus deckeni*

One was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, perhaps the first record for Somaliland and a long way west of the only other records in northern Somalia. It is, however, widespread in southern Somalia.

**Somali Lark** *Mirafraga somalica*

Seen at various places from c. 17–43 km north-east of Garadag in squares 21b and 22a on 22 May, both new squares for the species but from within the known range.

**Blanford's Lark** *Calandrella blanfordi*

A few were seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May, a new square and the furthest west record to date.



**Thekla Lark** *Galerida theklae*

At least one was seen and heard on the Ban Cade plains (21b) on 22 May, a new square for the species.

**Golden Pipit** *Tmetothylacus tenellus*

At least four full-plumaged males were seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May, a new square.

**Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris*

Large numbers (probably more than 30) were seen in display on the plains c. 5 km southwest of Ceel Afweyn (22a) on 25 May, a new square for the species, and on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May. These records suggesting that the species is a regular and widespread breeder, with display activity previously overlooked.

**White-browed Scrub Robin** *Erythropygia leucophrys*

Common in the Qorlugad (28a) area on 26 May and 27 May; a new square for the species, although recorded previously from the square to the east (28b).

**Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin** *Erythropygia galactotes*

A bird was observed in full song below the Daalo escarpment at c. 330 m altitude (13a) on 24 May, which constitutes a new square within the previously-documented range.

**Somali Wheatear** *Oenanthe phillipsi*

Seen on both 26 and 27 May in the Qorlugad (28a) area, a new square for the species, although recorded immediately to the north (21c) and east (28b).

**Red-breasted Wheatear** *Oenanthe bottae*

One was seen and photographed on the plains just to the west of Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19 May, a new record for Somalia (Cohen & Mills, in prep.)

**Blackstart** *Oenanthe melanura*

One was active around a deep erosion gully on the Ban Cade plains (21b) on 22 May, a new square.

**Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

One was seen in a small wetland en route from Hargeisa to Tog Wajaale, c. 2 km east of Gabiley (18b) on 19 May, a new square, although recorded immediately to the west (18a). There are few records, with only 20 previously for Somalia.

**Zitting Cisticola** *Cisticola juncidis*

Four and then one were recorded (heard and seen) on the plains near Tog Wajaale (18a) on 19 and 29 May, respectively, and at least one other was seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May, alongside Desert Cisticola *Cisticola aridulus*. These appear to be the first records for Somaliland, although the species has been recorded in southern Somalia along the Webi Shabeelle River (N. Borrow, *in litt.*; N. Redman, *in litt.*).

**Desert Cisticola** *Cisticola aridulus*

This species was heard in display on the plains c. 5 km southeast of Ceel Afweyn (22a) on 25 May and seen and heard on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May. Both squares are new for the species.

**Yellow-breasted Apalis** *Apalis flavida viridiceps*

At least six birds were seen in the Qorlugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, a new square for the species.

**Grey Wren-Warbler** *Calamonastes simplex*

The species was quite vocal in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, where at least four were also seen. This is a new square, although it has been recorded immediately to the north (21c) and east (28b).

**Yellow-vented Eremomela** *Eremomela flavicrissalis*

Four were seen in dense thickets in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square for the species, although it had been recorded immediately to the south (28c).

**Northern Crombec** *Syloietta brachyura*

Two singles were seen in bush on the escarpment in the Daalo area (13a) on 23 and 24 May; this is a new square for the species.

**Philippa's Crombec** *Syloietta philippae*

We had two different sightings totalling four birds c. 13–14 km east of Inaafmadow (9.148° N, 45.950° E, 870 m) in square 21a, a new square for the species. It was previously recorded from only three other squares in Somaliland.

**Arabian Warbler** *Sylvia leucomelaena*

Two were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square for the species, although it has been recorded immediately to the north (21c).

**Pale Flycatcher** *Bradornis pallidus*

In the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May we found several of these birds. This constitutes a new record for the country with all previous records coming from the south of Somalia. In order to rule out other species of flycatcher, we exhibit a recording of the vocalizations made by these birds, which can be downloaded from [www.birds-somalia.org/downloads](http://www.birds-somalia.org/downloads) or requested from the authors via email. Further details will be published elsewhere (Cohen & Mills, in prep.)

**Pygmy Batis** *Batis perkeo*

Two were seen and heard in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May; a new square for the species, although it had been recorded immediately to the east (28b). This is only the second square in Somaliland from which it has been recorded.

**Scaly Chatterer** *Turdoides aylmeri*

Two groups totalling at least 8 birds were found in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May; a new square for the species, although had been recorded immediately to the northwest (20d).

**Acacia Tit** *Parus thruppi*

One bird was seen and later heard in the Daalo area (13a) on 23 and 24 May, a new square within the known range.

**Mouse-coloured Penduline Tit** *Anthoscopus musculus*

One was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May; a new square, although it had been recorded immediately to the south (28c). There are only 22 previous records for Somalia.

**Red-naped Bushshrike** *Laniarius ruficeps*

This species was quite vocal in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May; a new square for the species, which had previously been recorded in Somaliland only from squares 20a, 20b and 20c.

**House Crow** *Corvus splendens*

This introduced species was abundant along the coast in the Saylac area (2c) on 17 and 18 May and was also seen around Berbera (11c) on 28 May. It must have become more widespread in the last 15 years, since it appears to have been recorded previously only once at Berbera (11c) in 1988 and once at Raas Ceseyr (7a) in 1950.

**Wattled Starling** *Creatophora cinerea*

A flock was seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May, a new square for the species within its previously-documented range.

**Nile Valley Sunbird** *Hedydipna metallica*

More than 10 birds, including males, were seen below the Daalo escarpment at c. 330m altitude (13a) on 24 May, which constitutes a new square. This lies midway between the two previously-documented areas of occurrence in the north, suggesting that it probably occurs along the entire northern coast.

**Hunter's Sunbird** *Chalcomitra hunteri*

One full-plumage male was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square for the species, although it had been recorded to the immediate north (21c), east (28b) and south (28c).

**Marico Sunbird** *Cinnyris mariquensis*

Two were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 May, a new square for the species, although it had been recorded to the immediate south (28c).

**Lesser Masked Weaver** *Ploceus intermedius*

About eight birds were seen around their nests in our hotel grounds in Burco (20b) on 21 May, a new square for the species. Apparently there are only 10 previous records from Somaliland.

**Red-billed Quelea** *Quelea quelea*

A flock was seen on the Qorladey plains (19c) on 31 May, a new square for the species, although it had been previously recorded to the immediate north (19a) and west (18d).

**Swainson's Sparrow** *Passer swainsonii*

Several were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, a new square for this widespread species which had been recorded from the square immediately north (21c).

**Somali Sparrow** *Passer castanopterus*

One was active and vocal around a deep erosion gully on the Ban Cade plains (21b) on 22 May, a new square within the previously-documented range.

**Yellow-spotted Petronia** *Gymnoris pyrgita*

A few were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 26 and 27 May, a new square for the species, although it had been recorded to the immediate north (21c), east (28b) and south (28c).

**Green-winged Pytilia** *Pytilia melba*

Two were seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a new square for the species, although it had been recorded to the immediate north (21c), east (28b) and south (28c).



**Black-cheeked Waxbill** *Estrilda chamosyna*

One was seen in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May, a long way east of all previous records in Somaliland. It appears to be rare, with only 20 previous records for Somalia.

**Northern Grosbeak-Canary** *Crithagra donaldsoni*

At least four males were singing in the Qorulugad (28a) area on 27 May. This species appears to be quite rare in Somalia, with only 25 previous records.

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