

The first record of Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus* for the UAE and Arabia

by Nick Moran



Picture by Nick Moran

At about 11.45am on 16th December 2006 I wandered across the road from the Spinney's supermarket, in the Khalidiya district of Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, to an area of parkland opposite the police station and Ministry of Justice buildings. As the sprinklers were on, I could not complete the circuit of the radio tower, so I rolled under a fence surrounding an area scheduled for construction and headed towards some mature trees. Suddenly a black, long-tailed bird shot out of the tree in front of me and disappeared into another tree.

Shortly after, the bird flew out again and perched in the tree from which it had originally emerged. It was immediately apparent that it was a species of drongo *Dicrurus* sp. I watched it for around a minute then telephoned the news to other birdwatchers resident in Abu Dhabi. The only member of the family previously recorded in the UAE, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, is itself very rare, with less than ten accepted records to date.

My initial thought that the bird must be of this species

was rapidly replaced by the feeling that some of the features seemed different. It lacked, for example, the glossy black underparts of that species and the head shape and jizz did not quite match my recollection of the many Black Drogos I had seen previously in Asia. However, no other species of drongo had ever been recorded in Arabia.

A number of other birdwatchers quickly arrived, including Maarten Verhage, Oscar Campbell and Simon Aspinall, and, after a further two hours of watching the bird, I returned home to consult reference books and the Internet for pictures of both Black Drongo and of Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*, which appeared to be a strong possibility.

This research convinced us that we had, indeed, been watching an Ashy Drongo. A description and accompanying photographs were subsequently submitted to the Emirates Bird Records Committee, which accepted the bird as the first record of the species for the United Arab Emirates and, therefore, for the Arabian peninsula.



Picture by Oscar Campbell



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The pictures taken and field notes of the bird were consistent with the *longicaudatus* race of Ashy Drongo, which breeds from north-east Afghanistan and Pakistan to the western Himalayas, usually wintering in southern India and Sri Lanka. It is, therefore, a plausible vagrant to the UAE.

Prior to the discovery of the bird, the weather had been cool but settled. There were no accompanying records on Abu Dhabi island, or elsewhere in the Emirates, of other more regularly occurring species of a similar provenance or from further afield, as is sometimes the case when extreme vagrants are recorded in the country.

Before considering the key features used to separate this bird from Black Drongo the age of the bird needed to be established. The active primary moult was a potential indication of a 1st winter bird, although it could not be determined whether this is conclusive evidence, due to a lack of literature on the ageing of drongos. However, Bill Harvey (*pers. comm.*) states that the neat pale tips to the under-tail coverts are indicative of 1st winter Ashy Drongo.

Bearing this in mind, the following features were used to eliminate Black Drongo:

- Fairly bright red eye (although adult Black Drongo can show a reddish eye, this would be highly unlikely in a 1st winter bird)
- Relatively long, narrow bill
- Matt smoky-grey underparts, without any trace of iridescence and without any white tips/blotching, except the under-tail coverts (all Internet pictures of 1st winter Black Drongos viewed, and the Indian fieldguide (Grimmett *et al.* 1999), show messy white blotching on the lower belly)
- Lack of white rictal spot
- Crown either flattish with a very shallowly sloping forehead or 'tufted' rather like a monarch flycatcher sp. *Monachus* sp., never showing the more smoothly rounded 'Alpine Chough-like' crown of Black Drongo.
- Many flycatching sallies were made from *within* the crown of trees, especially during the midday observations on 16th December. This is consistent with the forest habitat preference & feeding behaviour observed in Ashy Drongo, contrasting with the open country preference of Black (although the bird did occasionally use exposed tree-top perches later in the day)
- No white fringes were present on any upperpart feathers – 1st winter Black Drongo should show such fringing.

The bird was seen by at least sixteen birdwatchers from around the country, including one visiting group, and was last recorded on the afternoon of Tuesday 19th December 2006. No other Middle Eastern records of this species are known or published to date.

Reference

Grimmett, R, Inskipp C & Inskipp, T. (1999). Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent. Helm, A & C Black, London.

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Postscript

Remarkably a second individual was found in Al Ain at the end of February 2008, remaining here until at least March. (S.L. James *pers.comm*)