

THE UNUSUAL ENCOUNTERS OF A CORN CRAKE AND A LITTLE CRAKE IN QARU, KUWAIT

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During its three years of research on sea turtles as well as their underwater and beach habitats, the Kuwait Turtle Conservation Project (KTCP) has not been indifferent to bird populations – migrant or vagrant mostly - of islets Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim, which are its main research areas. Both consist of a sand cay surrounded by a vibrant coral reef, and their sizes are minuscule. Qaru has a diameter of 200 meters sporting no flora at all and Umm Al-Maradim is about 500 meters long and wide with some sparse bushy vegetation on its sandy soil.

Sponsored by TOTAL Foundation and TOTAL Kuwait since July 2008, a number of scientists and volunteers from many countries gathered in Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim several times a year in order to observe, assess and reflect upon wildlife conservation on these two ecological treasures of Kuwait. Sea turtles, sharks and at least 125 fish species (not counting the long list of molluscs and crustaceans) live here, some of them breeding and some foraging on the extended reef areas. On Umm Al-Maradim in March 2009, within just three days, in cold and rainy weather, KTCP members observed 45 species of birds, including 200 Chiff chaffs, pipits, a Rufus-tailed Rock Thrush and a Stone Curlew.

The team was, however, not prepared for two most unusual sightings, both occurring for the first time in the summer and on totally barren Qaru.

Firstly, the unusual sighting of a Corn Crake (*Crex crex*), which took place on an early June morning. After a long night shift observing Green turtles and at dawn, the KTCP team caught a glimpse of an unusual, "chicken-like" bird flying under the main communications tower of the island. A closer view and with the aid of photography by team environmentalist Aris Vidalis revealed that the bird was indeed a corn crake. Corn crakes mostly live and breed in Russia and Belarus and during its migrations travels in numbers but never solitarily. It inhabits grasslands and farmlands and breeds in bushy areas. It is quite common in its home range and not of any concern of extinction. It is very unusual, however, to encounter it on offshore sandy islets anywhere worldwide.

Its passage in Qaru, and outside the regular migration season was random and rare, rendering the sighting extraordinary. Later research in the literature revealed that this bird is the first one ever recorded on the island and one of the very few in the country. Over the years, a few sightings of this species have occurred mostly in the Sabah Al-Ahmad reserve during mid-spring or autumn, which are the most common migration seasons for birds. The bird seemed to be in good health, maybe a little subdued by the extreme heat, which at times was over 60 degrees Celsius in the shade.



Fig 2. Little crake on Qaru island (Aris Vidalis)

Almost a full month later, in the hottest hours of the afternoon, Aris Vidalis was outside with his camera when he noticed a medium-sized bird hopping from the hot sand to the shade of the Coast Guard Station terrace, finding refuge under the team's wet towels on the benches. With great difficulty Aris approached the bird and took photos of it. The bird then flew off to the pier of the island, where it was followed by Aris and photographed some more. Careful study of the photos revealed the bird to be a little crake (*Porzana parva* – the distinct red mark at the base of its bill made identification certain), which is as rare in Kuwait as the corn crake. These small birds, like corn crakes belong to the Rallidae family and breed in Eastern Europe and just into Western Asia. To KTCP members' knowledge these have not been reported in Kuwait before.

Both birds are abundant in their homelands and the IUCN Red List qualification for both is that of "Least Concern". They breed in their homelands from May till August. What these single individuals were doing during the breeding season in Qaru, especially as they do not travel on their own, remains unclear.

Sightings such as these demonstrate the extremely high ecological importance of Qaru and Umm Al-Maradim, which, due to their geographical position, provide sanctuary to all forms of wildlife, often creating unique opportunities of observations and raising the need for further research. Barren and remote at first, without sources of freshwater, these sand cays host passing bird populations of many kinds and at all seasons. Clearly, more constant research is needed in order to discover more about their role in local and regional biodiversity and ecological processes.



Fig 1. Corn crake on Qaru island (Aris Vidalis)

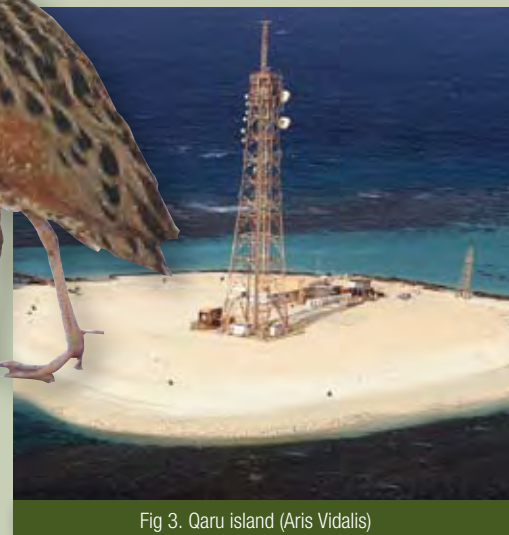


Fig 3. Qaru island (Aris Vidalis)