

## HOUSE CROW IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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House crow in Muscat

House Crows *Corvus splendens* are native to the Indian subcontinent but, for nearly 150 years, they have been expanding their range, primarily ship-assisted, throughout the Indian Ocean seaboard, its Islands and beyond (Ryall 2002); quickly achieving pest status wherever they establish. House Crows are now common introduced residents in many settlements, towns and cities in coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf.

According to Barnes (1893), some House Crows were released in Aden by an officer of the Bombay Infantry in the 1840s, though it is widely believed locally that Parsee immigrants brought them in (Ash 1984). In any case, by the 1960s, they were common breeding residents, reaching pest proportions in the Aden-Lahej-Abiyan area. Michael Jennings (1992) reviewed their status in Aden and described attempts taken to control their numbers.

The importance of this Aden release is not only the initiation of the first population in the region, but also that the massive crow colony that has subsequently developed in this international port, has long acted as a major source of ship-assisted spread, both regionally and globally. This spread from Aden has without doubt been amplified by the arrival, on many occasions, of House Crows aboard ships coming directly from Indian and Pakistani ports to ports in the Gulf and elsewhere, but the relative importance of these two sources is impossible to assess.

Within Yemen, from Aden the crows have spread to many coastal towns eastward to Oman and northwards along their Red Sea coast to Saudi Arabia. They have recently established on Socotra on a ship from Aden (Al-Saghier 2001) and, despite attempted eradication, a small population persists. House Crows have been present in Muscat, perhaps, since the 1920s and then spread to coastal towns northwards to the UAE and southeast along the Oman coast at least as far as Masirah. In the UAE itself, Jennings (1981) reported many House Crows along the east coast in villages with palm plantations by the early 1970s. They were present in Dubai by 1977 (Richardson 1990) and, in 1987, were at Abu Dhabi airport and Hatta, Huwailat, a few km inland. Though not in Qatar until the early 1990s, they were by 1995 turning up in Doha and up to 60km to the north. In Bahrain, House Crows appeared intermittently up to the 1970s (Nightingale & Hall 1992), but from 1983 were permanent breeding residents in villages in the north. In Saudi, after their first arrival in Jeddah in 1978 (Jennings 1981) they quickly reached pest status and, since 1986 (Baldwin & Meadows 1987) a large population has developed in Yanbu, a port 300km north of Jeddah. Further north still, a few were present in Haql, on the Gulf of Aqaba in 1989 (Mike Jennings *pers comm.*), close to the long standing population at Elat/Aqaba. Though House Crows were first recorded in Kuwait in 1972, they are still absent from Iraq.

House Crow distribution in Arabia shows a strong preference for the coast strip, as is the case elsewhere in their introduced range, which reflects the distribution of human settlements on which the species is dependent. However, in recent years they have begun to follow development projects into more inland sites. In 1989, Mike Jennings found House Crows to be common at Lahej, 40km from the port of Aden, and this still represents one of the most inland populations in the Arabian Peninsula.

House Crows are omnivores, scavenging on human waste and stealing food, and this dependence on man accounts for their widespread recognition as a pest. Adverse impacts include food theft, crop-raiding, damage to livestock, fouling of the human environment and water supplies, and bird strike risk for aircraft. As a gregarious and noisy species they are regarded as a nuisance, particularly around their large communal roosts in residential and tourist areas. Of particular concern in these days of West Nile Fever and bird flu is the House Crows' potential as a vector of human disease, by virtue of their close association with man. As yet, there is as no firm evidence for this, but they are proven carriers of potential human enteric pathogens, including *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, and cases of H5N1 infected House Crows have been found in the Far East, making this an important public health issue. In addition, in the Arabian Peninsula, House Crows are frequently observed raiding the nests of passerine birds, predated other small animals and harassing raptors, as they do elsewhere, often with devastating effects on avian diversity. Unsurprisingly, there have been numerous attempts at controlling House Crow numbers, but none of these, to date, can be considered successful.

There is an urgent need for specific behavioural investigations e.g. on foraging behaviour and spread of the species, etc. Collaboration and information exchange, which is crucial in facilitating a region-wide approach to combating the House Crow invasion, is slowly developing; and will become ever more important with the rapid pace of large scale development that is taking place in the wider region.

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