

# Observations of Clamorous Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens* and Mangrove Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus (scirpaceus) avicenniae* in mangroves of the Yemen Red sea coast

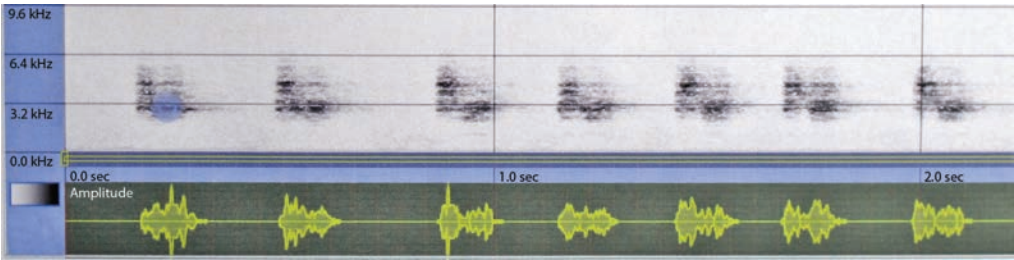
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During a waterbird survey of selected areas along Yemen's Red sea coast in January 2011, we spent 21–23 January at Al Jar (16° 04.381' N, 42° 50.183' E) situated some 35 km south of the Yemen/Saudi Arabia border. We used this opportunity to search this small section of the extensive mangrove *Avicennia marina* forest north of Al Luhayyah (Plate 1) for warblers. Clamorous Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus stentoreus* were fairly common, and their loud, raucous 'scratchy-scratchy' song was the mangroves' most characteristic sound; most appeared to be paired. Mangrove Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus (scirpaceus) avicenniae* were also present but none were in song and we were unable to determine whether they were breeding. No *Hippolais*-type warblers were observed, the relevance being that there have been recent claims of their presence in mangroves in Yemen (Baha El Din 2011). Over a 1 km stretch of mangroves we estimated at least eight pairs of Clamorous Reed and three pairs of Mangrove Reed Warblers were present.

On 23 January we noticed one of the Clamorous Reed Warblers collecting nesting material and taking it to a low remnant mangrove clump on the shore. A half completed nest was found (Plate 2) but a month later, on 24 February, DS found the nest had been



**Plate 1.** Extensive Mangroves *Avicennia marina* at Al Jar, Yemen. © David Stanton



**Figure 1.** Short burst of song of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar mangroves, Yemen, January 2011. Sonogram created using Sonogram Visible Speech 4.0.

partially destroyed, probably by the wave action of the sea as it had been built less than 15 cm above high water mark. Plates 3 and 4 show the position of the nest at low and high tide, respectively. This is the first time that nest building by this species has been recorded in Yemen—probably an indication of the fact that the mangroves are rarely visited in January/late winter when nesting appears to be taking place (see Jennings 2010). Given the numbers we observed it is likely that Clamorous Reed Warbler is a common breeding bird in the Yemen mangroves.

The Clamorous Reed Warblers, whilst spending some time in the upper branches of the trees, were noted to frequently feed low down, often hopping amongst the mangrove aerial roots (Plate 5). They could be fairly confiding. A short sequence of song was recorded on video and a sonogram is shown in Figure 1. This sequence of seven, harsh, scratchy phrases in 2 s bursts was part of a longer series of such phrases, each separated by a short gap before the next burst. The pattern conforms closely to that in the sonogram for Clamorous Reed Warbler (race *brunnescens*) in Kennerley & Pearson (2010).



**Plate 2.** Nest of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 3.** (left) Red arrow indicates position of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens* nest (Plate 2), low tide, Al Jar mangroves, Yemen, January 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 4.** (right) Red arrow indicates position of Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens* nest (Plate 2), high tide, Al Jar mangroves, Yemen, January 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 5.** (left) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. © RF Porter



**Plate 6.** (right) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. Note olive-brown upperparts, whitish supercilium, dark lores, inconspicuous whitish eye-ring, white chin and throat, warm brown flanks, short primary projection and short first primary. © RF Porter



**Plate 7.** (left) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. This image shows especially the white chin and throat and warm brown flanks becoming tawny on lower flanks; also short first primary. © RF Porter



**Plate 8.** (right) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. Note the tawny lower flanks, greyish brown centres to tertials and long-tailed/short-winged appearance. © RF Porter

## SUBSPECIFIC IDENTIFICATION

### *Clamorous Reed Warbler*

Examination of our field notes and photographs (Plates 5–12) and comparison with species accounts in the monumental *Reed and Bush Warblers* (Kennerley & Pearson 2010) confirmed that the Clamorous Reed Warblers were of the race *brunnescens*. This is the race that they, and Jennings (2010), give as resident on the Red sea coast. Thus Porter & Aspinall (2010) were incorrect in assigning the Red sea birds to the race *stentoreus*, a taxon that is restricted to the Nile valley, with *levantinus* being the race in Israel and Jordan (Kennerley & Pearson 2010). In addition to being resident on the Red sea coast *brunnescens* is resident in the eastern Arabian peninsula (Jennings 2010). It also breeds in south and central Asia, these migratory populations wintering in Pakistan and India (Kennerley & Pearson 2010).

The photographs in Plates 5–12, some of the first taken of Clamorous Reed Warblers in the Red sea area, clearly show the key features of *brunnescens* and eliminate *stentoreus* (see Kennerley & Pearson 2010). Note especially: the olive-brown upperparts with warmer rump and uppertail coverts, whitish supercilium (becoming obscure behind eye), dark



**Plate 9.** (left) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. This image shows the whitish supercilium, becoming obscure behind the eye and the olive-brown upperparts with warmer rump. © RF Porter

**Plate 10.** (right) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. Note the whitish supercilium, becoming obscure behind the eye, dark lores, inconspicuous whitish eye-ring and some dark streaks on throat. © RF Porter



**Plate 11.** (left) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. This image shows the broad base to the bill and streaking on throat. © RF Porter

**Plate 12.** (right) Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus brunnescens*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011, collecting nesting material. © RF Porter

lores, narrow and inconspicuous whitish eye-ring, white chin and throat (the latter showing faint greyish shaft-streaks in some birds) with rest of underparts whitish, but breast-sides and flanks warm brown becoming tawny on lower flanks and vent, and greyish brown centres to the tertials. Structurally you can see the longer tailed/short-winged appearance, short first primary and particularly the broad-based bill when seen from below.

### *Mangrove Reed Warbler*

Mangrove Reed Warblers were also photographed and those in Plates 13–15 appear to be amongst the first taken. The Mangrove Reed Warbler is a small warbler, appearing even smaller than European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* with rather dainty movements. Our notes described it as “a dinky, clean, unobtrusive warbler with very short primary projection; in posture/jizz a little like Blyth’s Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*”. On showing the photographs to Simon Aspinall he remarked on the ‘almost



**Plate 13.** (left) Mangrove Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus (scirpaceus) avicenniae*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. Note in this and Plates 14 & 15 the ‘clean’ appearance with posture similar to Blyth’s Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* and kindly face. © RF Porter



**Plate 14.** (right) Mangrove Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus (scirpaceus) avicenniae*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. © RF Porter

kind face’. These warblers spent nearly all of their time in the upper branches of the mangroves, rarely venturing to ground level, unlike Clamorous Reed.

The Mangrove Reed Warbler was first described by Ash *et al* (1989), originally as a subspecies of African Reed Warbler *A. baeticatus*. It is endemic to the Red sea and gulf of Aden region. On the African side it occurs from the coast of southern Sudan south to Eritrea and northern Somalia; in Arabia it is found on the Saudi Arabian coast south from Yanbu, and in Yemen in most mangroves of the Red sea coast and islands, though breeding has not been confirmed (Jennings 2010).



**Plate 15.** Mangrove Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus (scirpaceus) avicenniae*, Al Jar, Yemen, January 2011. This image shows the short primary projection. © RF Porter

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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