

## First record of Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus* in western Saudi Arabia

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**A**L-KHUNFAH PROTECTED AREA (20,450 km<sup>2</sup>), in north-west Saudi Arabia, consists of an immense sand/gravel plain with low sandstone hills on the western edge of the Great Nafud Desert. On 30 October 1997, we were at the main ranger camp in the reserve (28°18'N 38°36'E) when our attention was drawn to what we initially believed was a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*. It moved rapidly on the ground and frequently hovered to catch flying insects. We soon realised it was not a Chiffchaff but a wing-barred *Phylloscopus*, and observed it for c. 20 minutes before it flew behind the ranger house. It was subsequently observed feeding in the rubbish dump in this area, both on the ground and in nearby *Eucalyptus*, and was still present next day, when several photographs were taken (Plate 1).

### Description

Approximately the size of a Chiffchaff. Upperparts and rump bright green, particularly on the mantle. Broad and noticeable cream to yellowish greater covert wingbar and a fainter second wingbar on the median coverts. Also a broad, long yellowish supercilium reaching ear-coverts and meeting over bill. Underparts pale yellowish, with a lemon wash to the neck- and head-sides. Upper mandible dark brown, lower mandible pale flesh with a dark tip. Legs dark grey. No call heard. It was very active and moved constantly.

Because of the presence of two wingbars we originally considered that it could be a Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* or a worn Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus*. However, it lacked white fringes and tips to the tertials, and



Plate 1. Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*, Al-Khunfah Protected Area, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 30 October 1997. (S. Ostrowski)

dark centres to the wing-coverts, and the bill was rather large and not all dark. It also had bright green upperparts, distinctly pale yellow underparts and dark grey legs. Arctic Warbler *P. borealis* can also have two wingbars, but the Saudi bird's diminutive (not comparatively bulky) appearance, short bill, supercilia meeting above the bill, dark legs and bright green upperparts are inconsistent with *borealis* (Bradshaw & Riddington 1997). The features best matched Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* or one of its close relatives. Because of the pronounced greater covert wingbar, distinct upper wingbar, and yellowish tinged head- and neck-sides it was most likely Two-barred Greenish Warbler *P. plumbeitarsus* or Green Warbler *P. nitidus* (Baker 1997), both of which are variably treated as conspecific with, or specifically distinct from, *P. trochiloides* (see, e.g. Beaman 1994, Collinson 2001 and Helbig *et al.* 1995, for further discussion). Given the bright green upperparts, pale yellow underparts (not white) and distinctly lemon-yellow supercilium, head- and neck-sides, we believe the bird to have been *nitidus* (Baker 1997). The marked lemon coloration on the neck- and head-sides and prominent wingbars may indicate that it was a first-winter.

*P. nitidus* breeds in north Turkey, north Iran, the Caucasus, Transcaucasus, Transcaspia and perhaps north-west Afghanistan, from where it departs in August–October, with stragglers usually present until mid-October. It migrates through Iran, Afghanistan and the north-west Himalayas to winter in south peninsular India and Sri Lanka (Cramp 1992). Elsewhere in the Middle East and Arabia, it is rare on migration. In Oman, there are 17 records between mid-August and mid-November and single winter and May occurrences (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000), a total of four has been noted in UAE, in April, May (twice) and October (Richardson & Aspinall 1998), two have been reported in Bahrain, in May 1975 and on 27 September 1991 (Hirschfeld 1992), two in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, on 21 April 1975, near Dhahran, and on 6 May 1982, north of Hofuf (Bundy *et al.* 1989), and one was ringed at Eilat, Israel, on 27 October 1987 (Shirihai 1996). Our record is the first autumn occurrence in Saudi Arabia and the first outside Eastern Province. In view of its described autumn migration routes (Cramp 1992), further records of *P. nitidus* on northern and southern Arabian Gulf coasts appear likely and it is possible that it is overlooked in these areas.

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