

THE ORNITHOLOGICAL
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MIDDLE EAST



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OSME BULLETIN 15

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All records in this Bulletin are subject to acceptance by the relevant records committee of the country concerned.

Please note that details of expeditions, availability of expedition reports, news of members, other Societies and ornithological events are welcomed and may be printed in the Bulletin free of charge as "Announcements", subjects to the discretion of the Bulletin Editor.

A POSSIBLE HYBRID COMMON CRANE X SIBERIAN WHITE CRANE IN TURKEY

Neil Davidson

Early in the morning on 21st May 1985, I was in the Murrat Valley to the west of Bulanik, attempting to see Demoiselle Cranes Anthropoides virgo. I arrived at dawn, and could hear Common Cranes Grus grus displaying in both directions along the river. I walked eastwards towards a known Demoiselle site and eventually saw one, along with 51 Cranes which were grouped in small parties forming a loose flock.

After watching the Demoiselle I turned to head back, and now with the sun at my back, I noticed that one of a group of five birds about 400-500m from me was strikingly pale to the naked eye. I approached to roughly 300m and watched the bird for ten minutes through a 40x telescope at that range, noting the following details:-

GENERAL : Obviously a Crane, it was considerably taller than the accompanying Common Cranes, standing a foot taller when alert. Its stance was more elegant and it had a more graceful fluidity of movement, due to having appreciably longer legs and neck. The neck was also more slender with a supple serpentine character compared to the relatively stubby, straighter, thick based looking necks of the cranes. Furthermore, the bill was noticeably different from Crane, being broader based, very long and slightly droop-tipped. In addition to these size and structural differences the bird was outstandingly pale overall, and had a bold head pattern resembling that of Whooping Crane Grus americana.

HEAD AND NECK : Crown through eye, lores and a tapering line along the lower edge of the ear coverts to just behind the eye were dark red, appearing almost blackish abutting the base of the bill. The rest of the head and neck was a very pale, almost whitish-grey, except for rusty-brown streaking on the nape and rear ear coverts, and extensive sandy-brown streaking on the hind-neck.



UPPERPARTS : Mantle, back, scapulars and tertial plumes basically pale-grey, but densely overlaid with sandy-brown mottling on the tertials which were a more uniform brownish, though still pale in keeping with other features. The tips of some tertials were smoky-black, but these were fewer and less black than those of Crane, with the extent of the black on individual feathers being restricted more towards the tips than is the case with Crane. When viewed from behind the lower back seemed slightly darker than the surrounding areas.

UNDERPARTS : Uniformly pale-grey, continuous and concolorous with fore-neck.

UPPERWING : Primaries, primary coverts and secondaries black, strongly contrasting with pale-grey (as underparts) fore-wing.

UNDERWING : Primaries and trailing edge of secondaries dusky, remainder pale-grey.

BARE PARTS : Bill broad based, long, tapering and droop-tipped. Colour difficult to determine exactly, but seemed light-horn, not uniformly marked. Legs blackish or dark-grey, indistinguishable from the Cranes'. Iris glaringly pale, yellowish or yellowish-white. The eyes were clearly visible at a range where the dark eyes of the Cranes could not be seen at all.

The party took flight. Immediately after take-off there was a perceptible, though very slight, difference in wing-beat speed. The wing beats of this bird were marginally slower than those of the Cranes', but this was no longer the case after about 500m when they seemed to equalise at a more leisurely rate as they prepared to land.

As they landed in an inaccessible area, directly against the strong light, I was unable to obtain any further useful views and left the area.

AN ALBANISTIC CHUKAR IN ISRAEL

Henk K Mienis

The Chukar Alectoris chukar is a common bird in many parts of Israel. In farmland it is increasing rapidly, even causing economical damage now and then in newly-sown fields.

In the cotton fields of Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, which are situated just north-east of Ramlah, it is often encountered in fairly large numbers. The birds are not actually breeding in the fields, but in patches of wasteland along the borders or in dry wadis crossing the fields. The cotton fields are used for foraging and shelter.

While I was scouting the cotton fields for insect pests on 17th May 1985 every now and then Chukars flew up with a loud noise. On one such occasion two birds were flushed, one of which turned out to be an apparent albino. I watched the partridge in flight until it landed near a peach orchard of Moshav Ahizemah. During the next few hours, I saw the bird walking around in company with several other adult Chukars.

In the next few days it was seen again on several occasions. Sometimes it was alone, on other occasions it was part of a flock of up to seven adults.

On 21st May I watched it from nearby through a pair of binoculars. The plumage turned out to be indeed snow white, while the eyes appeared red - it was a completely albinistic Chukar.

As far as I know this is the first record of an albino Chukar.

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SPUR-WINGED PLOVERS KILLING A WHITE-BREASTED KINGFISHER

Henk K Mienis

The Spur-winged Plover Hoplopterus spinosus has become a rather common bird in the irrigated cotton fields of Kibbutz Netzer Sereni, near Ramlah, Israel. From 1-2 pairs in 1971, the population has increased to 30-40 pairs in the last few years. The nests are mainly situated in a rather small area: a strip of land about 150m wide running parallel to the normally dry, deep riverbed of Nahal Gezer.

The steep banks of the riverbed are used by White-breasted Kingfishers Halcyon smyrnensis as breeding sites. They dig their nest tunnels in the almost straight walls of the riverbed.

Usually, the plovers do not pay any attention to the kingfishers and vice versa. However, on 5th May 1977, when most plover pairs had three or four chicks, a brawl between two plovers and a kingfisher resulted in the latter's death. A kingfisher was seen flying in the neighbourhood of a nesting site of a plover pair. The reaction of the plovers was furious. They immediately took to the wing and one after the other attacked the kingfisher. Almost as soon as the fight started, it also ended. A search at the place of the fight revealed a dead White-breasted Kingfisher, still heavily bleeding from several deep head and nape wounds.

Similar aggressive reactions of Spur-winged Plovers have been recorded when their nests were approached by crows, kites, falcons, gulls and terns (Roselaar, 1983) however, it is not known whether this also led to the death of the aggressors.

References:

- Roselaar, C.S., 1983. Hoplopterus spinosus. In Cramp, S., & Simmons, K.E.L. (Eds) : The Birds of the Western Palearctic

Vol 3 : 227-235. Oxford University Press, Oxford, London, New York.

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POLLUTION IN THE RED SEA AND GULF OF ADEN

Saudi Arabia recently became the fourth state to ratify the Regional Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden - aimed at reducing pollution in the Red Sea. The Convention, which came into effect in July, applies to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aqaba, the Gulf of Suez, the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden. It establishes an organisation to prevent, monitor and control pollution from Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, South Yemen, Jordan, Sudan and Somalia.

EAST AFRICAN BIRD RECORDS

Any OSME member who visits Kenya, Tanzania or Uganda is encouraged to submit their ornithological records to the Ornithological Sub-Committee of the East African Natural History Society. The Sub-Committee publishes an annual bird report covering all three countries and has recently set up an East African Rare Birds Committee to assess records of rarities. Records should be sent to David Pearson, Department of Biochemistry, University of Nairobi, Box 30197, Nairobi, Kenya, who will also be pleased to tell you how to obtain copies of the bird reports.

THE ICBP CONSERVATION EXPEDITION COMPETITION

In 1985/1986, ICBP will again be running a Conservation Expedition Competition to encourage more expeditions to carry out conservation-

based ornithological research abroad and to gain experience of international conservation issues and co-operation.

The competition is open to university or other ornithological teams and ICBP will contribute up to \$1000 to each of the best two proposals and may provide letters of endorsement and management support to the runners-up. Projects will be judged on their conservation content, feasibility and likely impact; they must involve a local counterpart and have clearance from the host government and/or a local institute.

In 1985, awards went to teams planning ornithological surveys of the Zahamena Forest in Madagascar and Mount Oku in Cameroon. The two expeditions have been incorporated into ICBP's Conservation Programme which includes nearly 100 conservation projects all over the world.

To enter the competition a project proposal must be submitted to the ICBP Secretariat not later than 31st January 1986 and prizes will be announced at the end of March. Full details and entry forms are provided in a guide to the competition which costs £3 and can be obtained from ICBP, 219c Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0DL, England.

REVIEWS

Don Parr

'The Bird-Walker' - a Dictionary of Bird Sounds from Britain, Europe and North Africa; recorded by Jean C Roche and produced by L'Oiseau Musicien.

This set of three cassettes of bird songs and calls is an English version of 'Le Walkbird' produced in France in 1983, the adapter is D Couzens. It has been expanded to cover 400 species found in Europe (east to the USSR) and western North Africa. The recordings have been categorised (alphabetically) into large and small birds of Northern Europe and of Southern Europe.

This arbitrary arrangement is meant to facilitate the identification of song or call but I am bound to say that I found the order chosen produced strange bed-fellows and its use in the field difficult to envisage. The recordings by Jean Roche are generally of a high quality although clearly lack of space has frequently prevented the full range of calls and songs being presented. Although the Middle East has been specifically excluded from the geographical range, OSME members will find many recordings to interest them. Where else, for instance, can one find recordings of nine species of wheatear or sixteen species of lark in convenient close proximity?

The set of three cassettes at £15 (plus £1 for postage) must represent very good value; British members can order from D Couzens, 31 Richmond Park Road, London SW4, and members living in other parts of Europe from La Haute Borie, St Martin-de-Castillon 84750 Viens, France (at 180 French francs plus postage).

NOTES FROM THE SALES OFFICER

1. The Turkish Bird Report 1974-75 is now sold out and is no longer available. There is a steady demand for this publication so if anyone has surplus copies of this or previous reports in the series that they wish to donate or sell to the Society, will they please contact the Sales Officer.
2. A Bibliography of the Avifauna of the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant and Mesopotamia by Major W A C Griffiths, is now available again. Details of price, etc, are being worked out with the Army Birdwatching Society who originally published the bibliography. Anyone who wants a copy should write to the Sales Officer for further details.

3. We are awaiting further stocks of Wildlife in Bahrain. There is at present some delay in meeting orders.
4. Max Kasparek's publication on the ecology of the Sultan Marshes, Turkey, for which OSME gave a grant of £100 (see OSME Bull. 14: 11) has now been printed. Please note that the publication is in German and without English summary. A full review will be published in a future bulletin. The 153 pages include a full description of the ecology of the marshes, and details of plants, various invertebrates and vertebrates including birds found in the area. It is illustrated with black and white photographs. We expect to have copies available shortly and have provisionally set the price at £7.00 surface mail.
5. The stock of "Seasons Greetings" cards remains the same as in previous years. If anyone is able and willing to provide suitable artwork we would like to update our selection.
6. A Provisional List of the Birds of North Yemen. This 13-page list, prepared by Richard Porter and Effie Warr, is an annotated checklist containing up-to-date information about North Yemen's birds. It is now available from OSME Sales, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL, price £1.00 including postage.

OMAN WAHIBA SANDS PROJECT 1985/86

By kind permission of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Ruler of the Sultanate of Oman, the Royal Geographical Society has embarked on a five-month scientific expedition to Oman's Wahiba Sands, a 10,000 square kilometre isolated sand sea on the east coast of Oman, comprising diverse plant and animal life and many different sand dune forms. It is hoped that the 30-strong Anglo-Omani team will not only add to the small but growing body of scientific knowledge of such desert areas of the

world, but will collect information that will be useful to the Government of Oman. The Project was launched in London on 3rd September 1985 in the presence of the Project Patron, His Royal Highness Prince Michael of Kent and His Excellency the Omani Ambassador, Hussain bin Mohammed bin Ali. OSME wishes the project well and will be watching its progress with interest.

REQUEST

MIGRATION SURVEYS AND RINGING AT EILAT, ISRAEL

Help is required at the birdwatching centre of the Nature Reserves Authority at Eilat in 1986 for:-

1. Raptor migration survey from 15 February to 25 May; and
2. Ringing of passerines from 1 February to 15 June.

Ringing volunteers should have a ringing permit of type A or B, and have good ringing experience. Raptor-watching volunteers should have experience in raptor identification in flight.

The Nature Reserves Authority will help with lodging and food expenses for those able to stay for periods of longer than one month. Anyone interested should apply in writing and ringers should enclose a photocopy of their ringing permit, and any volunteer should enclose a recommendation from a well-known ornithologist and give details of past experience. Apply to H Shirihai, c/o NRA Birdwatching Centre, POB 774, Eilat, Israel.

OSME EXPEDITION TO NORTH YEMEN

At the time of going to press, we have received this report from Richard Porter on the first month's progress of OSME's two-month expedition.

"A few problems over transport and permission did not dampen enthusiasm or cause us to deviate too much from the main objectives. A little rearranging of the programme was, however, necessary. In the first month we managed to locate all the endemics and for many we established suitable study sites. It was encouraging to find, for example, flocks of Golden-winged Grosbeaks in two areas, where they were singing and displaying. On the Sumara Pass a loose association of 13 Arabian Accentors was fun and at Kawkaban we found a juvenile. Quite a lot of effort was put into establishing whether birds were breeding or not, and it was surprising just how many species were nesting or showing signs of nesting in October and November.

New birds for North Yemen? Well, six in the first month: Garden Warbler, Olive-tree Warbler and Wood Warbler - the latter, clearly a not uncommon passage migrant; Harlequin Quail - probably a local breeding bird on the Tihama; Wattled Starling (4) and Pin-tailed Snipe (2).

Other excitements. There were many. Two new sites for Arabian Bustard, including seven displaying males in one small area of farmland on the Tihama. During the display their neck and head swells up like a balloon and the tail fans out. In this erect posture they emit a popping call note. A party of 12 adult Bald Ibis had previously been found summering by members of the ornithological society of North Yemen. Later they were joined by two juveniles. Do they breed locally or were they summering birds from the Turkish colony at Birecik? Whatever the situation turns out to be it is a very exciting and important discovery.

The transport problems meant that we were not able to observe the raptor migration in the detail we had planned, but nevertheless we had a small

passage of Steppe Eagles, with over 2000 on one day. One gained the distinct impression that the Yemen foothills are an important flight line for this species as well as Steppe Buzzard, but a detailed study will have to await a future occasion."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Mike Hodgson for his cover illustration of a Crab Plover Dromas ardeola and Alan Kitson for constructive assistance.

SANDGROUSE 7

Due to delays beyond the Editor's control, this will not be going to the printers until early in the New Year.

We hope it will be published by March and those who have paid their subscription for 1985 will be sent a new copy. We apologise for this delay in publication.

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST

c/o THE LODGE, SANDY, BEDFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND.

The Ornithological Society of the Middle East was formed in April 1978 and is a successor to the Ornithological Society of Turkey.

Aims

1. To collect, collate and publish ornithological data on the birds of the Middle East.
2. To encourage an interest in and conservation of the birds of the Middle East.
3. To develop a mutually beneficial working relationship with all environmental and conservation bodies and natural history societies in and concerned with the Middle East.

Membership is open to all and spans over 40 countries.

Publications Sandgrouse is the annual journal of the Society and contains scientific papers on all aspects of the ornithology of the Middle East. A bulletin is also issued bi-annually to all members.



For further details and current subscription rates, write to:
The Secretary, OSME, c/o The Lodge,
Sandy, Beds, SG19 2DL, England

