
SANDGROUSE

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2005



ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST,
CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

OSME



ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST, CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

OSME

OSME was founded in 1978 as the successor to the Ornithological Society of Turkey. Its primary aims are:

- To collect, collate, and publish data on all aspects of the birds of the Middle East.
- To promote an interest in ornithology and bird conservation throughout the Middle East.
- To develop productive working relationships with other governmental and non-governmental organisations with an interest in conservation and/or natural history in the region.



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Publications

OSME publishes a scientific journal, *Sandgrouse*, containing papers, news and features on all aspects of Middle Eastern ornithology. Published twice yearly, it is issued free to members. Further copies are available for sale from OSME.

Meetings

An Annual General Meeting is held in London at which guest speakers provide new perspectives on ornithology in the region. There are also occasional special meetings, some taking place outside the UK.

Projects

OSME organises field expeditions to collect data on birds in little-known parts of the region and in areas where OSME can assist by teaming up with local groups.

The Conservation & Research Committee grants funds to valuable field projects and desk studies which further knowledge and conservation of birds in the region. Grants have been awarded to over 45 projects since the Conservation & Research Fund was set up in 1982.

MEBirdNet Email Discussion Group

This is an e-mail mailing list (moderated by OSME) that discusses birds and birdwatching in the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia. Subjects include research, conservation, bird news, recent records, identification, requests for information and exchange of information. To join the mailing list, send an empty e-mail to: MEBirdNet-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

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SANDGROUSE

Volume 27 (1)

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Cover Photograph:

Black Bush-Robin *Cercotrichas*
podobe taken by Hadoram
Shirihai at Eilat, March 2002.

Editorial

This is my first issue of *Sandgrouse* as Editor and my first duty, indeed a pleasure, is to express my whole-hearted admiration of Guy Kirwan's achievement in that job. Guy's patience during the handover period, when we could get together but rarely due to our respective absences to various parts of the globe is very much appreciated.

I don't intend to introduce editorials as a regular feature, but to restrict them for special occasions, or when the OSME Council has agreed a policy matter that is of interest to the membership or authors.

Council has agreed that its policy of seeking authors of papers and notes from nationals of the countries within the OSME region should be reinforced. Accordingly, as *Sandgrouse* Editor, I am introducing a couple of changes. The first is that OSME are seeking short papers that will obtain basic but important data for areas and regions that (as far as we know) lack that data: I am asking for papers whose main theme is phenology of a single species. For an example, see the Common Swift papers in this issue. We hope to encourage contributions from readers who may not have formal academic training but who are good observers, because phenological data are a mainstay of our understanding of species.

The second change deals with local knowledge, specifically oral information that derives from the traditional societies of the world. Here in western society, too many of us have become distanced from that tradition, and we fail to value it and we fail to record it. Historians have long appreciated its value, but the more formal world of scientific and academic publishing has often avoided, ignored or denigrated it. The need for rigour in formal papers is unquestioned, but now the rules are taken as an end, rather than a means to an end. If you think about it, rules do not define what you may do, they set limits beyond which you need to think clearly what you might do instead, but of course you have to be prepared to argue your case. Oral, or anecdotal evidence, is invaluable; a perfect example comes from Syria, where Gianluca Serra carefully evaluated local anecdotal information that revealed a hitherto unknown (to the rest of the world) colony of Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*.

Evaluation is the key. Anecdotal information must be evaluated at source and every time it is recounted. From this issue of *Sandgrouse* onwards, we are including formal method of identifying anecdotal information. Within a paper or short note, evaluated anecdotal information is indicated by including it in bold braces, thus, {...}. On occasion, the positioning of the braces may be disconcerting for the reader, but I assess this as a small price to pay.

On a separate subject, there are also occasions when formal notes are inadequate for full acceptance of a record, but the value of mentioning the record remains high. On such occasions, the information will be regarded as hypothetical and will be included in bold square brackets, thus, [...].

Each paper or note in *Sandgrouse* that contains information in either of the above two categories will be identified as such.

Mike Blair

OSME News



NEW EDITOR OF SANDGROUSE

After eight years as editor of *Sandgrouse* Guy Kirwan has found it necessary to move on due to the pressure of work. Guy was responsible for overseeing the journal over an important period of OSME's development and was instrumental in bringing in a number of new concepts. In addition to editing the journal he was always available to give constructive comment to help authors in completing their papers. In addition to this he found time to contribute many articles of his own. On behalf of everyone at OSME I would like to thank Guy for doing a great job.

We are pleased to welcome a new editor in Mike Blair, who has been sharing some of the workload with Guy, but now takes over the editorship in full. Born in 1943 in Arbroath, Scotland, Mike learnt the countryside and its natural history through his grandfather and father. From an early age he was interested in bird literature. In 1961 he joined the RAF, retiring in 1993 after a career as an aircraft engineer. Throughout this time he always took an interest in the natural history of wherever he was sent, including Australia, the Maldives, Aden, Bahrain, Sharjah, Oman, Masirah, Germany and the USA, especially Florida and Washington State. He joined the RAF Ornithological Society in 1983, since which he has been on expeditions to

Australia, Brunei, Austria, Hungary, Ascension Island and Belize. He is well qualified to edit our journal, having been the text and artwork editor of the *EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds*.

2005 AGM TO BE HELD ON 30 JULY

The 2005 OSME Summer Meeting will be held on Saturday 30 July in central London. Once again it will be held in the head office of the Association of British Travel Agents, 68-71 Newman Street, London W1T 3AH. A full programme of speakers will be published in the spring.

GIFT AID HELP TO OSME

Some 140 UK members have enabled OSME to reclaim 28% of the value of their membership subscription in taxes from the UK government. It costs these members nothing more than a signature on a simple form declaring that UK tax has been paid and authorising OSME to claim it back. There are still nearly 300 UK members who have not signed a Gift Aid form. These are readily available and declarations may also be made by telephone by calling the Treasurer, John Warr, on 01442 822108 or by e-mailing AJWarr@aol.com.

BRITISH BIRDWATCHING FAIR - 19-21 AUGUST 2005

Once again OSME will be exhibiting at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water in the UK, from 19-21 August. There are several ways members might help. We would welcome any items for the tombola (books, CDs and other birding items). These can be brought to our AGM on 30 July. We would also welcome any assistance on the stand during the Fair. Please make any offers to Tony Morris on 01304 851943 or tonymorris@easynet.co.uk. Once again we would like to recognise the generous support of Carl Zeiss for their assistance in subsidising our stand rental costs which enables the majority of our takings to be used for conservation purposes.

OSME SUPPORTS OWL

OSME has made a small contribution towards the cost of running Ornithological Worldwide Literature (OWL). This is an indexed compilation of bibliographic citations from ornithological journals from around the world. Anybody can access this important resource at no cost via the OWL web site <http://www.owl.org>. Results of all bibliographic searches are downloadable to a spreadsheet or database. OWL currently adds nearly 6,000 literature citations each year to the database, which by early 2005 is expected to contain nearly 100,000 indexed citations that will go back 20–25 years. All records are subject coded and spell checked; most have brief abstracts. The OWL team is constantly looking for more volunteers to help in this effort. If you are interested in helping, please contact Jay M. Sheppard (jmsheppar@aol.com).

RAPTORS

R. D. Chancellor, R. D. & B.-U. Meyburg (eds.) (2004) *Raptors Worldwide*. World Working Group on Birds of Prey and Owls / Birdlife Hungary pp 890, numerous figures, maps, photographs and line drawings. Paperback Eur 45 / US\$ 52 / £30. Available from WWGBP, PO Box 52, Towcester, Northamptonshire, NN12 7ZW, UK. Fax: (+44) 1604 862331. <http://www.raptors-international.de/>

This substantial publication consists of 81 refereed original papers in English, presented by over 150 authors from all over the world at the 6th World Conference on Birds of Prey and Owls, held in May 2003 in Budapest, Hungary. It has an extensive section on vultures comprising 12 papers on different Old and New World species and their conservation. There are also eight special studies providing a comprehensive picture of the recent catastrophic decline of species in the genus *Gyps* in Southern Asia.

Other sections are devoted wide-ranging topics as Population Limitation, Taxonomy, Electrocutations, Raptor /

Human Conflicts and Environmental Contaminants. Other special sections are devoted to Falcons and Eagles respectively, including accounts of the conservation work carried out in Hungary on such endangered species as the Saker Falcon and Imperial Eagle. Many other papers present the most up to date state of research and conservation of different diurnal and nocturnal raptors worldwide.

Studies from the OSME region include Griffon Vulture in Cyprus and the former Soviet Union, Lappet-faced Vulture in Saudi Arabia, Imperial, Golden and White-tailed Eagle in Kazakhstan and Bonelli's Eagle in Cyprus. Many other studies are of the ecology of species that occur in our region.

INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON THE GREATER SPOTTED EAGLE

A conference on research and conservation aspects has been convened at OSOWIEC, Biebrza National Park, NE Poland, 19–21 September 2005. The Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (GSE) is a globally threatened species breeding from eastern Poland to China and wintering from Europe and Africa across the Middle East to Japan and south to the Malay Archipelago and Sumatra. It has been studied comparatively little. The Biebrza valley in NE Poland holds its westernmost population, which has been studied here for 30 years including satellite tracking of 12 individuals, mostly adult birds. The first workshop on the GSE was convened on 14–18 November 1996 in Kemer, Latvia, to draft a European Action Plan that was published in 2001 by the Office of the Official Publications of the European Communities in Luxembourg. 2005 Conference details are at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Spotted-Eagles>. The 2001 proceedings are at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/nature_conservation/focus_wild_birds/species_birds_directive/birdactionplan/action_5.pd.

Keith Betton

NEWS & INFORMATION

compiled by Dawn Balmer & Guy M. Kirwan

The aim of this section is to inform readers about events in the OSME region. It relies on members and others supplying relevant news and information. If you have anything concerning birds, conservation or development in the OSME area please send it to *News and Information, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, U. K.*

This section is not intended as a definitive report or write-up of the projects concerned. Many of the projects are sponsored; such support is appreciated but is not generally given acknowledgement here.

GENERAL

His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan The late President of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan died on Tuesday 2nd November 2004. Visitors to the UAE will have seen the remarkable progress made by the country in the years since Sheikh Zayed became first Ruler of Abu Dhabi, in 1966, and then founding President of the UAE itself in 1971. Among his many interests, Sheikh Zayed was both an avid conservationist and a keen falconer, typical of the countryman who knows his environment and wildlife, exploits it and, at the same time, cherishes it. An environmentalist long before it became fashionable, he was particularly interested in the wildlife of Arabia, and, through his early support for captive breeding of the Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* in the years just before the species became extinct in the wild, he played a major role in the survival of this flagship species. Through support for bodies like the World-Wide Fund for Nature International, WWF, he also supported conservation internationally, and received WWF's prestigious Golden Panda Award for his services to conservation. Sheikh Zayed was well aware that the UAE had emerged in recent years as a popular destination for birdwatchers internationally, and was quietly both amused and pleased. When Arabia's first breeding colony of Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* for over 60 years was discovered near Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital, in the early 1990s, he was swift to order that it should be protected,

following up with the posting of a police guard that continues to patrol the site, the Al Wathba Lake (formerly known as the Al Ghar Lake) today. A committed devotee of falconry, he also prompted extensive research into the main prey species, Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis undulate macqueenii* and into the two key falcon species used in the sport, Saker *Falco cherrug* and Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, also launching several years ago an annual release programme to return wild-caught falcons into the wild at the end of the hunting season. His concern for the UAE's wildlife was genuine, and deeply felt. (Simon Aspinnall and Peter Hellyer.)

Adnan Budieri After five years as Head of BirdLife International's Middle East Division, Adnan Budieri has moved on to take a position with Friends of the Earth - Middle East. Adnan came to BirdLife from the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in Jordan, and established the Middle East Office in Amman in 1999. Since then BirdLife's influence has developed considerably in the region with active conservation programmes in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen, as well as strong and growing links with Bahrain, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. (Richard Porter)

Ibrahim Al Khader Ibrahim Al Khader has been appointed to succeed Adnan Budieri as the Head of the BirdLife Middle East Division with effect from the first of March. Ibrahim will be based in the Amman office, at an exciting time of development and new programmes. Ibrahim has been the Programme Development officer in the division for over 3 years, successfully administering the large multi-country 'Jordan Valley Project', focussing on IBA conservation through ecotourism, education and promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices. Before that Ibrahim had worked in the IUCN Middle East office, the Ministry of Environment in Jordan and with the BirdLife Jordanian Partner, RSCN. (Marco Lambertini via Richard Porter)

Nadim Taleb In December 2004 Nadim Taleb had a serious accident falling down the wet cliffs of Socotra. He was airlifted to Jordan for hospitalisation and treated for a punctured lung, broken hip and many ribs. We are delighted that he is making a good recovery and has been flown back to Yemen. (Richard Porter)

Arabic translation of Birds of the Middle East An Arabic translation of *Birds of the Middle East* is now available on the web at <http://birds.rscn.org.jo/elinks.html>. The translation was made by Saeed Mohamed, OSME Vice President and paid for by RSPB. RSCN in Jordan kindly host the book on their widely used Arabic conservation website.

Lesser White-fronted Goose migration In summer 2004 the Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* Conservation Project and the Goose, Swan and Duck Study Group of Northern Eurasia started a project to unveil the migration route from one of the most important breeding areas for the Lesser White-fronted Goose; the Polar Urals in European Russia. On 24th November one Lesser White-fronted Goose fitted with a satellite transmitter arrived in Haur Al Shubaicha, Iraq, after a journey through the Ob Valley in Russia, Kazakstan, Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey. The journey can be followed at <http://www.piskulka.net/Satellite%20tracking.htm>. For further information contact Tomas Aarvak at the Norwegian Ornithological Society, email: tomas@birdlife.no.

Threatened birds of the world 2004 In March 2004, BirdLife International released *Threatened birds of the world 2004*, a CD-ROM with species fact sheets for all the world's birds. This was the end result of over two years' review and updating of information presented in the monumental *Threatened birds of the world*, published in 2000. IUCN Red List categories were revised for 226 species, and the total number of Globally Threatened Birds has now risen to 1,213 species. The CD contains detailed fact sheets and additional data tables for all threatened and Near-Threatened species as well as for all 7,720 Least Concern species for the first time. This information forms the bird component of the 2004 IUCN Red List. *Threatened birds of the world 2004* is being distributed freely by BirdLife to make the information as widely available as possible.

As part of their annual rolling programme of keeping information and IUCN Red List assessments of the world's birds up-to-date, BirdLife are already reviewing the status of another 70 or so species, to feed any potential revisions into the next IUCN Red List. Please click the Globally Threatened Bird Update button on the BirdLife homepage to visit the Threatened bird discussion forums, where you can view topics describing the species currently under review and contribute your information and opinion on the proposed revisions, as well as suggesting additional species whose IUCN Red List status may now need revising. **Input from birders in the field is very valuable, and any input that is used in updating assessments or factsheets will be acknowledged.** For further information visit the BirdLife's website <http://www.birdlife.org/> and for a free copy of the CD-ROM: please email science@birdlife.org with your postal address.

Phoenix 21 The latest newsletter of the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia Project (ABBA) has recently been published. The 28 page newsletter is packed with news, photos and maps including the first breeding in Arabia of Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* and Bay-backed Shrike *L. vittatus*, Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* as a breeding bird in Arabia, report on ABBA survey 33 to Eastern Yemen (April 2004), breeding birds of Al Wahsen lake UAE, White-tailed Plover *Chettusia leucura* breeding in UAE and breeding birds in Kuwait in 2004. To subscribe to the newsletter contact Michael C. Jennings, Project Co-ordinator Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia and Editor *The Phoenix*, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, England. Tel/Fax 0044 1487 841733 (International). Email: arabian.birds@dial.pipex.com. Website: <http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds>

Zoology in the Middle East The latest issue, Volume 32 (2004), contains papers on the breeding biology of the Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopus syriacus* in the Gaza Strip, the diet and population of the Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria* in the urban environment of Tehran, Iran and the effect of high ambient temperatures on the behaviour of Magpies *Pica pica* in northern Cyprus. In Volume 33 (2004) there is a paper on the diet of Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* in Syria; analysis of pellets

yielded seven mammalian species (five rodents, one insectivore and one lagomorph), unidentified snakes and lizards, three species of birds, five insects, three species of scorpions, and a solifugid. Abstracts of these papers in English and German can be accessed on the journal's website <http://www.kasperek-verlag.de/>

AZERBAIJAN

The new website address for the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society is www.aos.az

KYRGYZSTAN

In late October 2004, seven boxes containing 127 Saker *Falco cherrug* were found being loaded onto a plane bound for Syria. The birds were wearing leather hoods and were destined for the falconry trade in the Middle East. The birds were worth an estimated US\$ 1 million. Members of NABU-Kyrgyzstan, the BirdLife contact organization in Kyrgyzstan assisted. Within a week, 114 of the birds had been returned to the wild, leaving a few sick birds to be treated in captivity. The Kyrgyzstan Saker population is estimated at 60 birds, suggesting that the birds had either been trapped on migration or brought into Kyrgyzstan from elsewhere. (Source: World Birdwatch.)

OMAN

Those interested in seawatching in Oman may like to take a look at the recently updated website <http://oman.seawatching.net/gallery.html> The photo gallery also includes a photo of a Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo cristata*, the first ever for Oman. (Niklas Holmström and Erik Hirschfeld.)

January 2005: deterioration of two key sites in Northern Oman. Khawr Sallan (highlighted in *Birdwatching Guide to Oman*, Eriksen & Sargeant) on the Al Batinah Coast, is a typical narrow semi-saline wetland taking accumulated water from a wadi running to the sea, the sandbar at the seaward end allowing some seepage of salt water at high tide. It was important in winter for assemblages of shorebirds and gulls, Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* being regular and Saunders' Tern *Sterna saundersi*, Caspian Tern *S. caspia* and Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* also occurring. Much material has now been deposited, raising the beach level considerably and stopping water entering the Khawr from the source, the bed of the Khawr being now totally dry; indeed, it may have been graded,

possibly as part of the work on a new park adjacent to the Khawr. The site may now be lost for the foreseeable future. Khawr Kashmir is mentioned in the IBA entry for the Al Batinah Coast as being maintained as a nature reserve, but now 90% of the site is dry, despite considerable rainfall in December and January, only a small puddle remaining from previous visits. Tyre marks on the dry bed suggest this area is not being treated as a nature reserve, whose urban setting may have led to its deterioration, but despite its location, it once held good numbers of terns, waders and wildfowl in winter. Indeed, I recorded Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* there in January 2001. (Derek Moore).

PALESTINE

Two books have recently been published by the Palestine Wildlife Society. *The Breeding Birds in the Jordan River Valley-Jericho area* is a 96-page book published in Arabic. It contains the results of a wildlife survey for the Jordan River Valley area and valuable information about the natural habitats of the valley. Further chapters cover bird migration and wildlife conservation. *Developing Eco-tourism in Palestine* (106 pages) was published within the Eco-tourism project that was funded by GEF/SGP and presents the Eco-tourism concepts in the Palestinian community. This book is published in Arabic with English summaries. For further information visit their website www.wildlife-pal.org (Imad Atrash.)

TURKEY

Doğa Derneği, the recently formed conservation body that has taken over from DHKD as the BirdLife Partner. Güven Eken, formerly from BirdLife's European HQ, is the new Director General. A new Important Bird Area book has been published for Turkey, which covers 184 IBAs in the country. Further work on IBAs and Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) will form the basis of their research programme. Their website can be viewed at <http://www.dogadernegi.org/> (Richard Porter.) Also on this website at www.dogadernegi.org/daghorozu/ you can follow the Caucasian Black Grouse project, accessible also in English (Geoff Welch).

The 7th Turkish Bird Conference was held in Izmir in October. Over 150 Turkish birdwatchers attended the conference, the majority under 30. Two days of talks was followed by two days of trips to the nearby

marshes and mountains. It is pleasing to see such as active birding community in Turkey.

UKRAINE

Summaries from the Ukrainian ornithological journal *Berkut* are available online at http://www.geocities.com/berkut_ua/

YEMEN

Arabian Breeding Bird Atlas Suvey update. 'Recently, I was lucky to reach the al Jawf area, the largest contiguous region in Arabia outside of the core Empty Quarter, not yet visited by an ABBA Survey. It has been rarely visited by outsiders and most of the records on the ABBA database from there were from the collection of Harry Philby who visited the district during his 1936 journey from Najran to the Hadramaut. Al Jawf comprises arid desert with low species diversity; I recorded 27 potential breeding species there, the maximum in a single atlas square being 17 species. Notable records included the second Desert Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo (ascaphalus) desertorum* record for Yemen (probably widespread along the southern edge of the Empty Quarter) and range extensions for the endemic Arabian Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris melanocephala* and Arabian Serin *Serinus rothschildi*. Records collected included the first-ever from one atlas square and several species from two squares that had only one recorded previously. Philby, who visited al Jawf in autumn, collected 12 potential breeders to the eight I observed, possibly reflecting different conditions in 1936. I visited the highlands, Jebel Bura and the Tihama, some notable events including a pair of Bearded Vultures (*Lammergeier*) *Gypaetus barbatus* at a possible nest site, a busy night on Jebel Bura with Hume's (*Strix butleri*), African Scops (*Otus senegalensis*) and Little (*Athene noctua saharae*) Owls and Mountain Nightjar *Caprimulgus poliocephalus* all calling, and on the Tihama an Arabian Golden Sparrow *Passer euchloris* colony of about 2000 pairs. The Mountain Nightjar record (I heard 3-4 at only about 800 m) is probably the first for Yemen but if you have Yemen records of this species please let me know.' (Mike Jennings).

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

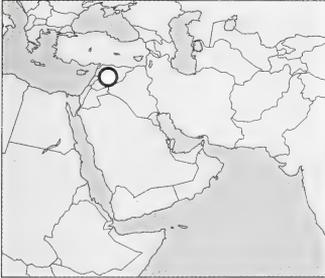
Striated Scops Owl Information on the historical and current distribution and status of Striated Scops Owl *Otus brucei* throughout the species range is requested. According to the literature, the range includes Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, south-central Turkey, southern Iran, eastern Iraq, Syria, western China and Afghanistan. Records for wintering birds and migrants include locations in northwest India, Pakistan, scattered throughout the Arabian Peninsula and Israel. Please send details to Susannah B. Lerman, Dept of Environmental Studies, Antioch New England Graduate School, Keene, NH 03431 USA or email: susannah_lerman@antiochne.edu

Sociable Plovers A colour-ringing project on Sociable Plovers *Chettusia gregaria* has started in the breeding areas east of Lake Tengiz near Korgalzhin, Central Kazakhstan. Between May-July 2004, 22 adult and 94 chicks were fitted with colour rings. The birds were marked with four coloured plastic rings above the tibio-tarsal joint according to standard protocols for waders. Colours used during 2004 were red, light blue, yellow, black and white. Five juveniles were also fitted with Russian metal rings on the left tarsus. This scheme is part of a new long-term study sponsored by BirdLife International on this threatened steppe species. Any re-sighting information, especially movements during the non-breeding season would contribute to our understanding of movements and survival. Sightings with details of colour combinations, location, date, and number of individuals observed should be sent to Dr Will Cresswell, Bute Medical Building, University of St Andrews, Fife, KY16 9TS UK. Tel +44 (0)1334 463010, email will.cresswell@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Dawn Balmer

A long-term bird survey in the central Syrian desert (2000–2003) - Part 1

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A thorough bird survey of the central Syrian desert was conducted during 2000–2003 within the framework of a UN biodiversity conservation project. This central area has received even less bird survey work than the rest of the country. Not unexpectedly, our new records for the area numbered over twice our new records for the country as a whole and included the rediscovery of three bird species after 50–70 years. Our results show that the surveyed area - centred by the Palmyra oasis - is transitional zoogeographically and is probably a crossroad for poorly known migratory flyways for Russian breeders. The conservation relevance of the area has been critically assessed, revealing at least 5 restricted-range bird species, 9 globally threatened species (one 'critically endangered' and 8 'vulnerable'), 3 globally near-threatened species, and some 15 regionally and locally threatened or declining species. A total of over 250 species has been reliably identified during the survey. For each species, quantitative estimations have been made of temporal occurrence distribution throughout the year and of their relative frequency of detection to the total number of detections ($n > 4300$).

Syria is considered one of the most biologically diverse Mediterranean countries, distinguished particularly by its rich and unique assemblages. Although the avifauna is predominantly Western Palearctic, Syria's location on the southeastern border of this somewhat arbitrary zoogeographic area makes it an interesting transitional zone (Martins & Hirschfeld 1998), like the whole Arabian Peninsula. Regional political history since the 1950s and a scarcity of local ornithological expertise have made Syria one of the least known countries of the Middle East. As access became easier from 1993, participation in Syrian birdwatching began to flourish (e.g. Fierant & Hofland 1994, Wester 1998, Vandemeutter & Soors 2001, Murdoch 2002, Le Croisette & Wheeler 2002, Showler & Farrow 2002, Murdoch 2003, Persson *in litt.*, Murdoch *et al.* (2004 and *in litt.*), recently accelerated by the discovery of a relict colony of critically endangered Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*, breeding in the central Syrian desert (Serra *et al.* 2003). Ornithological reference material for Syria remains scanty. Baumgart (1995) provides the most complete review (now also available as an OSME English translation). Our study aimed to integrate and reinforce Baumgart's work, by filling gaps in knowledge of bird distribution and status in the Syrian central desert.

SURVEY AREA AND METHODS

Survey Area

The Syrian semi-arid or desert steppe (*al Badia* in Arabic) - described here as 'desert', 'steppe' or '*al Badia*' - is the area within the average annual rainfall isocline of 250–200 mm, some 55% of the Syrian landscape; agriculture is not sustainable here. The steppe vegetation comprises mainly dwarf shrubs dominated by *Artemisia herba alba* in the lowlands, and by *Salsola* spp in the highlands. Typically of permanent desert, precipitation within *al Badia* is geographically and temporally unpredictable, year on year. For the purposes of our study, we define 'central Syrian desert' as that part of *al Badia* centred on Palmyra oasis (34° 33.196' N, 38° 17.15' E) extending radially for 100–130 km (limit determined by geography), described here also as the 'Palmyran desert'. The *Hamad* desert begins 70–100 km south of Palmyra, forming part of the northern edge of

the Arabic desert plateau that extends as far as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and has a characteristic average annual rainfall of ≤ 125 mm. As a biome, the central Syrian desert can be regarded as a significant and representative portion of the entire Syrian *al Badia*. Four main ecosystems are recognized comprising the central Syrian desert:

1. Open habitats (e.g. flat or undulating, shrubby or barren, sandy or rocky).
2. Natural or artificial oases, and fruit plantations or orchards, some of which are large and ancient, even millenary, as at Palmyra.
3. Seasonal and permanent wetlands (salt lakes, freshwater lakes, reservoirs and ponds).
4. Highlands (400–800 m asl) north of Palmyra (once covered by stands of *Pistacia atlantica* wood, which today have completely disappeared; the gently rolling slopes are often cut by the sheer limestone cliffs of large *wadis* formed by draining floods).

Methods

The survey team, equipped primarily with a 4x4 vehicle, sampled different ecosystems and habitats at regular intervals during each season, covering all locations at different times of day. The predominantly open habitats favoured sight observations and identification, using binoculars and powerful telescope (Swarovski, 20–60x). Each ecosystem and habitat was sampled by several linear transects, coinciding mostly with dirt roads and tracks. Replicating transects was achieved by following stored GPS data. Standardised data sheets were used to record observations, which were stored in a digital database. The team used an 800 mm telephoto lens to photo-document field observations whenever possible.

Bird Survey Context and Purpose

Bird surveys were undertaken within the framework of a project funded by the Italian Government, implemented by the UN-FAO (GCP/SYR/009/ITA) and based in Palmyra, aimed at assisting Syrian authorities in encouraging biodiversity conservation (The Palmyra project). One of its main goals was the establishment of the first functioning protected area in the country (*al Talila* reserve, 220 km²), some 30 km southeast of Palmyra. *Al Talila* is a pristine example of Ecosystem 1 above. A team that included a government representative (Ghazy Al Qaim) from the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, three members of the local community (Mahmud Abdallah, Adeb Al Assaed and Ahmed Khalek Abdallah), and one international UN conservation biologist (Gianluca Serra), carried out a 42-month faunal survey, aimed at preparing an inventory of the reserve and the surrounding area.

The bird checklist produced was based mostly on an intensive survey over the period of May 2000 to November 2003, but we include stringently evaluated opportunistic and anecdotal information, mostly as hypothetical records, obtained directly from Palmyran hunters and Bedouin nomads, and from reliable birdwatchers over the period 1980–2004. We adopted a standard approach to decode and grade the reliability of anecdotal information supplied by local people (e.g. Serra *et al.* 2003). See **SELECTED SPECIES STATUS NOTES** below for how anecdotal and hypothetical information is identified in the text. During the 2000–2002 period, observation effort averaged 3–4 days per week, but this reduced in 2003 to 1–2 days. 2001 and 2002 were dry years and 2003 was wet.

GS was present for most sightings and identifications that occurred while he was training local people. Adeb Al Assaed (AA)¹ and Mahmud Abdallah (MA)², two of the more skilled and experienced project trainees, identified species on their own on some

occasions, but these records required GS to be provided with detailed descriptions. Training references used in the field were; Roché (1993), Porter *et al.* (1996), Cramp & Simmons (1998), Clark (1999), Forsman (1999) and Mullarney *et al.* (1999).

RESULTS

The species list of the birds of the central Syrian desert will appear in Part 2 of this paper and will form the basis of a checklist for the area. It comprises a total of over 4300 confirmed identifications, recorded in a database that itself contains more than 6300 bird sightings. Over 250 species were reliably identified during the study period, of which around 15% were confirmed as breeding locally. Only 8% breeding species are resident throughout the year locally. Subject to review, 16 species may be completely new records for Syria; two species would be new breeders and 3 more represent new winter records. As many as 53 appear to be new records for the central Syrian desert, 10 being new breeding records and one a new winter record. Three are rediscovered species, Northern Bald Ibis and Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*, last recorded some 70 years ago, and (Red-billed) Cough *Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax* previously known from the 1950s (see Baumgart 1995).

Among the central Syrian desert breeders, 30% are not Western Palearctic species, and probable and possible breeding species are of similar proportions. The majority (11) of the confirmed breeders belong to the Saharo-Sindian domain, leaving 2 Palearctic and 3 Middle Eastern or Central Asian, *sensu* Martins & Hirschfeld, (1998). The passage migrant, wintering and vagrant species components of the checklist partly reflect this zoogeographic mixture, but it is enriched by Afrotropical and Eastern Palearctic elements. At least five species detected in the area have substantially restricted distribution ranges globally: Sociable Plover (Lapwing) *Chettusia gregaria* (*Vanellus gregarius*), Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cyprica*, Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*, Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus* and Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus* (Wester 1998).

Nine species found in the period are globally threatened with extinction (IUCN 2004). One in particular is listed as 'Critically Endangered' - Northern Bald Ibis - and 8 as 'Vulnerable'; Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*, Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*, Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*, Spotted Eagle *A. clanga*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, Common Crane *Grus grus* (Russian-population), Great Bustard *Otis tarda* and Sociable Plover³. Three species are designated 'Lower Risk - Near-Threatened' globally: Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* and Syrian Serin. Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* might soon also be listed as globally threatened because of its poorly-known (data-deficient) distribution in China.

Based on Baumgart (1995), on comparisons between our data and those collected (in the same area) by Goodbody (1945), Peters (1956) and Macfarlane (1978), and reinforced by the anecdotal, empirical information we obtained from local people, we conclude that the number of species now locally and regionally threatened is quite substantial. Examples are; Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, Northern Bald Ibis, several goose (*Anser*) spp, (Eurasian) Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*, Lappet-faced Vulture, Black (Cinereous) Vulture *Aegyptius monachus*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, breeding Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* and Peregrine *F. peregrinus*, (also passage Saker, Lanner and Peregrine), Great and Houbara Bustards and Barn Owl *Tyto alba*.

SELECTED SPECIES STATUS NOTES

Note that text enclosed by braces in bold, thus {...}, relates to the invaluable complementary vernacular (anecdotal) information from local residents of the central Syrian

desert. Any single such record has little value on its own, but the sum of all records of indigenous origin (as recently in Turkey and Australia) can provide useful background information that, after considering its provenance, often can be assessed with, and compared to, pertinent academic data. Text enclosed by brackets in bold, thus [...], represents either introduced (escaped) species or hypothetical information that nevertheless may be of use to future visitors to the central Syrian desert.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Its main migration route passes through western Syria (Baumgart 1995), but some birds seem to cross the desert, possibly Russian breeders. On 18 and on 27 August 2001 relatively large flocks (2000 and 1000 birds respectively) were migrating about 60–90 km north of Palmyra.

Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*

In early spring 2002, we instigated an intensive search for a 'lost colony' of Northern Bald Ibis in the highlands and on cliffs north of Palmyra, having evaluated AA's insistent reports. We were rewarded by the discovery of a relict breeding colony of 7 adult ibises (Serra 2003). Key aspects of the discovery were a systematic survey of optimal nesting habitats and the patience to learn from the comprehensive understanding of the natural world possessed by the local people; their non-systematic information requires careful evaluation to obtain data on which reasonable search and identification hypotheses and deductions can be based (Serra *et al.* 2003). We found that this critically endangered species, far from having becoming extinct in the Syrian desert in the early 1930s (Safriel 1980, Collar & Stuart 1985, Baumgart 1995), had suffered a dramatic decline only since the late 1970s. The Palmyra project implemented three subsequent protection programmes during the 2002 and 2004 breeding seasons, involving *al Talila* staff and local nomads, enabling the colony to achieve significant breeding success; the per pair rates were one chick in 2002 (dry), 2.3 in 2003 (wet) and 2 in 2004 (intermediate). In 2002 and 2003, the ibises remained in the breeding area from 18–20 February to 8–10 July.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus [ruber] roseus* (Knox *et al.* 2002)

Macfarlane's (1978) reports of 50 flamingos in *Sabkha al Moh* in May 1972, and 50–90 on 19–20 November 1974, enables an interesting comparison with the 80 or so wintering birds we found in January–February 2003 and the 45–56 in January 2004 (both wet winters). Note that none or very few (4–6) were present during the dry winters of 2001 and 2002. Taking into account fluctuations in the numbers present due to the extent of winter precipitation, these data indicate that in the long-term (since 1974), the number of flamingos using the *sabkha* has remained stable.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Six individuals stayed at a reservoir north of Palmyra (*Sed Wadi Abiad*) between mid-December 2001 and mid-February 2002; during this period hunters shot one bird.

Anser spp.

{AA has reported the occurrence of *Anser* spp. at least twice since about 1986: the earlier report was of thousands of *Anser* spp. around a seasonal salt lake (*Sabkha al Kowm*) about 80 km north-east of Palmyra and the later (1989) was in the *Hamad* desert. AA has also indicated that *Anser* spp. were commonly seen in winter in the *Hamad* desert in thousands before 1986. The geese used seasonal freshwater ponds (*khabbra*) for roosting and fed on seasonal grasslands}. During the project period (42 months) only one bird was recorded, flying over a reservoir in the *Hamad* desert 100

km south of Palmyra on 13 November 2000. This description suggests a huge decline locally since 1986: likely reasons are that sheep have increased in number, the grassland has degraded and hunting has been uncontrolled. {AA describes how the hunters from a village (*Qarietin*) 100 km from Palmyra once 'fished' for geese in the *Hamad* desert using a line and hook. AA claims never to have shot at geese because their taste was unpleasant; apparently the Bedouin share this view}.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*

In 2002, we examined a stuffed bird that had been shot in 1994 in the highlands north of Palmyra (*Jebel Abu Rigimin*). {The hunter said it was in a flock of hundreds}. The identity of the stuffed specimen was based on the body size (length 64 cm), bill size, the white patch extending from bill almost the top of the head and an absence of dark belly patches.

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

AA's report led to our recording a resident colony in February 2001, on a sheer limestone cliff about 20–30 km northeast of Palmyra. In spring 2001 the colony comprised 4–5 breeding pairs from a total of some 15 birds. A summer count in 2003 registered about 35 birds, but only 4–6 breeding pairs were present in April 2004. Interestingly, Evans' (1994) 1943 record of a colony of 8 breeding pairs located 'in the mountains 15 km north of Palmyra' could well refer to our colony site. The apparent reduction in colony breeding numbers is probably significant, but there are too few records to be certain. This may be the second-last surviving Syrian breeding colony, the other being in a Yarmuk River canyon at the Syria-Jordan-Israel border (pers. obs.). {AA reminisces that only 10 years ago Griffon Vultures were very common in the central Syrian desert, information aligning with Evans (1994)}. Contributory causes of such a dramatic decline probably include Bedouin and others' use of poisoned carcasses to control wolf populations, itself a conservation issue, and to uncontrolled hunting.

Lappet-faced and Black (Cinereous) Vultures *Torgos tracheliotus* and *Aegypius monachus*
{Of reports we received of 'large black vultures' from hunters and Bedu nomads during 1995–2001, four are assessed as reliable, although species cannot be assigned; of these, AA supplied two. Consistent with the findings of Evans (1994), AA reminisced that before 1985 'large black vultures' were quite common in the highlands north of Palmyra and in the *Hamad* desert. AA advised that a relative once killed a black vulture to cook its breast in wheat in the belief that to eat it would cure a certain illness}. Bedouin nomads also share this belief. The 'black vultures' also may have suffered from shepherds' use of poisoned carcasses.

Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*

{AA saw 5 'large black vultures' and a Griffon Vulture around a carcass in the *Hamad* desert in autumn 2002. The black vultures were larger than the Griffon Vulture and had reddish crowns, a feature that reliably separates adult Lappet-faced from Black Vulture}. Interestingly, Evans (1994) and Baumgart (1995) both mention two specimens of Lappet-faced Vulture in the Palmyra Museum. The specimens, apparently shot in the surrounding desert, are no longer on display.

Black (Cinereous) Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

One was shot and stuffed in autumn 2002 near *Qarietin* village. We had the opportunity to examine and identify the stuffed bird. Evans (1994) reported a stuffed specimen in the Palmyra Museum, but it is no longer on display. One was soaring

above the *Wadi Abiad* reservoirs, heading southwest, in late September 2004, some 12 km north of Palmyra.

[[Dark Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates*

AA reported sighting a singleton in the *Hamad* desert during the 1995–96 winter, about 40 km south of Palmyra, emphasising its ‘very long legs’ when the bird on the ground, when compared to Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*, with which he is familiar, having trapped and trained one for hunting before.]]. Treated as hypothetical.

***Aquila* spp.**

Apart from identified *Aquila* spp (not listed here), we saw at least 5 unidentified *Aquila* spp. in the study area in 2000–2003 (1 in January, 1 in February, 2 in March and 1 in May).

[[Black-winged (-shouldered) Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

AA saw one in the *Hamad* desert in November of 1997 or 98, attracted to ground bait intended to trap small falcons (Typically, the trap is a small cage with nooses on top and a live rodent inside). The bird watched the bait for a while, but flew away. AA describes it as a very small raptor, with a ‘slower’ flight than a falcon, and almost completely white. Another hunter, known to be reliable, related a similar account for 1996 in the same area]]. Treated as hypothetical.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

Peters (1956) reported a colony of Lesser Kestrel within the Palmyra ruins during 1948–50. There is no current trace or memory of this colony; Macfarlane (1978) made no mention of it. Small colonies, a few pairs strong, still breed in the mountain range north of Palmyra. Lesser Kestrel is not ‘sporadic’ on passage as stated by Baumgart (1995); rather, there is a remarkable passage both in spring (April–May) and in autumn (September–October) through Palmyra oasis and the surrounding desert.

Small *Falco* spp.

During the study period, there were several unidentified small falcons, probably Hobby *F. subbuteo* or Red-footed Falcon *F. vespertinus*: in 2002, 1 in April and 1 in November. Other unidentified falcons, possibly Red-footed Falcon, Hobby or Merlin *F. columbarius* were: in 2001, 3 in January, 1 in February, 1 in September and 3 in October and in 2002, 3 in November and 3 in December.

Large *Falco* spp.

Four unidentified large *Falco* spp. were recorded during the study period (3 in September 2001 and 2002 and 1 in December 2003). We failed to detect any large falcons breeding in the central Syrian desert during the 42 months of the survey. {Consistent with Macfarlane (1978) (see also Lanner Falcon *F. biarmicus* below), a relative of AA recalled large falcons breeding in a limestone cliff north of Palmyra at least until the 1950s}. The lucrative practice of trapping and trading live falcons for falconry began at that time and is surely the main cause of the disappearance of large falcons as breeding birds in the central Syrian desert.

Eleonora’s Falcon *Falco eleonora*

In mid-October 2002, Bedouin hunters captured a juvenile – which was examined alive by the authors. Three individuals were seen flying together over Palmyra oasis on 7 November 2002.

[Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*

The authors made two observations in the central Syrian desert of a medium-sized falcon, apparently uniformly dark-coloured, (April 2000 and June 2001). Because our identification remains uncertain, this hypothetical observation will be omitted from the Part 2 species list].

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*

According to Macfarlane (1978), Lanner Falcon probably still bred within the Palmyran *al Badia* in the mid-1970s. We found no evidence of breeding during 2000–2004, supporting the melancholy conclusion that over-trapping for falconry has eliminated the breeding population in the desert. We recorded some recent trapped migrating Lanners: 1 juvenile in September–November 2002 (examined alive by the authors), 1 juvenile on 18 October 2003 (examined and photographed alive by the authors) and 1 juvenile male *erlangeri* on 26 November 2003 (examined alive by the authors).

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*

Our records of live captures by falcon trappers within central Syrian desert during the study period are: 1 in mid-October 2000 (picture seen by the authors), {1 on 15 September 2001, was reported by AA and is said to have been sold for \$30,000US to Damascus intermediaries}, 3 juveniles in September–October 2002 ({2 reported to} and 1 seen alive by the authors), 2 in September–November 2003 ({1 reported to} and 1 seen alive by the authors). {According to AA, the trappers' yearly autumn bag of Saker has decreased by about 90% since 1984}. [A medium- to large-sized falcon seen in flight in February 2001 by the authors in the desert on the edge of Palmyra had brown upperparts and a boldly-streaked body. It had small moustachial markings. Its wings were quite long and the primaries darkish. Its flight was fast and rather 'loose'. At times, while flying, it briefly aimed at sparrows and doves. Our hypothetical identification could have been the first of a Saker Falcon in the central Syrian desert in February].

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Peregrine is by far the falcon most frequently trapped in the desert. Our records captures during the study period are: 2 in May 2001, 21 in September–November 2001, 15 in September–November 2002, 2 in July 2003, 11 in September–November 2003. {AA estimates that the trappers' yearly autumn Peregrine bag has decreased by 70–80% since 1984}.

[[Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus*

During the 42 months of the project survey, we received several reports from falcon trappers about rare sightings and captures of a very large white falcon (called locally '*al abiad*', 'the white one'). From quite a number of reports, possibly the most reliable are: AA describing chasing an individual by car in the *Hamad* desert in autumn 1980, but the bird crossed into Iraq; AA examining an individual captured alive in 1997 in the desert some 30 km west of Palmyra; lastly, the trapping of a bird in 1998–99 in the desert east of the Euphrates, for which \$160,000US was reportedly paid by Gulf falconers. Our present knowledge of Gyrfalcon movements makes a natural explanation unlikely of sightings of such a high-latitude raptor species and then of only the morph prized by falconers, particularly in the absence of any kind of corroborative information, such as photographs⁴.] Treated as an escape, *pro tem*.

{Sand or See-See Partridges *Ammoperdix heyi* or *A. griseogularis*

AA reports seeing six together (one was killed) in the *Hamad* desert in 1996. He states that it is resident in certain *Hamad* desert habitats, especially in stony *wadis*. It is not clear whether these partridges are very rare or simply overlooked}.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Every year the *al Talila* reserve hosts about 100–200 cranes, from November to March. Some 600 birds stopped over for a week in in mid-March 2001. They also use the adjacent *Sabkha al Moh* salt lake. Significant spring passage takes place in mid-March. A relatively limited segment of their northward migratory flyway is yet known, north of Palmyra, following the sheer cliffs marking the ridge on a southeast-northwest orientation (*Jebel Abiad*).

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*

Unfortunately, contrary to Evans (1994), we found no evidence during the project that this species occurred. {Moreover, AA and other local hunters had never seen it within the Palmyran *al Badia*}.

Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*

According to Pyman (1953), Houbara Bustard was often seen within the Palmyran *al Badia* during 1948–50. {AA describes it as a common bird until the mid-1980s, which is consistent with Evans (1994)}. It is extremely rare nowadays (1 sighting in 42 months). Comparison of past and present accounts testifies to a dramatic drop in occurrence rates (mirrored across its range) in *al Badia* since about 1964, undoubtedly due in part to over-hunting (it is the favourite prey of Arab hunters); the destruction of vegetation cover has also had a severe effect. {AA advised that its favourite habitat was shrubby plains and volcanic rock areas}.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*

{AA advises that this bird, usually seen in flocks, was still very common until about 1994 in the Palmyran *al Badia*, as given in Evans (1994), its favourite habitats being stony and barren undulating fields and *wadis*. One morning AA found a recently abandoned roost, identified as such by the tracks and the soil scratches, of several birds. Local people reported that it had been seen on at least 3 occasions during the 2003–2004 winter (groups of 16, 3 and 2 birds) in an area some 40–50 km northeast of Palmyra}. Accompanied by AA, Team C of the OSME-supported 2004 Expedition surveyed the same area in late February, but without success.

Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*

A flock of 7–10 individuals was detected in an open, flat area scattered with shrubs, on 22 March 2001 (the *Hamad* desert, about 50–80 km south of Palmyra). Our identification was based on the upperwing being coloured dark grey and a white patch displayed on the upperwing.

Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria*

We registered 1 possible and 4 confirmed detections during the study period: 14 February 2001, 10–15 unidentified lapwings were seen flying over hilly and shrubby steppe in *al Talila* reserve; the same day and at almost the same place, 5 were noted in flight; on 7 March 2001, 17 birds, in flocks of 4 and 13, were within 10–15 m on flat and sparse shrub-steppe just outside *al Talila* reserve; on 7–8 March 2003, a bird was shot (later identified by the authors) by a Palmyran hunter on open steppe adjacent to *al Talila* reserve {reportedly part of a small flock}, and lastly, on 22 February 2004, Team B of the OSME-supported Expedition saw 4 flying over open shrubby habitat of *al Talila* reserve. We suggest from present and past data that Sociable Plover uses *al Talila* reserve regularly, as for wintering or as a spring passage migrant (*cf* Evans 1994).

[Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

A trained reserve ranger claims to have seen and identified a Red-necked Phalarope in Sed Arak reservoir, 40 km northeast of Palmyra in September 2001, but he did not provide a full description, disqualifying this record from the Part 2 species list]. However, at Sed Wadi Abiad (some 35 km from Sed Arak) early on 19 April 2004, German birder Hannes Uhlig videoed a female.

Description: Swimming in typical circles and feeding from the surface, the bird had a very long thin bill and had a black crown, forehead and eye surrounds. It had a white throat and red collar, the breast being grey and the back dark grey with two yellowish linear stripes.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*

A single bird was seen on 12 September 2001 at *Sed Arak* and on 13 June 2004 at *Sed Wadi Abiad*. The latter observation of this marsh tern, partly in summer plumage, gave good views of its black cap, white patches on the upperwing and black tips to the outer primaries.

{Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus*

AA regards it as resident in the Palmyran *al Badia*, occurring within both the *Hamad* desert and the vicinity of *Sukhna* (a village 80 km northeast of Palmyra). It favours flat plains possessing shrubs and volcanic rocks. He usually identifies it by its diagnostic call. Supposedly, it occurs in smaller flocks (less than 20–30 birds) than Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *P. alchata*. AA last saw this species in the *Hamad* desert in autumn 2003).

{Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

AA saw a Barn Owl leaving a well at *Tarfa* oasis, some 30 km northwest of Palmyra, in about 1984. Other old sightings recalled by locals were of small to medium-sized white owls occurring at Palmyra oasis. No Barn Owls were seen or heard during the study period, indicating that the species has probably disappeared from the central Syrian desert since then}.

[[Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca*

MA found one perched on top of scaffolding in small hangar in the desert about 50 km west of Palmyra in the winter of 1981. He watched it at close range before catching it after climbing the scaffolding slowly and taking it by surprise from behind. He described it as an owl, about Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* in size, but completely white. Although Porter *et al.* (1996) report that 1st-year Snowy Owls have been recorded in northeast Iran in winter, it is likely that this bird was an escape, because it was so unwary]]. Treated as an escape.

Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii*

A few scattered individuals were seen in July 2000 on *al Talila* reserve, but identification remained unconfirmed, and others were noted in spring 2003 at *Wadi Abiad*, a first record for Syria (this issue). Murdoch *et al.* (this issue) later also identified them there.

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*

Kinzelbach (1986) stated that White-cheeked Bulbul was a resident breeder at Palmyra oasis 1977–79. Vandemeutter & Soors (2001) and Murdoch (2002) support this contention to a limited extent, reporting the species along the Euphrates. However, we failed to find it from 2000–2003 in the Palmyra area. We suspect that Kinzelbach's records of this common Middle Eastern cagebird were of escapes that failed to

establish themselves in the medium term. However, Palmyra oasis may be the species westernmost limit of its unstable distribution range, where it may appear from time to time, or the results may simply reflect a long-term decline since the 1970s.

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*

Seen in a patch of trees on 8 and 10 May in *al Talila* reserve, Thrush Nightingale can be separated reliably from Common Nightingale *L. megarhynchos*, because the latter in the Levant is paler than birds in western Europe, whereas the former has darker upperparts, mottled breast, and white vent.

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

Separated from Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens* essentially by its broader black patch on a pale orange-hued chest, their lack of rusty undertail, and particularly by the absence of upperwing white patches; we noted also that Pied Wheatear had a very dark head patch, highlighting the feathering below it almost into a supercilium. We separated *pleschanka* from Cyprus Pied Wheatear *O. cypriaca* by noting the former's white rump patch extending well between the wings and the latter's creamy belly. *O. pleschanka* was seen on at least 15 occasions during period February–June 2000–2003, mostly occurring on gentle rocky slopes.

Cyprus Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca*

Separated from Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens* in the same way as Pied Wheatear *O. pleschanka* was (see previous account). Separated from Pied Wheatear by noting Pied's white rump patch and Cyprus Pied's creamy belly. *O. cypriaca* was seen in 10 occasions during March–April 2001 and 2002, mostly in open habitats, when we obtained a good photograph.

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

Despite Porter *et al.* (1996) and Mullarney *et al.* (1999) emphasising that a grey-buff top to the head separates not only Cyprus Pied and Pied Wheatears but also South Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* from Mourning Wheatear, all the Mourning Wheatears we recorded in our area also had an evident grey-buff top to the head, a significant source of possible confusion. Our identification of Mourning Wheatear was based on its rusty undertail, its extensive white patch on the upperwing (seen only in flight) and the white rump patch extending to between the wings. It is a very common resident in the study area, breeding on rocky slopes.

Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha*

This species was found and identified three times in the study area in 2001 (on 29 April and 23 September beside a pond in *al Talila* reserve, and on 17 October at *Sed Wadi Abiad*). The latter observation was one of an adult male, identified by black feathering to the lower chest, its characteristic tail pattern and the white cap to the head.

White-crowned (-tailed) Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*

We identified this species by its tail pattern especially to separate it from the black-morph Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens*, and by its black head and body, on two different occasions, on 17 November 2001 close to a sheer limestone cliff (*Douara*), some 20 km north of *al Talila* reserve, and on 16 March 2004 in *al Talila* reserve itself.

Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli*

Our identification is based on noting very clear white edges to the tertials and secondaries, contrasting with dark grey of the back, a pointed dark grey head and

clear 'Zapata moustache', the weak reddish hue round the eye and that the species occurred in isolated, scrubby habitat on a steep rocky slope. Most probably the same individual was seen each time soon after sunset at the same roost site, behind a small shrub hanging down from a short ledge on a rocky, shrubby slope, on 20 and 21 March 2004. It is the tomb area of rolling hills amid the Palmyra ruins.

Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*

Noticeably smaller than Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, its *Oenanthe*-like tail pattern was seen on two different occasions, on 5 November 2003 some 10–20 km south of *al Talila* reserve and on 12 January 2004 in an isolated patch of trees in the middle of the desert.

CONSERVATION IMPLICATIONS

The harsh semi-arid conditions of *al Badia* account for the low percentage of breeding birds (migratory and resident) detected during the survey (just over 15% of the total). Such landscape typically has a variable and unpredictable annual occurrence and amount of precipitation, explaining the sporadic and opportunistic breeding of several bird species, perhaps 8. The majority of species detected by the survey are therefore seasonal residents (summer migrant breeders and winterers) and regular passage migrants and vagrants, some 92% of the total.

Migration passage through the Palmyra oasis and its *al Badia* environs appears quite remarkable. The oasis and the adjacent seasonal salt lake (*Sabkha Al Moh*) is therefore likely to act as a bottleneck, attracting the passing birds from hundreds of kilometres away. Not so much a spectacular flyway like that the Lebanon and Palestine coasts, but rather a secondary broad front, it likely is used mostly by the breeding birds of western and central Russia, whose migration concentrates in the corridor between the Black and Caspian Seas. Our present study confirms the mixed zoogeographic character of the central Syrian avifauna; one third of the breeding species are not from the Western Palearctic domain.

The strategic conservation importance of the central Syrian desert is highlighted in the present study. Part 2 of this paper not only records at least five bird species with globally restricted distribution ranges, it also discusses 9 that are listed as globally threatened and 3 described as globally near-threatened. Perhaps more important, from a Syrian perspective, it covers 18 declining regionally and about the same number declining locally. Quite apart from the conservation aspects, the above information also emphasises that the central Syrian desert is of great interest to botanists, entomologists and other biologists, as well as to ornithologists and birders.

The political and social history of the study area and of much of Syria as a whole since the mid-20th century has left neither time nor opportunity for conservation issues to be understood and tackled, circumstances best understood against a background of the need of the largely rural human population simply to survive. The unavoidable absence of conservation in national and local priorities until recently meant, by definition, that no money was available to raise awareness and educate the young about the environment and their place in it. In turn, at official level, often there is scant awareness amongst Syrian official and society itself about the conservation importance of Syria's remaining biodiversity. There are many indications of how Syrian biodiversity has experienced a widespread and unrelenting process of degradation since the mid-1980s, and that worse still, continues unabated. This decline is typified by the severe decline or disappearance of many large mammals,

such as Arabian oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, goitered gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*, mountain gazelle *G. gazella*, Saudi gazelle *G. saudiya*, cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*, South Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr*, Syrian ass *Equus hemionus hemippus* and Nubian ibex *Capra (ibex) nubiana*. Unfortunately many bird species likewise have declined, some to local extinction, such as Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, Northern Bald Ibis, several goose (*Anser*) spp, Griffon Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Black (Cinereous) Vulture, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, several breeding and passage falcon (*Falco*) spp, Great Bustard, Houbara Bustard and Barn Owl.

The two main proximal causes of widespread biodiversity degradation in *al Badia* are firstly, habitat destruction due both to sheep overgrazing and to shrub removal for firewood, and secondly, a combination of uncontrolled hunting (Syrian and foreign hunters) and of non-selective predator control (poisoned carcass baits). The former has initiated severe and widespread desertification throughout the whole *al Badia* since about 1989. The Palmyran people assert that sandstorms have increased in intensity, which if objectively confirmed, is only to be expected. The over-exploitation of natural resources derived from several root causes:

1. Land-use regulation since the 1960s when an open access system replaced the traditional tribal-controlled system.
2. A rapid increase in the demographic rate.
3. The effects of changing technology, such as the use of vehicles by nomads during migration and to transport water to livestock, and improved veterinary support reducing stock losses.

Since 1991 there has been a moratorium on hunting in Syria, but this edict seems to lack enforcement. In particular, foreign hunters use modern and inappropriate weaponry in a highly destructive and non-selective way. During our project, we had obtained a quite deep insight into the practice of falcon trapping, the demand for which is fuelled regionally by Gulf falconers, peaking during autumn passage (September–November). Falcon trapping is widespread throughout *al Badia*, involving at least a hundred people from Palmyra alone; perhaps more than 2–300 others may operate across the whole Palmyran *al Badia* between September and November. It is a very popular practice nationally, but the desert is the optimal hunting ground, its open landscape ideal for finding ground-resting falcons at a distance. The trappers' bag comprises mostly Peregrines, followed by Lanners and Sakers. The *Hamad* desert, being open and largely flat, allowing perched falcons to be seen easily, is the area favoured by trappers.

Until the mid-20th century, capturing and trading live falcons in the Arabian deserts was probably still sustainable. It probably became unsustainable (and highly lucrative) once the Saudi Arabian oil boom began in the 1950s. Bedu nomads began to trap falcons commercially, after a man from the *Sba'a* tribe, obtained the latest trapping technique from Egypt in 1954⁵. Palmyran falcon trappers assert that the trend of annual bags since the mid-1980s has been of steady decline.

We are encouraged greatly that since 1999 the Syrian Government has shown increasing concern about its national natural heritage by its involvement in the setting up of several biodiversity conservation projects, including the Palmyra project. These actions followed Syria's signing the Convention on Biodiversity in 1995; a National Country Study of Biodiversity and a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan have been prepared. As always, the size of the conservation infrastructure means that the funding of approved projects lags behind the establishment of protected areas,

and the Syrian Government will have a very difficult task, given the rapid decline in biodiversity, to match resources to the task. The major challenge is to make the 20 or so protected areas functional, by budgetary planning and implementation, and by recruiting and training capable and motivated staff to devise and adapt scientifically derived management plans. Even *al Talila* reserve, acknowledged as the most advanced protected area in Syria, is not yet self-sustaining or operating to recognised international standards.

Although it has begun to be recognised in many parts of the world that the local people have much to contribute to issues such as the planning, development and implementation of protected areas, their involvement often leading to a commitment to support these areas as a matter of pride and honour, in Syria this has not yet a commonplace part of general policy. Eco-tourism development suggestions largely stem from developers, who have a vested interest in the construction of the physical infrastructure to support their concepts; buildings can therefore appear without a proper consideration of their cultural and environmental impact. The importance of preserving biodiversity and the cultural and landscape heritage appears not to have been addressed by the Syrian regional and local authorities with an understanding of their value to the country and its people. The Palmyra project recently prepared conservation recommendations for the Syrian Ministry of Environmental Affairs; these were aimed at protecting the remaining fauna of *al Badia* (Serra 2002), and are summarised below:

- Halting poaching by foreign hunters.
- Halting the use of poisoned carcasses as predator bait.
- Regulating hunting by nationals to comply with current understanding of potential quarry species, including prohibition of hunting of threatened and declining species. To achieve adequate enforcement, funding is essential to purchase equipment and to train local people.
- Reforming the land tenure system so that that the user is made responsible for the natural resources on which the tenant depends.
- Facilitating (by subsidy) provision of viable appropriate-technology alternative methods cooking and providing fuel supplies to nomads (gas stoves and cooking sets are a possible short-term solution), while banning uprooting of shrubs, which will require enforcement.
- Establishing protected areas whose extent and boundaries are defined by soundly-based scientific surveys to allow subsequent monitoring.
- Providing each protected area with a practical budget, qualified and trained staff, proper equipment and a scientifically-based management plan.
- Providing the country with a national legal framework regulating the staffing and managing of protected areas, and ensuring that the benefits from eco-tourism go to the local communities.
- Raising the awareness of decision makers about the necessity of involving local communities in the process of planning, developing and implementing protected areas, and about the risks of developing uninformed mass eco-tourism that benefits only tour operators and urban investors [e.g., the eco-tourism development at *Wadi Rum* reserve in Jordan, Chatelard (2003)].
- By using the Northern Bald Ibis as a symbol (a flagship species) to counter desert biodiversity destruction, designing, planning and implementing a national awareness-raising campaign targeted at decision makers and at Syrian society at

large about the need to protect nature and the necessity of exploiting resources in a sustainable way.

- Including ecology and conservation education in the curriculum of intermediate and secondary schools and at universities.

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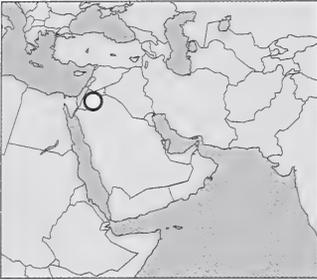
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- 1 AA is a most experienced and authoritative hunter from Palmyra, specialized in bustards and sandgrouse and also in trapping falcons for the falconry trade., with over 40 years of experience, He gained during the survey work significant credibility through the detection of several interesting non-passerines species, the most spectacular being Northern Bald Ibis.
- 2 MA, a former driver for the Palmyra project, is now employed as a reserve ranger on *al Talila*, because of his empathy with the natural world and his skill as a nature photographer. He reached an excellent standard in bird identification in the field during his training on the project.
- 3 Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria* might be soon upgraded from 'Vulnerable' to 'Endangered' or even 'Critically Endangered' (Collar *et al. in prep*), and Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus* from 'Lower Risk – Near-Threatened' to 'Vulnerable'.
- 4 There are several hypotheses to account for the claimed Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* sightings. Three are discussed here: **1. Misidentification.** Because AA has over 40 years' experience in trapping falcons, simple misidentification is felt to be unlikely. During the 42 months of the project survey work, AA consistently displayed a deep knowledge of these bird taxa, but of course this is based on the species he encountered. Now, the extent to which other large falcon species found in Syria in the wild are liable to produce very pale or leucistic individuals is not known, nor is their survival rate. However, a common event amongst species bred in captivity is the production of pale or leucistic individuals (see **2. Escapes** below), but the extent to which this occurs in large falcons is not known; understandably, there are no data on numbers taken, held, bred, bought and sold in Syria, let alone the raising of pale 'sports'. **2. Escapes.** An escaped large falcon species 'sport' is a strong candidate for misidentification. A white-morph Gyr Falcon escape is very possible, given that it is known to be in captivity in the region. There is the suggestion from Syrian handlers trappers and falconers can distinguish by its behaviour an escaped falcon that has received training from wild birds; UK falconers who have lost birds of native UK species believe that this is not always the case; far more reliable is the use of jesses. In Syria, the guardians of escaped falcons issue an alert and description of the bird, promising a reward to the finder. However, given the prices quoted elsewhere in this paper that captured falcons have fetched, the offer of a reward seems no guarantee of a successful return. {Reportedly, trappers usually return an escaped falcon to the owner because buyers would not confuse it with a wild bird, since it is of lower value}. **3. Frequent Juvenile Vagrancy.** There are no data to suggest that dark and pale juvenile Gyr Falcon morphs differ in the extent of their vagrancy, but juveniles, especially those from continental Arctic Russia (Cramp and Simmons 1998) are dispersive. It is also possible that white morph juvenile vagrancy might predominate from yet-to-be-identified populations with higher pale to dark ratios. The white morph occurs in Greenland, Arctic North America and northeast Asia (Clark 1999); Greenland individuals sporadically reach northern Europe during their winter dispersion, rarely occurring south of 60°N, but there are reports of them reaching as far south as northern Italy and Portugal (Cramp and Simmons 1998). There is very little information about movements of white morph Gyr Falcon juveniles from northeast Asia.
- 5 The first record of the modern falcon trade in Syria comes from 1950, when someone from the village of *Rokhaiba*, not far from Damascus, caught and sold 4 falcons to a Saudi Arabian prince. He had used a less sophisticated technique than that obtained from Egypt. Then, following the nomads' example, the villagers of the Syrian desert began to trap falcons for trade, at *Qarietin* from 1960 and in Palmyra from the mid-1960s.

Distribution and habitat associations of selected breeding birds in Wadi Araba, Jordan

MOHAMMED AL-SHAMLIH, KHALED NASSAR & FARES KHOURY



The distribution and habitat associations of birds in the flat areas of Wadi Araba were studied for the first time during the breeding season. Birds were censused and habitat variables estimated in different habitat types, ranging from sand dunes to alluvial fans, acacia stands and salt marsh. The variation of abundance of a few species was explained adequately with multiple regressions of two or more habitat variables. The impact of agricultural projects in this arid area was indicated by local absence of characteristic species of sandy habitats e.g. Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* and an increase in the number of opportunistic species e.g. Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* and Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*. Significant records included Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *Pterocles lichtensteinii*, Black Bush Robin *Cercotrichas podobe* (2nd records for Jordan), Temminck's Eremophila *bilopha* and Thick-billed Larks *Ramphocoris clotbey* (1st in Wadi Araba), as well as Rufous Bush Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* and Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis*, which were present at the newly established farms.

Wadi Araba is the southern continuation of the rift valley in Jordan. It comprises a variety of desert habitats ranging from sand dunes, gravel plains and alluvial fans to salt marshes and acacia stands. The geographical location of Wadi Araba and its favourable environment for many floral and faunal elements of afro-tropical origin has produced a Sudanian penetration zone, which extends all along the Araba valley up to the Dead Sea and the northern Jordan Valley (Al-Eisawi 1985). Because most of the area of Wadi Araba is a closed military zone, its birds are poorly known. Its standing as one of the least spoilt areas of Jordan is under threat, as local urbanisation and the current expansion of agricultural projects are affecting the ecosystem, modifying the unique habitats at an increasing rate. The aim of this study was to analyse the distribution and habitat associations of bird species and determine current and future anthropogenic impacts.

STUDY AREA

The study area comprised a corridor extending for 120km between Aqaba international airport in the south and Al-Ghweibeh village in the north, limited to only the flat low-lying plain below the eastern rift margin's foothills and stretching west to the Jordanian-Israeli border. Apart from the border area to the north (north of Beir Madhkur), the entire study area was covered. The area's altitude ranges from about 30 to 200 m asl from south to north (the Risha watershed). The climate is generally hot and hyper-arid, the mean annual precipitation being around 50 mm or less. The occasional rainfalls usually occur during the winter months when temperatures average 15–20 degrees lower than summer. Bedouin goats and camels graze widely, but less intensively near the borders. Several large and intensive irrigated farming projects, exploiting ground water, are ongoing in parts of the study area. They include fenced areas lined with introduced trees to act as windbreaks.

METHODS

Quantitative data on birds and habitat variables were collected daily during the breeding season using the line transect (centralised track) method (Bibby *et al.*, 1992), from early March to mid-May 2004, from sunrise to 10:00 am. Many sites were revisited to check for late arrivals of locally breeding birds such as Rufous Bush Robin.

Each line transect was 1 km long and approximately 200 m wide. Birds beyond the belt and those just overflying were omitted from the analysis. Migrants, aerial insectivores and species with large home ranges, which do not breed in the study area itself, e.g. Tristram's Grackle *Onycognathus tristramii* and Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* were also excluded. The locations of line transects for each habitat type were randomly selected on topographic maps and located in the field using GPS. Transects were performed in a south-north direction, in order to keep the whole route in the same habitat-type, habitat gradients being mostly along the east-west axis. The number of transects in each habitat type corresponded approximately to the area covered by the habitat type in the study area, except for the small salt marsh, where the number of transects was proportionately higher. Observers also carried out transects along the boundaries of farms located in sandy habitats, by walking parallel to the fence at some 50–100 m away, thus surveying both the surrounding habitat and the boundaries for birds. These transects were the same length (1 km) as transects in 'unaffected' habitats, but were not randomly selected because there are relatively few large farms in the area. The study comprised 107 line transects in all: 52 in sandy habitats (15 near farms and 37 remote), 22 in rocky habitats, 24 in acacia stands and 9 in saltmarsh.

Frequency of presence in each habitat type (the number of transects where a species was present/total number of transects) was a useful indicator of species distribution within habitat types. Species-habitat relationships were explored by multiple regression analysis, which relates the number or abundance of birds counted to a set of habitat variables estimated during line transects: in this analysis, only those species with frequencies above 5% for any of the habitat types were considered. Furthermore, as well as excluding the results of transects near farms (Sandy (C) in Table 2), birds recorded mainly near farms (also Sandy (C)) and the salt marsh were not considered in this analysis. The fitting of the linear regression model was performed by a stepwise regression (backward selection), which stops when the next variable to be rejected makes a significant contribution to the regression mean square (Khoury 1998). Habitat variables (Table 1) were quantified simultaneously with birds in the line transects. Variables were estimated to a range of 50 m at three points along each transect (start-, mid- and endpoints) before being averaged.

Table 1. Habitat variables estimated at each transect start-, mid- and endpoints to a range of 50 m.

R	Rock Cover [%]
St	Stone cover [%]
G	Gravel cover [%]
S	Sand Cover [%]
He	ground cover, including annuals/short vegetation < 20 cm [%]
Ds	Dwarf shrub cover [%]
Sh	Shrub cover (shrubs over 50 cm high) [%]
Tr	Tree cover (<i>Acacia</i> cover) [%]
Ns	diversity of trees and shrubs (number of trees and shrubs)
Mh	Mean height of shrubs and trees [m]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The habitats and distribution of breeding birds

The presence and absence data are summarized as frequencies in Table 2, which indicates the distribution of bird species among the general habitat types. Four general bird habitats were identified in the study area landscape:

- (a) Sandy habitats ranging from areas covered purely by sand dunes with very low vegetation cover, to a mixed habitat of sand dunes, interrupted by small wadis and with substantial cover of fine gravel and relatively high vegetation cover. The

dominant shrub is *Haloxylon persicum* with occasional *Calligonum* shrubs and *Acacia* trees along the small wadis. The annual ground cover after the rainy season manifests itself particularly on flat sandy surfaces and along the wadi beds. The most frequent bird species encountered in sandy habitats was Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*, followed by Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* and Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (Sandy (F) in Table 2). The Collared Dove became most frequent in the sandy habitat surrounding agricultural projects, but here the other two species were absent (Sandy (C) in Table 2).

- b) Rocky-stony habitats, ranging from stony plains in the study area's centre (e.g. Risha) to alluvial fans covered by stones and rocks towards the eastern foothills. The vegetation cover is low and dominated by *Anabasis* dwarf shrubs. The most frequent species were Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* and Blackstart *Cercomela melanura*.
- c) Large acacia stands on alluvial fans (e.g. north of Qatar), and at the mouths of wadis flowing into Wadi Araba, in addition to more open, extensive acacia stands on stony plains in the study area's centre (north of Risha). Tall acacia shrubs are frequent, but some stands included acacias as trees, with dense canopies higher than 4 m: *Acacia tortillis* and *A. radiana* occur the former being more widespread. The most frequent bird species were Collared Dove, followed by Desert Lark, Blackstart, Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygus* and Little Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*. The Arabian Warbler *Sylvia leucomalaena* and White-crowned Black Wheatear *O. leucopyga* were recorded in one third of the transects completed in this habitat type.
- (d) Saltmarsh. Only the saltmarsh (Qa' Taba) edges, north of Qatar, were included. This small area is covered with relatively dense vegetation dominated by the shrub *Nitraria retusa*, while the muddy and inaccessible core area is devoid of vegetation. The most frequent species was Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*, followed by Collared Dove and Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*.

Table 2. Percentage frequency of breeding birds in four different habitat types in Wadi Araba. Sandy (F)=Sandy habitats far from farms, Sandy (C)=Sandy habitats near farms. n = number of transects.

Species	Habitat type	Sandy (F) n = 37	Sandy (C) n = 15	Rocky n = 22	Acacia n = 24	Saltmarsh n = 9
Spotted Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles senegallus</i>		5	-	-	-	-
Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		45	100	36	95	66
Laughing Dove <i>S. senegalensis</i>		11	33	-	29	-
Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>		11	73	-	-	77
Lesser Short-toed Lark <i>Calandrella rufescens</i>		3	-	-	-	-
Desert Lark <i>Ammomanes deserti</i>		-	-	77	75	-
Bar-tailed Lark <i>A. cincturus</i>		14	-	4	-	-
Thick-billed Lark <i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>		3	-	-	-	-
Temminck's Lark <i>Eremophila bilopha</i>		5	-	-	-	-
Hoopoe Lark <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>		75	-	4	-	-
Yellow-vented Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus xanthopygus</i>		-	15	16	50	44
Little Green Bee-eater <i>Merops orientalis</i>		11	17	-	41	-
Rufous Bush Robin <i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>		-	33	-	-	-
Desert Wheatear <i>Oenanthe deserti</i>		48	-	4	-	-
White-crowned Black Wheatear, <i>O. leucopyga</i>		-	-	10	29	-
Blackstart <i>Cercomela melanura</i>		-	-	41	75	-
Arabian Warbler <i>Sylvia leucomalaena</i>		-	-	-	33	-
Graceful Warbler <i>Prinia gracilis</i>		-	53	-	-	-
Scrub Warbler <i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>		-	-	4	21	66
Great Grey Shrike <i>Lanius excubitor</i>		3	-	-	4	22
Palestine Sunbird <i>Nectarinia osea</i>		-	13	14	25	22
Arabian Babbler <i>Turdoides squamiceps</i>		-	-	-	4	11
House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>		3	82	-	4	11
Trumpeter Finch <i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>		3	-	6	20	-
Desert Finch <i>Rhodospiza (Rhodopechys) obsoleta</i>		-	7	-	-	-

HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS

Multiple regression analysis was carried out for the 15 most frequent bird species, the aim being to determine those habitat variables that contributed to the abundance of bird species (Table 3).

Table 3. Habitat variables that made a significant ($p < 0.05$) contribution to explaining the numbers of birds. The table shows the sign of the relevant regression coefficients. R²=variance explained by fitted model. n.s. =not significant. Key to variables: See Table 1.

Species / Variables	R	St	G	S	He	Ds	Sh	Tr	Ns	Mh	R ²
Collared Dove	-							+		+	57.8
Laughing Dove											n.s.
Crested Lark							+				34.7
Desert Lark	+									+	60.1
Bar-tailed Lark											n.s.
Hoopoe Lark			+		+		+				45.8
Yellow-vented Bulbul				+				+		+	42.7
Little Green Bee-eater							+	+		+	36.8
Desert Wheatear					+						35.1
White-crowned Black Wheatear											n.s.
Blackstart		+		+				+		+	49.2
Arabian Warbler	+							+		+	36.8
Scrub Warbler						+		+			36.4
Great Grey Shrike								+			26.2
Palestine Sunbird								+			35.8
Trumpeter Finch	+			+							28.7

Variation of abundance (R²) of only five species could be explained adequately with regressions of two or more variables each, as they accounted for more than 40% of the variance. The Collared Dove and Yellow-vented Bulbul increased in areas with trees and high shrubs (Tr +, Mh +, Table 3.), while the abundance of Desert Lark was correlated with rockiness. The positive effect of the variable Mh was because Desert Lark was present in larger numbers in rocky areas, which contained tall acacia trees. Although probably no direct relationship occurs between this species and acacias, it is assumed that Desert Lark occurs at higher density in sites with higher productivity, as indicated by the presence of acacia trees. The Blackstart was also common in acacia stands (Tr+). However it preferred those stands at wadi mouths and on alluvial fans where the ground was covered with a mix of sand and stones (S, St +). The Hoopoe Lark was more abundant in sandy habitats, where the ground was a mix of sand and gravel (G+), and which contained a relatively high density of *Haloxylum* Shrubs (Sh+) and a good cover of annuals in spring (He+). It was generally the most constant species in all sandy habitats, even those that purely contained sand dunes (i.e. without gravel) and were nearly devoid of vegetation, but at lower density.

Despite the low value of R² in the other cases, the results are interpretable for a few species. The numbers of Arabian Warbler were related to the presence of acacia trees and high shrubs. In fact, this species was found only in relatively dense acacia stands, where acacias were in the form of trees or tall shrubs with dense canopies. The Desert Wheatear was recorded in half of the transects in sandy habitat (Table 2), where it appears to prefer sandy areas with a higher cover of annuals in spring (He+, Table 3), probably due to the abundance of insects at such sites.

Notes on the occurrence and distribution of less common/frequent species

Three Sandgrouse species are known to occur in Wadi Araba, but only two were recorded during this study: Spotted and Lichtenstein's *Pterocles lichtensteinii*. Spotted Sandgrouse prefers open, flat areas and occasionally formed large aggregations of up



Fig 1. A view of Wadi Araba as taken from the eastern part of the study area near Qatar. The landscape includes acacia stands (foreground), sand dunes (distant right) and the edge of the salt marsh (left)

to 150 birds at Qa' Al-Sa'idyin before and during the study period. Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse was recorded in October 2004 after the survey ended, in an acacia stand south of Rahma. Although not recorded, Crowned Sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus* is known to breed in small numbers in Qa' Al-Sa'idyin (Andrews *et al.* 1999) and it has been previously recorded in the northern parts of Wadi Araba, at Tassan Springs (Khoury, pers. obs.) and in wide wadis flowing into Wadi Araba, including Wadi Fidan (Andrews 1995).

Seven lark species have been recorded during the breeding season, two new for the Jordanian side of Wadi Araba, Temminck's *Eremophila bimophila* and Thick-billed Lark *Ramphocoris clotbey*, both species being recorded in and south of Qa' Sa'idyin respectively. Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* was also recorded singing in suitable habitat at Qa' Sa'idyin. While Hoopoe Lark can be considered the most frequent bird species in sandy habitats, Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cincturus* had a discontinuous

distribution and was concentrated in three areas: the sandy, flat Qa' Sa'idyyin, the gravel-stone plains south-west of Beir-Madhhkur and the sandy habitats between Wadi Feinan and Ghweibeh. It appears to avoid sandy habitats with high and mobile sand dunes. Another, Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni*, previously recorded in Wadi Araba (Andrews, *et al* 1999) was not observed during the study period. This species is known to be a nomadic and irregular breeding species in Wadi Araba (Shirihai 1996).

Rufous Bush Robin, observed and heard singing on farm boundaries during May, appears to be expanding its breeding range into desert areas, including Wadi Araba. Black Bush Robin *Cercotrichas podobe* was also recorded during our fieldwork in a small acacia stand, the second record for Jordan (Grieve *et al.* 2004).

Other species, not recorded during this study (and whose status needs clarification) that may occur in the poorly-covered northern part are Nubian Nightjar *Caprimulgus nubicus* (Andrews *et al.* 1999) and Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulate*, both being rare in the Middle East.

CONSERVATION

The Jordanian side of Wadi Araba still harbours a unique variety of bird habitats, which are currently threatened by the expansion of large farming projects. Species such as Hoopoe Lark have declined on the Israeli side of the valley because suitable and undisturbed habitats have diminished mainly due to agricultural and other activities (Shirihai 1996). Although our study showed a direct impact on birds only in the environs of farms in sandy habitats, farm expansion risks the loss and fragmentation of remaining suitable habitats and the consequent serious declines, even local extinctions, of characteristic bird species. Our results suggest indicator species to be nominated, enabling their monitoring to gauge the anthropogenic impact of other than grazing activities in the Wadi Araba habitats. For example, Hoopoe Lark and Desert Wheatear clearly are good indicators of the quality of unimproved sandy habitats; any trend of declining numbers would indicate declining habitat quality. Arabian Warbler can be used to monitor the impact of human activities on relatively dense acacia stands. On the other hand, monitoring local increases of opportunistic species such as Collared and Laughing (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) Doves and Crested Lark will indicate the impact of agricultural projects on the surrounding desert habitats.

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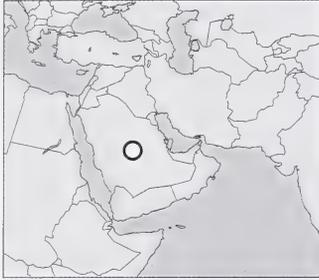
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Will the real Sykes's Warbler please stand up? Breeding data support specific status for *Hippolais rama* and *H. caligata*, with comments on the Arabian population of 'booted warbler'

PETER CASTELL AND GUY M. KIRWAN



In early-January 2000, one of us (GMK) received a communication from Michael Walters, the former Curator of Eggs at the Natural History Museum (Tring), concerning a recent short note by Castell (1999, see below) within these pages, in which a nest, apparently of *Hippolais rama*, was depicted. MW commented: "However, in the photograph of the nest accompanying the note, the eggs do not appear to be those of *rama*, which has a very distinctive egg quite different from those of all other species of *Hippolais*...These eggs are definitely those of a *Hippolais*, but not of *H. rama*. I suggest that the identity of this isolated population should be investigated carefully." Recently, PC has gained unequivocal first-hand experience of both *H. rama* and *caligata* on their breeding grounds in Kazakhstan. Thus, the time has now come to reopen the investigation...

Despite significant interest in the field identification of the genus *Hippolais* since the 1960s (Wallace 1964), until recently the two principal taxa within the Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* complex were widely treated as subspecies, except by some Russian literature (Stepanyan 1978, 1983). (It should be noted that *H. caligata annectans* Sushkin, 1925 is not generally accepted, but if considered a valid taxon probably clusters with *rama*.) For West European ornithologists, more readily accessible evidence for their specific separation did not arrive until the remarks of J. Haffer, in Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer (1991), comments that were swiftly taken up by Sibley & Monroe (1993), in a supplement to their influential world checklist, as support for such a split. Thereafter, renewed interest in *rama* and *caligata* and the greater accessibility of their zone of overlap in the breeding season, in Central Asia, culminated in the important contributions of Svensson (2001, 2003), who provided a detailed résumé of the vocal, mensural, behavioural and, limited, morphological differences between *rama* and *caligata*, which are now generally accepted as being two biological species (e.g. Knox *et al.* 2002, Parkin *et al.* 2004).

The aim of the present contribution is to bring to wider attention qualitative data on differences in breeding biology between *caligata* and *rama*, documenting the appearance of the nest, eggs and nestlings, as well as habitat, nest site and methods of nesting, all of which factors may operate to differentiate between species; the importance of behavioural and biological traits in the elucidation of taxonomic conundrums was emphasised by Löhrl & Thaler (1992). Our remarks are based on several nests, of both species, found by PC and co-workers in two different areas of Kazakhstan, in June 2003, and other nests in the United Arab Emirates, in May 1998 (Castell 1999). Based on the latter, we proffer comments on the identity of those birds nesting in Arabia, which to date have been unequivocally assigned to *rama*, although published evidence for this treatment has been relatively thin until very recently (Pearson *et al.* 2004).

Beyond the scope of the present work is to comment in detail on the suggestion that the Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* group (including *rama* and *caligata*) is

genetically closer to *Acrocephalus* (Leisler *et al.* 1997), a proposal that has received mixed support (see discussions in Sangster *et al.* 1999, Parkin *et al.* 2004). Helbig & Seibold (1999) also found some divergence between the Olivaceous/Booted Warbler group and the remainder of the taxa traditionally placed in *Hippolais*, suggesting that the name *Iduna* would serve as a suitable subgenus for the former grouping. Dickinson (2003) also employed *Iduna* for these taxa, but at the level of genus. Nonetheless, it might be noted that nests of *Acrocephalus* are constructed in dense vegetation and, in the case of most species, often over or by water. They are typically deep well-formed cups, usually among vertical stems, the nests often being woven around or bound to these. In contrast, nests of *Hippolais* are usually in bushes or trees, sometimes in the thinner twigs at the end of branches. They are not as deep (relatively) as those of *Acrocephalus*. Nests of Booted, Sykes's and all forms of Olivaceous are typical of *Hippolais*, but the nestlings of two forms within this group have three tongue spots (see below), unlike any other *Hippolais*, all the rest of which show two spots.

SYKES'S WARBLER

H. rama was noted breeding in an area of semi-desert with young *Saxaul* trees/scrub, mainly c. 3 metres tall, 30 km north-west of the village of Kokpek, south-east Kazakhstan (Plate 1). Pairs were distributed over much of the area, but were distinctly concentrated in an area of older, woodier and slightly taller bushes. On 3 June 2003 five nests had: C/5 (Plate 2), C/5, C/2 (incomplete clutch), B/5 (newly hatched; Plate 3), B/5 (aged 4–5 days). All nests were constructed in the low forks of *Saxaul* bushes, 0.2–1.2 m above ground, and the two lowest nests were partially screened by weeds growing within the bushes. Nests were mainly of grasses, with some roots and strips of bark, and a base and outer edge of small twigs, with spider webs around the rim, and lined with fine grass and/or vegetable down. Typical eggs of *Hippolais* warblers are pink with sparse black spots and specks, but those of *rama* are greyish white with heavy blackish-brown (or irregular black) scrawls and blotches at the larger end, and sparse spots and specks elsewhere (Harrison & Castell 2002); the eggs in these nests were typical of *rama*. The newly hatched young were altricial and naked; gape flanges yellowish white; mouth orange-yellow, with two oval black spots, one at either side of the base of the tongue; and both broods had the two tongue spots.

BOOTED WARBLER

H. caligata was breeding in scattered low bushes (of *Artemisia* and *Spirea* spp.), mainly growing in slight depressions, on flat open steppe near the village of Qorghalzhin (Plate 4), south of Astana in northern Kazakhstan, c. 1,000 km north of where the Sykes's Warbler nests were discovered. Between 19 and 23 June, six nests contained: C/2 (incomplete clutch, and subsequently four eggs on 26 June; Plate 5), C/6 (deserted), C/0 (new and ready for eggs, and probably a replacement for the deserted nest), B/6 (aged 3–4 days; Plate 6), B/3 (aged 6–7 days), B/3 (aged 9–10 days) and an infertile egg. In addition, several broods of fledged young were observed, and one young was caught and photographed (Plate 7). The nests were mainly 0.3 m (or lower) in the centre and base of low bushes, some partially screened by grass, and were similar to those of Sykes's Warbler in Kazakhstan, except that twigs were absent and plant stems had been utilised. The eggs were typical of most species of *Hippolais*, and thus quite different from *H. rama*. The young were altricial and naked at hatching; gape flanges pale yellow; mouth orange-yellow. In one nest all six young, aged 3–4 days, had three spots on the tongue, two black oval spots, one at either side of the base, and a much smaller, narrow spot at the tip; in another nest, two of the three young, aged 6–7 days, had only two spots at the base of the tongue, but the third also had a third spot at the tip. Three young, aged 9–10 days, in another nest, had only the

two spots at the base. A recently fledged juvenile, photographed in the hand, had only two tongue spots; the legs were pinkish cream; not dark pinkish- or pale reddish-brown, with a variable greyish cast, as in adults (Svensson 2001). It is likely that the spot at the tip of the tongue fades and disappears as the nestling develops, which also occurs in other species (Harrison & Castell 2002).

ARABIAN BIRDS

Those breeding (apparently just 5–20 pairs) at Khor Kalba in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are considered to be Sykes's Warblers, according to Aspinall (1996) and Richardson & Aspinall (1998), as are those in the Batinah, at Shinas and Liwa, in adjacent Oman (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000), with occasional records from elsewhere (Aspinall 1996). Svensson (2001) was also of the opinion that this population was referable to *rama* (and further suggested that such birds might also breed in similar habitat on the opposite shore of the Gulf, in Iran), but until very recently the only detailed published justification for such a viewpoint was that by Ash & Pearson (2002), who examined two specimens in the Natural History Museum (Tring; NHM), one from Khor Kalba and the other from Ras al Khaimah (both UAE; the latter had originally been identified as an Olivaceous Warbler, form *elaieca*, the one from Khor Kalba as *rama*), and concluded that they were, indeed, *rama*. This identification appears correct, as evidenced by an independent examination of the same specimens by GMK and A. Grieve; however, these individuals do exhibit some differences from classic *rama* in wing formula and moult timing. In UAE, the birds breed in low mangroves on the landward edge of taller, more mature mangrove trees (Plate 8). Two nests contained eggs on 11–14 May 1998 (Plate 9), and several were ready for eggs, with singing birds nearby (Castell 1999), and a fresh, but empty nest was observed on 21 March 2000 (PC unpubl.). All nests were situated lower than c. 0.5 m, in tree forks, and constructed mainly of plant stems, grass and roots. Eggs were typical of other *Hippolais*, including *caligata*, but totally unlike those of *rama* in Kazakhstan. Nestlings in UAE do not appear to have been described.

TAXONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Differences in the appearance of eggs and nestlings are significant factors in differentiating between species, equally as important as differences in adults, especially when consistent. The eggs of *rama* and *caligata* in Kazakhstan clearly differ, whilst eggs from the population breeding in Arabia are consistent with *caligata*, despite all of the literature implying that the form there is *rama*. Whilst available data are limited, nestlings of *rama* (two tongue spots) and *caligata* (three spots) clearly differ on hatching in Kazakhstan, and it would be most interesting to discover the pattern in newly hatched nestlings from Arabia. Nestlings of closely related species can also be identified by the number of tongue spots, e.g. two spots in Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida* and three in Western Olivaceous Warbler *H. opaca* (Crespo *et al.* 1988), re-emphasising the potential usefulness of breeding biology data in taxonomic

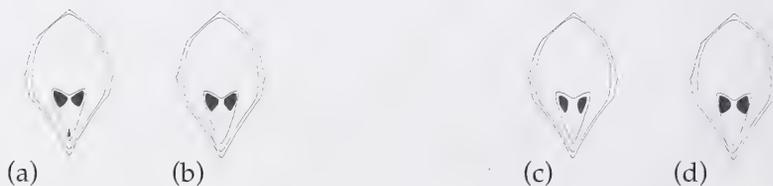


Figure 1. Mouth-marking diagrams: (a) Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* nestlings at 3–4 days; (b) Booted Warbler nestlings at 9–10 days; (c) Sykes's Warbler *H. rama* newly hatched nestlings; and (d) Sykes's Warbler nestlings at 4–5 days. (Richard Castell, from photographs by Peter Castell)



Plate 1. Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama* breeding habitat, south-east Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 2. Nest with five eggs of Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, south-east Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 3. Nest and newly hatched young of Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, south-east Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 4. Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* breeding habitat, near Qorghalzhin, Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 5. Nest with four eggs of Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, near Qorghalzhin, Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 6. Nest with six Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* chicks, near Qorghalzhin, Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)

studies. Habitat, nest site and nest are considered much less important in differentiating species: bush-nesting species may choose to breed in a variety of shrubs, depending on the tree species available in different parts of the range; the nest may also be built at differing heights above ground, presumably to optimise the site (e.g. strength of fork and best cover) within a particular bush; and nests are constructed of local materials, i.e. nests of the same species may be superficially similar in perhaps shape and size, but of totally different local materials in different parts of the range.

Clearly more detailed work on the vocalisations, morphometrics (data for only two birds are widely available) and, to a much lesser extent, the morphology of the Arabian birds is demanded (Pearson *et al.* 2004 already noted that the two UAE specimens show slightly atypical wing formulae from Central Asian *rama*). Current data suggest that this population is almost certainly resident, as singing birds are present at Khor Kalba in January (Aspinall 1996) and A. Grieve *et al.* (pers. comm.) have records from most winter months in the mangroves in Omani Batinah, but detailed information on the temporal status of these birds is urgently required as part of efforts to acquire a more complete understanding of the natural history of this population. It appears to be the case that Arabian birds were originally presumed to be *rama*, in part perhaps given the relative proximity of populations, in central Iran, known to be of this form (e.g. one taken by W. T. Blanford near Kerman, in May 1872 [NHM 98.9.1.964]). Whereas *caligata* breeds across taiga and other steppic habitats, from the Baltic states and south-east Finland east to north-west Mongolia, *rama* breeds principally east and south of the Caspian Sea as far east as north-west Pakistan (see Svensson 2001, Parkin *et al.* 2004). Both taxa principally winter in India, but 'migrant' *rama* also winter in Arabia, whilst *caligata* has apparently also occurred in Oman in winter (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000), although this form is principally a passage migrant through Arabia.

Whilst this note was in preparation Pearson *et al.* (2004) published the results of mtDNA cytochrome-*b* gene analysis of the two Arabian specimens mentioned above, as well as another suspected *rama* specimen from Eritrea. All three proved to have perfect matches for the published sequence of *rama* in Helbig & Siebold (1999). At face value, this would appear to prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that the Arabian population is referable to *H. rama*, but leaves us with a significant quandary concerning the anomalous breeding data for this population.

If the east Arabian mangrove population shows some characters of *caligata*, and not purely of *rama* as previously believed, this presents a new taxonomic query: is a cryptic (mangrove-dwelling) species involved? If this population is resident, as appears to be the case, then the case for specific status for these birds would surely be strengthened, as they are most certainly pursuing a separate evolutionary trajectory to other populations of *caligata*, all of which are migratory. Separation from *rama* would be less clear-cut, given that this form is considered to winter in some numbers in Arabia and the close similarity of the available specimens to *rama* from Central Asia (Ash & Pearson 2002), but would still require fuller investigation than has thus far been performed. It is also interesting to speculate which population of *rama* might be considered 'basal'. Given that *Hippolais* appears, at face value, to have an east Mediterranean / Middle Eastern centre of evolutionary origin, perhaps it is the mangrove-dwellers that represent the oldest branch of the modern species' lineage. It is important to remember that some birds exhibit rather pronounced nuclear-genetic-based variation, which will *not* be revealed by mtDNA analysis (see Brawn *et al.* 1996), and that some avian taxa appear to have arisen to species-level status much more rapidly than would normally be predicted (see Klicka & Zink 1997, Buckley & Buckley

2004), albeit usually on oceanic islands. See also García-Moreno (2004) and Witt & Brumfield (2004) for comments on the difficulties in fitting speciation events into the context of molecular phylogenies.

In sum, the eggs and mouth markings of nestlings on hatching of *caligata* and *rama* are diagnosably and consistently different (Harrison & Castell 2002; this work), but the Arabian population appears to be *caligata* (based on breeding data), rather than *rama* as long assumed and recently 'confirmed' by DNA analysis. As with so many modern taxonomic problems, additional molecular (specifically nuclear-genetic) research into the Arabian birds, and all plausibly related populations, e.g. *H. pallida elaeica* and *H. p. pallida*, and those birds, also considered to be *rama*, that were recently discovered, almost certainly breeding, in mangrove in Somalia and perhaps elsewhere in north-east Africa (Ash & Pearson 2002), as well as *caligata* and *rama* from Central Asia, is urgently required.

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Plate 7. Recently fledged young Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, near Qorghalzhin, Kazakhstan. (Peter Castell)



Plate 8. Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama* breeding habitat, Khor Kalba, United Arab Emirates. (Peter Castell)



Plate 9. Nest and three eggs of Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, Khor Kalba, United Arab Emirates. (Peter Castell)



Plate 10. Adult male Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, Shinas, Oman, 27 March 2004. (Andrew Lassey)

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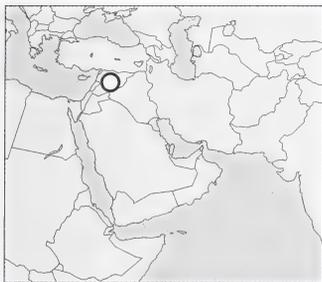
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Observations from Syria with notes on 11 new breeding species

DAVID MURDOCH



We know little about the occurrence and distribution of much of Syria's bird life. Large areas of Syria have not yet been properly explored by ornithologists and there are very few breeding season records. This paper describes two independent visits made in early spring of 2002 and summer 2003. Two species found are probably new to Syria (Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii* and Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocolis*). 11 new breeding species were added to the Syrian list (Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, Coal Tit *Parus ater*, Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Eurasian Serin *Serinus serinus* and Yellow-throated Sparrow). There was a second breeding record of Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* and proof of a significant range extension for the Mesopotamian endemic Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*. Large areas of Syria were under intensive cultivation and almost devoid of wildlife, but many sites were still in good condition and rich in birds, notably the Aqra Mountains round Kassab, Sabkhat al-Jabbul, the steppes round Palmyra, Mheimideh and Ba'ath Reservoir. It is important for birders to visit these areas because there is much important recording to be done, particularly during the breeding season.

Syria's avifauna is one of the least well-documented of any Western Palearctic or Middle Eastern country; probably many areas have never been visited by ornithologists (see the handbook 'Important Bird Areas in the Middle East', Evans 1994, hereafter referred to as the IBA inventory); many Syrian IBAs lack significant data. The only summary of the Syrian avifauna (Baumgart *et al.* (1995) emphasises this point. Since then, Syria has become more open, tolerating visits by independent birdwatchers, whose trip reports are documented informally on the OSME website. This paper documents formally the major observations from two recent visits, in early spring (from 24 February to 8 March 2002) and summer (10–19 June 2003). Its purpose is to show that Syria is an exciting destination where pioneering birdwatchers can make a substantial ornithological contribution.

SITES VISITED

In spring 2002, I noted that much of Syria's interior was intensively cultivated and appeared almost birdless, notably the Ghab (the valley of the Orontes) and the steppes south of Aleppo. In the Euphrates valley, the best site was Mheimideh, a small oxbow lake on the north bank about 20 km upstream from Deir ez-Zor. Though surrounded by housing, it held an outstanding range of waterbirds, including White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*. The Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor, the main city on the Syrian Euphrates, held White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* and several conspicuous parties of Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*. Archaeological sites were often interesting, notably the Byzantine fortress of Halabbiyah in the Euphrates gorge, the Roman city of Rasafa (Resafe) in the desert 20 km south of the valley and the Byzantine fortress at Dura Europos. I travelled through the northeast region of Syria, the Jazira, a rolling steppe that, according to the IBA inventory, should hold species such as bustards and sandgrouse, but now it is now intensively cultivated, and densely settled (farms every kilometre), making this prospect very unlikely. The Khabur, the Jazira's major river, was grossly polluted at the Turkish border at Ras al-Ayn, and further south, water pumps had sucked it dry. The IBA at Ras al-Ayn (IBA 001; Evans 1994) had been massively degraded

and bore little relation to its description in the IBA inventory; most of the *Salix* woodland, an important element of the IBA, had been cut down. In the Tigris valley in the far northeast of Syria, 500 m from the Turkish border, I discovered several pairs of Red-wattled Plover *Vanellus indicus* holding territory in fields near the ruined Roman bridge at Ain Di'war.

In June 2003, Lake of Homs (IBA 017) held breeding Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus spinosus* and Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*. Six species of heron were present on an estuary in the south-west corner of the lake just east of the village of Moudan. On 11–12 June, I visited the pine-cloaked Aqra Mountains on the Turkish border, a superb area that very few ornithologists have visited, finding six new breeding species for Syria in two days. Above Ras el-Bassit, the cork oak scrub held Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli*, Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* and Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia*. In the pine forests, Coal Tit *Parus ater* and Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* were widespread with Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* common in clearings. Mature pines below Kassab held breeding Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* and Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*; Eurasian Serin *Serinus serinus* was common in the fields. In the Fouroq Forest, a huge protected area of mature pine forest, a stream held three pairs of Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*. Much of the habitat in the Aqra Mountains appeared to be in excellent condition; the area merits a week's exploration in the breeding season. On 13 June, during a brief visit to Sabkhat al-Jabbul (IBA 006), a Ramsar site, I recorded ten species of wader, including Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* (a common breeding species), four species of tern, including a large colony of Gull-billed *Sterna nilotica*, and 80 Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus [ruber] roseus*; Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* were widespread in suitable breeding habitat but I could not obtain formal evidence of breeding. Al-Jabbul is the most important wetland in Syria and merits at least a week's exploration in the breeding season.

On 14 June, I was taken to the relict colony of Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* near Palmyra (Serra *et al.*, 2003), an area of the 'badia' (steppe) rich in birds; other species included a flock of Red-billed Cough *Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumannii* and Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* (the second published record for Syria; *Sandgrouse*, this issue) in a mixed flock that included Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* and Temminck's Horned Lark *Eremophila bilopha*. On 15 June, Sed Wadi Abied, a desert reservoir near Palmyra, held Little Swift *Apus affinis*, Garganey *Anas querquedula* and Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* in suitable breeding habitat, none of which have been proven to breed in Syria. At Deir ez-Zor, a colony of Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocollis* was breeding in the tops of roadside telegraph poles along the Euphrates embankment (the first records for Syria; see *Sandgrouse*, this issue); on the other side of the river, the area round the playground held breeding Ménétries's and Olivaceous *Hippolais pallida* Warblers, displaying Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* and singing Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*. Iraq Babbler were present, though elusive, but I was unable to locate White-cheeked Bulbul. On 16–17 June, the oxbow lake at Mheimideh held several pairs of Ferruginous Duck with young, a female White-headed Duck with young (the first Syrian breeding record) and a flock of 30 Marbled Duck in flight, with at least three females with young. Also present were several pairs of White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*, Spur-winged Plover and Black-winged Stilt, over 50 pairs of Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*, a colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus* and Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*. On 18 June, an oxbow lake at Jazara held Shoveler *Anas clypeata*, Ferruginous Duck, breeding White-tailed Plover and two White-winged Black Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus*, for which there are no

Syrian breeding records. A brief visit the next morning to Ba'ath Reservoir revealed a large wetland in good condition with breeding Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* and Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, at least 50 pairs of Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, 5 Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* flying over, many flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* coming to drink, 2 reeling Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*, Iraq Babbler (a 100 km. range extension), Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*, Olivaceous and Ménétries's Warbler.

In nine days, I recorded two new species and 11 new breeding species for Syria; I was unable to confirm breeding for another 10–20 species present in suitable habitat. It is clear that our knowledge of Syria's breeding birds is woefully inadequate; as an example, the IBA Inventory (Evans 1994) states that no breeding colonies of any species of heron were known in Syria. The situation is even more extraordinary as this country is in the Western Palearctic as well as the OSME region. I urge adventurous birders to visit.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SELECTED SPECIES

In the following list, when the Syrian breeding status of a species is revised, breeding categories and codes follow the EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds (Hagemeyer and Blair 1997). Briefly, the prefix A denotes possible breeding, B probable breeding and C confirmed breeding.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* C12

At least 5 pairs were found over a wide area of Ba'ath Reservoir on 18–19 June 2003; one pair had 2 small young. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as suspected of breeding but never proven. The first documented breeding record for Syria but likely to be a common breeding bird on the Euphrates reservoirs.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* A1

One at Sed Wadi Abied on 15 June 2003 was probably the first breeding season record for Syria. 'No evidence of breeding' (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

The only records were of two singles at Mheimideh on 7 March 2002 and five flying over Ba'ath Reservoir on 19 June 2003. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as 'a rare visitor', but recent observations indicate that it winters commonly along the Euphrates (Murdoch *et al.* 2004). There may well be substantial breeding colonies to discover.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* B3

Widespread along the Euphrates in June 2003; recorded from Deir ez-Zor footbridge, Mheimideh (where it was notably common), the Euphrates near Mayadin, Jazara and Ba'ath Reservoir. Clearly breeding at many sites though there are no recent breeding records (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* B3

More than 50 at Lake of Homs on 10 June 2003 and at least 50 pairs at Ba'ath Reservoir on 18–19 June 2003; almost certainly breeding at both sites though not formally proven. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) had no firm evidence of recent breeding.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* B3

Hundreds present on 10 June 2003 at Lake of Homs, which is likely to hold a substantial colony; elsewhere scarce and very localised. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) noted summering individuals but had no concrete evidence of breeding.



Plate 1. Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus* (David Murdoch).



Plate 2. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops superciliaris* (David Murdoch).



Plate 4. White-tailed Plover *Chettusia leucura* (David Murdoch).



Plate 3. Typical Syrian wetland habitat encountered (David Murdoch).

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* C14

Ten sightings (with a maximum of five at any one time) at Lake of Homs on 10 June 2003. A minimum of 10 pairs were present on the south side of Ba'ath Reservoir on 18–19 June 2003; one bird constantly returning to the same area of reeds close to the railway viaduct, once carrying food, was clearly returning to a nest. As Baumgart *et al.* (1995) had no clear evidence of breeding, this is probably the first breeding record for Syria.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Three distant singles at Mheimideh on 7 March 2002 could have been the same bird. Four at Lake of Homs on 10 June 2003 were the first breeding season record for decades. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite only three recent records.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* B3

Two pairs at Sed Wadi Abied on 15 June 2003 and a male at Mheimideh on 16 June were in suitable breeding habitat. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) offered no evidence of breeding.

Shoveler *Anas clypeata* A1

A male at Jazara on 18 June 2003 in suitable breeding habitat was the first breeding season record for Syria. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as a passage migrant and winter visitor only.

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* C12

A small flock, probably of eight birds, was at Mheimideh on 7 March 2002. At least 50 birds were estimated at Mheimideh in June 2003, with at least 3 family parties on 17 June 2003, the first confirmed breeding for Syria. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as possibly breeding at Shumaytiyah.

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

A female in suitable breeding habitat at Mheimideh on 16 June 2003, probably the second breeding season record. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as a passage migrant and winter visitor.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

At Mheimideh, at least ten were present on 4 March 2002; a minimum of 5 pairs on 16–17 June 2003 with at least three family parties. A male was in suitable breeding habitat at Jazara on 18 June 2003. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite one April record. The first proven breeding was at al-Ashara in 1994 (Hofland 1994).

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* C12

Present at Mheimideh on 7 March 2002. A female at Mheimideh with at least two well-grown young on 16 June 2003 was the first breeding record for Syria; two pairs without young were also present. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite one June record from Jabbul as the only breeding season record.

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

One male in the desert steppes near Palmyra on 14 June 2003. No current breeding sites (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio* B7

An agitated individual was at Mheimideh on 16 June 2003 but unequivocal evidence of breeding was not obtained. This is the first Syrian breeding season record for many years; Baumgart *et al.* (1995) considered it to be extinct in Syria but it was recorded

from Sabkhat al-Jabbul in March 2001 (Vandemeutter & Soors 2001) and from several wetlands in early 2004 (Murdoch *et al.*, 2004).

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* B3

At least 10 individuals at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on 13 June 2003 but no unequivocal evidence of breeding. Not yet proven to breed in Syria.

Red-wattled Plover *Vanellus indicus* B5

About ten birds by the Tigris at Ain Diwar on 6 March 2002, with several birds displaying on a ploughed field 100 m from the river. This is the first evidence of probable breeding in Syria. This population is on a sensitive international border and visits by foreigners carrying powerful optics must be handled with care!

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*

At least 10 pairs, some with young, were at Mheimideh on 16–17 June 2003. A pair with young was at Jazara on 18 June 2003. MacFarlane (1978) found a breeding pair at Mayadin in 1976. *Contra* Baumgart *et al.* (1995), this species is likely to be a relatively widespread breeding bird along the Syrian Euphrates.

Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus spinosus*

Breeding documented in June 2003 at Lake of Homs (at least 4 pairs) and Mheimideh (at least 10 pairs). No breeding records from the 1990s (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*

At least 100, including freshly fledged young and adults with active nests, were at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on 13 June 2003. No unequivocal evidence of recent breeding (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

No recent breeding records (Baumgart *et al.* 1995); present at Sabkhat al-Jabbul and Mheimideh in June 2003, and common at Ba'ath Reservoir, where there is likely to be a colony.

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* B4

On 15–17 June 2003, individuals were frequently seen in display flight over the Agricultural University at Deir ez-Zor, but breeding was not formally proven. No unequivocal breeding records (Baumgart *et al.*, 1995).

Little Swift *Apus affinis* A1

Ten were flying over Sed Wadi Abied on 15 June 2003. There are no proven records of breeding (Baumgart *et al.* 1995).

Eurasian Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Two singles were in suitable breeding habitat near Deir ez-Zor on 18 June 2003. According to Baumgart *et al.* (1995), Eurasian Bee-eaters no longer breed in Syria.

Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* A1

Two birds were in a mixed flock of Trumpeter Finches, Temminck's and Lesser Short-toed Larks in the desert steppes near Palmyra on 14 June 2003. This appears to be the first fully documented record for Syria (Murdoch *et al.*, this issue). An earlier record is being prepared (Serra, *pers. comm.* and this issue).

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

A male was feeding on floating vegetation on the Euphrates at al-Zouwea, near Deir ez-Zor, on 4 March 2002. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) list three records but there have been several more recent observations.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* C12

Three pairs, at least two with young, along an almost dry river bed in the Fourq Forest east of Kassab on 12 June 2003. This is probably the first breeding record for Syria; Baumgart *et al.* (1995) give no evidence of previous breeding.

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* A2

At least two males were singing in suitable breeding habitat, an extensive reedbed, at Ba'ath Reservoir on 19 June 2003. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as a passage migrant.

Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*

Baumgart and Stephan (1986) located a substantial breeding population in cork oak scrub above Kassab. Several singing birds seen on 11–12 June 2003.

Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

One male was singing in Deir ez-Zor playground in the Euphrates valley on 15 June 2003. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as present on the slopes of the anti-Lebanon.

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*

A male was in Palmyra ruins on 2 March 2002. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite very few recent records, only two in winter.

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* C12

One of the commonest species in the Aqra Mountains pine forests, with hundreds of birds on 11–12 June 2003. At least two pairs feeding recently fledged young on 12 June 2003 appear to be the first documented breeding records for Syria; Baumgart *et al.* (1995) considered that Chiffchaffs probably bred in the north-west of Syria but gave no definite records.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* C14

At least 3 pairs in mature pine forest below Kassab on 12 June 2003 and a single in Fourq Forest on 12 June 2003; one pair carrying food. The first breeding record for Syria; Baumgart *et al.* (1995) give no breeding records.

Coal Tit *Parus ater* C12

Widespread but scarce in the Aqra Mountain pine forests around Qastal Ma'af and below Kassab on 11–12 June 2003. At least two pairs feeding recently fledged young appear to constitute the first documented breeding records for Syria; Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite only one previous record for Syria.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* C12

A family party in mature pinewoods below Kassab on 12 June 2003 constitutes the first breeding Syrian record. Perhaps two previous Syrian records (Showler and Farrow, 2003); not recorded by Baumgart *et al.* (1995).

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

A colony of at least 5 pairs was discovered in reedbeds on the south side of Ba'ath Reservoir on 19 June 2003. No records in Baumgart *et al.* (1995) but Tavares *et al.* (2000) confirmed breeding at Sed Wadi Abied.

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*

Singles were recorded on three occasions in March 2002 at Deir ez-Zor: from the footbridge over the Euphrates, in the adjacent playground, and 500 m away in the grounds of the Agricultural Institute. No birds were found in June 2003 despite considerable effort. This species is not listed by Baumgart *et al.* (1995).

Turkestan (Isabelline) Shrike *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides*

An adult male seen well on telegraph wires at Mheimideh for 2 minutes on 7 March 2002 may be the first Syrian record; Isabelline Shrike is not listed in Baumgart *et al.* (1995) but records from other independent visitors exist.

Description (brief): Size and shape very similar to Red-backed Shrike *L. collurio*. A well-marked bird with thick jet-black eye-stripe from bill to ear-coverts, clearly defined but narrow white supercilium reaching forehead, prominent rufous crown merging to mid-brown back, rufous tail (upper- and under-) and clean white underside. Small white primary patch on dark wings. Flank, undertail covert, bill and leg colour not noted before the bird flew off.

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*

A Mesopotamian basic endemic not recorded by Baumgart *et al.* (1995). Common and conspicuous in reeds along the Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor in March 2002; on 15–18 June 2003, many calling individuals in the same area, with one in an orchard, but only one briefly seen. One was in gravel workings by the Euphrates near Mayadin on 16 June 2003. Several birds were at Ba'ath Reservoir on 19 June 2003, a range extension of 100 km. Behaviour was dramatically different between March, when they were very conspicuous, forming noisy, highly visible groups and making frequent contact calls, and June, when they were extremely wary and almost silent.

(Red-billed) Chough *Pyrrhcorax pyrrhcorax*

A flock of 70–80 birds was seen around a mountain ridge near Palmyra on 14 June 2003. Described by Baumgart *et al.* (1995) as extinct in Syria.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

A flock of five birds feeding on grain at Ras al-Ayn on the Turkish border on 5 March 2002; the first record for northern Syria. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) describe it as a rare visitor to the Golan Heights.

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*

In June 2003, a characteristic bird of scrubby vegetation near water, recorded from Lake of Homs, Sed Wadi Abied and at eight sites along the Euphrates valley.

Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocollis* C15

A colony discovered at Deir ez-Zor on 15–18 June 2003 included two nests (one with young) in the tops of roadside telegraph poles on the south side of the Euphrates, a bird on a telegraph wire 500 m further upstream and at least 4 'singing' males in conifers on the north side of the Euphrates. These observations indicate a minimum of 5 pairs. A new species for Syria (*Sandgrouse*, this issue).

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

A flock of about 100 at Deir ez-Zor on 7 March 2002 was much the largest recorded from Syria, and probably the fourth record.

Serin *Serinus serinus* C12

On 12 June 2003, at least 3 males were singing 1 km south of Kassab along woodland edges. A female feeding recently fledged young in woodland glades was probably the first breeding record for Syria. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) cite one breeding season record and comment that it winters in western Syria.

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* C12

On 14–15 June 2003, this species was common in the desert steppes near Palmyra, with a flock of at least 20 birds including newly fledged juveniles on 14 June. This is the first documented breeding record for Syria, but an earlier record is being prepared (Serra *pers. comm.*). According to Baumgart *et al.* (1995), 'breeding... has never been proved'.

Fuller details with additional comments are available in the relevant trip reports on the OSME website.

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Azerbaijan: a miscellany of recent bird observations (Status and occurrence of selected visiting species and amending known breeding ranges)

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The breeding range of a number of species of bird in Azerbaijan is incorrectly or inconsistently mapped in much English language ornithological literature. Similarly, the occurrence of a number of passage migrant and winter visiting species is either inaccurately documented, or was hitherto unknown from this country. This paper describes some of the more significant results of recent survey work in Azerbaijan by the author, and adds to the ornithological literature from this relatively poorly known country. Three new species, Corncrake *Crex crex*, Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* and Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, are newly confirmed as breeding in Azerbaijan, while two species new to the country checklist, Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* and Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*, also recorded, are reported on here.

The Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan, once part of the former Soviet Union, is situated to the west of the Caspian Sea between Iran to the south and Russia to the north, and borders, to the west, both Georgia and Armenia. The climate over most of Azerbaijan, lying at a latitude of only 40°N, is decidedly temperate, more so than might be expected given its inland location and with the Caspian Sea obviously having an ameliorating influence.

Most published literature on the ornithology of the country is in Russian and/or Azeri, and thus not readily “accessible” to western ornithologists. Amongst literature sources other than, for example, existing European bird field guides, are Tuayev (1996) and Shelton & Sultanov (2001), both of which restrict their coverage to Azerbaijan, the latter in English, and the website of the Azerbaijan Center for the Protection of Birds (Azerbaijan Ornithological Society) which is available in all three languages (<http://www.aos.az>). Study of the avifauna of the country is ongoing, but suffers from inadequate funding and from a paucity of trained or professional ornithologists.

Many species of bird possess more widespread breeding ranges within Azerbaijan than modern field guides (e.g. Fitter *et al.* 1979, Jonsson 1992, Svensson *et al.* 1999), the Concise Edition of Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow & Perrins 1998), and other sources illustrate, even given the map size and possible accuracy or resolution thereby attainable. The same is true of the mapped occurrence of many migratory species passing through the country. No single field guide remains a reliable source for all species, although the rather more broad-brush approach of Fitter *et al.* (1979) often depicts a more accurate picture than the, apparently, more precisely mapped distributions given in other similar, but more recent publications.

The purpose of this note is not to serve as a critique of existing literature, but to rectify certain inaccuracies readily appreciated from its examination (some perhaps merely being perpetuated therein), by adding that data obtained during nine recent visits by the author between May 2001 and January 2005 to the pool of published information available. All observations detailed here were made by the author, sometimes alone, but in many instances jointly with one or two of Dr. Ilyas Babayev (IB), Dr. Elchin Sultanov (ES) and Nigar Agayeva (NA), or as otherwise stated.

Amongst breeding species, all of the following are distributed more widely than atlas maps in field guides and other literature show: Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*, Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (and actually present year-round on the Caspian coast), White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*, Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* (inland), Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*, Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschi* (also actually mainly resident), Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*, Rook *Corvus frugilegus* and Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* (Sultanov in prep.). Conversely, the Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* is often shown as being omnipresent, when in fact this is not the case at all. It occurs as a breeding species only above about 1500–2000m (the map in Snow & Perrins (1998) is accurate for this species, although incorrect in Cramp (1988)). Note also, in the early printings of the Collins Bird Guide (Svensson *et al.* 1999), the respective maps or names of Chukar *Alectoris chukar* and Rock Partridge *A. rufa* had been accidentally transposed.

Similarly, some migrants or winter visitors are not shown on field guide maps as occurring, when in reality they both may occur in sizeable numbers, or with predictable regularity, at the appropriate time or times of year. Examples include Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus*, Smew *Mergus albellus*, Velvet Scoter *Melanitta nigra*, Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* (which winters widely in some numbers in semi-desert areas), Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* and Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*. The last-named is, moreover, an altitudinal migrant and not solely a summer visitor as many sources show, even if some individuals of the distinctive Caucasian race present, *T. t. armoricum*, can be found south to Arabia in severe winters. Certain of these species, Bewick's Swan for example, are already widely documented as occurring in Azerbaijan, but remain consistently absent from most of the popular guides.

NOTEWORTHY AND UNUSUAL SPECIES

In addition to the above examples, some more unusual or noteworthy records are given below, these being either range extensions or confirmation of breeding in certain species, or observations of the occurrence of passage migrants about which either the literature is currently sparse, incorrect or otherwise imprecise. Notwithstanding such observations, genuine range expansions may explain the appearance of certain species, as indicated below (for example White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*). Shelton & Sultanov (2001) also provides information on range and status of some of those species appearing below, although overlap with and duplication of any information given in that earlier publication is deliberately avoided here, except where a significant difference has been detected. Note that evaluated anecdotal evidence is depicted thus: {...}.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*

Two individuals seen singly on spring passage near Kirdamir (c175km west of Baku), 24 & 26 April 2002. This species is known as a passage migrant in Azerbaijan (Mustafayev & Gambarov 1977), with recent published records from Shirvan on the Caspian coast (Shelton & Sultanov 2001). All localities mentioned here are east of the mapped range shown in e.g. Svensson *et al.* (1999), although Fitter *et al.* (1979) and Harrison (1992) are accurate with respect to Azerbaijan.

Corncrake *Crex crex*

On 15 and 16th June 2004 SJA, John Elliot and Shahlar Talibov heard two or three different males calling during the daytime, at 1600 and 0830 respectively, in alpine

meadows close to the border with Dagestan, Russia. Two sites were involved, a minimum of eight kilometres apart. The site on the 15th was 5km north-west of the settlement of Laza at an altitude of 2400m, the other, the following day, being near the village of Sudur at c2200m. Some areas of these extensive alpine meadows, identified as possible Corncrake sites by the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society (AzOS), are cut manually for hay.

{The local inhabitants knew this species and its call well and told my companions and myself that, along with a Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, itself very common here, they arrived on around 20th May and stayed into August each year. They are known to be present in meadows from at least 1300m upwards, but appear not to be present in agricultural land in the Caspian lowlands. The village of Boyuq Mozuq at this lower elevation down valley from Sudur, with attendant rasping call of corncrake emanating from the many meadows, translates perhaps fittingly as 'Big Raspberries'. Rahim Shahverdiyev, living near Sudur, described how he once accidentally killed four small young corncrakes hand-scything these meadows for hay.}

Clearly this species is breeding here in some numbers, although fieldguides do not show it as present at all in Azerbaijan. This appears, remarkably, to be the first confirmation of its presence as a breeding species here. A change of status seems wholly unlikely given the oral reports gleaned locally, and since it is documented as breeding in similar habitats in neighbouring Georgia, perhaps to even greater altitudes. Up to 3000m is given in Cramp & Simmons (1985) for the USSR (quoting from Dementiev & Gladkov 1951) and this could well be in reference to Georgia, which was of course part of the former Soviet Union.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Eighteen individuals were noted on the steppe near the village of Karasu, c75km west of Baku, on 6 May 2002. This constitutes a highly unusual inland record of this species. Low cloud and drizzle apparently produced a temporary migratory halt in this and other species (see White-winged Black Tern below).

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus*

A continued westward expansion is evident, with one or more territorial pairs present near Yevlakh, c 245km west of Baku, in May 2002. This species was first recorded in Azerbaijan in 1953, on Lake Mehman (Gambarov 1953). It is now widespread in wetland areas (Sultanov *et al.* 2000 & 2002), although is included in the Red Data Book of Azerbaijan.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

A male was in aerial display over steppe near Sangachal (c35km south of Baku), with broken-wing type distraction display by a pair being observed nearby on 22 April 2002. This species was already previously considered a possible breeder (Sultanov pers. comm.), with a question mark appearing in Azerbaijan in the map in Snow & Perrins (1998) and Harrison (1982) showing it as universally present. Subsequent to this observation, an alarmed female was present on the plain at Sangachal on 8 June 2004 and was thought to be nesting, although no nest could be found. However, a female was found by SJA, IB and NA incubating a nest containing a clutch of three eggs just four days later, on 12 June, three kilometres to the south-west of Sangachal village. The author has since been provided with an earlier breeding record of this species, concerning a pair with chicks at Gobustan on 26 May 2003: Azeri scientists had shown the site that year to visiting British ornithologists Eric Meek and Mel

Kemp (Meek pers. comm.). {This coastal semi-desert site, less than 20km south of Sangachal, had reportedly also held a breeding pair the previous year}. These reports appear to constitute the first confirmed breeding of this species in Azerbaijan.

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*

A single light-phase bird was watched by SJA chasing a Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* at Yashma (c40km north of Baku) on 20 November 2002. This appears to be a new species for the Azerbaijan checklist (subject to acceptance). An abridged version of the field description lodged with AzOS is provided below.

"This bird was viewed by telescope (at 30 x magnification) initially flying at a range of about 200m when it was already in aerial pursuit of a Sandwich Tern. It proceeded to come closer to the observer, before giving up chasing the tern and heading back out to sea. It was clearly a skua, with all dark upperparts apart from a white flash in the primaries, both above and below. The underwing was otherwise all dark and plain. The bird had a dark cap, white breast and belly, with dusky smudging on the sides of the breast, and a long pointed tail. The central tail feathers protruded as spikes beyond the rest of the tail. In general appearance it was relatively slim and well-proportioned, having strongly pointed angled wings with narrow arms. The body was not deep-chested as in Pomarine Skua *S. pomarinus* and the flight lighter than in that species. Given the lack of barring, the, perhaps broken, tail projections and clean plumage it was considered to be an adult."

Another individual, the second national record, was observed by SJA, IB and NA on the shore of the Caspian Sea in the Kura delta on 28 September 2004.

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus*

A colony of 28 pairs was discovered in 1989 on the islands off Elat/Pirsigat, c65km south of Baku, (Patrikeev 1991), and constituted the first breeding by this species in Azerbaijan (and also probably the Caspian Sea basin). This number has since increased to c250 pairs in 1996 (Sultanov *et al.* 2000). This species is at least partially resident in Azerbaijan, but with a spring influx certainly evident. In May 2001, 66, all but four being adults, were in Baku bay on 7 May, with 150+ at Sangachal on 8 May. This influx was again noted in 2002, on 12 May, when over 100 individuals, mostly adults, were off Baku (but note no visit was made by the observer on any other date). A recent and continuing eastward range expansion is clearly involved. Snow & Perrins (1998) has this colony accurately placed on the appropriate map.

Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*

Referred to as Herring Gull *L. argentatus* by most local researchers, this is a matter of nomenclature only. The form in question is obviously of *cachinnans* type. The translucency on the primaries, grey tongue protruding well into the black on the upper wing, long bill, large white triangular tip to primary 10 (P10) and sub-terminal mirror to P9 (black band on P5 and 'comma' on P4) are features of *cachinnans* (Newell *in litt.*). See images, this issue, but for others of individuals photographed in Azerbaijan in the breeding season, see: <http://www.magickircle.com/birds> (search for 'aspinall').

Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

A second-year bird (first summer) was seen by SJA as it flew north at Sangachal on 22 April 2002. This constitutes a first record for Azerbaijan (subject to acceptance). An abridged version of the field description lodged with the AzOS is provided below.



Plate 1. Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, showing upperwing, Baku. (Simon Aspinall)



Plate 2. Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, showing underwing and wingtips, Baku. (Simon Aspinall)



Plate 3. Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*, on the water at Baku. (Simon Aspinall)

"This bird was observed at about 40 metres range at c1030 as it flew north low along the coast at Sangachal Bay. It bore the typical black 'W' pattern across the upperwings, albeit faded, with the tail having a dark terminal band, again faded. The mantle was light grey. The bill was pale yellowy or green with a dark tip, and there was a small dark smudge behind the eye. It was about the same size as Slender-billed Gulls *Larus genei*, and substantially larger than Little Gulls *L. minutus*, both of which were also seen at the time."

Recent records of Kittiwakes from the Gulf of Oman in winter, per OBRC & EBRC, and that here, together with that of an Arctic Skua (above), are suggestive of an overland crossing via the Caspian Sea to reach the Arabian Sea. The occurrence of both Arctic and Long-tailed Skua *S. longicaudus* on passage in the southern Caspian Sea has been documented previously (Feeny *et al.* 1968), with more recent sightings of the latter, also on the Caspian, by Newell & Dukes (pers. comm.). An overland passage as required by seabirds to reach the Caspian is not without precedent, even if remaining rarely observed or reported from the region in question.

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

Over 6000 together hawking over steppe near the village of Karasu, c75km west of Baku, on 6 May 2002. Low cloud and drizzle apparently produced a temporary migratory halt on a west-bound lowland flyway, involving not only these terns but also some 600 Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, 120 Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola*, 30+ Black-winged Pratincoles *G. nordmanni* and the 18 Grey Plover (as referred to above) all grounded.

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

A single free-flying bird was observed on the outskirts of Baku in February 2002, with a flock of 10 present in the same city in February 2003, latter when atypically cold with blizzard conditions. Winters here are considered insufficiently severe to hinder possible future colonisation, especially given the species' recent successful naturalisation in continental western Europe and its natural occurrence on the Iranian Caspian coast.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Continuing range expansion and population increase apparent (see Shelton & Sultanov 2001); now present almost to the border with Georgia. Colonisation has proceeded upstream along the Kura river valley, through the Kura Araz lowlands, where villages and farmland have offered ideal habitat for the species.

Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Apparently present in urban settings only. See Shelton & Sultanov (2001).

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

The typical breeding race in the Caspian lowlands is *feldegg*, the black-headed wagtail, with *beema*, *thunbergi* and *lutea* all also being noted widely on spring passage; the westernmost regular passage limits of *lutea* remain unknown.

Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*

A minimum of 14 singing males were found in tamarisk scrub wetland at Sangachal (c30 km south of Baku) in May 2001, with both courtship and nest-building being observed (SJA, IB, ES). This constitutes the first report of breeding by this species in Azerbaijan, where it was hitherto known only as a migrant. Birds were again present at this site in spring 2002, while two singing males were also located in apparently suitable breeding habitat by the Kura river, near Yevlakh, c.220km west of Baku, on 4 May 2002. Some 23 singing males were recorded in the Sangachal area in June 2004. The species appears to have been overlooked previously, although a question mark appears in Azerbaijan on the map for this species in Svensson *et al.* (1999). Collection of material for DNA analysis and of biometric data is deemed to be worthwhile. Sykes' Warbler *H. rama* is ruled out on the basis of sound recordings obtained by the author.

Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* ssp. *pallidirostris*

Only individuals of *pallidirostris* have been noted by the author to date. Such birds have been seen both on passage and in winter, but do not remain to breed, nor does any other form of this species locally. The Lesser Grey Shrike *Lanius minor* appears to be a widespread migrant breeder throughout suitable habitat.

Common Mynah *Acridotheres tristis*

This species, possibly introduced, has made a recent appearance in Azerbaijan and may now be established locally around Baku, although it appears to be absent there in winter. None were seen in or around Baku in the winter of 2004/5 and it may thus not have survived.

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*

Singing males were recorded well to the north of currently mapped range, and at lower altitude than might be typical elsewhere in their range, on rocky limestone hills at 1200–1400m above (global) sea level, c125 km north-west and c100 west of Baku in May 2001 and May 2002 respectively. It is possible these birds were still on migration,

but, if so, they had already overshot the known northern limit to their summer range. Passage birds are regularly noted along the central Caspian coastal lowlands in spring (Sultanov pers. comm.), again to the north of the known breeding areas. The distribution of this species throughout much of its range is generally considered poorly known. Crtolan *E. hortulana* is a widespread breeding species in the lowlands.

Finally, of particular conservation interest, is that three globally-threatened international (IUCN) Red Data species, namely Pygmy Cormorant *P. pygmaeus*, White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* and Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, currently remain sufficiently abundant in Azerbaijan that they are not even listed as national Red Data species.

Although only a very modest amount of "new" information is included here, it is clear that no single printed source provides wholly accurate information concerning the avifauna of Azerbaijan. Allowing for those species for which genuine range or status changes are demonstrable, it is nonetheless evident that much is still to be learnt about the distribution and occurrence of birds in this country.

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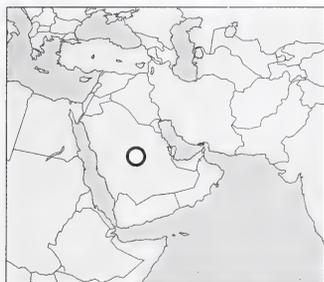
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The breeding avifauna of the Umm al-Qamari Islands protected area, Saudi Arabia

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We carried out eight ornithological surveys of the Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area (19°00'N, 41°07'E), located some 20 km south of the coastal city of al-Qunfudah, Saudi Arabia, between January 2001 and July 2003, as part of a breeding seabird study and to monitor any changes in the avifauna of the Protected Area that might have occurred since 1988. A total of 49 bird species was recorded including 11 breeding species. Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*, Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*, Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichii*, and Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis*, recorded as breeding in 1988, we recorded in similar numbers. As in 1988, the Protected Area still holds a spectacular colony of African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea* estimated at 950–1300 pairs in May 2002. Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* and Swift Tern *S. bergii* were recorded as new breeding species, the last-named at 380–410 pairs in July 2003 constituting the largest colony reported in the Red Sea region.

Umm al-Qamari, literally 'the mother of doves', is the smallest Protected Area managed by the National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development (NCWCD), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, encompassing less than 0.1 km² of land. Comprising two islands and one sand bank, it has long been known as a spectacular breeding site for African Collared Doves *Streptopelia roseogrisea* (Child & Grainger 1990). The presence of a large congregation of doves during spring and summer on such a small offshore area is almost unique in the region and renders the islands worthy of continued protection. Indeed, the islands have long been protected by traditional hunting laws, a circumstance officially ratified in 1977 by the Saudi Council of Ministers in terms of hunting legislation as a non-hunting area (Child & Grainger 1990); eventually, in 1988 the NCWCD designated it as a Special Nature Reserve, Saudi Arabia's highest level of protection for a protected area (Child & Grainger 1990).

Despite its recognition as an Important Bird Area in the Middle East under bird species assemblage rules (Evans 1994), the Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area has received little ornithological attention. A seminal survey was carried out on 20 June 1988 (Symens 1988) followed on 21 February 1993 by a single short-duration visit (Newton *et al.* 1993). Nearly a decade later we carried out eight consecutive visits to the Protected Area between January 2001 and July 2003. We detail here these ornithological observations and assess the changes in the Islands' breeding avifauna between 1988 and 2003.

THE STUDY AREA

The Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area is composed of two small, flat (<3m asl), fossil-coral islands, Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah (5.7 ha), Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah (1.6 ha) and one sand bank (0.1 ha) located respectively 3.8, 6.4, and 1.8 km off the Saudi Red Sea coast (Fig. 1). The protected area is centred at 19°00'N, 41°07'E, about 20 km south of the coastal city of al-Qunfudah. The two islands and the sand bank are surrounded by a coral shelf whose shallow waters support marine sea-grass (e.g.

Table 1. Bird species recorded in the Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area, with maximum numbers counted during each survey. (* = proven breeding species; + = not counted)

Species_Survey Date	20/06/881	21/02/932	24/01/01	29/04/01	30/09/01	23/12/01	25/05/02	20/10/02	16/07/03	29/07/03
Brown Booby <i>Sula leucogaster</i> *	15	40–50	50–60	65	58	55	70–80	155	125	
White Pelican <i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	+	1	17	2	6	11	2	6	13	24
(Northern) Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	5		1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1
Striated Heron <i>Butorides striatus</i> *	155			60–70			120		85	95
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> *	18		1	2			6	2	16	14
Western Reef Heron <i>Egretta gularis</i> *		36		19			2		6	
(Eurasian) Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> *				1						
Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>		1								
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				1						
Montagu's Harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>					3	2	1	2	2	2
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> *	5	2	4	2	1					
(Eurasian) Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>								3		
Crab Plover <i>Dromas ardeola</i>								4		
Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2	2	2	2	2	2	3	1	
Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>								2		
Lesser Sand Plover <i>Charadrius mongollus</i>		2	4		1	3		4		
Sanderling <i>Callidris alba</i>						1		2		
Little Stint <i>Callidris minuta</i>								2		
Dunlin <i>Callidris alpina</i>		2	4			1	1			
(Common) Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>										
(Common) Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>		6	2	6	28	22	9	6	2	
(Ruddy) Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>		100	180	45	30–40	170	180	35	235	280
Sooty Gull <i>Larus hemprichii</i> *		1	8–10	3						
White-eyed Gull <i>Larus leucophthalmus</i>				6						
Great Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ichthyaeetus</i>				45						
Yellow-legged (Caspian) Gull <i>Larus cachinnans</i>				4		30–40				
Armenian Gull <i>Larus armenicus</i>				2				2	1	
Caspian Tern <i>Sterna caspia</i>	+			2				42	550–600	320
Swift Tern <i>Sterna bergii</i> *	+	+		10–20	16	10	300–400	24	>650	>650
Lesser Crested Tern <i>Sterna bengalensis</i> *	+	+	1	20–30	8	40–50	10–20	1		
White-cheeked Tern <i>Sterna repressa</i>	+	+							2	2
Bridled Tern <i>Sterna anaethetus</i>										
Saunders's Tern <i>Sterna saundersi</i>			1							
Common Noddy <i>Anous stolidus</i>				1						

	>550	600-800	>500?	20-40	900-1300	100-150	+
African Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia roseogrisea</i> *				2			+
European Bee-eater <i>Merops apiaster</i>				1			
Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>				1			
Sand Martin <i>Riparia riparia</i>				20-40		1	
Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>				6			
Yellow Wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>				10		3	
Isabelline Wheatear <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>				2			
Northern Wheatear <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1				
Mourning Wheatear <i>Oenanthe lugens</i>			1				
Gracful Pintia <i>Prinia gracilis</i> *		+	+	+	+	+	+
African Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus baeticatus</i>				2			
Spotted Flycatcher <i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1				
Golden Oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus</i>				1			
Isabelline Shrike <i>Lanius isabellinus</i>						2	
Brown-necked Raven <i>Corvus ruficollis</i>		6	2		1		

Notes: 1 Symens (1988) did not visit the sand bank.
2 Newton *et al.* (1993) visited only Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island.

Table 2. Number of incubated nests and chicks of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* recorded on the three islands of Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area during eight surveys between January 2001 and July 2003

Survey date	Sand bank Nests		Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah Nests		Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Nests		Totals
	with egg(s)	with chick	with egg(s)	with chick	with egg(s)	with chick	
24/01/01	0	0	0	3	0	0	3
29/04/01	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
30/09/01	0	12	2	14	2	0	30
23/12/01	0	0	1	6*	0	1	8
25/05/02	20	0	1	0	0	0	21
20/10/02	0	3	25	10	0	0	38
16/07/03	6	19	6	1	0	0	32
29/07/03	10	24	27	1	4	0	66
Totals	40	58	62	35	6	1	202

*One nest with one chick and one egg

Posidonia sp.). Protruding coral reefs offer roosting sites to a number of bird species. On Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah and Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah, the vegetation community essentially comprises dew-dependent *Salvadora persica*, *Suaeda fructicosa*, and *Suaeda* sp. forming dense thickets up to 3 m tall (less on Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah) towards the edges of the vegetated areas and shorter in the middle of the islands. The littorals of both islands consist of coral sand beaches possessing above the intertidal zone isolated clumps of *Cyperus conglomeratus*, *Atriplex farinosa*, and *Zygophyllum album* (Alwelaie *et al.* 1993). The sand bank has no vegetation. There are no weather records for Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area, but we have assumed that weather data pertaining to al-Qunfudah applies, giving a mean ambient temperature range of 26 to 33°C throughout the year and a mean relative humidity range of 65 to 85%, increasing at night, possibly reaching 100% (Al-Jerash 1989). As in the southern Red Sea, rain is unpredictable, rarely exceeding 40 mm annually in al-Qunfudah (Alwelaie *et al.* 1993). Between September 2001 and July 2003 we recorded less than 2 mm of rain in Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah.

METHODS

The Protected Area was visited on eight occasions, on 24 January 2001, 29 April 2001, 30 September 2001, 23 December 2001, 25 May 2002, 20 October 2002, 16 July 2003, and 29 July 2003. Birds were observed on foot or from a boat throughout the study area, from sunrise to late morning during each survey and were identified by reference to the standard ornithological literature. Observations of eggs or chicks observations were taken as proof of breeding. In May 2002 and July 2003 we estimated nest density within the African Collared Dove and tern colonies by counting nests within a number of 2x2 m or 1x1 m squares placed evenly throughout the colonies. We then determined the nest totals per colony by measuring either the surface of the potential breeding area for doves (dense *Suaeda* sp. and *Salvadora persica* habitat) or the occupied area for terns.

We used Garmin III GPS; its 'TrackBack' navigation feature enabled us to retrace any path that defined breeding colonies. We stored locations at 1m intervals, enabling us to map accurately perimeters and surfaces using ArcView 3.2. We used callipers (+/-0.1 mm) to measure the dimensions of sampled eggs and an electronic portable scale (+/-0.1 g) to determine weights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*

The species was found breeding during all eight visits to the Protected Area. Between January 2001 and July 2003 a total of 108 incubated nests and 94 chicks were recorded (Table 2) (Plates 1–2–3). Clutch size was generally two (67.6%; $n = 73$), less frequently one (31.5%; $n = 34$) and in one case three (0.9%). We never observed more than one chick reared by parents, but on one occasion we recorded a clutch with one egg and one hatched chick confirming asynchronous hatching (Cramp & Simmons 1977). All but two nests were located on the coral sand beaches, above the intertidal zone, either without vegetation protection or at the edge of clumps of *Cyperus conglomeratus* sedges. Nests were shallow depressions in coral sand sometimes being lined with twigs, dry algae, debris and flotsam (Plate 4). Two pairs had laid and incubated an egg in an old Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) nest built from branches of *Salvadora persica*, in clumps of *Atriplex farinosa*. Eggs were oval, pale blue with a chalky white coating (Plate 5) and measured 41.3–66.1 mm by 37.0–43.6 mm (average = 58.7x41.1 mm; SD = 3.9x1.3; $n = 56$) and weighed 40.2–55.9 g (average = 49.1 g; SD = 5.3; $n = 14$), similar in size and mass to those at Ascension Island (59x40 mm, 39–65 g; Stonehouse 1963). Although our observations suggest that the species is a year-round breeder in the



Plate 1. Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* on nest, Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah Island, Saudi Arabia, 20 October 2002. (Eric Bedin)



Plate 2. One-day-old Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* chick, Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah Island, Saudi Arabia, 23 December 2001. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 3. Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* about to fledge (i.e. 90–100 days), Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah Island, Saudi Arabia, 20 October 2002. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 4. Nest of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah Island, Saudi Arabia, 29 April 2001. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 5. Comparative sizes of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* (left), Swift Tern *Sterna bergii* (middle), and Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* (right) eggs, Umm al-Qamari sand bank, Saudi Arabia, 29 July 2003. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 6. Breeding Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island, Saudi Arabia, 25 May 2002. (Eric Bedin)

Protected Area, Symens (1988) did not record the species in June 1988 and Newton *et al.* (1993) found no signs of breeding but observed five individuals flying amongst the Sooty Gull flock over Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island. Although Newton *et al.* (1993) limited their visit to Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island where we noticed throughout our surveys fewer breeding pairs than on other islands (Table 2), their recorded lack of breeding pairs suggests that the Brown Booby may be a relatively recent breeding species in the Protected Area.

Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*

On 25 May 2002 we recorded an almost-fledged chick hiding in an *Atriplex farinosa* clump bordering the intertidal zone. The species appears resident in the Protected Area, a maximum of 2–3 pairs breeding (Symens 1988).

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

On 29 April 2001, there were 45–50 birds in breeding plumage roosting on the tallest *Salvadora persica* and *Suaeda* sp. thickets in south-east Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah but we could not confirm breeding. On 25 May 2002 we found about 90 birds in breeding plumage and two nests (with one and two eggs respectively in these dense *Salvadora persica* and *Suaeda* sp. thickets in south-east Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah (Plate 6). Probably there were more incubating nests, but we limited our investigations to minimize disturbance. On 16 and 29 July 2003 there were 25 and 45 juveniles respectively, close to fledging, and about 65 adults. Adults flew frequently to the mainland, never being seen foraging around the island. The number of breeding pairs was comparable in 2001–2003 to 1988 (Symens 1988). Presumably, the species is a regular breeder from May to June on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island.

Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*

Concomitant to our Cattle Egret observations, we recorded up to six adult Western Reef Herons in the Cattle Egret heronry on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah where by 16 July 2003 five juveniles were close to fledging. Two weeks later there were seven newly-fledged birds amongst eight adults foraging on the island's beaches and coral reefs. Symens (1988) had reported a similar number of breeding pairs. This species also appears to be a regular summer breeder in the Protected Area, deserting the islands during autumn and winter.

(Eurasian) Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia archeri*

On 29 April 2001, 19 adults in fresh breeding plumage were roosting with Cattle Egrets on the tallest *Salvadora persica* and *Suaeda* sp. thickets in south-east Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah and on 25 May 2002 two birds in breeding plumage were present in the Cattle Egret colony on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah but we were unable to confirm breeding. Eventually, on 16 July 2003 we found one nest with two chicks (Plate 7) in the Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah heronry; there was also an adult and a newly-fledged juvenile foraging on the beach. We also recorded the species foraging around the islands in winter. The species' breeding period and the extent to which it species uses the Protected Area as a regular breeding site are unclear. On 21 February 1993, 36 adults in breeding plumage were present, and possibly about to breed on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah (Newton *et al.* 1993). On 29 April 2001, 28 nests containing almost-fledged chicks were recorded on as-Seqalah Island located about 15 km north of the Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area (PERSGA/GEF 2003), none then being located in the Protected Area itself. Unfledged birds were still present on 29 July 2003. The species is possibly an irregular breeder in the Protected Area between March and June.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Three nests were recorded on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah and two on Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah, all but one being sited on the ground at the islands' periphery of the islands and being constructed of flotsam and *Salvadora persica* branches. The nest previously described by Symens (1988) is right in the middle of Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah, comprising a 1.5m pile of *Salvadora persica* branches. On 24 January 2001 a nest on the northern Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah coastline had three eggs (Plate 8). Another pair was roosting on a nest on Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah. Some two months later the former nest held an unfledged chick (Shobrak, pers. comm.). A maximum of two pairs appears to breed during winter on the Umm al-Qamari Islands.

Sooty Gull *Larus hemprichii*

We recorded the species regularly in the Protected Area, numbers ranging from 45 to 280 (Table 1). On 23 December 2001 we found a carcass of a one to two-week-old chick below a *Suaeda* sp. bush on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah, proof of breeding. On 25 May 2002 we observed many adults in bright breeding plumage, but our search of all the *Cyperaceae* vegetation clumps failed to find any nests where Symens (1988) had recorded several on 20 June 1988. However, on 16 July 2003, on beaches on Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah and Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah we found two and four downy chicks respectively. Despite Symens' (1988) estimate of 50–100 pairs breeding in the Protected Area, our records of over 200 adults in July 2003 are not yet augmented by accurate numbers of breeders. The species appears to be a regular summer breeder in the Protected Area.

Swift Tern *Sterna bergii velox*

We recorded the species in the Protected Area throughout the year. On 30 September 2001, there were 13 decomposed carcasses of almost- or newly-fledged juveniles on the sand bank. On 25 May 2002 the breeding colony of about 270 pairs (6–7 nests/m² on an area of 42 m²) was located on the west-centre of the sand bank (Plate 9). On 16 July 2003 that colony comprised three crèches of 299 chicks of varying age on mudflats adjoining the sand bank; 80–110 adults were still incubating. By 29 July 2003 there were 140–150 unfledged chicks in two crèches and 60–70 adults still incubating. The proportion of incubating adults that had started head feather moult had increased from 9% to 53% between the two visits. Eggs were sub-elliptical, buff-cream, blotched and speckled black and dark brown (Plate 5), measuring 58.5–66.5mm x 42.5–44.2 mm (average = 63.0x43.2 mm; n = 9) and weighing 50.7–60.9 g (average = 54.1 g; SD = 3.9; n = 14). We estimated the colony at 380 to 410 breeding pairs in 2003. Although the Swift Tern is recorded breeding in the region (Cramp and Simmons 1985), this newly recorded colony on the Umm al-Qamari Islands is the largest described so far in the Red Sea region (Jennings, 1995; PERSGA/GEF 2003).

Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*

Like the above species, it was observed throughout the year. On 25 May 2002 the Swift Tern colony had only one *S. bengalensis* that possibly was breeding, but by 16 July 2003 there were an estimated 420 birds breeding in association with the Swift Terns at an average density of 9.5–10.5 nests/m² on a 41 m² area (Plate 10). In addition 148 chicks of different ages had assembled in two crèches. Two weeks later there were 280–320 chicks in crèches and 210–260 birds still incubating. The proportion of incubating adults that had started head feather moult did not vary between the two visits (14–16%). Eggs were sub-elliptical, buff-cream, blotched and spotted black (Plate 5), measured 49.0–52.4 mm x 33.0–36.7 mm (average = 51.3x35.3 mm; n = 10) and weighed 25.9–34.1 g (average = 26.8 g; SD = 2.6; n = 10). At least 550 to 600 pairs of Lesser



Plate 7. Two Spoonbill chicks *Platalea leucorodia archeri*, Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island, Saudi Arabia, 16 July 2003. (Eric Bedin)



Plate 8. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* nest and clutch Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island, Saudi Arabia, 24 January 2001. (Eric Bedin)



Plate 9. Swift Tern *Sterna bergii velox* colony, Umm al-Qamari sand bank, Saudi Arabia, 25 May 2002. (Eric Bedin)



Plate 10. Mixed colony of Swift Terns *Sterna bergii velox* and Lesser Crested Terns *Sterna bengalensis*, Umm al-Qamari sand bank, Saudi Arabia, 29 July 2003. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 11. Young African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*, Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island, Saudi Arabia, 29 April 2001. (Stéphane Ostrowski)



Plate 12. Nest and clutch of African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*, Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah Island, Saudi Arabia, 29 April 2001. (Stéphane Ostrowski)

Crested Terns bred in the Protected Area in 2003 in association with Swift Terns. Symens (1988) had speculated that because Sooty Gull is a predator of broods of other gulls and terns, it may have prevented other seabirds from breeding on the islands he had visited. Now although he did not record breeding terns in June 1988, he had not surveyed the sand bank. Newton *et al.* (1993) had visited the area during February when they were unlikely to record breeding terns. In 2003 we observed that Sooty Gulls took unguarded eggs and newly hatched chicks at the mixed colony's periphery.

African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*

We recorded this species breeding in large numbers on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah in April 2001, May 2002 and July 2003. Nests, eggs, chicks and recently fledged juveniles all were present during these visits (Plate 11). Nests were frail twig structures, 0.3–1.8 m above ground in *Salvadora persica* bushes (Plate 12). Eggs were pure white, one to two per clutch. Because the species uses widespread very dense habitat that allows poor sightlines to observers, it proved difficult to assess absolute number of birds present in the colony (Newton *et al.* 1993). On 20 June 1988 Symens (1988) estimated the total number of African Collared Doves to be between 600 and 800 birds. On 21 February 1993, Newton *et al.* (1993) estimated that more than 500 birds could have been present during their visit and mentioned that after 1600 hours, additional flocks of birds arrived on the island from the mainland. In May 2002 we calculated that the area of dense *Salvadora/Suaeda* thickets used by breeders on Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah stretched over c. 9,550 m². Applying measured density samples of 0.10–0.14 active nests/m² to this area suggests that these thickets house up to 1350 nests during May. This is a conservative estimate, for we did not include known and likely areas of higher densities, nor the 12–17,000 m² of low *Suaeda* sp. vegetation in the middle of the island where the species breeds, but probably at lower densities. We lack data on its population dynamics and its migration patterns from 1988 onwards and so offer no explanation for its gregarious breeding on the islands. It appears to reach the Protected Area in February (Newton *et al.* 1993), numbers building up until May–June, and then its population size decreases until it deserts the breeding site in October. However we note that from 2001 to 2003 the species did not breed in the *Salvadora/Suaeda* thickets of Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah, only 2.4 km from Umm al-Qamari al-Baraniah, although it had been reported breeding on both in June 1988 (Symens 1988). (Newton *et al.* (1993) did not visit Umm al-Qamari al-Foganiah in 1993).

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis*

This species is the only Passeriforme to have been recorded as breeding in the Protected Area. It is very common, individuals singing during each of our visits. We found one nest and a recently fledged juvenile in a *Suaeda* sp. bush in January 2001, indicating winter breeding. The species is resident in the Protected Area.

CONCLUSION

The Umm al-Qamari Islands Protected Area appears to be a relatively undisturbed birdlife sanctuary on the Saudi Red Sea coast. Although we found evidence of African Collared Dove being hunted and having their eggs collected and of indirect disturbance by picnickers and fishermen, such events seemed marginal and irregular. That ground-nesting species and the African Collared Dove (which often nests low down) breed so successfully implies that ground predators, such as rat, cat and fox spp., thankfully are absent. The Protected Area thoroughly deserves its listing as an Important Bird Area in the Middle East not only for its seabird colonies but also for its spectacular concentration of African Collared Doves.

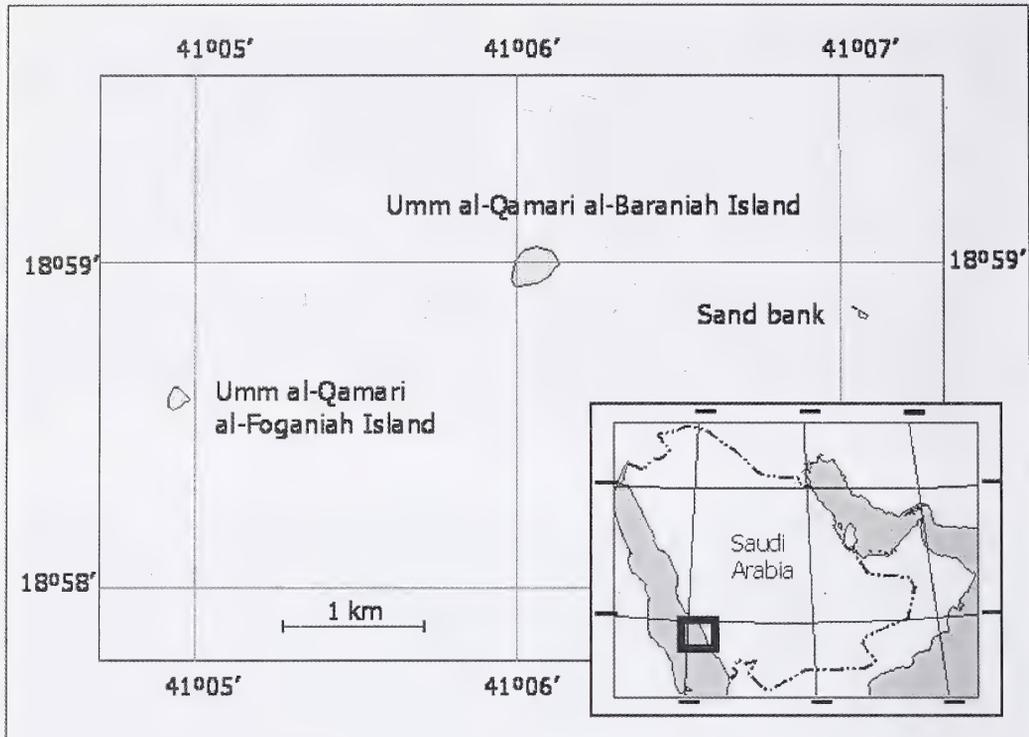


Fig 1. Map of Umm Al-Qamar Islands Protected Area

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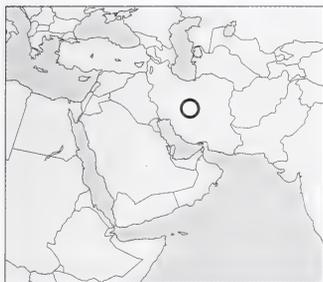
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Bird observations from Iran in February–March 2001, including a new species for the Middle East

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is situated at the junction of the Western Palearctic, Eastern Palearctic, Oriental and Afrotropical (marginally) zoogeographic regions, and boasts an extraordinary range of habitats. The resulting diverse avifauna has, since 1979, been studied mainly by the active ornithology unit of the Department of Environment, and since the 1990s also by a few foreign workers (e.g. van Diek *et al.* 2004). Still, our knowledge of the avifauna in this huge country is incomplete.

We present interesting observations from a visit in early spring 2001. Between 25 February and 10 March several areas in the north-east of the country, in the provinces of Mazandaran and Semnan, near the Caspian Sea were visited, including Miankaleh, Fereidoonkenar, Incheh Borun, Touran, Golestan National Park and the Parvar Protected Area. On 12–18 March data were collected around Bandar-e Abbas near the Strait of Hormuz, the wetlands of Rud-i-Hara and Rud-i-Minab were visited, as was the protected area of Kuh-i Geno. From 20 March, two weeks were spent in Seistan and Baluchistan, in the extreme south-east, close to the border with Pakistan, mostly in the Garmbit area. Place names, where possible, follow the *Times Atlas of the World* or Evans (1994). A complete list of species recorded can be obtained from any of the authors.

Persian Shearwater *Puffinus persicus*

A boat trip near the island of Larak in the Strait of Hormuz produced a total of 120 individuals on 18 March. These could have been breeders from one of the nearby islands, although no breeding sites in the Strait of Hormuz are known (Porter *et al.* 1996).

Marbled Teal (Duck) *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

Considered Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2000). One was seen on 21 March at Bandar-e-Abbas and three on 30 March at Beris, east of Chabahar, Baluchistan province.

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

There are very few observations in Iran. We saw an adult on 13 March, 20 km north of Minab, Hormozgan province. A sighting of four in the same region in 1998 was the first record in Iran (Kirwan 1998), with another record from the same area on 13 March 2001 and one 20 km west of Minab in mid-April 2001 (Balmer & Betton 2001), and subsequently one was photographed at Karun fishponds, Khuzestan province, on 22 January 2004 (van Diek *et al.* 2004). The nearest known breeding areas for this resident species are in the Indus plains of Pakistan (Grimmett *et al.* 1998) and in Iraq (Salim 2002). The records in Iran might indicate a previously overlooked breeding locality or represent a recent range extension.



Plate 1. Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*, Hara mangrove, Iran, 17 March 2001. (Reto Burri & Raffael Aye)



Plate 2. Great Stone Plover *Esacus recurvirostris*, Hara mangrove, Iran, 12 March 2001. (Raffael Aye)



Plate 3. Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*, Rud-i-Hara, Iran, 17 March 2001. (Reto Burri)



Plate 4. Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*, Minab, Iran, 15 March 2001. (Reto Burri)



Plate 5. Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides*, Minab, Iran, 15 March 2001. (Raffael Aye)

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

Approximately 100 km east of Shahrud, north of Touran Wildlife Refuge, Semnan province, at least 150 were observed migrating north on 5 March during one hour. Steppe Eagle is a passage migrant throughout the Middle East, but heavy spring passage is mainly known from Israel and Egypt (Shirihai *et al.* 2000). The date of our observation corresponds well with the peak migration in Israel, which is in the first or second week of March (Shirihai *et al.* 2000), although Zarudny (1903) mentioned the passage of some numbers between Quchan and Mashhad, on the frontier with Turkmenistan, in early to mid-March 1898. As Steppe Eagle breeds principally in Asia, from south-east European Russia, through Central Asia to Manchuria (Shirihai *et al.* 2000), most of those passing through Israel will subsequently move towards the Caspian Sea, which they could bypass west or the south. Shirihai *et al.* (2000) stated that 'whether significant numbers pass through the southeast Caspian Sea region remains open to speculation'. Our observation suggests that they actually do so.

Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*

On 17 March at least 600 were at Hara mangrove, on the southern shore of Khuran strait, Hormozgan province. Additionally, we observed 38 at Rud-i-Minab, Hormozgan province, on 15 March, and 30 at Govater, extreme south-east Baluchistan province, on 21 March. Waterfowl counts undertaken in 1970–78 by the ornithology unit of the Department of Environment estimated 1250–1500 wintering and 1500+ breeding birds in this region (Evans 1994), and the entire world population is c. 43,000 individuals (Rose & Scott 1994). Our observation represents more than one-third of the entire Iranian wintering or breeding population of the 1970s, and more than 1% of the world's population. However, in January 2004, some 4598 were counted along the Hormozgan coast alone (*Dutch Birding* 26: 132) indicating that the wintering population, at least, is much higher than previously suspected.

Great Stone Plover *Esacus recurvirostris*

Very limited breeding range in the Middle East (Porter *et al.* 1996). The following observations were made: two at Hara mangrove on 12 March, three at Minab on 15 March, one at Govater on 21 March and one at Pozm Tiab on 24 March.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*

On 25 March, two were near Chabahar. There is also a previously unpublished record of three on 22 April 2000 at Bandar-e Abbas (T. Sacher). These observations support the statement by Keijl *et al.* (2001) that the species 'is probably more common in Iran than previously thought'.

Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria*

On 2 March, one was at Gomishan, Mazandaran province, only the 11th record since the 1950s (Sachanowicz *et al.* 2002).

White-tailed Plover *Chettusia leucura*

On 17 March, three were observed in Bandar-e Abbas.

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*

At least 1000 were estimated along the shore at Rud-i-Hara, Hormozgan province, on 17 March. As the species principally migrates in late April–May (Hayman *et al.* 1986), these individuals were probably wintering. The estimated wintering population for the entire country was only 500–1000 (based on counts by the Department of Environment in the 1970s; www.wetlands.org/inventory&/MiddleEastDir/

Doc_chapters/IRAN4.doc), which appears to be a significant underestimate, given our observation and the discovery of 906 individuals along the Hormozgan coast in January 2004 (van Diek *et. al.* 2004).

Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus*

Five were observed near the island of Larak, Strait of Hormuz, on 18 March. Apparently a relatively early spring arrival.

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

On 13 and 15 March, two were observed between Bandar-e-Abbas and Minab, and a single at Minab on 15 March. Pied Kingfisher is only mentioned as a breeding bird for south-west Iran (Fry *et al.* 1992), but some appear to reach other parts of the country in winter (Porter *et al.* 1996), and the species is probably regular in the Bandar-e Abbas area (Khani pers. comm.), where it may be extending its range (D. A. Scott *in litt.* 2004).

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*

One was recorded 21 March at Govater, extreme south-east Baluchistan province. Most probably this bird was wintering in the region, as spring migration starts only in April (Ali & Ripley 1998). The map in Alström & Mild (2003) does not include Iran within the species' winter range, but Richard's Pipit is considered an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor in the United Arab Emirates (Richardson & Aspinall 1998) and overwintering in Iran could be expected. Indeed, D. A. Scott (*in litt.* 2004) recorded at least three instances of presumed overwintering in the 1970s: one at Miankaleh, south-east Caspian, on 3 January 1971, one near Govater, south-east Baluchistan on 4 March 1971 and one at Lake Maharlu, near Shiraz, Fars province, on 19 January 1974. Another record suggesting overwintering is from Miankaleh, on 22 February (S. Nicolle & H. P. Roche *in* Bradshaw & Kirwan 2000).

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*

At least five singing birds were observed on 14 March on the slopes of Kuh-i Geno (Bandar-e-Abbas). Although Long-billed Pipit is mentioned as a breeding bird for this area in Evans (1994), neither the maps in Porter *et al.* (1996) nor in Alström & Mild (2003) include this area within the species' breeding range, these references indicating that it reaches its southern limit in this region further north. Evans (1994) based his information on personal observations by D. A. Scott (*in litt.* 2004), who found the species breeding in this region in the 1970s, and again in April 1998 and 2001. Long-billed Pipit commences territory defence in the breeding areas in southern Baluchistan (Pakistan) from late February (Roberts 1992).

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*

On 27 March one was at Nikshahr, Baluchistan province. Its size, structure and coloration closely matched Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*, but the black streaking was strikingly coarse and contrasting on the breast, there was a discernible dark spot below a pale spot on the ear-coverts, and it possessed an obvious two-toned supercilium (buff or yellowish near the bill and whitish behind the eye), and an unstreaked olive-green mantle, characters that in combination readily separate *hodgsoni* from *trivialis*. This is only the second record for Iran (Scott 1994), but as it is a locally scarce to rare winter visitor to several Middle East countries (Porter *et al.* 1996), the species might also winter in Iran and probably also occurs more regularly on passage.

Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina*

In late afternoon of 28 March RA discovered a pale-blue passerine, which we subsequently identified as a male Verditer Flycatcher. It was located in a small oasis near Garmbit, extreme south-east Iran. Watched from a distance of c. 15 metres, we observed the following.

General appearance: Approximately the size of a Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, with an upright and slightly elongated stance, recalling Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*. Coloration entirely turquoise-blue. The plumage and especially the feather tips showed no unusual signs of aberration or wear. **Head:** Distinct black lores, contrasting with pale turquoise-blue rest of head. Bill black and similar to that of Spotted Flycatcher in shape. **Body:** Except undertail-coverts, entirely turquoise-blue lacking any contrast. Undertail-coverts possessed whitish fringes, forming a scaly pattern. Rectrices entirely blue, lacking any hint of white.

These features exclude the similar Dull-blue *E. sordida* and Nilgiri Flycatchers *E. albicaudata*, which are in any case endemic to Sri Lanka and the Western Ghats of India, respectively. Also, the superficially similar male Pale Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis unicolor* does not match these criteria, notably lacking the turquoise suffusion to the entire plumage, the sharply contrasting black lores and the scaly appearance to the undertail-coverts. Given the sharply contrasting black lores, it is probable that the Garmbit bird was a male.

Verditer Flycatcher breeds from Pakistan through northern India and Nepal to south-east Asia and winters from the Himalayan foothills south to Bangladesh (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). The nearest breeding populations to Iran are in northern Pakistan, in the Murree Hills and the lower Neelum and Kagan valleys of Kashmir, where the species is strongly migratory (Roberts 1992). The Garmbit bird had presumably drifted west on spring migration, as the date corresponds to the only spring passage record mentioned by Roberts (1992), one in March at the Murree Hills. Despite the species' attractive coloration, it seems unlikely that the bird was an escape. In general, insectivorous birds are difficult to keep, and probably few people do so in Iranian and Pakistani Makran and Baluchistan. This is the first record of the species in the Middle East (Porter *et al.* 1996).

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

On 13 March, a male *phoenicuroides*, a male *phoenicuroides* of the type 'karelini' and a male *arenarius* were observed c. 20 km north of Minab. Three forms were subsequently observed together on 16 March near Hormud, Hormozgan province: two male *isabellinus*, at least five male *phoenicuroides* and two male *arenarius*. We encountered examples of these red-tailed shrikes on a further eight occasions in southern Iran, with *phoenicuroides* being the most common taxon. *Phoenicuroides* is the only form of Isabelline Shrike that breeds in Iran, and probably also occurs on passage, whilst *arenarius* winters in southern Iran, and *isabellinus* is expected to occur on passage (Lefranc & Worfolk, 1997, Worfolk 2001). It is rather exceptional to observe three forms within this complex together, although Iran is probably one of the few countries where this is possible (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). Following Worfolk (2000), we did not consider 'tsaidamensis' to be valid and have considered birds formerly known as *speculigerus* as the nominate, and former *isabellinus* to be *arenarius*.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis pallidirostris*

On 1 March one was seen in the Turkoman steppes, Mazandaran province. *L. m. pallidirostris* breeds in north-east Iran. According to Lefranc & Worfolk (1997), a significant proportion of breeders in southern Turkmenistan and, probably, Iran winter

locally. (Very few winter observations are available from the presumed breeding range in Iran: K. Kratochwil *in litt.* 2004). That we observed thus might have been a wintering individual, although an early migrant cannot be excluded, as migrant *pallidirostris* populations breeding east of the Caspian return from early March (Lefranc & Worfolk 1997). Two specimens in the American Museum of Natural History (New York) are very indicative of wintering in Iran (dates corrected to modern dating system): a male from Djelalabad, Seistan, on 28 December 1900 (AMNH 660287), and a female taken at Tahlab, near Ladiz, Baluchistan, on 3 February 1901 (AMNH 660292).

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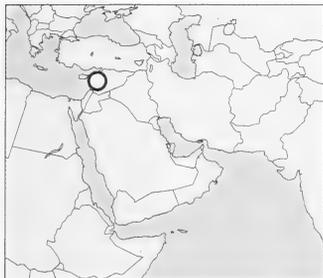
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Ornithological observations from Lebanon during 2003–4

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These notes contribute to fill some of the gaps of our slowly-advancing knowledge and understanding of the Lebanon's bird fauna. We present observations from 2003–4 of 18 selected species which include one new species Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* and one new subspecies Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus rubicola* for Lebanon. The list contains the first record for over 64 years of Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria* and for over 33 years of River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* and Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*. It also holds the second record for Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*, Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* and the fourth and fifth records for Sanderling *Calidris alba* and Chough *Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax* respectively. Other observations cover five new records for Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, including the first in autumn, likely breeding by Spur-winged Plover *Hoplopterus spinosus* and the sedentary nature of Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*. We also suggest that the rather rare migrant passage of Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* may include some winter visitors, making its status as a vagrant questionable. Common Crane *Grus grus* is probably a common rather than a scarce passage migrant. We have an unusual record of Corncrake *Crex crex*, recorded the largest number of Gannets *Morus bassanus* so far, and include a significant wintering record of Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*.

Continuous birdwatching activities by GR-J & MR-J continued during 2003 and 2004 within the framework of the project 'Assessment and Monitoring of Biodiversity in 5 protected areas in Lebanon', financed by the United Nations Development Programme and implemented by the Faculty of Science in the Lebanese University on behalf of the Ministry of Environment. On several occasions, SW voluntarily joined these birdwatching activities within and outside protected areas, especially during migration and wintering times in areas that are poorly explored. The study provided us with several significant observations which will add to the previous records of by Macfarlane (1978), Kirwan (1997, 1999 and 2001), Busuttill & Flumm (1998a and 1998b), Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi (1997, 1999, 2001 and 2002), Ramadan-Jaradi *et al.*, (2004), Beale (2000), Bradshaw & Kirwan (2000), Beale and Ramadan-Jaradi (2001), Bara (2002, 2003), Balmer & Betton (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003 and 2004) and will be expanded in the Lebanon Bird Report (in prep). We present here the most significant observations for 2003–4 of 18 species considered either rare in Lebanon or deserving reappraisal of their status or distribution.

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

On 28 Sep 2004, one in autumnal plumage in an artificial pond at Tyre Coast Nature Reserve. It was present until we left the site. Previously, the only record for Lebanon was of one at the Damour river mouth, 20 Dec 1996 (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi, 1999).

(Northern) Gannet *Morus bassanus*

One immature 7 Dec 2003 and nine, including 2 adults on 14 Dec 2003, offshore Naquoura near the southern Lebanese border. This is the largest flock ever recorded in one observation in Lebanon; previously it has been considered as accidental (Cramp & Simmons, 1977), although 3 were three recorded in one morning on 10 Apr 1997, offshore Beirut (Busuttill & Flumm, 1998a).

Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*

GRJ and SW observed an individual gliding fast south at Aley on 20 Sep 2003, but could not confirm it. On 7 Oct 2003 one adult male was circling overhead at Arnoun, largely corresponding to the description given by Porter *et al.* (1996). Initially, it appeared intermediate between Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* and Honey Buzzard *P. apivorus*, but the 6 fingers, dark gorget, extremely vestigial black carpal-patches and the black flight-feather band anterior to the trailing edges reaching the body provided sufficient evidence. This observation is the first known for Lebanon, but it almost certainly has been overlooked in the past, because it seems to be regular further south, in Israel (Balmer & Betton, 2001a, 2001b, 2002b, 2003; Bradshaw & Kirwan, 2000; Kirwan, 1999, 2001).

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

The Peregrine is a scarce passage migrant late March–late April and late August–late October over many areas including Beirut; it is also a very scarce winter visitor mid-November–late February to the Beqaa valley, in low mountains and the coastal strip (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999). Since that paper, we have encountered this species 37 times in 14 different localities on migration and in winter. On 1 Nov 2004, we learnt (Randa Armanazi pers comm) that two appeared on the top of Al Murr 25 Stores Tower in Beirut every day for about a week. We quickly verified the presence of a pair of Peregrines; the roof held prey remains, mainly wings of Feral Pigeons *Columba livia* f. *domestica*, Laughing (Palm) Doves *Streptopelia senegalensis*, and Collared Doves *S. decaocto* and regurgitated pellets. Subsequent observations from ground level showed the birds still present at the time of writing (late November). This indicated that the wintering period begins by late October instead of mid-November as stated by Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi (1999). The presence of such a wintering pair probably led Schrader (1892: in Kumerloeve, 1962) to believe the species bred near Beirut, which statement Benson (1970) and Tohmé & Neuschwander (1974) was the basis of their suggestion that the species possibly formerly bred.

Corncrake *Crex crex*

An uncommon passage over Lebanon in mid Aug–late Oct and early Mar–late May (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al.*, 2004). On 6 Dec 2003, one slightly limping but strong-flying individual was noted in the cultivated fields of Tyre Coast Nature Reserve. An extensive search a week later was unsuccessful. Its presence in early Dec is exceptional and suggests either that its injury had delayed it or it was a very late migrant.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

In accordance with its apparent past rarity, Kumerloeve (1962) considered the Lebanese area to be off the Common Crane's migration routes. Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi (1999) proposed that the species was a scarce and irregular passage migrant during Mar–Apr and mid-Sep–Nov, whilst Beale & Springer (*in litt*) found it to be a common spring migrant but rare in autumn at Aammiq Wetland. We organised additional, nocturnal observations together with the environmental Society 'TERRE' in Lebanon; these provided sufficient evidence to show it is common, even abundant during both periods, more so in the interior (the Beqaa Valley) in spring (mainly early Mar), with maximum daily peaks of 3300 birds. In autumn it is generally more abundant (mainly late Oct) between the coast and the 300m contour, the largest total being 6500 on 21 Oct 2003. Outside the above passage period, we noted only one bird (12 Jan 2003) at Qaraoun Lake and another 11 (4 Dec 2003) over Beirut.

(Eurasian) Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

With only four records between 1955 and 1998, the Oystercatcher was considered vagrant in Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi, 1999). Recent observations on Palm Islands Nature Reserve cover in 2002 one on 23 Apr and, two on 28 Sep and in 2003, one on 7 Apr and five on 11 May. Elsewhere, a putrefied corpse was found at Qaraoun Lake on 24 May 2004. These records suggest that Oystercatcher is a regular but scarce passage migrant, the September record being the first for autumn.

Spur-winged Plover *Hoplopterus spinosus*

Cited as an extremely rare passage migrant in mid-March to mid-June (most mid-Apr–mid-May) and early Aug–late Oct (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi, 1999) and rare on Palm Islands Nature Reserve (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi, 2001), it may have been overlooked in the past, because it seemed to be commoner during 2003–4. Furthermore, the recently-revealed Cheikh Zennad records comprise two on 31 Mar, six on 21 Apr, 3 on 1 May, four on 12 May, two on 26 May (chasing a Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*), and eight on 3 Aug 1996 (Bara pers. comm.) In 2003, two were present at the same site in May and June, although without proof of nesting. However, one juvenile, its black forehead fringed with brown, was present on the strand at Aammiq on 14 Jun and one adult was seen at Tyre Coast Nature Reserve on 1 Jul, strongly suggestive of summer breeding.

Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria*

The sole previous Lebanese record was of a small flock on 30 Oct 1958 at Rayak in the Beqaa (Flach, 1959). The second record comprises the three birds we observed on 22 Oct 2004 in a cultivated field above Qaraoun Lake.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

One of us (GRJ) with John Waterbury observed three individuals on 22 Sep 2002 at Cheikh Zennad and on 6 Oct 2004 we found six at Tyre Coast Nature Reserve, constituting the fourth and fifth records respectively for Lebanon. The three previous records are one at Beirut in late spring 1876 (Kumerloeve 1962), four at Cheikh Zennad on 15 Sep 1996 and eight there on 29 Sep 1996 (Bara 1998).

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

One was at Tyre Coast Nature Reserve on 14 Oct 2004, the second published record for Lebanon. Previously, one had been recorded at Cheikh Zennad on 12 May 1996 (Bara 1998).

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

One of us (GRJ) and John Waterbury observed one on 22 Sep., 2002 at Cheikh Zennad. On 8 Sep., 2004, GRJ recorded four at the mouth of Nahr Beirut (new locality). This later record is the 14th in Lebanon whilst the others were: one at Aammiq on 3 Apr., 1975 (Macfarlane, 1978), seven records at Cheikh Zennad in 1996–1997 with a maximum of six on 12 May 1996 (Bara 1998), one near Khaldeh on 25 Aug., 1996 (GRJ), one at Aammiq on 20 Mar., 1997 (S. Busuttill & Flumm, 1998b), one at Cheikh Zennad on 19 Jan., 2000 (Balmer & Betton, 2001) and one on 24 Aug., 2001 at Aammiq (Balmer & Betton, 2002a).

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

One of us (GRJ) with John Waterbury observed one on 22 Sep 2002 at Cheikh Zennad, the second record for Lebanon. The first record was from the same site on 18 Aug 1996 (Bara, 1998) making that of Al-Mécija (in Balmer & Betton, 2004) at Cheikh Zennad on 6 Sep 2003, the third record.

Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*

Given the number of records - one captured at Marjayoun by a forest guard (14 Feb 2001), one calling at Kfarhouneh (11 Mar 2001), one shot at Rihane (23 Mar 2002), one seen at Mliqh (13 Oct 2002), one captured in a fox trap near Horsh Ehden Nature Reserve (1 Feb 2003), two (more?) heard on Jabal Barouk's eastern slopes (Mar–Apr 2003) and one roadkill below Deir El Qamar (15 Jul 2004) - the species' status is revised to 'uncommon resident' and not 'uncertain' as given by Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi (1999).

(Common)¹ Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus* (Normand & Gosselin, 2002)

S.t. maurus (Normand & Gosselin, 2002) was widespread, being recorded regularly between 20 Oct and late Nov 1999 (Beale, 2000). Our own observations of the species (a passage migrant and over-winterer) during 2003–4 indicate that *S. t. rubicola* was about twice as abundant as *maurus*, especially at Aammq Wetland, in the Beqaa Valley cultivation, the Tyre Coast Nature Reserve, Naqoura, Damour and Beirut. Our observations were reinforced by those of Thierry Bara at Tyre and Naqoura on 3 Jan 2004 and by mist net captures at Tyre on 14 Oct 2004. All the birds considered *rubicola* showed a white half-collar similar to that on the male Semi-collared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata*, had a finely streaked rump and the reddish-orange breast extended lower down than on *maurus*. In the hand in autumn, the upperpart feathers terminate rusty-brown instead of the sandy-brown of *maurus*. Other details such as wing length and tail colour were checked, but not consistently. These, the first published records of *rubicola* in Lebanon, align with data from Israel (Shirihai, 1996). Another subspecies, *variegatus* (Normand & Gosselin, 2002), was noted at Aammq on 27 and 29 Oct 1999 (Beale, 2000) and on 8 Mar 2000 (Balmer & Betton, 2001).

River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis*

One was observed for ten minutes on the American University of Beirut campus on 6 Oct 2003. It was generally very similar to Savi's Warbler *L. luscinioides fusca*, the only differences noted being that its throat is streaked and its undertail covert has more obvious white crescents and the tail being longer than the folded wings. This is the second record for Lebanon and the first for over 33 years (Benson, 1970).

(Red-billed) Chough *Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax*

On 10 Oct 2004, at least 15 *Pyrrhonorax* sp were high above us on a cliff above Dinnieh, at 2400m asl, near several Rock Doves *Columba livia*. We were uncertain, even with binoculars, whether they were *P. pyrrhonorax* or Yellow-billed Chough *P. graculus*. On 17 Nov we revisited the site, identifying 26 *P. pyrrhonorax* clearly by telescope. The latter observation constitutes the fourth record for in Lebanon, but in a probable new locality; a few had been seen at an unspecified locality (Aharoni, 1931), one at Faraya in 1996 (Benson, 1970) and 55 at Bqaa Kafra (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al.*, 2004).

Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*

An uncooperative bird in the Aammq reedbeds on 23 Apr 2000 was thought to be this species. One, perhaps two, individuals in first winter plumage were observed in a farm at Damour on 2 Dec 2003. The crown-stripe, supercilium and the black-bordered cheeks were all the same rusty colour. The thin black malar streak did not reach the bill and the white underparts had fine black streaks. This is the second record for Lebanon since the first some 33 years ago (Benson, 1970).

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¹ **Editor's Note:** the 1998 decision of the Dutch Committee for Systematics to split Common Stonechat into 3 species (all with subspecies), European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*, Siberian Stonechat *S. maura* and African Stonechat *S. torquata* has been supported by Wink *et al* (2002) in mtDNA research, although Wink adopts different scientific binomens for these groups. Urquhart (2002) in his monograph on Stonechats provides a reasonable case to follow the Dutch argument for the English and scientific names, assigning *S. rubicola* two subspecies, *S. maura* (*maurus*) six and *S. torquata* (*torquatus*) seventeen, while noting that further DNA studies on subspecies may well show that some in the second and third groups are synonyms and not valid.

First records of Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocollis* from Syria

DAVID MURDOCH

The main range for Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocollis* extends from the head of the Persian Gulf to the Indian subcontinent (Clement *et al.*, 1993); the Indian populations are resident but those breeding in Iran and Iraq winter in India. Small numbers have been found breeding in south-east Turkey, most famously at Birecik on the Euphrates. This report documents the first records of the species from Syria, where a breeding colony was discovered in June 2003 on an island on the outskirts of Deir ez-Zor, the largest city on the Syrian Euphrates.

At 1400 on 15 June 2003, as I was driving along the road that runs along the main branch of the river, my attention was drawn to two sparrow-sized birds on telegraph wires by the roadside; their shape was odd, as they were slimmer than House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, they were slightly pot-bellied and they had longer conical bills. I stopped the car and looked up at the closer bird, 20 metres away, which was producing a loud, repetitive chirping 'song' similar to Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*. I noticed two strong whitish wing bars and then a yellow throat patch, and I suddenly realised that I was looking at a male Yellow-throated Sparrow.

Description

Size about 14–15 cm. Shape as above, with long, rather angular head and distinctive long conical black bill; the tail appeared quite long and was noticeably notched. It was difficult to assess colours accurately as I was looking up into strong light, but the overall plumage tones were nondescript, with the upperparts unstreaked grey-buff and the underparts unstreaked whitish-buff, and with a well-demarcated yellow throat patch. The face was plain grey-buff with a poorly defined blackish eyestripe. The remiges were browner than the back, with a long crescentic off-white wing-bar on the greater coverts, a shorter median covert bar and an inconspicuous chestnut panel on the lesser coverts. On 18 June, I saw a single female 1 km. upstream from the first site, in very similar habitat on telegraph wires. The sexes were similar but the males had more clearly marked throat patches and blacker bills; the females had dull pink lower mandibles and very poorly marked 'shoulders', and one appeared not to have yellow on the throat. Voice: a monosyllabic, repetitive 'chiff chiff chop', noisier and more raucous than House Sparrow but indistinguishable from some calls of Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus* (common in the area).

On 17 June, about 1 km. from the original observations, I found four singing males on the north side of the Euphrates. These were in a belt of dense conifers along the road running north from the Euphrates footbridge through the heart of the Agricultural University grounds.



Plate 1. Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia (Gymnoris) xanthocollis* 25 December 2002 (David Murdoch).

Behaviour

Over the next three days, up to five birds were seen at the first site, with two active nests about 100m apart; one female was nest-building in an open-topped telegraph pole and another had noisy young in a pole with an irregular lump of concrete on its top. This was a significant observation as this nest was effectively in a hole, and therefore protected from the abundant Magpies *Pica pica* in the area. I photographed two males as they sat on the telegraph wire 'singing'; they did not assist with nest duties, but often flew for brief periods into the field immediately behind the nests but always returned within a few minutes to continue chirping from the wires. The females were busy with nesting activities and much more difficult to photograph well. The colony was active

throughout the day, even when it was extremely hot and most other birds showed little activity. Individuals often flew 50m across the Euphrates to an island with orchards and thick riverine vegetation. On the landward side of the road, there were a few large buildings and a rich mix of gardens, orchards, thick hedges and fields with cattle; the sparrows also fed in this area.

Discussion

There have been a few records of vagrant Yellow-throated Sparrows, including from Malta (2) and Israel (2) (Clement *et al.*, 1993, Shirihai, 1996, Snow & Perrins, 1998) but no previous observations from Syria (Baumgart *et al.*, 1995). It appears that there is an established colony on the outskirts of Deir ez-Zor; there could be a substantial population, as much of the Agricultural University looked to be suitable habitat. As very few birders have visited the Syrian Euphrates at this time of year, and Yellow-throated Sparrows only return to the Birecik colony in late spring, it is possible that this colony has been present for many years. Sadly, the lush environment around Deir is unusual for the Syrian Euphrates; population pressure has led to intensive agriculture through most of the valley, hedges are rare and the range of farmland birds is usually very limited. However, Yellow-throated Sparrows can use a variety of wooded habitats, including scrub, groves, oases and date palms (Clement *et al.*, 1993).

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The first American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica* in Oman and Arabia

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While undertaking bird counts at Sur sewage treatment lagoons on the afternoon of 23 November 2003, a medium-sized plover flew over uttering a different call from the many Pacific Golden Plovers *Pluvialis fulva* previously seen and heard at several sites during our survey. It was very windy and the call was partially 'lost' as a result, and as the bird was quickly lost to view over the nearby desert its identity could not be established. A few minutes later we reached a reed-filled sewage-settling pond and viewed an area of flooded desert where a medium-sized plover was standing. DIMW was first to spot the bird and he swiftly articulated that it seemed to be a classic *dominica*. We all agreed with his sentiment and the following salient features were noted.

Description

Size and shape. Appeared slightly larger than Pacific Golden Plover but smaller than European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and, in particular, distinctly smaller than Grey Plover *P. squatarola*. Body appeared slightly bulkier than Pacific Golden, but slim and long-bodied as in that species. Distinctly longer winged and slimmer than European Golden and Grey Plovers, and the primaries projected well beyond the tail tip (more so than in any of the confusion species, with four primary tips clearly visible beyond the end of the tertials). Legs appeared longer than European Golden and Grey Plovers, but not appreciably so compared to Pacific Golden. Thus overall appearance was of a slim-bodied, small-headed, long-winged, tall-standing, medium-sized plover. **Head.** Strongly marked with broad, bright white supercilium from above bill to rear head, contrasting with darker crown and nape. Supercilium curved downwards, narrowed and dissipated as a pale off-white bar on neck-sides behind ear-coverts. Ear-coverts more extensive and darker than in the



Plate 1. American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, Sur sewage treatment lagoons, Oman, 19 December 2003. (Jens Eriksen)

confusion species, forming distinct area, though slightly divided by pale off-white submoustachial stripe from above bill, across face into centre of ear-covert area. Narrow blackish eyestripe from behind eye to rear ear-coverts, curving around, and less sharply defined behind, ear-coverts. **Upperparts.** Generally much greyer than corresponding plumage of Pacific Golden, which is usually rich brown in colour. Mantle grey with feathers narrowly centred darker grey and fringed whitish. Back and wing-coverts grey with small dark grey centres and broader whitish fringes. **Underparts.** Washed dusky grey with dark grey-centred vertical streaking on throat onto upper breast where became more spotted, dusky grey wash on belly and vent, with pale grey streaking on body-sides and vent. **Bare parts.** Bill black, dagger shaped, quite stout, and perhaps slightly smaller than Pacific Golden. Legs greyish black. **Wing pattern.** Similar to Pacific Golden, but flight feathers greyer with similar grey underwing and, in particular, similar grey axillaries to Pacific Golden, but unlike white axillaries of European Golden and black axillaries of Grey Plover. Legs did not appear to project beyond tail in flight. **Calls.** Distinctive, a triple-syllabled 'clee-ee-eeu' high pitched and wavering on last note, unlike 'chee-wee' or 'cheewee' of Pacific Golden.

The bird was feeding on some temporarily flooded shallow pools in the desert near the sewage treatment lagoons and was present until 26 December 2003, being photographed by Hanne & Jens Eriksen on 19 December. Interestingly, his photographs show some golden spangling on the mantle, which together with the general greyish cast to the plumage, rather striking white supercilium and darker cap confirmed the bird as a first-winter.

This is the first record in Oman and Arabia of a highly migratory species, which breeds in Arctic Canada and Alaska, and winters in South America (Marchant *et al.* 1986); it has been accepted by the Oman Bird Records Committee. The only other record in the Middle East involved a first-year or adult female at the Göksu Delta, Turkey, on 15 May 1993 (Kirwan 1994).

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Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii* - a first record for Syria

G. SERRA

The distribution of Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunnii* is poorly known apart from northern Saudi Arabia (Snow & Perrins, 1998), although Porter *et al.* (1996) maps it in parts of Oman and Yemen, inserting question marks as to its status between the two areas, all of which contain flat, arid lowlands that are lightly vegetated, its apparent preferred habitat (Snow & Perrins, 1998). Such habitat exists widely in both Syria and Iraq. Arid lowlands in the region suffer erratic rainfall and so it is likely that the species is highly nomadic in search of a supply of seeds adequate to allow good breeding success, a factor that may explain the species' erratic appearance as far west as Mauretania (Snow & Perrins, 1998). A 1988 irruption into Israel was followed by breeding records in 1989, but colonisation did not persist (Shirihai, 1996). Two subspecies are known, *E.d. dunnii* from the Sahara and *eremodites* from Arabia. Until recent advances in lark identification, confusion of Dunn's Lark with other species was not uncommon, several having to be re-attributed or withdrawn (Cramp, 1988)

I first saw this species in Syria on 24 May 2003, - a wet year - when at midday in *Wadi Abiad* near Palmyra, I noticed a couple of larks feeding on the ground; they appeared to be different from all other lark species commonly found in the area (e.g. Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*, Short-toed Lark *C. brachydactyla*, Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* and Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*), all of which were familiar to me. This sense of difference arose from a number of factors.

Description

The two birds had: 1. An obvious, stout and pale-coloured bill. 2. A fine, blackish pattern behind and below the eye. 3. Fine dark stripes on the crown. 4. A white chest and belly. 5. Very pale but patterned upperparts (wings and body), with near-white feather fringes contrasting with pale sandy-brown. 6. A head that proportionally was more prominent to the rest of the body. 7. A very solid and strong build compared to the other larks. All these features were observed from close range using binoculars. The birds were unconcerned, remaining close for quite long time before flying away, when I could see the striking black sides on the tail.

In July 2000 in al Talila reserve, I and M. Abdallah had seen a few scattered individuals which we took to be this species, some 30 km southeast of Palmyra, but our notes were not conclusive enough to rule out Desert Lark. That description included a drawing showing the fine crown stripes, the strong bill, and black bands on the side of the tail and black tipped primaries, but the bird lacked the moustachial stripe.

On 12 June 2004 - a fairly wet year - I saw a Dunn's Lark in *Wadi Abiad* carrying food. The bird had a stout bill, striated top to its head, striated side to its chest and pale edges to its wing feathers.

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A record of Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* from Syria

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Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* is bird of open deserts with sparse low vegetation; it has a discontinuous breeding range from Mauritania to Sudan and Arabia (Snow and Perrins 1998). It breeds erratically in Jordan (Andrews 1995) is a nomadic visitor to Israel, an invasion in 1988 being followed by the first breeding records in 1989 (Shirihai 1991). It was omitted from a recent summary of the Syrian avifauna (Baumgart *et al.* 1995) and so two individuals seen in the steppes 30km northwest of Palmyra on 14 June 2003 probably constitute the first fully documented record from Syria. They were found in Wadi Abiad, in a mixed flock that included three Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*, several Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*, a family party of Temminck's Horned Lark *Eremophila bilopha* and a juvenile Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*. We watched one individual at 10m range for several minutes in good light before the flock flew off.

Description

A stocky, round-headed lark with an upright stance; size about 13-15 cm. Its plumage was mostly two-tone, with sandy-coloured upperparts and off-white underparts, and with fawn streaks on the chest. Most distinctive were the short, horn-coloured bill with a swollen base, the strongly contrasting off-white fringes on the dark-streaked fawn mantle feathers, and the facial pattern, with a black 'tear drop' running down from the eye, darker area on ear coverts and a pale supercilium with dark streaks on a fawn crown. The median coverts and greater coverts were broadly tipped off-white. The primary tips were dark and only just projected beyond the tertials. The undertail was dark but was not seen well. The legs were pale pink. No call was heard and the bird was not seen in flight.

It differed from Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* and Bar-tailed Desert Lark *A. cincturus* in bill shape, facial and mantle pattern and minimal primary projection. In addition, size, structure and bill colour were wrong for Desert Lark and it was more robust than Bar-tailed Desert Lark. It was a distinctive and easily identified bird.

The avifauna of Syria is little known (Evans 1994) although a national total of 14 recorded lark species (Baumgart *et al.* 1995) is the highest in the Western Palearctic. Dunn's Lark has been seen or reported in July 2000 in al Talilah reserve (MA *pers. obs.* as ranger) and on 24 May 2003 in Wadi Abied. Murdoch (*pers. obs.*) may have seen two individuals near Palmyra on 12 June 2003 and Richardson (*pers. obs.*) reported a singing bird along the 'Baghdad road plains' on 9 April 2004 (Its image is on the OSME website.) One of us (GS) has prepared a report of the first formal record, a sighting on 24 May 2003. It includes MA's informal July 2000 sighting.

Because very few observers visit Syria, the status of Dunn's Lark remains uncertain, but the species may be regular. This may be the first fully documented record.

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Plate 1. Dunn's Lark *Eremelauda dunni*, Israel in April (Paul Doherty).

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Phenology of Common Swift *Apus apus* in the Middle East - Tehran, Iran

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Common Swift (*Apus apus*) is a common spring and summer migrant species in Iran (Mansoori 2001), the main spring passage occurring in late March and early April and the main autumn passage in August. As Tigges (2001) indicates, unlike much of Europe, there are few precise data available for the arrival and departure of *A. apus* in the Middle East. To begin to rectify matters in Iran, arrival and departure dates were monitored in the Tehran urban environment between 2000 and 2004, during which period other observations were obtained for Central Tehran. Derek Scott (pers.com) has supplied a summary of his records from the 1970s and those of other ornithologists and birdwatchers active in Iran between 1968 and 1977, and these are tabulated separately. The results were compared with those from other Middle Eastern countries.

Records since 2000

First arrival and departure dates for 2001 to 2004 inclusive were March 15th, 10th, 8th and 12th respectively, and late June and 3rd, 7th and 10th July respectively. The visiting period of *A. apus* was 116–122 days in the urban area, where the estimated population was over 200 birds, concentrated mostly in the centre and south of the city. Flocking behaviour was observed on arrival dates and by small groups in May and June. In their final week, they continued to fly almost to sunset; many sorties had the appearance of city-wide exploration.

Informal observations during 1999–2000 correlate the above visiting period with that occurring at the shrine of the coastal city of Mahmoud-Abad, Mazandaran province. The earliest Iranian occurrence (ssp *pekinensis*) was on 26 February 2000 in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan province (Dubois *et al.*, 2000). On 6 March 2001, nine days earlier than the Tehran sightings, some 50 individuals appeared at the ancient castle of Shoush, Khuzestan province, southwestern Iran, and a few were in Pol-Dokhtar, Lorestan province (pers. obs.). Other records are of one individual in Esfahan on 9 March 2000 (Tourenq *et al.*, 2000) and of a group of perhaps 50 individuals birds around the Azadi Square bridge, Sanandaj (Kordestan province) on 1 April 2003; by 22 April the group was no longer homogenous (pers. obs.).

BH Kiabi (pers. comm.) has noted that *A. apus* occurs in Tehran's urban environment at different times to those recorded in natural environments, seemingly preferring the former to village areas (pers. obs.). Amongst the controlling factors are urban temperature and precipitation, making comparisons with natural environments difficult. Two late records were noted; on 18 August 2000 in Takab, West Azerbaijan province (Sehhati-Sabet, pers. comm.), and on 22 August 2004 in the Moutheh area of Esfahan province (pers. obs.). The latest records so far are of two probable migrant groups of five and six birds respectively, on 28 September 2000 at Salmas Bay and the next day between Orumieh and Islamic Island (Jalving & Vos, 2003).

Records from 1968 to 1977

Records of early arrival and late departure dates obtained by Derek Scott (DAS), other personnel of the Department of Environment, expatriate birdwatchers resident in Tehran and visiting ornithologists during the period 1968 to 1977 are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

These above dates of earliest arrival, spanning the period 14 March to 1 April (average date 22 March), would appear to be about ten days later than recent arrival dates in Tehran, where the first arrival dates of 15, 10, 8 and 12 March for 2001 to 2004 respectively give an average date of 11 March.

Table 1: The earliest arrival dates in northern Iran, 1968–1977.

Year	Date	Numbers	Location	Observer
1968	29 March	Common	Over Tehran and Karadj	Anon
1969	19 March	-	First recorded over Tehran	S.M. Downhill
1972	15 March	20	Over Tehran	M. Smart
1973	1 April	2	Over Tehran	P.N. Paul
1973	6 April	4	Over Shemiran, north Tehran	P.N. Paul
1973	6 April	100	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1973	11 April	400+	On drive from Tehran to Zandjan	A. Eftekhar
1974	25 March	10	Near Karadj, west of Tehran	DAS
1974	27 March	64	Galenow Marsh, south-east of Tehran	DAS
1974	29 March	50	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1975	14 March	2	Over Tehran	F.B. Argyle
1975	20 March	80	Galenow Marsh	DAS
1975	20 March	1	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1975	30 March	Common	Nishabur, Khorasan	A. de Vos
1976	25 March	5	Astara, Gilan	K. Rogers
1976	30 March	Several	Over Tehran	E&P*
1977	20 March	-	First recorded over Shemiran, north Tehran	GNL*

*E&P = P.A. Etheridge and A. Parker, and GNL = G.N. Langfield.

There are few arrival or departure dates for central and southern Iran. However, a record of six birds in the Monde River valley near Kavar, Fars Province, on 7 October 1975 is noteworthy in being about ten days later than all but one of the latest records in northern Iran.

Arrival and departures dates of Common Swifts in the southern coastal lowlands of Iran (Khuzestan, Bushire, Hormozgan and southern Persian Baluchistan) have not been determined because of the difficulties of separating them from the resident and very similar Pallid Swift *A. pallidus*. Pallid Swifts are common throughout the winter in the Khuzestan lowlands and along the north Gulf coast, e.g. 100 over the Dez River south of Shushtar on 15 February 1971, 100 in the Shoush area and 30 at Shushtar on 5 January 1972, 200 between Ahwaz and Shushtar on 23 January 1974, several hundred over the Hilleh Rud Delta near Bushire on 25 January 1974 and 150 in Bushire on 18 January 1975.

Table 2: The latest departure dates in northern Iran, 1968–1977.

Year	Date	Numbers	Location	Observer
1968	13 September	4	Zibakenar, Caspian coast	A.F.G. Walker
1968	13 September	Several	Daryakenar, near Babolsar, Mazandaran	Anon
1968	14 September	Several	Babolsar, Mazandaran	Anon
1969	24 August	1	Over Tehran	S.M. Downhill
1971	31 August	Common	Dasht-e Gaz, east of Sanandaj, Kurdistan	DAS
1972	17 August	1 & 10	Lake Kobi & Miandoab, Azerbaijan	DAS
1972	10 September	5	Miankaleh Peninsula, Mazandaran	BZE**
1972	22 September	1	Over Shemiran, north Tehran	P.N. Paul
1973	13 September	5	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1973	16 September	40+	Larim Sara near Sari, Mazandaran	DAS
1973	1 November	1	Miankaleh Peninsula, Mazandaran	A. Eftekhar
1974	29 August	80	Semeskandeh near Sari, Mazandaran	DAS
1974	31 August	2	River Neka mouth near Sari, Mazandaran	DAS
1974	19 September	1	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1975	15 September	4	Lashgarak/Latian Dam north-east of Tehran	DAS
1975	26 September	75	Passing north over Astara, Gilan	DAS
1975	27 September	6 & 9	Astara & Abbasabad Dam, Gilan	DAS
1975	28 September	2	Over Anzali Mordab, Gilan	DAS

**BZE = Nickname for D.J. Garbutt and M.B. Webster

Discussion

It does seem that Common Swifts are arriving in northern Iran about ten days earlier than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, correlating well with the pattern over much of the northern hemisphere for many migrant bird species. It is likely that climatic factors are involved, and future analysis of temperature and precipitation records may establish a correlation.

In comparison with other Middle Eastern records, the respective arrival and departure dates of Common Swift in Tel-Aviv (11 February 2000 and 7 June 1999; Tigges, 2001) were approximately one month before the dates above. However, Moroccan arrival dates (mid-March) approximate to Iranian dates (Tigges, 2002). In the UAE, there is a report from 27 February (Aspinall & Hellyer, per MEBirdNet Discussion Group). The findings of Tigges (2001) and those recorded above, when combined with future work elsewhere, may help establish the Common Swift's migration routes to, from and within Iran.

In 2004, House Martin (*Delichon urbicum*) (Normand & Gosselin, 2002) first arrived on exactly the same date in the city of Lahijan, Gilan province (Sehhati-Sabet, pers. comm.) as Common Swift reached Tehran. Much remains to be done to establish the details of the status of resident, breeding and migrant populations, to document the four waves of territorial occupancy and to establish migration routes, breeding ecology and population dynamics of Apodidae and Hirundinidae in Iran and the region.

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Phenology and Behaviour of the Common Swift *Apus apus* in Israel (Holy Birds, or the Common Swifts of Jerusalem's Western Wall)

ULRICH TIGGES AND HEINRICH MENDELSSOHN*

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is all that remains of the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70AD. Only part of the western outer wall still exists, shoring up the Temple Mount, an artificially elevated plateau, comprising the Temple Area, the Temple having been the central building. This part of the Wall, or 'Kotel', remains an important place for Jewish worshippers, not only because it is near the holiest places, but also it is now holy itself. The Kotel is part of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The El Aksa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock stand on the Temple's site on Temple Mount, which is under Islamic religious authority, known as Wakf.

The Temple area is an ideal habitat for certain bird species. The great Temple building was made of natural stone whose many crevices and holes offer birds many opportunities to build nests and hatch chicks. These apertures comprise a typical biotope for the Common Swift, which will use any suitable cavity, whether it evolved through erosion or was provided intentionally, if for other purposes. Here we are sure that Swifts have used the Temple for nesting since it was built.

The stones of the present Western Wall vary in type and quality. The builders clearly took great pains to use high-quality blocks in the lowest rows, but those higher up are often of indifferent standard. Although one cannot put a knife-blade between stones in the lower rows, near the top of the building, one can see many hollows that Swifts can exploit. Where the stonework was damaged during construction, Swifts can sometimes gain access to the inner part of the wall, which contains many cavities.

Common Swift *Apus apus* nesting cavities (See Photo on pp86-7).

Since 1967, the Western Wall has been under Jewish administration and has been subject to extensive restoration, and the space it faces has been transformed into a large plaza. This work

involved cleaning the stones in the Temple Wall and sealing some gaps with anachronistic concrete. In 2002 we noted the Common Swift using 85 holes.

There are two more such nest-sites in the neighbouring wall of the synagogue and another in the triangular stone ledge where the walls of the two buildings meet. Other bird species that use the cavities are; Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* (two cavities), Feral Pigeons *Columba livia* forma *domestica* (five cavities) and House Sparrows *Passer domesticus biblicus* (15 cavities, five being shared with Swifts).

We observed the study area from 14–27 April 2002, noting all the holes that Swifts entered and selectively recording the frequency of entry. As well as Common Swifts using cavities for breeding, unpaired birds may also occupy a cavity. The strong site-fidelity exhibited by the Common Swift means that breeding birds usually return yearly to the same site to breed, and take precedence over unpaired birds.

A total of 412 entries was recorded, the true number inevitably being much higher. Table 1 provides an estimate of entry frequency rather than an absolute count of the number entries. We assumed that the holes entered most were breeding places. It was easy to document parent birds feeding young throughout the day (proof being a full pouch, visible only at close range), but not homecoming non-breeders returning as darkness fell. We could note the entry of perhaps 10% of the large groups of birds returning to the evening roost.

Table 1: Frequency of entry by Common Swift into Western Wall cavities

Entries per cavity	No of holes
1–5	57
6–10	25
11–15	6

Many holes are about nine metres up the wall, between the 9th and 10th rows of stones, where there were 16 nesting sites. The southern part of the Wall holds the fewest sites, probably because so many cracks have been sealed here. Some holes are not perpendicular to the Wall surface, forcing the Swifts to enter obliquely. At one site, the birds flew straight into the cavity without touching down at the entrance. At four sites the Swifts had to make a 90° turn just before the entrance hole, but could fly into it without touching down at the entrance. We assumed that in these cases, the nest itself is deep in the stonework. Screening vegetation obscures two holes, and because a Swift's feet allow it only to cling, it cannot walk or hop round obstacles. Its limited manoeuvrability means that growing vegetation can make suitable nest holes inaccessible.

Phenology

In Jerusalem, Common Swifts mostly arrive in late February (Cornfeld 2001). In 2002, the first arrived at the Kotel on 19 February and in 2003 on 13 February (Cornfeld 2002, & *in litt.*). During our observation period, the chicks hatched and were brooded for about one week, when their eyes are still closed. The Swift population also includes non-breeders in two categories, those that occupy a nesting place and those that do not. All three groups exhibit different behavioural patterns. In the case of breeding birds, after brooding, the parents gather food continuously. Only when the weather is cold does one parent stay at the nest. The non-breeders serve as a 'reserve' for the breeding birds, their role being to replace drop-out breeders, or to reconnoitre for their own nesting places for the following year. Those non-breeders occupying a nest hole have to defend it; either they are not in breeding condition, or have secured a nest site too late to raise a brood. Common Swifts that do not occupy a nesting place will investigate every possible nesting site, whether occupied or vacant, in an attempt to supersede failed breeders or to drive out the current occupant. We did not see any such antagonistic behaviour, probably because the young had all hatched and it was too late to start a brood (Swifts leave their breeding areas punctually some 100 days after the arrival of the main body of migrants, a circumstance that so far seems common to all populations).

Common Swifts feed exclusively on airborne insects. In poor weather, such as very low temperatures, strong winds, or especially when it is raining, the insect supply temporarily diminishes,

and non-breeders - particularly those that do not have a nesting place - quit the colonies to feed in areas with better weather conditions, returning to the colonial area once the weather improves. Consequently, breeding birds tend to have sole access to the reduced supply of food in the breeding area. Non-breeders that have secured a nesting place remain in possession of their nest-holes at night in order to defend them from competitors. Those without a nesting site spend the night on the wing.

The Wall floodlights illuminating the plaza stimulate the Swifts to very early departures from their nests, as we observed on nights when the sky was completely dark, departures beginning long before sunrise in mid-April at 0540 (sunrise on 14 April was at 0612) and the first sorties of the day being complete by 0630. Orientation at any hour is endogenous, the species remaining on the wing permanently except during the breeding season. Individual Swifts did not always remain in the colony area, numbers of birds in flight above the plaza varying greatly.

Direction of Flight

Throughout the day, when the breeding birds left the colony in search of food, they scattered in different directions. A summary of 30 observations of the initial headings selected (in 90° arcs) gives: North, 4; East, 2; South, 21 and West, 3. Several birds made radical course changes after some distance. A typical return heading pattern for non-breeders was: South, 24; West, 10 and Southeast, one.

However, the determination of return direction of breeders was largely confined to just the two seconds during which the birds were acquired visually, before they re-entered the nest sites. Only two returning breeders were observed over a longer period, coming from the North and East respectively. Common Swifts can enter nest-holes at 70 km/h (Arkel 1997). Where birds circled before entering the nest-holes, return direction was seldom confirmed. We noted only three instances of overflying, two involving singletons (S to N and ESE to ENE) and the third a flock of some 18 birds (WNW to ESE).

Flight patterns above the colony area varied, especially in front of nest sites. Orbits, over the Kotel plaza were mostly clockwise (occurring during 12 of 17 observations) Three observations noted anticlockwise orbits. There were two observations of conflicting clockwise and anticlockwise orbits. The velocity of the circling birds was noticeably lower than usual, possibly a collision-avoidance tactic.

The return in the afternoon

The daily timetable is flexible, but it is based on a clear and regular pattern of activity of leaving the colony in the morning to feed and returning in the late afternoon. The feeding parents have to take advantage of the daylight hours to collect as much food as possible for the young, while the non-breeders must be back at their nesting site to defend it against competitors. After the return, the non-breeders fly around the colony area. Table 2 gives the average and total numbers of Common Swifts above the Kotel Plaza:

On some days there were early assemblies of up to 15 birds, from 1500 onwards, over the Kotel Plaza. On only three days at this time did the skies remain empty, except for birds in transit and the feeding parents. The highest density of birds occurred around sunset, replicating Tel Aviv observations (Tigges 2003). Those non-breeders that have no nesting site climb to an altitude safe enough for aerial roosting. To sleep on the wing they orient themselves into the wind

Table 2: Numbers of Non-breeding Swifts above the Kotel Plaza in late Afternoon

Obs Times	Avg No of Birds	Max No Present
1500-1600	4	8
1600-1700	4	9
1700-1800	5	17
1800-1900	12	50
1900-1930	16	55
1930-1945	6	10

direction. This way they are able to stay as near as possible to their colony territories, by responding according to the oscillatory wind conditions. (Bäckman & Alerstam, 2002). The common phenomenon of non-breeders from several colonies assembling as dusk gathers to gain altitude in loudly-screaming flocks was noted twice directly above the Kotel Plaza, the flock comprising some 50 individuals in each case.

Swifts seen scattering about and circling the colony in the late afternoon and the evening predominantly were non-breeders. Because the fledglings have to reach a weight of about 55 grams, the parent birds have a full schedule in their search for insects and feeding their young, which were two to three weeks old at that time. The feeding task leaves no time for the parents to join non-breeders in social flights; they have no need to look for nesting sites to begin to mark out territory. The flights of parent birds always were purposeful, although the initial courses selected were not always the same.

Influence of weather

The only unequivocal effect of weather conditions related to variations in the size of the groups observed at the same time in the afternoons: these fell into three size classes, 0–13, 15–35 (on 5 days) and 40–60 (4 days) birds respectively. However, Table 3 suggests that low temperature, rain and wind together reduce the numbers of birds; non-breeders largely were absent, but the sample size of such observations is low. The effect of low temperature and wind in dry conditions is less clear-cut.

Table 3: Maximum numbers of Swifts seen in the Western Wall colony in various morning and afternoon weather conditions. (*The median of all the highest daily counts was 25 individuals, in both mornings and afternoons.*)

Date	Av Wind	Max Wind	Wind	Max /min	Rainfall	Rainfall	Max birds	Max birds
Apr 02	Speed (m/s)	Speed (m/s)	Dir'n (°)	Temp (°C)	am (mm)	pm (mm)	seen* (am)	seen* (pm)
14	2.6	6.8	090	28.6/17.7	0	0	30	40
15	2.8	6.7	270	28.4/23.5	0	0	13	35
16	3.4	8.3	290	29.0/20.4	0	0	25	25
17	6.0	10.2	290	21.6/14.0	0	0	20	22
18	4.3	9.7	290	17.2/10.1	0	0	No count	No count
19	4.9	8.4	280	17.2/10.2	0	9	No count	25
20	6.0	9.3	280	14.9/8.9	2.2	0	No count	13
21	5.3	8.5	280	13.8/9.3	3.6	0	0	8
22	4.6	7.4	300	16.5/9.9	0	0	10	22
23	1.6	3.8	110	21.0/9.3	0	0	50	60
24	4.5	9.4	280	23.6/13.3	0	0	30	20
25	4.8	7.6	290	18.7/10.9	0	0	No count	40
26	2.9	7.7	300	17.3/9.8	0	9	30	1
27	5.8	10.3	300	16.8/8.8	0	0	No count	No count

* Maximum counts refer to the maximum seen at one time in any hour; am=0600–1200, pm=1200–last light.

Colonial areas

In the mornings and in the evenings, the Common Swifts flew around the colony territory, which comprises a core and a fringe (Tigges 2003). All colony members, breeders and non-breeders alike, use all the colonial territory, possession being indicated by irregular sorties by screaming groups. The fringes of colony territories also accommodate Swifts from neighbouring colonies. The consequence, as at the Western Wall colony, is that 'strangers' very seldom entered the territory, usually overflying it at quite a high altitude. Common Swift colony boundaries often coincide with clear-cut topographical features, such as a line of houses or streets. The Western Wall colony core boundary comprised the City wall to the south, the Ha Kotel Road to the west, to the north touching Ha Shalshet and in the east being the Western Wall itself. In the southeast, it follows the crown of the Wall of the Temple Mount in a dog-leg that includes the Southern Wall. The Western Wall Swifts never took the short cut over the Temple Mount.

Other neighbouring colonies were around the Sidna-Omar-Mosque, around Yehuda Halevi - Batei Makhase and probably above the Temple Mount, where we could not gain access.

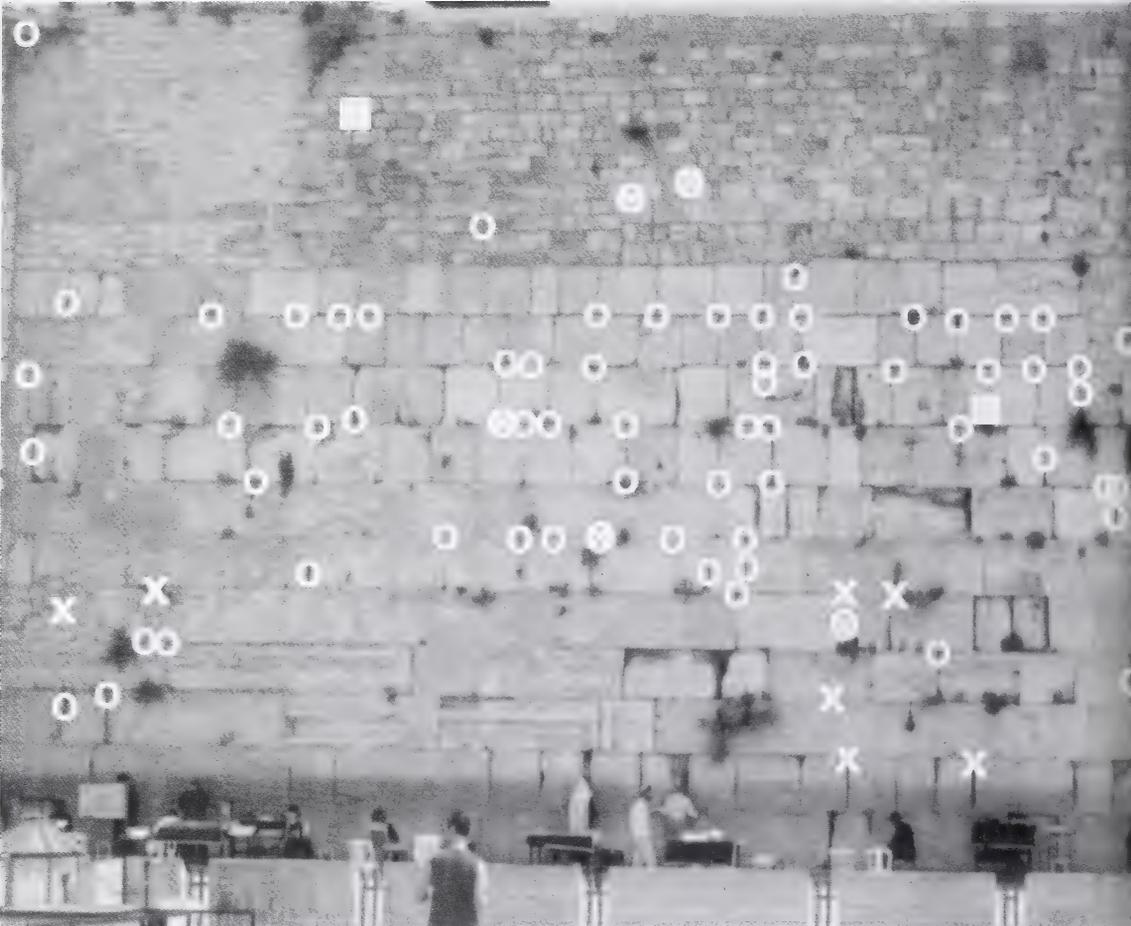


Plate 1. Most of the actual and likely nesting sites in the Western Wall. The Common Swift *Apus apus* used 88 holes in 2002 (two holes are out of shot to the left). Species usage is indicated thus: White circle = Common Swift, white X = House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, white square = Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* and white filled circle = Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* forma *domestica*. Note that some holes are shared by more than one species.

Censusing the colony

The Western Wall colony contained about 115 Common Swifts, and we estimate from our analysis of the nest-entry frequency that this total included some 30 breeding pairs in the Kotel. About 20 to 30 non-breeding individuals owned a nesting place, as estimated from the numbers of birds that flew into the colony most often. Perhaps another 20 to 40 were non-breeders without a nest site; these birds lived in the colony territory only when the weather was suitable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Rabbi Yosef Cornfeld of Jerusalem, firstly for drawing my attention to the Swifts in the Western Wall, but secondly for suggesting the subtitle. Our thanks go to Jake Allsop, Cambridge (UK) for checking the English text and to the Israel Meteorological Service, Bet Dagan, which supplied the weather data.

* Professor Mendelssohn died on 19 November 2002.

ADDENDA

Some 2004 data. The first three Common Swifts were seen in Jerusalem on 26 February, coming out of nest holes in the Western Wall. By the 28th, there were six. On 01 March, some 20 were circling above the Western Wall plaza, as others were seen outside the Old City of Jerusalem (Y. Cornfeld, pers. comm.). In



Zichron Yaakov the first few had arrived by 26 February (M. Adar, pers.comm.) and in Ramat Aviv on 28th; none were seen on 29th, but a few were noted the next day (01 March) (A. Geron pers. comm.). Tigges saw one in Tel Aviv late on 29 February, and at least 15 the next morning. First arrivals in the solitary standing house colony (Tigges, 2003) appeared 01 Mar: six were present 3rd (25 were in a neighbouring colony) and 14 the next day (still 25 nearby), repeating the circumstances of 2000.

First 2005 data. The first Common Swifts arrived at the Wailing Wall colony on 18 February and in Tel Aviv on 19th.

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REVIEWS & Recent Literature

Kasperek, M. & R. Kinzelbach (eds.) (2004) *Zoology in the Middle East - Vol 33* Kasperek Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany. pp 168. £10.50 (including post & packing) from OSME Sales. Previous volumes are also available.

The latest volume of this journal includes one article of ornithological interest - a paper on the diet of the Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* in Syria by Adwan H. Shehab. Pellets were collected from Al-Karyatien in central Syria. The analysis yielded 206 food items representing seven mammalian species (five rodents, one insectivore and one lagomorph), unidentified snakes and lizards, three species of birds, five insects, three species of scorpions, and a solifugid. By frequency small mammals constituted 76.2% of the consumed prey items, of which the Long-eared Hedgehog, *Hemiechinus auritus*, constituted 25.3%. Additional distribution ranges for certain small mammals in Syria are discussed.

Keith Betton

Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America. Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson. 2004. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London. ISBN 0-7136-7087-8. 608pp. £45.00. Hb.

For gull enthusiasts across the Northern Hemisphere the arrival of a new book on gull identification was eagerly awaited. For many years, Peter Grant's superb book *Gulls - an identification guide* had fuelled interest and our understanding of this challenging group of birds. The first edition of this new book, published in autumn 2003, was quickly recalled by the publishers due to the large number of typographical and printing errors. A little over a year later the revised and corrected version was released and credit must be given to the publishers for doing this.

43 species are discussed in full and other recognisable forms such as Mongolian Gull *Larus (cachinnans) mongolicus* and Steppe Gull *L. (cachinnans) barabensis* are covered well. The authors' view on taxonomy will not please everyone; Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans*, Yellow-legged Gull *L. michahellis*, Vega Gull *L. vegae* and Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini* have been 'split' whilst Baltic Gull *L. fuscus fuscus* has not. There is a comprehensive introduction covering age terminology, moult, hybrids and tips on judging size, jizz and photographs. For each species there are sections on identification, voice, moult, detailed plumage descriptions, geographical variation, distribution and migration and measurements. I like the way the plates are interspersed between the relevant texts making it easy to flick between the two. Clear, bright maps show the breeding and non-breeding range for each species, although these are not always correct, e.g. Herring Gull *L argentatus* in Britain.

The plates by Hans Larsson are of variable quality; the Little Gulls *L. minutus* are superb but the Great Black-headed Gull *L. ichthyaetus* (called Pallas's Gull) looks rather odd. The choice of background colour for the 'white-winged' gull plates does not do justice to these superb birds. The inclusion of over 800 high quality photographs complements the plates and text well, although the layout on the page could have been better. Klaus Malling Olsen's species accounts are generally well written and concise. The large number of references given in the text suggests the subject has been thoroughly researched. I like the summary of ageing criteria in the orange shaded boxes for quick reference. For anyone with a serious interest in gull identification this is a 'must-have' book; it is a great contribution to our knowledge at this time although I'm sure it won't be the last word on this ever-evolving subject.

Dawn Balmer

Fry, C.H. & S. Keith (Eds) (2004). **The Birds of Africa Vol. VII**. Christopher Helm, London. 666 pages, 36 plates by M. Woodcock. ISBN 0-7136-6531-9, hbk, GBP 135.

Being the final volume of seven, this tome contains the remainder of the passerine families of Africa and its offshore islands (but not Madagascar): sparrows, weavers, waxbills, whydahs, finches, buntings and their relatives. Though many of these species may not appear the most attractive to birders (think of the identification difficulties with flocks of non-breeding weavers, bishops or whydahs), the aesthete will enjoy illustrations of dozens of beautiful and iconic species and groups, like malimbés, olivebacks, pytilias, crimsonwings, twinspots, seedcrackers, bluebills, paradise-whydahs and some forest weavers. This volume's 309 species neatly matches the average of 305 per volume (2134 *in toto*).

The seven-page standard introduction emphasises systematics and taxonomy. Using the Grey-headed Sparrow *Passer griseus* superspecies as an example of knowledge gaps, we can understand why the relationships and range of the five associated taxa might involve five species, four or just one.

Short paragraphs introduce each family and each genus. Species accounts average one to two pages, but may be shorter, or sometimes six pages long (Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus*). The range and status section is sufficiently detailed per species and complemented with a very precise distribution map. All other sections are adequately treated: description (detailed, with subspecies and measurements), field characters, voice, general habits, food and breeding habits, the last-named sometimes being extensive. The bibliography covers papers published up to 2002. The many black-and-white line drawings of I. Willis and C.H. Fry depict, in particular, weaver nests and special behaviour. The plates usually show male and female (if different), some subspecies variation and non-breeding males. In general the plates are of high standard, some being slightly crowded. The style occasionally has a 'wooden' feel, and I would have preferred more lively illustrations.

Despite the seven volumes being published over 22 years, they show remarkable consistency. The sole structural difference occurring in the species accounts begins with Vol V, where the distribution maps improve greatly. The editorial team, and the illustrators - colour plates by M. Woodcock, line drawings principally by I. Willis - and the source of acoustic references (C. Chappuis) have been unchanged since 1986 (Vol II), but sadly, Stuart Keith died shortly before the final volume went to press. Details of the history of the project are given in Fry *et al.* 2004.

Little could have been done better. Some, like me, might prefer plates to be grouped at the front or the back, or wish that each plate had not been mirrored by a monochrome outline on the facing page, labelling illustrations; potentially that would have saved 232 pages overall! It would have been more useful if the scales of the range maps had matched the sizes of species' distributions; a tiny range is near-invisible on the page. Nowadays, bird conservation thinking and strategy covers not just species, but all taxa; Fry *et al.* (2004) suggest that the inclusion of subspecies' ranges half-way through the project might have been too time-consuming. None of these quibbles should spoil in any way the pleasure these books bring, nor do they diminish the admiration for an enormous project brought to appropriate fruition.

Who will use the series? - everyone with a more than superficial interest in African birds, many of which occur in the OSME region.

REFERENCE:

FRY, C.H., E.K. URBAN & M. WOODCOCK (2004): All The Birds of Africa. *Bull. ABC* 11(1): 59-66.

Klemens Steiof

Around the Region

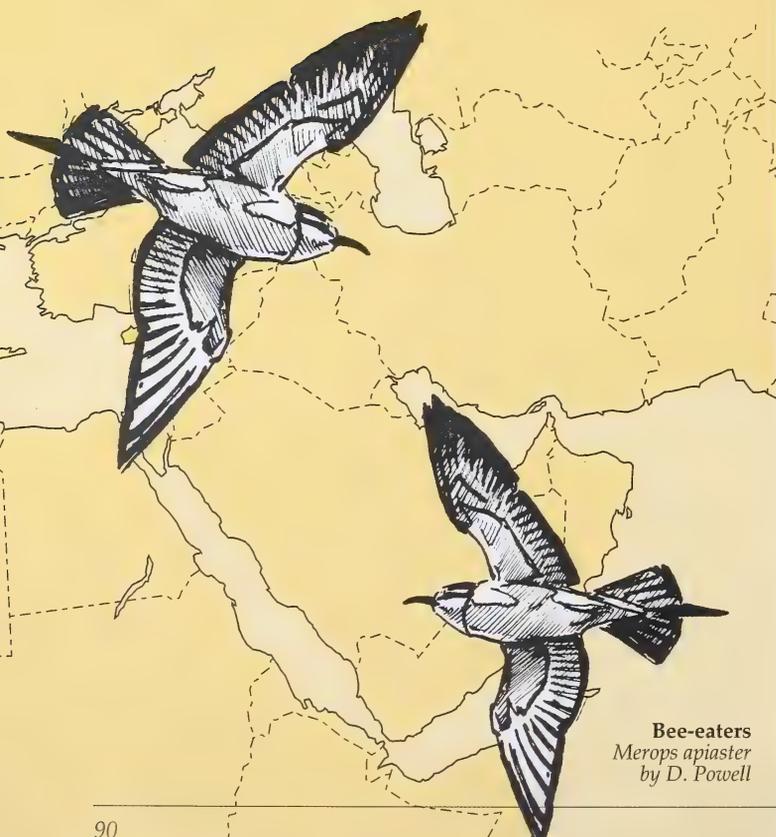
compiled by
Dawn Balmer and Keith Betton

Records in *Around the Region* are published for interest only; their inclusion does not imply acceptance by the records committee of the relevant country. All records relate to 2004 unless otherwise stated.

Records and photographs for *Sandgrouse 27 (2)* should be sent by 15 June, to *Around the Region*, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, U.K.; or aroundtheregion@osme.org

ARMENIA

At Arapan Reservoir there were three adult and one juvenile **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* on 1 September. Two pairs of **Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia* were found breeding in the Ararat district in June 2004, with young still in the nest on 23 July (first bred 2003 after 50 years). The **Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* is a rare localised breeder so a pair seen on 11 June and single on 20 July in Ararat district are notable records. Seven were at Armash on 14 September. Small parties of two–six **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* were seen throughout June and July in Ararat district where it is an uncommon localised breeder. Three were at Armash on 14 September. Three **Black Vulture** *Aegypius monachus* were seen together on 21 July in Aragats Mountains; it is a rare and localised breeder in Armenia. A subadult/adult **Steppe Eagle** *Aquila nipalensis* at highland valley in Vayots Dzor district on 8 June was an unusual summer record. Two males and a possible female **See-see Partridge** *Ammoperdix griseogularis* were at Syunik on 10 June (first recorded in Armenia in 2003). At Armash there were ten **White-tailed Plover** *Chettusia leucura* on 1 July, a single **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus* at Vardakar Reservoir on 1 September with a single at Armash on 14 September. Fifteen **Marsh Sandpiper** *Tringa stagnatalis* were at Armash on 7 September, with a Terek Sandpiper there on 14 September. An adult **Caspian Tern** *Sterna caspia* at Armash on 11 September was the fifth for Armenia. A colony of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops persicus* were found breeding in the Arax Valley on 24 June (14 individuals) 24 June and 25 were at Armash on 1 July. **Citrine Wagtails** *Motacilla citreola* were found breeding at a new (second) site at Lake Sevan with at least two pairs on 4 June; adults with juveniles were recorded later at this site. Two (possibly three) first-winters were there on 7 September. At least five **Red-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthopygma* were at the traditional site in Syunik district on 10 June and two pairs were in the Ararat district on 26 June and 1 July and were seen feeding fledglings on 20 July. The sixth **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* for Armenia was found at Aragats on 30 May. Singing **Savi's Warbler** *L. luscinioides* were recorded through May–July in Ararat district where it is a rare and localised recent colonist.



Bee-eaters
Merops apiaster
by D. Powell

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* is rarely recorded during the breeding season so a record of a singing male on 2 June in Ararat district was notable. Four **Paddyfield Warbler** *Acrocephalus agricola* were at Armash on 1 July and six were singing throughout May–July in Ararat district. At least two pairs of **Mongolian Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes mongolicus* were in the Arax Valley with nest building observed on 10 June, one (possibly two) family groups with juveniles on 20 July. A group of five were there on 14 September. **Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus* is a rare and localised breeder in Armenia so the record of at least three pairs in Ararat district adults with strong-flying juveniles 1–20 July is notable. In Vedi Hills, at least eight **Grey-necked Bunting** *Emberiza buchanani* were recorded on 1 July.

BAHRAIN

A visit to the Inland Sea (Khor-al-Udeid) on 2 December produced one **Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* at sea, 25 **Western Reef Heron** *Egretta gularis*, one **Kentish Plover** *Charadrius mongolus*, one **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* and one **Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*.

CYPRUS

On 7 October, 14 **Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris diomedea* were feeding at sea 28km north of Kyrenia. An early return **Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus* was seen on 10 August at Ozanköy. **Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* and **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* bred in a mixed colony at Famagusta Lake in summer 2004 – the first breeding records for both species from the island of Cyprus. **Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* also bred there – the first breeding record for North Cyprus; on 4 August there were 57 Cattle Egret, 33 Squacco Heron and 17 Little Egrets. Forty **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* flew west at Karaoğlanoğu on 11 August. **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* had an excellent breeding season and were present in high numbers at many reservoirs: 76 at Serdali on 16 July, 80 at Kanliköy on 14 July. Out of season records of **Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* came from Vrecha and Choulou on June 19. The adult **Black Vulture** *Aegyptius monachus* was seen again at Kensington Cliffs on 3 November. A **Lanner** *Falco biarmicus* at Larnaca Sewage Works between 11–30 November will be the third record if

accepted. A **Corncrake** *Crex crex* was in dry herbage at Salamis on 27 August; a good record for this under-recorded species. **Coot** *Fulica atra* also had a successful breeding season and 400+ were at the Fresh Water Lake on 24 July. **Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* is an uncommon passage migrant so the record of ten flying over the sea near Argaka on August 9 was notable. **Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* bred successfully at Asprokremnos Dam; two adults and two juveniles were seen on 26 June. If accepted, the third records of **Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* was at Lady's Mile, Limassol on 20 October. A **Spur-winged Plover** *Hoplopterus spinosus* was at Şirievler Reservoir on 10 July, three pairs were at the Fresh Water Lake on 13 July and another breeding pair at Kanliköy reservoir on 14 July. A **Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* at Achelia Stream from 15–22 June was unseasonal. Two adult **Heuglin's Gull** *Larus argentatus heuglini* were at Larnaca Sewage Works on 7 November. On 19 August, 14 **Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger* were at Phasouri Reedbeds; a good records of this irregular passage migrant. Seven **Nightjar** *Caprimulgus europaeus* at Kouklia on June 16 was an excellent record. Eighty **Pallid Swifts** *Apus pallidus* were at the Apostolos Andreas Monastery on 1 July and the first **Little Swift** *A. affinis* for North Cyprus was at there on 1 July. On 24 June, 20 **Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* flew north-east from Zafer Burnu; a very late record for this species. A flock of c90 **House Martin** *Delichon urbicum* over Paphos Forest on June 19 was an impressive count. Three **Lesser Short-toed Lark** were at Mandria, Paphos on 6 November. Two **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* were reported from Armou on 1 September and at least two were reported from Neo Chorio on 2 September – there have been three previous records. At Ozanköy, the over-summering **Blackbird** *Turdus merula* was present all month. A reponse to a playback survey on 12 July found the distribution of **Sardinian Warbler** *Sylvia melanocephala* in the Lefke area showed little change since three years ago, with no spread into the Güzeyurt/Morphou citrus groves.

EGYPT

Four **Pink-backed Pelican** *Pelecanus rufescens* were at Abu Simbel on 23 June. A **Goliath Heron** *Ardea goliath* was at Hamata mangroves on 19

August and 40 **Yellow-billed Stork** *Mycteria ibis* were recorded at Abu Simbel on 23 June. At Bir Shalatein, up to 100 **Egyptian Vulture** *Neophron percnopterus* were counted on 22 August, 50 **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Torgos tracheliotos* on 25 June with 80 there on 22 August and a **Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* was there on 25 June. Between 26–29 September, 78 **Marsh Harriers** *Circus aeruginosus* 95 **Pallid Harriers** *C. macrourus* (30% adult males) were counted migrating SW of the Southern Red Sea coast. A **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* was in the Wadi El Gemal National Park on 9 September (last recorded in November 2000). Between 150–170 breeding pairs of **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor* were counted on Wadi El Gemal Island, plus an additional 21 pairs on three of the four islands of the Qulan Archipelago on 3–10 September. Probable breeding was noted in the interior of the Wadi El Gemal National Park along the Gebel Sartut Range on 9 September. Seven were migrating SW of the Southern Red Sea coast between 26–29 September and an adult was along the Nile between Luxor and Aswan in late October. Two **Little Crake** *Porzana parva* were at Crocodile Island on 30 September. About 15 **Painted Snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis* were at El Abbasa on 23–24 September and a maximum of eight were on Isis Island at Aswan between 7–20 December. At Hamata mangroves, 11 **Crab Plovers** *Dromas ardeola* were counted on 25 June, 48 between 19–23 August and c90 on 5 September. At El Abbasa on 23–24 September, c10 **Senegal Thick-knees** *Burhinus senegalensis* and c800 **Collared Pratincoles** *Glareola pratincola* were recorded. A **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* was at El Gouna Golf Course on 25–26 September. Five **Swift Terns** *Sterna bergii* were at Ain Sukhna on 25 September with two at Bir Safaga the next day. An **African Collared Dove** *Streptopelia roseogrisea* was at Zabargad Beach Resort, Hamata on 21 August with two at Bir Shalatein the next day. An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was at Karnak Temple, Luxor on 30 September. Possibly the first record of **White-breasted Kingfisher** *Halycon smyrnensis* for South Sinai was in the grounds of the Hilton Hotel in Neweiba on 23 December. Three pairs of **Black-crowned Finch Lark** *Eremopterix nigriceps* were at Bir Shalatein on 22 August. A **Richard's**

Pipit *Anthus richardi* was at El Gouna on 25–26 September with two Richard's Pipits there on 15 October. The second **Black Bush Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe* for Egypt was at Bir Shalatein on 28–29 September. A **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschenka* was at El Gouna on 15 October and a male **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus* was at Wadi Dome Marina on the Egyptian Eastern Desert Red Sea on 13–14 November. A first-winter **Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria* was at El Gouna Golf Course on 19 October and five **Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia* were seen at Bir Shalatein on 28–29 September.

GEORGIA

Twelve **Pygmy Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus* at Kumisi Lake on 29 November was a good record for this irregular winterer. At Khanchali Lake, 14 **White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* and nine **Dalmatian Pelican** 9 were there on 9 August. Two **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* were at Lisi Lake on 4 August with a single at a small pond in Krtsanisi Dendrological Park on 12 August. A single **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* was at Kumisi on 21 September. During a three-hour count on 17 September 510+ **Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* were observed at Kobuleti lowland in Ajaria, SW Georgia. Two **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* were at Vartsikhe Reservoir on 2 December, one adult and one immature were recorded at Jandari Lake on 12 December. At least 16 **Booted Eagle** *Hieraetus pennatus* were counted on migration during a four hour period at Kura (Mtkvari) river mouth in the western part of Gori town on 28 September; a high count for this species. Between 12–21 September, 21 **Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni* were observed migrating in Kura (Mtkvari) river mouth in the western part of Gori town; a good count for this species. At least eight **Caucasian Snowcock** *Tetraogallus caucasicus* were at Kazbegi on 29 June. A single **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* was bagged by a local hunter on 29 August near Tikhauri village, Ozurgethi district, SW Georgia; this species is a rare on passage migrant, although probably under-recorded. Ten **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaeus* were at Jandari Lake on 7 December and two were recorded on the bank of Kura River in Gori on 20 December. On 2 October, three small flocks (c30–35 birds) of **Common**

Swift *Apus apus* were in Tbilisi; a very late record. Up to 150 **Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia* were recorded in small flocks in Kura (Mtkvari) River Valley between Tbilisi and Mtskheta on 3 October; a late record for this species. A **Rufous Bush Robin** *Cercotrichas galactotes* on 25 July at Yaghluja ridge, Eastern Georgia was a new location. Three **Guldenstadt's Redstart** *Phoenicurus erythrogaster* were at Kazbegi on 29 June. During December, one–three **Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* were regularly recorded in the lower part of Liakhvi River Valley in northern part of Gori. On 6 December, between 120–130 **Great Rosefinch** *Carpodacus rubicilla* were recored in settlements and along Georgian Military highway in Kazbergi district; this is a high concentration and probably caused by severe weather conditions.

IRAN

An expedition from 9–29 January by ten Dutch birders to participate in the international mid-winter count of waterbirds produced some excellent sightings. The records are summarised by province. In Gilan, along the Caspian Sea, highlights were: one **Lesser White-fronted Goose** *Anser erythropus* (first for Gilan), 12 **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*, **Mediterranean Gulls** *Larus melanocephalus* (first for Gilan), 21 **Grey-headed Swamphens** *Porphyrio poliocephalus*, a **Pomarine Skua** *Pterocorax pomarinus* (uncommon in Caspian Sea), one **Arctic Skua** *S. parasiticus* (uncommon in Caspian Sea). In Mazandaran the 60km long Miankaleh Peninsula and adjacent Gorgan Bay were visited and the most numerous species was **Coot** *Fulica atra* with 810,960 birds. Other important counts were 625 **White-headed Duck** *Oxyura leucocephala*, 131 **Pygmy Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*, 209 **Dalmatian Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus*, c73,000 **Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus* and 125 **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*. Of note, six **Siberian Crane** *Grus leucogeranus*, including a pair with a juvenile in Fereidoonkenar Damgah, were recorded. Other interesting records from Mazandaran included a **Pomarine Skua** and three **Mediterranean Gulls**. In Khuzestan, c111,600 waterbirds were recorded including c20,000 **Coots** at Mianganan lake near Izeh. Other counts were c3,200 **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, 1,200 **White-tailed Plover** *Chettusia leucura*, 350 **Marsh**

Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* and 460 **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis*. Two **Sacred Ibis** *Threskiornis aethiopicus* at Bamdej marsh, a **Little Crake** *Porzana parva* at the Hoveyzezh surroundings, 28 **Armenian Gull** *Larus armenicus* were observed. Forty-two **Iraq Babbler** *Turdoides altiostriis* were found; until recently this species was known as a near-endemic of the marshes of southern Iraq but now appears to be spreading. Up to 12 **Caucasian Stonechats** *Saxicola torquatus variegatus*, 10 **Plain Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus neglectus* and 242 **Dead Sea Sparrows** *Passer moabiticus* were recorded. A remarkable count of 35 Mesopotamian Crows *Corvus cornix capellanus* was made. An **Oriental Pratincole** *Glareola maldivarum* was found near Bostan on 18 January, the first for Iran. At Karun fishponds a juvenile **Black-shouldered Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* was recorded; this species has only recently been discovered in Iran. A male **Striated Scops Owl** *Otus brucei* was head calling at Izeh cave. An adult **Rose-coloured Starling** *Sturnus roseus* seen on the border at Hoor Alazim marshes was previously unknown as a winter visitor. Twenty-four sites were visited in Hormozgan province and only 65,000 birds recorded; the vastness of the areas and inaccessibility made counting difficult. The highlights were 7500 **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*, c4600 **Crab Plover** *Dromas ardeola* (the majority in Hara protected area on Qeshm island), c4600 **Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus*. Good counts of **Greater Sandplover** *Charadrius leschenaultia* (2200) and **Lesser Sandplover** *C. mongolus* (2000) were also made. An impressive count of **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus* (900) highlights Iran's importance for this species. A small wintering population of **Great Knot** *C. tenuirostris* (133) was discovered. Three **Goliath Heron** *Ardea goliath* and 41 **Great Stone Plover** were also counted. A **Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis* in the straits of Hormuz was probably the first record for the region and a **Plain Martin** *Riparia paludicola* seen at Jask Harbour on 21 January is a rare visitor to Iran. In Baluchistan, the highlights were two **Red-breasted Mergansers** *Mergus serrator* at Tiss Port, up to six **Great Stone Plover** *Esacus recurvirostris* at Khore-e-Galek, a group of 385 **Kentish Plovers** *C. alexandrinus* at Khore-e-Tang, two **Pintail Snipe** *Gallinago stenura* at Lolakadan and upto 20 **Desert Whitethroats** *Sylvia*

curruca minula at Lipar Marsh. During a visit to Touran in Semnan province, ten **Pleske's Ground Jay** *Podoces pleskei* were seen in late January. Also of note a female **Evermann's Redstart** *Phoenicurus erythronotus* and a **Black-throated Thrush** *Turdus ruficollis atrogularis* were recorded.

Elsewhere, six **Goldcrest** *Regulus regulus* were at Keshavarzi Garden, Evin Tehran during mid-November to early December. Two **Crossbill** *Loxia curvirostra* were observed north of Altin Tokhmagh village (date uncertain) with sparrows and larks perching in scrub. The previous sighting of Crossbill in this habitat was in winter 2001. Four **Red-headed Bunting** *Emberiza bruniceps* were in Ardabil province (Khalkhal City), north-west Iran on 5 June.

ISRAEL

A **Black-throated Diver** *Gavia arctica* at Eilat between 22–25 December was the 17th record for Israel. On 21 December a **Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus* was reported from Lake Kinneret; the third record if accepted. The fourth **Swinhoe's Storm-petrel** *Oceanodroma monorhis* for Israel flew into a lamp at Eilat north beach on 21 September and was taken into care. An adult **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* photographed at Rishon Letzion on Mediterranean coast south of Tel Aviv on 16 July was the first record. Another first concerns an **Intermediate Egret** *Egretta intermedia* seen at Yotvata sewage ponds from 6–19 November and later reported from Og, north Dead Sea on 30 November. A **Yellow-billed Stork** *Mycteria ibis* reported at Hula Lake on 25 August, if accepted, will be the 20th record. Two **Velvet Scoter** *Melanitta fusca* flying south off Jaffa Port on 12 December will be the sixth record if accepted. Two **Smew** *Mergellus albellus* at Revaya Reservoir, Golan Heights on 9–23 December were perhaps returning from the previous winter. A **Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator* was at Ma'agan Michael on 21 November and two were at Lake Kinneret 2–20 December. Seven **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* seen in northern valleys during annual raptor survey during September. On 5 October a **Black Vulture** *Aegypius monachus* was at Ginnegar in the Jizreel valley and one flew over Hula Lake on 9 December. A **Greater Spotted Eagle** *Aquila clanga* of the form '*fulvescens*' was at the Hula Valley on 30 October. A **Purple**

Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio* was at Ma'oz Hayim, Bet She'an valley 6 October and another was at Ma'agan Michael on 6 November. On 20 October a **Little Bustard** *Tetrax tetrax* was at Sde Eliyahu, Bet She'an valley. At Kfar Ruppim, a **Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* was seen on 2–3 September, a **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* on 4–5 September and a juvenile **Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* on 6 October. A **Sociable Plover** *Chettusia gregaria* was at Hula Reserve on 8 September and one was at Kfar Ruppim between 8–20 October. A **White-tailed Plover** *Chettusia leucura* was at Be'er Sheva SF from 28 August to 1 September. A moulting adult **Long-toed Stint** *Calidris subminuta* was at Ma'oz Hayim fishponds, Bet She'an valley on 22–23 October; the second for Israel. At the same site a **Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* was seen on 6 September. Eilat North Beach hosted a **Lesser Crested Tern** *Sterna bengalensis* on 21 September, 14 **Arctic Terns** *Sterna paradisaea* between 16–20 July with two lingering until 30 July (previous record was 3 in July 2003). Up to three **White-cheeked Terns** *S. repressa* were at Eilat North Beach 16–20 July, an adult at Ma'agan Michael on 25 July until the end of August and ten at Eilat on 21 September. Four **Bridled Terns** *S. anaethetus* were at Eilat North Beach 16–20 July and one was at Ma'agan Michael 21–22 August (probably the returning bird from 2003). Three **Turtle Doves** *Streptopelia turtur* and a **Rufous Turtle Dove** *S. orientalis meena* were reported from Hula 6–10 December; a very late record for Turtle Dove. A count of 80 **Shorelark** *Eremophila alpestris* in Mt Hermon on 10 December was a high count for the time of year. A male **Grey Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus* was trapped and ringed at Eilat on 17 November. A female **Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* near the lower cable station on Mt Hermon on 10 December, was a late date for this species. A **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus* was seen at Mitzpe Ramon between 31 October – 2 November with two there 19–20 November. A **Subalpine Warbler** *Sylvia cantillans* was trapped and ringed at Jerusalem Bird Observatory on 18 August. The second **Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus nitidus* for Israel was in the Jordan Valley near Menahemya on 24–25 August; the first record was in Eilat on October 1987. At least seven **Red-breasted Flycatchers** *Ficedula parva*

were at Sde Boker during October. A **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius pallidirostris* was at Yotvata on 22 September, and another at Hula 11–22 October. A **Rose-coloured Starling** *Sturnus roseus* was in Eilat on 29 July. A large influx of **Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla* occurred in the northern Golan on 10 December. A mixed finch flock of 1200 birds contained 80% Brambling and 20% **Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs*. A count of 17 **Crimson-winged Finch** *Rhodopechys sanguinea* on 10 December in Mt Hermon was a high winter count for this species.

JORDAN

On 29 November three **Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* flew ESE and 74 **White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* flew SSE at Al Quwayra. A male **Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus* was north of Dana on 18 October and a juvenile was in the Wadi Rum area in November. A **Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Aquila pomarina* was seen at Aqaba on 22 October. Records from Al Quwayra include one **Greater Spotted Eagle** *A. clanga* on 24 November with two there on 25 November, 21 **Steppe Eagle** *A. nipalensis* on 22 November and a sub-adult **Imperial Eagle** *A. heliaca* on 29 November. A **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor* was at Petra on 20 October with four at Wadi Rum on 21 October. A first-winter **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* Aqaba and a **Little Gull** *L. minutus* were at Aqaba on 22 October. Two **Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* were at Fidan on 23 October with five (including a juvenile) at Al Quwayra on 29 November. On 3 August a **European Bee-eater** *Merops apiaster* and a **Syrian Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos syriacus* were near Jallad, Amman. A **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* was at Disi with another at Jebel Khazali on 21 October. Around 700 **House Crow** *Corvus splendens* were at Aqaba on 22 October and ten **Syrian Serin** *Serinus syriacus* were at Dana on 19 October.

KAZAKHSTAN

Between May–July, as part of a ringing programme of **Sociable Plover** *Chettusia gregaria* in the steppes of the Tengiz depression in central Kazakhstan, 22 adults and 94 chicks were ringed.

KUWAIT

Two juvenile **Shikra** *Accipiter badius* were at Hujaijah on 1 October with a

different juvenile there on 15 and two more at Al-Abraq Al-Khabari on 22 October. An adult male **Levant Sparrowhawk** *A. brevipes* was at Sabriya Farm on 1 October, a **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor* was seen at Jahra on 8 October and a **Saker** *F. cherrug* was trapped at Adaira on 6 October. The third confirmed breeding record of **Little Crane** *Porzana parva* comes from Sabah Al-Salem on 5 October. On 25 October a **Red-wattled Plover** *Hoplopterus indicus* was at Jahra East Outfall. An **Indian Roller** *Coracias benghalensis* was seen at Sulaibikhat Bay on 4 October. At least four **Common Babbler** *Turdoides caudatus* (possibly a family party) were found at Mohammed Al-Ajmi Farm near the Iraq border on 10 September; a possible addition to Kuwait list.

LEBANON

The only group to report sightings was the A Rocha Project at the Aammq Marshes in the Bekaa Valley where unusually high water levels attracted good numbers of wildfowl. **Cattle Egrets** *Bubulcus ibis* were present in the marsh throughout the autumn with a maximum of six on 1 November, with one still present on 14 December. Up to 100 **Night Herons** *Nycticorax nycticorax* were recorded in the marsh in September. This is the highest number ever seen here. On 5 October a huge flock of 800 **White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* was recorded above Lake Qaaroun. On 27 October a total of 95 **Common Cranes** *Grus grus* headed south over Khirbet Qanafar in the Beqaa Valley. A **White-breasted Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* was present from July to December with two in October. This is a new species for the Aammq wetland. Four **Wigeon** *Anas penelope* were unexpected on 13 December as this is a rare visitor at the marsh, as are **Pintail** *Anas acuta*, four of which four were seen on 14 October. Up to three **Pallid Harriers** *Circus macrourus* were present from mid-October until December and roosted in the marsh during the night. A male **Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni* was at Khirbet Qanafar on 23 September. A **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius pallidirostris* was just south of Aana on 16 September. A **Scrub Warbler** *Scotocerca inquieta* was near Khirbet Qanafar on 30 August. The species is rare in Lebanon. Late News: six **Purple Gallinule** *Porphyrio porphyrio*, the first certain record since 1945, were at Aamiq wetland on 16 January 2005, one being shot in front of the observers; the corpse was

confiscated. On 16 February 2005, a **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius*, at the American University of Beirut hit Mike Harrison's office window, calling while slightly stunned. This observation with another from 14 February 2001 suggests that spring passage is from mid-February and not late February. A **Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* was on 22 January 2005 in the Nahr (River) El Kalb valley, north of Beirut, the first record of this extremely rare species since 1999 and in a new locality.

OMAN

A count of 1350 **Jouanin's Petrels** *Bulweria fallax* off Ras Janjari on 12 November is a new record count. Nearby a **Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris diomedea* at Ras al Khabbah on 23 September is the 8th record, while on the same day 1800 **Pale-footed Shearwaters** *Puffinus carneipes* there was a record count. There were 200 **Persian Shearwaters** *Puffinus (Therminiere) persicus* off Qurayyat on 1 September. The 6th record of **White Pelican** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* was a single at Al Qurm Park on 2 November. A record count of **Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* was 170 at Al Ansab Lagoons on 10 December. Two **Black-headed Herons** *Ardea melanocephala* at East Khawr on 20 August are scarce records. Following on from the first recorded breeding in 2002 there were 190 **Cattle Egrets** *Bubulcus ibis* at Sohar Sun Farms on 13 October. A total of 58 **Night Herons** *Nycticorax nycticorax* at Al Ansab Lagoons on 21 October is a new record count. The 4th and 5th records of **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* were two at Khawr Rawri from 2–26 November. Single **White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* were at East Khawr and Khawr Taqah on 17 and 18 November while a **Greylag Goose** *Anser anser* was at Hilf on 14 November followed by five at Al Ansab Lagoons on 10 December. The 6th record of **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* was a single at Al Qurm Park from 27–30 August. A **Pallas's Fish-Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucorhynchus* was at Al Ansab Lagoons on 4 November. **Lesser Spotted Eagles** *Aquila pomarina* were at Sunub Dump on 22 October, with two on 11 November, Al Ansab Lagoons on 4, 11 and 19 November and 3 December, Khawr Rawri on 7 November and Barka on 24 November. There were 30 **Sooty Falcons** *Falco concolor* at Fahl Island on 1 November. An adult and immature **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo*

was at Ras al Hadd on 24 September. A record count of 180 **Red-wattled Plovers** *Hoplopterus indicus* was made on 13 October at Sohar Sun Farms. Four **Sociable Plovers** *Chettusia gregaria* were there on 3 November with a single there on 13 November. A **European Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria* at Qurayyat from 1–16 September is the 9th record. At least 400 **Kentish Plovers** *Charadrius alexandrinus* were at East Khawr on 18 November. There were nine **Caspian Plovers** *Charadrius asiaticus* at Qurayyat on 9 September while six were at Sohar Sun Farms on 23 September. A **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* was at Al Qurm Park on 6 September and 26 October. A count of 500 **Ruffs** *Philomachus pugnax* at Sohar Sun Farms on 13 October was a new record. A **Subantarctic Skua** *Catharacta antarctica* at Ras al Khabbah on 23 September is the 4th record. The next day a **South Polar Skua** *Catharacta maccormicki* off Ras al Hadd was the 3rd record. Some 7000 **Sooty Gulls** *Larus hemprichii* were at Al Maghsayl on 23 October increasing to at least 20,000 on 25 November. A juvenile **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* at Ayn Hamran on 3 October and a juvenile **Indian Hawk-Cuckoo** *Cuculus varius* at Qatbit on 26 October were both 2nd records. Two **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis* were at Al Ansab Lagoons on 31 October. A **Malachite Kingfisher** *Alcedo cristata* at Khawr Taqah on 27 October and 8 November is the first record and was followed by another at Al Maghsayl on 11 and 17 November. Previously it has been reported from Yemen where it may breed. An impressive 650 **Indian Rollers** *Coracias benghalensis* and 400 **Crested Larks** *Galerida cristata* were at Sohar Sun Farms on 23 September – both record counts. An **Oriental Skylark** *Alauda gulgula* there on 2 November is a significant record, as is that of a **Brown-throated Sand Martin** *Riparia paludicola* at Muntasar on 11 November. A total of 48 **White-cheeked Bulbuls** *Pycnonotus leucogenys* at Shinas on 5 November is a new record count. A **Radde's Accentor** *Prunella ocularis* at Sayh from 18–19 November is the 1st record. This is the first sighting in Arabia. The species breeds in Turkey and Iran. Two **Little Rock-Thrushes** *Monticola saxatilis* were at the Qatbit Motel on 22 October, and a single was at Ayn Razat on 24 October. A **Hume's Lesser Whitethroat** *Sylvia (curruca) althaea* was at Sunub Dump on 11 November

while two were at Sayh, Musandam on 18 November. A **Rüppell's Warblers** *Sylvia ruppelli* at the Qatbit Motel from 9–12 November is the 1st record as was a **Pied Flycatcher** *Ficedula hypoleuca* there from 21–22 October. A **European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* at Sayh, Musandam on 19 November is the 4th record as is a male **Pied Stonechat** *Saxicola caprata* at Al Qurm Park from 5–9 October. A pair of **Mourning Wheatears** *Oenanthe lugens* near Khaluf on 9 July are significant records. There were three **Oriental White-eyes** *Zosterops palpebrosa* at Mahawt on 8 July. A **Maggie** *Pica pica* was at Al Qurm Park on 15 October and the 1st record. The only population in Arabia is the distinctive race in the Asir Mountains of Saudi Arabia. The sighting is presumably of an escaped individual. A total of 1000 **Common Mynas** *Acridotheres tristis* were at Sohar Sun Farms on 13 November and 1000 **Yellow-throated Sparrows** *Petronia xanthocollis* at Ras al Hamra on 22 August is a record count.

SAUDI ARABIA

In the Dhahran area most sightings came from the sewage effluent lake. An adult **Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* present on 17 and 24 December and a juvenile on 27 December were good winter records. A flock of 26 **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* on 5 September was unusual. A total of 18 **Gadwall** *Anas strepera* was present after heavy storms on 9 December. They are normally seen in the Arabian Gulf bays, rather than on freshwater habitat. A female **Garganey** *Anas querquedula* on 27 August was unusual, as the species has not been seen before on autumn passage. A **Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* on 2 December was an unusual winter record. **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* were seen on 3 October, and 1, 3 and 6 November. A **Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* was seen on 27 October and four were present on 3 December. An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was seen at the lake area from 28–30 December. It is a scarce winter visitor and passage migrant. Autumn passage records of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops [superciliosus] persicus* included 21 on 17 October, 40 on 19 October, 17 on 24 October and two on 28 October. **Kingfishers** *Alcedo atthis* on 22, 24 and 31 December were the only winter records. An adult **White-breasted Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* was

present on 26 November and 24 December. This is a rarity in eastern Saudi Arabia and has turned up in Dhahran on only a few occasions since 1996. Two **Black Redstarts** *Phoenicurus ochruros* were seen on 3 December and a single on 17 December. A female **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* was seen on 3 September. **Red-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* is normally seen in spring so a single on 20 October was unusual.

Further to *Sandgrouse* 26(2) mentioning spring passage in the Dhahran area extending to the end of May, some 15 days later than usual, we hear that it actually continued well into June, with the following additional records: **Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia*, six, on 1 February and a winter maximum of 800 **Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* 1–20 February, all at Sabkha al Fasl; **Spotted Crake** *Porzana porzana* one on 4 June at Jubail, a late spring migrant; an **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* pair seen at dusk 24 June and one 1 July in suitable breeding habitat at Khafrah Marsh; a **Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla* at Al Sharkiyah Agricultural Development Area, 50km southwest of Jubail on 23 April, and **Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria* spring passage from 12 April to 18 June, on which last date a male (in song) and a female were in gardens on the King Fahd Bahrain-Saudi Arabia Causeway.

SYRIA

A visit to the Bloudane in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains from 27–28 February benefited from ideal weather conditions with bright sunshine but a lot of snow. Species seen included an adult **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*, seven singing **Woodlarks** *Lullula arborea*, **Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* (rare in Syria), eight **Isabelline Wheatears** *Oenanthe isabellina*, 30 **Shore Larks** *Eremophila alpestris* (of the race *bicornis*), **Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia*, 100 **Rock Sparrows** *Petronia petronia*, two **Syrian Serins** *Serinus syriacus*, two **Rock Nuthatches** *Sitta neumayer*, ten **Yellowhammers** *Emberiza citrinella* (rare in Syria), two **Black Redstarts** *Phoenicurus ochruros*, two **Scrub Warblers** *Scotocerca inquieta* and three **Syrian Woodpeckers** *Dendrocopos syriacus*. Elsewhere a **Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* was seen in May in Hawran, the southern region of Syria.

TURKEY

A **Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus* at Riva(Çayağzı) on 12 December was the 15th record for Turkey. Three Cattle Egrets were seen by the River Euphrates south of Birecik on 26 July. A flock of 31 **Bewick's Swan** *Cygnus columbianus* at Sariyer Barajı – Nallihan (Ankara) on 19 December was the 24th record. On 26 December a **Red-breasted Goose** *Branta ruficollis* was seen at Yörükler, the 31st record since 1966. Two **Scaup** *Aythya marila* at Mert lake, İğneada, Edirne on 1 January 2005 is an excellent record of this rare bird in Turkey. Seven **Caucasian Black Grouse** *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi* and two **Caspian Snowcock** *Tetraogallus caspius* were at Sivrikaya on 18 June. A pair **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo* were east of Bulanik on 29 June. At Yeni Akpınar Köyü, Birecik one **Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* was recorded on 8 July, with four there on 10 July. An adult **Lesser Sand Plover** *Charadrius mongolus* in non-breeding plumage was reported from the lake shore at Arin Gölü (north of Lake Van) on 18 September. The record is currently being assessed by the German Rarities Committee. Five **Red-wattled Plover** *Hoplopterus indicus* were recorded 5km north of Cizre on 30 June and three were on River Tigris at Cizre on 27 July. Three **Sociable Plover** *Chettusia gregaria* were at Hürmetçi Marshes, Kayseri on 29 September and 3 October; there have been rather few records of late (none between 1995 and 2002). A count of 103 **Knot** *Calidris canutus* at Gediz, İzmir on 13 December was high for this species. Two **Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* at Gediz, İzmir on 18 December was the fifth winter record for Turkey. At Birecik three juvenile **Striated Scops Owl** *Otus brucei* were seen on 3 July with an adult and two juveniles there on 26 July. A **Tengmalm's Owl** *Aegolius funereus* at Kızılcahamam, Ankara on 18 September was the ninth or tenth record. At least one pair of **Alexandrine Parakeets** *Psittacula eupatria* nested in Gulhane Park next to the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul. Breeding first took place nearby in 2003. A **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* seen on 14 November at Kocahisar köyü/Şeytan Köprüsü, Adıyaman was at the northern limit of its range in Eastern Turkey. At least 10 **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops persicus* were at Hüyükülü on 3 July, a flock of 50 being recorded at Ani ruins,

Arpa çayı (Armenian border), Kars on 19 September and three at Mogan Gölü, Ankara on 24 September. Three **Radde's Accentors** *Prunella ocularis* were at Demirkazık on 5 July and 15 **Red-tailed Wheatears** *Oenanthe xanthopygma* were at Nemrut Dağı, near Kahta on 30 July. At Ercek Gölü at least three Paddyfield Warblers were recorded on 26 June. The fifth **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* for Turkey was at Ege University campus, İzmir on 29 October. On 24 and 25 June two **Plain Leaf Warblers** *Phylloscopus neglectus* were found singing from a sparsely vegetated sloping hillside South of Van on the Çatak road about one kilometre south of the junction with the road to Bahcesaray. The area had scattered 3m-tall mature junipers and *Daphne mucronata* shrubs. It is possible that three birds were present. This is the first record from Turkey and the first breeding season record away from Iran. A **Great Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor* at Tayakadın, Edirne on 1 January 2005 is a good record. A record of seven **Common Mynah** *Acridotheres tristis* at Tuzla on 29 May was the fourth from Istanbul; the status of this species is still unclear in Turkey. A pair and three juvenile **Mongolian Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes mongoliensis* were near Serpmetas on 28 July and at least seven **Trumpeter Finches** *B. githagineus* including two fledged juveniles were at Ishak Pasa on 24 June. Two **Grey-necked Buntings** *Emberiza buchanani* were in Van Hills on 28 July.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

A dead **Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* was found at Maqta, Abu Dhabi on 4 December. Records of **Jouanin's Petrel** *Bulweria fallax* at Al Ghurfa, Fujairah on 18 October and **Pale-footed Shearwater** *Puffinus carneipes* off the Fujairah Hilton beach

on 8 October are both the 1st records of long-awaited species, the latter still being subject to acceptance. A **Wilson's Storm-petrel** *Oceanites oceanicus* was seen off Fujairah 18 July and three were there on 6 August - the first records since June 1996. Single **Brown Boobies** *Sula leucogaster* off Fujairah 8 October and 1 December were the 10th and 11th records. A **Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris* was at the Dibba dairy farm on 18 November. A **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* at Al Wathba on 25 October is the 6th record. Single **Goshawks** *Accipiter gentilis* at the Dibba dairy farm on 1 November and in the Jebel Ali Hotel gardens on 6 December will be the 6th and 7th records if accepted. Separate **Lesser Spotted Eagles** *Aquila pomarina* were at Al Wathba fields 29 October and 1 November. An **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* at the Al Wathba camel race track on 28 July-5 August will be the 4th record if accepted, and an **Oriental Pratincole** *Glareola maldivarum* there from 21-24 September is the 8th record. **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* at the Dubai Pivot fields on 7 July and at the Al Wathba camel track on 16 August will be the 11th and 12th records if accepted. A **Black Tern** *Chlidonias nigra* at Al Wathba marsh on 23 August will be the 8th record if accepted. The 4th and 5th records of **Lesser Noddy** *Anous tenuirostris* were at Fujairah breakwater on 18 July and 2 December, while a single **Common Noddy** *Anous stolidus* was off Fujairah on 18 July, followed by four at Fujairah breakwater on 1 December, with a fifth there the next day - the 8th to 10th records. A **Rufous Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia orientalis* at Al Wathba camel track fields from 16 September-1 October is the 8th record and one at the Fujairah National Dairy Farm on 19 October is the 9th record. Two **Long-eared Owls** *Asio*

otus were found in their usual roost (for the third year in a row) at Mushrif Park, Dubai on 5 December. A **Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha calandra* was at Al Wathba from 25 November-1 December and is the 6th record. A **Brown-throated Martin** *Riparia paludicola* was at Al Wathba fields from 22 October-23 November and one was at the Fujairah dairy farm on 25 November, being the 11th and 12th records. Two **Asian House Martins** *Delichon dasypus* at Emirates Hills golf club, Dubai from 16-23 September will be the 3rd record if accepted. An **Olive-backed Pipit** *Anthus hodgsoni* at the Al Wathba fields from 29 October-10 December is a good record of a less than annually-occurring species. A **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus* was at Ghantoot on 6 December. A **Blyth's Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus dumetorum* in Mushref Palace gardens from 29 October-2 November is the 10th record. Single **Great Grey Shrikes** *Lanius excubitor* in Abu Dhabi on 30 October and at Al Wathba fields from 3-4 December are the 2nd and 3rd records, however a skin collected on Das Island, Abu Dhabi on 29 October 1998 has now been confirmed as the 1st record, being of the race *homereyi*. A **Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia* at Al Wathba camel track fields on 8 October will be the 1st record if accepted, while a **Rustic Bunting** *Emberiza rustica* there on 24 November is the 9th record and the first since 1996.

YEMEN

Two **Black-billed Wood Doves** *Turtur abyssinicus* were found in mangroves at Al Urj on 12 November. This is the first record (See *Sandgrouse* 27(2).) of the species in the Middle East. The species is found in Eritrea which lies little more than 100 miles across the Red Sea.

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SANDGROUSE

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