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VOLUME 34(2) 2012

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Photo above: Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, Yotvata, Israel, March 2011. © Yoav Perhman

Cover photo: Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, April 2008. © AJ Drummond-Hill

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A proposed Important Bird Area and Internationally Important Wetland: Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran

MOHAMMAD TOHIDIFAR & MOHAMMAD KABOLI

The criteria given by Birdlife International and the Ramsar convention on wetlands were evaluated to identify Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran, as a potential new IBA and Internationally Important Wetland. Field surveys were conducted October 2007–January 2009. The wetland meets seven criteria of BirdLife International (A1, A3, A4iii, B1i B1iv, B2, B3) and criteria 1–6 of the Ramsar convention on wetlands. This wetland supports large numbers of migrating Common Cranes *Grus grus* (3300 individuals in October 2007). Five avian species recorded from the wetland are categorized as globally threatened: Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* (CR), Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (VU), Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (VU), Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* (VU), Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* (VU) and three are near threatened (NT): Pallid Harrier *Circus macronurus*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and European Roller *Coracias garrulus*. Meyghan wetland suffers from various human and natural threats and suggestions are made on how to overcome them.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that large portions of Iran are arid or semi-arid (Scott 1995), there are several very extensive wetland systems of great importance for a wide variety of seasonal and migratory birds. These wetlands are mainly in coastal and near-coastal areas eg Miankaleh, Gomishan, Boujagh (Bandar Kiashahr), Uromiyeh in the north and west and Shadegan, Parishan, Bakhtegan, Mond, Heleh, Hara (Khouran straits) in southwest, south and south-central Iran (Scott 1996). The wetlands of Iran constitute vital staging and wintering areas for numerous migratory waterfowl that use the West Siberian-Caspian-East African and Central Siberian-Indus-South Asian flyways and also support large breeding populations of many species. Several million waterfowl utilize the wetlands as wintering habitat, while perhaps as many birds again use the wetlands as staging areas on their way to and from wintering areas further to the southwest or southeast (Scott 1996). At least 800 km separate the northern (Caspian sea) and southern (Persian gulf) coastal regions suggesting that staging areas exist between them.

As a contracting party to the Ramsar convention, Iran has introduced 24 wetlands as Ramsar sites (www.ramsar.org updated 4 March 2011). Furthermore, Evans (1994), in an inventory of Important Bird Areas (IBA) in the Middle East, described 105 IBAs in the Islamic Republic of Iran, though none have been added or deleted subsequently.

Situated in west-central Iran, Meyghan wetland supports a significant number of migratory birds and especially some globally threatened species including Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* and Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*. This paper summarizes information gathered during field surveys at Meyghan wetland, in particular on its avifauna, to evaluate its potential as a Ramsar site and IBA.

STUDY AREA

Meyghan wetland (34° 11' 59" N, 49° 50' 32" E, 1660 m asl), also called Kavir Meyghan, is a playa or kavir (base-level plain of inland drainage basin) covering an area of c10 640 ha located 17 km northeast of Arak (Markazi province) in west-central Iran (Figure 1, Sadough & Jalalvand 1999). This area consists of a complex of sabkhas (salt-encrusted flats) (Akhani 2006), mudflats, marsh, artificial islets (resulting from exploitation of sodium sulphate) and open water (Plates 1–4). After good rainfall, mainly in autumn or late winter,



Figure 1. Meyghan wetland (the white-coloured playa or kavir) in west-central Iran. The red polygon indicates the only permanent water body and which was used by the authors for monitoring birds in the present study.



Plate 1. A view of southwest Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran, October 2007, with thousands of waterfowl present. © *Mahammad Tahidifar*

the whole area is covered with a shallow layer of water but this is temporary and in a few days the water drains, the sea-like landscape vanishes, and salt desert reappears. This site is known as an autumn habitat for up to 5000 Common Cranes *Grus grus* (Behrouzi-



Plate 2. Flocks of hundreds of Common Cranes *Grus grus* and ducks *Anas* spp, southwest Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran, January 2009. The ground is snow covered and water partially frozen over. © *Mohammad Tohidifar*



Plate 3. Artificial islets in centre of playa resulting from sodium sulphate extraction, December 2007, Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran. © *Mohammad Tohidifar*



Plate 4. A temporary red river (they disappear after good rains or evaporate away in hot months), June 2008, Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran. Coloration due to *Dunaliella salina*, a halophilous micro-alga. © Mohammad Tohidifar

Rad *et al* 1997). Meyghan has a valuable flora and about one quarter of Iranian halophyte species have been found there (Akhani 2006). Three main plant genera are *Centaurea* spp, *Astragalus* spp and *Lepidium* spp (Akhani 1989). The highest density of vegetation occurs mostly in the southwest and mainly includes *Phragmites australis* and *Cyperus eremicus*. The climate of the area is on the border of warm and cold semi-arid based on the Köppen-Geiger climate classification (Kotteck *et al* 2006). Mean annual precipitation is 258 mm and maximum water depth c220 cm (Sadough & Jalalvand 1999). The Meyghan wetland is a major site for industrial exploitation of sodium sulfate in Iran and in recent years the southwest of the wetland has received a large inflow of treated wastewater from Arak city which has changed the southwest to a brackish permanent wetland with open water (Figure 1, Ansari *et al* 2008).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection

Until recently, only a very few ornithological studies have been carried out at Meyghan wetland: collection of bird specimens for the Danish zoological museum (Paludan 1940) and a population survey of Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* which was carried out 21–22 June 1957 (Read 1958). In recent years, several studies have been done at Meyghan wetland. Behrouzi-Rad *et al* (1997) mentioned autumn occurrence of 5000–6000 Common Cranes in Meyghan. Another study concerned ecological assessment of Meyghan for Common Cranes (Ansari *et al* 2008).

We carried out surveys every month, October 2007–January 2009, for 15 months. Counts were done mostly in the southwestern part of the wetland (an area of c350 ha,

Table 1. Biome-restricted bird species of Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran.

		Biome
Pallid Harrier	<i>Circus macrourus</i>	Eurasian Steppe and Desert
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	Eurasian Steppe and Desert
Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>	Eurasian Steppe and Desert
Caspian Plover	<i>Charadrius asiaticus</i>	Eurasian Steppe and Desert
Sociable Lapwing	<i>Vanellus gregarius</i>	Eurasian Steppe and Desert
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Eurasian High-Montane
White-throated Robin	<i>Irania gutturalis</i>	Irano-Turanian
Finsch's Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe finschii</i>	Irano-Turanian
Streaked Scrub-warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>	Sahara-Sindian Desert
Black-headed Bunting	<i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>	Mediterranean

Figure 1) and at the islets in the centre of the wetland, with a maximum area of 50 ha, due to physical inaccessibility (mud *etc*) of other areas. Observations were carried out using 10×40 binoculars and 20×60 telescopes. Digital SLR cameras were also used.

Data analysis

To identify whether the wetland qualifies for IBA and Ramsar status, we used the new IBA criteria proposed by Birdlife International (www.birdlife.org/datazone/info/ibacritme) and the criteria approved by the Ramsar convention on wetlands (www.ramsar.org/ris/key_ris_index.htm). An IBA is defined as a key site for conservation that is small enough to be conserved in its entirety and is often already part of a protected area network. They do at least one of the following three things: hold significant numbers of one or more globally threatened species; are one of a set of sites that together hold a suite of restricted range species or biome-restricted species; have exceptionally large numbers of migratory or congregatory species. In the Middle East, there are two levels of IBAs—sites of global importance (A-level sites) and those that do not meet the criteria for global importance but which nonetheless are of Middle Eastern importance (B-level sites) (eg Khairallah & Conroy 2010). These criteria are available in detail on the BirdLife and Ramsar websites.

Table 2. Estimated/counted numbers of Common Cranes *Grus grus*, 2007–2009, Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran. * denotes a minimum estimate or count.

Date of observation	Number of individuals
26 Oct 07	2750–3300
6 Nov 07	2500*
23 Nov 07	100
14 Dec 07	100
19 Jan 08	27
29 Feb 08	11
30 Mar 08	324
25 Apr 08	1
23 May 08	2
5 Jun 08	2
20 Jun 08	1
22 Aug 08	2
5 Sep 08	150
19 Sep 08	21
17 Oct 08	3
25 Oct 08	500
7 Nov 08	500*
5 Dec 08	1000*
12 Dec 08	2100*
26 Dec 08	910
23 Jan 09	1200*

RESULTS

In total, 126 bird species from 38 families were identified at Meyghan wetland. The highest species number belongs to the Scolopacidae with 13 species, Anatidae has 11 and Accipitridae 10. Thirty-seven species met one of three categories of breeding evidence: possible, probable and confirmed breeding. Appendix 1 lists bird species, their status and maximum numbers counted on a monthly basis during the survey period. We recorded three species listed as threatened (VU, vulnerable) on the IUCN Red List: Saker Falcon, Greater Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, and three near threatened (NT), Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and European Roller *Coracias garrulus*.

Our study shows that Meyghan wetland meets the criteria for both an IBA and an Internationally Important Wetland. The wetland meets seven criteria of BirdLife International, as below.

A1. Species of global conservation concern

Five such species have been recorded in Meyghan, namely Sociable Lapwing (Tohidifar & Zarei 2007), Saker Falcon, Greater Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle and Marbled Teal *Maruarouetta angustirostris* (F Mobaser pers comm).

A3. Biome-restricted species

For 10 species, the breeding distributions are largely or wholly confined to one biome. Table 1 lists these species and their biomes.

A4. Congregations

This site meets the third article of this criterion (A4iii), the holding of $\geq 20\,000$ individuals of waterbirds on a regular basis. This occurs October–December (Appendix 1) when more than twenty thousand ducks assemble in Meyghan wetland.

B1. Regionally important congregations

This indicates sites which are known or thought to hold $\geq 1\%$ of a flyway or other distinct population of a waterbird species and two species qualify. Greylag Goose *Anser anser* (1% of the regional population of western Siberia and the Caspian sea was determined to be 800 individuals—Evans 1994). One thousand five hundred individuals were counted 1 December 2006, and 800 and 1000 individuals were present 14 December 2007 and 7 December 2008 respectively. The Common Crane (1% of regional population in southwest Asia is 200 individuals—Evans 1994) which on nine visits by ourselves numbered in excess of 200 individuals (Table 2). The site is a 'bottleneck' where over 3000 cranes regularly pass on autumn migration. In the present study, due to limitation of researcher numbers and the scattering of Common Cranes in adjacent agricultural fields outside the wetland, a complete count of the species was not possible but previous studies mentioned 5000–11 000 individuals in early autumn of the 1990s and early 2000s (Ansari *et al* 2008, Behrouzi-Rad *et al* 1997).

B2. Species with an unfavourable conservation status in the Middle East

The site is one of the five most important sites in the country/territory (*ie* Iran) for a species with an unfavourable conservation status in the Middle East (threatened or declining throughout all or part of their range in the region). The three species are Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* and Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, which occur at Meyghan wetland and are listed in this category. For these species, site-protection approaches are thought to be appropriate.

B3. Species with a favourable conservation status but concentrated in the Middle East

The area meets this criterion (Evans 1994) with occurrence of two species, namely White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis* and Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii* (Appendix 1).

The Meyghan wetland meets 6 out of 9 Ramsar convention criteria for qualifying as an Internationally Important Wetland.

Criterion 1. A wetland contains a representative, rare, or unique example of a natural or nearly natural wetland type found within the appropriate biogeographic region

Meyghan wetland is a unique wetland located in the Irano-Turanian biome and almost all other wetlands of Iran are located more peripherally.

Criterion 2. A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities

As A1 of IBA criteria.

Criterion 3. A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports populations of plant and/or animal species important for maintaining the biological diversity of a particular biogeographic region

A total of 129 bird species have been recorded at Meyghan wetland as well as various mammals eg Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*, Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*, European Hare *Lepus europaeus* and Persian Jird *Meriones persicus*. Moreover, three plant species *Microcnemum coralloides*, *Arabidopsis parvula* and *Asparagus licoenicus* found in the wetland are either near endemic (*M. coralloides* is also found at lake Orumiyeh) or endemic to the wetland (Akhani 1989).

Criterion 4. A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions

Of the 37 breeding species recorded at Meyghan, at least 21 are ecologically dependent on wetlands during the breeding season. The breeding season presents a period of intense activity and sensitivity to disturbance for most bird species when nests, eggs, chicks, and adults at the nest are vulnerable to predation (Sutherland *et al* 2004). During severe winters (eg January–February 2008) most parts of the wetland are frozen and at these times, vegetated areas (especially the *Cyperus eremicus* community) provide good cover and food for waterbirds or cranes.

Criterion 5. A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 20 000 or more waterbirds

As A4 of IBA criteria.

Criterion 6. A wetland should be considered internationally important if it regularly supports 1% of the regional population of one species or subspecies of waterbird

As B1 of the IBA criteria.

CONSERVATION AND THREATS

Wetlands in arid ecosystems play a major role in producing and supporting the floral and faunal diversity of an area. Such wetlands are very sensitive and fragile especially in response to human-made threats (Madjnoonian 1999). Wetlands in Iran, as elsewhere in the region, are increasingly coming under pressure from human activities.

Meyghan wetland is 250 km away from Gavkhoni wetland (Evans 1994) and 140 km away from the Howz-Sultan salt lake in Qom. In recent years, Gavkhoni has faced severe ecological devastation (drought and extensive extraction of salt) and was not being used

by migratory waterbirds (Shayan Kia 2003). This highlights the value of Meyghan wetland for migratory species as well as breeders and winter visitors. Meyghan wetland is the second known breeding site of Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus* in Iran whilst the first, at lake Orumiyeh, is threatened by drought (Tohidifar *et al* 2010).

Meyghan wetland is degraded not only because of construction of a road (compacted sabkha covered with a thin layer of asphalt) to the centre of the saline to exploit sodium sulphate, and changes in its hydrologic balance, but also due to the extreme grazing and agricultural activities around it (Akhani 2006). The extensive mining of sodium sulphate at Meyghan wetland is reducing the number of islets suitable for breeding of Armenian Gulls and other islet-related breeding species *eg* Pied Avocet. The Markazi provincial office of the Department of the Environment has no plans as yet for controlling the mining of sodium sulphate.

Disturbance by feral dogs of breeding birds was seen several times during the period of this study and including destruction of landbird nests. At the same time, water level fluctuations and drought are threatening the breeding waterbirds at Meyghan. Meyghan has a unique ecosystem and eutrophication in the southwest mostly caused by discharge from water treatment facilities in Arak is a problem. Industrial pollutants also enter the wetland.

Ansari *et al* (2008) recommended that hunting should be better controlled in the area. The no-hunting area (c30 000 ha) declared on 6 November 2008 by the Department of the Environment includes the Meyghan wetland. Conservation measures in place to protect the area must be enforced and eco-tourists and bird watchers should be encouraged to visit the wetland (Ansari *et al* 2008, Tohidifar *et al* 2009).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Saeed Cheraghi, Taher Ghadirian, Mohammad Ali Mazhari, Farid Mobaser, Mohammad Pourhedayat, Ali T Qashqaei and Afshin Zarei who assisted us during field work and Saeedeh Baniassadi who prepared the map for this paper. Hossein Akhani kindly helped by supplying some references. Critical comments by Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh improved the ms.

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Appendix I. Bird species and maximum numbers counted at the Meyghan wetland, west-central Iran, in the present study (October 2007–January 2009). Nomenclature and order follows Scott & Adhami (2006). P = passage migrant, R = resident, W = winter visitor, B = breeding, b = may breed, snb = summer non-breeder, pnc = present but not counted.

	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09	Status
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>															1		P
Black-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>													1	1			P
Great White Pelican <i>Pelecanus anacratalus</i>								1									P
Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					5									2			P
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>			1			5				1			3				P
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>									1	1			1	3			P
Purple Heron <i>Ardea purpurea</i>										2							P
Great Egret <i>Casmerodius albus</i>						1									7		P
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>								12	3	36	14	13					b
Squacco Heron <i>Ardeola rallioides</i>							2	9	pnc								P
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>								1	4	1							P
Eurasian Bittern <i>Bataurus stellaris</i>		2				1								2			P
White Stork <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>						15	10										P
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>						5	3	13	4	35		33	4				b
Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucoradia</i>										1	2						P
Greater Flamingo <i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>					165	530	518	1050	672	450	360	300	200	150	2		PW snb
Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>		150	800		150	50							15	1000	200	17	WP
Common Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadarna</i>	15	2												4	10	160	P
Ruddy Shelduck <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	60	30	3		21	41	1	4		35			10	30	176	100	WP
Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	15	2	1			30	100	1	2	90	2000	4500	1500	pnc	8000	40	BW

	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09	Status
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	10	50	4		10	10	2	5	40	400	50	100	1	10	20	170	WP
Northern Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>												5	10		1		P
Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>							2	3	1								P
Northern Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>		1				30	20	2	1		1			2	3	1	WP
Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>			1														P
Common Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>												1					P
Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>														3			P
Unidentified Duck		6500	7500									10 000	25 000	25 000	30 000	750	
White-tailed Eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>													1		3		P
Western Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2	2	1			2						3	3	4	2		WP
Hen Harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	2												4		P
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macraurus</i>		1															P
Common Buzzard <i>Butea butea</i>						12									1		P
Long-legged Buzzard <i>Butea rufinus</i>	2	1	1	1	1	1	1			1			1	1	2		R
Greater Spotted Eagle <i>Aquila clanga</i>														1			P
Steppe Eagle <i>Aquila nipalensis</i>															1		P
Eastern Imperial Eagle <i>Aquila heliaca</i>		1			1										2		P
Golden Eagle <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	1	1		1													W
Common Kestrel <i>Falca tinnunculus</i>	2				1	1									1		R
Eurasian Hobby <i>Falca subbutea</i>												1	2				P
Saker Falcon <i>Falca cherrug</i>												2	1				P
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falca peregrinus</i>	1		1														W
Common Quail <i>Caturnix caturnix</i>							1	1	1								B
Common Crane <i>Grus grus</i>	3300	2500	100	27	11	324	1	2	2		2	150	500	500	2100	1200	PW
Water Rail <i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1	1									2	2	1				R
Unidentified crane <i>Parzana spp</i>													1				P
Purple Swamphen <i>Parphyria parphyria</i>		1															P
Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		1				1		2	1	1	2	3	5			15	R
Eurasian Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>		130	55					2		2	1	1	10	100	27	40	BW

	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09	Status
Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	25	5	1			50	50	100	200	1000	15		10	pnc			BP
Pied Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avasetta</i>							2	2	80	70		5	10	5	2		BP
Collared Pratincole <i>Glareola pratincola</i>							10	10	2	30	15	1					B
Little Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius dubius</i>						5											P
Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>									20								P
Caspian Plover <i>Charadrius asiaticus</i>										15							P
Northern Lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	10	9	3		3	20	15	10	30	50		15	15	1	3	8	BW
White-tailed Lapwing <i>Vanellus leucurus</i>						3	10	12	5	5		8					B
Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1	10	2		5	5	10	2			10	10	8	15	15		PW
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limasa limasa</i>						4	10										P
Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>							1	4		25	1	2					P
Common Redshank <i>Tringa tatanus</i>		6				1	5	15	9	25	1	2	pnc	20	3		BW
Marsh Sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>							15	10									P
Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa achrapus</i>					2			2	3	2	15		2	2	2		P
Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareala</i>							1	25				15					P
Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						1	5	1		8							P
Sanderling <i>Calidris alba</i>														1			P
Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>															8		P
Curlew Sandpiper <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>							2	1									P
Ruff <i>Philamachus pugnax</i>								5			10		1				P
Red-necked Phalarope <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>								15				11					P
Armenian Gull <i>Larus armenicus</i>									60	61	65	10					B
Caspian Gull <i>Larus cachinnans</i>					44												P
Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ridibundus</i>	25	55	150		400	1000	1	2				25	120	200			PW
Slender-billed Gull <i>Larus genei</i>									1								P
Gull-billed Tern <i>Sterna nilotica</i>							20	5	pnc	70	2	5					b
Common Tern <i>Sterna hirunda</i>								2									P
Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidanius hybrida</i>								5	37	100							b
White-winged Tern <i>Chlidanius leucapterus</i>							2	50	15	100							b

	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09	Status
Black Tern <i>Chlidanius niger</i>							3	2									P
Black-bellied Sandgrouse <i>Pteracles</i> <i>orientalis</i>	1								2	5	9					130	R
Rock Dove <i>Calumba livia</i>	25				30	2		6	pnc	10	10	5		pnc	3	6	R
European Turtle Dove <i>Streptapelia</i> <i>turtur</i>												2					P
Laughing Dove <i>Streptapelia</i> <i>senegalensis</i>						1							1				R
Little Owl <i>Athene nactua</i>									1			1					R
Common Swift <i>Apus apus</i>						40	pnc	pnc	10								B
Blue-cheeked Bee- eater <i>Meraps persicus</i>								2				3	120	10			P
European Bee-eater <i>Meraps apiaster</i>							10	5	6	1	1		20				B
European Roller <i>Caracias garrulus</i>									1	2	2	1					B
Eurasian Hoopoe <i>Upupa epaps</i>								3	2	1		5	1				B
Calandra Lark <i>Melanacarypha</i> <i>calandra</i>								6				1					b
Bimaculated Lark <i>Melanacarypha</i> <i>bimaculata</i>					3	7	2	3									P
Greater Short-toed Lark <i>Calandrella</i> <i>brachydactyla</i>									1	1							P
Lesser Short-toed Lark <i>Calandrella</i> <i>rufescens</i>				7		5		1	4		3	1				pnc	R
Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>	2		1	2	3	8	2	2	2	5	2	1	pnc	1			R
Eurasian Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i>	25	3	25	1	10	10						25	1			30	PW
Barn Swallow <i>Hirunda rustica</i>								10		20	20	50	18	3			B
White Wagtail <i>Matacilla alba</i>						13	1						2		3		P
Citrine Wagtail <i>Matacilla citreala</i>						1		1	1						2		P
Yellow Wagtail <i>Matacilla flava</i>						5		10	20	10	2	1					B
Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i>															1		W
Water Pipit <i>Anthus spinaletta</i>		1		1		1							1				W
Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius calluria</i>								1				2					P
Isabelline Shrike <i>Lanius isabellinus</i>											2	2	4				P
Great Grey Shrike <i>Lanius excubitar</i>											2	5	1				P
Bluethroat <i>Luscinia svecica</i>			1			2							1		2		P

	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07	Jan 08	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09	Status
White-throated Robin <i>Ironia gutturalis</i>		1															P
Rufous Bush Robin <i>Cercotrichas galactates</i>													3				P
Common Stonechat <i>Saxicola torquata</i>														1			P
Finsch's Wheatear <i>Oenanthe finschii</i>							1										P
Desert Wheatear <i>Oenanthe deserti</i>													3				P
Isabelline Wheatear <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	3				2	6	1	5	2	pnc	5	2	2				B
Moustached Warbler <i>Acrocephalus melanapagan</i>		10	1									1	1	2	3		PW
Sedge Warbler <i>Acrocephalus schaenabaenus</i>	1							4					1				P
Great Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>								5	3	2	1			1			B
Willow Warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>												1	5				P
Common Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>									1								P
Common Whitethroat <i>Sylvia communis</i>								1									P
Spotted Flycatcher <i>Muscicapa striata</i>											1	3					P
Black-headed Bunting <i>Emberiza melanocephala</i>								2			2						B
Common Reed Bunting <i>Emberiza schaeenicus</i>			2		6	1	1								3	7	W
Corn Bunting <i>Emberiza calandra</i>		2				2	3	1					1				R
Desert Finch <i>Rhadapechys absaleta</i>													1				P
House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>						pnc	pnc	10	3				pnc	pnc		pnc	R
Spanish Sparrow <i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>													pnc				P
Common Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		1500	50	1	60	100	50	50	3		50		100	pnc	11		BW
Eurasian Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>				3	4		2	pnc	3	2	2	4	10	pnc	5	6	R
Rook <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		3	30		200	1	2	3	25		15	pnc	20	pnc	100		BW
Carriion Crow <i>Carvus carane</i>	1	5	1	5	6	2	2	3	1	6	3	1	6	pnc	5	3	R

Nesting parameters of Turtle Doves

Streptopelia turtur arenicola breeding in Bahrain

BRENDAN KAVANAGH & ABDULLA AL KAABI

The Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur arenicola* (E Hartert, 1894) breeds from Morocco east to Tripoli, and from Iraq and Iran east through Afghanistan, Turkestan and Khirgiz steppes to northwest China (del Hoyo *et al* 1997). Within the Arabian peninsula it has been recorded breeding in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen in addition to Bahrain. It has not been recorded breeding in Qatar though suitable habitat exists there (Jennings 2010). Turtle Doves are widespread and common migrants throughout Arabia. They are thought to spend the winter in the Sahel and Ethiopia, returning north March–May to breed. Post breeding movements occur July–October and there is no evidence of wintering in Arabia (del Hoyo *et al* 1997, Beaman & Madge 1998, Jennings 2010).

The earliest record of breeding in Bahrain dates back to 1969, with additional records from 1982, 1985 and 1993 (Nightingale & Hill 1993). The largest estimate was of 30 nests in Al Areen wildlife park in July 1985 (Nightingale & Hill 1993). The colony monitored in the current study is immediately south of Al Areen wildlife park, in a group of mature desert broom *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* bushes, and may be the only Turtle Dove colony in Bahrain. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this breeding colony has been present annually for several decades at least, though recent evidence of birds breeding within the park was not available.

The aims of the study were to gather information on the breeding parameters of this Turtle Dove colony, to estimate colony size and to conduct ringing of the chicks in the hope of getting recoveries to elucidate movement patterns of these Bahrain birds.

STUDY AREA

The Turtle Dove colony (10–20 m asl, 25° 58' 27" N, 50° 31' 13" E, Plate 1) occurs in a series of sandy wadis 3 km from the western sea shore and 1.5 km directly south of Al Areen wildlife park. The wadis are dominated by desert broom bushes which can grow to a maximum height of 3 m (Phillips 1988). Most of the bushes, however, are less than 2 m due to regular grazing by domestic camels from a nearby farm. The area surveyed was



Plate 1. Wadi containing desert broom bushes used by nesting Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur*, part of the Bahrain colony studied in the present paper, 27 May 2011. © Brendan Kavanagh



Plate 2. Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* almost fledged, Bahrain, 1 June 2010. Note droppings in nest. © Brendan Kavanagh



Plate 3. Young Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* waiting to be ringed, Bahrain, 27 May 2011. © Brendan Kavanagh

c1.4 km² (1400 ha) with several sandy wadis interspersed between rocky desert devoid of vegetation. The terrain slopes gently towards the west. While no information was available on the feeding habits of the birds, it is thought that they were obtaining food from the animal pens in the wildlife park.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study area was visited nine times 27 May–30 July 2011. All visits occurred during the late afternoon (after 16.00 h) when the heat was less intense. Each visit lasted 1.5–2.0 h. As the area was large, it was not possible to survey it completely each visit so different portions of the site were selected each time. All bushes within the wadis were searched individually on foot. A label was placed in the sand beneath each nest to allow individual identification of nests. The contents of the nest were recorded on each occasion, noting all empty nests and any evidence of droppings that indicated the previous presence of squabs (Plate 2). Nests continued to be monitored throughout the study period to ascertain if any renesting occurred within the same nest. Once chicks reached c7 days old, they were ringed under license with a British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) ring. Permission to use BTO rings in Bahrain was granted by the Bahrain government agency, the Public Commission for the Protection of Marine Resources, Environment and Wildlife.

Laying, hatching and fledging date were estimated using 13 days for incubation and 19 days for brood rearing (Cramp 1985, del Hoyo *et al* 1997). Ages of chicks were estimated as 2, 4, 7, 10 or 15 days depending on size and feather growth stages based on prior ringing experience of chicks at the same site in 2009 and 2010 (Plates 3 & 4).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In total 54 nests were monitored over 65 days, 27 May–30 July 2011. Nine visits were undertaken, producing an average of 2.8 records per nest (range 1–6, Figure 1). Early nests

tended to have a higher number of records as the increasing summer temperatures made later visits to the site shorter.

Breeding began before the monitoring period and the fledging period extended beyond the last visit. Assuming 13 days incubation and 19 days chick rearing, the earliest calculated incubation date was 25 April and the latest fledging date was 11 August. Thus the breeding season was estimated to span 109 days in 2011. The minimum number of active nests, estimated from the data from each visit to the colony, ranged from 13 on 25 June to four on 30 July (Figure 2). The largest number of active nests was recorded in June with declining numbers through July.

A summary of the breeding performance of the Turtle Doves is shown in Table 1. Of the 54 nests observed, one was empty throughout the recording period while 12 others were only visited once. No analysis was possible from these nests. Of the remainder, 18 failed to produce young, 17 fledged at least one young and 6 further nests showed evidence of droppings corresponding to some young having at least hatched or possibly fledged. Based on nests of known outcome, 48.6% ($n = 17$) of nests were successful and 51.4% ($n = 18$) unsuccessful to fledging.

Of the 33 nests which had eggs when first recorded, four had one egg (12%), 28 had two eggs (85%) and one had three eggs (3%), yielding an average clutch size of 1.97 eggs per nest ($n = 33$). Twenty-nine chicks were fledged from 17 successful nests, 12 of these fledged two chicks while five nests fledged one chick, yielding an average fledging success of 1.7 fledglings/successful nest.

The conservatively estimated breeding season of 109 days, 25 April–11 August, corresponds well with other records from the Gulf region where eggs have been noted from 26 April and a few recorded in July (Jennings 2010). The presence of eggs on 18 July in Bahrain, which subsequently hatched and fledged chicks, provides evidence of breeding continuing through July into the first half of August in that population. This breeding season is earlier than in southern Europe but similar to that observed in North Africa by Heim de Balsac and Mayaud in the early 1960s (Cramp 1985).

It is difficult to ascertain the size of the breeding colony/population from the data provided. The maximum confirmed number of breeding pairs at any one time was 13 on 25 June. However if one assumes that all nests with eggs were occupied at that point, then the number of pairs was 19. No evidence of second broods could be discerned from our data (Figure 2) though other studies confirm that the Turtle Dove is at least double brooded throughout its range (Cramp 1985, Jennings 2010). Given that the vast majority of nests were not reused for second breeding attempts in Bahrain, the 54 nests would plausibly have been produced by 20–25 pairs of doves (allowing for two breeding attempts and additional replacement nests after failed attempts). This number is in line with an estimate in 2010 based on a single visit to the colony on 5 June when an estimated 24 nests were occupied (www.hawar-islands.com/blog/gen_stub.php/2010/06/).

The failure of 51.4% of nests, whose outcome was known, can be attributed to several factors. Camels were known to feed on the broom bushes on several occasion during the breeding season. Grazing of the bushes caused displacement of nests and eggs though



Plate 4. Young Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* being ringed, Bahrain, 27 May 2011. © Brendan Kavanagh

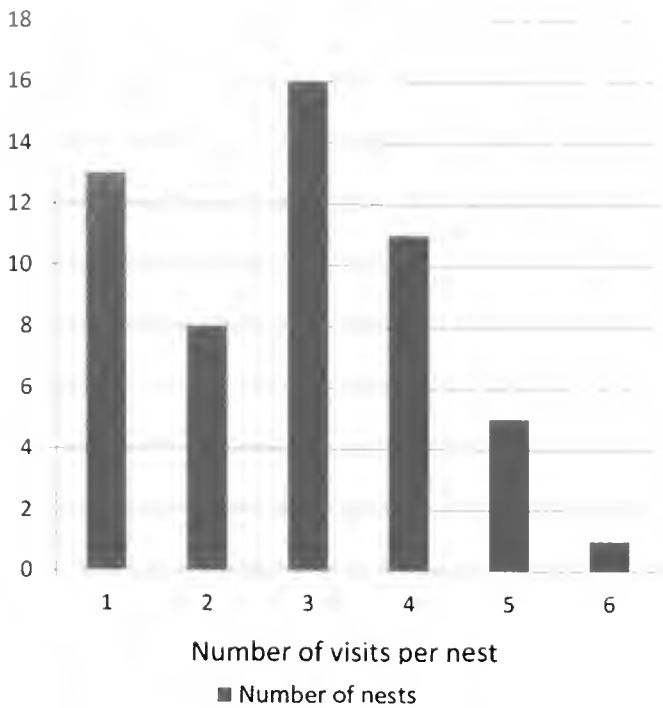


Figure 1. Number of visits to each of 54 Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* nests in Bahrain, 2011.

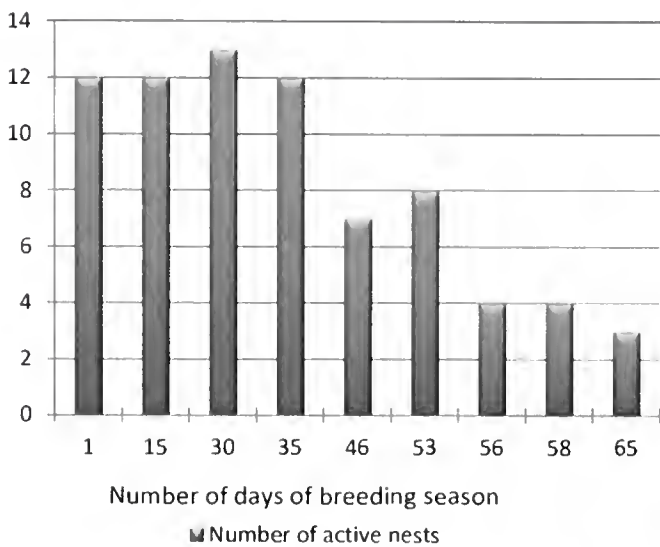


Figure 2. The number of active nests observed during the Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* breeding season, Bahrain 2011. Day 1 = 27 May, Day 35 = 30 June, Day 65 = 30 July.

Table 1. The outcome of 54 nesting attempts of the Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* recorded breeding in Bahrain, 2011.

Breeding Outcome	Number of nests
Empty nest	1
Unknown	12
Possible success	6
Failed	18
Successful	17
Total nests monitored	54

older chicks appear to be able to withstand the disturbance. Sporadic shooting of adults was also in evidence from a number of fresh, empty, shotgun shells observed on one occasion. This was also in evidence in previous years. Disturbance at the nest due to the observers could also be a factor causing nest failure though it was not possible to quantify this in this study. The nesting success rate of 48.6% of nesting attempts from our data represents minimal figures as other nests showed evidence of having had fledglings present prior to recording.

The recorded clutch size of 1.97 eggs/nest is in line with observations from other populations (Cramp 1985), as is the fledging success of 1.7 fledglings/successful nest. If one assumes a similar performance in the category of 'unknown' nests (12) in the study area then the total chick production in 2011 was in the order of 49 birds from the estimated 20–25 pairs. A more systematically timed approach to the field work would have been required to verify these figures.

Turtle Dove behaviour at the nest

Based on the distribution of nests, turtle doves appeared to be territorial within the wadis. Occupied nests were spaced at least 50 m apart, only one nest per bush. No successful nest was reused for a second breeding attempt. Nests were placed 1.5–2.0 m above the ground and all were reachable without a ladder. They were placed inside the bushes in their upper half. Full grown chicks usually fled the nest, diving into the centre of the bush, when approached. Younger chicks showed no such behaviour and were easily removed from the nest for ringing and replacement only to sit quietly again.

Nests were constructed from dead twigs collected from the broom bushes. No artificial materials were incorporated into the structure which was flat and open. Eggs could be easily seen through the loose weave of dead twigs (Plate 5).

During the survey visits the behaviour of adult birds was noted. Incubating birds sat tight on the nest until our presence

was within a few metres of the nest. On many occasions the birds allowed approach to within 1 or 2 m before escaping. On one occasion the adult bird was caught on the nest and ringed. On leaving the nest, birds invariably flew 50–100 m away and dropped to the ground feigning injury. This involved lying on its belly and flapping one or sometimes, both wings as if they were broken. This was usually conducted on the bare stony desert within view. The behaviour would normally last less than a minute and no attempt was ever made to approach the nest again while we were present. This distraction-lure display has been observed by several authors in previous studies (Cramp 1985).

Young chicks up to 4 or 5 days old were normally brooded and the adult birds appeared to incubate them. Older chicks were usually alone in the nest or the adult birds had escaped while we were still over 50 m away. Adult birds were normally seen singly rather than in pairs and fledged young were frequently observed together in the sand beneath the nest bush thus remaining close to the nest for some days after fledging.

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Plate 5. Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* nest with eggs, Bahrain, 1 June 2010. © Brendan Kavanagh

Roosting behaviour of a Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* in Oman

KOLBJORN SCHJOLBERG

Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* breeds in central Asia from the Sayan and Altai mountains of northern Mongolia and southern Siberia through northern Sinkiang, southern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the Himalayas with a possibly isolated population mainly in Szechwan. The species winters to the Indian subcontinent east to Thailand (Snow & Perrins 1998). In Oman, Hume's Warbler is a rare passage migrant and winter visitor late September–mid April (www.BirdsOman.com).

I was fortunate to have a wintering Hume's Warbler in my garden in Muscat during the winters of 2005/06 and 2006/07. It foraged mainly in our garden's large *Acacia* tree, and was especially active during late afternoons, allowing good sightings (Plate 1). Normally the bird disappeared early evening. In February 2007 I realised it had started roosting in a 3 m tall tree situated a couple of metres away from our patio. It would come to roost to the exact same branch nearly every night, some 1.5 m above ground level. The branch was extremely thin, and I presume this was chosen so it could detect subtle movements by potential predators at night. At the same time a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* also roosted in the garden, choosing a similar type thin branch but in a different nearby tree. With my family sitting quietly on the patio a few metres away, both warblers allowed stunning close-up views.



Plate 1. Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Muscat, Oman, 12 February 2007. © Kjetil Scholberg

Time of Hume's Warbler going to roost

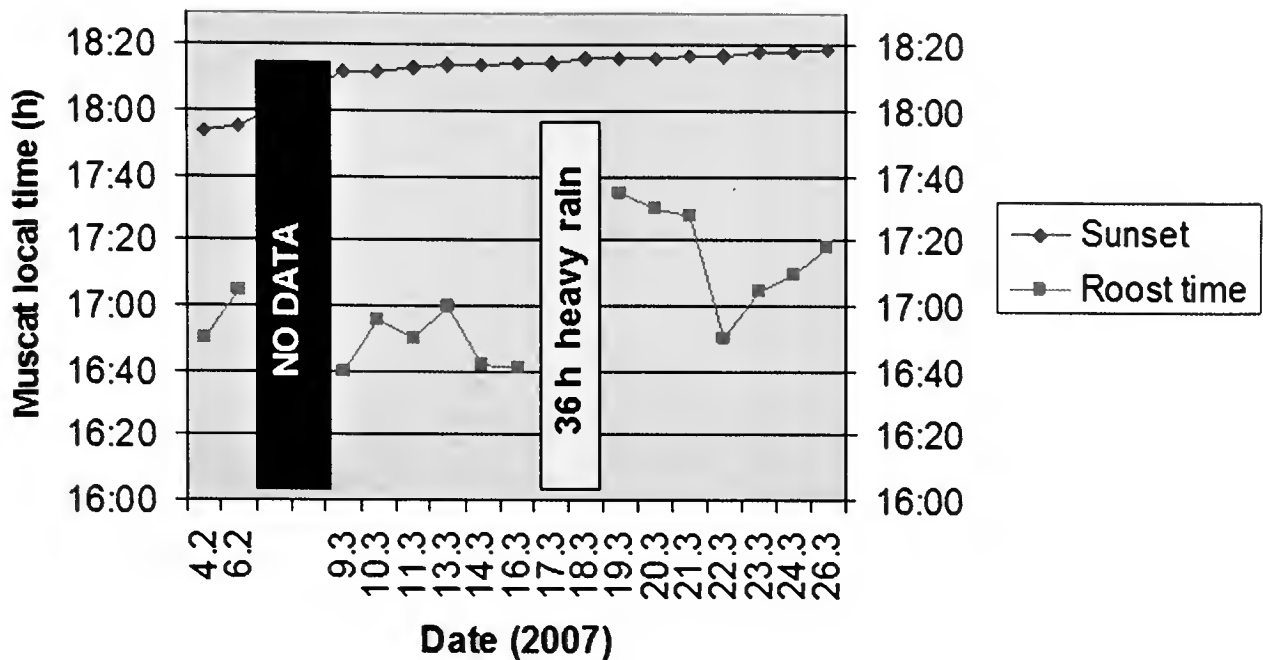


Figure 1. Time (pink curve) of Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* arriving at its night roosting branch, Muscat, Oman, 2007. Sunset is indicated in dark blue. Following the rain the bird seemed to 'reset' its clock, going to roost up to 1 hour later.

Because of my work commitments it was not possible to follow the bird on a regular basis; however, in March 2007 I was able to monitor it almost daily over a two week period. It would typically arrive in the garden some 5–25 min prior to going to roost. One typically gets alerted by this species by its characteristic disyllabic 'tse-huiit' call. It would be foraging in the middle to upper parts of trees (preferably *Acacia*) for insects. In typical manner, it would flick its wings every 1–3 s, while picking insects from underneath leaves, occasionally hovering. In some situations, it would catch insects in flycatcher-like fashion. Following this it would typically preen itself over a period up to 4 min, while occasionally stretching. Eventually it would drop down to its roosting tree. Once there it would go to rest at its usual branch within seconds or a maximum of a minute after arriving in the roost tree. It would then sit motionless, 'inflating' its feathers (Plate 2).

On the evening of 17 March, we experienced heavy rain with a slight drop in temperature which lasted till midday 19 March. During these two days I could not locate the bird. On the evening of the 19th the bird once again turned up, but appeared to have 'reset' its clock: it arrived at its roosting branch 1 h later compared to the nights before the rain. On average it would go to roost 20–25 min later after the rain (Figure 1). This seemed logical given the longer daylight hours too. Prior to the rain it went to roost a mere 1 h 20 min (on average) before sunset. This I interpret as a 'leftover' from winter when sunsets are a lot earlier; at c17.15 h local time.

Only one morning, 14 March 2007, did I monitor it minute-by-minute till it left the roost. Up until 04.47 h it was sitting motionless. From 04.48–05.46 h it occasionally moved its head, looking around. At 05.47 h it stretched a bit before hopping onto another branch where it proceeded stretching its wings and feet. One minute later, at 05.48, it flew up into



Plate 2. Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* at night roost, Muscat, Oman, February 2007. © Kolbjorn Schølberg

the neighboring *Acacia* tree where it started foraging. Given it went to roost at 17.00 h the night before, this suggests a solid 12 h 47 min motionless slumber!

Cramp (1992) referred to a wintering Hume's Warbler in the Netherlands which followed set routes daily within some 1 km². It roosted in a park "at 2–3 m in dense growth of holly *Ilex* and *Cotoneaster*; also used 2nd site c500 m away in shrubbery between two blocks of flats." This confirms my observations since clearly my bird had alternative roost sites nearby—not every night did it come to my garden.

The last sighting that season was 30 March. Apart from the present record, in Oman I have previously seen a Hume's Warbler in my garden, 13 January–11 February 2003 and additionally I recorded two individuals at separate locations at the Saiq plateau, Jebel Akhdar, 27 January 2006.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Edwin Lamers for his comments on my initial draft and to my brother Kjetil Schjolberg for the photo in Plate 1.

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First record of Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* in Iraq

R WILLIAMS

Between March and July 2008, the Royal Navy was in command of a coalition of naval vessels patrolling Iraqi territorial waters in the Gulf. I was on board the flagship HMS Chatham, which was stationed for most of the four months in the waters immediately around the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal—located ten miles due south of the Shatt al Arab waterway. I am an experienced sea birder and co-founded the Biscay Dolphin Research Programme (now the charity Marinelife) which conducts monthly line transect surveys of the English channel and bay of Biscay recording cetaceans, elasmobranchs and birds.

I identified and photographed (Plates 1–3) a Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* on 12 May 2008 in Iraqi territorial waters (29° 47.00' N, 048° 48.02' E). This is apparently the first record for the country and has been accepted by the Nature Iraq bird records committee (Salim *et al* 2012).

The bird was sighted at 20.10 h local time, on the starboard beam of HMS Chatham, which was steaming due north at 10 knots, 3000 m due east of the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal. I was not bird watching at the time the bird passed, but was fortunate to get three photos using a Canon Ixus 75 through the back of hand-held 10x magnification binoculars from the fo'c'sle. There was a lot of dust in the atmosphere, consequently a low and diffuse light. The bird passed the ship c100 m off and was seen also by Commander John Wheele. I was immediately aware of the bird's long tail feathers, and classic pale form skua appearance, with a dark upper surface with contrasting pale cheeks and black cap on the head—an obvious Long-tailed Skua although at the time I did not know the significance of the record. I had been endeavouring to photograph all the bird



Plates 1–3. A Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* on 12 May 2008 in Iraqi territorial waters (see text), photographed through 10x binoculars from HMS Chatham. © R Williams

species I was seeing on and around the oil platform (which totalled 75) so I immediately went for the camera. The bird was moving with the ship but seemed to be 'on a mission' so I knew I had little time to get a photo before it became too distant. There were a number of Slender-billed Gulls *Chroicocephalus genei* in the area.

Earlier during the deployment I had watched Arctic Skuas *Stercorarius parasiticus* harassing gulls and terns, spotted mainly from the ship and I recall at least one observation from the east side of the oil platform. When at sea, I was seldom on the upper deck, but I saw them on at least three occasions with some days in between and so assumed they were always out there and did not log them in my notebook. I think all the sightings were in April. They were all pale phase birds, which I have seldom seen, and this is why I took particular pleasure in watching their aerial pursuits. I recall that they were all seen in the same area as the Long-tailed Skua. I expected the 12 May skua to be another Arctic, and this is why the long tail plumes immediately struck me as different.

Long-tailed Skua is a vagrant to Iran (Roselaar & Aliabadian 2009) and Kuwait (three records of singles, Al-Sirhan 2011). There are ten records for the United Arab Emirates (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010).

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Akpetky lakes, Sarykamys lake, Ayakaghytma lake, and their desert surrounds: three new Important Bird Areas in Uzbekistan

ANNA TEN, ROMAN KASHKAROV, GULARA MATEKOVA, ILIA ZHOLDASOVA & MUKHTOR TURAEV

The first steps of the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) programme in Uzbekistan date back to 1996. However, the real inventory of IBAs began in 2005 within the framework of the "Central Asian IBA project". In 2005, the Uzbekistan investigators compiled a list of more than 60 potential IBAs and a programme of field studies was initiated. As a result, 48 IBAs in Uzbekistan were confirmed by the BirdLife International secretariat in 2008. Currently, the Uzbekistan Society for the Protection of Birds (UzSPB) is the main executive agency of the IBA programme in Uzbekistan (Kashkarov *et al* 2008).

Not all potential IBAs were covered by the 2005–2008 studies. Therefore, the main focus of the present project was aimed at filling these gaps. The project was implemented 2010–2011 as part of the conservation leadership programme (CLP, www.conservationleadershipprogramme.org) and save our species programme (SOS, www.sospecies.org). This project was also supported by UzSPB. Field studies in Karakalpakstan were partially supported by the agency of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea of Uzbekistan (IFAS). The main goal of the project was to collect sufficient data to confirm three potential sites as IBAs.

The second important goal of the project was to increase the capacity of students and raise awareness of local communities of the importance of their region. Twenty-three students from five Uzbekistan universities—National University of Uzbekistan, Samarkand, Bukhara and Karakalpak State Universities, Kokand Pedagogical Institute—were involved in training and survey work.

The principle investigators in this project were Anna Ten, UzSPB IBA programme assistant; Oleg Kashkarov, UzSPB public relations assistant; and Nodir Azimov, a member of the *Phasianus* birdwatcher's club and UzSPB member.

The three sites surveyed during 2010–2011 were:

- Akpetky lake system (southern Aral sea region, Karakalpakstan), 15 October–4 November 2010.
- Sarykamys lake (Ustyurt plateau, Karakalpakstan), 15 October–4 November 2010.
- Ayakaghytma lake (southern part of the Kyzylkum desert, Bukhara province), 9–28 April 2011.

Justification for IBA status was prepared based on the results of the surveys and published data. In September 2011 the BirdLife secretariat confirmed the status of the three sites: UZ049 "Akpetky lakes and surrounding Aralkum desert", UZ050 "Sarykamys Lake and surrounding Ustyurt Plateau" and UZ051 "Ayakaghytma Lake and surrounding desert" (Figure 1). Detailed information on each site is presented below.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection and processing

The surveys were conducted according to standard methodologies using point and route counts. The collection and analysis of additional data for completing the IBA data sheets

IBAs in Uzbekistan

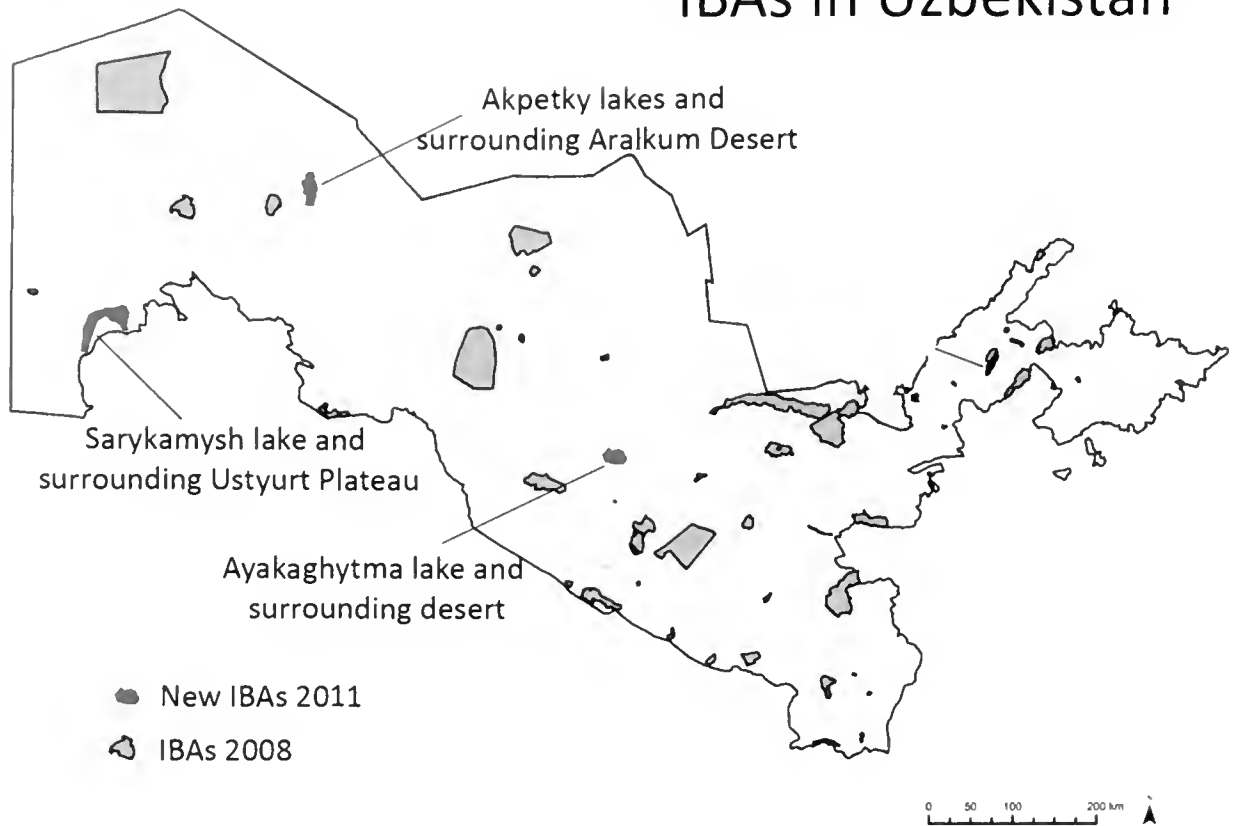


Figure 1. Location of the three new IBAs in Uzbekistan, in red. Existing IBAs are shown in grey.

were carried out by the authors according to the Central Asian IBA project guidelines (Welch & Sklyarenko 2006). The data were then entered into the global IBA-World Bird/Biodiversity Database (www.globalconservation.info).

IBA criteria

IBA identification is based on quantitative ornithological criteria (Welch & Sklyarenko 2006). These criteria confirm that a site is of real importance for the conservation of bird populations at the international level. Criteria at the 'A' (global) level were applied during the implementation of the Central Asian IBA programme, namely:

- A1 Globally threatened species. The site regularly holds significant numbers of globally threatened species, or other species of global conservation concern.
- A3 Biome-restricted assemblages. The site is known or thought to hold a significant component of the group of species whose distributions are largely or wholly confined to one biome.
- A4 Globally important congregations:
 - A4i. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, >1% of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species.
 - A4ii. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, >1% of global population of a congregatory seabird or terrestrial species.
 - A4iii. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, >20 000 waterbirds or >10 000 pairs of seabirds of one or more species.
 - A4iv. The site is known or thought to exceed thresholds set for migratory species at bottleneck sites.

RESULTS

Akpetky lakes and surrounding Aralkum desert (Figure 2, Plates 1 & 2)

IBA ID: 29349, National ID: UZ049

Muynak district, Republic of Karakalpakstan

Coordinates: 43° 39.22' N, 60° 22.41' E

Area: 39 146 ha

Conservation status: unprotected



Plate 1. Lakeside reeds and other vegetation, Akpetky lakes, Uzbekistan, October 2010. © Anna Ten



Plate 2. Aralkum desert, Akpetky lakes, Uzbekistan, October 2010. © Anna Ten

Site description. This lake system was formed on the exposed bed of the southeastern part of the Aral sea, in the vicinity of the former Akpetky archipelago. Now it is surrounded by the Aralkum desert. The Akpetky lake system represents a number of inter-related lakes of which the largest are Ashshykul, Akshoky, Orda, Soraly, Akpetky and Karabes. The lakes are fringed by thick reedbeds up to three m in height. Large thickets of tamarisk *Tamarix* sp and sparse saxaul *Haloxylon* sp woodland grow in the surrounding areas. The waterbodies are of significant importance in terms of fisheries for the region and have been rented out to commercial fishermen. The nearest village, Birdam, is 40 km to the southwest of the lakes.

Birds. The lakes of the Akpetky system and the surrounding Aralkum desert are of great importance for migrating and nesting birds. The main survey period was 16–28 October 2010. Additional data were obtained as a result of short-term field trips conducted by UzSPB 9–17 June 2008 and by Gulara Matekova in 2007 and 2008. In total, 156 bird species were recorded, of which 21 are classified as rare (Table 1)—10 from the IUCN Red List (www.iucnredlist.org) and 14 included in the Uzbekistan Red Data Book (2009).

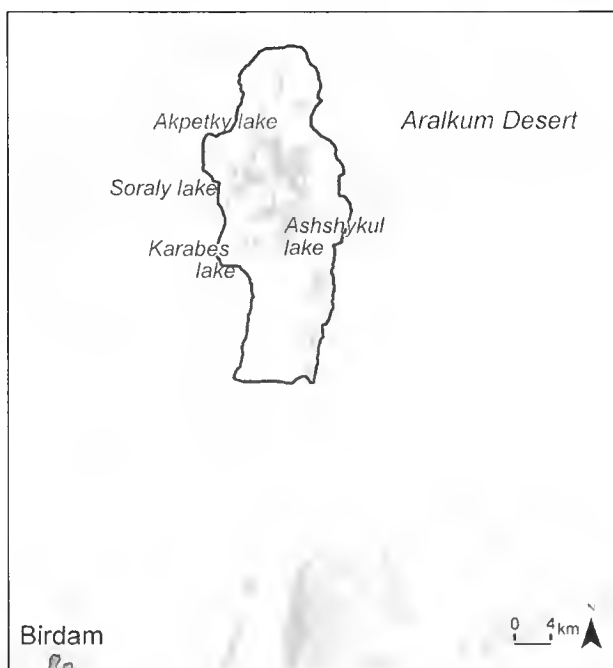


Figure 2. Akpetky lakes and surrounding Aralkum desert IBA, Uzbekistan. Red line denotes boundary.

Table 1. IBA criteria and relevant bird species of the Akpetky lake system and surrounding Aralkum desert, Uzbekistan. Range of numbers eg 60–685 is the minimum and maximum daily count during the survey period.

Key species	Notes	
	Breeding spp	Passage/wintering
A1 Globally threatened species		
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> ^{1,2}		60–685 (2010)
White-headed Duck <i>Oxyura leucacephala</i> ^{1,2}		1–10 (2010)
A3 Biome-restricted species of Eurasian deserts and semi-deserts		
Egyptian Nightjar <i>Caprimulgus aegyptius</i>	1 (2007)	
White-winged Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos leucapterus</i>	3 (2007); common	
Brown-necked Raven <i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	uncommon (2007)	
Sykes's Warbler <i>Iduna rama</i>	1 (2007)	
Asian Desert Warbler <i>Sylvia nana</i>	common (2007)	1 (2010)
Pander's Ground Jay <i>Padaces panderi</i>	uncommon (2007)	
Saxaul Sparrow <i>Passer ammadendri</i>	rare	2–13 (2010)
Desert Finch <i>Rhadaspiza absaleta</i>	nesting	212 (2010)
Red-headed Bunting <i>Emberiza bruniceps</i>	2 (2007, 2008)	
A4i >1% of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species		
Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>		15 000 (2010)
Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		37–360 (2010)
Great White Pelican <i>Pelecanus anacratalus</i> ²	3 (2008)	2–410 (2010)
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> ^{1,2}		60–685 (2010)
A4iii >20 000 waterbirds of one or more species		
waterbirds		26 000 (2010)
Rare species		
Lesser White-fronted Goose <i>Anser erythropus</i> ^{1,2}		2 (2010); rare
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus alar</i> ²	36 (2008)	6–80 (2010); common
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i> ^{1,2}	10 (2008)	1–6 (2010); not numerous
Greater Flamingo <i>Phaenicopterus raseus</i> ²	4 (2008)	
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> ²	17 (2008)	
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i> ²	12 (2008)	
Pygmy Cormorant <i>Micracarba pygmeus</i> ²		1–2 (2010); rare
Short-toed Snake Eagle <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> ²		rare
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macraurus</i> ^{1,2}		1 (October 2010); rare
White-tailed Eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> ²		1–4 (October 2010); rare
Pallas's Fish Eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucaryphus</i> ^{1,2}		rare
Steppe Eagle <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> ²		2 encounters (2010); rare
Eastern Imperial Eagle <i>Aquila heliaca</i> ^{1,2}		2 encounters (2010); rare
Golden Eagle <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i> ²		1–2 (2010)
Little Bustard <i>Tetrax tetrax</i> ^{1,2}		rare
Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i> ¹		1 (2010); rare
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse <i>Pteracles alchata</i> ²		65–7454 (2010); numerous
European Roller <i>Coracias garrulus</i> ¹	nesting	

¹Species listed in the IUCN Red List but not present in numbers to qualify under IBA criterion A1.

²Species listed in the UZ RDB.

The Akpetky lake system lies on the migratory route of both waterfowl and terrestrial bird species and is especially important for the migration of pelicans, ducks, geese and sandgrouse. During two weeks of observation in October 2010 more than 21 000 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*, a Red Data Book of Uzbekistan species, were recorded. Additionally, there were records of Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*, at the northernmost boundary of its distribution in Uzbekistan (Plate 3), and the second Uzbek record of Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*.



Plate 3. Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*, Akpetky lakes, Uzbekistan, October 2010. © Valentin Soldatov

Other animals. Eight fish, one amphibian, four reptile and 17 mammal species are also known from the site. IUCN Red List species are: Central Asian Tortoise *Agrionemys horsfieldii* (globally Vulnerable VU), Goitered Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* (VU) and Marbled Polecat *Vormela peregusna* (VU).

Main threats and problems of conservation. There are no human settlements in the immediate vicinity of Akpetky and the site is only visited seasonally by teams of fishermen. Extensive encroachment of the waterbodies by reeds was noted. Due to its remoteness the site is not used for grazing but every year the site attracts an increasing number of hunters. The biodiversity of the lake system depends completely on water supplied through the Kokdarya and KS-4 canals. Due to its significance for fishing, the optimal solution for the conservation of this IBA is the establishment of an ornithological reserve in which fishing is permitted and hunting prohibited during the main migration periods.

Sarykamysh lake and surrounding Ustyurt plateau (Figure 3, Plates 4 & 5)

IBA ID: 29791, National ID Uz050

Kungrad district, Republic of Karakalpakstan

Coordinates: 42° 12.26' N, 57° 20.85' E

Area: 95 974 ha

Conservation status: unprotected



Plate 4. Sarykamysh lake, Uzbekistan, November 2010. © Anna Ten



Plate 5. Sarykamysh lake, Uzbekistan, November 2010. © Anna Ten

Site description. This IBA is situated 130 km to the southwest of Kungrad and includes a 2 km wide strip of the Uzbekistan part of lake Sarykamys, the cliffs of the eastern escarpment of the Ustyurt plateau and part of the plateau including the Sarja depression. Lake Sarykamys is one of the largest lakes in Central Asia (Middle Asia) formed in the 1960s as the result of the discharge of collector-drainage waters from the lower reaches of the Amudarya river into the Sarykamys depression. The current area of the lake is c4000 km²; the depth is up to 50 m. The northern deep part of the lake (c1000 km²) is situated in Uzbekistan, while the central and southern parts (c3000 km²) are in Turkmenistan. The cliffs of the southeastern Ustyurt stretch along the western and northeastern shores of the lake (Sanin 1991).



Figure 3. Sarykamys lake and surrounding Ustyurt plateau IBA, Uzbekistan. Boundary shown as red line.

Table 2. IBA criteria and relevant bird species of Sarykamys lake and surrounding Ustyurt plateau, Uzbekistan. Range of numbers eg 95–595 is the minimum and maximum daily count during the survey period.

Key species	Notes	
	Breeding spp	Passage/wintering
A1 Globally threatened species		
White-headed Duck <i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>		2 (2010)
Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	2 pairs (2010)	
A4i >1% of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species		
Common Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i>		95–595 (2010)
Rare species		
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i> ²		6–73 (2010); common
Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> ²		2–18 (2010); common
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i> ^{1,2}		2 (2010); rare
Greater Flamingo <i>Phaenicopterus roseus</i> ²	4 (2010)	
Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucoradia</i> ²	1 (2010)	
Great White Pelican <i>Pelecanus anacratalus</i> ²	1 (2010)	
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> ^{1,2}	1–3 (2010)	
White-tailed Eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> ²		2–5 (2010); common
Saker Falcon <i>Falca cherrug</i> ^{1,2}	2 nests (2010)	
Macqueen's Bustard <i>Chlamydatis macqueenii</i> ^{1,2}	1 (2007)	
Little Bustard <i>Tetrax tetrax</i> ^{1,2}		1 (2010); rare
Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i> ¹		1 (2010); rare
Great Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ichthyæetus</i> ²		1 (2010); rare
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles alchata</i> ²	4–5 (2010)	2–17 (2010)

¹Species listed in the IUCN Red List.

²Species listed in the UZ RDB.



Plate 6. Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Ayakaghytma, April 2011. © Valentin Soldatov

The shore vegetation in the northern part of the lake is poorly developed due to a rise in water level. Narrow patches of reeds *Phragmites* sp and reed mace *Typha* sp are found in the shallow parts of the northern and northwestern shore. The eastern shores are completely devoid of vegetation due to the high water level. Saxaul and tamarisk are found along the shore separating the lake from the Ustyurt plateau. The Ustyurt plateau is an elevated flatland ending in escarpments 150–370 m in height. The main vegetation is boyalich *Salsola arbuscula*, biurgun *Anabasis salsa* and in places saxaul. The eastern escarpment of the Ustyurt in the vicinity of the lake is an almost vertical cliff c100 m in height, which descends to the lake from the west and northeast. On Ustyurt, vegetation is very scarce and consists of glasswort *Salicornia* sp, wormwood *Artemisia* sp and sparse saxaul.

The only use of the lake is for fishing and there are seven fish farms leasing nine sites with a total area of 4510 ha. The lake is one of the principle water bodies in Karakalpakstan: its share in the total fish catch of Karakalpakstan constituted 25% and 50% in 2009 and 2010 respectively. The Sarykamysch lakeshore refuge (Nature Reserves of Central Asia and Kazakhstan 2006) was established in the Turkmenistan part of the lake in 1980. In 2008 this part was designated as an IBA (Rustamov *et al* in press).

Birds. Being deep, waterfowl are mainly restricted to the shoreline. The cliffs of the eastern escarpment provide nesting sites for predatory birds, particularly Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (Plate 6) and Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*. Additionally, Common Swift *Apus apus* and Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* also nest. This is the only known nesting site in lowland Uzbekistan for the latter species (Kashkarov 2010). The Ustyurt plateau is the nesting area for many desert species including Macqueen's Bustard *Chlaunydotis macqueenii*, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* and Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus*. The surveys recorded the first Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus* and Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* for the Ustyurt area. In addition to the CLP-SOS survey in 2010, the authors surveyed this site in spring 2007 and summer 2010. In total 108 bird species were recorded of which 16 are classified as rare (Table 2)—eight in IUCN Red List and 14 in the Red Data Book of Uzbekistan.

Other animals. Of 15 fish species found in Sarykamysch lake two species are included in the Uzbekistan Red Data Book: Aral Stickleback *Pungitius platygaster aralensis* and Turkestan Barbel *Barbus capito couucephalus* (Zholdasova *et al* 2009). Ten mammal species have been recorded including Brandt's Hedgehog *Hemiechinus hypomelas* (UZ RDB) and Goitered Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* (VU; UZ RDB).

Main threats and problems of conservation. A serious threat is the change in the water level of Sarykamysk lake in the last ten years, which has resulted in the loss of nesting sites of waterbirds, especially Dalmatian Pelicans *Pelecanus crispus*. A new threat has also emerged recently – the diversion of water from the collectors feeding Sarykamysk lake to fill an artificial lake in Turkmenistan, Altyn Asyr (Turkmen Lake ‘Altyn Asyr’ 2009). This may lead to an increase in salinity and a decline of the fisheries importance of the lake. Monofilament gill nets, which are concentrated in the littoral zone, may cause the death of diving ducks and coots. As there are only fishing teams using the site, they should be considered as the major target group for the development of protection measures for the IBA.

Ayakaghytma lake and surrounding desert (Figure 4, Plate 7)

IBA ID: 29789, National ID UZ051

Gizhduvan district, Bukhara province

Coordinates: 40° 36.86' N, 64° 32.12' E

Area: 32 854 ha

Conservation status: unprotected

Site description. The Ayakaghytma depression is situated in the southern part of the Kyzylkum to the southeast of the Kuldjuktau ridge. It is surrounded by cliffs up to 60 m in height. A significant part of the site consists of saline marshlands (solonchak). The natural borders of the depression are included in the IBA. Ayakaghytma lake formed in the late 1980s as a result of the discharge of collector-drainage waters into the depression. The lake currently covers c11 000 ha. The water level of the lake is unstable and depends on the volume of inflowing water.

The shoreline vegetation is poorly developed and consists mainly of reeds and tamarisk thickets but most of the shoreline is devoid of vegetation. The western and southern parts of the site consist of vast saline marshlands and sandy desert with fixed dunes; the eastern part is clayey-rubble desert. Isolated groups of saxaul and sandy acacia *Ammodendron conollyi* occur throughout. There is a small village, Ayakaghytma, with fifty households, on the shore of the lake. The local population is involved mainly in cattle husbandry and fishing. The lands surrounding the lake are used for grazing. There are seven teams of fishermen on the lake.

Birds. As the lake does not freeze and provides rich feeding, it is very important for passage and wintering waterbirds. The aerial inventory by IWC 10 January 2000 recorded 23 231



Plate 7. Ayakaghytma lake and surrounding cliffs, Uzbekistan, April 2011. © Anna Ten

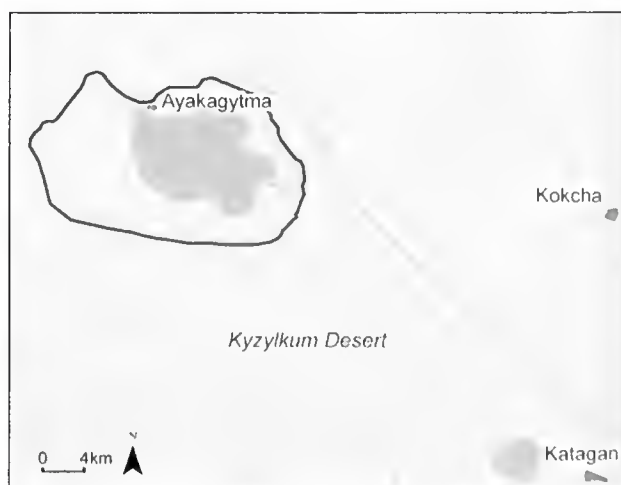


Figure 4. Ayakaghytma lake and surrounding desert IBA, Uzbekistan. Red line denotes boundary.



Plate 8. Eurasian Curlews *Numenius arquata*, Ayakaghytma, April 2011. © Valentin Soldatov

waterfowl (Atadjanov *et al* 2001). The vast saline marshlands stretching along the shores of the lake attract wading birds, particularly Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*, Eurasian Curlew *N. arquata* (Plate 8), Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* and Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*. Breeding species include Western Greylag Goose *Anser a. anser*, Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* and several species of terns, gulls and waders. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* and Caspian Plover *C. asiaticus* nest in the desert.

The loess cliffs fringing the Ayakaghytma depression are excellent places for breeding birds of prey, particularly Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (Plate 6), Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*. During the 2000–2011 studies, 198 bird species were recorded, of which 25 are classified as rare (Table 3): 11 on the IUCN Red List and 23 in the Red Data Book of Uzbekistan.

Other animals. Rare species recorded at the site are Central Asian Tortoise *Agrionemys horsfieldii* (VU; UZ RDB), Desert Monitor *Varanus griseus* (UZ RDB), Goitered Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* (VU; UZ RDB) and Marbled Polecat *Vormela peregusna* (VU).

Main threats and problems of conservation. Fishing is intensive and the adjoining lands are used as pasture. Unsustainable use of these resources has caused a decline of fish stocks and depletion and degradation of pastures and shrubs. The unstable water level adversely affects the state of the entire lake-desert ecosystem. Living standards of the residents of Ayakaghytma village directly depend on the state of water resources in this area. This

Table 3. International IBA criteria and relevant avian species at Ayakaghytma lake and surrounding desert, Uzbekistan. Range of numbers eg 1–130 is the minimum and maximum daily count during the survey period.

Key species	Notes	
	Breeding spp	Passage/wintering
A1 Globally threatened species		
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> ^{1,2}		1–130 (2011); common
White-headed Duck <i>Oxyura leucocephala</i> ^{1,2}		4 (2009); rare
Egyptian Vulture <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> ¹	3–4 pairs (2011); common	
A3 Biome-restricted species of Eurasian deserts and semi-deserts		
Greater Sand Plover <i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	35 (2006)	
Asian Short-toed Lark <i>Calandrella (rufescens) cheleensis</i>	14 (2008)	
Sykes's Warbler <i>Iduna rama</i>	2–14 (2011)	
Asian Desert Warbler <i>Sylvia nana</i>	14 (2008); common	
Scrub Warbler <i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>	1 (2011); rare	
Desert Finch <i>Rhodospiza absoleta</i>	3–90 (2011); common	
A4i >1% of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species		
Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>		4016 (2000)
Western Great Egret <i>Ardea alba</i>		451 (2000)
Pygmy Cormorant <i>Micracarba pygmeus</i> ²	31 (2006)	827 (2000)
Great White Pelican <i>Pelecanus onacrotalus</i> ²		28–482 (2011); common
Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i> ^{1,2}		1–130 (2011); common
A4iii >20 000 waterbirds of one or more species		
waterbirds		23 281 (2000)
Rare species		
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i> ²	36 (2006)	8–16 (2008–2011)
Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> ²		1–2 (2008, 2011)
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i> ^{1,2}	2 (2006)	3 (May 2007), 1 (2011)
Greater Flamingo <i>Phoenicapterus roseus</i> ²		20–115 (2011)
Black Stork <i>Ciconia nigra</i> ²		2 (2008)
Glossy Ibis <i>Plegadis falcinellus</i> ²		30–106 (2007)
Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucoradia</i> ²		2–4 (2008, 2011)
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i> ²	3 (2006)	1–13 (2011)
Western Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> ²		single birds (2007–2011)
Eurasian Griffon Vulture <i>Gyps fulvus</i> ²		1 (2008)
Short-toed Snake Eagle <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> ²		1 (2011)
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macrourus</i> ^{1,2}		2 single encounters (2008, 2011)
Steppe Eagle <i>Aquila nipalensis</i> ²		8 (2008), 6 (2011)
Saker Falcon <i>Falca cherrug</i> ^{1,2}	1 pair (2011); rare	
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falca peregrinus</i> ^{1,2}		1 (2008)
Macqueen's Bustard <i>Chlamydatis macqueenii</i> ^{1,2}	1 (2008); rare	
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limasa limosa</i> ¹		17–36 (2011); common
Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i> ¹		1–93 (2011); common
Black-winged Pratincole <i>Glareala nardmanni</i> ^{1,2}		3 (2007)
Great Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ichthyaetus</i> ²	8 (2006)	2 (2011)

¹Species listed in the IUCN Red List.

²Species listed in the UZ RDB.

makes working with the local community a priority in order to increase their awareness of nature and introduce sustainable land use and fishery practices.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of the CLP-SOS project enabled the identification, and confirmation by BirdLife, of another three IBAs in Uzbekistan, with a total area of 167 974 ha. Information was collected on the distribution and numbers of 16 globally threatened bird species. The IBAs described are of significant importance for the conservation of birds and biodiversity in general. This determines the necessity for further development of nature conservation activities aimed at the sustainable use of natural resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful for assistance with organising and conducting surveys by Edith Koshkin and Geoff Welch (both RSPB), and Reg Thorpe, Adrienne Stratford and David Trotman (RSPB Cymru). Special thanks are extended to Usman Kurganovich Buranov, head of IFAS. We are also grateful to Ernest Khurshut for preparing the maps for this paper, and Valentin Soldatov and Alisher Atakhodjaev for their active participation in project fieldwork and provision of photographs.

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Great Bustard *Otis tarda* in Turkey: adult female with three chicks at forest edge in Kars province

ESRA PER, M UFUK ÖZBEK, M ERKAN UZUNHISARCIKLI & BILGEHAN BILGILI

The Great Bustard *Otis tarda* prefers natural and semi-steppe grassland, pastures, undisturbed cultivated areas and open countryside. The species avoids forests and steep or rocky terrains. Places with a good view of the surrounding area appear essential. Breeding areas can be found from sea level up to 3000 m asl. Afforestation restricts breeding areas and causes loss of habitat (Kollar 1996). In eastern Anatolia the species nests mainly in agricultural landscapes with a high diversity of crops (Gürkan *et al* 2003). It avoids areas with high levels of annual rainfall and very dry areas. However, habitat requirements of the species in Turkey are not precisely known (Özbağdatlı *et al* 2004).

The most recent estimate of the global population of the Great Bustard is 43 500–51 200 individuals (Palacin & Alonso 2008). The Turkish population was estimated at 764–1250 individuals (Kılıç & Eken 2004), representing 2–3% of the global population (Palacin & Alonso 2008). There appear to be two Turkish subpopulations—one centred in central Anatolia and the other in east and southeast Anatolia. A more recent assessment (Karakaş & Akarsu 2009) estimated the Turkish breeding population as 200–300 pairs at most. The



Plate 1. Adult female Great Bustard *Otis tarda*, forest edge, Kars province, Turkey. © Ufuk Özbeke



Plate 2. Adult female Great Bustard *Otis tarda* and one chick, forest edge, Kars province, Turkey. © Ufuk Özbek



Plate 3. Two Great Bustard *Otis tarda* chicks, forest edge, Kars province, Turkey. © Ufuk Özbek

Great Bustard is considered Vulnerable (VU) both in Turkey and globally according to IUCN criteria (www.birdlife.org).

The majority of the breeding population of the Great Bustard in Turkey is found in eastern Anatolia, principally Ağrı (Patnos plain), Ardahan (southwest of Ardahan), Bitlis (Korkut, Güroymak, Ahlat, Nazik/Ovakışla, Yarımada village), Muş (Bulanık, Sultanlı village, Malazgirt plain, Kotanlı village, TİGEM farm), Erzurum (Karasu plain) and Van (Göldüzü: Arin lake) (Karakaş & Akarsu 2009). The highest density is located in Muş, Bitlis and north of lake Van.

The Great Bustard was recorded in Kars province, eastern Anatolia, for the first time 15 June 2011 when an adult male was observed and photographed by Emrah Çoban. In our study in Kars province, we carried out a survey 9 July 2011 when one adult female Great Bustard with three chicks was observed and photographed at a forest edge by MUÖ (Plates 1–3). The dominant vegetation in the area where the birds were seen is open Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* forest at an altitude of c2300–2350 m asl. Other plant species identified there were *Cruciata taurica*, *Alyssum* sp, *Lotus corniculatus*, *Papaver triuifolium*, *Trifolium pretense*, *Pilosella piloselloides*, *Anthemis triumfettii*, *Helichrysum arauarium*, *Cardaria draba* and *Hieracium* sp.

The presence of an adult Great Bustard apparently using the edge of a Scots Pine forest as a feeding area for its chicks seems a remarkable observation. Presumably the adult had bred in surrounding grassland/agricultural areas. A comprehensive investigation is required to assess the status and ecology of Great Bustards in this province.

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Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* consumes a Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis* at migration stopover site in southern Israel

KAMEN P RUSKOV

Shrikes (Laniidae) are well known for their habits of preying on and impaling small birds, lizards, insects and small mammals (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Harris & Franklin 2000). A number of bird species are recorded as prey of the Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* "... notably and perhaps exclusively exhausted migrants" (Cramp & Perrins 1993). Eilat, Israel, is located at the head of the gulf of Aqaba where the Negev desert reaches the sea. A bird park, containing local plant species, is located on the northeast edge of the city and serves as a refuelling station for many passerine migrants en route from Africa to Eurasia, including Masked Shrikes (Yosef 1998). Graceful Warblers *Prinia gracilis* are present in the area year-round (Cramp & Perrins 1993, Shirihai 1996).

At 05.25 h on 20 April 2001 I saw a Masked Shrike feeding on a Graceful Warbler in a 6–8 m high tree in the bird park just 5 m from the ringing station building. The Graceful Warbler was impaled on a 7 cm long hard leafless twig (not a thorn) on a more or less horizontal branch 120 cm from the trunk at a height of c175 cm above the ground. The Masked Shrike consumed all the flesh, removing larger feathers. At 05.36 h the Masked Shrike finished eating, moved 35 cm further along the same branch and wiped its bill. Forty seconds later, it moved 70 cm further along the same branch where it spent the next 90 s preening. Apart from a leg and some feathers there were no other remains of the Graceful Warbler after the Masked Shrike had moved away.

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Birding Sites of the OSME Region 8— The birds of the lower Syrian Euphrates

DA MURDOCH & AH AIDEK

Much of eastern Syria consists of open steppes and desert, becoming more arid towards the Iraq border. The river Euphrates flows southeast from the Turkish highlands to join the Tigris in central Iraq (Figure 1); as it passes through northeast Syria it forms a broad and fertile valley in an otherwise barren landscape. For millions of birds that breed in eastern Europe and central Asia, the valley forms a stepping stone across an inhospitable region to the abundance of tropical Africa. For other migrants escaping the harsh winters of central Asia, it is an important wintering refuge. The Euphrates is also at the heart of the Fertile Crescent, one of the first centres of civilisation. As the human population grows, it takes up more and more of the valley's resources. Until 50 years ago, the river regularly flooded to a depth of four metres, destroying the farms along its banks, but from 1968 the valley has been transformed by a series of massive dams, beginning with the al-Furat dam that created lake Assad. Large areas of former floodplain are now fields and people can build and farm without fear of destruction. The population density is high and rapidly increasing.

In spite of its strategic position, the bird fauna of the Syrian Euphrates is little known. For many years access was difficult as it required a long journey across the drylands east of Aleppo to the city of ar-Raqqa. The completion in 1981 of an excellent road from Damascus to Deir ez-Zor via Palmyra transformed the situation, bringing the valley within five hours' easy drive of the capital. An inventory of wildlife areas in the Middle East made

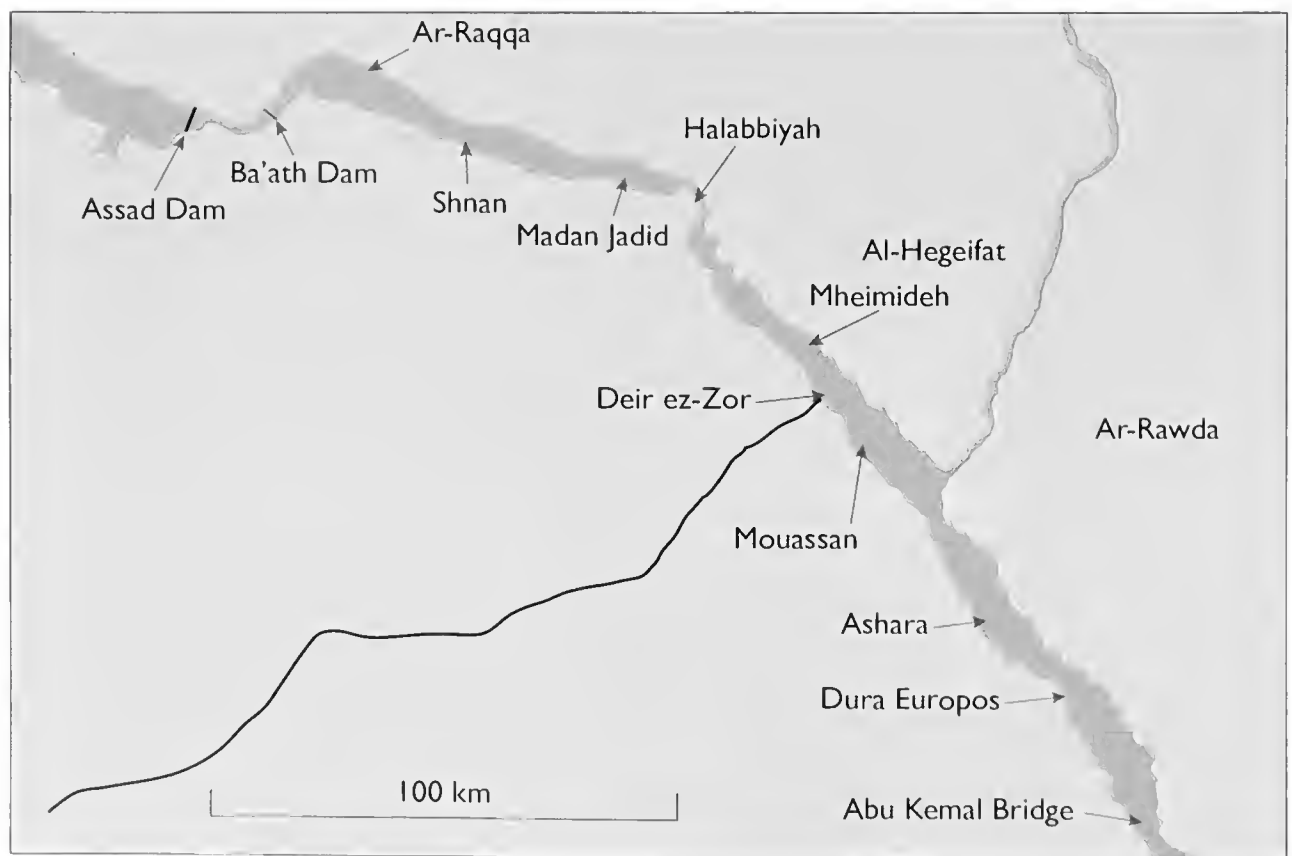


Figure 1. Key sites along the lower Syrian Euphrates.

in the early 1990s (Evans 1994) provides an invaluable summary of the scanty data then available for Syria; it designated 22 Syrian Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The entire Syrian Euphrates valley was included in IBA10 but almost all the data came from three sites, an oxbow at Shumaytiyah*, 20 km upstream from Deir ez-Zor, 'Mayadin Pool', since drained, and the Halabbiyah area. Baumgart *et al* (1995, English translation with update supplement 2003) summarised the Syrian avifauna but their account did not include several species now known to breed commonly along the valley.

In the last ten years, Syria has been recognised as an exciting destination for its birds as well as for its outstanding archaeological sites, and there has been a huge increase in foreign birders and ecotourists. The first records from Mheimideh (Figure 1) are from 1994 (Hofland 1994). The Syrian Wetland Expedition (SWE) of January–February 2004 (Murdoch *et al* 2004, 2005), supported by OSME, collected baseline data on the resident and wintering birds of the Euphrates though coverage was not comprehensive. In preparation for the SWE, Andrews downloaded satellite photographs from the NASA website and used them to locate potentially interesting habitats; he listed the oxbows, giving each a number prefixed by the letter W (Table 1), a numbering system followed in this account. Of the 36 he located, expedition members assessed 18, including all eight major oxbows. Few have been surveyed since; birders often visit the well-known sites, Mheimideh and the suspension bridge at Deir ez-Zor, but many oxbows are still little known or even unvisited. As a result, this account of the valley's birds is based on very limited information, particularly during the breeding season. Its first aim is to present an overview of the available data and to indicate where more observations would be most valuable; the authors hope to stimulate birders to explore some of the many underwatched sites in the valley. The second is to emphasise how much of its wildlife is threatened. The third and most important is to argue that conservation of what remains requires active participation from the people living in the valley, which requires provision of high-quality information about conservation in a language that they can understand; and a precondition for that is substantial support from the international conservation community.

THE PHYSICAL AND MAN-MADE ENVIRONMENT

The Euphrates still flows throughout the lower valley but the upper valley is filled by two massive reservoirs, lakes Tishreen and Assad, and the much smaller lake Ba'ath. This account covers the valley from the dam furthest downstream, the Ba'ath dam, to the river's entry into Iraq, a distance of c320 km, c60% of its length in Syria. The major source of water in the Euphrates is from snow melt in the Turkish mountains; peak flow is at its highest in March–May. Maximal spring flow rates were formerly forty-fold the minimal flow rate in October and water levels were on average 3–4 m higher in spring than in autumn (Evans 1994). The series of dams in the upper valley now controls the annual spring floods. Two major tributaries join this stretch of the river, the Balikh at ar-Raqqa and the Khabur near Busayrah. Much of their water comes from a network of springs greatly depleted by excessive extraction of water for irrigation; their flow is now intermittent. Three dams now control the flow of the Khabur.

The climate is continental, with daily mean temperatures of c40°C in July–August but c7°C in midwinter, with many nights of frost. Gentle evening breezes relieve the summer heat but in winter bitter winds blow off the Turkish mountains. Annual precipitation is c300 mm where the Euphrates enters Syria from Turkey but is only c140 mm at the Iraq

* Sites for which GPS data are available are denoted with an asterisk (*) and the data presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. List of oxbows on the lower Syrian Euphrates (following Andrews in Murdoch *et al* 2005). The list is not exhaustive but includes all oxbows of a reasonable size that are as yet undrained. Column headings 1: code number of oxbow; 2: name given to the oxbow (usually that of the nearest village); 3: oxbow size (S = small, L = large); 4: bank (S = southwest bank, N = northeast bank); 5: co-ordinate (N°); 6: co-ordinate (E°); 7: date(s) in 2004 of visits during SWE; 8: conservation value as assessed during SWE (* little, ** important, *** very important).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
W1	-	L	S	35.84	39.16	17.2	**
W2	Shnan	L	S	35.82	39.23	14.1, 17.2	***
W3	Sabkha	S	S	35.81	39.27	17.2	*
W4	-	S	S	35.81	39.32	-	
W5	-	S	S	35.81	39.37	-	
W6	Jdeida	L	N	35.84	39.40	18.2	**
W7	-	S	S	35.81	39.40	-	
W8	-	S	S	35.78	39.51	-	
W9	-	L	N	35.81	39.56	-	
W10	Madan Jadid	L	S	35.76	39.6	16.2	**
W11	-	L	S	35.75	39.65	16.2	**
W12	-	S	N	35.78	39.67	-	
W13	-	L	N	35.77	39.74	18.2	*
W14	-	S	N	35.76	39.78	18.2	*
W15	al-Kasra	S	N	35.59	39.93	15.1	**
W16	-	S	S	35.50	39.94	-	
W17	Shumaytiyah	S	S	35.46	39.99	-	
W18	Mheimideh	S	N	35.43	40.10	15.1, 17.2, 19.2	***
W19	-	S	N	35.38	40.13	-	
W20	Hatla	S	N	35.34	40.19	17.2	*
W21	-	S	S	35.28	40.20	-	
W22	-	S	N	35.28	40.31	16.1	**
W23	Mohassan	S	S	35.24	40.30	19.2	*
W24	-	S	S	35.15	40.38	-	
W25	-	S	S	35.13	40.40	-	
W26	-	S	N	35.03	40.50	-	
W27	-	S	N	35.00	40.53	18.2	*
W28	Ashara	L	S	34.90	40.55	20.2	**
W29	-	S	S	34.80	40.64	-	
W30	Abu Hammam	S	N	34.80	40.68	16.1, 20.2	**
W31 / W32	Gharanij	S	N	34.80	40.74	16.1, 20.2	**
W33	-	S	S	34.61	40.88	-	
W34	-	S	N	34.63	40.95	-	
W35	-	S	S	34.57	40.90	-	
W36	-	S	N	34.56	40.95	-	

border. The valley lies 80–200 m below the surrounding plains and is usually c10–12 km in width, narrowing to 1–2 km at the Halabbiyah ‘gorge’. It is characterised by many large oxbows up to 4 km across; some have been drained but many still have substantial areas of open water and reedbed. There are many villages, mostly on the lower slopes of

the valley. The major population centre above the Halabbiyah gorge is the ancient city of ar-Raqqa*, c170 km east of Aleppo, the only location in the upper valley with hotels catering for foreign tourists. Below Halabbiyah, the valley is initially similar, but near the Iraq border it becomes noticeably hotter with a very high population density. Deir ez-Zor* is the major city of the lower valley and one of the largest in Syria; a relatively modern city with a pleasant, relaxed feel, it lies along the river with several suburbs on islands. Its name is often abbreviated to 'Deir', the Arabic for 'monastery'. It has several hotels; the Ziad hotel*, 15 minutes' walk from the suspension bridge, is much used by birders and strongly recommended.

The main access roads run from Aleppo, a dour 90 km journey of little ornithological interest east to the valley at Maskaneh, and the stunningly beautiful 460 km drive across the *badia* (arid lands) from Damascus to Deir ez-Zor, which can be full of birds on migration. The valley roads are not as fast as most Syrian highways, particularly on the northeast side and downstream from Deir ez-Zor; they pass through endless villages where the going can be very slow. A new road planned to run above the southern edge of the valley will greatly reduce journey times.

VEGETATION

The flora is mainly of Indo-Turanian origin with Mediterranean and Saharo-Sindian influences (Evans 1994). The increasing aridity as the Euphrates flows through Syria determines the vegetation that the ecosystem can support (Mouterde 1984). The other major contributing factor is human activity. The valley was once thick with forests of Euphrates Poplar *Populus euphratica*, willows *Salix* spp and tamarisk *Tamarix* spp (Aidek 2010) but all natural woodland has long disappeared. Many islands fringed by Common Reed *Phragmites australis* and Common Bulrush *Typha latifolia* have formed as a result of the river's declining flow; these islands, known locally as *hawaeij*, are characteristic of the valley and one of its most important habitats (Plate 1). Two common shrubs on the *hawaeij* are the desert-thorn *Lycium depressum* (Solanaceae) and the herbaceous perennial *Glycyrrhiza glabra* (Fabaceae); the roots of *G. glabra* are of medicinal value and the source of liquorice. Common grasses along the river include the canary grass *Phalaris minor*, the couch grass *Cynodon dactylon* and Slender Wild Oat *Avena barbata* (Poaceae). Eastern Groundsel *Senecio vernalis* (Asteraceae) is a poisonous annual of medicinal value.



Plate 1. Islet (a *hawaeij*) in river Euphrates, Abo Hardoub, 80 km east of Deir ez-Zor, Syria, 8 November 2009. © Ahmad Aidek

The badia bordering the valley has long suffered from severe overgrazing. Vast areas of northeast Syria have been converted to intensive irrigated cultivation and few areas of reasonably intact steppe remain. The following have high grazing value: perennial subshrubs including White Wormwood *Artemisia herba-alba* and Redstem Wormwood *Artemisia scoparia*, the saltwort *Salsola vermiculata* and the saltbush *Atriplex leucoclada*, the salsify *Scorzonera papposa* and grasses such as *Schismus arabicus*, Wall Barley *Hordeum murinum*, Mediterranean Hair Grass *Rostraria cristata* and the wiregrass *Aristida plumosa* (Poaceae), *Haloxylon salicornicum* (Chenopodiaceae) and *Arnebia decumbens* (Boraginaceae). Some plants such as the annual wall-rocket *Diplotaxis harra* (Brassicaceae), *Phlomis syriaca* (Lamiaceae) and Wild Mignonette *Reseda lutea* (Resedaceae) have little or no grazing value and are indicators of degraded habitat; others such as Harmal *Peganum harmala* (Zygophyllaceae), the germander *Teucrium prinosum* (Lamiaceae) and the daisy *Gymnarrhena micrantha* (Asteraceae) are poisonous. Other perennials and subshrubs include the yarrows *Achillea fragrantissima* and *Achillea santolina*, the thistle *Carduus anstralis*, the burdock *Cousinia wesheni*, Rough Cocklebur *Xanthium strumarium* and the knapweed *Centaurea virgata* (Asteraceae) and the rockrose *Helianthemum ledifolium* (Cistaceae).

After good rains, the spring is characterised by flushes of flowers, at their best in April, which may include the lilies *Ixiolirion tataricum* and *Ixiolirion montanum* (Ixioliriaceae), the stock *Malcolmia crenulata*, *Alyssum linifolium*, and several species of milkvetch *Astragalus* (Fabaceae), species of storksbill *Erodium* (Geraniaceae), the pheasant's-eye *Adonis dentata* (Ranunculaceae), the rupturewort *Herniaria hemistemon* (Caryophyllaceae), Eurasian Heliotrope *Heliotropium europaeum* (Boraginaceae), the bullwort *Ammi majus*, the 'giant fennel' *Ferula blanchetii* and the thorow-wax *Bupleurum lancifolium* (Apiaceae). Ruderals include Corn Poppy *Papaver rhoeas* (Papaveraceae) and the annual aromatic mayweed *Matricaria aurea* (Asteraceae). Areas of sabkha may support the grasses *Aeluropus lagopoides* and *Aeluropus littoralis* (Poaceae), *Aizoon hispanicum* (Aizoaceae) and Sharp Rush *Juncus acutus* (Juncaceae). The needle grass *Stipa damascena* (Poaceae) and the horehound *Ballota undulata* (Lamiaceae) are found in rocky areas.

NON-AVIAN VERTEBRATES

Syria possessed a rich mammal fauna into historical times but little remains after millennia of overhunting and habitat destruction. Assyrian reliefs show the king hunting Asian Lions *Panthera leo persica* in a fertile landscape; Lion and the Anatolian Leopard *Panthera pardus tulliana* are extinct in Syria. Caracal *Lynx Caracal caracal* is endangered but Wolves *Canis lupus* and Syrian Striped Hyenas *Hyaena hyaena syriaca* still survive in low numbers. Smaller predators of the badia include Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes* (common and widespread), Rüppell's Foxes *Vulpes rueppellii* (scarce) and Sand Cats *Felis margarita* (widespread south of the Euphrates but very rare to its north). There are still a few Jungle Cats *Felis chaus* and Otters *Lutra lutra* along the river. The most successful remaining predator is Golden Jackal *Canis aureus*; it is still common and easy to see, foraging round human settlements at night. Of the herbivores, the steppes held Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, Sand Gazelles *Gazella subgutturosa* and Syrian Wild Asses *Equus hemionus hemippus*, even into Ottoman times; all are gone and the last is now globally extinct. Overgrazing and habitat degradation have greatly diminished numbers of the smaller herbivores such as jerboas *Jaculus* spp and Cape Hare *Lepus capensis*, with major effects on populations of predators. Indian Crested Porcupines *Hystrix indica* still survive in the arid mountains south of the valley and Long-eared Hedgehogs *Hemiechinus auritus* are commonly seen at night by the roadside. Eurasian Wild Boars *Sus scrofa* and Persian Fallow Deer *Dama mesopotamica* once inhabited the valley's forests but are now extinct in Syria; a few Eurasian Badgers *Meles meles* persist along the river and the adjoining badia. Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* was believed



Plate 2. Euphrates Soft-shelled Turtle *Rafetus euphraticus*, al-Qsupy, 65 km upstream of Deir ez-Zor, Syria, 26 July 2009. © Ahmad Aidek

extinct in Syria but in 2008 one was shot on a haweija between Deir and Mayadin; it was videoed and its identification confirmed (AHA). Mongooses are occasionally reported along the valley; the authors have no personal experience but they are most likely to be Grey Mongoose *Ichneumon herpestes*, which is present in Syria's coastal mountains. Syria's mammal fauna is now essentially relict; a few species, mainly scavengers, are doing well but most of the larger species are extinct or need urgent protection.

Reptiles include Striped-necked Terrapin *Mauremys rivulata* and Dice Snake *Natrix tessellata*, both common. The Euphrates Soft-shelled Turtle *Rafetus euphraticus* (Plate 2) is an endangered species limited to the Tigris–Euphrates basin; it is difficult to find but appears to be rare. It is hunted using fishing lines and eaten by local people; the huge reservoirs of the upper valley have presumably fragmented and greatly reduced its range. The Desert Monitor *Varanus griseus* is still widespread in the badia but suffers from persecution and habitat destruction. The Euphrates holds 30 genera and at least 40 species of fish including the cyprinids *Aspius vorax* and *Cyprinion macrostomus*, several species of barbels *Barbus* spp and the catfish *Silurus triostegus* (Beckman 1962, Ferlin 1983, Aidek 2010).

BIRDS

The river itself often holds few birds. Few duck seem to use it for feeding except in the Halabbiyah gorge. In winter there are small numbers of Common Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* and Armenian Gulls *Larus armenicus*; Great Black-headed Gulls *Larus ichthyaetus* are widespread but uncommon. Ten species of gull have been recorded, including even Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* (Kinzelbach 1985). A few raptors drift along it, most commonly Black Kites *Milvus migrans* and Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus*. Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis* are common and conspicuous residents; Common Kingfishers *Alcedo atthis* and Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* winter in small numbers. Spur-winged Lapwings *Vauellus spinosus* are widespread and vocal. Good vantage points from which to enjoy the river are the suspension bridge* at Deir ez-Zor, an excellent and convenient viewpoint (Plate 3); Hassan, on the road from Deir to Mheimideh; the late



Plate 3. Suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor, Syria, 8 September 2009. © Ahmad Aidek



Plate 4. Cliffs below Dura Europos, Syria, 8 March 2010. © Ahmad Aidek

Roman city of Dura Europos*, which has fine views from its cliffs of the lower valley (Plate 4); and the Halabbiyah gorge*, where roads run along both banks. There are several road bridges but as they are usually of military significance, visitors should be accompanied by Syrian nationals who can translate as necessary.

The Euphrates follows an irregular, almost serpentine course, looping down the valley, which has resulted in the formation of large numbers of islands and oxbows. Gravel beds form temporary islets and provide breeding sites for Spur-winged Plover and Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*. More permanent islands, the hawaeij, become heavily wooded and fringed by dense vegetation (Plate 5), making access difficult; as a result, they are key



Plate 5. Aiash island, a *hawaeij*, river Euphrates 10 km upstream from Deir ez-Zor, Syria, 29 October 2009. © Ahmad Aidek

refuges for wildlife but ornithological data are scanty. Hawaeij offer safe feeding for migrants such as Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* and winter hunting grounds for Great Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga* VU (globally Vulnerable). Cetti's Warblers *Cettia cetti* are noisy residents of the riverine undergrowth. Few species appear to use the woods for nesting; exceptions are Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*, which often forms large colonies, and Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*, which can be very common. Common Woodpigeons *Columba palumbus* have been seen displaying but are not yet proven to breed; other possibilities are raptors such as Black Kites and colonies of herons and Rooks *Corvus frugilegus*. More observations from hawaeij would be valuable.

Most of the valley floor is intensively cultivated and often soaked in insecticide. Species that can flourish in the fields are

the common birds of the valley: House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis*, Magpie and Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*. Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* is heavily hunted and wary but still common. During migration, sparrows, shrikes *Lanius* spp and a few warblers pass through but at other seasons interest is limited; Black-headed Buntings *Euperiza melanocephala* are widespread in summer, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters *Merops persicus* are conspicuous on telegraph wires (Plate 6) and a few Ménétries' Warblers *Sylvia mystacea* nest in the more extensive scrubby areas. In winter there are large flocks of Rooks and Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* and smaller numbers of Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*; Western Jackdaws *Corvus monedula* are much scarcer in the lower valley than upstream. Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Song Thrush *Turdus philouelos*, European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* and Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* are widespread winter visitors. 'Chiffchaffs' *Phylloscopus collybita sensu lato* are relatively common; the classification of this group is still debated but it is likely that individuals



Plate 6. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*, Syria, 16 April 2010. © Ahmad Aidek



Plate 7. Gravel pit near Mohassan, Syria, 19 April 2010. © David Murdoch

of the nominate subspecies, *P. collybita abietinus* and possibly of Caucasian Chiffchaff *P. (collybita) loreuzii* overwinter. Wet fields are always worth checking as they can hold a range of passage waders and passerines, for instance Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* and Red-throated Pipits *Anthus cervinus*. Some fields are too salty to cultivate; they are easy to miss, lost in dull expanses of intensive agriculture, but observations from the SWE indicate that they form an important habitat: in winter they can hold large roosts of duck and waders and in summer, if they are relatively undisturbed, breeding waders such as Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*. Villages and farms are scattered through the valley floor and relentlessly spreading; they hold few birds apart from Laughing Doves *Spilopelia senegalensis*, Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* and House Sparrows. The pressure on the land is so intense that gardens are rarely of any size.

Human activity has left behind many derelict gravel pits (Plate 7), often close to the river, with pools of varying depths fringed by reeds. The pits are good for migrant waders and hold wintering passerines such as White Wagtails *Motacilla alba*, pipits (Water *Anthus spinoletta*, Meadow *Anthus pratensis* and a few Red-throated) and occasional Citrine Wagtails *Motacilla citreola*. If they are undisturbed, species such as Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Little Ringed Plover and White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* may breed. The derelict land round pools can develop dense stands of ruderals such as thistles *Carduus* spp that attract a wide range of passerines; they always deserve a thorough search. In winter, there are flocks of Eurasian Skylarks *Alauda arvensis*, Crested Larks *Galerida cristata* and Calandra Larks *Melanocorypha calandra*; several races of Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*; and finches such as Common Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* and Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*. During migration, they may hold Whinchats *Saxicola rubetra* and Tawny Pipits *Anthus campestris*. A wide range of shrikes *Lanius* spp pass through the valley; apart from the common migrants Red-backed *Lanius collurio* and Lesser Grey *Lanius minor*, Steppe Grey *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris* and several forms of Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus sensu lato* have been recorded. The classification of the 'Isabelline Shrike' complex is still unclear, making assessment of

status difficult; the commonest form is Turkestan Shrike *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides*, which has been recorded in most months, but there are several records of Daurian *Lanius (i.) isabellinus*, which may be commonest in winter. Surprisingly, members of the SWE recorded several individuals of the form *Lanius (i.) areuarius*, sometimes called Chinese Shrike, which appears to be a winter visitor in small numbers to the lower valley; there are few other records of this form from the Western Palaearctic. There is an excellent and well illustrated discussion of this contentious subject in Hofland & Saveyn (2005). We would be grateful for all observations of atypical shrikes, which should be fully documented, preferably with photographs.

The most distinctive habitats of the valley are the oxbows (Table 1). Several, brackish and barren of vegetation, are less interesting, though migrant waders probably stop to feed and Kentish Plover and White-tailed Lapwing sometimes breed. Examples are at al-Kasrah* (W15), on the north bank just downstream of the ruins of Zalabbiyah, and oxbow W13*, upstream of the gorge. Most oxbows are freshwater and form one of the most valuable wildlife habitats in Syria. They are typically sickle-shaped, with the deepest water furthest from the river, shelving gradually into the centre of the oxbow, where the dry land is often too salty to cultivate. The ends of the oxbow usually peter out into substantial areas of sedge *Juncus* or huge reedbeds *Arundo* and *Phragmites*, though one end may still connect with the river. Thus an intact oxbow affords a rich mosaic of habitats. The open water holds Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, Eurasian Coots *Fulica atra*, ducks (dabbling and diving), terns and herons. In winter the commonest duck are Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* and Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*, with smaller numbers of Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* and a few Gadwalls *Anas strepera*. Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula* and Common Shelducks *Tadorua tadorua* are scarce and the Eastern Greylag Goose *Anser anser rubirostris* appears now to be a rare visitor. During migration, oxbows are havens for Garganeys *Anas querquedula*, which probably breed in small numbers, though this is not yet proven anywhere in Syria. Several species of terns pass through including Gull-billed *Gelochelidon uilolica*, Whiskered *Chlidonias hybridus* and White-winged Black *Chlidonias leucopterus*, Common *Sterna hirundo* and Little Tern. Nine species of heron, Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* and Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* are regular in small numbers. Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*, Great White Egrets *Egretta alba*, Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* and Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* are present throughout the year, Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* are widespread winter visitors and Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea*, Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides* and Little Bitterns *Ixobrychus minutus* are common in summer. Pygmy Cormorants *Microcarbo pygmaeus* are winter visitors to the lower Syrian Euphrates; there is a large colony on the Turkish Euphrates just north of the border and they are much commoner in the upper valley. Breeding has never been proven for either cormorant or any of the herons, partly because much of the river is inaccessible, mainly because coverage has been poor; secluded backwaters could well hold colonies. Open waters usually suffer from excessive human disturbance, from fishermen and from the many weekend hunters. Thick belts of reeds, sometimes several kilometres long, form around them, habitat for large populations of Bearded Tits *Panurus biarmicus* and warblers such as Great Reed *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*, Reed *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and Savi's *Locustella luscinioides*. Moustached Warblers *Acrocephalus melanopogon minutus* are resident but relatively scarce; perhaps the harsh winters limit their numbers. Purple Gallinules *Porphyrio porphyrio* are widespread but wary, except at Mheimideh. Little Crake *Porzana parva* is a frequent migrant and Water Rails *Rallus aquaticus* are common in winter; both may breed but this is hard to prove. The reedbeds form roost sites for often vast flocks of passage migrants such as hirundines, Spanish Sparrows *Passer hispaniolensis* and Yellow



Plate 8. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*, al-Hjeifat, Syria, 10 March 2009. © Ahmad Aidek

Wagtails. In winter, Corn Buntings *Emberiza calandra* are very common and Reed Buntings *Emberiza schoeniclus* are widespread in smaller numbers; they are hunted by raptors such as Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*. Most importantly, the reeds form safe breeding sites for several species of duck with a temperate breeding range that are now globally endangered. Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca* NT (globally Near Threatened) are widespread residents, favouring small areas of open water deep in the reeds; tens of pairs breed at Mheimideh. Marbled Ducks *Marmaronetta angustirostris* VU are usually easy to see at Mheimideh but have been recorded from a few other locations; they appear to be much scarcer in winter. Small numbers of White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala* EN (globally Endangered) are resident at Mheimideh where a few pairs (probably less than five) breed; they have not yet been recorded elsewhere but visitors are urged to look for them. These species are all wary and estimating their breeding populations is extremely difficult. Late spring/early summer records indicate that small numbers of Northern Shovelers, Mallards and Common Pochards may also nest.

The valley sides are steep and often vertical. They are good habitat for See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, here near the western edge of its range; it occurs as far upstream as lake Assad, the site of the first Syrian records (Macfarlane 1978), but the site that most birders visit is a barren valley* south of the Halabbiyah ruins (Murdoch *et al* 2005). The cliffs offer nest sites for raptors and Northern Ravens *Corvus corax*; they are likely to hold Eagle Owls *Bubo* sp, which could be Eurasian *Bubo bubo* or the recently separated Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, present at Talilah 150 km to the southwest (Serra *et al* 2009). There is a well-known colony of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* on cliffs c15 km upstream from the Halabbiyah gorge and another on the cliffs below Dura Europos (Plate 4).

Much of the badia close to the valley is heavily grazed, grossly degraded and almost birdless; human pressure is intense. Where it is in better condition, common birds include several species of resident lark such as Crested Lark, Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* and



Plate 9. Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*, Mheimideh, Syria, 31 January 2011. © Ahmad Aidek

Temminck's Lark *Eremophila biloplia*, with flocks of wintering Eurasian Skylarks, Calandra Larks and Eurasian Dotterels *Charadrius morinellus*, hunted by Merlins *Falco columbarius* and Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus*. Isabelline Wheatears *Oenanthe isabellina* and Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor* are breeding visitors, with occasional Eurasian Stone-Curlews *Burhinus oedicuennus*. The avifauna of the steppes was formerly much richer; it included Arabian Ostrich *Struthio camelus syriacus*, a subspecies now globally extinct, and Asian Houbara (Macqueen's Bustard) *Chlamydotis uacqueenii* (VU; now almost extinct in Syria). Great Bustards *Otis tarda* VU still winter in small numbers but are heavily persecuted. Even sandgrouse *Pterocles* spp are now scarce; Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* (Plate 8), once a characteristic and abundant resident of the badia, has suffered a massive decline. Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis* was once a common winter visitor from the Turkish plateaux; again, there are very few recent records. All observations of sandgrouse are requested.

For two species, the Euphrates valley is at the western edge of their range, making them of special interest to visiting birders. Until recently Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* (Plate 9) was believed to be endemic to riparian habitats in Iraq. The first Syrian records were from the suspension bridge at Deir ez-Zor in March 2001 (Vandemeutter & Soors 2001) but in January 2004, during the SWE, it was seen within 10 km of the Turkish border and in 2006 it was found breeding in gravel pits north of Birecik in southern Turkey (Donaghy 2006). In Syria it is now a common resident of reedbeds and adjacent luxuriant habitat throughout the valley. Why are there no earlier records of such a conspicuous and vocal bird? It has surely only recently colonised the Birecik area, which has been well-watched for many years; it was not seen at the 2006 breeding site in 2005 and it has since been recorded elsewhere in the area (Kirwan *et al* 2008, Kirwan pers comm). But few birders visited the Syrian Euphrates in the 20th century and it could have been overlooked; as an example, Baumgart *et al* (1995) did not recognise Bearded Tit or Savi's Warbler as Syrian breeding species, yet both are widespread along the Euphrates. It is impossible to be certain but it

Table 2. Co-ordinates of sites other than oxbows (W2 etc = oxbow codes, see Table 1).

	N°	E°
Ar-Raqqa	35.95	39.01
Shnan (W2), point closest to road	35.83	39.22
Shnan (W2), viewpoint over reedbed	35.83	39.24
Shnan (W2), riverside wood	35.860	39.206
Halabbiyah ruins	35.69	39.82
Halabbiyah See-see valley	35.66	39.82
Halabbiyah upstream viewpoint	35.733	39.802
Al-Mustah salt fields	35.75	39.67
'Lesser Kestrel cliffs'	35.72	39.72–39.74
Turn to Halabbiyah west of gorge	35.676	39.676
Turn to Halabbiyah south of gorge	35.627	39.786
Pontoon bridge downstream from Halabbiyah	35.696	39.823
Mheimideh (W18)	35	40
Mheimideh roadside sedges	35.431	40.094
Mheimideh causeway	35.428	40.106
Mheimideh salt fields	35.41	40.13
Viewpoint over river at Hassan	35.35	40.14
Deir ez-Zor, Ziad hotel	35.339	40.142
Deir ez-Zor, suspension bridge	35.34	40.15
Hatla (W20), southwest corner	35.345	40.187
Hatla (W20), north end	35.358	40.202
Turn off main road to oxbow W22	35.280	40.310
Gravel pits at oxbow W22	35.276	40.305
River edge at oxbow W22	35.264	40.312
Turn to Mohassan (W23)	35.213	40.288
Mohassan (W23) centre	35.23	40.30
Mohassan gravel pits	35.21	40.28
Riverside bluffs on N side opposite Mohassan	35.260	40.34
Pools 3km south of Mayadin	34.985	40.460
Dura Europos	34.75	40.73
Abu Kemal bridge	34.46	49.93
Site upstream of Abu Kemal bridge	34.472	40.938
Al-Hjeifat steppes	35.570	40.250
Valley east of Shola	35.21	9.91
Ad-Dukhoul steppes	35.056	39.900
Ar-Rawda	35.336	41.043

seems likely that Iraq Babbler has recently expanded its range up the Syrian Euphrates. The other recent addition is White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus (leucogenys) leucotis*, which for several years was believed to be restricted to the immediate area round Deir ez-Zor; there was a strong suspicion that the population originated from escaped cagebirds. However, it spread northwards in Iraq in the 20th century (Salim *et al* 2012) and is now well established in Azraq, eastern Jordan (Balmer & Murdoch 2009). In 2010, on a day-trip from Deir to the Iraq border, the authors found it at five new locations, so it is probably present throughout the valley downstream from Deir ez-Zor. These observations strongly indicate natural colonisation. It is now widespread in Deir's gardens and has been recorded upstream as far as Mheimideh; it will surely spread further. A third species draws visiting birders: Syria is an important staging area for the Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* CR (globally Critically Endangered), the status of which is of major concern. The Syrian Sociable Lapwing Survey of 2007 (Hofland & Keijl 2008) drew international attention to its passage in February/March through the steppes of northeast Syria. The intensity of hunting in the badia is possibly a major factor in its recent decline. Numbers and sites vary from year to year, dependent on the amount of winter rainfall.

Several scarce raptors hunt the valley. Data from the SWE indicates a substantial wintering population of Great Spotted Eagles VU. Pallid Harrier is a common passage migrant (Murdoch & Betton 2008); in winter it is widespread but scarce throughout the northeast

of Syria, including the valley. Recent observations indicate that Lesser Kestrel may still be a widespread breeding species in the interior (Murdoch & Betton 2008). Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* EN was once a common summer visitor but it has suffered a massive regional decline and is no longer present along the valley.

BIRDING SITES

Birding areas near ar-Raqqa

Between the reservoirs and the Halabbiyah gorge several areas of interesting habitat are worth exploring, including three major and at least seven smaller oxbows, as well as several sections of the river with multiple islands and false channels. The best base is the city of ar-Raqqa*, c25 km downstream from the Ba'ath dam, which is also useful for exploring the extensive wetlands of Ba'ath lake and the almost unknown lake Assad further upstream.

On the south side of the river, a large oxbow* at Shnan (W2), c25 km downstream from ar-Raqqa, deserves better coverage. It has a mosaic of habitats: a large area of open water, a reedbed 5 km long with hidden pools and, closer to the river, a large patch of thorn scrub, abandoned gravel pits and a marshy water course. In the river are three large hawaeij, none yet explored by birders. A network of roads and tracks supplies the fields on either side and gives some access to the river but the area needs a lot of walking; the tracks are very muddy in winter. Close to the main road, the raised sides of a canal give views over one end of the reedbed. In winter 2004, Shnan was excellent for raptors, with eight species including up to four Great Spotted Eagles. The reeds hold Purple Gallinules and Ferruginous Ducks and look good for Marbled Duck. A track on the upstream side ends at an attractive riverside wood (Plate 10) with large numbers of Dead Sea Sparrows. Unfortunately, recent drainage operations may have reduced the oxbow's interest. Further



Plate 10. Riverside wood, Shnan, Syria, 17 May 2006. © David Murdoch

downstream, a very large, almost circular oxbow* at Madan Jadid (W10), 56 km from ar-Raqqa (and 24 km direct from Halabbiyah) abuts directly onto the village; a stretch of open water 6 km long is at one point only 100 m from the main road. The open water suffers from heavy disturbance from fishermen, and probably from weekend hunters. A large expanse of saline flats* and derelict land between the arms of the oxbow looks interesting but is difficult to access; it holds Spur-winged Lapwings and should be good for White-tailed Lapwing. In February 2004 the oxbow held a selection of duck, notably Gadwall. Six km further downstream (and close to the al-Mustah fields, see below), a small oxbow* (W11) explored in February 2004 held a roost with a variety of waders, which may have been using the nearby salt fields to feed. It does not appear to have been visited since.

The oxbows on the north side have been very poorly covered. A large oxbow* (W6) near the village of Jdeidah briefly surveyed in February 2004 held a wide range of species including good numbers of Pygmy Cormorants and a few Ferruginous Ducks. Further downstream, an almost dry oxbow* (W13) was good for pipits including Syria's only record of Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus*. Neither appears to have been visited since. Just downstream from Zalabbiyah there is a saline oxbow* (W15) with little marginal vegetation; it is close to the road and worth a quick stop to look for waders. The Balikh valley running north from ar-Raqqa was included in IBA003 (Evans 1994). Most of the river water is now abstracted for irrigation. Small areas of wetland survived into the 1980s but were rapidly disappearing. It is unlikely that any significant areas of habitat remain but recent coverage has been minimal.

The 'Halabbiyah loop' (Figure 2)

Upstream from Deir ez-Zor, the loop refers to a diversion through the gorge of that name, an easy journey from Deir or an excellent break on the long (and mostly tedious) journey from Deir to Aleppo. It can be accessed from the main Deir–Raqqa road*, c60 km by road from Deir or c80 km from ar-Raqqa, or, for those who have just visited Mheimideh, by continuing upriver and crossing the pontoon bridge* just below the gorge. The road is scenically attractive and combines good birding with a prime archaeological site, the Roman fortress city of Halabbiyah* (Plate 11), in itself a good site for wintering Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*. The road runs through the fortress, along and 10 m above the river, giving excellent views of the Euphrates, which runs fast and direct without marginal vegetation. On the other (northeast) side of the river stand the ruins of its twin fortress, Zalabbiyah, which are easily accessible but not in such good condition; there are good views over the river from Zalabbiyah but the gorge itself is out of sight. In winter, the river is good for Great Black-headed and Armenian Gulls, Great and Pygmy Cormorants, small numbers of Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* and several species of duck, notably Gadwall; the first Smews *Mergellus albellus* for Syria were recorded here in February 2004 (Murdoch *et al* 2005). During migration, small numbers of raptors use the gorge to cross the valley. There are Desert Larks *Ammodramus deserti* and See-see Partridges in these arid hills; See-sees have been seen on a ridge behind Halabbiyah and in the dry valley* 3 km to the south. Above the narrows there is a good viewpoint by the roadside* and a pleasant walk along the river with views over some small Hawaeij. Great Spotted Eagle has been seen here. The road then meanders gently upstream; c15 km by road (9 km direct) from the ruins of Halabbiyah, it runs 30 m from the base of the 'Lesser Kestrel cliffs'* (Plate 12), giving excellent views of a photogenic colony of Lesser Kestrels (probably 30–50 pairs, although they are extremely difficult to count accurately). There are also several pairs of Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus*, Little Owls *Athene noctua*, Eurasian Rollers *Coracias garrulus* NT and Western Jackdaws (here at the southern edge of its breeding range). See-see Partridges have been seen on the cliffs. Further upstream, and c20 km from the ruins

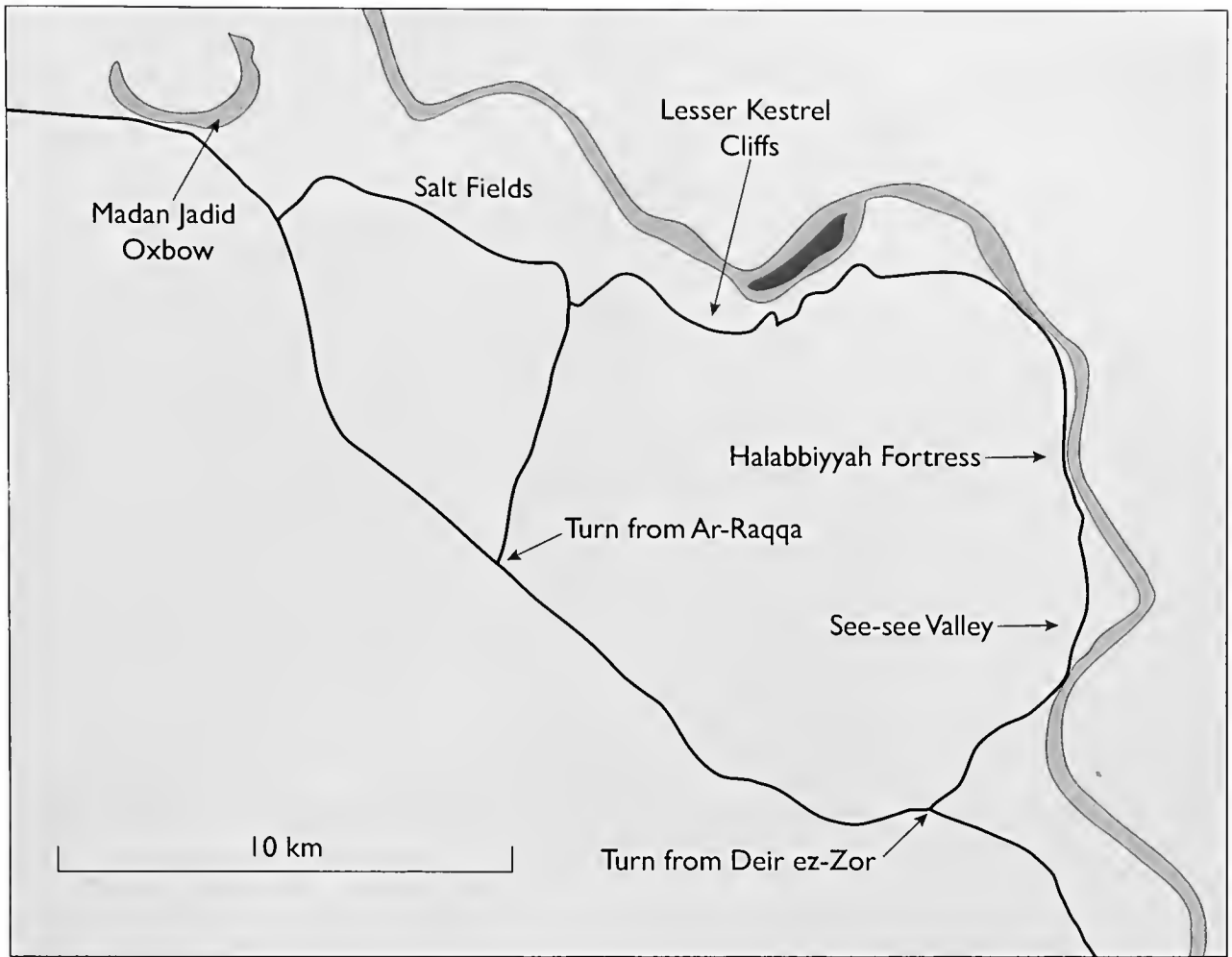


Figure 2. Key sites along the Halabbiyah loop, Syrian Euphrates.



Plate 11. Euphrates with ruins of Halabbiyah beyond, Syria, 20 April 2010. © David Murdoch

(15 km direct), there is a wide expanse of arable land with the 'al-Mustah salt fields'* in its centre (Murdoch *et al* 2005). When they were first visited in winter 2004, the fields held an exceptional range of waders with good numbers of Pied Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* NT and Eurasian Curlews *Numenius arquata*, all scarce in Syria, and smaller numbers of ducks, notably Eurasian Teal. In spring 2006,



Plate 12. 'Lesser Kestrel cliffs' contains a photogenic colony of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni*, Syria, 7 April 2010.
© Ahmad Aidek

a shallow pool with wet fields attracted an excellent variety of passage waders including several Red-necked Phalaropes *Phalaropus lobatus*; several pairs of White-tailed Lapwings were territorial. Recent visits during migration have been very disappointing; human pressure was intense and the fields were totally dry. Further visits in a wet winter would be interesting.

Sites round Deir ez-Zor (Figure 3)

Most birders visiting the valley stay in Deir ez-Zor*, an excellent choice with good birding within walking distance; close to the city there are orchards and thick hedges that leave more space for wildlife, giving a different feel to the rest of the valley. Hotel gardens may hold White-cheeked Bulbuls. Little Swifts *Apus affinis* have been seen several times over the city but is not yet proven to breed; this is a scarce species in Syria and the location of a nesting colony would be of great interest. At Deir, the Euphrates forms two channels with several islands fringed by reeds and mature riverside trees. The attractive suspension bridge* gives fine views of the main channel; this is a good area for Little Crake and Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*. In April 2009, evening visitors watched Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* and Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonorae* flying together (Haraldsson 2009). The city (south) side of the suspension bridge is on the pleasant island of Al-Haweikah, which has several large orchards worth checking; a road runs upstream from the suspension bridge, the corniche giving good views of the main channel. The first Yellow-throated Sparrows *Gymnoris xanthocollis* for Syria were found along this road* in June 2003 (Murdoch 2005), breeding in the tops of telegraph poles. On the further (north) side of the suspension bridge there are some small fields* secluded by dense conifers up to 15 m tall and protected from hunters; unfortunately there is no public access. Long-eared Owls *Asio otus* are regular in winter and Eurasian Scops Owls *Otus scops* occur on passage, though it has not been proven to

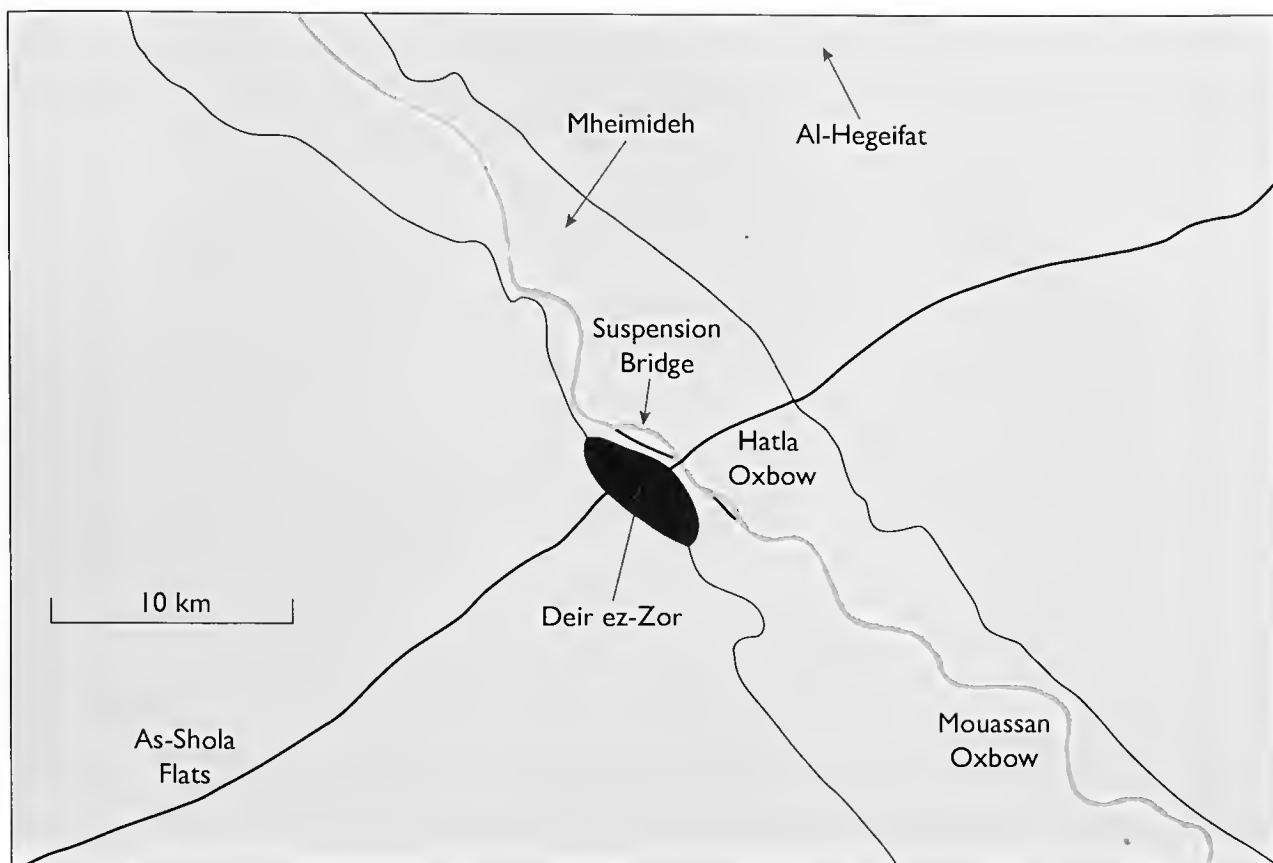


Figure 3. Key sites around Deir ez-Zor, Syria.

breed; the fields also hold Greenfinches *Carduelis chloris* and Common Woodpigeons and there are winter records of Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* and Redwing *Thrdus iliacus*, both rarely reported from Syria. The straight road leading away from the bridge on its north side is a good spot for the owls. Several Yellow-throated Sparrows were singing in the conifers in June 2003 but there have been no reports since, perhaps because few birders visit in midsummer. The city side of the suspension bridge has several pleasant riverside restaurants; an evening drink enjoying the sunset and contemplating the river is highly recommended.

Mheimideh* (W18) (Plate 13) is the best site on the Syrian Euphrates. It is on the north side of the river, 18 km by road from Deir (12 km direct) and 2 km from the river, and is more fully described in a previous account (Murdoch 2007). This relict oxbow, just $c1.5 \times 1.5$ km in size and surrounded on all sides by houses—it is effectively in the middle of an extended village—suffers from extreme disturbance, with massive grazing pressure, harvesting of reeds, tipping of rubbish, trapping and some hunting, yet it is still astonishingly good for birds. Breeding species include Ferruginous, Marbled and White-headed Ducks, as described above; a remarkable number of waders including perhaps five pairs of White-tailed Lapwings, sadly reduced from even five years ago, but still at least ten pairs each of Spur-winged Lapwing and Black-winged Stilt; a substantial colony of Whiskered Terns; Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, which has only rarely been recorded breeding in Syria, and Little Grebe; and a range of reedbed species including Iraq Babbler, Purple Gallinule (common and conspicuous) and Moustached Warbler. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters bred until recently but feral dogs roam the site and have chased them away; White-cheeked Bulbuls have now appeared. The only breeding record of Citrine Wagtail from Syria comes from the sedges* right by the main road (Murdoch & Betton 2008). Nine species of herons have been recorded and visitors can expect at least five; none has been



Plate 13. Mheimideh, the best site on the Syrian Euphrates, 3 February 2009. © Ahmad Aidek

proven to breed though Little Bittern is likely to do so. A few Eurasian Bitterns winter. When it is not too dry, it is excellent for passage waders, most commonly Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, with records of Syrian rarities such as Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni* and Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponicus*. Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* are often present in spring but probably do not stay to breed. Little Crake is a regular migrant and Water Rails are common in winter; late spring records indicate that either species could breed. It is good for raptors, with harriers and Merlins the most regular. Access is excellent; the main road along the northeast side of the river runs along one edge and a causeway* at the far end of the oxbow gives excellent views of the most productive area. It is best to visit at first light as many waterbirds soon disappear into the reeds. But pressure on the land is intense and Mheimideh is in extreme danger of being drained; a proposal was narrowly rejected in 2010 because AHA, working for the Department of Environmental Affairs, was able to lodge objections. Fortunately, some local people, encouraged by foreign birders' visits, are interested in saving the site. There are plans to develop Mheimideh as the flagship nature reserve for the Euphrates valley, for its outstanding educational potential as much as for its birds. The chances of saving Mheimideh will increase if birders use the local shops and let village children look through their optics; a Palmyran conservationist, Adib al-Asaad, has played a key role in enthusing them and they are always interested in meeting foreign visitors. Illustrated wildlife magazines are very popular, so bringing some to give away is appreciated. Publications in Arabic such as *A guide to the biodiversity of the Deir ez-Zor area* (Aidek 2010) and the Syrian field guide (SSCW & BirdLife International 2009) are also welcomed.

Several other sites close to Deir ez-Zor look promising but are rarely visited. On the northeast side of the river, there are some 'salt fields'* four km southeast of Mheimideh, checked during the SWE but apparently not since; in February 2004 they held good numbers of waders, notably White-tailed Lapwing and Temminck's Stint *Calidris*

temminckii. Very close to the Deir–Hasakah highway, a small oxbow at Hatla* (W20) has thick reed beds, a small area of sedges at the southern end (Plate 14), open water with secluded pools and a large expanse of salt-pans at the north end*. Records include Ferruginous Duck, Purple Gallinule, White-tailed Lapwing, Iraq Babbler and Penduline Tit, all likely to breed. This wetland is within 20 minutes' drive of the centre of Deir and could be checked out in two hours. Further down the northeast side, 14 km downstream from the Deir–Hasakah highway, an accessible area of gravel pits* fringed with reeds leads down to an oxbow* (W22) with several narrow channels good for dragonflies; there are several hawaeij in the main channel of the river. A large area of derelict land between the gravel pits and the bluffs along the valley edge is good for wintering stonechats and wheatears and a path leads down the east side of the oxbow to the river*. On the southwest side of the river, Mohassan* (W23) is an oxbow 18 km downstream from Deir with similar habitat to Hatla. Records include Black Francolin, Marbled Duck, Purple Gallinule, White-cheeked Bulbul, Steppe Grey Shrike, a variety of waders along the wetter edges and, in a relict area of tamarisk, Ménétries' Warbler. Almost opposite the turning to Mohassan are some undisturbed gravel pits* good for waders and pipits; White-tailed Lapwings may breed here. Macfarlane made several visits to a relict oxbow at Shumaytiyah* (W17), 20 km upstream of Deir, in the 1970s (Macfarlane 1978), recording Marbled Duck in June 1975; several thousand duck were present in the 1993 International Wildfowl Census (Evans 1994). It was not surveyed in the SWE but exploration in April 2006 (DAM) found little of interest.

The badia adjoining the valley has been neglected by foreign birders. Al-Hjeifat* (Plate 15), an area of steppe c30 km north of Deir, is excellent February–March (and sometimes good in late autumn), holding sandgrouse and a range of larks including Hoopoe Lark, Lesser-Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* and Eurasian Skylark; Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* is common on passage. Sociable Lapwings often stage here February–March and there are reports in March of up to four Asian Houbaras. Small flocks of up to ten Common Cranes *Grus grus* pass through and Stone Curlews may still breed. Raptors in early spring can include Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Eastern



Plate 14. Hatla sedges, close to the Deir–Hasakah highway, Syria, 16 April 2006. © David Murdoch



Plate 15. Al-Hjeifat, an area of steppe c30 km north of Deir, Syria, 27 February 2010. © Ahmad Aidek

Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*, harriers, Common Kestrel and Merlin. Not surprisingly, al-Hjeifat is very popular with hunters. It is of less interest later in the year; in April 2010 it was very dry and almost birdless. The road from Deir to Palmyra crosses a broad valley east of the village of al-Cholla (or Shola)*, c25 km southwest of Deir, which, when it floods, can form an excellent wetland; at its best, when the thick emergent vegetation conceals large numbers of migrant waders and harriers quarter overhead, it is worth at least an hour's visit. Further towards Palmyra, on 1 March 2007, during the Syrian Sociable Lapwing Survey, Hofland & Keijl (2008) recorded a minimum count of 113 Sociable Lapwings CR in steppes near al-Cholla; eight Sociable Lapwings were present here on 29 February 2008. Ad-Dukhoul is a large area of steppe southeast of al-Cholla and c30 km southwest of Deir ez-Zor; it can hold large flocks of sandgrouse, larks and waders including Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* and Dotterels, hunted by the usual range of raptors. More than 200 Sociable Lapwings were present in 2009. Cream-coloured Coursers possibly breed and the area is good for shrikes and wheatears on passage.

The valley from Deir ez-Zor to the Iraq border

This section of the valley, the farthest downstream, has been little covered; the Iraq border and the intense population pressure have probably deterred visitors. However, it has interesting and almost unexplored habitat with potential for major discoveries. The main road on the southwest side of the valley crosses an oxbow 3 km south of the town of Mayadin, not listed by Andrews, with some interesting pools* by the roadside; a reedbed stretches towards the river but is difficult to access. During the 1993 International Waterfowl Census (Evans 1994), 'Mayadin Pool' was a shallow pool of 300 ha that held 2375 waterfowl, but it appears to have been drained. A sizeable oxbow at Ashara* (W28), c65 km from Deir and 20 km from Mayadin, has large reedbeds, extensive salt pans and two long stretches of open water, but disturbance from fishermen from the nearby village is intense. In February 2004 the open ground was good for wintering stonechats and Chinese Shrikes and the reeds held Eurasian Bittern, Purple Gallinule, Little Crake and Moustached

Warbler. Most interestingly, a Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* was well seen, the first record from the valley. This oxbow clearly deserves better coverage, best in the early morning. It is a slow drive down to Abu Kemal, the town by the Iraq border, where a major road bridge* crosses the river. Here, the river looks much more interesting than for many kilometres upstream; the banks are thick with trees but the bridge is too close to the border to stay long. A brief halt in April 2010 turned up a White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, a species rarely recorded from the valley. On the northeast side, immediately upstream of the bridge, the river is easy to reach* and there is good habitat with large palm groves and thick hedges. An early morning visit would be ideal but it is a long journey from Deir and there appear to be no hotels for (Western) foreigners in Abu Kemal. Western birders are strongly advised not to visit unless they are in the company of a Syrian national—and certainly not to stop on the bridge! Further up the northeast side, the road is particularly slow. Some wet fields* between road and river at al-Buseira, 15 km north of Mayadin, held a good variety of passage waders in April 2010. In winter 2004, just downstream from the village of Abu Hammam, members of the SWE found several oxbows* (W30–32) and a large floodplain with reedbeds and saltpans but also scattered housing; several roads crossed the area and hunters were active. Undisturbed areas held small numbers of ducks, waders, and passerines such as wintering Siberian Stonechat. Birders do not appear to have visited since.

This account includes Sabkhat ar-Rawda (Plate 16) because it is best visited from a base in Deir ez-Zor and because the area has exceptional potential to which we wish to draw readers' attention. It is one of a complex of three sabkhas straddling the Iraq/Syrian border; they have rarely been visited and very little is known about their birds. Sabkhat ar-Rawda itself is just inside Syria, c70 km north of the valley and c130 km from Deir. Examination using Google Earth revealed a triangular depression c10 × 15 km in size fed via the al-Ajeaj ravine by 23 springs in Syria and Iraq. Its significance was discovered by chance: a Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* VU satellite-tagged in the Taymyr peninsula of Russia spent December 2006–January 2007 in a previously unknown site in eastern Syria before moving into Iraq. This was the first unequivocal Syrian record. The first expedition to the site, in February 2007 (Kullberg 2007), encountered a huge barren steppic area with



Plate 16. Sabkhat ar-Rawda, near Iraq border, Syria, 8 March 2010. © Ahmad Aidek

minimal human disturbance; the sabkha was dry but had recently held water. Interesting observations included at least 700 Ruddy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea* and a few geese (Greater White-fronted *Anser albifrons* and Greylag *Anser anser*); Kullberg (2007) suggested that the sabkha had probably held large flocks of geese before it dried out. A second expedition, in February 2010 (Eskelin & Timonen 2010), which covered only the northern and eastern shores, recorded several species of waterfowl including at least 500 Greater White-fronted Geese, thousands of Eurasian Teal and at least 25 000 Ruddy Shelducks (one of the largest counts made in the OSME region), over 500 Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus*, hundreds of waders and 33 Gull-billed Terns. Over 30 000 waterfowl remained unidentified, many of which may have been Ruddy Shelduck. On a day's visit in April 2010 the authors found a huge lake with several rocky islands, a vast flock of Greater Flamingos almost lost in the heat haze, a distant mass of unidentifiable duck and a muddy edge lined by thousands of migrant waders. Several species, notably Kentish Plover and Pied Avocet, were settling down to breed. We found no human habitations. Roads petered out several km short of the water but a network of sandy tracks ran round some of the edges. The area is extremely remote and, being so close to the Iraq border, disturbance from hunting would seem unlikely, but, sadly, Eskelin & Timonen (2010) found some shot Ruddy Shelducks. These sabkhas clearly deserve IBA status and a full-scale expedition to explore them properly. A key issue is the frequency with which they hold water: in 2010 the water level was relatively high but in 2011 they were completely dry. Eskelin & Timonen (2010) suggested that several years' observations were needed to document their hydrology and the resulting changes in the bird populations. In wet years they may hold substantial numbers of breeding waders and even colonies of Greater Flamingos. It was extremely challenging to visit in a saloon car; visitors are strongly recommended to take a 4WD vehicle!

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The wildlife of the Euphrates is remarkably little known considering that the valley lies in the Western Palaearctic. This is in part because it has been extensively degraded. None of the original vegetation survives intact and the mammalian fauna is essentially relict; data sets on other faunal groups are rarely available but would probably give a similar picture. Fortunately, the river itself, its islands and reedbeds, are relatively inaccessible to humans; as a result, its birdlife shows a rich and seasonal diversity. But the major reason for the lack of information is the very poor coverage. Most birders visit well-known localities in April, during the height of spring migration; coverage at other times of year is poor (and minimal late May–September). Many potentially interesting oxbows have never been surveyed; coverage during the SWE was not comprehensive. The inaccessibility that offers protection from hunters also makes birding difficult. Few birders venture downstream from Deir ez-Zor; the valley close to the Iraq border might well hold populations of several species known from central Iraq (Salim *et al* 2012). These include Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelims*, a common summer visitor to oases, orchards and tamarisk in central Iraq; Afghan Babbler *Turdoides (candata) luttomi*, a resident of arid areas with thorn scrub; Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius*, a summer visitor to semi-deserts (there are a few old Syrian records); and Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, an inhabitant of open country with scattered trees.

In particular, very little is known about the breeding species. In global terms, the most significant are probably Iraq Babbler, of which there are likely to be hundreds of pairs, and three globally threatened species of duck. Ferruginous Duck NT is easy to find and the valley probably supports an internationally significant population, perhaps in the hundreds of pairs. Marbled VU and White-headed Duck EN have been recorded from

few sites but are more elusive; the valley still holds large, unexplored areas of potential breeding habitat and it is impossible to estimate their numbers. The status of reedbed specialists is particularly unclear. Little Crakes and Water Rails breed in southern Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008) and probably also in Syria; they have been recorded from suitable habitat in the valley in late spring. The warblers of the genus *Acrocephalus* present the greatest challenge of all as identification often needs examination in the hand. There are a few reports of Clamorous Reed Warbler from the valley; it is unknown whether they refer to the resident subspecies *Acrocephalus steutoreus levantinus*, which breeds rarely in southern Syria (Murdoch & Betton 2008, Kennerley & Pearson 2010) or the longer-winged migratory form *A. (steutoreus) brunnesceus*, sometimes given species status as Indian Reed Warbler, a migrant and winter visitor to Iraq (Salim *et al* 2012). Another species that may be overlooked is Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* EN; it is known to breed regularly only in the lower Tigris/Euphrates basin but there is one confirmed Syrian record (Yésou *et al* 2007), photographed in April 2006 at Halabbiyah. *Acrocephalus* warblers consistent with Basra Reed Warbler have been recorded on several occasions, seen briefly or singing (DAM), but confirmation of identification needs photographic and/or sonographic evidence or, ideally, examination in the hand using mist-nets. There are many sites in the valley, for instance Mheimideh and Ashara, suitable for mist-netting. A ringing programme would have many benefits; it would increase knowledge of other elusive birds of the valley *eg* River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* (rarely recorded but probably a regular migrant), and enable use of intrinsic markers such as stable isotope ratios (Coiffait *et al* 2009), for instance to investigate the breeding origin of the wintering 'Chiffchaffs' and 'Isabelline Shrikes'.

So how can foreign birders and ecotourists assist? To make best use of the information available, every Syrian record is being uploaded onto the Middle East Birds database (www.worldbirds.org/middleeast), which is part of the WorldBirds network; the database is freely available to all. Naturalists with records not yet submitted are asked to send them to OSME for inclusion in the database. Individual birders can contribute by exploring little-known sites. They are strongly advised to use the services of local naturalists: partly to make their trip safer and more enjoyable and partly to support the infant Syrian conservation community. Bringing wildlife literature to give away is a good way of reciprocating friendship—Syrians are extraordinarily hospitable. Second-hand optics are much appreciated gifts as few local naturalists can afford to buy them. At a national level, Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul (southeast of Aleppo) have exceptional potential as flagship reserves for Syrian conservation; their protection and development may be the responsibility of national and international organisations but their economic value to local communities will be critical to their success. Birders can contribute by visiting and supporting them financially.

Most of all, there is a pressing need for far more information of educational value in a form that ordinary Syrians can understand. Many Syrians show genuine interest in their wildlife but almost no literature is available in Arabic. An illustrated booklet has begun to address this problem; written by AHA (Aidek 2010), it is available free. It is of critical importance that international conservation organisations support such efforts. In the last generation, there has been a calamitous degradation of the badia's wildlife (Murdoch 2010). Without the support of the people living in the valley, encouraged by educational material and assisted by financial support from conservation organisations, this may happen along the Euphrates and attempts to save its remaining wildlife will be likely to fail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to MH Shehada for advice about the plants of the Euphrates valley. Sami Timonen, Toni Eskelin, Guy Kirwan, Bernhard Herren and Ian Fisher contributed to the ornithological aspects.

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FROM THE RARITIES COMMITTEES

Ian Harrison & Peter Cowan

Sandgrouse's Around the Region feature declares that its records are published for interest only and that their inclusion does not imply acceptance by the records committee of the relevant country. The intention of this new feature 'From the Rarities Committees' is to publish the results of the assessment of rarity records by the rarity/record committees that operate in the OSME region.

The chairman or secretary of a country's records committee will produce a list of rarity records accepted by the committee after publication of the preceding issue of *Sandgrouse*. This listing should be accompanied by representative photos of those rarities if photos exist and are of reasonable quality. Some rarities committees already publish their decisions online—these include Egypt (www.chn-france.org/eorc/), Israel (www.israbirding.com/irdc), Oman (www.birdsoman.com) and the United Arab Emirates (www.uaebirding.com). Despite this online accessibility, we feel that it is still useful to have the news published in *Sandgrouse* thus bringing together all decisions in one feature—which will start in the next issue, *Sandgrouse* 35 1. IH will communicate with record/rarity committees by email, compile and write-up the outcome.

It is hoped that 'From the Rarities Committees' will give country rarity committees a greater prominence and we will publish their contact details and names of members. It should be noted, however, that rarities committees can only function properly and can only keep their country databases and lists up to date if observers submit information promptly on the rare birds that they see. Unlike in Around the Region, the names of finders and initial describers/identifiers of rarities will be published.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Lebanon: a form of bird hunting that is little more than slaughter

In October 2011, I made a short bird watching trip to Lebanon. Timed to take advantage of the autumn migration, I still had happy memories of birding at the Bosphorus and was looking forward to reacquainting myself with the eastern Mediterranean avifauna. My Lebanese friend tried to warn me, but having watched birds over the last 30 years in over 60 different countries I thought I'd 'seen it all'. I have to admit now that I was confronted by an unexpected scenario, a real shock.

If one starts from the principal that hunting involves respecting certain laws, common-sense rules and limits, including a concern for the quality of the environment, then the current situation in Lebanon rarely fits this description, but resembles instead a kind of poaching on a huge scale, carried out in full view, and with the knowledge of all. Field observations made during the ten-day visit in October 2011 confirmed the catastrophic scale of the problem, tolerated by a good-natured attitude of indifference that is virtually endemic in Lebanon.

Lebanon is not lacking in assets as far as its natural heritage is concerned, with its extensive coastline and two mountain ranges running along a northeast/southwest axis—the mount Lebanon range in the west which peaks at over 3000 m, and the Anti-Lebanon range to the east. They are separated by the fertile Bekaa valley. This magnificent little country (one third the size of Belgium) benefits from a rich biodiversity and unique combination and variety of habitats.

Birds in their millions

Lebanon is situated on one of the main migration routes of Palearctic birds en route to, or returning from, their winter quarters in Africa. Probably hundreds of millions pass through these 'killing fields' each year—200 million each autumn through Israel is a recent estimate—and the prospect of sometimes exceptional sightings prompts scores of birders from around the world to scour the birding hotspots of Israel and the gulf of Aqaba. The

numerous trip reports on line (135 presently to be found on www.travellingbirder.com) are proof enough. By contrast, the same on-line databases are virtually devoid of similar reports for Lebanon. Furthermore, the Israel checklist stands at 535 species (www.israbirding.com/checklist), while Lebanon's, just next door, is only 395 (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). The handful of trip reports that are available on the net certainly whet the appetite. The ornithological discoveries made in recent years in the northern semi-desert zone alone are sufficient to provoke interest (Prior & Conroy 2009).

The scale of bird-hunting in Lebanon (Plate 1) is probably one of the main reasons for this. Officially hunting has been banned in Lebanon since 1 January 1995, when a law promoted by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, www.spnl.org), the Environment Ministry and several international bodies, was passed. Applied for a term of 5 years as part of an international agreement involving the European Union and the UN, and linked to substantial financial aid, this radical measure was designed to allow the state to make use of new means to properly manage hunting. At the time, the new law not surprisingly provoked lively reaction, to the extent that the process of reflection on hunting was completely paralysed, producing four renewals of the so-called ban. So it was not until February 2004 that Lebanon finally managed to ratify law 580, officially fixing rules for the activity.

Since then, in order to hunt, a gun licence, an annual hunting permit and a valid insurance certificate are all supposedly necessary. The law also specifies that hunting is forbidden at certain times of the year, as is shooting in towns and villages, public parks, near places of worship and between houses. Moreover, it is officially illegal to make use of any kind of traps or lures to attract targeted prey. Many migratory species are equally exempt from the right to be subject to 'reasonable hunting'. Result: Lebanon officially has only 20 000 legally declared hunters. But we know that between



Plate 1. Whinchat and swallows killed just a few minutes earlier, Lebanon October 2011. © Sonam Depris

20 and 25 million cartridges are sold in the country each year. Spot the discrepancy.

In fact, the law right from the outset has not lacked its shortcomings, the authorities having neither the resources nor the motivation to enforce it. Many local police officers are keen hunters themselves, and helped by a pervasive corruption, any eventual 'problems' are most often resolved by a simple bribe or 'baksheesh'. In reality, the majority of hunters (at least 74% according to an SPNL study) practice their hobby without adhering to any form of regimentation, and, given the discrepancy between the estimates by hunting organisations (60 000) and SPNL (more than 600 000), no-one has any real idea of just how many hunters there really are in Lebanon nowadays. One thing is for sure—in October in most regions of the country, the smallest piece of land is under permanent surveillance and bushes searched as if with a fine toothcomb. A real problem for the birdwatcher or walker alike, hunters are literally everywhere. When asked about it,

many of them affect to be unaware of any laws concerning hunting. The minister of the environment is himself reputed to be a keen hunter. In any case, the majority of hunters don't appear to follow any kind of rules, including those for personal security, judging by the number of people admitted to hospital with shotgun wounds each year.

From Pelican... to Wren

But which species can generate such a craze? Looking from Europe, one imagines the classic species: pigeons, thrushes, woodcock. In reality, in Lebanon, everything is shot at. Illuminating 'bag lists' confirm this—see photos on the Facebook page of the 'Hunting in Lebanon' group (www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100002637363741&ref=ts#!/group.php?gid=4574453566&v=info). Internet forums are also well worth consulting. Thus one can read *eg* "Usually thrushes are hunted between 10 October and 25 March. But we also hunt finches, warblers [Blackcap, Garden, Orphean and Barred] which become fat in

autumn, plus quail, larks, bee-eaters, pipits, flycatchers, redstarts and robins. And we hunt all year round (it's our tradition). Some shoot swallows and bats (when night falls). A lot of people also shoot raptors". One can equally see that many hunters don't really know which species they're killing. For example, a study carried out by SPNL in 2004 showed that only 18% of hunters could differentiate between migratory and resident species. The majority of hunters don't know, or pretend not to know, what impact their unbridled hunting has on the avifauna. Take Abdo, 48 years old, a hunter since he was 9. Sceptical as regards the increasing rarity of species, he believes that killing birds in huge numbers is easily justifiable "because there are thousands of them". Like the hunters we encountered in autumn 2011 in the Ras Baalbek area that were proud to confirm that they hunt the Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* as soon as it appears in late May—a rare species in Lebanon whose breeding in the country was only recently confirmed (Prior & Conroy 2009). Some hunt extensively in spring, in the breeding season. Others affirm that they concentrate on hunting migratory species, believing that in this way their activity has no effect on the local environment. However, there is evidence that resident sedentary species are just as impacted. Thus, according to research carried out by SPNL between 2002 and 2007, in the space of five years the number of birds in Lebanon diminished by 18%. A similar study carried out in the 1990s showed a reduction of 9%. SPNL also believe that 16 threatened species are actually in the process of becoming extinct in Lebanon.

As regards the place of guns in Lebanese society, internet forums tend to confirm that firearms are everyday objects: "every household has at least one hunting rifle" says one correspondent. In addition, cartridges are easily bought everywhere—at around 5 Euros for 25 (12 caliber no.9)—including in mini-markets and superettes. Automatic weapons are also widely available; certain hunters don't hesitate to use them, given the chance eg to shoot at flocks of storks and pelicans. During our field observations in October 2011 we attempted, on several occasions, to count the number of shots per minute but without success as the crackling of firearms

was so intense. The true environmental impact of tons of lead shot falling on the land each year—between 640 and 800 tons is the estimate—is as yet largely unquantified. If the average hunter is not overmuch worried about this, Birdlife International for its part considers that, as do many scientists, the severe lead contamination of certain areas of Lebanese land represents an unexploded health time bomb.

A neighbourhood activity

In Lebanon, hunting is often a neighbourhood activity. It is done in the garden or nearby orchards. The hunter often makes himself comfortable beforehand. Alone, or with friends, one just waits...usually not for long, the flow of birds being virtually continuous. Such is the case with Youssef, past his sixties, who we met in autumn not far from the little village of Aana. As usual, he had parked his car in the shade of the avenue of trees leading from the village. Sat in his plastic garden chair next to his old Toyota, he had organised the open boot/trunk to make for an agreeable day's hunting: on the left, thermos of hot coffee, arak, fig jam, radio and mobile phone; on the right, his 'bag', already an impressive tally considering it was only 10am: twenty-odd Blackcaps, male and females neatly laid out side by side, a dozen or so Redstarts, some Garden Warblers, two House Martins, a Spotted Flycatcher, a Tree Pipit.... "Not long till the finch season" reflected Youssef, for whom hunting is evidently a year-round activity linked to the ebb and flow of various species. Like a lot of hunters, Youssef uses a tape machine with powerful speakers, balanced on top of a pole, to attract the birds. Many hunters use them 24 hours a day. This was particularly noticeable during our visit around Barouk village, and not far from there, below the car park at the entrance to the Chouf nature reserve. Loop tapes, particularly of quail (especially prized), played loudly all night, are then followed by the traditional explosions of gunshot at dawn. The more impatient even hunt with flashlights at night, others make use of various traps and nets regularly checked. In certain strategically rewarding hunting locations, such as the pretty hill in the Qubayat area (in Akkar region, towards the northern frontier

with Syria), with its small fields bordered by hedgerows ideally oriented in a north/south axis, the amount of used cartridges and cartridge boxes per square metre of ground is so dense one cannot discern the true colour of the soil.

Safety seems to be a matter of subjective choice, and no code of conduct seems to be in practice in Lebanon. So, people shoot around houses, and don't hesitate to stop suddenly by the side of the road to try and shoot down a bird of prey spotted from the vehicle just beforehand. Moreover, it seems that there's no age limit for starting to hunt. So, sons are often given their first rifle at around ten years old, the caliber and power varying according to the age of the debutant hunter. All this is considered quite normal. Some even consider that hunting is a component of the rites of passage between childhood and adult life. The son goes hunting with his father. He's proud to carry a gun and to shoot skillfully. Hunting is also a factor in social recognition. And the pride in carrying a shotgun is all the more increased by the size of the bag achieved, photographed and posted on-line or stuck to the window of one's car.

Blackcaps... on skewers

As regards what the hunters do with the masses of birds killed, although many of them are dumped in waste bins or simply left on the ground where they fall, the tradition in autumn is to cook fricassees and kebabs of passerines. As detailed by one hunter in an on-line forum, mid-October is particularly favoured: "The birds arrive in their thousands and every hunter gets hundreds of delicious birds...Bee-eaters and warblers carry significant amounts of fat; they're not bad at all!" Respected sources testify to a related business, including across borders. In normal times, certain sought after species are in fact killed in Syria—where hunting is also supposedly illegal—and re-sold in Lebanon where they are destined for restaurants (on the menu 'fried birds' or 'on skewers': 'miqliyyeh' or 'Asafeer mishwiyyeh'), see Murdoch (2008). Some observers have suggested that the 'troubles' in Syria probably increased the hunting pressure in Lebanon in autumn 2011.

To face up to the hunting lobbies, Birdlife International launched an awareness

campaign to promote 'sustainable' hunting of birds (see www.birdlife.org/action/change/sustainable_hunting/PDFs/EC_LIFE_SHP_0108.pdf). Other concrete initiatives have been developed by local, regional and national organisations. Foremost among these, SPNL promotes various projects, supported by some local bodies. Thus, three 'himas' that serve as migratory 'stop-off' points have been established, thanks to campaigns and international donations: Qoleileh (south of the coastal town of Tyre), Kfar Zabad and Ebel el Saki (Bekaa valley). In these places, it's officially the local authorities and local population that prevent hunters from killing birds and protect nature as they thus gain a benefit through tourism. SPNL organise an annual festival, including various activities aimed at making young people aware of the need to protect birds. In addition, field research and observations have enabled 15 IBAs to be established (www.spnl.org).

Unfortunately, even though some initiatives have been successful, eg the courageous actions of the charity A Rocha Lebanon (www.arocha.org/lb-en/index.html), the small number of sites concerned are more often "little islands of nature targeted by hunters" explained Nizar Hani, scientific coordinator of Shouf Cedars nature reserve (southeast of Beirut). If need be, as we witnessed ourselves at the small wetland of Chamsine/Kfar Zabad (near Aanjar) financed by USAID, people don't hesitate to cut through fences and padlocks into officially protected areas in order to get at their targeted prey.

Setting quotas and rules for the activity

Without a stable government, an honest police force or a greater awareness by the people, the enforcement of the laws is for many observers just a pipedream. Resolutely constructive despite the scale of the task, national and international experts alike call for an eventual effective control of the activity in Lebanon. "Hunting has always existed and it would be counter-productive to ban it" says Dr Ghassan Ramadan-Jaradi, professor of ecology and taxonomy. Driven by the same pragmatic realism, Bassima al Khatib of SPNL suggests "Huntable species must be specified, quotas established, licences awarded and rangers trained".

For the moment, the least that can be said is that such results are still some way off. Some Lebanese demonstrate that they *are* aware of the scale of Lebanon's ecological problems...in order to better justify the continued practising of their favourite sport: "In Lebanon, there are more hunters than birds now because green spaces are disappearing, the forests are being burned, quarries are eating away the mountain sides, and concrete invades the fields and meadows. Environmentalists should speak up against this destruction of our environment...instead of trying to stop us hunting". Naturalists even forwarded the idea a few years ago that the fear of 'bird flu' perhaps offered an opportunity to better protect birds and reduce hunting in Lebanon. Having seen the 'hunting bags' resulting from last autumn's activity in Lebanon, it appears that this kind of fear has little chance of affecting Lebanese attitudes in this area.

This is precisely why I have written this letter. Without naivety, I take this step with the aim of bringing to light this important information, which I hope all will understand

requires tackling urgently. Perhaps this simple gesture will help NGOs and funders of nature conservation bodies and projects to become more aware of the gravity of this unacceptable situation? That is the 'big question'. For my part, I cannot in all conscience just 'sit on my hands'.

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Beuôit Forget
Belgium

Translated from the original French
by Richard Prior

[See *Sandgrouse* 33: 61–63 for two letters concerning the slaughter of wild birds in Kuwait. *The Editor*]

OSME NEWS

Geoff Welch

Sandgrouse 34 (1) editorial

OSME Council wishes to dispel any notion that the editorial in Sandgrouse 34 (1) regarding the expanded area of interest for papers to be considered for publication could be interpreted as OSME 'encroaching' into areas covered by the African Bird Club and Oriental Bird Club. As stated, the sole intention was to make authors aware of an additional 'outlet' for the publication of papers on species, research and conservation issues which are of relevance to those resident in or visiting the OSME region. The editorial was in no way meant to imply that OSME would be expanding any of its other activities such as the provision of grants or the appointment of Country Contacts.

Arrived at last!

The bird skins collection of the Institute of Zoology in Almaty, Kazakhstan, is one of the most important in Central Asia and has played a key role in resolving taxonomic questions surrounding many bird species *eg* unravelling the Turkestan/Daurian Shrike complex, splitting Booted Warbler into two species, separating Pale Martin from Sand Martin, and ongoing studies of the Lesser Whitethroat and Asian Short-toed Lark complexes. Additionally, many of the great names associated with species found in Central Asia have worked at the Institute over the years—Peter Simon Pallas, EA Eversmann, Nikolai Zarudny and NA Severtzov to name but a few. In 1946 over 300 scientists were



Plate 1. OSME Chairman Geoff Welch in the Institute of Zoology, Almaty, with (from left to right) Dr Sergey Sklyarenko, Professor Anatoly Kovshar and Dr Anatoly Levin, after inspecting some of the specimen boxes, March 2012. © Geoff & Hilary Welch

employed in the zoological section of the Institute, today there are less than 10 many of whom are working in a voluntary capacity. The skins collection is in a particularly poor condition with no suitable storage facilities. Therefore when the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK, announced that it had a large number of wooden specimen boxes it needed to dispose of, OSME offered to coordinate an international effort to transport the boxes to Almaty. A partnership was established between OSME, the Natural History Museum, the British Ornithologists' Club, the American Natural History Museum (Frank Chapman Memorial Fund) and a group of Swedish ornithologists led by Lars Svensson who together raised the funds required to cover the packing and transport costs. After numerous technical and bureaucratic delays, the boxes finally arrived in Almaty in early 2012 where they were warmly welcomed by staff at the Institute—see Plate 1. The major

task of transferring the specimens to the boxes is now underway. This international effort has enabled a start to be made on safeguarding this unique resource for use by current and future generations of researchers, both from Central Asia and around the world.

Conservation and Research Fund update

In February 2012, Dr Christine Booth, a lecturer at Oxford University, took over as chair of the Conservation and Research Fund (CRF) sub-committee. Christine is currently reviewing the grant application guidelines to develop a standardised format which will help ensure that future applications provide all of the information required by the CRF for assessing applications quickly and objectively. The other members of the CRF sub-committee remain the same—Richard Porter, Michael Brombacher, Vasil Ananian and Rob Sheldon.

NEWS & INFORMATION

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

GEORGIA

Batumi Bird Festival

To celebrate the 5th Batumi Raptor Count, a festival will be held on 19–23 September 2012. During the full four-day programme there will be daily guided excursions in small groups; visits to birding hotspots in the region and interesting lectures by leading raptor specialists (Dr Keith Bildstein, Alejandro Onrubia, Erwin van Maanen, Andrea Corso). The festival can be easily reached from Batumi airport. For further information visit www.batumiraptorcount.org

IRAQ

Joint UK and Iraq team set to work on major new conservation initiative in Iraq

Thanks to a £300 000 grant from Defra's Darwin Initiative, a major new three year conservation programme is starting in Iraq. Focusing on the mountainous region of Kurdistan the project will involve experts from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) and BirdLife International, in partnership with Iraqi NGO Nature Iraq. The project will generate new data for conservation and resources for protected area management and environmental education. The team's aim is to make progress in addressing the challenges of conservation resulting from nearly 30 years of scientific isolation.

At present the only internal organisation engaged in conservation work is Nature Iraq. Supported by BirdLife International, since 2005, it has adopted a Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) approach to identifying biodiversity-rich regions. This is not the UK teams' first involvement in Iraq. Both BirdLife and RBGE have been working with Nature Iraq for several years, delivering training to Iraqi scientists. These activities have involved staff, students and personnel

from all major Iraqi organisations with an interest in the environment, including the major universities and ministries in Iraq and the Kurdish autonomous region. This project brings together the foremost British expertise in both Middle Eastern plants and birds to work in partnership with Nature Iraq. It will involve extensive fieldwork in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. One legacy will be interactive identification guides to the biological diversity of Piramagroon (a KBA), including photographic guides which can be downloaded to mobile phones. This technology has been recognised as a particularly appropriate, accessible and user friendly way to disseminate information in the Middle East. (Source: BirdLife International, Migratory Soaring Birds Project)

Threat assessment of Lesser Zaab river

Nabil Musa started a threat assessment of the Lesser Zaab, a tributary of the Tigris, in February 2012. A project partly funded by the Rufford small grant foundation, the aim is to develop action plans for addressing the important problems on the river including fuel spills, municipal sewage works, dams and water extraction.

Nature Iraq uses art to raise environmental awareness

Julius Richard, Zoilo Lobera and Nabil Musa are working to create, produce and deliver a community arts education programme campaigning for the health of the upper Tigris river basin and all Iraq's rivers.

Iraq ministry publishes book on threatened birds

The Iraq ministry of environment has published the first book about the threatened birds of Iraq (in Arabic) as a preliminary step towards a conservation programme for these species.

New management team leads Nature Iraq

Azzam Alwash, Nature Iraq's founder and CEO, and OSME vice-president has resigned from his position. He will serve as president of the organization's board. From January 2012, Jassim Muhammad Al-Assadi, Araz Mustafa Hamarash and Nadheer Abud Fazaa will form the Nature Iraq management team as managing directors. Nadheer Abood Fazaa was appointed as Nature Iraq's CEO.

KAZAKHSTAN

New website for Kazakhstan

Arend Wassink, author of *The Birds of Kazakhstan* (2007) has developed a new website (www.birdsofkazakhstan.com) which he hopes will generate more interest in the birds of Kazakhstan and that will contribute to the protection of Kazakhstan's birdlife. The site will be updated continuously with new data from literature, scientific reports, trip reports *etc* and additional photographs and sound recordings will be added. Contributions in the form of good quality sound recordings (in mp3 format) and photographs of birds, landscapes and habitats (preferably unedited and in the best possible resolution) taken in Kazakhstan are welcomed. For further information contact Arend (email: a.wassink@texel.com).

SYRIA

Death of Syrian ornithologist

We are sad to report that Yousef Ali Alzaoby was killed in his home town of Dara'a on 10 April. Yousef's intimate knowledge of the Yarmouk valley and Harrah regions of southern Syria was invaluable to ornithological research of the region. He was a life-long birdwatcher and acted as a guide and advisor to numerous researchers and birders visiting Syria. He was a much valued member of the Global Owl Project team and contributed valuable information on distribution and breeding biology of owls.

OTHER NEWS & INFORMATION

First international gathering of Middle East NGOs marks a new era for nature conservation in Iraq

The first ever gathering of international civil society organisations for nature in post-Saddam Iraq has taken place in Sulaimaniya, Iraqi Kurdistan, hosted by BirdLife partner Nature Iraq. The event, the tenth annual meeting of BirdLife's Middle Eastern partnership, drew representatives from the most active nature conservation organisations in the region. BirdLife International is the largest partnership of national civil society organisations in the region with representatives in Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

Nature Iraq's CEO, Nadheer Abood commented, "We are at a crucial turning point where we can shape the country's nature conservation agenda and conserve the amazing natural heritage of our country for the benefit of nature and people alike". BirdLife International CEO Dr Marco Lambertini said, "We are very excited to have Nature Iraq as BirdLife Partner and we are deeply impressed by the dedication, professionalism, knowledge base and conservation achievements of this young and extremely dynamic organisation. We are very proud that the tenth BirdLife Middle East partnership meeting was the first ever meeting of an international nature conservation organisation to take place in Iraq. It is a great recognition of Nature Iraq's efforts and dedication and testimony of how civil society is fast developing in Iraq. The development of civil society organisations like Nature Iraq brings real hope to our quest for a future where nature is valued and people live sustainably respecting the environment".

Nature Iraq is the country's most influential conservation organisation. Now with a staff of 37, and conservation projects across the country, it is also slowly developing a membership base. Nature Iraq actively supports the capacity of Iraq's institutions to protect the environment,

encourages environmental awareness and stewardship, and promotes the sustainable use of Iraq's natural resources. Among the young NGO's most spectacular achievements is the restoration of a large area of the Mesopotamian marshes, which were drained under Saddam. With the support of BirdLife partnership staff Nature Iraq is also developing a biodiversity database of sites and species, environmental conditions and trends within Iraq, following 30 years of scientific isolation. The BirdLife Middle East meeting discussed the partnership's work to save the region's biodiversity and improve the livelihoods of local people through programmes and initiatives, such as the innovative Hima fund which aims to revive the traditional and sustainable use of natural areas for the benefit of local communities and wildlife. A Hima Fund to support the development of local projects has been recently launched with the support of Sheikha Jawaher Bint Hamad Bin Sahim Al-Thani and Friends of the Environment, the Qatari BirdLife affiliate organisation. (Source: BirdLife International)

World Migratory Bird Day

On 12–13 May, the BirdLife International UNDP/GEF Migratory Soaring Birds project celebrated World Migratory Bird Day 2012. The events took place, under the umbrella of the Migratory Soaring Birds project, in Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Palestine, Sudan and Syria and involved hundreds of participants from the hunting, energy, waste management, agriculture and tourism sectors as well as local communities. This year's theme was "Migratory Birds and people together through time" and was intended to raise awareness and emphasise the cultural, economic and environmental connection with migratory birds throughout history.

The economic benefits of supporting the world's migratory bird species was one of the key themes of the celebrations. There is a growing trend among bird tour operators to practice sustainable and socially responsible ecotourism, while relying on local goods and services or supporting local conservation projects. Indeed, the UNEP Green Economy report shows that global spending on all areas

of ecotourism is increasing by about six times the industry-wide rate of growth. A survey by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service puts the annual economic value generated by bird watchers (or 'birders') and other wildlife watchers at around US\$ 32 billion per year in the United States alone. This amount corresponds to the GDP of Costa Rica, which, coincidentally, is a popular destination for US birders. (Source: BirdLife International)

Phoenix 28

Phoenix 28 was published in January 2012. The issue contains more photos and is 'full colour' for the first time. The contents include reports on Sooty Gulls *Larus hemprichii* breeding at Sir Bu Nair Island, UAE; the status and range expansion of Purple Swamphens *Porphyrio porphyrio* in eastern Saudi Arabia; studies of the Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* in the Barr al Hikman region of Oman; news of recent rarities in Kuwait; the ornithological dividends of the study of Leopards in Yemen; a further successful breeding in 2011 of the Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* at Al Wathba wetland, UAE; the decline of the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* in Saudi Arabia; results of a bird survey in eastern Yemen in January and February 2011; further records in 2011 of Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* breeding in the UAE; breeding seabirds in the northern Red sea, Saudi Arabia; birding at Al Wathba lake, Abu Dhabi; the status of shelducks *Tadorna* spp in the Eastern province, Saudi Arabia; Caspian Terns *Sterna caspia* breeding at Sir Bani Yas and Umm Al Kurkum islands, UAE; a record of a Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* in summer in Saudi Arabia; weavers *Ploceus* spp in the UAE; the wildlife trade in the Taif region of Saudi Arabia; bird observations at three protected areas, northwest Saudi Arabia, May 2011; notes on recent changes in the avifauna of the Liwa oasis, Abu Dhabi, UAE; a Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* survey in western Saudi Arabia in January 2011 and the breeding of Socotra Cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* at Umm Qasar island, UAE over three breeding cycles, 2009/10 to 2011/12. Copies of this issue can be purchased for £5 (includes postage). For further information

and payment methods please contact Mike Jennings (email: ArabianBirds@yahoo.com). For a single payment of £25 (€35/US\$45) subscribers are sent the next five issues (28–32). Mike welcomes contributions of articles, photos and other material for *Phoenix*.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Wintering/migrating Black-tailed Godwits in the OSME region

Information is required for the AEWA single species action plan for the Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*. The objective of the action plan is to improve habitat conditions for this species throughout the flyway. The initial target group are policy makers and other people responsible for bird conservation in each of the countries that are visited by Black-tailed Godwits during their annual cycle. Most policy makers know very little about when godwits are in their country and what areas and sites they use. Furthermore, although we know the phenology of the western flyway population (Netherlands–Guinea-Bissau and vice versa) even ornithologists have poor understanding of the phenology of the eastern flyway population (Russia–sub-Saharan Africa and vice versa). Information from

bird surveys in habitats that seem suitable to the Black-tailed Godwit (zero counts are also important in this respect) is required. Using these data, a number of maps showing when godwits are in which countries and which sites they use will be produced. These will provide a good starting point for taking action on the ground. For further information contact Diedert Spijkerboer (email: diedert.spijkerboer@wur.nl).

Bibliography of Owls of the World

Prof Richard J Clark and a small team of researchers are currently undertaking the work of updating the Working Bibliography of Owls of the World (Clark *et al* 1978). This is an enormous task, involving collecting and collating thousands of owl related citations from all regions of the world. Also, as the ultimate aim is to produce and publish the completed work both in hard copy and digitally, they are also collecting pdf copies of articles corresponding to the citations. If anybody can supply owl related citations and/or owl related articles concerning any countries in the OSME region, please contact Alan Sieradzki (email: naturalistuk@aol.com).

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AROUND THE REGION

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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 refer to 2012 unless stated otherwise.

Records and photographs for *Sandgrouse* 35 (1) should be sent by 15 December 2012 to atr@osme.org.

AFGHANISTAN

Our correspondent at Camp Bastion has supplied a useful number of reports of residents and migrants with a sighting of **Shikra** *Accipiter badins* on 5 Apr and notable counts of 200 **Crowned Sandgrouse** *Pterocles coronatus* on 29 Jan and 51 **European Rollers** *Coracias garrulus* on 2 May. There was also an **Oriental Skylark** *Alanda gulgnla* 11 Mar and a **Mountain Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus (collybita) sindianus* 3 Apr. Expected migrants were a **Paddyfield Warbler** *Acrocephalus agricola* 25 Mar and a **Booted Warbler** *Iduna caligata* 17 Mar whilst of interest was a **Hume's Whitethroat** *Sylvia (cnrruca) althaea* on 3 Apr. The first passage **Variable Wheatear** *Oenanthe picata* was noted 3 Mar and a **Hume's Wheatear** *Oenanthe albonigra* 3 Apr. An **Oriental Magpie Robin** *Copsychus saularis* recorded 3 Apr will be the first record for Afghanistan if formally accepted. Three **Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes githaginens* were seen 19 Mar and there were single **Rustic Buntings** *Emberiza rustica* 24 Feb and 1 Mar.

AZERBAIJAN

Migrant **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were noted through Besh Barmag this spring with one north 31 Mar and three north 16 May whilst three small parties of one–four **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius*, totalling 12 birds, were noted there late March/early April and a **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* 18 Apr. A particularly heavy passage of 630 **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola norduanni* through Besh Barmag occurred on just one evening, 18 Apr, while a vagrant **Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperborens* was noted 27 Apr. **Arctic Skuas** *Stercorarius parasiticus* were often seen passing north offshore over the Caspian sea at Besh Barmag but a surprise

was the discovery of eight dead birds on the beach there 19 May.

The first **Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus nitidus* of the spring was trapped at Besh Barmag 10 Apr while two **Olive-tree Warblers** *Hippolais olivetorum* seen in the Batabat region of the Nakhchivan enclave 22 May was the first occurrence of this species for Azerbaijan. A **Hume's Whitethroat** *Sylvia (cnrruca) althaea* in the mountains in this same area 25 May was also of interest. A **White-headed Wagtail** *Motacilla (flava) leucocephala* at Besh Barmag 12 Apr was the first record of this form for the country. Family parties of up to ten **Desert Finches** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* in the Batabat region on 20 May appear to be the first proof of breeding of this species in the country. Two **Pine Buntings** *Emberiza leucocephalos* were at Besh Barmag 31 Mar.

BAHRAIN

A **Red-wattled Lapwing** *Vanellus indicus* at Ras Jubour 5 Feb was the sixth record while also notable were two **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* at Hamalah farm, Manama, 2 Feb. Up to 60 **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelims* remained at Jasra until at least 24 Mar. A **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* was ringed on the Alba marshes 20 Jan, the first record for the island.

CYPRUS

Two juvenile **Mute Swans** *Cygnus olor* at Clapsides marsh 19–23 Jan were the tenth occurrence for Cyprus with the second **Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis* at Gulseren pond, Famagusta, 3 May. **Northern Gannets** *Morus bassanus* are less than annual so of note were singles off Kermia beach, Agia Napa, 16 Mar and cape Drepanum 19 Apr. There were single **Baillon's Crakes** *Porzana pusilla* at

Polis reedbeds 14 Apr and Xeros Potamos pools 20–24 Apr and there was a stronger than usual spring passage of 400 **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* through the Akrotiri peninsula 13–24 Mar.

Other notable sightings included the second **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* for Cyprus at Akrotiri gravel pits 23–24 Mar, the ninth **White-tailed Lapwing** *V. leucurus* since 2000 at Paralimni lake 18–22 Apr and the largest ever flock of 27 **Greater Sand Plovers** *Charadrius leschenaultii* at Mandria beach 11 Mar. Single **Caspian Plovers** *C. asiaticus* at Paralimni lake 14–26 Apr and at Spiros pool, Larnaca, 25 Apr were notable as were single **Eurasian Dotterels** *Charadrius morinellus* at Akrotiri gravel pits 3 Apr and at Larnaca desalination fields 5 May. The 19th and 20th records of **Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* were at Xeros Potamos 2 May and Spiros pool 12 May respectively and there was a **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* at Spiros pool 17 May. High numbers of **Broad-billed Sandpipers** *Limicola falcinellus* and **Red-necked Phalaropes** *Phalaropus lobatus* were seen this spring with eight of the former on Spiros pool 29 Apr and another eight on Akrotiri salt lake 16–19 May and two of the latter at Paralimni lake 7 Apr and up to five on Akrotiri salt lake 16 Apr–16 May. A **Grey Phalarope** *Phalaropus fulicarius* at Spiros pool 12 May was the fourth record while two **Cream-coloured Coursers** *Cursorius cursor* were at Akrotiri gravel pits 16–24 Mar with another at Spiros pool, Larnaca, 15–17 May. Notable gatherings of **Collared Pratincoles** *Glareola pratincola* included 200 at Akhna dam and 150 at Zakaki Mars 27 Apr with another 100 at Larnaca sewage works 28 Apr while there was a single **Black-winged Pratincole** *G. nordmanni* at Spiros beach 1 May.

Two **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyactus* were noted at Pissouri bay 11 Feb with singles at Larnaca salt lake 21 Jan and at Akrotiri 13–14 Feb whilst the highest recorded number of **Gull-billed Terns** *Gelochelidon nilotica* occurred 23 Mar at Paralimni lake when 100 were counted. A **Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* at Spiros beach is a less than annual occurrence. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* continued their run of sightings, the seventh in the last 20 years when one was at Mandria 22 Apr. A

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis* at Lefka 17 Apr constitutes the ninth record. Single **Pied Kingfishers** *Ceryle rudis* were at Zakaki marsh 30 Jan, Agios Trias 7–11 Feb and Akhna dam 21 Feb.

A spring record of **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* at Baths of Aphrodite on 9 Apr (*cf* Israel observations) was the 11th record. There were a few noteworthy records of **Rose-coloured Starlings** *Pastor roseus* with singles at cape Kormakitis 24 Apr, Xeros Potamos 11 May, Gaziveran 16 May and Larnaca sewage works 19 May. A male **White-throated Robin** *Irania gutturalis* at cape Greco 15 Apr was a good record. The 17th–21st records of **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* (all singles) occurred at Akrotiri gravel pits 14–15 Apr, Paphos lighthouse 15 Apr, Mandria 15 Apr, cape Kormakiti 21 Apr and Lady's Mile 22 Apr. Twenty **Rock Sparrows** *Petronia petronia* at Marathounta 1–19 Jan was a good record. The two **Ashy-headed Wagtails** *Motacilla (flava) cinereocapilla* at Spiros pool, Larnaca, 19–21 Feb is the fourth record. There was a **Richard's Pipit** *Anthus richardi* at Paphos lighthouse 4–7 Apr. **Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus* sightings were as follows: one at Pomos 3 Apr, three at cape Greco 21–24 Apr and one at Akrotiri gravel pits 14 May. A **Red-fronted Serin** *Serinus pusillus* at Mavrokolymbos dam 20 Jan is the ninth record. **Western Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza (cineracea) cineracea* is not observed every year so the sighting of a single at Androlikou 21 Apr is noteworthy.

EGYPT

Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* is rarely recorded from the Red sea so one off Hurghada 3 May was notable as was the count of 76 **Yellow-billed Storks** *Mycteria ibis* at Abu Simbel 12 May. A **Goliath Heron** *Ardea goliath* was at the usual site of Hamata mangroves 8 May while 19 **Pink-backed Pelicans** *Pelecanus rufescens* were at Abu Simbel 11 May. **Lammergeiers** *Cypactis barbatus* are only infrequently recorded along the Red sea so of note was one at Al Bahr al Ahmar 14 Mar whilst eight **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Torgos tracheliotus* were at Shelatein 9 May where larger numbers have previously been recorded. A **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* at Sharm el Sheikh 31 Jan was of interest.

There have been few **Macqueen's Bustard** *Chlamydotis macqueenii* records in recent years so one at Samalut, near Minya, 8 Mar was particularly noteworthy. The presence of two **Crab-plovers** *Dromas ardeola* at Hamata mangroves 12 May is a further indication of possible breeding in the area. Confirmation of successful breeding by **Three-banded Plovers** *Charadrius tricollaris* came from Tut Amon fishponds, Aswan, 10 May where two adults and two juveniles were noted; a second pair was at Abu Simbel 13 May. There was a **Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* at El Gouna 15 Apr. A large flock of 19 **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* was counted at Abu Simbel 3 Apr. **African Skimmers** *Rynchops flavirostris* were present on the Nile this winter with seven at Kom Ombo 11 Jan and up to nine at Daraw 14 Jan–21 Feb but only one noted at Abu Simbel, 12 May.

A major discovery was the presence of **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles exustus* at Sandafa, near Minya, 18–23 Mar with a peak count of 120 on 22 Mar, the first records since 1979. Eighty-two **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** *Pterocles lichtensteini* were at Sharm el Sheikh 18 Jan. The two **African Mourning Doves** *Streptopelia decipiens* first recorded at Abu Simbel in 2010 continued to be seen to the end of May 2012. Another good count of **Namaqua Doves** *Oena capensis* was made near Kom Ombo where 54 were present 14 Feb. A **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* was well south of the usual areas, at Crocodile island, Luxor, 3 Feb. 20 **Egyptian Nightjars** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* were counted at Wadi el-Rayan 13 Apr. Further evidence of the spread of the **White-throated Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* south along the Nile was provided by a single at Beni Mazar 31 Mar. A migrant **Daurian Shrike** *Lanius (isabellinus) isabellinus* was at Hurghada 29 Feb. There are fewer than five records of **Oriental Skylark** *Alauda gulgula* for Egypt so the two at Gorgonia Beach hotel near Shams Alam 12–17 Feb and one at El Gouna 27–31 Mar will be subject to formal acceptance. Two **Asian Desert Warblers** *Sylvia (uana) uana* were at Nabq 10 Jan, a known area for previous winter records. Spring records of single **Rose-coloured Starlings** *Pastor roseus* are unusual so one at Samalut 6 May and one at Sandafa 10 May are noteworthy. **Black**

Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas podobe* now seems to be annual along the Red sea with one at Berenice 19 Mar. Four stonechats at Wadi Lahami 6 Apr appeared to be **Byzantine Stonechats** *Saxicola (torquatus) armenicus*. The first sighting of **Palestine Sunbird** *Cinnyris osea* on the African continent involved two at Ain Sukhna 12 Jan. A **Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* was at Aswan 5 Feb and two **Eurasian Siskins** *Carduelis spinus* were well south at Sandafa, near Minya, 27 Mar.

GEORGIA

Two interesting migrants reported this spring were a **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus* at Tsalka on 5 May and a **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* at Dedoplis Tskaro 10 May.

IRAN

The last surviving **Siberian White Crane** *Grus leucogeranus* of the former western population was last seen at the wintering site of Ezbaran on 1 Mar and a survey in the Semnan area of the Alburz mountains in early May found a substantially larger **Black-headed Bunting** *Eumemberiza melanocephala*/**Red-headed Bunting** *E. bruniceps* hybrid zone than previously reported by Jürgen Haffer in "Secondary contact zones of birds in northern Iran" published in 1976.

IRAQ

An adult **Black Kite** *Milvus uigrans* in moult 28 May and 13 Jun at Piramagroon mountain (PM) in Kurdistan is an interesting record for the breeding season. A juvenile **Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus* was observed flying over rocky outcrops near the top of PM 11 Jun (Plate 1) while another on Jebel Shrin 30 May is the first record from this area. There was a strong passage of 215 **Lesser Kestrels** *Falco naumanni* through Haditah, Anbar province, in late April while a **Barbary Falcon** *Falco (peregrinus) pelegrinoides* pair with young were at Hazermerd at the end of May. Four pairs of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* were seen at PM 11 Jun. A **Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco* at Qara Dag on the late date of 27 May indicated probable breeding in this area. A new breeding site of **Little Swift** *Apus affinis* (Plate 2) was found at PM 28 May whilst a pair of **Common Kingfishers** *Alcedo atthis*



Plate 1. Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, 11 June 2012, Piramagroon mountain, Kurdistan, Iraq. © Korsh Ararat



Plate 2. Little Swift *Apus affinis*, Kurdistan, Iraq. © Korsh Ararat

seen carrying food at Chami Rezan 30 May provided proof of nesting. A pair of **Red-backed Shrikes** *Lanius collurio* was found breeding on 10 May at PM (new breeding species record for Iraq). The first breeding for Iraq of **Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor* was noted 8 Jun on Jebel Shrin where one of the two pairs seen was feeding young. A **Desert Lark** *Ammodramus deserti* at PM 2 Jun is the most northerly record for Iraq. Eight pairs of **Plain-leaf Warblers** *Phylloscopus neglectus* were counted 26–29 May at PM while the first confirmed breeding for the country of **Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* was at Chami Razan 28 May with a further six birds noted at Mawat 1 Jun. Single singing **Olive-tree Warblers** *Hippolais olivetorum* were observed at PM (8 May) and in the garden of Sulaimani University (16 May). A good series of sightings of **Semi-collared Flycatchers** *Ficedula semitorquata* involved 11 individuals at two sites in Salah-ad-Din province in early May and there was also a male in the western desert of Anbar at this time. Two breeding colonies of **Desert Finches** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* were found at PM in late May/early June.

ISRAEL

The second Israeli record of **Bean Goose** *Anser fabalis*, present at Kfar Barukh reservoir from 2011, stayed to 4 Feb. The nine **Whooper Swans** *Cygnus cygnus* at Hagoshrim in Hula valley, also from 2011 and Israel's fifth occurrence, stayed to 9 Feb. A female **Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula* was well south at the KM19 sewage ponds, Eilat, 13–18 May. Some notable seabirds included a **Great Shearwater** *Puffinus gravis* off Shikmona, Haifa, on 28 Jan, the 6th record for Israel if accepted, a **European Storm Petrel** *Hydrobates pelagicus* off Ashdod beach 28 Jan, the fifth record for Israel, and a **Swinhoe's Storm Petrel** *Oceanodroma monorhis* reported off Haifa 18 Feb, the 6th or 7th record. Single **Leach's Storm Petrels** *O. leucorhoa* were off Ashdod 2 Feb and Jaffa 23 Jan with a remarkable 40 reported off Jaffa 19 Feb. A **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* off Eilat 2 Jan was joined by a second bird February–May. A surprise was a wintering **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* in the Eilat date plantations 6 Jan–4 Mar with several migrants reported through the Eilat area in May. **Black-**

winged Kites *Elanus caeruleus* nested for the second time in Israel, at Giv'at Koach in the Dan region where a pair with three fledged young was seen 11 May; the first occurrence of breeding was in 2011 at Agamon Hula. Three **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* at Hamadiya in the Jordan valley 8 Jan were followed by two at Ramtaniya reservoir, Golan Heights, 20 Jan and there was a **Purple Swamphen** *Porphyrio porphyrio* at Neot Hakikar 7 Apr. Single **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were at Agamon Hula 24 Mar, at Kfar Menachem 29 Mar–7 April and over Eilat 31 Mar. Of note were single **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* at Kfar Ruppim 23 Jan and Yotvata 22 Feb with a **White-tailed Lapwing** *V. leucurus* in the Bet She'an valley 20 Apr. Two **Caspian Plovers** *Charadrius asiaticus* at Eilat fields 12 Mar were followed by a single at Yotvata 22 Mar and possibly as many as ten more different individuals through the Eilat area to 15 Apr whilst a **Grey Phalarope** *Phalaropus fulicarius* was at Ma'agan Michael 5 Mar. A ringed **Audouin's Gull** *Larus audouinii* at Ashdod 30 Mar originated from Sardinia. A **Swift Tern** *Thalasseus bergii* off Eilat 8 Apr was not unusual but more exceptional was the report of a **South Polar Skua** *Stercorarius maccormicki* off Jaffa 15 Jan, the third record for Israel if accepted.

Migrant **Egyptian Nightjars** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* were at Yotvata 2 Mar and Neot Hakikar 22 Mar with two at the latter site 2 Jun. Single **Daurian Shrikes** *Lanius [isabellinus] isabellinus* were at Kfar Ruppim 23 Jan, Wadi Habesor, Negev, 27 Feb and Nizzana 17 Mar. Two **Red-billed Choughs** *Pyrhacorax pyrrhacorax* on mount Hermon 18 May constituted the second record for Israel. There was a **Dunn's Lark** *Eremalauda dumni* at Yotvata 1 May with a further five at Hameishar 18 May. Three single **Yellow-browed Warblers** *Phylloscopus inornatus* apparently on spring passage (cf Cyprus summary) were at Kfar Adumim 8 Mar, Eilat 28–29 Mar and Haifa University 15 Apr. There were two further records of **Basra Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus griseldis*—singles trapped and ringed at Lahavot Habashan, Hula valley, 23 May and Hula valley ringing station 2 Jun. A little flurry of **Ménétriés's Warblers** *Sylvia mystacea* included singles at Eilat 15 Mar, Hai Bar nature reserve 23

Mar and KM19, near Eilat, 25 Mar. There was a **Rose-coloured Starling** *Pastor roseus* at Shikmona, Haifa, 28 Apr, a **Ring Ouzel** *Turdus torquatus* at Jerusalem bird observatory 11 Apr and single **White-throated Robins** *Irania gutturalis* at Yeroham park 20 Apr and Neot Smadar 28 Apr. A **Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe* was at Neot Smadar sewage works 17 May. An unprecedented passage of 100–150 **Pied Wheatears** *Oenanthe pleschanka* and 100 **Cyprus Wheatears** *O. cyprica* this spring also included **Kurdistan Wheatears** *O. xanthopyrnum* at Ein Gedi 28 Feb and Neve Ativ, mount Hermon, 29 Mar, a 'vittata' form of **Pied Wheatear** at KM20, Eilat, 24–31 Mar, the first for Israel with undocumented reports of two further birds, and finally the sixth record of the black morph of **Eastern Mourning 'Basalt' Wheatear** *Oenanthe lugens* in the Uvda valley 21 Mar. There was a **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* at Neot Smadar 21 Apr, the tenth record for

Israel. There was a strong passage of **Western Cinereous Buntings** *Eumyza (cineracea) cineracea* with one at Ofira park, Eilat, 2 Mar, five at mount Amasa 12 Mar and two at Lotan 20 Mar when also six at Susita. The **Red-headed Bunting** *Eumyza bruniceps* at Bet Kama 18 Apr is potentially the third for Israel.

JORDAN

There were three notable vagrant sightings at the Aqaba bird observatory in January with an **Egyptian Goose** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* on 3 Jan, **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* 11 Jan (Plate 3) and two **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* on 5 Jan. A wintering **European Honey Buzzard** *Peruis apivorus* at Aqaba 10 Feb was also notable. More usual was the **Sooty Gull** *Larus hemprichii* off Aqaba 2 Jan with a mid-winter sighting of two **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis* at Kafrayn reservoir 6 Jan. A **Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* was well south at Madaba 6 Jan and a **Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* was at Aqaba 4 Jan, a regular wintering locality.

KAZAKHSTAN

A late **Goosander** *Mergus merganser* was in Charyn canyon 4 May whilst further north 20 **White-headed Ducks** *Oxyura leucocephala* were on lake Isay, near Khorgalzin, within the main breeding range, on 13 May. There was also a **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* near Khorgalzyn 13 May—this species is not often recorded from this area. An **Upland Buzzard** *Buteo (rufinus) hemilasius* was reported over Charyn canyon 4 May though hybrid **Upland × Long-legged Buzzards** *B. rufinus* have recently been observed in this area. Single **Lesser Sand Plovers** *Charadrius (uongolus) atrifrons* were at Sorbulak 9, 13 and 23 May (different birds) and although still a vagrant, sightings have been almost annual in recent years. Fifty **Alpine Swifts** *Tachymarptis melba* over Charyn canyon 4 May was a good count whilst belated news of a **Pander's Ground Jay** *Podoces panderi* at Kyzylkumy, near Shimkent, 17 Mar 2011 shows that the species is still present in this area. A **Pied Stonechat** *Saxicola caprata* at Fetisovo, north Caspian sea, 21 May was north of the usual areas whilst the **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* at Mangistau, Fetisovo, 24 Apr is probably not that unusual near the



Plate 3. Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, 11 January 2012, Aqaba bird observatory, Jordan. © Feras Rahahleh

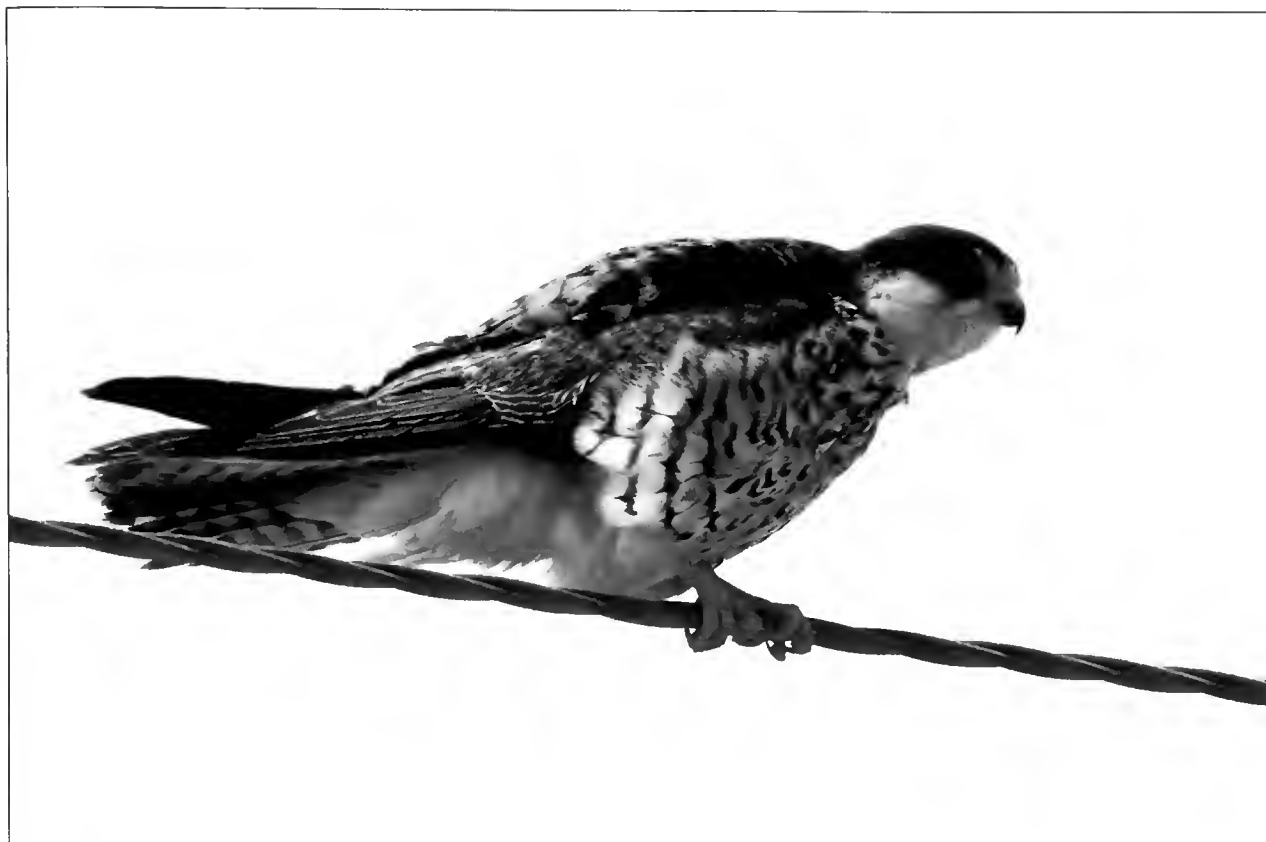


Plate 4. Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*, 13 May 2012, Jahra East outfall, Kuwait. © Pekka Fågel

Caspian although probably under reported. Further singles of **East Siberian Wagtails** *Motacilla (alba) ocularis* were at Konshengal 5 May and Sorbulak 26 May adding to the 20 or so previous sightings whilst a late **Long-tailed Rosefinch** *Uragus sibiricus* was at Prudhoz, near Chilik, 22 Mar. A rarely recorded **Red-fronted Rosefinch** *Carpodacus puniceus* was at the Almaty cosmos station on 1 Jan though it is known to breed in the area. A **Pine Bunting** *Emberiza leucocephalos* near Zhalanash, Charyn canyon, 17 May confirms its continued presence at the southern limit of its range. A **Meadow Bunting** *Emberiza cioides* was in the same area on the same date after one was noted at Kegen pass 4 May, also at the southern limit of its distribution in Kazakhstan.

KUWAIT

The third sighting of a **Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor* for the country was made at Jahra East outfall 15 Feb and a **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* in Sulaibikhat bay 5 May was the 16th record. There was a **Shikra** *Accipiter badius* at Al Abraq Al Khabari 7 Apr and an **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* at Jahra

East outfall 13 May (Plate 4), the latter the second record for the country. An excellent count of 2000 **Crab-plovers** *Dromas ardeola* was made on Boubyan island 18 May, the largest breeding concentration in the Middle East. A **Franklin's Gull** *Larus pipixcan* at Jahra East outfall, present from 5 Jun, is the first country record. A **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* was recorded on Green island 2 Feb. **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* totalled over 60 at a combination of sites in mid February. A **Hume's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus humei* at Al Abraq Al Khabari 30–31 Jan is the fifth record. **Afghan Babbler** *Turdoides caudatus lintoni* has again nested at Abdaly farms with a pair feeding a single chick 4 May. A male **Dead Sea Sparrow** *Passer moabiticus* was seen and heard singing at Al Abraq Al Khabari 12–13 Apr and there are now more than ten records for the country. A **Radde's Accentor** *Prunella ocularis* 15 Mar and another at Subriya farm 6 Apr were the third and fourth records while the **Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla (alba) personata* at Wafra farms 12 Feb was the second record. The **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* noted at Al Abraq Al Khabari from 9 Dec 2011 stayed to at least

28 Feb and an **Eastern Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza (cineracea) semenowi* was at Al Abraç Al Khabari 23 Mar.

LEBANON

A wetter winter and early spring favoured breeding waterbirds at Aammiq, including **Mallard** *Anser platyrhynchos*, **Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, **Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* and **Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra*. Three pairs of **Little Grebes** with young were observed at Bishmezzine 12 Jun. **Spur-winged Lapwings** *Vanellus spinosus* also bred this year at Tyre Coast nature reserve.

OMAN

The real highlight of the period was the first record for Oman and the Middle East of **Grey-headed Lapwing** *Vanellus cinereus*, at Sahnawt farm, Salalah, 3 Jan. A further record of note was a juvenile **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* at the new Al Mouj golf course, Muscat, 1 Jan (9th record). Both records have been accepted by the Oman Bird Records Committee. Thirty-eight **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* were

at East Khawr, Salalah, 11 Jan. **Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* records included four at West Khawr and two at East Khawr 15 Mar while there was a single **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* at East Khawr 7 Jan and two at West Khawr 9 Mar. There was a single **Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufina* at Al Ansab wetland 9 Jan—this species is comparatively rare in the north. The **Black Storks** *Ciconia nigra* seen in the Wadi Darbat and Khor Rouri area in late 2011 were present until 28 Feb (four at Wadi Darbat). Seven hundred **Western White Storks** *Ciconia ciconia* at Raysut 9 Mar was a high count. **Yellow Bittern** *Ixobrychus sinensis* is a regular breeding summer visitor to coastal khawrs in the south and there were five at East Khawr and two at Khawr Taqah 8 May. A single **Intermediate Egret** *Egretta intermedia* was at Khawr Sawli 8 Jan and one at Khawr Taqah 8 May. The three immature **Great White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* present in December at East Khawr, remained until 22 Mar (Plate 5).

A **Black-eared Kite** *Milvus (migrans) lineatus* was at Al Mouj golf course, 2 Apr.



Plate 5. Great White Pelicans *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, 10 March 2012, East Khawr, Salalah, Oman. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 6. White-throated vittata form of Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*, 15 April 2012, Sayh, Musandam, Oman. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen



Plate 7. Eastern Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe (hispanica) melanoleuca*, 15 April 2012, Sayh, Musandam, Oman. © Hanne & Jens Eriksen

Three **Crested Honey Buzzards** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* at East Khawr 7 Jan may have been the same birds seen in the area in November—small numbers now seem to winter in the south of Oman. One was also at Salalah 8 May. Twelve **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Torgos tracheliotus* were at a carcass at Bahla 20 Apr. A **Bonelli's Eagle** *Aquila fasciatus* was at Al Ansab wetland 10–14 Mar. Eleven **Arabian Partridges** *Alectoris melanocephala* were seen on Jabal Nakhl 10 Jun—this species is uncommon in the north. A single **Spotted Crake** *Porzana porzana* was seen at Sall Ala, Musandam, 16 Apr—the first record of any crake species in this region. Single **White-breasted Waterhens** *Amaurornis phoenicurus* were seen at Ayn Razat 23 Feb, Al Mughsayl 27 Feb and Ayn Hamran 22 Mar. **Red-knobbed Coots** *Fulica cristata*, a rare visitor, were seen at West Khawr (three) on 7 Jan with one at Al Mughsayl on the same date and two there 27 Feb and 3 May. Sixty **Collared Pratincoles** *Glareola pratincola* were at Sun farm, Sohar, 3 May while eight young were observed 28 May. Single **Small Pratincoles** *Glareola lactea* were at Salalah nature reserve 2 Jan and at Khawr Taqah 11 Jan. Four **Spotted Thick-knees** *Burhinus capensis* were at East Khawr and eight at Salalah 8 May. Two hundred and forty **Pacific Golden Plovers** *Pluvialis fulva* were at Sahnawt farm, 10 Mar, a high count.

Six **Spur-winged Lapwings** *Vanellus spinosus* were at Sahnawt farm 3 Jan—a new maximum for this rare winter visitor (five had been seen there 14–18 Nov 2011). On the same day four **Red-wattled Lapwings** *Vanellus indicus* were at the same location—this species is rare in the south. Three **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* were at Sun farm 11–13 Jan. A single **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media*, a rare migrant, was at Al Ansab wetland 5 Feb, the second record this winter.

Three hundred and fifty **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyaetus* at Qurayyat 19 Jan was a high count. A single **Common Gull** *Larus canus* was at Al Mouj golf course 28 Apr—this was a late date for this uncommon migrant. Five hundred plus **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles exustus* at Sun farm 19 Jan was the highest count for some years. Eleven **Common Woodpigeons** *Columba palumbus casiotis* were observed at 1800 m in Wadi Sahtan 24 Apr. Twenty-six **Namaqua Doves** *Oena capensis* at Sun farm 13 Jan was the highest count since 2007. Two **Asian Koels** *Eudynamis scolopaceus* were at East Khawr 7 Jan. Four hundred **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** *Merops superciliosus* were counted at Sun farm 10 Apr. Two hundred plus **European Rollers** *Coracias garrulus* in one tree at Al Ghaftayn in the central desert 3 May was an unusual sight. **Indian Rollers** *Coracias benghalensis* are

rare visitors to southern Oman so one at Jarziz farm, Salalah, 8 Jan was noteworthy.

A single **Woodchat Shrike** *Lanius senator* was at Khasab, Musandam, 13 Apr while a **Masked Shrike** *Lanius nubicus* was at Dawkah farm, central desert, 4 May. Three **Oriental Skylarks** *Alauda gulgula* were at Sun farm on 2 Mar. Six **Bar-tailed Larks** *Ammomanes cinctura* were found near Mudday in the south 27 Feb and eight were there 24 May. **Dunn's Lark** *Eremmelauda dunnii* is highly nomadic and very elusive so one near Mudday 27 Feb was an excellent find. A male **Whinchat** *Saxicola rubetra* was at Sall Ala, Musandam, 16 Apr while a 'Caspian' **Stonechat** *Saxicola [torquatus] maurus variegatus* was at Al Mughsayl 4 Jan and another at Sun farm on 2 Mar. The white-throated *vittata* form of the **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* is rare so a male at Sayh, Musandam, 15 Apr (Plate 6) is noteworthy. There was a single male **Eastern Black-eared Wheatear** *Oenanthe (hispanica) melanoleuca* at Sayh 14–15 Apr (Plate 7)—this is also a rare visitor to Oman. Eight **Hooded Wheatears** *Oenanthe mouacha* (six males, two females) were at Kitnah, Dhahirah region, 26 Apr. A single male **Semi-collared Flycatcher**

Ficedula semitorquata was seen at Sayh, 15 Apr. Four **Nile Valley Sunbirds** *Anthodiata metallica* at Qatbit 11 Jan were noteworthy. Eighty **Pale Rockfinches** *Carpospiza brachydactyla* were at Sun farm 11 Mar while 17 **Richard's Pipits** *Anthus (novaseelandiae) richardi* at the same location 2 Mar was a good count. **Arabian Golden-winged Grosbeak** *Rhychostruthus percivali* is not always easy to find so two at Dalqut on 7 May and two at Ayn Hamran 8 May were noteworthy. Seventy **Ortolan Buntings** *Eubleriza hortulana* were counted at Sayh 14 Apr.

QATAR

Rare winter visitors at Abu Nakhla included seven adult **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* (10 Feb) and a **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* (23 Mar). At least five, possibly eight adult **Black Kites** *Milvus migrans*, a rare passage migrant, at Al Shamal (five) and Ras Al Shindwee (three) 18 May. A juvenile **Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus*, normally a rare winter visitor was at Irkayya farm (IF) 29–31 May. The first breeding record of **Red-wattled Lapwing** *Vauellus indicus* for Qatar occurred at IF May/June when a pair



Plate 8. Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* with chick, June 2012, Irkayya farm, Qatar. © Khalid Al Maadeed

succeeded in raising one young. Six juvenile/adult winter **Eurasian Golden Plovers** *Pluvialis apricaria*, a rare winter visitor, were at IF 13 Jan, with three staying to at least 21 Jan. An adult male **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus*, normally a rare winter visitor, was at Al Khor 30 May. The first breeding record for **Collared Pratincole** *Glareola pratincola* was of an adult sitting on two eggs at IF 31 May. Subsequent observations in June showed that two pairs had produced chicks (Plate 8).

A male **Asian Koel** *Endynamys scolopaceus* at Umm Jolaq farm 20 Apr–3 May is the first country record. An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius*, a rare passage migrant, was at IF 30 Apr. A **Common Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia* was seen at Traina 31 Mar, the third record. A **European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* was at IF 2 Mar, the third record and the first since 3 Dec 1983. Single **Black Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas podobe*, a rare visitor, were recorded at Al Udeid air base 16 Mar, Umm Jolaq farm 17–23 Mar and Sealine beach resort (SBR) 24 Apr. A first summer male **Kurdistan Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthopyrmina* at Traina 2–15 Mar, was the

second record. **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* is a rare passage migrant, so two males at IF (15 Apr), a female at SBR (18 Apr) and a female at Traina (19–20 Apr) are noteworthy.

SAUDI ARABIA

(All records are from the Eastern province (EP). Sabkhat Al Fasl, Jubail, is a wetland site 125 km north of Dhahran.)

A single second calendar year **Greater White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons* was at Sabkhat Al Fasl (SAF) 17 and 18 Feb (Plate 9). This is a vagrant to EP. An immature **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* was at Dhahran 23 May while a **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* was at SAF 25 May. Fifty-six **Western Great Egrets** *Egretta alba* were at SAF 6 Jan along with 357 **Common Shelducks** *Tadorna tadorna*—the largest flock for some years at the site. Six adult and two first year **Eurasian Spoonbills** *Platalea leucorodia* were at Dammam port mangroves 13 Jan. Six adults were still present 10 Feb. An adult was at SAF 4 May. A juvenile **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* was at Dhahran 29 Mar while an adult **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus (caeruleus) vociferus* was there 29



Plate 9. Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*, 17 February 2012, Sabkhat Al Fasl, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Bobbington

Mar–17 Apr (Plate 10, very dark under-wing markings on the secondaries unlike the more western race *E. (c.) caeruleus*). This was a first record for EP. A second calendar year **Short-toed Snake Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus* was over Dhahran 11 Feb. Nineteen **Western Marsh Harriers** *Circus aeruginosus* at SAF 6 Jan was a high count. Thirteen **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* at SAF 2 Feb was the highest count of the winter. Two second calendar year **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca* were seen at SAF 2 Feb. Two adult male **Little Crakes** *Porzana parva* were at Dhahran 29 Feb. Four (three males and a female) were seen on 4 and 5 Mar with singles seen until 20 Mar. Two adult **Armenian Gulls** *Larus armenicus* were at the Dammam–Al Khobar wader roost (south) on 10 Feb. The status of this species in EP is uncertain but it is certainly rare. An adult **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaetus* in breeding plumage was well inland at Dhahran 11 Feb.

An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was seen in the evening of 4 Mar at Dhahran. Shrike migration was noted

throughout March with highs of **Woodchat Shrike** *Lanius senator* (3) and **Daurian Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus* (8) at SAF 9 Mar, **Turkestan Shrike** *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides* (18) at the same location 31 Mar and **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris* (2) there 30 Mar. An adult **White-spectacled Bulbul** *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* was at SAF 30 Mar. This appears to be only the second record for EP. Fifty **Red-rumped Swallows** *Cecropis daurica* were at Dhahran 4 Mar while a **Common Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia* was there 1 Apr. An adult male **Finsch's Wheatear** *Oenanthe finschii* was seen in the evening of 7 Mar at Dhahran. An adult **Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* was seen feeding on insects at SAF 12 Jan. An adult male was present at the same site 10 Feb and an adult male at Dammam airport pools on 23 Mar. A female **Black-headed Bunting** *Emberiza melanocephala* was at Dhahran 8 and 9 May. Six **Corn Buntings** *Emberiza calandra* were at Dhahran 9 Feb with four still present the next day.



Plate 10. Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, 29 March 2012, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Babbington

SYRIA

Four **Northern Bald Ibises** *Geronticus eremita* returned to the breeding cliffs near Palmyra this year; there were three in 2011 and the origin of the fourth bird is unknown. One pair, the same individuals as in 2011, attempted to breed but failed. A captive pair from the Turkish population has also so far failed to breed successfully. This pair has been kept since 2010 at the reserve at Talila to supply future birds for release.

TAJIKISTAN

A late report of a **Pallas's Fish-Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* Sep 2011 comes from the Pamir mountains in the east of the country and would be the only recent record of this vagrant if accepted. A **Western Crowned Warbler** *Phylloscopus (coronatus) occipitalis* near Qala-i Khumb at the end of May was probably a breeding bird.

TURKEY

The cold winter Jan–Mar 2012 produced a good array of records of waterbirds that normally remain along the northern shores of the Black sea. Single **Red-throated Divers** *Gavia stellata* were recorded in Göksu delta 25 Feb, Kocaçay delta 22 Jan and Büyükçekmece lake 18 Feb. The sudden appearance of **Egyptian Geese** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* raised questions about origin. Two were in Riva, near Istanbul, 31 Mar and one Beytepe campus in Ankara 13 Apr. Despite the cold winter, the numbers of **Red-breasted Geese** *Branta ruficollis* were below expectations. One was at Sarıyar dam lake on 19 Feb and seven Kocaeli Kandıra 26 Feb. Six **Scaups** *Aythya marila* were at İğneada 10 Feb, one at Büyükçekmece 11 Feb, 5 İstanbul Şile harbour 22 Feb, one Hersek lagoon 5 Mar, one Filyos delta 4 Feb and 17 were recorded during the mid-winter counts in Yeşilirmak delta 13 Feb. **Common Eiders** *Somateria mollissima* were observed away from known localities: one Kocaeli Kandıra 25 Feb and one Sakarya Karasu 7 Apr. High numbers of sea ducks were present at Yeşilirmak delta 13 Feb, including 48 **Velvet Scoters** *Melanitta fusca*, 34 **Common Scoters** *Melanitta nigra* and a remarkable total of 702 **Goldeneyes** *Bucephala clangula*. A young **Yellow-billed Stork** *Mycteria ibis* was seen at Mogan lake

near Ankara, 18–24 June. One **Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor* was in the Meriç delta 21 Jan and one Kulu lake 15 Apr and 18 Jun.

A **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* was recorded Yenikent Zır valley, Ankara, 26 April. Cold weather pushed many **Rough-legged Buzzards** *Buteo lagopus* to the south. One was seen at Sarıyar dam 11 Mar, one Büyükçekmece lake 9 Feb, two Terkos lake 18 March, two Üsküdar, İstanbul, 11 Feb, one was at Filyos delta 18 March, one Yalova Safranköy 24 Mar and five were in Kızılırmak delta on 6 Mar. A **Saker** *Falco cherrug* was observed Büyükçekmece lake 28 Apr. A **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* was at Yumurtalık lagoons 11 Apr and one Alanya 4–28 Apr. Twenty-seven **Great Bustards** *Otis tarda* were seen Burdur 29 Jan and two Şanlıurfa Kızılırmak 4 Mar. A migrant **Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor* was at the Göksu delta 21 Apr. Two individuals of the rare spring migrant **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* were recorded at Yumurtalık lagoons 11 Apr and 29 **Sociable Lapwings** *Chettusia gregarius* were at Şanlıurfa Akçakale 10 Mar and 21 at Şanlıurfa Kızılırmak 4 Mar. The first breeding record of **Red-wattled Plover** *Hoplopternis indicus* away from the river Tigris was a pair in Akçakale 17 May–24 Jun and one was in Mardin 13 May.

A **Pomarine Skua** *Stercorarius pomarinus* was in Filyos delta 17 Apr, one Kavak delta 16 Apr and two Rize 25 Feb. A **Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* was near Konya Kozanlı 8 Jun, the fourth record. Fifteen **Short-eared Owls** *Asio flammeus* were at Yedikır dam lake 11 Feb. A migrant **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** *Merops superciliosus* was in Riva, İstanbul, 29 Apr. One **Cyprus Wheatear** *Oenanthe cyprica* was in the Göksu delta 10 Apr and one at Akyatan lake 25 Mar. Four **Semi-collared Flycatchers** *Ficedula semitorquata* were in Erzurum Aşkale 21 Apr, suggesting a new breeding site. **Great Grey Shrikes** *Lanius excubitor* were present in many localities within the northern half of the country. One was in Kırklareli Vize 20 Jan and 13 Feb, one Çorum Alaca 21 Feb, one Kızılırmak delta 25 Mar, one Kocaeli Kandıra 10 Mar, one Manyas lake 26 Jan and one at Sarıyar dam lake 11 Mar. The **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus rubescens* visited its traditional site again: one was at Samandağ 21 Jan. An **Isabelline Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus* was in Kızılırmak delta 12 Apr and one Mardin 5

May. A **Subalpine Warbler** *Sylvia cantillans* was near Samsun 30 Apr, the most northerly record for Turkey.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* from December was re-found in Al Ain 13–15 Jan (5th record). Up to three **Red-crested Pochards** *Netta rufina* were in Dubai 28 Jan–11 Feb (12th record). The **Eastern Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus (ibis) coromandus* at Wamm farms 28 Mar–2 Apr is possibly the returning bird last seen 24 Jun 2011. One **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* on a Khor Kalba pelagic 11 May was the 16th record. Up to two **Hen Harriers** *Circus cyaneus* at Wamm farms 13 Jan–23 Mar was only the 7th record since 2000. Another female-plumaged bird stayed at Khor al-Beida 20 Jan–22 Feb. One **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* was seen at Dubai desert conservation reserve on 16 Jan. Possibly the same **Great Stone-curlew** *Esacus recurvirostris*, first seen 27 Sep 2011, was re-found at Khor Qirqishan (Musaffah) 27 Feb–6 Mar (first UAE record). One **White-rumped Sandpiper** *Calidris fuscicollis* at the Al Ain water treatment plant 18–26 May was the first UAE record and the first for Arabia. An adult **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* was at Mafraq rubbish tip 4 Feb–19 Mar (9th record) while a **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* was recorded on a Khor Kalba pelagic 11 May (13th record).

One well twitched **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* was at Wamm farms 20–26 Apr (third record) while a **White-throated Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* was seen at Jebel Dhanna 1 Apr (11th record). An immature **Black-naped Oriole** *Oriolus chinensis* in Safa park 18–25 Feb was a new species for the UAE and only the second record for the region, the first having been seen in southern Oman 7 Dec 2011 (see *Sandgrouse* 34 (1) for further details). There were three records of **Bay-backed Shrikes** *Lanius vittatus* this spring—all at Wamm farms (8, 16 Apr, 4 May). One well photographed **Black Drongo** *Dicrurus macrocercus* at Al Barsha pond park, Dubai, 18 Jan–1 Feb was the second confirmed record; a bird at the Dubai pivot fields on 11 Mar and 15 Apr was possibly the same individual. The fifth record of **Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus* was

seen in Al Ain 18–25 Mar. This spring was very good for '**Caspian**' **Stonechats** *Saxicola [torquatus] maurus variegatus* with a total of 17 birds 6 Feb–24 Mar (8th–18th records). A male **Kurdistan Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthopyryna* at Jebel Dhanna 22 Mar–2 Apr was only the second UAE record (the first was in 2003/04). **Finsch's Wheatear** *Oenanthe finschii* has not been recorded in the UAE since 2006 so a male at Jebel Dhanna 21–22 Mar (the 21st record) is of note. A **Radde's Accentor** *Prunella ocularis* photographed in Safa park 10–14 Apr was a new species for the UAE. Two **Buff-bellied Pipits** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* the first of which was seen 10 Dec 2011, wintered at Emirates palace, Abu Dhabi, until 3 Mar with another bird at Wamm farms 20 Jan–2 Mar (21st record). A single **Eastern Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza (cineracea) semenowi* was on Saadiyat island 9 Mar.

UZBEKISTAN

Following the first record of **Western Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis* April 2009 (*Sandgrouse* 31: 221) breeding was confirmed when two nests were found in a mixed colony of **Black-crowned Night Herons** *Nycticorax nycticorax*, **Little Egrets** *Egretta garzetta* and **Rooks** *Corvus frugilegus* in an ash-tree grove in Alat city (Plate 11, Bukhara region) 4 May 2011. Recent research at Dalverzin hunting management area IBA, in the middle reaches of the Syrdarya river south of Tashkent, has produced several records of note. A flock of 10 **Glossy Ibises** *Plegadis falcinellus* was observed 5 May 2012 with several flocks totalling 50 birds at nearby Sasikol lake on 2 Jun. These are notable counts and the first records for the site. A single **Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus* was present 7 Mar.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* is a scarce but annual migrant at Dalverzin, usually in April, so one on 9 Jun was of note and could, potentially, indicate local breeding. Confirmed breeding activity of several species was certainly noted in the area on this date. **Eurasian Stone-curlew** *Burhinus oediniemus* was noted breeding on the banks of the Syrdarya river while two small temporary islands in the river hosted breeding **Little Ringed Plovers** *Charadrius dubius*, more than 50 **Collared Pratincoles** *Glareola pratincola*, clearly holding breeding territories, as well as



Plate 11. Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, 4 May 2011, Alat city, Uzbekistan. © M Turaev

Common and **Little Terns** *Sterna hirundo* and *S. albifrons*. Normally river levels are higher at this time of year so there is usually no suitable breeding habitat. **Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* is generally considered to be a migrant and wintering species in Uzbekistan so a singing male in deciduous forest in the Amankutan mountains (Zarafshan range, Samarkand region) on 6 Jun was notable. The species breeds in northern Iran and the central and western Kopetdag in Turkmenistan so could, potentially, also breed in Uzbekistan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following assisted in the compilation of this review:

Humoud Alshayji, S Alterman, Abdulla Aly, Raffael Ayé, Jem Babbington, Y Baser, Chris Bowden, Kerem Ali Boyla, Jamie Buchan, Jacqueline Burrell, Amir Ben Dov, Gennady Dyakin, Hanne & Jens Eriksen, Pekka Fågel, Vassiliy Fedorenko, Antonina Fokina, P Franke, Lars Gaedicke, Kai Gauger, J Geburzi, Barak Granit, Boris Gubin, M Guys, Anders Haglund, Rashed Al Hajji, Anders Hammergart, Tomas Axen Haraldsson, Michael Heisse, M Held, Richard Hoath, Dick

Hoek, Haitham Ibrahim, Askar Isabekov, Moldovan Istvan, Josh Jones, Bert de Jong, Graeme Joynt, Tuvia Kahn, Roman Kashkarov, Brendan Kavanagh, Patrick Keirsbilck, Leander Khil, Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh, Fares Khoury, Howard King, Dick Koek, Aleksandr Kostukov, Andrey Kovalenko, Thomas Lang, Pim Lemmers, Mary Megalli, David Murdoch, Jos van Oostveen, Tommy Pedersen, Yoav Perlman, Svend Pettersson, Mike Pope, Richard Porter, Mahmoud Ghasem Pouri, Richard Prior, Ghassan Ramadan-Jaradi, Feras Rahahleh, Colin Richardson, Jozef Ridzon, Ignaas Robbe, Phil Roberts, Jon Rouse, Richard Seargent, John Sevenair, Itai Shanni, Omar F Al-Sheikhly, AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan, Brian J Small, Ian Smith, Anders Søgaard, Johan Stuut, A van-Egmond, Andrey Vilyayev, Hellin de Waavrin, Geoff Welch, Andrew Whitehouse, Edwin Winkel, Nizamettin Yavuz, D Yosha and Thorsten Zegula

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ERRATA

The following errors unfortunately appeared in *Around the Region Sandgrouse* 34 (1) 2012.

AFGHANISTAN

Black Drongo *Hypsipetus leucocephalus* should read **Black Drongo** *Dicrurus macrocercus*. **Snow Pigeon** *Lerwa lerwa* should read **Snow Pigeon** *Columba leuconota*. It is uncertain whether or not the **Painted Sandgrouse** *Pterocles indicus* reported was claimed as ssp *indicus* or *arabicus*. The latter is nowadays treated as a ssp of **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** *P. lichtensteinii*.

ISRAEL

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* should read **Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*.

KAZAKHSTAN

Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus* should read **Lesser Sandplover** *Charadrius atrifrons*.

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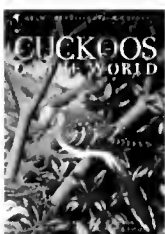
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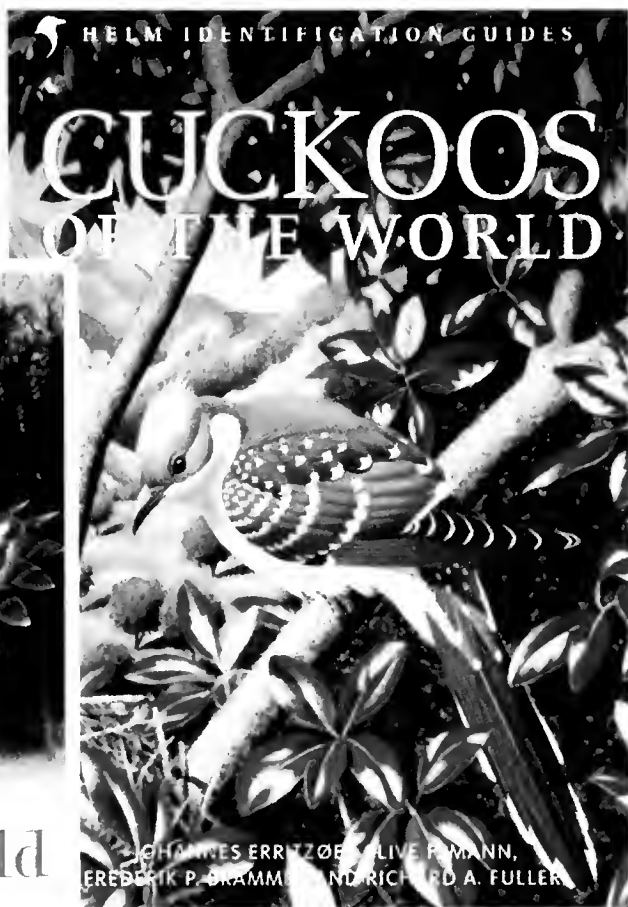
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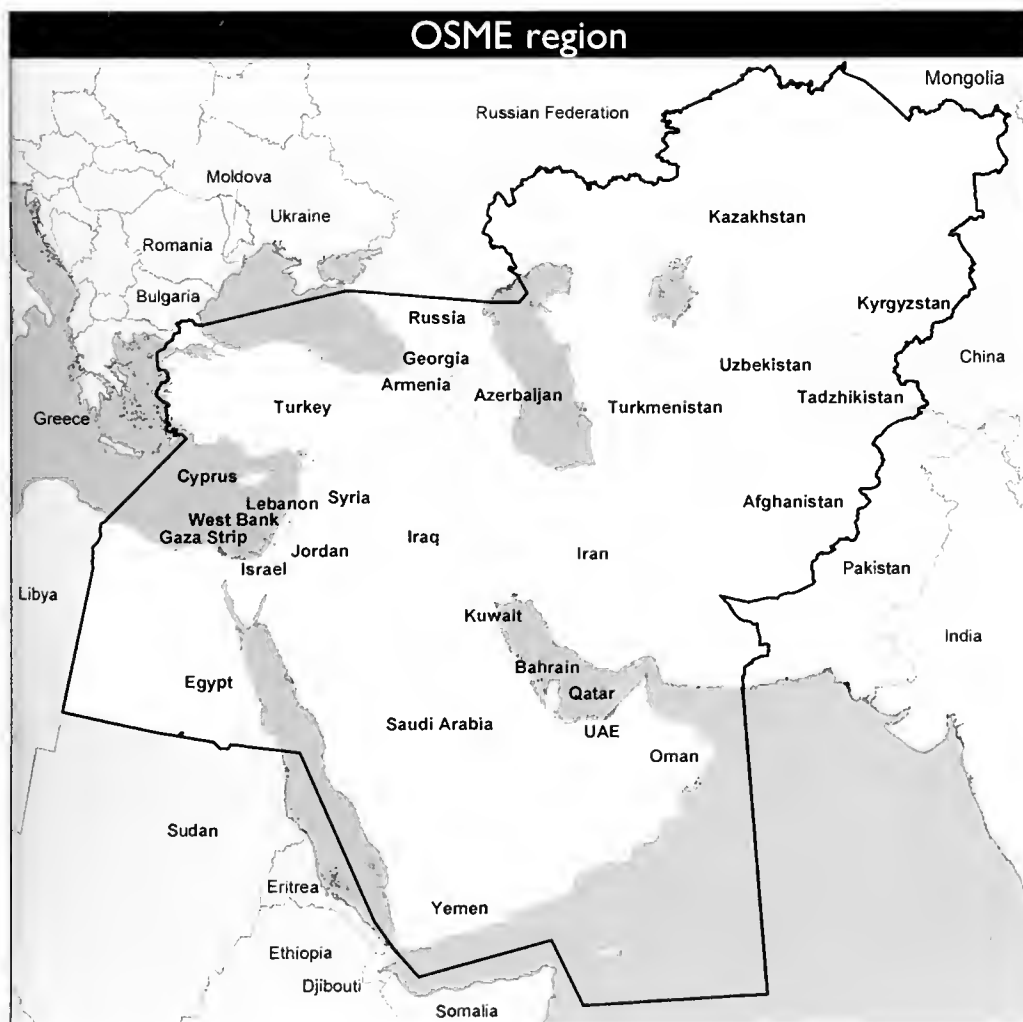
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ADVICE FOR AUTHORS

The Editor will consider for publication papers and notes on the birds of the OSME region. 'Russia' on the OSME region map refers to the Russian Federation's North Caucasus (to 45°N). Papers which additionally include birds in areas outside the OSME region or which are concerned with the birds of areas of which the OSME region, partially or completely, is an important part *eg* the Saharo-Sindian region or Siberian–African flyways, will also be considered. The Editor will give careful thought to the publication of mss concerning the birds of the following countries/areas close to the OSME region: **eastern half of Libya, arid/semiarid Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, 'Republic of Somaliland', 'Puntland State of Somalia', Kashmir, Tibet, Sinkiang and western half of Mongolia.** Please consult the Editor if in doubt about the suitability of material.

All correspondence between authors and Editor, including initial submission of mss, will be by email. All mss must be in UK English and use Word. Consult recent issues of *Sandgrouse* for style conventions but apply minimal text formatting *eg* no rules, small caps or text boxes. All figure, table and plate captions should be in the text file at the end of the ms. Tables can be placed at the end of the Word document or be attached separately. All diagrams, maps, graphs and photos must be attached as individual files in a popular format. The Editor encourages the submission of maps and colour photos. All mss for publication are sent for review. Avian scientific nomenclature and species sequence should follow the Simplified OSME Region List, www.osme.org, unless argued convincingly otherwise.



ISSN 0260-4736

OSME region map design
by Ian Fisher and
colleagues at the RSPB

Typesetting & layout
by Eng-Li Green
engli@greenworks.us

Printed by
Swallowtail Print
of Norwich, UK
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