

# SANDGROUSE

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ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST  
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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# ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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# Unravelling Meinertzhagen-generated confusion concerning the occurrence of Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta* in Egypt and the Near East, with a review of the species' status in the Middle East

GUY M KIRWAN & ANDREW GRIEVE

We present evidence to dispute the often-stated 'fact' that the recently recognised species, Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta*, a principally Central Asian breeder, has been recorded in the Near East and Egypt. Claims from the latter country are based solely on misidentified specimens collected by Michael Nicoll and Richard Meinertzhagen, and the second-named was also responsible for equally erroneous claims from southernmost Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Some of these reports have been perpetuated in subsequent literature down to the present. Statements concerning the species' occurrence and status in Israel are to some extent contradictory and require clarification; we therefore consider that more proof of its presence in that country than has been provided to date is required. Status in Iran is also discussed in the light of significant recent advances in knowledge of separating *R. diluta* from Common Sand Martin *R. riparia*. The sole available evidence for the species' occurrence therein appears to be a recent, unpublished, photographic record. Finally, we present a résumé of other Middle Eastern records of Pale Sand Martin, all of them since the year 2000, from the easternmost portion of the Arabian peninsula.

## INTRODUCTION

During the course of the last c15 years the extent to which The Natural History Museum (NHM, Tring, UK) bird collection and the ornithological record in general are compromised by specimen fraud perpetrated by Richard Meinertzhagen has become increasingly apparent (see *eg* Rasmussen & Prys-Jones 2003). However, not all problems concerning Meinertzhagen's specimens are the result of fraudulent activity; some, like those of his peers, apparently pertain to simple misidentifications. Here we discuss Meinertzhagen-generated errors concerning the status of Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta* in Egypt and the Near East. It merits stating at the outset that knowledge concerning the characters unequivocal of *R. diluta* and those taxa considered most closely related to it were subject to considerable confusion amongst ornithologists well into the second half of the 20th century, some of them with far more experience of the relevant forms than Meinertzhagen. Nonetheless, in the present case, the erroneous statements he published have, to a greater or lesser extent, been accepted and perpetuated until the present day.

*R. diluta* was, until recently, generally considered a subspecies of Common Sand Martin *R. riparia*, but is now increasingly frequently regarded as a species apart, based on vocal and morphological differences, and the realisation that the two breed in separate colonies over a broad area of sympatry in Central (Middle) Asia (Gavrilov & Savchenko 1991, Goroshko 1993, Loskot & Dickinson 2001, Turner 2004, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Loskot 2006), but also in mixed colonies with no evidence of mixed pairings *eg* at lake Alakol in eastern Kazakhstan (P Alström, AG, PA Lassey and L Svensson pers obs). Molecular evidence also supports their specific status (Pavlova *et al* 2008). Pale Sand Martin breeds from central Siberia and southern and eastern Kazakhstan east to the river Lena in the north and eastern China in the south. Northern populations (*eg* *R. d. diluta* and *R. d. gavrillovi*) are migratory, moving south principally to winter in the northern Indian subcontinent as far south at least as Maharashtra (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005) and perhaps South-East Asia (Turner 2004). In the latter region, Robson (2008) mentioned records for East Tonkin (northern Vietnam) and Malaysia, but Bakewell (2010) pointed out



**Plate I.** Meinertzhagen specimens of sand martins *Riparia*, most of which were originally identified as Pale Sand Martin *R. diluta*, but all of which are Common Sand Martin *R. riparia*, as follows, from left to right. BMNH 1965-M-8263, collected at Wadi Natrun, Egypt, 14 April 1923; BMNH 1965-M-8264, collected at the same locality on the same date; BMNH 1965-M-8262, collected at Hadda, near Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 3 April 1948; BMNH 1965-M-8240, collected at lake of Antioch, Turkey, 17 May 1933; BMNH 1965-M-8239, collected at the same locality on the same date; BMNH 1965-M-8261, collected at the same locality, 28 May 1933; and BMNH 1965-M-8260, collected at the same locality on the same date. Guy M Kirwan/© Natural History Museum, Tring

that none of the several claims from the last-named country are acceptable. This illustrates how prevalent the problem of separating *diluta* appears to be. Some authors have included eastern Iran within the breeding range of *diluta* (eg Vaurie 1951, Kumerloeve 1961, Énard & Etchécopar 1970), but this should also be re-evaluated given modern knowledge of the species' identification. Occurrence in the southeast corner of the Arabian peninsula in winter has been well established within the last decade (Porter & Aspinall 2010) and is considered further here only in the Discussion.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

We examined potentially misidentified Egyptian and Middle Eastern specimens of *R. diluta* in the following museums: NHM, Tring, UK, the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (FMNH), and, through the assistance of JM Bates and J Engel, the American Museum of Natural History, New York (AMNH). Relevant specimens for investigation were established from the literature, with additional material from adjacent regions being examined where appropriate. Specimen identification followed a standard protocol combining plumage features, which focused on overall upperparts coloration (paler and more greyish in *diluta* compared to *riparia*), much less contrasting (paler) ear-coverts of *diluta* but obviously dark lores and eye, underparts pattern, especially the nature of the breast-band (less clear-cut and often broken in *diluta*) and throat colour (often pure white in *diluta*), and the presence and pattern, or absence, of tarsal feathering, with mensural data. We relied on our combined field experience of *R. diluta* on its Central Asian breeding grounds (AG) and, to a lesser extent, its wintering areas in southern Asia (GMK), as well as Loskot's (2006) work on variation and identification of specimen material.



**Plate 2.** Specimens of Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta* from India, collected by WN Koele and held at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, showing differences in underparts pattern from Iranian specimens of Sand Martin *R. riparia innominata* taken by the same collector (see Plate 3, Table 1). © Guy M Kirwan

Among plumage characters, the pattern of the breast-band and ear-coverts are unquestionably the most important, although some overlap between *diluta* and *riparia* is known (Schweizer & Ayé 2007). The pattern of tarsal feathering, as noted by Loskot (2006) can be difficult to accurately establish on museum specimens for several reasons, including the possibility that any such feathers have been lost. In general, in *R. riparia* “one or two small feathers may be present above the feather tuft near the base of the hind toe, but these never reach the middle of the tarsus, and the upper half of the tarsus always remains bare” (Loskot 2006). Nonetheless, we must point out that our own research, in conjunction with that of our colleagues L Svensson and H Shirihai, indicates that the tarsal feathering differences reported by Loskot (2006) require considerable clarification, especially with respect to other sand martin taxa in the Middle Eastern region, most notably *R. r. shelleyi* and *R. r. eilata*. The two most important mensural characters are wing length and tail fork depth (Schweizer & Ayé 2007). In adults, nominate *riparia* usually has the wing <111 mm (all values approximate), versus *diluta* <104 mm, while in juveniles the respective values are <108 mm and 105 mm (Loskot 2006). With respect to tail fork values, adults of nominate *riparia* typically measure >13 mm versus >6.5 mm in *diluta*, with juveniles scoring >8.5 mm and 7.5 mm, respectively (Loskot 2006). Most of the above-mentioned characters are to



**Plate 3.** Specimens of Sand Martin *Riparia riparia innominata* from Iran, collected by WN Koelz and held at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, all of which were suggested to be hybrid *R. riparia* × *R. diluta* by Charles Vaurie (see Table 1). © Guy M Kirwan

some extent diagnostic, but there is overlap in many of them and all of our identifications were based on as broad a sample of these as possible.

All mensural data were collected by GMK, with the exception of those specimens held at AMNH, which were measured by John M Bates. Wing (flattened chord) and tail measurements were taken to 0.5 mm accuracy using a standard metal wing rule with a perpendicular stop at zero. Our results are presented below according to country/region.

## RESULTS

### *Egypt*

The case of the Egyptian specimens of '*diluta*' provides a classic example of 'hand-me-down' assumption, with numerous sources, many of them highly authoritative including the definitive national checklist (Goodman & Meininger 1989) and many keynote reviews of the family (eg Turner 2004), having unwittingly or uncritically persisted in repeating the original error. Writing about *R. r. diluta*, Meinertzhagen (1930) stated "A single bird obtained on 24/ix. by Nicoll, near Cairo, belongs to this form, and several obtained near Cairo and in the Wadi Natrun between 9/iii. and 19/iv. On 14/iv./1923 there were large flocks of this form at the Wadi Natrun, among which were some conspicuously large birds,

one having a wing of 113 mm. No record from Sinai, though they doubtless occur." The latter bird would be long-winged by any standards, but is well outside the range of any *R. diluta* identified according to modern standards (Cramp 1988, Loskot 2006: 217). Two of these specimens are held at NHM (Table 1, Plate 1) and the rest were, at least formerly, presumably at the Giza Zoological Museum, although at no point does Meinertzhagen (1930) make explicit the total number of Egyptian *diluta* specimens or where they are held. Given the extent to which Meinertzhagen endeavoured to falsify the ornithological record (many publications since Clancey 1984, then Knox 1993), it is even plausible that his mention of 'several' taken between 9 March and 19 April refers to nothing more than the two NHM specimens. Nevertheless, given that we suspect the present case to exemplify nothing more



**Plate 4.** Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta*, Sohar Sun farms, Oman, March 2004; note the obviously dark lores/eye, contrasting with the rest of the head, ear-coverts grading into paler throat (lacking obvious demarcation) and breast-band obviously narrower and paler in its centre. © PA Lassey

than lack of knowledge, rather than deliberate fraud, it might initially appear strange that he should employ subterfuge to support his hypothesis that *diluta* occurs in Egypt. It merits emphasising that knowledge of *diluta*, then considered only subspecifically, was sufficiently weak at the time to make Meinertzhagen's claims entirely plausible, or at least difficult to question, especially given a lack of complete knowledge concerning the nature of plumage variation within the local race of *R. riparia*, *shelleyi*, which persists to the present day. Despite that we have been unable to trace or examine all of the specimens to which Meinertzhagen (1930) referred (including Nicoll's September specimen), we consider that the species should be removed from the Egyptian list given that those specimens that are available clearly concern *R. riparia* and because Meinertzhagen throughout his career failed, more or less consistently, to reliably differentiate *R. diluta* and *R. riparia* (see Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Discussion).

Other commentators have been content to maintain *R. diluta* on the Egyptian list, albeit proffering varying levels of support and occasionally misquoting the original source. Etchécopar & Hüe (1967) cited Egyptian records in March, April and September (repeated by Turner & Rose 1989) obviously following Meinertzhagen (1930). However, three years later the same authors made no mention of Egypt under the range of *R. diluta* in the Middle East (Hüe & Etchécopar 1970). Cramp (1988: 238) stated only that *R. diluta* had been collected in Palestine and Egypt (occurrence in Palestine was seemingly first mentioned by Meinertzhagen 1954; see below). Goodman & Meininger (1989) considered it to be a passage migrant through Egypt without proffering further details, although given the complete lack of records from further south in Africa (Keith *et al* 1992), it is unclear to where these birds might have been en route. Shirihai (1996: 377) mentioned East Africa as forming part of the wintering range of *R. diluta*, but no other author seems to admit this possibility (Urban & Brown 1971, Britton 1980, Nikolaus 1987, Zimmerman *et al* 1996, Ash & Miskell 1998, Ash & Atkins 2009, Redman *et al* 2009). In this respect, it merits mentioning that, among specimens of *R. riparia* from elsewhere in Africa held in the Chicago and Tring museums, we are unable to locate any misidentified *R. diluta*. In contrast to other

authors, Keith *et al* (1992) stated that there was only one record from Egypt, while Turner (2004) mentioned that nominate *diluta* has been recorded from western Egypt. Most recently, Moldovan (2010) continued to list *R. diluta* for the country (as a 'passage visitor') in his 'provisional' checklist, claiming to have examined and validated the two NHM specimens, as well as mentioning that "some birds caught Hurghada sewage works [on the Red sea coast] as Sand Martin *R. riparia* likely to be Pale Martin". The latter statement is inadmissible without thorough documentation, and superficially appears to be based on an entirely retrospective consideration. Although Moldovan (2010, and MJ Blair therein) claimed to have examined the two specimens, their personal familiarity with *R. diluta* is unclear to us, and given that other NHM specimens of *R. riparia* are also mislabelled as *diluta* it would be easy for a relatively inexperienced worker to continue to promulgate the misidentification based on an uncritical examination and comparison with other incorrectly labelled material.

### Iran

Occurrence in Iran has been mentioned in the literature on several occasions (*eg* Kumerloeve 1961, Énard & Etchécopar 1970), but *diluta* is not stated to occur in the country by many other keynote works (*eg* Turner 2004, Scott & Adhami 2006, Porter & Aspinall 2010). Vaurie (1951) seems to have been first to promulgate the hypothesis that *R. diluta* does occur in the country, claiming that birds found by Zarudny (1911: 221) breeding in Seistan and Kerman 'probably' belonged to this form. However, we have found nothing in Zarudny's own writings to suggest that he considered *diluta* to comprise part of the Iranian avifauna, which is significant given his own (partially flawed) contribution to the taxonomy of these swallows (Zarudny 1916). As subsequently demonstrated by Loskot (2006), Zarudny (1916) described a new (pale) race of *R. r. innominata* based on a mixed series of specimens of *R. riparia* and *R. diluta*. The two Iranian specimens from this series, taken at Dzhelalabad (Seistan) in late June, are both referable to *R. riparia* (Loskot 2006). Furthermore, Vaurie (1951: 8) listed no *diluta* specimens from Iran. The same author did, however, list 18 specimens, of all ages and sexes, taken by WN Koelz in western Iran (Luristan) on various dates between May and October, which Vaurie considered to be intermediate between *R. riparia* and *R. diluta*. All of these specimens are held at FMNH and AMNH, and were re-examined by GMK, John M Bates and J Engel, along with several other Koelz specimens of *R. diluta* from India (Plate 2). The results of this examination revealed that all of these specimens, which come from two localities, Borujerd (= Brujird; 33° 54' N, 48° 45' E) and Dow Rud (= Durud; 33° 29' N, 49° 04' E), can confidently be identified as *R. r. innominata* Zarudny, 1916 (Table 1, Plate 3), based on a combination of plumage characters, presence and pattern of tarsal feathering, and morphometrics (following Loskot 2006). As noted by the latter author, *R. r. innominata* possesses a breast-band quite equal in strength to that of *R. r. riparia*, thereby assisting to alleviate any potential confusion between what is otherwise a relatively pale form of *R. riparia* and *R. diluta*. Recently, A Ouwkerk photographed what appears to be a single *R. diluta* near Minab, Hormuzgan, on 25 January 2007 (which we identified on the basis of underparts pattern and coloration of the upperparts). Given the recent revelation that *R. diluta* overwinters in the southeast corner of Arabia (see Discussion) that some birds migrate through Iran, and indeed presumably overwinter there too, at least in the far south, becomes unsurprising.

### The Levant

There does not seem to be any record of *R. diluta* for Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008), but Meinertzhagen (1954: 280) mentioned *diluta* for Syria, which claim was repeated by Turner & Rose (1989). However, this mention of Syria refers to Meinertzhagen's specimens from

**Table 1.** Mensural and other data for relevant *Riparia* specimens from Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, together with comparative data for several Indian specimens of Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta* (probably migrants from further north, rather than local breeders) collected by W.N. Koelz, who was also responsible for all of the Iranian specimens listed here. Wing (flattened chord) and tail-length measurements (mm) were taken using a standard metal wing rule with a perpendicular stop at zero. In addition to the pattern of any tarsal feathering, plumage characters (principally the general coloration of the upperparts, throat colour, and the breast-band pattern) were also used to identify each specimen to species, following Loskot (2006). All measurements by GMK, except for those specimens held in New York, which were measured by JM Bates. Note that age and sex information is based solely on label data. Museum acronyms: AMNH = American Museum of Natural History (New York); BMNH = The Natural History Museum (Tring, UK); and FMNH = Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago).

Museum registration no.	Age / sex	Collection locality	Collection date	Wing	Tail	Comments	Tarsal feathering
<b>Sand Martin <i>Riparia riparia</i></b>							
BMNH 1965-M-8263	male	Wadi Natrun, Egypt	14.4.1923	107	57	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Meinertzhagen	no perceivable tarsus feathering
BMNH 1965-M-8264	female	Wadi Natrun, Egypt	14.4.1923	111	58	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Meinertzhagen	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
BMNH 1965-M-8261	male	Lake of Antioch, Turkey	28.5.1933	106.5	56	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Meinertzhagen	tiny tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
BMNH 1965-M-8260	male	Lake of Antioch, Turkey	28.5.1933	99.5	52	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Meinertzhagen	no perceivable tarsus feathering
BMNH 1965-M-8240	female (not breeding)	Lake of Antioch, Turkey	17.5.1933	105.5	50	labelled as <i>riparia</i> by Meinertzhagen	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
BMNH 1965-M-8239	male (not breeding)	Lake of Antioch, Turkey	17.5.1933	107	52.5	labelled as <i>riparia</i> by Meinertzhagen	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
BMNH 1965-M-8262	male	Hadda, Jidda, Saudi Arabia	3.4.1948	113	62	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Meinertzhagen	no perceivable tarsus feathering
FMNH 233289	juvenile male	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	19.7.1941	98	46	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	no perceivable tarsus feathering
FMNH 233290	juvenile female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	1.10.1941	102.5	49.5	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	some tarsal feathering
FMNH 233291	ad female?	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	27.9.1941	111	56	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> by Vaurie, but obviously a <i>R. riparia</i>	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
FMNH 233292	juvenile male	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	28.9.1941	101	58	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	no perceivable tarsus feathering
FMNH 233293	juvenile male	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	19.7.1941	99	51	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	no perceivable tarsus feathering
FMNH 233294	juvenile male	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	18.7.1941	98	46	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
FMNH 233296	juvenile female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	2.10.1941	100.5	55	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint

FMNH 233295	first-winter	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	2.10.1941	103	54	labelled as hybrid by Vaurie, but obviously a <i>R. riparia</i>	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
FMNH 233297	juvenile female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	16.8.1941	100	49	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	no perceivable tarsus feathering
FMNH 233298	juvenile female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	18.7.1941	97	52	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
FMNH 233299	juvenile female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	30.9.1941	107	57	labelled as hybrid by Vaurie, but obviously a <i>R. riparia</i>	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462505	ad female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	27.9.1941	111	56	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462506	juv female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	30.9.1941	99.5	46	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	minimal tarsal feathering
AMNH 462507	ad male	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	1.10.1941	110.5	55.5	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462508	ad female	Brujird, Luristan, Iran	2.10.1941	103	52	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462509	female (ovary granular)	Durud, Luristan, Iran	16.5.1942	111	55.5	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462510	female?	Durud, Luristan, Iran	16.5.1941	109	incom- plete	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint
AMNH 462511	ad female	Durud, Luristan, Iran	22.10.1941	106	50	labelled as hybrid <i>riparia</i> × <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	tuft of feathers above tarsal joint

#### Pale Sand Martin *Riparia diluta*

FMNH 233288	male	Bheraghat, India	15.11.1946	101	48	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	some tarsal feathering in line above tarsal joint
FMNH 233287	female	Sind, India	25.01.1934	100	50	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	extensive tarsal feathering above tarsal joint
FMNH 233284	not sexed	Sind, India	7.12.1939	102.5	50	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	extensive tarsal feathering above tarsal joint
FMNH 233286	not sexed	Sind, India	5.12.1939	96.5	incom- plete	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	some tarsal feathering in line above tarsal joint
FMNH 233285	not sexed	Sind, India	6.12.1939	98	53	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	extensive tarsal feathering above tarsal joint
FMNH 233283	male	Sind, India	7.12.1939	102	54	labelled as <i>diluta</i> by Vaurie	extensive tarsal feathering above tarsal joint

the now-drained lake of Antioch (Amik Gölü), in the southernmost part of modern-day Turkey (see below), making subsequent checklists of Syrian birds correct to have ignored this statement (Baumgart *et al* 1995, Murdoch & Betton 2009). Hüe & Etchécopar (1970) noted that *R. diluta* had been recorded in Palestine presumably based on Meinertzhagen (1954: 280); neither offered details. The most detailed information concerning *diluta* in the Near East comes from Israel, where Shirihai & Colston (1992) and Shirihai (1996) described it as an uncommon passage migrant, mainly through the southeast of the country and almost exclusively in spring. *R. diluta* was considered by these authors to constitute up to c20% of Sand Martins passing through in spring, but more usually <10%, mid March–mid June, with most between late March and the first week of May peaking on 5–20 April. In autumn, Shirihai (1996) regarded *diluta* as considerably less numerous, comprising c5% of the Sand Martin passage. However, in stark contrast, Morgan & Shirihai (1997: 15) described the situation as follows “The major subspecies involved is the Central Asian *R. r. diluta*, and nominate *R. r. riparia* is uncommon and occurring almost only in spring.” Yet, the same authors go on to report that all of the ringing recoveries and controls at Eilat (admittedly only eight) involved the following countries, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia and Tunisia (Morgan & Shirihai 1997: 16), *ie* all apparently from the range of nominate *riparia*, which seems decidedly curious if *diluta* really is so predominant, although it is conceivable that the range of nominate *riparia* is more likely to yield ring recoveries through greater human population densities, better knowledge of the significance of bird ringing, *etc.* This is in unexplained contradiction to Shirihai (1996), and given such a marked discrepancy (and the lack of any documentary evidence of *diluta* in the Middle East, away from the southeast corner of Arabia and Iran; see Discussion and below, respectively) suggests to us that more concrete proof of its occurrence in Israel is required, despite that Shirihai & Colston (1992) and Shirihai (1996) presented mensural data and plumage details supporting the identifications. We suspect that *R. r. shelleyi*, which is known to breed only in Egypt but may wander more widely, might be a complicating factor in analysing *Riparia* records in Israel. Loskot (2006) recently demonstrated that morphometrics alone certainly are insufficient for species identification in many cases. The Israeli Records & Distribution Committee continues to regard *diluta* as a subspecies of *R. riparia* to the present (A Cohen *in litt* 2011).

### **Saudi Arabia**

In his magnum opus, *The birds of Arabia*, Meinertzhagen (1954: 280) mentioned collecting a *R. r. diluta* from a flock containing both nominate *R. riparia* and this form at Hadda, near Mecca, on 3 April 1948. The specimen (BMNH 1965.M.8262) is also held at Tring and is an obvious *R. riparia*, based on morphology (Plate 1) and measurements (*eg* very long wing, see Table 1). Perhaps strangely, this Arabian record of *diluta* appears to have been largely ignored in the subsequent literature, unlike most other Meinertzhagen specimens and claims of *diluta* discussed here.

### **Turkey**

Meinertzhagen (1935) claimed that he found *R. r. diluta* breeding in late May at the lake of Antioch (the now-drained Amik Gölü), in southernmost Turkey, very close to the Syrian border, whilst nominate *riparia* were still on passage at the same site. Meinertzhagen mentioned taking two specimens of each form. We examined these four specimens (held at NHM) and found that all of them are clearly *R. r. riparia* based on plumage (Plate 1) and, to a lesser extent, measurements (Table 1). As there are no other claims of *R. diluta* in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008) any notion that it has occurred there to date can be categorically

discounted. Kumerloeve (1961: 138), Roselaar (1995) and Kasperek & Bilgin (1996) all rightly ignored Meinertzhagen's (1935) mention of *diluta* in Turkey.

## DISCUSSION

Perhaps the first Middle Eastern record of *R. diluta* to have been assessed, and accepted, by a records committee, is from Oman, where, on 8 February 2002, D & N Sargeant observed one of this taxon at Sohar Sun farms, in the north of the country (Eriksen *et al* 2003). Subsequently, AG, PA Lassey and BN Hill closely observed and photographed five individuals at the same locality on 26–27 March 2004 (Plate 4), and I Harrison and D Sargeant observed another bird in the same place on 16 February 2007, although this record has not been formally submitted. There is also a record from Qurum park, Oman, of a single bird on 1 November 2009 (I Tengklint), but this too has not been submitted. There is also another report in Oman, involving two, also at Sohar Sun farms, on 28 December 2004 (Balmer & Betton 2005), and Schweizer & Ayé (2007) published two photographs, by H & J Eriksen, of a bird, also at Sohar, simply dated 'January'. However, in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, the species now appears to winter regularly, albeit in variable numbers: the first record is dated 14 January 2000 and the peak single-day count involved 80 in late December 2006 (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010). Reports appear to have been at least annual since the first (*cf* Schweizer & Ayé 2007), with most between December and early April, but there is at least one May report (Balmer & Betton 2002) and there was a veritable 'rush' in early 2005, when up to 30 individuals were present at Al Wathba lake alone (Balmer & Betton 2006). Several photographs of *R. diluta* from the United Arab Emirates have been published, most recently in Balmer & Murdoch (2010: 189). This pattern of exclusive or near-exclusive occurrence in the southeast corner of Arabia is mirrored by other vagrants and winter visitors from the Indian subcontinent region, *eg* Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus*, Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii* and Bay-backed Shrike *Lanius vittatus*, amongst others. Elsewhere in the Middle East, these taxa are unknown or virtually so, even in comparatively well-watched Israel. So, while we certainly would not eliminate the possibility of vagrancy by *R. diluta* to, or even small numbers passing through, Israel, the presence of many thousands, if not tens of thousands on regular spring migration (as implied by Shirihai & Colston 1992, Shirihai 1996 and, especially, Morgan & Shirihai 1997), seems improbable.

There may be other records of *R. diluta* from Arabia, especially its eastern seaboard, but because of its previous treatment as a race of *R. riparia*, observations may be effectively 'buried' from view, or even discounted as uninteresting by their observers. On Bahrain, Hirschfeld (1995) noted that *R. diluta* could occur, but did not seemingly encounter it during the three years he spent on the island. Elsewhere, other national avifaunal reviews have not attempted to discriminate between races of *R. riparia sensu lato* (*eg* Richardson 1990, Nightingale & Hill 1993, Gregory 2005).

Finally, we note that there are other Meinertzhagen specimens belonging to the *R. riparia/R. diluta* group that were either misidentified by their collector or are otherwise problematic. PC Rasmussen and R Prÿs-Jones (pers comm) have examined Meinertzhagen's two specimens of *R. r. ijimae* and one of *R. diluta* collected in Afghanistan: the latter proves to be *R. diluta* and the two *R. r. ijimae* are apparently fraudulent. These specimens will be discussed in detail by Rasmussen and Prÿs-Jones' forthcoming work on the Asian specimens of Richard Meinertzhagen. As a result of the type of problems described here, it seems that there is still comparatively much to learn concerning the relative distributions of these two species in Central Asia and related regions.

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# The first confirmed records of Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* for the United Arab Emirates and Oman, in 2011

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Until very recently, the distribution of seabirds in the gulf of Oman off the United Arab Emirates was relatively poorly known. Knowledge was from a scattering of old records made from merchant ships, a small number of mainly coastal trips made by local birders, and, to a greater extent, land-based observations. However, since June 2010, a small but enthusiastic group of local birders have made afternoon boat trips to search for seabirds from Kalba harbour, Sharjah emirate, on the UAE east coast. Most trips have been on a boat skippered by a local fisherman, Abdulla al Zaabi. In 2011 trips were near-weekly mid April–late September and some trips gathered truly pelagic records, ranging up to 50 km offshore. A number of species regularly seen on these trips were previously regarded as exceptionally rare vagrants, or even unknown, in UAE waters. Perhaps the least anticipated was Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*. Indeed, Cory's were seen on three dates mid May–early July in 2011. The OSME Region List (2010) records this taxon as suspected but unconfirmed. The similar looking and closely related taxon Scopoli's Shearwater *C. (d.) diomedea* was assumed to account for records from *eg* Oman and the gulf of Aqaba, presumably because of its occurrence in the eastern Mediterranean.

## RECORDS OF CORY'S SHEARWATER IN 2011

### *First record*

12 May, observers KalD and Derrick Wilby (Plate 1). A single bird was found at 17.15 h, c20 km east-northeast of Kalba. It was first located sat on the water among Persian Shearwaters *Puffinus persicus*. It then flew and was followed at speed for several minutes with the last sighting at 25° 07.400' N, 056° 35.787' E. The area was re-visited two days later but the bird was not present.

### *Second record*

22 June, seven observers including GT (Plates 2, 3). A single bird was found at 16.00 h, c5 km east-southeast of Kalba. The co-ordinates were not noted. It was observed at close range as it flew steadily eastwards.

### *Third record*

1 July, eight observers including OC (Plates 4–7). A large feeding flock of Persian and Flesh-footed Shearwaters *P. carneipes* and Bridled Terns *Onychoprion fuscata* was located at 17.30 h, c24 km east-southeast of Kalba. A single Cory's was seen to settle on the sea among them. The flock was approached and the Cory's Shearwater observed at close range on the sea and then followed for c15 minutes as it flew south. Co-ordinates for the last sighting are 24° 54.772' N, 056° 37.289' E, within Omani waters. The initial sighting was either within or very close to UAE waters.

The Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC) accepted the records as referring to three different Cory's Shearwaters *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, based mainly on plumage aspects and wear. The Oman Bird Records Committee also accepted the third record as a Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*.



**Plate 1.** Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c20 km east-northeast of Kalba, UAE, 12 May 2011. This is a typical Cory's in every respect and its identification is straightforward. It has a relatively rather large head, broad wings, and heavy bill. Its overall hefty structure eliminates Scopoli's *C. (d.) diomedea* and suggests a male Cory's. The underwing pattern is diagnostic of Cory's. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border between the two feather tracts (particularly clear on the left wing). The under primary-coverts dark spots are not visible. © Derrick Wilby



**Plates 2 & 3.** Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c5 km east-southeast of Kalba, UAE, 22 June 2011. Not as hefty-looking as the individual in Plate 1, but still a fairly straightforward Cory's. Its structure lies outside of the range of Scopoli's *C. (d.) diomedea*, except possibly the largest males. It certainly is broad-chested and has a fairly large bill. That aside, the underwing pattern is diagnostic of Cory's. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border. This pattern is evident on both underwings, but the left underwing primaries (Plate 3) show a hint of a reflective quality and look slightly greyish. This effect is accentuated when strong light catches the underwing. The under primary-coverts on both wings show two dark spots. © Huw Roberts



**Plates 4–7.** Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis*, c24 km east-southeast of Kalba, UAE/Oman 1 July 2011. This is not a straightforward Cory's given the photographs. The left underwing pattern in Plate 4 (top left) rings alarm bells when presented as a Cory's. The region of the primaries appears like a pale/whitish triangle, strongly suggesting white fingers merging together in a photographic effect. In other words, it looks like a Scopoli's Shearwater *C. (d.) diomedea*. However, the structure is not typical of a Scopoli's, particularly evident in Plate 5 (top right: bill, head and body) and Plate 6 (bottom left: bill). It is also worth noting that observers saw this *Calonectris* shearwater alongside two Flesh-footed Shearwaters *Puffinus carneipes* and noted that it dwarfed them. Confirmation that we are dealing with a Cory's Shearwater comes from Plate 7 (bottom right). Despite the fact that the photograph lacks detail, it is evident that the exposed primaries are dark. Knowledge of interpreting photographs of seabirds in flight indicates that the dark is genuine and not a result of some shadow effect. The under primary-coverts dark spots are not visible.  
© Oscar Campbell (Plates 4–6), Steve James (Plate 7)

## IDENTIFICATION

The first British record of Scopoli's Shearwater was confirmed with photographs off the Isles of Scilly, 2 August 2004. The official finders' account includes a summary of criteria used by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC) to assess claims of Scopoli's Shearwaters (Fisher & Flood 2010). BBRC's criteria were drawn upon by EBRC in their decision making and Adam Rowlands, chairman of BBRC, was consulted and provided further useful feedback. The critical criteria relate to size and structure and, in particular, underwing pattern. Other plumage features such as head pattern are extremely difficult to assess due to the effects of light on the eye and the camera. Even using such criteria, the separation of Cory's from Scopoli's Shearwaters is not always straightforward and, based on current knowledge, some birds cannot be identified to taxon (Howell & Patteson 2008). We draw upon the latter article and our own experiences to discuss the main identification criteria below (in order of importance) and we use the captions to the plates of the three birds in question to apply these criteria and to confirm their identification as Cory's. Also,

the criteria will be useful for birders on future seawatches and pelagic trips in the OSME region.

### *Underwing pattern*

The single most useful criterion for field separation of Cory's and Scopoli's is the underwing pattern, although it is not without its problems. The exposed primaries of a typical Cory's are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white. This gives an evenly-rounded pale/dark border between the two feather tracts. The under primary-coverts typically show two dark spots (Robb *et al* 2008). The spots are dark marks in the outermost two greater primary coverts. These may be visible in good photographs, though some caution is required because the coverts may be out of place or one may overlap the other. The under primary-coverts of Scopoli's are white, like Cory's, but the exposed primaries have white tongues along the inner webs of the outer primaries giving white fingers protruding into the hand. The under primary-coverts typically show one dark spot in the outermost greater primary covert. However, one quality of the underside of the remiges (and indeed the larger coverts) of Cory's and Scopoli's, like all Procellariiformes it seems, is that they are reflective. A Cory's flying away with its underwings catching the light could easily appear to have much whitish in the primaries, suggesting Scopoli's and photographs of such a bird might look convincing for Scopoli's (*eg* see Plate 4). Conversely, the whitish fingers of a Scopoli's might be hard to see if the underwings are in shadow, or the bird is flying against strong light.

Caveats aside, a typical Cory's and a typical Scopoli's, if seen well, can be separated (Plates 8 and 9), but unfortunately not all birds are typical. Some skins of Cory's at the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK, show short whitish fingers, and this is borne out by observations in the field at the breeding grounds (RLF *pers obs*). This did not escape Howell & Patteson (2008) who offered the following guidelines for the underwing primaries: (1) all dark is Cory's, (2) short whitish tongue on p10 only is presumed Cory's, (3) whitish tongue on p9 only is presumed Cory's, (4) whitish tongues on 2–3 primaries among p8–10 is Cory's or Scopoli's, (5) distinct white tongues on 3 or more primaries *including* p10 is Scopoli's. Extensive studies in the Mediterranean and Atlantic hope to clarify matters further (RLF & D López-Valasco *in prep*).

### *Size and structure*

On average, Cory's is an altogether larger and heftier bird than Scopoli's (up to 46% heavier; Thibault *et al* 1997). It is larger-headed, broader-winged, and heavier-billed. However, males average larger than females so that a male Scopoli's may overlap in size and structure with a female Cory's. Thus, it is only male Cory's and female Scopoli's that are likely to stand out in the field as, respectively, visibly relatively large and hefty or small and slight (Plates 8, 9).

### *Other plumage features*

Scopoli's compared to Cory's is said to have a paler greyer head and possibly upperparts, and less grey markings on the chin and throat. However, in worn plumage Cory's dark feathers fade so that the head and upperparts become paler and greyer like Scopoli's. In fresh plumage dark feathers are at their darkest so that the head and upperparts of a fresh Scopoli's are darker than a faded Cory's. In addition, it is well known that light influences the apparent tone of feathers (*eg* overcast skies versus strong sunlight). All in all, colour of the head and upperparts is not a helpful distinction.



**Plate 8** (left). Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) diomedea* off Catalonia, Spain, 10 September 2011. A typical Scopoli's. The diagnostic underwing feature of dark bordered long white inner webbings to the primaries stands out in this photograph (particularly important that it shows this in p8–p10). They give the impression of white fingers extending beyond the underwing coverts along the primaries. Also note the slim bill, head and body. Indeed, compared to the Cory's *C. (d.) borealis* in Plates 1–6, this individual looks emaciated and most likely is a female. Note one distinct dark spot in the outermost under primary-coverts. © Ashley Fisher

**Plate 9** (right). Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* off the Scilly isles, UK, 1 August 2008. A typical Cory's. Note the large head, broad wings, and heavy bill. The exposed primaries are dark, while the under primary-coverts are white, giving an evenly-rounded pale/dark border. Note two distinct dark spots in the outermost under primary-coverts. © Ashley Fisher

## RANGE

Scopoli's Shearwater breeds almost exclusively within the Mediterranean, while Cory's Shearwater breeds almost exclusively across the Macaronesian islands in the northeast Atlantic (excluding the Cape Verdes, the breeding islands of the similar-looking but much smaller Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*). Difficulty in at-sea identification of Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters have made it difficult to determine their non-breeding distribution. Del Nevo (1994) and Thibault *et al* (1997) suggested that Scopoli's mainly winters off South African coasts and Cory's concentrates off the eastern United States before moving to the southwest Atlantic. However, on the basis of new field characteristics (Gutiérrez 1998), it was possible for Camphuysen & van der Meer (2001) to identify many Cory's off South Africa, refuting conventional thinking. The regular presence of both taxa off North Carolina, USA, during spring–autumn (Howell & Patteson 2008) and in the central South Atlantic during March–April (RLF pers obs) provides further evidence that the two taxa do not segregate in the non-breeding season. Numbers of both taxa are found off South Africa during November–April and both enter the southwest Indian ocean (*eg* Ryan 1997, Oschadleus *et al* 2001, Camphuysen & van der Meer 2001). This is one possible origin for Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters seen off Arabia and suggests that either form could occur in the region.

Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that Scopoli's Shearwater enters Arabian waters from the Mediterranean via the Suez canal. Indeed, this was suggested by small numbers that summered regularly at the head of the gulf of Aqaba, Eilat, Israel, throughout the 1980s and until the early 1990s (Shirihai 1996). In addition, there are nine accepted records of Scopoli's for Oman, with the most recent in June 2006 (Eriksen *et al* 2012). However, recent records of well-photographed birds from the gulf of Aqaba at Eilat (eg up to eight in 2011), after very few records since the early 1990s, all appear to be Cory's (Y Perlman pers comm; see eg the front cover of *Sandgrouse* 32(2) which shows the underside of a flying *Calonectris (diomedea) borealis* photographed at Eilat, April 2010).

All of this raises uncertainties about Cory's and Scopoli's Shearwaters in Arabian waters—about the regularity of occurrence, the frequency in each month of the year, and the relative proportion of each taxon. The identification criteria summarised in this paper and the continuation of pelagic trips off the east coast of the UAE should contribute to clarifying matters.

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# Presence of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* in lowland Turkmenistan

TIZIANO LONDEI

A recent evaluation of historical and current records of griffon *Gyps* vultures throughout the former Soviet Union (Katzner *et al* 2004) found “almost no information on vultures from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan” *ie* a considerable part of Central (Middle) Asia. Distribution of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* in Turkmenistan, mapped in a very recent guide to Central Asian birds (Ayé *et al* 2012) is almost the same as in Dementiev & Gladkov (1951) *ie* limited to the mountains at the southern and the eastern boundaries of the country.

I have recently seen Eurasian Griffons in western and northwestern Turkmenistan. On 9 August 2012 at 10.30 h local time eight birds were circling above the northwestern slopes of the Great Balkan, an isolated massif in the lowlands near the Caspian sea. They were gaining height together near rocks, as griffons usually do when they leave a communal roost. My distant observation point (39° 42' N, 54° 23' E GPS) was at c500 m asl in a hill steppe which changed to flat gypsum desert with sand tracts at lower altitude further north. Livestock (sheep) were progressively scarcer. The day after, at 15.50 h local time, I observed a pair of Eurasian Griffons passing along cliffs in the Yangykala canyon (40° 28' N, 54° 43' E, Plate 1). Seen from above they exhibited the white downy ruff and pale wing-coverts with contrasting dark blotched band, characteristic of adult birds. This remote canyon is a spectacular product of the erosion of an ancient sea bed, which is now at c200 m asl. It was an extremely dry area and although I explored the surroundings in the late



**Plate 1.** One member of the Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus* pair seen in the Yangykala canyon, Turkmenistan, 10 August 2012. © Giuliana Marzi

afternoon and next morning, I found no sign of either domestic or wild mammals except for one, blurred, gazelle trail.

My first sighting suggests the presence of a griffon colony 200 km minimum distance from the nearest known griffon area, the northernmost foothills of the Kopet Dag. It might be a small colony—griffon colonies are small in similar regions (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951, Katzner *et al* 2004)—nesting on the rocks of the Great Balkan and scavenging on the relatively productive pastures of its foothills. My second sighting suggests a wider geographic distribution; to almost 100 km further north, and a harsher habitat. A consequent question is whether the observed pair of adult birds were local breeders, long-ranging foragers, or vagrants. Radiotracking in desert regions (Bahat 1995) showed adult birds less prone to vagrancy than immatures, though they were able to forage very far away from the colony; but such long flights might result from the choice to reach grazing areas intensively used by ungulates, which would not be the case at Yangykala. Although mountains seem preferred, griffons can also inhabit plains provided that broken terrain is available (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951): Yangykala would offer extensive cliffs as nesting sites and thermal-producing ground. A further question is whether my sightings resulted from a Eurasian Griffon presence overlooked for a long time, or recent range expansion. The same question applies to the Eurasian Griffons in neighbouring southwestern Kazakhstan, to the north, most of them seen only recently and with no sign of breeding (years 2000–2011, map in Sklyarenko & Katzner 2012). Dolgushin (1962) mentioned a record from the Mangghystau peninsula. Taken together, these sightings suggest a rather wide distribution of the Eurasian Griffon in the lowlands east of the Caspian sea.

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# A mixed pair of pale and black morph Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe lugens lugens* in the southern highlands of Jordan

FARES KHOURY, MUNA HADDAD, SHARIF AL-JBOUR & FERAS RAHAHLEH

The black morph of Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens lugens*, commonly named the 'Basalt Wheatear', has been recorded mainly in the basalt desert of northeast Jordan and southern Syria (Andrews 1994). The classification and taxonomic status of this population have been the subject of several reports since its discovery several decades ago (Wallace 1983, Tye 1994, Förschler *et al* 2010, Khoury *et al* 2010, Shirihai *et al* 2011). It was first described as a Mourning Wheatear by Tye (1994), and thereafter treated as a black morph of nominate *lugens*. The fact that there appeared to be no recent evidence of mixed pairings of pale and black morph birds (*cf* L Cornwallis in Cramp & Simmons 1988) was used in support of taxonomic separation by Shirihai *et al* (2011). The geographical restriction of the black birds combined with the near absence of normal, pale morph, birds in the basalt desert, which is evident at least during the breeding season, originally stimulated discussions about a possible taxonomic distinction. The black form of Mourning Wheatear is considered very rare in Jordan and restricted during the breeding season to those parts of the black basalt desert which include the suitable habitat structures typical for breeding Mourning Wheatears (Khoury *et al* 2010). The few scattered records of Mourning Wheatears with black plumage outside the basalt desert, notably in Egypt and Israel, were assumed to be of visiting or dispersing birds, based on previous observations of Mourning Wheatears which carry out short movements after the breeding season (*eg* Khoury & Boulad 2010). Recently, Shirihai *et al* (2011) proposed the black form as a separate subspecies, *Oenanthe lugens warriiae*, due to its morphological distinction, mainly plumage coloration. Shirihai *et al* (2011) decided on subspecies level for the taxon based on a previous mtDNA analysis which revealed no genetic differentiation among the black and pale forms of nominate *lugens* found in Jordan (Förschler *et al* 2010). In this note, we report on a mixed breeding pair of pale and black morph Mourning Wheatears outside the basalt desert.

## OBSERVATIONS

### *Location and habitat of the black morph individual*

During field work on 16 April 2012 in the mountains near Rajif, south of Wadi Mussa, a wheatear with black plumage was discovered sitting on a large rock (30° 09' N, 35° 27' E, 1640 m asl) along the road leading to Ma'an. The bird was identified by FK immediately as being a black morph of *O. l. lugens* (Plate 1, see description below). The black individual was thus recorded during the breeding season at a distance of 250 km southwest of the basalt desert which contains the known breeding grounds of 'Basalt Wheatear' (Khoury *et al* 2010).

The bird held territory along a small valley and adjacent slopes. The habitat



**Plate 1.** Black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, 17 April 2012, Rajif, southwest Jordan. © Sharif al-Jbour



**Plate 2.** Hybrid juvenile of a mixed pale/black morph pair of Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe l. lugens*, 30 May 2012, Rajif, southwest Jordan. © Fares Khoury

consists of arid/semi-arid highland steppe, dominated by the dwarf shrub *Artemisia sieberi*; but the vegetation was degraded due to overgrazing. The area was generally undulating with small flat plateaus and steep to moderate slopes with abundant rocky outcrops. Hills were separated by valleys which contained rock piles and boulders. The exposed limestone rocks and boulders were typically pale yellowish to off-white, and there were no basalt rocks. Isabelline Wheatears *O. isabellina* were also breeding in the area, although they tended to occupy flat plateaus and gently sloping terrain, as typical of this species (Cramp & Simmons 1988). Mourning Wheatears occupied rocky and steep slopes, and all individuals observed in the area, except for the adult male dealt with here, were normal pale morph *O. l. lugens*. The black morph bird was observed again on several occasions during April, May, August and September.

### **Behaviour**

The black individual was clearly a male holding territory when first recorded in April: it sang the typical song of *O. l. lugens* on elevated perches and occasionally chased away an Isabelline Wheatear entering its territory. A neighbouring male of the pale morph of *O. l. lugens* was also singing down the valley, but direct interactions with conspecific neighbours were not observed. The black morph male was paired with a normal type (pale) female which was seen on 16 April within the territory of the black male, moving among rock boulders, possibly nest site prospecting, and sitting on heaps of stones at the foothill below a steep slope. The male often approached the female to a few metres, without showing any antagonistic behaviour. During short visits in late April/early May, the black morph male was mostly recorded while feeding and singing, whereas the female was rarely seen. On 30 May, two recently-fledged juveniles were seen at the foothill and were fed once by the male and another time by the female. One was photographed (Plate 2). During later visits in August/September, only the male was observed and the juveniles presumably had dispersed. We were able to verify the identity of the adult male in September by trapping it using a clap net with mealworms as bait (Plates 3–6, handled and ringed by FK). It is a pity that the plumage of the young birds after moult of their juvenile



**Plate 3.** Upperwing of black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, adult male in fresh plumage, Rajif, southwest Jordan, 1 September 2012. © Feras Rahahleh



**Plate 4.** Lower side of wing of black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, adult male, Rajif, southwest Jordan, 1 September 2012. © Feras Rahahleh

body feathers could not be determined. At least one normal, pale morph bird was recorded along the borders of the male's territory in early September and no other black *lugens* was observed in the vicinity.

#### *Description of plumage of adult male and juveniles*

The adult male showed the typical combination of 'Basalt Wheatear' features (cf Shirihai *et al* 2011) which include entirely black plumage, except for the white on the inner webs of primaries that reach the shaft (Plates 1, 3, 4), small white rump (Plate 5), and white undertail coverts which lack the rufous/rusty-buff colour of normal, pale morph *O. l. lugens* (Plate 6).

The bird trapped early September at the site was identified as an adult (most probably the same adult male) and not one of the young birds. This was determined by the lack of contrast in wing feathers including the greater coverts. The primary coverts had rather rounded tips without any traces of white (Plate 3). The following measurements were taken: wing length 99 mm, tail length 66 mm, and bill length (to skull) 17 mm. The 6th primary was not clearly emarginated and P1 was slightly shorter than the primary covert tips.

Except for the greyish mantle and dark sides of chin characteristic of black morph juveniles, the fledged juveniles generally had a similar plumage to the juvenile pale morph (Plate 2), and even had the rusty undertail coverts typical of the normal variety of *O. l. lugens* (see Khoury *et al* 2010 for photos of juvenile black and pale morph *O. l. lugens*).

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This is the first confirmed record of a mixed pair, which is well outside the breeding grounds of the black morph/subspecies '*warriae*'. This record provides some additional information relevant to evaluating the taxonomic status of the 'Basalt Wheatear' (black morph vs *O. l. warriae*; Shirihai *et al* 2011). With this record, the geographical and ecological restriction of breeding black Mourning Wheatears to the basalt desert of northern Jordan and southern Syria, *eg* in Egypt, were assumed to be winter visitors or vagrants; however they may also indicate that the black variety does exist elsewhere but at extremely low frequencies.

The black Mourning Wheatear male of Rajif, which appeared identical to the birds belonging to the basalt *warriae* population, was obviously successful in attracting and pairing with a female of the normal variety. Reproductive separation of Basalt Wheatear from pale morph Mourning Wheatear was not demonstrated; evidence of very close



**Plate 5.** Rump and tail of black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, adult male, Rajif, southwest Jordan, 1 September 2012. © Feras Rahahleh



**Plate 6.** Undertail coverts of black variety Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, same bird as in Plates 1, 3–5, Rajif, southwest Jordan, 1 September 2012. © Feras Rahahleh

taxonomic relationship (Mayr & Ashlock 1991). This observation also raises questions about the importance of certain features in display and territory signalling *eg* the size of the white rump patch (see Shirihai *et al* 2011) which differs among the two varieties.

The record reported here does not necessarily refute the subspecies status recently suggested by Shirihai *et al* (2011). A particular phenotype distinguishing one geographic subspecies may occur in other populations, but a clinal decrease in its frequency away from its main population can be expected. Data supporting this are however lacking, and their collection would require considerable time and effort due to the rarity of the black variety outside the basalt desert. A more realistic approach would be to study the frequency of pale birds and mixed pairs, and plumage of offspring before and after first body moult, in and near the basalt desert during the breeding season, with further field studies on behaviour, *eg* song, in the Jordanian, Syrian and possibly also the adjacent Saudi Arabian part of the basalt desert, where '*O. lugens warriae*' apparently has its main population (Khoury *et al* 2010).

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# First record of Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus corone capellanus* in United Arab Emirates

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On 26 November 2012 a lone Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus corone capellanus* was seen feeding on the carcass of a young Socotra cormorant chick *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* on Siniya island in the Arabian gulf (Umm al Quwain emirate, UAE). Siniya island is located c100 m offshore to the east of Umm al Quwain town. The bird was feeding on the shore of the inner lagoon (25° 37' 6.00" N, 55° 37' 27.68" E) at c14.22 h and was viewed for 5 minutes (Plate 1). The crow then flew directly in front of the observer (RG) permitting photos of the bird in flight (Plate 2). TP confirmed identification from the photos. The Emirates Bird Records Committee accepted the record as the first for the UAE. Subsequent observations of the bird have occurred sporadically in the same area on Siniya island, up to as recently as 21 March 2013.

The *Corvus corone/cornix* complex consists of crows that have variable plumage and are widely distributed in the Palaearctic (Mayr & Greenway 1962). Although the common name Hooded Crow is attributed to the '*cornix*' group, they are usually treated within *Corvus corone* by most authorities (Jonsson 1992, Cramp and Perrins 1994) although some authors regard them as a separate species *Corvus cornix* (Porter & Aspinall 2010). Hooded Crows are characterized by a combination of glossy black on the head, throat, underwings, primaries and tail and ashy grey in between (Cramp & Perrins 1994). Genetic analyses confirm that Hooded Crows belong to *Corvus corone* (Haring *et al* 2012). Previously described *cornix*-group subspecies (Mayr & Greenway 1962) are also largely supported by genetic analyses that cluster *Corvus corone capellanus*, the Mesopotamian Crow, within the western clade of *C. corone* (Haring *et al* 2012). The Mesopotamian Crow has the glossy black pattern characteristic of Hooded Crows but the ashy grey is replaced by whitish tones, giving it its alternative common name, the Iraq Pied Crow (Cramp & Perrins 1994). It is resident in Iraq and southwest Iran (Porter & Aspinall 2010). Interestingly, the Siniya island individual appears to have black feathering on the front of the tibial region of the leg with white at the rear (Plate 1) whereas the painting in Porter & Aspinall (2010) shows pale grey feathering around the 'thigh' and that in Madge & Burn (1999) black.



**Plate 1.** Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus corone capellanus* on the ground, Siniya island, UAE, 26 November 2012. © Robert Gubiani



**Plate 2.** Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus corone capellanus* in flight, Siniya island, UAE, 26 November 2012. © Robert Gubiani



Strong winds, thunderstorms and rain were reported for the whole region from 8–16 November, with the weather moving in an easterly direction from Kuwait over Saudi Arabia and directly over the UAE and Oman (Emirates

Meteorology Portal 2012). We speculate that high winds and storm activity in the area could have driven the lone individual to the UAE. A Mesopotamian Crow was observed in Kuwait from 23 October 2012, the first confirmed record for Kuwait (al Ghanem 2013).

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# Large increase of the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* population on Masirah island, Oman

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Field surveys for nesting Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* were conducted during 17 days in February and May 2012 on Masirah island, Oman. Fifty-three nesting territories were found, one of the highest breeding densities in the world; 52 were occupied by pairs. 85% of breeding territories were in the northern half of the island, where the main municipal dump was located. We estimate that there are 65–80 territorial Egyptian vulture pairs on the island (> 4 times the previous estimate), and 260–386 individuals. Of 40 pairs for which age of both breeders was determined, 38 were adult/adult pairs, one was an adult/subadult pairing and one of two subadults. Ninety-two active and old nests were found, all located in holes and crevices on steep slopes or cliffs at a mean elevation of 119 m asl ( $n = 32$ ). Breeding performance was low compared to studies elsewhere, with 0.46 fledglings/territorial pair, 0.82 fledglings/incubating pair and 1.13 fledglings/successful pair being produced ( $n = 39$ ). Fish and domestic livestock remains were important food sources. Unintentional poisoning and electrocution are possible threats, but there was no evidence that these threats were active. The absence of wild mammalian carnivores on the island (which can lead to poisoning events), the lack of human disturbance at the nests, and the existence of the rubbish dump and the way in which waste is handled may be the main factors contributing to the large resident Egyptian Vulture population on Masirah.

## INTRODUCTION

The Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* is a medium-sized scavenger distributed throughout southern Europe, mostly northern Africa, the Middle East, Transcaucasia, Central (Middle) Asia, Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Its historical distribution is much reduced, especially in more southern areas of Africa (Mundy *et al* 1992). In recent decades populations in many areas have declined dramatically, notably in the Balkans, Italy, Turkey, large parts of the Middle East, East Africa, Central Asia and India (BirdLife International 2012), while a few populations have been more or less stable or show slight increases (Del Moral 2009, Kobierzycki 2011, Porter & Suleiman 2012). The mainland populations on the Arabian peninsula are thought to have declined by 90% in the last 50 years (Jennings 2010).

Historical information on the Egyptian Vulture population of the island of Masirah, Oman, is available. A whole-island survey September 1944–May 1945 found 10 pairs, although the author misidentified them as Black-winged Kites *Elanus caeruleus* (Green 1949). The population probably remained stable for some time, and a survey in March 1975 estimated there to be 12 breeding pairs (Griffiths & Rogers 1975). In recent times the population has most probably increased, as suggested by the observation of more than 40 birds at the Masirah rubbish dump in May 2005 (Sargeant & Harrison 2005).

In 2008 the Egyptian Vulture was categorized as endangered (BirdLife International 2012), and since then populations have continued to decrease in a number of countries *eg* Greece (Xirouchakis & Tsiakiris 2009), Spain (Del Moral & Martí 2002), countries of central West Africa (Rondeau & Thiollay 2004, Thiollay 2006), Bulgaria (IA pers obs). Oman is thought to have a population of only  $c100$  pairs (Jennings 2010). This backdrop of globally declining numbers, a purportedly small Omani population and an interest to better survey and document the birds on Masirah, an IBA (Evans 1994), provided the impetus for this survey of breeding Egyptian Vultures on the island, which aimed to collect baseline information on their numbers and distribution, and on productivity.

## STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Field surveys were conducted 23 February–1 March and 9–17 May 2012 (17 days) on Masirah island (c20.42° N, 58.79° E), Oman. Masirah is located c19 km off the east coast of Oman in the Arabian sea (Figure 1); it is 65 km long and 6–16 km wide with an area of c649 km<sup>2</sup>. Masirah is characterized by a desert landscape with hills in its central and eastern parts, reaching elevations up to 256 m asl. Vegetation is mostly dwarf-shrub, including *Limonium* and *Suaeda*. The human population is found mostly in the northern half of the island, and numbers c10 000. Fishing is the main livelihood, but there is also an Omani airbase on the island.

Surveys were made during c320 km of car travel and c40 km of walking into areas remote from roads and tracks. Car surveys were typically done with four people (driver and three observers). Figure 1 shows the routes travelled during surveys. Frequent stops were made along the routes and all cliffs and hills offering suitable breeding habitat for Egyptian Vultures were checked for nests, using binoculars (10×50) and a telescope (20–60×60). Given the terrain this meant that cliffs up to c500–1500 m from the routes were checked. The sky was scanned for vultures.

During February, territory occupancy was recorded and we tried to determine the age and breeding status of the pairs. Timing of egg laying was recorded based on observations of pairs at nest sites and age of chicks, both nestlings and already fledged young around nests. Active nests were not visited (with one exception) so as to avoid potential disturbance prior to and during incubation. Aging birds in the field followed Clark & Schmitt (1998). In May visits were made to as many nests as possible in order to record the number of chicks in the nest, investigate reasons for breeding failure, collect prey remains and record the following parameters for each nest: latitude/longitude, elevation, aspect and nest cavity dimensions. Reproductive rates were calculated excluding nests where nestlings were ≤ 40 days old because we were unsure of the survival-rate-to-fledging of such young nestlings.

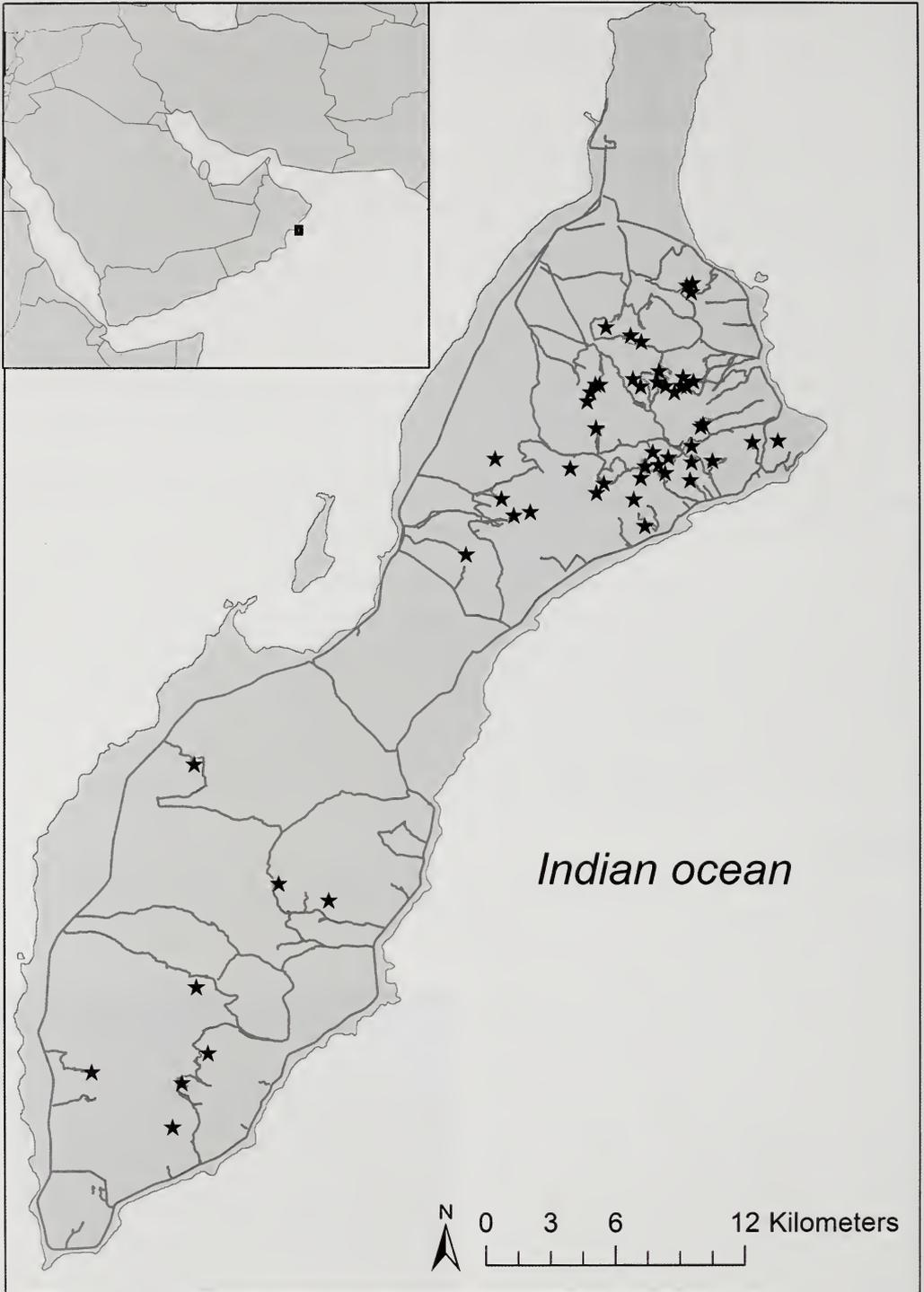
*Ad hoc* observations were made at the municipal rubbish dump (20° 34.575' N, 58° 52.814' E) to get an idea of the number and age composition of vultures using the dump.

## RESULTS

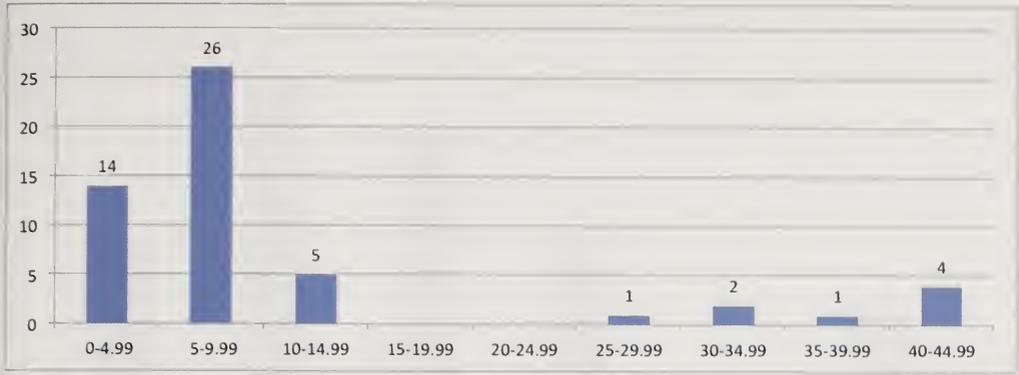
Fifty-three occupied breeding territories were located (Figure 1), 52 were occupied by pairs and one by a single territorial bird. Of these, 45 (85%) were located in the northern half and 8 (15%) in the southern half of the island. Thus, at a minimum, the nesting density of the Egyptian Vulture on the island is 8.17 pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup>; the mean nearest neighbour distance was 1.02 km (range: 120–6670 m). In total 92 nests were found. Nests were always in holes or crevices on very steep slopes or cliffs that had an abundance of potential nesting cavities (Plate 1). Nest sites were located high up (mean elevation 119 m, n = 32) on ridges and hills that were remote from human habitation and also provided good protection from the weather. At least 93% of the nests located were accessible without the use of climbing equipment. Nests faced mainly north (8), east (7) and west (5). On average, nesting cavities (n = 21) were 115 cm wide, 113 cm



**Plate 1.** Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* breeding habitat within a large wadi in the northern part of Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaýlo Angelov



**Figure 1.** Locations of the 53 Egyptian Vulture breeding territories (asterisks) and survey routes (lines) travelled on Masirah island, Oman.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of Egyptian Vulture breeding territories ( $n = 53$ , vertical axis) in relation to the distance (km) to the municipal rubbish dump on Masirah, Oman, in 2012.

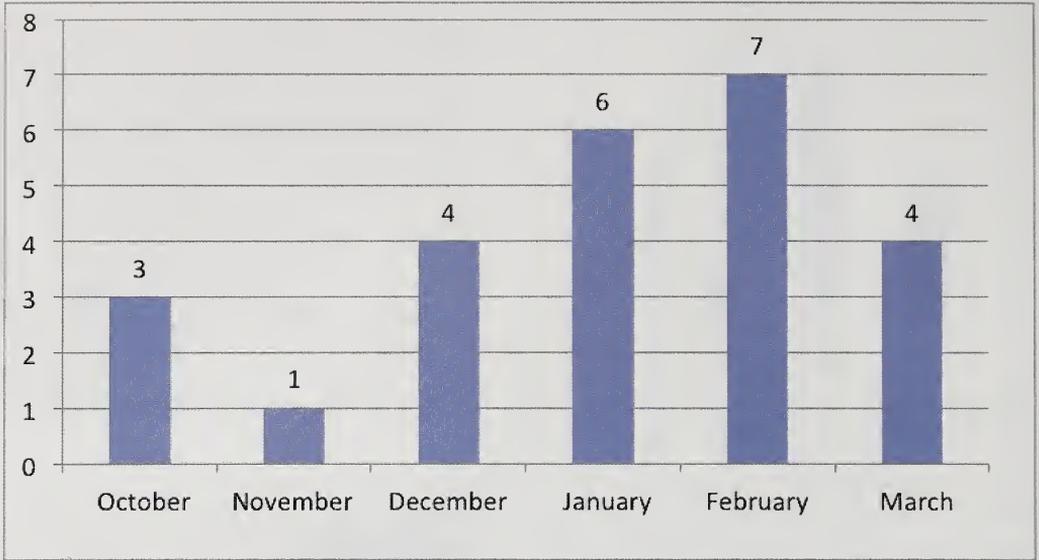
deep and had an entrance height of 74 cm (Plate 2). Density of nesting territories was apparently higher in the vicinity of the rubbish dump (Figure 2).

Egyptian Vultures on Masirah laid eggs October–March ( $n = 25$ , Figure 3), with most laying in January and February. It is possible that some pairs may lay eggs during May–September, but the timing of our surveys precluded determining this. Of 42 pairs examined, 25 (59.5%) laid eggs (Plate 3). Reproductive data from three nests were excluded from further analyses because one was still incubating in May and the nestlings at two were <30 days old when visited in May. Six of 22 pairs (27.2%) failed during incubation or lost their young after hatching. Thus, 18 nestlings >40 days of age were produced from 16 pairs that hatched eggs (Plate 4). Egyptian Vultures on Masirah produced 0.46 juveniles per monitored pair ( $n = 39$ ), 0.82 juveniles per breeding pair ( $n = 22$ ), and 1.13 juveniles per successful pair ( $n = 16$ ).

Prey remains from 10 nests were collected. All contained fish and domestic livestock remains, and these animal groups probably represent the main food source for the Egyptian Vultures on the island. Remains were also found of gulls *Larus*, a single domestic cat *Felis catus* and a single Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*. The only significant congregations of foraging vultures were observed at the municipal rubbish dump (Plate 5), where up to 26 birds were observed (Table 1). Smaller, apparently ephemeral, groups were seen at locations around the island (Plate 6). Immature and adult Egyptian Vultures were also observed roosting communally on east and south facing cliffs at higher elevations, particularly in the area of Jabal ash Shabbah, c6.5 km south of



**Plate 2.** Fully feathered juvenile Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (lying at back) in deep and well sheltered nest cavity, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov



**Figure 3.** Timing of egg laying ( $n = 25$ ) for Egyptian Vultures on Masirah, Oman, in 2012.

the rubbish dump. On 14 May, 18.00–19.30 h, one such roost held 35–38 Egyptian Vultures, including 18–20 immatures (apparently non-territorial birds).

## DISCUSSION

Our survey confirmed 53 occupied breeding territories of Egyptian Vultures on Masirah, which is almost 4.5 times the number previously thought to be breeding on the island (Griffiths & Rogers 1975). Given the increase in human population in recent years, and thus the increased amount of waste being disposed of at the rubbish dump, it seems likely that at least some of the increase is real and not the result of improved survey. Although we recorded many more territories than previous observers, some pairs were most certainly missed by us because we did not survey all areas on the island, and the time frame of field work was limited. Taking into account the amount of apparently suitable habitat that we did not survey and the effect nearness to the dump site had on the density of territories we estimate the current breeding population to be 65–80 breeding pairs (*ie* a 5.4–6.6 fold increase from previous reports). Our findings clearly suggest that the Oman national population size of the Egyptian Vulture is underestimated at 100 pairs (Jennings 2010). MJM (unpublished data) counted 15+ hatchling Egyptian vultures from the year at two different rubbish dump sites (the main dump for Muscat and at Quriyat) in northern Oman in August 2012. It is likely that many if not all of those would have been produced

**Table 1.** Egyptian Vulture age structure at the municipal rubbish dump on Masirah, Oman, 2012. 1st plumage refers to juvenile bird.

Date	Time	1st plumage	2nd plumage	3rd plumage	4th plumage	Adult	Total
23 Feb	07.30–08.30 h	0	7	4	1	10	22
9 May	08.10–08.25 h	0	1	1	0	12	14
11 May	14.45–15.00 h	2	5	1	0	18	26
15 May	06.50–07.05 h	0	3	1	0	8	12

at nest sites in Oman because migrants from more northern areas would not have arrived in Oman by then. This evidence of productive nests in northern Oman supplies additional support to the idea that Oman's breeding population of Egyptian Vulture is larger than 100 pairs.

Donázar *et al* (2002) found that 33.6% of Egyptian Vultures on the Canary islands off northwest Africa were breeders. If one assumes that the ratio of breeders to non-breeders on Masirah is similar and that the confounding influence of movement between the islands and mainland is not very different between the Canaries and Masirah (see Agudo *et al* 2010a, b), then the number of Egyptian Vultures on Masirah is estimated to be at least 386. The minimum size of the Masirah population can also be estimated by using the ratio of immatures to adults at the rubbish dump in spring (Table 1). So, with 65 breeding pairs, comprised almost entirely of adult/adult pairings and a ratio of adults to immatures at the dump site being c1:1, it can be conservatively estimated that 260 individuals occur on the island. Five visits were made during different parts of the day to the Masirah rubbish dump on 11–12 October 2012, and counts of the vultures there were made from different vantage points. A maximum of 76 vultures was observed, comprising birds of all ages, including birds reared in 2012 (ESO unpubl data). These October counts do not undermine our island population estimate, but highlight a confounding aspect: the potential existence in October of non-territorial birds that were reared on the mainland or in other nearby countries (see Cunningham 2002, Meyburg *et al* 2004).

Nest site locations on Masirah (high steep slopes) are like those reported by Green (1949) and, taking into account the lack of predation pressure on Masirah, the locations of nest sites were similar to those used by island populations elsewhere (*eg* Gangoso & Palacios 2002). We did not analyse all factors that might affect spatial distribution of territories (*eg* distribution of suitable nesting sites or distribution of human habitation), but this lack of analyses does not detract significantly from the impression that the rubbish dump is important. Survey effort, as measured by the length of the routes, was not systematically biased and so the north–south difference in breeding density is probably not a sampling effect. The density of breeding territories was highest around the rubbish dump, almost certainly because it is a reliable source of food for the vultures. Most waste collected by the local sanitation services and from private fishing boats is brought to the dump, and thus it provides an abundant and relatively stable source of food for vultures. Timing of breeding recorded on Masirah appears to be slightly later than on Socotra



**Plate 3** (left). Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* nest with four eggs, one of which lacks pigmentation, Masirah island, Oman. Worldwide, we know of no record of Egyptian Vulture clutch size > 3. © Ivaylo Angelov



**Plate 4** (right). Two Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* juveniles (at back) in nest showing individual plumage variation, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov



**Plate 5.** Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* perched on the fence of Masirah island's municipal rubbish dump, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov



**Plate 6.** Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* are commonly seen feeding on road kills or on dead domestic animals disposed of near roads, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov

**Table 2.** Distances from the municipal rubbish dump on Masirah to nest sites of Egyptian Vulture pairs known to have failed at the egg or nestling phase.

	Pair 5	Pair 11	Pair 12	Pair 16	Pair 24	Pair 25
Distance to rubbish dump (km)	8.08	2.53	7.2	8.32	37.48	8.83

and slightly earlier than elsewhere on the Arabian peninsula (Jennings 2010, Porter & Suleiman 2012). However, our data are from a single year and we do not know how timing of breeding varies between years. Also, because timing of breeding could be affected by food availability, the existence of the rubbish dump on Masirah might contribute to a lack of variability in timing of nesting.

Twenty-seven percent of the reproductive pairs failed at the egg or chick stage. It is unclear why these nests failed, and Table 2 shows no clear spatial pattern. That at least one nest close to the dump site failed suggests that nest failure is not always due to lack of food. Further study could determine whether proximity to the rubbish dump is related to long-term productivity. However, timing of breeding and the onset of territoriality and the consequent ranging that is more focussed on the nest may also influence the effect of the rubbish dump on breeders. The reproductive rates on Masirah (0.46 fledglings/territorial pair, 0.82 fledglings/breeding pair and 1.13 fledglings/successful pair) are the lowest of which we are aware (Abuladze & Shergalin 1998, Cortes-Avizanda *et al* 2009, Donázar *et al* 2002, Garcia-Ripollés & López-López 2006, Kobierzycki 2011, Liberatori & Penteriani 2001, Margalida *et al* 2012, IA pers obs Bulgaria). As stated above with regard to nesting density, proximity to the rubbish dump may affect reproduction. A study of a dense population in Turkey that preferentially foraged at a rubbish dump, found large variation in breeding success between two consecutive years (Şen *et al* 2011). A long-term study is needed to better understand the scale of annual variation in breeding success and to properly establish the reasons for the apparently low breeding performance on Masirah, and whether density dependent effects are evident.

Domestic livestock and fish remains were the main food consumed by the vultures. Local people report that a species of catfish (*Arius* sp), which has little commercial value, is discarded if caught, and this may result in tens or hundreds of such fish washing ashore on some days, where they become food for the vultures (Plate 7). The importance of this sometimes plentiful food source could be the basis of further study.

## POTENTIAL THREATS AND CONSERVATION

At present the high density of breeders, large proportion of adult/adult pairings and good numbers of immatures (though some of these may be immigrants from the mainland) suggest that the Egyptian Vulture population on Masirah is healthy. While we saw almost no evidence of any major active threats to the vultures on Masirah, vulture populations can be affected by factors that increase mortality (Plate 8) or reduce breeding success, including direct and indirect poisoning, electrocution, declines in food availability and habitat loss (Donázar *et al* 2002, Hernandez & Margalida 2009).

The breeding density of Egyptian Vultures on Masirah (8.17 pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup>) is extremely high, exceeded only by once-dense urban populations (Alleon 1876, Galushin 1971) and probably by the extant population on Socotra (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Margalida *et al* 2007, Porter & Suleiman 2012). While the rubbish dump is a source of consistently available food and is normally beneficial to the vultures, vultures feeding there could be affected if poisoned or contaminated material is available. Because vultures will feed in aggregations, single contamination incidents can have disproportionate effects



**Plate 7** (above). Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* feeding on a fish that has been washed ashore, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov



**Plate 8** (right). Dead adult Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* found in a wadi relatively high in the hills, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov

on the Masirah population or even the wider population (Tewes 2002). Currently, local herders on Masirah do not appear to use poisons and there are no large predators on the island that threaten domestic livestock. This situation is similar to that on Socotra (Porter & Suleiman 2012), where Egyptian vultures also occur at very high densities. Local people on Masirah reported that vultures used to very occasionally attack newborn livestock, but it is not known whether this behaviour still persists or is decreasing due to the increased amount of other food available to the vultures on the island.

Hunting is forbidden in Oman, and as long as it remains so, illegal shooting probably has little impact on Egyptian Vultures on Masirah and throughout the country. In recent years networks of medium-voltage power lines have been installed on the northern side of the island. The pylon design used in this network (Plate 9) is potentially dangerous because large birds such as Egyptian Vultures could be electrocuted when perching on them if they touch a wire with a wing. Quite a lot of work has been done in other parts of the world to design acceptable ways of constructing power lines and pylons that are not dangerous to birds (eg Jenkins *et al* 2010). Discussions with the electricity company should be initiated to better understand this potential, and change the design of the power lines and pylons to more bird-friendly types. The effect of these power lines on Egyptian Vultures on the island (and other soaring birds) is unknown, and should be studied. Although it seems that there are currently few problems, this threat may grow because electrification of the island will undoubtedly expand.

Changes in food availability, availability of secure sites for nesting, and other influences, such as the potential modernization of waste disposal could negatively affect the Egyptian Vulture population on Masirah. The increasing human population in Oman, including on Masirah, along with living standard changes, is likely to increase the amount of waste of all types being disposed. While we are unaware of any plans to modernize waste disposal on Masirah, improvements in waste management are being made in other parts of the Sultanate. The effects of modernizing waste disposal management in Oman



**Plate 9.** Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* perched on electricity pylon, with vertical insulators above a horizontal crossbar, a design type that is considered dangerous in terms of electrocution risk, Masirah island, Oman. © Ivaylo Angelov

on vultures are not known, and observations are ambiguous. Based on a limited number of surveys at dumpsites in northern Oman (Al Balushi *et al* 2013), more modern waste disposal does not necessarily mean a decline in vulture numbers using dumpsites. The most modern waste disposal site in Oman, at Al Multaqa, which receives most of Muscat's biological waste, is used by large numbers of avian scavengers (>230 Egyptian vultures counted at times during October 2012). Conversely, no vultures were observed on other sites where disposal is less modern *eg* Barka (two visits) or Samail (one visit), which had an apparent abundance of food including carcasses of camels, goats, sheep and cattle.

The management of waste is an important aspect to consider for the conservation of scavengers (including vultures), and there is a tension between the desire to dispose of waste in a way that supports human health benefits and a way that makes food available for vultures. In Europe, for example, stricter animal carcass disposal laws were put in place due to concerns about the possibility of diseases (*eg* BSE) spreading to humans, and as a result food availability to scavengers dropped and special dispensation needed to be given to so called 'vulture restaurants' that provide safe and plentiful food for avian scavengers. Additionally, globally, there is a lack of information about health effects to vultures of scavenging at rubbish dumps, including the potential for infection by pathogens, ingestion of residues of veterinary drugs or other contaminants, and other potential effects (Blanco *et al* 2007). Against a background of global conservation challenges to avian scavengers and likely improvements to waste disposal in Oman, it is important that strategies for waste disposal in Oman address the human health element,

but do not undermine conservation. For example, perhaps 'vulture friendly' areas within some dumps could be established, where suitable certified-'clean' organic waste could be dumped under professional supervision, and thus ensure the availability of safe food for vultures and other avian scavengers. Modern and traditional dump sites in Oman and elsewhere are attractive to scavenging raptors (mostly vultures and eagles), and this makes the dump sites attractive to birdwatchers, including those from other countries. Indeed, bird-watching blogs and internet sites (eg [www.fatbird.com/links\\_geo/middle\\_east/oman.html](http://www.fatbird.com/links_geo/middle_east/oman.html)) highlight dump sites in Oman as good places to see birds. So, while potential conservation benefits are obvious, there would also be benefits to tourism that could be enhanced, first probably on the mainland and then later on Masirah, especially if dump site managers, municipalities, conservationists and the tourism industry work together to improve the sites for scavengers.

Although no plans have been made there have been discussions by government agencies about the possibility of building a bridge connecting Masirah with the mainland. Such a bridge, if realized, would enable an increased flow of people and investments onto the island. As in other parts of the world, a bridge may also provide access to the island for mammalian predators (eg foxes), and this could expose adult Egyptian Vultures, their eggs and offspring to predation. Predictably, some ground predators (ie cats, dogs, and rats) do occur on Masirah, but currently their distribution appears to be around human habitation and away from areas used by vultures for nesting. During the surveys only a single car with tourists was encountered in the inner parts of the island where Egyptian Vultures breed. At present, disturbance from recreational activities during the breeding season does not seem to be a concern on Masirah.

We know that there is a large annual influx of scavenging birds to Arabia from more northern areas during the non-breeding season. It is not known what proportion of birds observed at the rubbish dump came from places off the island. The distance to the mainland (19 km) is not as large as at Socotra (c240 km), and we do not believe it is an insurmountable barrier to immigration and emigration. Satellite tracking of Egyptian vultures, whether from Masirah or elsewhere, could help clarify the situation. Even if one assumes that the distance to the mainland is not a barrier to movement, it is almost certain that Masirah is not a sink population. However, given the apparently low productivity, it is also not clear to what extent the population is a source of birds that will breed elsewhere. We also could not rule out density dependent effects influencing productivity, nor, as mentioned above, whether the number of birds of all age classes combined was a result of immigration. Obviously, if the Masirah island population of Egyptian Vultures is contributing breeding birds to sites away from the island then the importance of the island population in terms of regional and global conservation is increased.

Fruitful avenues of future work exist on Masirah including the clarification of whether birds on the island come from elsewhere or leave the island to breed. Opportunities exist to build local expertise in surveying, monitoring, and conducting research on vultures on the island, and using the Egyptian Vulture to promote conservation of wildlife there. The situation on Masirah offers possibilities to better understand general features of Egyptian Vulture ecology and biology, the ecology of island populations, and provide information on Egyptian Vultures at the regional scale, highlighting the importance of Arabia for its resident and visiting Egyptian Vultures.

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# A description of the nest and eggs of the Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, Oman

ANDREW DIXON

The Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* is considered by several authorities to be a distinct species separate from the Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens* (eg Jennings 2010, Birdlife International 2013, Gill & Donsker 2013). This treatment has been supported by an analysis of the Mourning Wheatear complex using molecular markers and comparative morphometry, which recommended adopting three species: *O. lugens*, *O. lugentoides* and *O. lugubris* (Förschler *et al* 2010). The Arabian Wheatear is polytypic with two subspecies, the nominate *lugentoides* occurring in southwest Arabia and *boscaweni* inhabiting a drier and lower altitude biotope in eastern Yemen and southern Oman (Jennings 2010).

Despite being a common breeding species in southern Arabia, with an estimated 800 000 and 130 000 pairs of nominate *lugentoides* and *boscaweni* respectively, there is little detailed information on the breeding ecology of the species (Jennings 2010). Castell *et al* (2002) noted the lack of published information on breeding biology and described a nest site of *O. l. lugentoides* in a low cliff within a crevice lined with flat pebbles leading to the grass nest, which was constructed c30 cm from the entrance. A description of the nest and nestlings of Arabian Wheatear can be found in Castell & Castell (2009), but the eggs do not appear to have been described.

On 3 April 2012 I found an active Arabian Wheatear nest in Wadi Darbat, near Salalah, southern Oman. The nest was positioned c20 cm back in a deep recess c2 m up a rock wall within a relatively shallow cave. The wide-mouthed cave was at the base of a rock outcrop of a well-wooded hillside: the cave also housed a wood-built stockade, not in use, and cavities in the 4–6 m high roof provided nest sites for several Tristram's Starlings *Onychognathus tristramii* and Rock Doves *Columba livia*. The nest was similar to that described previously and a number of small stones had been placed within the cavity in front of the nest, a common feature of the nests of several wheatear species (Plate 1, Harrison & Castell 2002), whilst the nest itself was roughly constructed of dried, coarse grass with a shallow cup lined with finer grass. The nest held four ovate eggs, which were unusually heavily marked for a wheatear species (Plate 2). The ground colour was



**Plate 1.** The Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* nest entrance, in a cave recess, showing numerous small stones placed at the entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon



**Plate 2.** The clutch of four heavily-marked eggs of Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides*, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon



**Plate 3.** The male Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* at the nest entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. The nest is behind the bird. The rim of the nest and rampart of stones extend out to the left of the bird. © A Dixon



**Plate 4.** The female Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* at the nest entrance, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon

off-white with spots and blotches of sienna, brown and brick red concentrated towards the broader end forming an indistinct ring. Both adults, presumably *boscaweni*, were photographed close to the nest (Plates 3, 4); the male had a white crown, black throat, a black terminal band on its tail and rusty-buff undertail coverts, whilst the female had a



**Plate 5.** The male Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* away from its nest, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon

**Plate 6.** The female Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugentoides* away from its nest, Wadi Darbat, southern Oman. © A Dixon

dark grey-brown back, with a lighter grey-brown head and a buff underside that appeared quite streaky and paler rusty-buff undertail coverts. Both birds were also photographed away from the nest (Plates 5, 6).

All species of the genus *Oenanthe* breeding in the Western Palearctic build their nests inside cavities or rodent burrows and have eggs with a white or pale blue ground, which are typically lightly spotted with orange, red and brown mainly at the larger end (Cramp 1988). The eggs of Arabian Wheatear described here follow this general pattern but are much more heavily marked than is typical for the genus. As this is the only clutch of eggs described it is not possible to state whether or not these heavily marked eggs are characteristic of the species.

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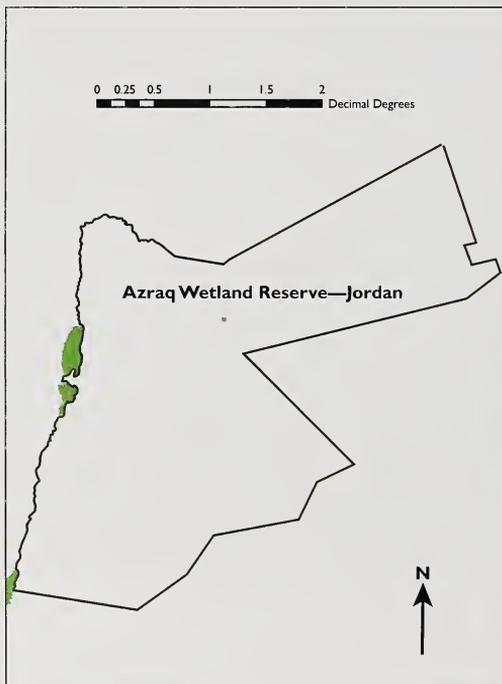
# A Striated Heron *Butorides striata* at Azraq, Jordan

TAREQ QANEER & GREG BUTCHER

The Striated Heron *Butorides striata* is a local breeding resident of the Egyptian Red sea in coastal areas and on islands, north to the southern gulf of Aqaba (Goodman & Meininger 1989). It is also resident on the Saudi Arabian Red sea coast (Jennings 2010). Striated Herons have been recorded breeding on mariculture platforms off Eilat, northern gulf of Aqaba (Yosef *et al* 2002, Perlman 2004). In Jordan the Striated Heron has previously been recorded once, a single adult in 1991/92 at Aqaba (Andrews 1995, Fares Khoury pers comm).

On 5 November 2012, whilst bird-watching at Azraq wetland reserve, Jordan (Figure 1), a single bird was observed flying on the edge of the water pool (Plate 1). The sky was clear and light conditions were excellent. The bird was watched from closer up revealing details such as the long bill, the brownish colour with white spots on the wings, bold stripes on the neck, bare yellow on lores, white streak below the eye, and relatively short legs (Plate 2). We concluded that it was a juvenile Striated Heron. A second visit was made to Azraq reserve, on 12 November 2012, to search for any possible breeding pairs though no evidence of breeding was found. The record has been accepted by the Jordan Bird Records Committee.

Aside from it being the second record for Jordan, the significance of this record is that it occurred at an inland wetland a considerable distance from the sea at Aqaba and Eilat.



**Figure 1.** Location of the Azraq wetland reserve, northern Jordan. The gulf of Aqaba reaches the extreme southwest of Jordan at Aqaba.



**Plate 1.** Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, Azraq wetland reserve, northern Jordan, 5 November 2012. © Omar A'abed



**Plate 2.** Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, Azraq wetland reserve, northern Jordan, 5 November 2012. © Omar A'abed

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Omar A'abed for his assistance with photography and Ehab Eid for his help in drafting this short communication and map preparation.

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# White-winged Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus* breeding at high elevation in eastern Anatolia, Turkey

JENS HERING & PA BUCKLEY

In Turkey, White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* was considered by Kirwan *et al* (2008), "A fairly widespread and common passage migrant to wetlands and coastal areas, especially across the eastern two-thirds of the country, which is regularly recorded in summer and often assumed to breed... However, our detailed dissection of the literature, both published and unpublished, has revealed very few records that can be considered even strongly suggestive of breeding...and recommend that any definite future nesting records be thoroughly documented. Nonetheless, it does seem likely that breeding occurs in Turkey at least occasionally".

We report the discovery of three White-winged Tern breeding colonies in 2011/2012 in eastern Anatolia, Turkey, each at high elevation. Two of the three were along busy main highways, and once sites were occupied by conspicuous adults, it is hard to imagine their being unnoticed by passing birders or ornithologists, so perhaps they have been only recently established. The third colony was some distance from a main road and could have been easily overlooked.

The first colony was found by PAB *et al* on 30 June 2011 c575 km east of Caldiran, Van province, on the north side of highway E99 at 39° 09' 16.69" N, 43° 57' 59.93" E and 2039 m ASL. To avoid disturbance it was not entered, but adults were clearly incubating eggs/brooding young in a sedge wetland, as they rose up when disturbed and immediately settled back on their nests. Visible near the road were 150–200 adults in the air at once, and this was in perhaps only 25–33 % of the entire colony site. Only a handful of flying adults were visible in the site's further reaches c0.5–1 km away, but we obtained no additional estimates of total colony size. We saw no other larid or waterbird species present at the colony site.

The second colony was also found by PAB *et al*, on 1 July 2011 at 40° 30' 57.60" N, 43° 16' 15.90" E and 2185 m ASL by highway D070 at Borluk, c14.5 km southeast of Kars, Kars province. It was in two sections, the larger in a 0.5 km long sedge-reed marsh and freshwater pond complex set back 50 m from the south side of the road below five communication towers atop a nearby hill. A second, much smaller section occupied a flooded sedge marsh north of D070. To avoid disturbance neither was entered, but adults were clearly incubating eggs/brooding young and rose up when disturbed, immediately settling back on their nests.

The site on the south side of the road supported more than 30 White-winged Terns but being some distance from the road at the back of the ponds, most were not disturbed by our presence so we surely underestimated their numbers. Many other water birds, probably breeding, (notably a White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*) were present, several raptors were patrolling the wetlands and adjacent fields, and the smaller colony north of the road held at least another 80 White-winged Terns.

The third colony was found by Jens and Heidi Hering on 25 June 2012. Some 50 White-winged Terns were observed on a flooded meadow, several hectares in area, 2.5 km west of lake Balik, Ağrı province, at 39° 44' 52.31" N, 43° 29' 55.37" E and 2465 m ASL. An inspection of the shoreline led immediately to attacks from the air by at least 10 individuals. A subsequent check of two small islands, scarcely noticeable in the



**Plate 1.** White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* nest with freshly-hatched chick and an egg, 2.5 km west of lake Balik, eastern Turkey, 25 June 2012. © Jens Hering



**Plate 2.** White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* nest with two eggs, 2.5 km west of lake Balik, eastern Turkey, 25 June 2012. © Jens Hering

middle of the flooded depression, revealed two nests. The first nest contained a freshly-hatched chick and an egg (Plate 1). In the second nest (Plate 2) there were two eggs, one of which showed signs of shell chipping (shortly before hatching). The nests, built in low vegetation, consisted of both green and dry stalks. There were probably several other nests in the area. The search was discontinued so as not to disturb the birds. The dominant vegetation species in the breeding habitat were of the wetland herb alliance *Eleocharito palustris-Sagittarion sagittifoliae*, including large stands of Common Water-plantain *Alisma plantago-aquatica*. Approximately 20 Redshanks *Tringa totanus*, some of them alarm calling, were also present at the fringes of the wetland. It is questionable whether the broods of the birds nesting here were successful as there was also a large cattle herd grazing in the shallow water reaches of the flooded area. A further flock of c80 White-winged Terns was observed over the open water of lake Balik.

## DISCUSSION

These three 2011/2012 sites are within a 100-km-long strip at elevations of 2039–2465 m ASL in Van, Ağrı and Kars provinces and suggest that at present White-winged Tern breeding activity within Turkey is centred on the Armenian plateau in eastern Anatolia. It seems likely that other colony sites remain to be discovered in this general area, and late June–early July appears to be an optimal time for searches. Based on these observations, the authors wonder if the White-winged Tern might routinely breed at similar or higher elevations in suitable locations throughout its range.

Breeding sites at such high elevations were previously not known for this species, which occurs primarily in lowlands, although broods have allegedly occurred at an elevation of c2000 m in Armenia. A nest was described at an elevation of 2023 m in northwest Armenia at lake Arpi (Dahl 1954). In addition, the species bred at c1900 m in the lake Sevan basin at lake Gilli until about 1928 (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942). There is also a record from Georgia from lake Madatapa at 2108 m, where a large number of White-winged Terns with fledged young were observed in July 1934 (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942). Whether or not the terns actually bred at this elevation must remain an open question, as great heights are also not avoided on migration. In this respect records exist of sightings from over 3700 m from the Pamir region of central Asia (Ivanov 1969, Abdusaljamov 1971).

White-winged Terns can be observed regularly in Turkey in summer. Sightings during the breeding season in central and eastern Anatolia are not uncommon (Husband & Kasperek 1984, Kasperek 1992, Kirwan *et al* 2008). There is an older record from the border

area with Armenia, where in early May 1911 a large number of White-winged Terns were present near the village of Tash-burun between the Araks river and the foothills of the Ararat massif (Lyaister & Sosnin 1942). Finally there are records from the Black sea coast region. On 16 June 1983 two adults and a fledged young bird were observed at lake Yeniçağa (Kılıç & Kasperek 1987) and there was a sighting of young being fed in the Kızılırmak delta 17 July 1992 (Hustings & Van Dijk 1994).

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# FROM THE RARITIES COMMITTEES

Ian Harrison (compiler)

Observers who have had a country first record accepted by a rarities committee are encouraged to write it up for publication.

## CYPRUS

BirdLife Cyprus Rarities Committee members: Colin Richardson (chair), Melis Charalambides, Stavros Christodoulides, Jeff Gordon, Hugh Buck, Nigel Cottle. Claims should be sent to Colin Richardson at richar@cytanet.com.cy

## EGYPT

The Egyptian Ornithological Rarities Committee comprises: Sherif Baha El Din (chair), Frédéric Jiguet (secretary, non-voting), Web Abdou, Richard Bonser, Andrea Corso, Pierre André Crochet, Andrew Grieve, Richard Hoath, Manuel Schweizer. Official external advisors are Istvan Moldovan, Ahmed Riad and Mary Megalli. Claims should be sent to eorc.secretary@gmail.com. See also [www.chn-france.org/eorc/eorc.php?id\\_content=1](http://www.chn-france.org/eorc/eorc.php?id_content=1) where claim forms can be downloaded.

## ISRAEL

Avner Cohen (Secretary), James P Smith, Barak Granit, Rami Lindroos, Killian Mullarney, Eyal Shochat, Eran Banker and Tomer Landsberger. Claims should be sent to Avner Cohen at israbirding@gmail.com. See also [www.israbirding.com/irdc](http://www.israbirding.com/irdc) where submission forms can be downloaded.

## JORDAN

The Jordan Bird Records Committee (JBRC) comprises: Fares Khoury (secretary), Richard Porter, Ian Andrews, Feras Rahahleh, Khaldun Al-Omari. Claims should be sent to Fares Khoury at avijordan2000@yahoo.com. JBRC has accepted one record since the report in *Sandgrouse* 35(1).

**Striated Heron** *Butorides striata*. One Al Azraq wetland reserve 5 and 12 November 2012 (T Qaneer). Second record.

## KUWAIT

The Kuwait Ornithological Rarities Committee (KORC) comprises: Mike Pope (chair), AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan (secretary), Pekka Fagel, Oscar Campbell (external adjudicator), Peter Kennerley (external adjudicator), Brian Foster (honorary member). Claims should be sent to AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan at alsirhan@alsirhan.com. KORC has accepted the following claims since the last report in *Sandgrouse* 35(1).

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*. Two Jahra pools reserve (JPR) 18 February 2013 (M Pope). Tenth record.

**Horned Grebe** *Podiceps auritus*. Two JPR 1 January 2013 (R Al Hajji). Second record.

**Grey Phalarope** *Phalaropus fulicarius*. One Jahra East outfall (JEO) 28 May 2013 (R Al Hajji). Fifth record.

**Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger*. One JEO 29 May 2013 (R Al Hajji). 12th record

**Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus*. One Fahaheel park 5 February 2013 (N Hulet). Third record.

**White-crowned Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucopyga*. One Mutla ridge 12 January 2013 (R Al Hajji). 15th record.

**Collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicollis*. One Al Abraaq (AA) 10 April 2013 (A & A Nava). First record.

**Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla (alba) personata*. One JPR 2 March 2013 (M Al Saddni). Third record.

**Dead Sea Sparrow** *Passer moabiticus*. One JPR 4 March 2013 (K Al Ghanem). 15th record

**European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*. One AA 10 April 2013 (A & A Nava). First record.

**Desert Finch** *Rhodospiza obsoleta*. Two Khiran area 5 February 2013 (O Al Shaheen). Tenth record.

First breeding records for Kuwait:

**Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*. First breeding proven JPR 12 April 2013 (J Judaa).

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*. First breeding proven JPR 6 April 2013 (German bird group).

**Desert Finch** *Rhodospiza obsoleta*. First breeding proven Khiran 14 February 2013 (O Al Shaheen).

Records not proven: Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* (Al Kout-Fahaheel 4 Apr 2013), Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus optatus* (20 Apr 2013), Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* (23 Apr 2013); Plain Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus* (Khiran chalets 24 Apr 2013).

## OMAN

The Oman Bird Records Committee (OBRC) comprises: Jens Eriksen (recorder), Ian Harrison, Dave Sargeant, Graham Searle, John Atkins, Peter Cowan, Simon Tull, Waheed Al Farsi, Zahrán Al Abdulasalam. Claims should be sent to Jens Eriksen at [hjoman@gmail.com](mailto:hjoman@gmail.com) from whom claim forms can be obtained. As of June 2013 the Oman list stands at 516. OBRC has accepted the following claims since the report in *Sandgrouse* 35(1).

**Lesser Whistling Duck** *Dendrocygna javanica*. Three Al Baled archaeological park (ABAP) 4 January–18 March 2013 (J Debuck *et al.*). Third record.

**Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris borealis*. One at sea off Khatmat Milahah flying into Oman waters from UAE 1 July 2011 (O Campbell). First record of *borealis*, but tenth of Cory's/Scopoli's Shearwater complex.

**Cinereous Vulture** *Aegypius monachus*. Four near Tawi Atayr 16–18 February 2013 (H & J Eriksen). Third record.

**Watercock** *Gallinula cinerea*. One Khawr Rawri 6 January 2013 (S Menzie). Fourth record.

**Ruddy-breasted Crake** *Porzana fusca*. One Wadi Darbat 23 November–4 December 2012 (P & P Olson, K & O Fritz). First record.

**Long-tailed Jaeger** *Stercorarius longicaudus*. One off Muscat 15 April 2013 (H & J Eriksen). Sixth record.

**African Collared Dove** *Streptopelia risoria*. One heard Mudday 11 February 2013 (H & J Eriksen). Sixth record.

**Diamond Dove** *Geopelia cuneata*. One Sun farm, Sohar, 13–14 December 2012 (H & J Eriksen, JD Atkins). First record, considered escape.

**Grey-bellied Cuckoo** *Cacomantis passerinus*. One Khawr Rawri (KR) 1 April 2010 (M Becker). Fourth record.

**Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis*. Adult female first at East Khawr, then ABAP 5 November 2012–18 March 2013 (H & J Eriksen). Seventh record.

**Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe*. One KR 17 December 2009 (R van der Zwan). Second record.

**European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula*. One A'Sayh 19 November 2004 (I Harrison). Fifth record.

**Pied Bush Chat** *Saxicola caprata*. One A'Sayh 12 April 2007 (I Harrison, DE Sargeant). Seventh record.

**Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** *Phylloscopus orientalis*. One Sayq plateau (SP) 24 February 2013 (M Schilz). Fifth record.

**White-crowned Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucopyga*. One Qurayyat 3 & 17 November 2006 (I Harrison, R Hendrie, SJ Tull). Eighth record.

**Asian Brown Flycatcher** *Muscicapa latirostris*. One at Ras A' Sawadi 14 October 2012 (R Graf). Third record.

**Taiga Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicilla*. One Qatbit 18–26 November 2009 (B Richards, A Lassey, B Hill). First record.

**Black Drongo** *Dicrurus macrocercus*. One Sall Ala 24 April 2013 (H & J Eriksen). Sixth record.

**Eurasian Siskin** *Spinus spinus*. 11 SP 28 December 2012 with at least four staying till 24 February 2013 (I Robbe, H & J Eriksen). Eighth record.

**Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia*. Male Dawkah farm 14–23 February 2013 (M Schilz, H & J Eriksen). Third record.

**Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla*. One Muntasar 28 January–10 February 2013 (H & J Eriksen *et al.*). Tenth record.

## QATAR

Qatar Rare Birds Committee members: Jamie A Buchan (chair/recorder), Michael J Grunwell, Neil G Morris, Simon J Tull.

Claims should be sent to Jamie Buchan at jamie\_buchan@yahoo.com.

## UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The Emirates Bird Records Committee (EBRC) currently comprises the following voting members: Oscar Campbell (chairman), Nick Moran (secretary), Huw Roberts, Mark Smiles, Neil Tovey, Tommy Pedersen (UAE bird recorder). Ahmed al Ali and Peter Hellyer are non-voting members. Records are circulated and assessments published three times per year, as according to the timetable outlined at [www.uaebirding.com/ebrc.html](http://www.uaebirding.com/ebrc.html). Decisions on assessments, plus EBRC's constitution and information about the assessment process and downloadable report forms are all available at the same location. Claims should be sent to [ebrc@gmail.com](mailto:ebrc@gmail.com) or to Tommy Pedersen at [777sandman@gmail.com](mailto:777sandman@gmail.com).

In addition to ongoing work involving assessment of current records, in August 2013 EBRC will initiate a review of records, some historical and some more contemporary, of a number of species deemed difficult to identify (and perhaps subject to recent confusion) or of questionable origin. The result of this review will be published in due course. EBRC has accepted the following particularly significant records from 2012.

**Cotton Pygmy-Goose** *Nettapus coromandelianus*. One Zakher pools 8–26 December 2012 (M Parr *et al.*). Tenth record and first since 2003.

**Marbled Teal** *Marmaronetta angustirostris*. One Al Warsan lakes 14–29 November 2012 (S Varghese, M Ullman *et al.*). Seventh record; the previous one being January 2012.

**Flesh-footed Shearwater** *Puffinus carneipes*. Up to 12 birds seen on pelagic trips off Khor Kalba 28–30 June 2012 (A Al Zaabi, K Al Dhaheri, SL James *et al.*) and another 14–16 September 2012 (G Talbot, A Al Zaabi *et al.*). Eight and ninth records; last 2010.

**Jouanin's Petrel** *Bulweria fallax*. A major and unprecedented influx in late autumn 2012, with up to 300 birds seen on pelagic trips off Khor Kalba 24 October–16 November

2012 (A Al Zaabi, K Al Dhaheri, T Pedersen *et al.*), culminating in 609 birds 21 December 2012 (M Smiles *et al.*). Six previous records, five in autumn 2011 and one from 2004. See also *Phoenix* 29: 24–25.

**Cinereous Vulture** *Aegyptius monachus*. One Dubai desert conservation reserve (DDCR) 16–31 October 2012 (M Smiles, S Bell, G Simkins *et al.*). First record, although birds in 1995 and 1999/2000 brought to wildlife rescue centres may have been of wild origin.

**Himalayan Griffon Vulture** *Gyps himalayensis*. One DDCR 13–16 October 2012 (SL James, S Bell, N Suseelan *et al.*). First record.

**Shikra** *Accipiter badius*. Resident in greater Dubai area, but only three records away from there: one winter 2009/2010 at Sila, then a juvenile Sila' public park 28 September–6 October 2012 and nearby 1 December 2012 (OJ Campbell, M Smiles, SP Lloyd). A juvenile Kharran water treatment plant 24 November 2012 (OJ Campbell, M Smiles, A Ward).

**Great Stone-curlew** *Esacus recurvirostris*. One Bu Al Siaief marine protected area 27 September 2011 (S Javed, S Khan) and seen again Khor Qirqishan (Musaffah) 27 February–6 March 2012 (SWL Strickland *et al.*). First record (see *Tribulus* 20: 57–58).

**White-rumped Sandpiper** *Calidris fuscicollis*. One Al Ain water treatment plant 18–26 May 2012 (OJ Campbell, D O'Mahony *et al.*). First record (*Sandgrouse* 35: 36–38).

**Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus*. One adult Mafraq rubbish tip 4 February–19 March 2012 (OJ Campbell, M Smiles *et al.*). Ninth record; last 2011.

**Brown-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*. One immature Dibba port 11–12 December 2012 (A Jones, T Pedersen, C Papazoglou, P Panayides). Seventh record; first since 2001.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*. One adult Dibba harbour 7–11 December 2012 (M Parr *et al.*). Fifth record; last 2010.

**Lesser Noddy** *Anous tenuirostris*. One seen on pelagic trip off Khor Kalba 16 November 2012 (M Smiles *et al.*). Fifth record; last 2011.

**Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius*. One Wamm farms 20–26 April 2012 (OJ Campbell *et al.*). Third record; last 2011.

**Black-naped Oriole** *Oriolus chinensis*. An immature Safa park 18–25 February 2012 (A & M Günther *et al*). First record.

**Black Drongo** *Dicrurus macrocercus*. One Al Barsha pond park 18 January–1 February 2012 (M Charlton *et al*) and possibly same bird Dubai pivot fields 11 March 2012 (T Pedersen *et al*) and 15 April 2012 (N Tovey). Second and third records; first since 2005.

**Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus*. One Ain al-Fayda 18 February–26 March 2012 (G Askew *et al*). Sixth record; last 2011.

**Brown Shrike** *Lanius cristatus*. One Wadi Bih (Colin's farm) 20 November 2012 (to 5 January 2013) showing characteristics of *L. c. cristatus* (M Ullman *et al*). Seventh record; first since 2010.

**Mesopotamian Crow** *Corvus (cornix) capellanus*. One Siniyah island 26 November 2012–23 January 2013, also seen at nearby Khor al Beida (R Gubiani *et al*). First record.

**Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha calandra*. One Dalma island 3 December 2012 (OJ Campbell, GI Ensor). Seventh record; last 2011.

**Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe*. One Sila'a 15 November 2012, until 29 March 2013 (OJ Campbell *et al*). Sixth record; last 2009.

**Kurdistan Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna*. One male Jebel Dhanna 22 March–2 April 2012 (R Willbond, SL James, K Al Dhaheri *et al*). Second record; last 2004.

**Radde's Accentor** *Prunella ocularis*. One Safa park 10–14 April 2012 (B Baker). First record.

**Taiga Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicilla*. One Wamm farms goat farm 25 November–3 December 2012 (M Ullman *et al*) and another Safa park 30 November 2012–25 March 2013 (M Smiles *et al*). Fourth and fifth records; last 2010.

**Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla*. One Wadi Bih 26 October 2012 (S Parr). Seventh record; first since 2001.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# REVIEW

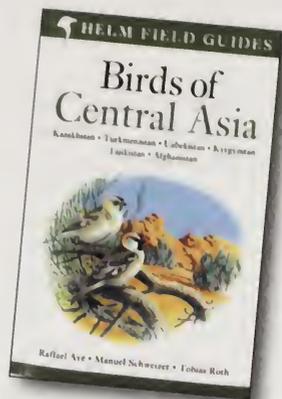
## Birds of Central Asia

Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer & Tobias Roth

Christopher Helm, London. 2012.

Softback. 336 pages. 143 colour plates

ISBN 978-0-7136-7038-7



I first visited Kazakhstan in 1987 and recall the problems of finding any suitable literature covering the country. European field guides did not include the specialities and I had to fall back on the late Vladimir Flint's *Birds of the USSR*, which did include all the species but otherwise fell short by modern standards. A field guide to the birds of Kazakhstan and surrounding countries has long been overdue and finally we have *Birds of Central Asia* added to the Helm series of guides.

The book includes details of 618 species in its 336 pages, covering the area from Kazakhstan in the north to Afghanistan in the south. It is a relatively slim volume and follows the now established format of previous Helm guides. The first 33 pages comprise the introductory chapters, including the usual glossary of terms, a chapter on taxonomy (of which more later) and 16 half-page habitat photographs, which if nothing else serve to showcase the stunning variety of habitats in the region.

The bulk of the book naturally comprises the list of species, with the text on the left opposite the appropriate plate. Initial impressions of any field guide are often drawn from a quick glance at the illustrations and not many readers will be disappointed here. Thirteen different artists were used and a number of the 143 plates have been previously used in other field guides. The general standard of the artwork varies from good to very good. The whole point of illustrations in a field guide is to complement the text, thus enabling a correct identification to be made, and in nearly all examples this will be the case. The text is neatly laid out with normally 3–5 species per page. Key identification features are emboldened and the text is of a high standard. Distribution maps are included for all but vagrant species and

common non-breeding migrants; although on the small side, they appear to be as accurate as possible within the limits of our current understanding of distribution in the region.

Other than taxonomic splits, only one unfamiliar species is included in the region's avifauna, namely the near-mythical Large-billed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*, previously known from only one specimen obtained in northern India in 1867. The species then went unrecorded for more than 100 years until, due to pioneering work by Lars Svensson, Raffael Ayé and others, it was found in various specimen collections and is now known to breed in the region. In brief, visiting birders should carefully check all presumed Blyth's Reed Warblers *A. dumetorum* breeding at high altitude from Afghanistan northwards to southern Kazakhstan.

The dramatic rise of taxonomic changes is making life for those of us who work in the field a nightmare, and authors must also be struggling to keep up with the latest thinking. Many of the generally accepted splits are included such as Booted *Iduna caligata*/Sykes's Warblers *I. rama* and Taiga *Ficedula albicilla*/Red-breasted Flycatchers *F. parva*, but some others might cause consternation. Turkestan *Lanius phoenicuroides* and Daurian Shrikes *L. isabellinus* are split with *arenarius* (the so-called Chinese Shrike) included within the latter, despite its different wintering grounds. Mention is made of hybridisation between Turkestan and Red-backed Shrikes *L. collurio*, which is a real problem where the two come together. I was surprised to see that the grey shrike complex is now split into three species, with a 'new' Asian Grey Shrike, including both *pallidirostris* and *aucheri*, two forms that to my eyes could not be more different within the complexity of this group. We now have two golden orioles with *kundoo*

now a full species, named Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo*. Turkestan Tit *Parus bokharensis* appears to be lumped with Great Tit *P. major*, but without great conviction in the text, although hybridisation between the two is widespread. Yellow-breasted Tit *Cyanistes flavipectus* started life as a race of Azure Tit *C. cyanus*, was then afforded specific status but is now relegated to a race of Azure Tit—all very confusing. Perhaps the biggest shock is the treatment of the larks. Anyone who has visited the deserts of Kazakhstan and surrounding areas will have found the *Calandrella* larks a problem. We have been accustomed to the *longipennis* race of Greater Short-toed Lark *C. brachydactyla* sharing habitat with *heinei* Lesser Short-toed Lark *C. rufescens*. Additionally, the search has been on to find the *leucophaea* race of Asian Short-toed Lark *C. chelensis*. We are now led to believe there are no Lesser Short-toed Larks in the region and that *heinei* is in fact an Asian Short-toed and that *leucophaea* is probably another species. It may well have been best to leave the nomenclature as it was, until the true status of *leucophaea* becomes established. The latest information suggests that the Aral sea might be the place to look rather than lake Balkhash, where many of the older records came from. The Lesser Whitethroats *Sylvia curruca* are dealt with well, nominate in the north with *halimodendri* occupying other areas. True desert birds *S. minula* are probably scarce and not separable from *halimodendri*. It is good to see that the migratory Indian House Sparrow *Passer indicus* has been split, as this taxon breeds alongside the resident House Sparrow *P. domesticus*, and the males at least are diagnosable in the field.

The systematic list is followed by a collection of doubtfully recorded species prior to 1950. Some may regard the authors as

being somewhat harsh. Knowing the wealth of ornithological talent formerly based at Almaty it would be surprising if White-naped *Grus vipio* and Hooded Cranes *G. monacha* would have been misidentified and equally Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* has been recorded twice from Uzbekistan and yet does not find favour in this book.

To summarise, the *Birds of Central Asia* is an excellent guide and an absolute must for anyone travelling to the region. Excellent concise text, good artwork and a wealth of fine detail. The more you delve into it, the more you realise the commitment the authors have for this region. Finding faults is surprisingly difficult, one could argue with some of the taxonomy but the authors clearly state the authorities they have chosen to follow. Kazakhstan's only endemic bird Panders Ground Jay *Podoces panderi* of the race *ilensis* could have been better covered as we are given no indication of how to separate from the nominate. Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* is treated as specifically distinct from Black Scoter *M. americana*, yet the Common Scoter on plate 11 is labelled Black Scoter. It would have been good to know in which of the countries the vagrants have occurred. This information must have been available to the authors during their research and it is a pity they have not shared it with us. All this is, however, nit-picking and in no way detracts from the book's usefulness.

As the authors state, there is much to learn about the avifauna of Central Asia and this slim volume will greatly facilitate that process. With the *Collins Bird Guide*, *Birds of the Middle East*, and now *Birds of Central Asia* we have three excellent field guides to cover the OSME region. I cannot recommend the latest addition too highly.

P A Lassey

# OSME NEWS

Geoff Welch

## Certificate of Recognition

While many of the problems facing birds and the environment in the OSME region will only be solved by the work of governments and NGOs, a great many individuals are selflessly devoting much of their time, energy and resources to 'make a difference' at a local level. OSME feels strongly that such commitment should be recognised and therefore we are launching an annual Certificate of Recognition award which includes £200 worth of books from the Natural History Book Service (NHBS).

We are delighted to announce that the first recipient is Ahmad Aidek from Syria for the production of *A Guide to the Biodiversity of Deir ez-Zor Area* which was published in 2010 (see Plates 1,2). This photographic

guide to the flora and fauna of the area is for free distribution to local schools, universities, conservation staff and interested locals. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing situation in Syria, it has not yet been possible to send Ahmed his certificate or books.

OSME is now inviting nominations for this year's award. Nominees should be residents of the OSME region who have made an outstanding individual contribution to the conservation of species or sites locally. This can take the form of research, awareness-raising or practical action. Nominations should be no more than two pages of A4 and clearly state why the action carried out is 'outstanding' and provide details of:

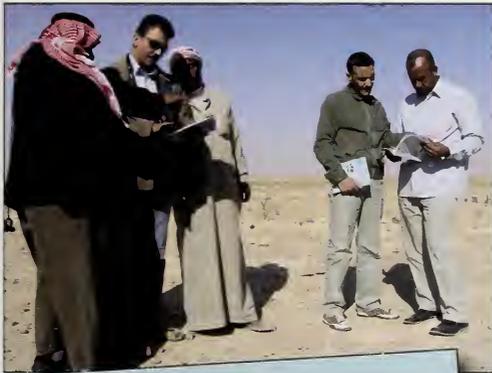
- the issue that was addressed
- the action(s) that was carried out
- the successful outcome.

Additional supporting materials such as photographs, media coverage *etc* are also welcome. Nominations should be sent by email to the OSME Secretary ([secretary@osme.org](mailto:secretary@osme.org)) by 31 October 2013. Please note that self-nominations are not permitted and the £200 award is for books only and cannot be taken as cash.

## Conservation and Research Fund news

Due to personal reasons, Christine Booth has regrettably decided to stand down as chair of the CRF sub-committee and I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for all of the work she did to 'professionalise' the operation of the CRF. A replacement chair will be appointed shortly. On a more positive note, I am pleased to welcome Maxim Koshkin who will be advising on applications to the fund from a Central Asian perspective.

Additionally, I am also pleased to announce that the 'average' level of grant awarded by the CRF has now been increased to £1000 and larger grants, up to £2500 will also be considered – see the OSME website for details of how to apply.



**Plate 1** (top). Ahmad Aidek (second from left) with local community members. © Ahmad Aidek

**Plate 2** (bottom). Cover of *A Guide to the Biodiversity of Deir ez-Zor Area*. © Ahmad Aidek

# NEWS & INFORMATION

*Dawn Balmer (compiler)*

## CYPRUS

### Call for the adoption of 'zero tolerance' towards illegal bird trapping

BirdLife Cyprus and Friends of the Earth Cyprus expressed their concern and disappointment regarding the state response to the incidents that took place in the village of Paralimni. On 27 April 2013, residents of Paralimni and the surrounding area sabotaged the elections for vice president of governing DISY, demanding the withdrawal of the anti-poaching unit of the Cyprus police from the Kokkinochoria area and the stopping of coordinated anti-trapping operations with regards to migratory birds, which the unit has been undertaking during the spring in cooperation with environmental organisations. The two organisations were shocked at the subsequent political decision to withdraw the anti-poaching unit from the Kokkinochoria area, caving in to the demands of protestors to stop the anti-trapping police operations, thereby safeguarding the interests of the trappers who can thus continue their illegal activity undisturbed during the festive season.

This political decision is disturbing since it does not give the right message of 'zero tolerance', something that all stakeholders agreed at the Larnaca Declaration (July 2011); instead, it encourages the continuation of this illegal activity and makes enforcement less efficient and effective. Moreover this decision sets a precedent regarding the way that the most relevant competent authority for crime enforcement of the state ensures the implementation of the legislation. BirdLife Cyprus and Friends of the Earth Cyprus are calling for true political will and upholding of the law, without the involvement of party political considerations, to combat illegal bird trapping with the use of limesticks and mist nets, which indiscriminately kills over 150 different bird species due to its non-selective nature, and results in hundreds of thousands of birds being killed each year due to the large scale trapping that takes place. (Source BirdLife Cyprus)

## Griffon Vulture conference

BirdLife Cyprus organized an international conference for the protection of the Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* in Cyprus, which was held 6–8 March in Limassol, as part of the project 'GYPAS' ([www.gypas.org](http://www.gypas.org)) for the protection and reinforcement of the threatened population of Griffon Vultures in Cyprus. The conference was attended by scientists from Cyprus and abroad who specialize on vulture conservation, as well as representatives of government agencies and non-governmental organizations concerned about the protection of this species.

## EGYPT

### New agreements for bird sensitive energy development

The Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), the Migratory Soaring Birds Project's (MSBP) national partner in Egypt, and the New and Renewable Energy Authority (NREA) have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) crystallising their collaboration for bird sensitive energy development in Egypt. The purpose of this MoU is to provide a framework of cooperation destined to incorporate and promote the conservation of migratory soaring birds and biodiversity in general within the energy sector in Egypt. Both parties recognise that the switch from fossil fuels to renewable energies is necessary as a mechanism to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, ensure energy sufficiency and promote economic growth. However, the development of renewable energy should be undertaken in an ecologically sustainable manner, and subject to appropriate environmental planning and safeguards. Renewable energy can be bird sensitive through adoption of best practices being applied in the industry by planners, policy makers, donors, governments and renewable energy investors.

EEAA and BirdLife International's coordinated MSBP funded by UNDP/GEF has

embarked on the task of developing tools and guidelines to ensure that the risk assessment and management process for renewable energy and associated infrastructure in Egypt appropriately takes into consideration and effectively addresses key conservation concerns with regards to migratory soaring birds. As part of this partnership, EEAA backed up by BirdLife International will provide NREA with the proper technical tools and materials developed through MSBP along with capacity building activities empowering them to properly address bird conservation and renewable energy development. This agreement will mark the first step of a long-lasting collaboration between EEAA and NREA that will see bird sensitive energy development in Egypt take off. (Source BirdLife International)

## IRAQ

### **Nature Iraq's festival in the marshes**

Nature Iraq (BirdLife's Partner), held a spring festival on the banks of the Euphrates to celebrate the restoration of the famous Mesopotamian marshes. Richard Porter, BirdLife's Middle East adviser, had the privilege of being there and his personal account can be viewed online at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22706024](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22706024). Richard commented, "This Festival, on the edge of one of the world's great wetland complexes, was a truly memorable occasion, the result of months of planning and hard work by Nature Iraq. In such a short period NI has achieved so much for conservation, often in very difficult circumstances. I'm now eagerly awaiting the publication of *Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq* which will cover over 100 sites and catalogue the results of eight years of extensive surveys by Nature Iraq biologists. A first step towards a national network of protected areas". (Source BirdLife International)

### **Iraqi conservationist wins the Goldman Environmental Prize**

The Goldman Environmental Foundation has awarded one of the six 2013 Goldman Environmental Prizes to Azzam Alwash, CEO of Nature Iraq. "The Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia to Azzam Alwash is a prestigious

tribute to the dedication and determination of individuals who are working in difficult socio-political situations to build a sustainable world where people and nature can live in harmony" said Dr Marco Lambertini, BirdLife's CEO. "It is a major acknowledgment to Azzam personally and indirectly to the organisation he is part of, Nature Iraq which we are proud to have as the BirdLife Partner in Iraq. A source of inspiration, motivation and hope for all of us."

As a young boy in Iraq, Azzam Alwash spent many days out in the marshes with his father, who was head of the irrigation department in the area during the early 1960s. He fondly remembers looking over the side of the boat into very clear water, watching large fish dart away, and spending precious time with his busy father whose work often required his presence in the field. When Saddam Hussein rose to power, Alwash moved to the United States. When the Hussein regime fell, Alwash knew the time had come for him to go back to restore the beloved marshes of his childhood. In 2003, he made the difficult choice of giving up a comfortable life in California and moved back to war-torn Iraq, with the hopes that one day his own daughters might be able to see the place he had loved as a child.

In 2004, Alwash founded Nature Iraq and put his experience in hydraulic engineering to use, surveying the region and developing a master plan to restore the marshes. He reached out to the environment and water resource ministries to educate government officials about the environmental, social and economic benefits of restoring the marshes.

His work was not only politically challenging; it was dangerous as well. Despite these hurdles, the Mesopotamian marshes are starting to flourish again as a result of Alwash's advocacy; the restored marshes are slated to be established as the country's first national park in the spring of 2013. While continuing the restoration work, Alwash is now fighting a new threat to Iraq's environment: an extensive chain of 23 dams upstream along the Turkey/Syria border, which if completed, would reduce the flow of water into Iraq to a mere trickle. He is organizing a flotilla tour to call global

attention to the threat of water-based conflicts and turning the dams into an opportunity to revive conversations about the need to protect water resources in the broader region.

The Goldman Environmental Prize, now in its 24th year, is awarded annually to environmental heroes from each of the world's six inhabited continental regions. With an individual cash prize of \$150 000, it is the largest award for grassroots environmental activism. (Source BirdLife International)

### Children make bird boxes

Iraqi children from five schools around the mountain of Peremagroon in Kurdistan made and erected over 40 nest boxes as part of a conservation education programme funded by the UK Government's Darwin Initiative (Plate 1). A year ago Nature Iraq, in partnership with BirdLife International and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, embarked upon a multi-faceted, three-year conservation programme—the first of its kind in the Middle East. An online course in conservation has started at Sulaimani University and over 40 students and others have enrolled. Plans are also taking shape for developing an app to help identify birds, together with other animals and plants that children, students and Iraqi visitors to the region might expect to see around Peremagroon—one of the most important areas for biodiversity in Kurdistan.

The most exciting venture has been the nest box project. Holes for hole-nesting birds seem to be at a premium in Kurdistan, possibly because of the destruction of woodland in the past, and the fact that many trees have not been allowed to mature. Hopefully this Nature Iraq project will provide nesting sites for birds such as the Great Tit *Parus major* and Sombre Tit *Poecile lugubris*. A future step will be for NI to put video cameras in some of the boxes. (Source BirdLife International)

## KUWAIT

### Sociable Lapwings shot

In March three Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius*, 120 Caspian Plovers *Charadrius asiaticus* and hundreds of larks were shot in Kuwait. This is the first confirmed killing of Sociable Lapwings in Kuwait. These birds were returning to Kazakhstan where they

would have started to breed. From extensive research between 2004 and 2012, it is known that the Sociable Lapwing is declining due to low adult survival, which is almost certainly caused by being shot during migration. There is evidence from known stopover sites in northeastern Syria and some areas in Iraq from 2008 and 2009 that these birds are widely hunted by both locals and visiting falconers from the Gulf states.

The RSPB acts as co-ordinator for the implementation of the International Single Species Action Plan for the species under a memorandum of cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme secretariat of the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA).

In May 2012, the revision of the 2002 action plan was adopted by the 5th meeting of the parties to AEWA (MOP5) in La Rochelle, France. This identified the urgent need for action across Sociable Lapwing range states to implement and enforce effective hunting legislation. Sergey Dereliev, AEWA technical officer, commented, "Although Kuwait is not yet a Contracting Party to AEWA, the Government has expressed its interest in the objectives of the Agreement through attendance at MOP5, and it could play a significant role in the Gulf region in helping to halt the decline of this Critically Endangered species by implementing and enforcing hunting legislation. By improving adult survival by 30% we could see a stabilization of the current population size on the way to a future increasing population trend". (Source RSPB)

## KAZAKHSTAN

### Lesser White-fronted Goose is 'Bird of the Year'

Kazakhstan has awarded the Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* 'Bird of the Year 2013'. This goose is included in the Red Data Book of Kazakhstan, where up to a 95% of their world population passes through on its way from breeding to wintering areas, forming large flocks in the north of the country. This bird is also part of a conservation action plan approved by the Ministry of Environmental Protection of Kazakhstan in 2012.

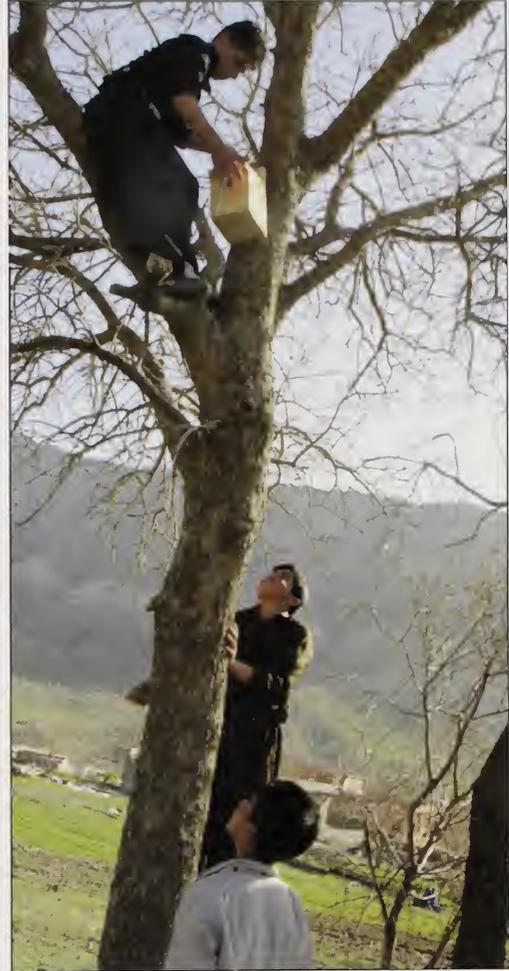


Plate 1. Iraqi children from five schools around the mountain of Peremagroon in Kurdistan made and erected over 40 nest boxes. © Nature Iraq

Groups of ornithologists from Kazakhstan, Norway, Finland, Russia and Bulgaria carry out every year the monitoring of migrating geese, which is a key activity in the project “Reducing the threat from (illegal) hunting on threatened waterbirds in Kostanay, Kazakhstan”, supported by UNEP-AEWA and coordinated by BirdLife Partner ACBK (Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan). In autumn 2012, the counting, which also includes all rare and game species of waterbirds, produced not only a result of 35 000 Lesser White-fronted geese at 89 lakes of two areas, but also 150 000 Red-breasted Geese *Branta ruficollis*, which became a sensation since this number is twice higher than the previous estimates of the species’ world population.

In addition to the field studies, meetings are conducted with management of game farms and game wardens, together with hunters and governmental officers, where questions on hunting management and conservation of wild animals are discussed. Booklets, posters, questionnaires for hunters with information on the Lesser White-fronted Goose and other globally threatened bird species are published annually.

This work is already giving significant results, such as the setting of quiet zones in several hunting areas and specific days for hunting. As a result of these measures, almost all the migratory flocks of geese were focused in autumn 2012 in the western side of northern Kazakhstan, just before they fly to wintering areas in the south.

### **Black Lark research**

Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis* is the subject of a research project, part funded by the OSME Conservation and Research Fund, looking at the species’ breeding behaviour. The project team has set up a blogspot—[www.blacklarks.blogspot.de](http://www.blacklarks.blogspot.de). It is both informative and a good read! (Source Geoff Welch)

## **LEBANON**

### **Hikers walk through Lebanon for the conservation of birds**

The Lebanon Mountain Trail Association (LMTA) launched on 30 March 2013 its fifth annual ‘thru-walk’ from Andaket in north

Lebanon. This year, 150 hikers from nine countries spent up to 28 days on the trail, walking for birds and promoting new hunting regulations. The importance of birds and bird populations and the critical need to end hunting malpractices, including the massacre of migratory soaring birds was relayed to trailside communities (about 70 villages and towns). Armed with Lebanon’s new hunting regulations, the group of hikers presented and discussed a string of new procedures during evening seminars organized in collaboration with the UNDP/GEF-funded Migratory Soaring Birds Project which is implemented by the Ministry of Environment and BirdLife’s national partner, the Society for the Protection of Nature. To learn more about the trail and their activities, please visit [www.lebanontrail.org](http://www.lebanontrail.org). (Source BirdLife International)

### **SPNL receives ‘Best Practice’ award from the United Nations**

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL—BirdLife in Lebanon) recently received an international ‘best practice’ award for their work at the Qolieleh hima site, southern Lebanon, where they are preserving the coast and improving living conditions for local people. Dubai Municipality presented the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to SPNL for community-based conservation at the coastal hima site. This award focuses on projects that sustainably improve the living environment, under the United Nations Human Settlements Programme. This year, the ninth session of the award, they recognised SPNL’s work in reviving a traditional land-use practice, hima, as a model for improving the quality of people’s lives in an environmentally-sustainable and culturally-sensitive way.

Carried out in collaboration with the municipality of Qolieleh, the Site Support Group, Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation, the German non-governmental organization EURONATUR, ATW-WWF, Care International and Jensen/BirdLife International, the project preserves the southern Lebanese coast and its resources whilst empowering local people. As well as attracting different species of marine bird, the project aimed to benefit local fishermen

by creating job opportunities, such as marine guides, and training them on sustainable fishing methods—and promoted eco-tourism in the area. The project also involved the neighbouring village communities (in the area stretching from the south of Tyre Coast nature reserve to Naqoura) in protecting the coast, birds and marine life. By raising awareness and support for nature conservation amongst local people, this will also promote sustainable living, improve daily income and enhance the respect they have for their local biodiversity. (Source BirdLife International)

## SYRIA

### Northern Bald Ibis update

Despite the current crisis in Syria, the field team have continued to monitor the ibises, and have reported the sad news that only one of the Northern Bald Ibises *Geronticus eremita* has returned to the breeding site at Palmyra this spring. Unfortunately, there are no signs of any more birds so far returning from their migration to Ethiopia. The returning female ‘Zenobia’ was last year paired to ‘Odeinat’, the last male, which was fitted with a small satellite tag that stopped transmitting in southern Saudi Arabia in July 2012 ([www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/tracking/northernbaldibis/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/tracking/northernbaldibis/)). It has not been possible to search for Odeinat, as the last signals did not give an accurate location. Subsequently, a total of four birds was seen briefly in January this year by Yilma Abebe and Tariku Dagne (a visit supported by the Ethiopian Natural History Society and the Culture and Tourism Office of Ethiopia, with funds from RSPB) at the usual Ethiopian highland wintering site, but it now seems clear that only one of these birds has returned to the breeding area.

This looks ominously like it may be the end for the relict eastern population of the species, having been rediscovered in 2002 when there were three breeding pairs. Despite huge efforts the colony dwindled to just one pair in the past two years and now it seems to just be the one bird. This comes at a time when coordinated efforts are strengthening and indeed after the establishment of the new International Working Group in Jazan, Saudi Arabia in November 2012.

Among the hopes for maintaining the eastern population are further releases from the former colony site at Birecik in southeast Turkey where a semi-wild population persists. Meanwhile the only other wild population, which receives dedicated conservation efforts by Souss-Massa national park and the Spanish BirdLife International Partner SEO/BirdLife, has remained relatively stable (some recent increases) over the past 20 years despite growing development pressures, but comprises just over 100 breeding pairs at only two colonies in Morocco (<http://northernbaldibis.blogspot.com.es/p/about-nbi-projet.html>). (Source Chris Bowden)

## UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

### 420 bird species found in Abu Dhabi in 2012

About 420 bird species were found in Abu Dhabi emirate last year, according to the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi’s (EAD) annual report for the year 2012. EAD monitored wild birds throughout the emirate at nearly 60 sites including various habitats in different terrains; an average 42 000 birds were recorded every month. Highlights included nearly 12 000 breeding pairs of Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* and Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* breeding at Al Wathba wetland reserve with 17 chicks fledging successfully. The report released by Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, EAD’s Secretary General, documents its efforts in protecting the environment of the emirate. It highlights the measures taken in environmental regulatory and policy framework, conservation of ground water and biodiversity, ensuring clean air and minimising climate change and its impacts, and promoting sustainable communities. The agency succeeded in protecting approximately 60 000 square metres of mangroves on Al Reem island after learning of a developer’s illegal attempt to clear the area. An environmental protection and awareness plan at the Eastern Mangroves in Abu Dhabi was also implemented last year. Two patrols are operated in the area daily to monitor ecological conditions. (Source Gulf News)

## REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

### Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia: 2013 records

Observers in the Arabian peninsula are asked to send in their personal observations of breeding species for 2013 at the end of the season. ABBA works closely with natural history groups active in Arabia and with their ornithological recorders, so that benefits may accrue to all parties. Information is regularly passed between ABBA and such groups and recorders but individual contributors are strongly encouraged to copy their ABBA reports to their local group or bird recorder. Records of observations prior to 2013 are also welcome. Please send records to Mike Jennings (ArabianBirds@dsl.pipex.com), Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire PE28 3WD, UK.

### Crowd-sourcing an atlas of migratory bird hunting

OSME has received a request from Paul Jepson of the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, asking us to help with a project to create an atlas of migratory bird hunting. As he states, this practice is still widespread yet we lack an easily accessible overview of where hunting happens and what the trends are. A short questionnaire can be found at <http://research.ouce.ox.ac.uk/limesurvey/index.php?sid=47842&lang=en>.

Paul would be extremely grateful if you could first complete the questionnaire if you have knowledge of migratory hunting and secondly circulate news of this project via your networks and the birding and conservation social media with a request for community members to map and contribute their knowledge. This can be first-hand knowledge, from reports or books, or from friends and acquaintances.

The intention is to focus on the Mediterranean basin first. If successful this approach could generate a global map to bring wider attention to the issue and as a resource for policy and research. It may also inspire other projects to map the interactions of people and birds. The idea for this project

arises from collaboration with Cery Levy and the Bird Effect. (Source Paul Jepson)

## GENERAL

### Wildlife Middle East News

The latest issue (vol 6, issue 4) was published in March and includes an article on the breeding biology, threats and conservation of the Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* at Siniya island, United Arab Emirates. A PDF can be downloaded from [www.wmenews.com](http://www.wmenews.com). Submissions for future issues should be sent to the editor at [info@wmenews.com](mailto:info@wmenews.com).

### Birdfair/RSPB Research Fund for Endangered Birds

The 2013 round of the Birdfair/RSPB Research Fund for Endangered Birds is now open. These grants of up to US\$2000 are to support research work on birds listed by BirdLife/IUCN as endangered, critically endangered or data deficient. Further details and an application form can be found at [www.birdgrants.org](http://www.birdgrants.org). The closing date is 31 October 2013.

### Migration blog for Djibouti

A blog about the migration count at Ras Siyyan, Djibouti and the tracking of an Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* via satellite captured in Tadjoura, Djibouti has been set up at <http://egyptianvulturedjibouti.blogspot.co.at/>. (Source Mike McGrady)

### New Yahoo Group for Arabian peninsula conservation

A new group called Biodiversity Conservation Arabian Peninsula has been created on Yahoo Groups. The purpose is to connect people actively involved in researching and managing the region's terrestrial biota. This includes regional and international scientists, people from NGOs, government and educational institutions and environmental authorities. It aims to promote inter and intra-regional and personal collaborations: to share knowledge, ideas, data, publications and biodiversity news. See [http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Biodiversity\\_Conservation\\_Arabian\\_Peninsula/](http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Biodiversity_Conservation_Arabian_Peninsula/). (Source Sarah May, Natural History and Science Museum, Qatar)

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# AROUND THE REGION

Ian Harrison & Chris Lamsdell (compilers)

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 2013 unless stated otherwise.

Records and photographs for *Sandgrouse* 36 (1) should be sent by 15 December to atr@osme.org.

## AFGHANISTAN

A **Long-tailed Shrike** *Lanius schach* was singing at the national museum, Kabul, 29 Apr and four were at Kabul airport 1 May. Single **Greenish Warblers** *Phylloscopus trochiloides* were seen in Kabul 24 Apr and 15 May while a **Brahminy Starling** *Sturnia pagodarum* was recorded there 21 Apr. A **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* was at Wazir Akbar Khan, Kabul, 11 Apr and a **Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus* was at Kabul 1 May.

## ARMENIA

The mid-winter waterbird census in January identified high numbers of **Red-crested Pochards** *Netta rufina* (5853) and **Eurasian Coots** *Fulica atra* (26 838) at lake Sevan. A total of 788 **Western White Storks** *Ciconia ciconia ciconia* were counted on the Metsamor river system. The first record of **Desert Finch** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* (at least two adult birds) was near Vedia 18 Jun.

## CYPRUS

120 **Red-footed Falcons** *Falco tinnunculus* at Anarita park 20–21 Apr is the largest spring congregation ever recorded and a **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* was at Paralimni lake 15 Apr. Up to two **Baillon's Crakes** *Porzana pusilla* were at Agia Varvara soakaways 1–15 Apr. Rare migrant waders included a **Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* at Akrotiri gravel pits 30 Mar, a **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* at Mandria beach on 9 Mar, another Larnaca sewage works area 3 Apr and a third Paralimni lake 7 Apr. Other unusual waders included a **Eurasian Dotterel** *Charadrius morinellus* at Mandria 21 Mar; single **Bar-tailed Godwits** *Limosa lapponica* at Akrotiri salt lake on 1 Apr and

12–28 May and another at Spiros pool 29 Apr. A **Broad-billed Sandpiper** *Limicola falcinellus* at Mandria beach 7 Apr was the earliest record for this species. Up to three **Red-necked Phalaropes** *Phalaropus lobatus* were at Larnaca airport pools 14–22 Apr with six on 25 Apr and one at Akrotiri salt lake 27 Apr. Single **Cream-coloured Coursers** *Cursorius cursor* were at Paphos headland 15 Mar and Akrotiri gravel pits 21 Mar. Fourteen summer plumage **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyæetus* off cape Greco 26 Mar was the largest ever group recorded of this rare migrant. Two **Caspian Terns** *Hydroprogne caspia* passed cape Greco 29 Mar and another was seen off Petounta point on the same day. **Arctic Skuas** *Stercorarius parasiticus* were seen off Spiros beach and Paphos lighthouse 12 Jan while 11 were off cape Kiti 22 Mar.

A pair of **Laughing Doves** *Spilopelia senegalensis* was found with two nestlings at Limassol 14 Jun, the first breeding record of this possibly escaped species. A **Little Swift** *Apus affinis* reported at Mandria 5 Apr was only the 13th record. **White-throated Kingfishers** *Halcyon smyrnensis* were at Asprokremmos dam 28 Mar, lower Ezousas soakaways on 13 Apr while two birds remained in the Akrotiri area until the end of April. Single **Pied Kingfishers** *Ceryle rudis* were at Zakaki marsh 11 Jan–Feb 22 and at Klepini dam 18 May. Unusually high numbers of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** *Merops persicus* were seen in spring 2013, the highest group being 21 at the lower Xeros Potamos pools 16–17 Mar.

A **Daurian Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus* was at cape Greco 5 Apr and another probably this form at Akrotiri gravel pits 6 May. A **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis*, possibly race *aucheri*, was at cape Greco 8–10



**Plate 1.** Mountain Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus (sindianus) lorenzii* 2 April 2013, Koulikia reedbed, Cyprus. © C & DK Lamsdell

Apr (second record of this race). The second record of **Caucasian Mountain Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus (sindianus) lorenzii* was trapped and ringed at Koulikia reedbed on 2 Apr (Plate 1). **Olive-tree Warblers** *Hippolais olivetorum* were at Ladies Mile 25–27 Apr and Konia 26 Apr. A **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* was at Coral Bay Pathos 12 Apr (14th record). At least three **Ring Ouzels** *Turdus torquatus* at Troodos 1 Mar constituted only the fifth record in the last ten years (the last being October 2005). A female **Siberian Stonechat** *Saxicola maurus* was at Petounta point 26 Mar and another cape Greco 16–17 Mar. A female **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* at cape Andreas 30 Apr was the fourth record. A **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* was at cape Greco 31 Mar. A **Rock Sparrow** *Petronia petronia* was at Marathounta 13 Jan. The first record of **Asian Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* (two birds) occurred at Larnaca sewage works 18–20 Mar. There was an unusually high influx of **Hawfinches** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* with wintering flocks of up to 20 reported in several locations, the largest influx for 12 years. There were also

unusually high numbers of **Yellowhammers** *Emberiza citrinella* with 19 at Troodos 22–25 Feb—this flock also contained the sixth record of **Pine Bunting** *Emberiza leucocephalos* 22 Feb (the last being 2003).

## EGYPT

Mid winter counts 29 Dec 2012–8 Jan in the Nile valley between the High dam and Kom Ombo (c70 km) produced the following records: five **Little Bitterns** *Ixobrychus minutus* (probably winter visitors), 124 **Purple Herons** *Ardea purpurea* (a rare winter visitor in the Nile valley), 186 **White Storks** *Ciconia ciconia* (a few winter records), 1113 **Glossy Ibises** *Plegadis falcinellus* (irregular winter visitor), 158 **White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* (rare in winter), 842 **Black-winged Stilts** *Himantopus himantopus* (rare in winter), 91 **White-tailed Lapwings** *Vanellus leucurus* (occasional in winter), 275 **Black-tailed Godwits** *Limosa limosa* (rare in winter) and 658 **Gull-billed Terns** *Gelochelidon nilotica* (rare in winter). **Yellow-billed Stork** *Mycteria ibis* records: c40 birds around Abu Simbel 5 and 7 May, five soaring over Tut Amon fish ponds near

Aswan 7 May and four at Kings island 14 May. Two **African Openbills** *Anastomus lamelligerus* were photographed during a Nile cruise near Kom Ombo 31 May (second record). A **Goliath Heron** *Ardea goliath* was at Hamata mangroves 8 May. **Pink-backed Pelicans** *Pelecanus rufescens* were noted in the Abu Simbel area 5–7 May with a high single count of 19 on 6 May. 10–15 **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Torgos tracheliotus* were in the Bir Shalatein area 1 May. A **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* was at Safaga–Qena road 15 Apr. About 2000 **Levant Sparrowhawks** *Accipiter brevipes* passed over El Gouna 20 Apr while a **Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* was there 9 Apr. A **Greater Spotted Eagle** *Aquila clanga* was at Kings island 18 Feb while a **Sooty Falcon** *Falco coucolor* was there 14 May. An **African Swamphen** *Porphyrio madagascariensis* was at Minya 29 Apr. Four **Crab Plovers** *Dromas ardeola* were at Hamata mangroves 4 May while 40 **Kittlitz's Plovers** *Charadrius*

*pecuarius* were seen at Abu Simbel 28 Apr with three there 6 May. Two **Three-banded Plovers** *Charadrius tricollaris* were recorded at Tut Amon fish ponds 7 May. Two **Greater Painted Snipes** *Rostratula benghalensis* were found near Abassa 28 Apr. Single **Greater Black-backed Gulls** *Larus ichthyæetus* were at Dehab 27 Feb and Ras Shukeir 1 Mar.

Two **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles exustus* were near Sandafa 29 Apr while c80 **Crowned Sandgrouse** *Pterocles coronatus* were at Hurghada–Safaga road 6–18 Apr (Plate 2). Three **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** *Pterocles lichtensteini* were seen at Wadi Shartut (Wadi El Gimal national park) 2 May. A male **African Mourning Dove** *Streptopelia decipiens* was found at Abu Simbel 5 May. A single **Senegal Coucal** *Centropus senegalensis* was near Abassa 28 Apr. A **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* was at El Gouna golf course 17 Apr while six **House Crows** *Corvus splendens* were there 14 Feb. A visit to Marsa Alam Gorgonia 24–27 Feb produced



**Plate 2.** Crowned Sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus* 18 April 2013, Hurghada–Safaga road, Egypt. © Mohammed Habib

the following: an **Oriental Skylark** *Alauda gulgula* (26–27 Feb), a **Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe* (24–26) and a **Cyprus Wheatear** *Oenanthe cypriaca* (27 Feb). **Nile Valley Sunbirds** *Anthodiaeta metallica* were reported at El Gouna with five on 8 Mar with an adult male there 16 Apr, a male at Minya 29 Apr and a pair just south of Kalabash on the Aswan–Edfu agricultural road on 7 May. **Streaked Weavers** *Ploceus manyar* were seen at Abassa with three females and at least one singing male 28 Apr. The first record of **Olive-backed Pipit** *Anthus hodgsoni* was at Dahab 20–24 Feb.

## IRAQ

28 **Lesser White-fronted Geese** *Anser erythropus* and c900 **Marbled Ducks** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* were counted Hawiza marsh, south Iraq, 13 Jan, with 125 **Marbled Ducks** at Dalmaj marsh in late Mar and 11 in the Central marshes early April. Single **Black-winged Kites** *Elanus caeruleus* were at Dalmaj 26 Mar and at Barzan 23 Apr (the most northerly record in Iraq). A **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* was at Dalmaj marsh 29 Mar. The **White-tailed Lapwing** *Vanellus leucurus* population at Dalmaj marsh was estimated at over 1000 pairs at the end of March. A **Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* was at Dalmaj 29 Mar.

A **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris* was at Dalmaj 27 Mar. About fifty **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* were at Dalmaj marsh 30 Mar with birds already on territory. The first **Basra Reed Warblers** *Acrocephalus griseldis* recorded in spring were at Dalmaj marsh 29 Mar and the first at Central marshes were on 2 Apr. Two **Semi-collared Flycatchers** *Ficedula semitorquata* were at the Central marshes in early April. A **Spanish Sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis* breeding colony at Dalmaj marsh represents the first record for southern Iraq. The **Dead Sea Sparrow** *Passer (moabiticus) moabiticus* colony at Dalmaj marsh was estimated at c1400 pairs (end March). A flock of 2000 **Yellow Wagtails** *Motacilla [flava] flava* was at Dalmaj marsh 28 Mar. At least five **Common Rosefinches** *Carpodacus erythrinus* were seen together in early May at Barzan, Kurdistan (second record for Iraq). It was noted that **Hawfinches** *Coccothraustes*

*coccothraustes* were common this winter at the same location (*cf* Cyprus section above).

## ISRAEL

More than 40 adult **Marbled Ducks** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* were found on a football pitch-sized body of water in the western Jezreel valley including a pair with eight ducklings and a pair with ten one-day old chicks. A **Yellow-billed Stork** *Mycteria ibis* was in the Harod valley 27 May–late June (20th record, first since 1997). A single **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* was at En Feshkha, Dead sea, late January and several were seen migrating over Eilat during May. A **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* was at Dudaim, north Negev, 15 Jan (first since 1991), a single **Cinereous Vulture** *Aegypius monachus* was seen migrating over Eilat mountains 19 Mar and an adult **Bateleur** *Terathopius ecaudatus* was reported migrating over Elkana 15 May (eighth record). Six **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* were at Kfar Ruppim from 3 Jan. Three **White-tailed Lapwings** *Vanellus leucurus* were at Eilat throughout March; with a **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* there 22 Mar, up to five at Yotvata until 9 Apr and a single at Mitzpe Ramon 4 May. Three **Greater Painted Snipes** *Rostratula benghalensis* were at Ya'ar pond, 3 May while single **Great Snipes** *Gallinago media* were at Ashdod and Nizzana 6 May with four at Hulda reservoir 21–25 May. The fourth record of **Grey-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus* was reported at KM19 sewage farm, Eilat, 3 Apr (first since 1989). An **Audouin's Gull** *Larus audouinii* was at Acre 2 Feb and a **Sooty Gull** *Larus hemprichii* at Eilat's North Beach 22 Mar. A **Bridled Tern** *Onychoprion anaethetus* was off Rosh Hanikra, north Mediterranean coast, 19 Jun (there were breeding attempts in the summers of 2008 and 2009, in a colony of Common Terns). An early **White-cheeked Tern** *Sterna repressa* was at Eilat 22–24 Mar and three 14 May. Five **Egyptian Nightjars** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* were at Yotvata throughout February.

A **Turkestan Shrike** *Lanius [isabellinus] phoenicuroides* was at Yotvata 27–30 Mar. A **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis elegans* remained at Bteha, Kineret, all January while two were in south Arava mid January. A **Pallas's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus proregulus*

was reported at Hazeva, north Arava, 15 Apr. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* was at Be'er Sheva 15–24 Feb with another at Nafha, central Negev, 2 Mar. A **Hume's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus humei* was at Nir Moshe 9–12 Feb. A **Common Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia* was ringed at Yeroham, central Negev, on 6 Apr (eighth record) and an **Asian Desert Warbler** *Sylvia nana* was at Haifa 20 Apr. Two **Ménétriés's Warblers** *Sylvia mystacea* were at Eilat 23 Mar and one was ringed at Hula lake 31 Mar. Five **White-throated Robins** *Irania gutturalis* were at Eilat and Arava, 14–30 Mar. **Black Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas podobe* were exceptionally early with a northern record of one at Hazerim, north Negev, 8 Mar and 14 seen at Eilat, Yotvata and Neot Smadar 16 Mar–9 Apr. A 2cy male **Pied Stonechat** *Saxicola caprata* at Tirat Zvi, Bet She'an valley, 31 May–1 Jun is the 8th record. A **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* was at KM76, south Arava, 15 Mar while a **Cyprus Wheatear** *Oenanthe cypriaca* was there 19 Mar and another at Eilat 11 Apr. There was a large-scale breeding invasion of **Pale Rockfinches** *Carpospiza brachydactyla* into large parts of the Negev, Arava and Judean desert, involving perhaps thousands of pairs, as a result of exceptional winter rains in the desert. **Buff-bellied Pipits** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* were present in good numbers at Kfar Ruppim, Hula, Samar (south Arava) and Yotvata during January. Three **Olive-backed Pipits** *Anthus hodgsoni* remained at Elkana and one at Tel Aviv all Jan; with another at Nir Moshe, north Negev, 21 Jan.

## KAZAKHSTAN

A **Japanese Waxwing** *Bombycilla japonica* was ringed in the apple garden in the foothills of Ile Alatau on 3 Jan (first record for Kazakhstan/OSME region). A single **Red-throated Thrush** *Turdus [ruficollis] ruficollis* was recorded at the Russian olive thickets in the Ile river valley near Akbastau village, Almaty oblast, 19 Jan. A **Dusky Thrush** *Turdus [naumanni] eunomus* was seen in the Russian olive thickets near Baiserke village (Ile region, Almaty oblast) 16 Feb.

## KUWAIT

A female **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* with nine ducklings (2nd breeding record) 18 May and a **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* seen with ten chicks (first breeding record) 9 Apr at Jahra pools reserve (JPR). A **Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* was at Sea city, Khiran, 12 Dec 2012 while two **Horned Grebes** *Podiceps auritus* were at JPR 1–22 Jan (second record, Plate 3). Single **Western White Storks** *Ciconia ciconia* were at Pivot Fields 12 Dec 2012 and JPR 7 Jan. Single **Great White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* were at Sulaibikhat bay 27 Dec 2012 and Jahra East outfall (JEO) 6 Jan and 23 Mar. Two **Socotra Cormorants** *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* were at Sea city 12 Dec 2012 and sixteen on 9 May. A **Cinereous Vulture** *Aegypius monachus* was at JPR 26 Feb while an **Eastern Imperial Eagle** *Aquila heliaca* was at Pivot Fields 21 Dec 2012 and a juvenile **Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* at JEO 11 Dec 2012. Breeding of **Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra* was confirmed 13 May at JPR (second confirmed breeding for JPR, first 1996). Breeding of **Purple Swamphen** *Porphyrio porphyrio* (two chicks) was confirmed 2 May at the same site. 57 **Caspian Plovers** *Charadrius asiaticus* were



**Plate 3.** Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus* 6 January 2013, Jahra pools reserve, Kuwait. © AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan

seen in the Liyah protected area 16 Mar. A **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyactus* was at JPR 5 Mar. **Lesser Crested** *Sterna bengalensis*, **Little** *Sternula albifrons*, **Bridled** *Onychoprion anaethetus* and **White-cheeked Terns** *Sterna repressa* were seen off Sea city 9 May. A **Common Woodpigeon** *Columba palumbus* was at JPR 4–5 Mar. A **Pharaoh Eagle Owl** *Bubo ascalaphus* with five chicks confirmed breeding at an oil field 14 Feb.

A **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris* was in Khiran area 6 Mar. The third record of **Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus* occurred at Fahaheel park 5 Feb–3 Apr. Three **Mesopotamian Crows** *Corvus (cornix) capellanus* were at JPR 15 Feb while a **Brown-necked Raven** *Corvus ruficollis* near KEPS/EPA 13 Dec 2012 was considered a probable escape. A **Wood Lark** *Lullula arborea* was at Fahaheel park on 9 Jan. A **Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus nitidus* was at JEO 30 Apr while a **Savi's Warbler** *Locustella luscinioides* was at JPR 5 Mar. A **Rose-coloured Starling** *Pastor roseus* was at JPR 28 Dec 2012 and another on 15 May. A **White-spotted Bluethroat** *Luscinia (svecica) cyanecula* was at JPR 22 Mar and another at JEO 23 Mar while a **Caucasian Bluethroat** *Luscinia (svecica) magna* was at Al Abra q 22 Mar. A **White-crowned Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucopyga* (15th record) was at Mutla ridge near SAANR 12 Jan while the **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* was re-found at JEO 1 Dec 2012. Single **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes** *Monticola saxatilis* were at Mutla ridge 16 Feb and 3 Mar.

The first record of **Collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicollis* was at Al Abra q 10 Apr. Single **Dead Sea Sparrows** *Passer moabiticus* were at JPR 4–5 Mar. Ten **Indian Silverbills** *Lonchura malabarica* were at Entertainment city 13 May. A **Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla (alba) personata* at Jahra pools 2 Mar was the third record. The first record of **European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris* was at Al Abra q 10 Apr. Two **Eurasian Siskins** *Serinus serinus* were at Al Abra q 21 Dec 2012 while a single bird was there 15 Feb. A **Desert Finch** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* (tenth record) 5 Feb at Khiran resort was confirmed breeding 14 Feb when four chicks were seen. A **Rock Bunting** *Emberiza cia* was at JPR 20 Mar while an **Eastern Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza (cinerea) semenowi* was at Khiran 21 Mar.

## OMAN

115 **Little Grebes** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* at Al Ansab wetlands 10 Apr is very close to the maximum recorded there (116 on 30 Jul 2012). Nine **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* frequented a wadi in Al Khuweir 27 Dec 2012–23 Feb. Three **Lesser Whistling Ducks** *Dendrocygna javanica* were at Al Baleed, Salalah, 4 Jan–18 Mar. A boat trip Muscat–Fahal island 15 Apr produced a **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** *Puffinus pacificus* with another 15 May during a pelagic trip to deep waters 60 km due north of Muscat when 50 **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** *P. carneipes* were also seen. 32 **Jouanin's Petrels** *Bulweria fallax* were seen on a further trip 19 Mar. Three **Red billed Tropicbirds** *Phaethon aethereus* were displaying 28 Jan at Ras al Kabbah while 19 were at Raysut lighthouse 28 Feb. **Black Storks** *Ciconia nigra* continued to be seen in small numbers at various locations in Dhofar from Hadbeen (one 26 Feb) to Wadi Darbat (six 28 Mar). The last record was on 4 Apr (five Khawr Rouri). The autumn influx of **Abdim's Storks** *Ciconia abdimii* resulted in birds continuing to be seen in the Dhofar region throughout the period including one seen well inland at Dawqah farms 27 Dec 2012 and still there 4 Jan. Seven **Yellow Bitterns** *Ixobrychus sinensis* at East Khawr, Salalah, 7 May is a new maximum. An **Eastern Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus (ibis) coromandus*, a vagrant to Oman, was at Sun farm, Sohar (SFS) 9 Apr. The tenth record of **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* was at SFS 25 Apr. Two **Cinereous Vultures** *Aegypius monachus* were at Tawi Attair 27 Feb (third record). Ten **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** *Gyps fulvus* at a dead cow in the Dhofar mountains 17 Feb were accompanied by 35 **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Torgos tracheliotus*, two **Egyptian Vultures** *Neophron percnopterus* and 22 juvenile **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca*. Two **Amur Falcons** *Falco amurensis* were at Jarziz farm, Salalah, 3 May. Two **Lanner Falcons** *Falco biarmicus* were seen Wadi Aydam, Dhofar, 4 Jan.

The **Common Crane** *Grus grus* and five **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* first seen in October 2012 continued to roost at Sahanawt farm and feed at East Khawr and were last seen 3 Mar. A **White-breasted Waterhen** *Amaurornis phoenicurus* was at

A'Shuwaymiyah 5 Jan. The fourth record of **Watercock** *Gallinago cinerea* was at Khawr Rouri 9 Jan (the second year running this species has been recorded). Eight **Red-knobbed Coots** *Fulica cristata* including juveniles were at West Khawr 2 May. A **Spur-winged Lapwing** *Vanellus spinosus* was at West Khawr 2–3 May. 75 **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* were at Sahnawt farm, Salalah, 31 Jan while two to four were at SFS 14 Jan–21 Feb. A **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* was at Al Baleed, Salalah, 2 Mar. A **Long-toed Stint** *Calidris subminuta* was at SFS 5 Apr together with 150 **Collared Pratincoles** *Glarcola pratincola*. Over 5000 **Red-necked Phalaropes** *Phalaropus lobatus* were counted on a pelagic boat trip from Muscat 19 Mar. **Common Gull** *Larus canus* is a rare winter visitor so one on 15 Feb at Raysut is noteworthy. The third record of **Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*, an immature, was seen at Taqah 18 Jan. A **Brown Noddy** *Anous solidus* was at Ras Mirbat and a further four at Khor Taqah 2 May. A **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* (sixth record) was seen on a boat trip Muscat–Fahal island 15 Apr. 60 **Bruce's Green Pigeons** *Treron waalia* (a new maximum) were counted Wadi Darbat 16 Feb. Two **European Turtle Doves** *Streptopelia turtur* were at Al Ansab wetland 20 Apr while two **Rufous Turtle Doves** *Streptopelia (orientalis) meena* were there 13 Apr and another at Hilf 8 Apr. An **African Collared Dove** *Streptopelia risoria* was heard at Mudday 11 Feb, perhaps indicating an expansion of this species. Records of **Asian Koel** *Eudynamis scolopaceus* away from the usual wintering birds on Masirah island include one at Al Baleed farm 12 Jan, two at Qatbit 22 Feb and one there 11 Apr. 600 **Pallid Swifts** *Apus pallidus* were counted during a boat trip Muscat–Fahal island 15 Apr. A **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* seen at Khawr Al Baleed and East Khawr on various dates to 13 Feb may have been the same wintering bird as that seen November/December at the same locations.

The sixth record of **Black Drongo** *Dicrurus macrocercus* was at Birkat Khalidiyah, Mussandam, 24 Apr. Single **Bay-backed Shrikes** *Lanius vittatus* were recorded on A'Sayh plateau, Mussandam 24–25 Mar and 18–19 Apr. Single **Lesser Grey Shrikes** *Lanius minor* were seen at Qatbit 3 Feb, SFS 7 Mar, Al

Rawdah, Mussandam, 18 Apr and two A'Sayh plateau 22 Apr. 400 **House Crows** *Corvus splendens* at Raysut 12 Feb indicates possibly an influx of more ship assisted individuals or a rapid breeding rate but is certainly an enormous explosion in numbers of this invasive species since the arrival of the first bird in 1994. Two **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* were at Qatbit 6 and 22 Feb. An **Oriental Skylark** *Alauda gulgula* was at SFS 12 Jan and 1 Mar. Six **Red-rumped Swallows** *Cecropis daurica* were at Dawqah farm 11 Apr. '**Siberian Chiffchaffs**' *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* were seen singing at Quriyat 30 Jan and at A'Sayh plateau 22 Apr while single **Hume's Leaf Warblers** *Phylloscopus humei* were at Qatbit 12 Jan and 6 Feb. The first confirmed breeding for Oman and Arabia of **Eastern Orphean Warbler** *Sylvia crassirostris* was obtained during a visit to juniper woodlands west of Jabal Shams 9–11 Jun (four birds seen). Two male **Hume's Whitethroats** *Sylvia althaea* were found singing during the same visit (3rd record).

An escaped **Superb Starling** *Lamprolornis superbus* was at Muscat airport 7 and 12 Jun. A **Song Thrush** *Turdus philomelos* at A'Sayh 22 Apr was an unusual spring migration record. Two **Thrush Nightingales** *Luscinia luscinia* were at Dawqah farm 7 May—the eleventh record. A male '**Caspian**' **Siberian Stonechat** *Saxicola (maurus) variegata* was seen on various dates at SFS 10 Jan–1 Mar. The presence of five **Isabelline Wheatears** *Oenanthe isabellina* on Jebel Shams 9–11 Jun indicates possible breeding. **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* is an uncommon breeding resident so single birds Mudday and Wadi Aydam 11 Feb and another Jebel Qamr (all Dhofar) 12 Feb are of note. Two more records of **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* were noted this winter (one 23 Nov 2012 was the first for several years)—one A'Sayh Plateau 25 Mar and one Azeiba 10 Apr. A new maximum number of **Nile Valley Sunbirds** *Anthodiaeta metallica* was counted in the Mudday area of Dhofar on 11 Feb—50 individuals. A **Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla (alba) personata* was at SFS 1 Mar and a '**Yellow-headed Wagtail**' *Motacilla (flava) lutea* was at A'Sayh 22–23 Apr. The first confirmed breeding record for Oman of any wagtail was obtained at SFS 31 May—a female **Black-headed Wagtail** *Motacilla (flava) feldegg*

feeding a fledgling with a male bird nearby. Two **Buff-bellied Pipits** *Anthus (rubescens) japonica* were found at SFS 12 Jan while one was there 20 Mar. The six **Olive-backed Pipits** *Anthus hodgsoni* on Masirah island 23 Dec 2012 remained until at least 23 Feb (seven 26 Jan). 30 **Red-throated Pipits** *Anthus cervinus* were counted at Al Ansab wetlands 10 Apr. Up to 240 **Yemen Serins** *Crithagra menachensis* were feeding in a single flock on the plateau at Shaat, west of Salalah, 1 Mar. Two **Eurasian Siskins** *Carduelis spinus* were on Sayq plateau 1 Feb and three 5 Feb (eighth record). A pair of **Common Rosefinches** *Carpodacus erythrinus*, the male in breeding plumage, were found in juniper woodlands west of Jabal Shams 9–11 Jun. Up to 220 **Ortolan Buntings** *Emberiza hortulana* were at A'Sayh 18–22 Apr. The third record of **Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia* (a male) was at Dawqah farms 20 and 23 Feb. A **Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla* at Muntasar 8–9 Feb was the tenth record. **Yellow-breasted Bunting** *Emberiza aureola* is a rare passage migrant so one 12 Jan at Qatbit is of note.

## QATAR

**Black-eared Kites** *Milvus (migrans) lineatus* were at Al Zubara 29 Mar (one) and 3 April (six). An adult **Short-toed Snake Eagle** *Circus gallicus*, a rare passage migrant and winter visitor, was at Irkayya farm (IF) 8–17 Mar and a juvenile **Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus*, a rare winter visitor and passage migrant, was there 29 May. A juvenile **Bonelli's Eagle** *Aquila fasciatus* photographed by a camera trap, Khor al Adaid 23–24 Jun, was the second record. An adult **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* at Sealine beach resort 7 Apr, was the third record. An adult **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus*, a rare passage migrant, was at Al Ruwais harbour 2 Apr. An adult **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* at IF 24 Apr, was the third record. An adult **Small Pratincole** *Glareola lactea* at Al Kharaanah 25–26 Jan, was the first record as was a first-winter **Little Gull** *Hydrocoloeus minutus* Al Ruwais harbour 11 Jan and a single **Arctic Skua** *Stercorarius parasiticus* Simaisma 5 Mar. Two **Long-tailed Skuas** *Stercorarius longicaudus* were offshore at Sealine beach resort 8 Apr, the second record. At least six

**Short-eared Owls** *Asio flammeus*, a rare winter visitor, remained at IF to at least 24 Feb.

An adult **Long-tailed Shrike** *Lanius schach*, Al Shamal park 11 Jan—at least 14 Apr, was the first record. The first proven breeding record of **Lesser Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella rufescens* was at IF in April. **Eurasian Crag Martins** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* were seen at Fuwairit 14 Apr (one) and IF 24 Apr (one). An **Icterine Warbler** *Hippolais icterina* was seen near IF 28 Apr, the second record. **Hume's Whitethroats** *Sylvia althaea* occurred at IF 20 Mar (one), Traina (Tr) 22 Mar (two), IF 22 Mar (two), and Tr 25 Mar (two) and were the second to fifth records. An adult male **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata*, Al Shamal park, 31 Mar, was the ninth record. An adult female **Yellow-throated Sparrow** *Gymnoris xanthocollis*, Tr 29 Mar, was the seventh record. A **Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus*, IF 18 Apr, was the third record as was a **Striolated Bunting** *Emberiza striolata*, Tr 1 Feb.

## SAUDI ARABIA

A **Eurasian Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris* in a fodder field at Al Hayer 12 April was a very unusual record for central Saudi Arabia. A **Goliath Heron** *Ardea goliath* was at Al Birk, by the Red sea, 27 Mar. Four **Crested Honey Buzzards** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* were at Dhahran Hills golf club 18 Jan in the air together (male, female, two juveniles) and another adult male at Dhahran Hills 12 Feb. An adult **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* was at Wadi Rabigh 24 May. A 2cy female and 2cy male **Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus* were over the spray fields Dhahran Hills 22 Apr. A maximum count of ten **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* were at Sabkhat Al Fasl 8 Mar.

An adult **Purple Swamphen** *Porphyrio porphyrio* was at A'Sharqiyah development company farm, Fadhili, 31 Jan; this is a new site for the species, suggesting a range expansion. Two adult **Spur-winged Lapwings** *Vanellus spinosus* were at the site 31 Jan and 15 more were at NADEC dairy farm in Haradh 7 Feb, indicating that this species is expanding its range eastwards into the Eastern province. A flock of 35 **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* were in fields north of Jizan 14



**Plate 4.** Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni* 25 April 2013, Dhahran Hills, Eastern province, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Babbington

Feb, the highest count for the country in recent years. Two **Greater Painted Snipes** *Rostratula benghalensis* were flushed at Malaki dam (Jizan) and two others were seen well at Sabya sewage lagoons near Jizan 31 Mar with a family group seen there 16 May—this is the first confirmed breeding of the species. Two **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* were at the spray fields Dhahran Hills 23–26 Apr (Plates 4, 5) with five at Buraidh 25 Apr. A 2cy **Common Gull** *Larus canus* was at



**Plate 5.** Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni* 25 April 2013, Dhahran Hills, Eastern province, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Babbington

Sabkhat Al Fasl, Jubail, 3 Jan with two 2cy birds there 17 Jan, appearing to be only the eighth and ninth documented records for the Eastern province. An adult **Armenian Gull** *Larus armenicus* was at Abqaiq landfill 11 Jan.

An adult **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* was at Rabigh dam 15 Feb and another at Yanbu dump 14 Mar. At dusk 29 Mar a **Nubian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus nubicus* was seen near acacias at Wadi Jawwah. Two of the increasingly scarce **Arabian Magpies** *Pica (pica) asirensis* were seen at Dahna waterfall near Abha 2 Apr. A flock of 40 **Bimaculated Larks** *Melanocorypha bimaculata* were in a pivot irrigation field near Nayriyyah 14 Mar where a **Common Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia* was also present then. Two **Savi's Warblers** *Locustella luscinioides* were singing at Dhahran 3–16 Mar with one at Sabkhat Al Fasl 8 Mar and another 11 Apr. A **Red-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe chrysopygia* was at Dhahran Hills 6 Jan–18 Feb. A female **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* was at A'Sharqiyah development company farm, Fadhili, 23 Mar. Two **Eastern Cinereous Buntings** *Emberiza (cineracea) semenowi* were at Sabkhat Al Fasl 21 Mar, another at nearby Duffi park (Jubail) 23 Mar (Plate 6), one in the west of Saudi Arabia at Al Khalib park (Al



**Plate 6.** Eastern Cinereous Bunting *Emberiza (cineracea) semenowi* 23 March 2013, Duffi park, Jubail, Eastern province, Saudi Arabia. © Jem Babbington

Baha) 3 Apr, one in Riyadh 10 Apr and one at Buraidh 25 Apr.

## TAJIKISTAN

Four **Black-throated Thrushes** *Turdus atrogularis* near Khovaling 11 Apr were late in the season. **Bohemian Waxwing** *Bombycilla garrulus* is a scarce to rare winter visitor so one on the shores of Qayrakum lake, Khujand region, 17 Mar is noteworthy.

## TURKEY

The relatively mild winter this year did not seem to promise good waterfowl but waterbird counts across the country found many interesting species. Yedikır dam lake, Amasya, produced singles of **Red-breasted Goose** *Branta ruficollis* 19 Jan and **Bean Goose** *Anser fabalis* 26 Feb, the latter last recorded in 2006. 65 **Velvet Scoters** *Melanitta fusca* and 12 **Common Scoters** *Melanitta nigra* were present off Yeşilırmak delta, Samsun, 18 Jan. At lake Büyükçekmece, İstanbul, there were two **Goosanders** *Mergus merganser* 25 Jan and two 23 Feb. The first proven breeding record

of **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* comes from Bozova, Şanlıurfa, 20 May where a nest with young was photographed. Another bird was in Yemişli Mardin 21 Apr. A **Cinereous Vulture** *Aegypius monachus* 13 Apr in Kızıldağ and a **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* 29 March in Subaşı, Antakya, were the first records for the province, both probably being regular but overlooked migrants. A single **Great Bustard** *Otis tarda* Kızılırmak delta, Samsun, on 10 May (Plate 7) is the first record there in the last 10 years. Three **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* were recorded—singles at lake Büyükçekmece, İstanbul, 20 Jan, Göksu delta 1 Jan and Yedikır Barajı, Amasya, 26 Feb.

The highlight was the first record of **Allen's Gallinule** *Porphyrio alleni*, at lake Mogan, Ankara, 26–30 April. Four wintering **Red-wattled Lapwings** *Vanellus indicus* were present at Savur, Mardin. Spring passage **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* were recorded throughout the country, singles being seen at Kızıldağ, Antakya, 18 May, Hancağız dam lake, Gaziantep, 5 and 18 May, lake Beyşehir 18 May and near Van 17 May. Two **Terek Sandpipers** *Xenus cinereus* were at Kızılırmak



**Plate 7.** Great Bustard *Otis tarda* 10 May 2013, Kızılırmak delta, Samsun, Turkey. © Nizamettin Yafuz

delta, Samsun, 11 May. Good numbers of **Black-legged Kittiwakes** *Rissa tridactyla* were recorded—six in Antalya city 8 Feb after very strong southern winds and 12 at Zonguldak 23 April. Seven **White-eared Bulbuls** *Pycnonotus leucotis* were present in Birecik 16 May, confirming the colonisation of the species along the Turkish Euphrates. A single **Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* was at Zonguldak University campus 14 Jan. Strong southern winds blowing from North Africa in mid-March brought many good migrants: an **Asian Desert Warbler** *Sylvia nana* and a **Cyprus Warbler** *Sylvia melanothorax* were in Boğazkent, Antalya, 18 Mar where there was also a **Desert Wheatear** *Oenanthe deserti* on the same date and two more of the latter species near Alanya, Antalya, 20 May with three also in Gazipaşa, Antalya, on the same day. A **Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla* was observed 15–19 Jan in Filyos harbour, Zonguldak, the first known record for the province while another was recorded in Subaşı, Antakya, 30 Jan.

## UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

A Bewick's Swan *Cygnus (columbianus) bewickii* (second record) was at Fujairah tennis club dam 17 and 21 Jun, flying strongly—precise provenance currently not clear. There have been a number of records of **Red-crested Pochards** *Netta rufina* this winter. Two males were at Ajman water treatment plant 4 Jan while the two birds first seen 31 Dec 2012 were still at Zakher lake 12 Jan. A female was at Discovery gardens 3–6 Feb. Various pelagic trips from Khor Kalba produced a number of **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** *Puffinus pacificus*—five 31 May, two 7 Jun, eight 8 Jun, six 14 Jun (fourth–seventh records). **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** *Puffinus carneipes* (ten previous records) were recorded on several dates while 20 **Jouanin's Petrels** *Bulweria fallax* were seen on 14 Jun (ninth record). An immature **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* was seen off Luoluayah beach 6 Jan (19th record). The **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* first found on Yas island remained into March. Six **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** *Gyps fulvus* over Al Faqa, south of Dubai desert conservation reserve 18 Mar constituted the 13th record. The adult male **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* originally found 3 Dec 2012 at Wamm farms was still there 2 Jan. A female was at the same location 11 Apr. A **Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Aquila pomarina* at Dubai pivot fields 27–29 Mar was photographed, the first photographic record of this species in the UAE. 107 **Lesser Kestrels** *Falco naumanni* were counted at Wamm farms 27 Apr. Two adult **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were found at Al Qua'a fodder field near Al Ain 22 Feb (seventh record) and remained there until 1 Mar. The eighth record of **Common Crane** *Grus grus* was seen over Hamraniyah fields 15 Mar. A **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* was at Khor al-Beida 22 Feb–6 Apr. A **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* was at Ajban 25 Apr while seven were at Wamm farms 27 Apr. A **Little Gull** *Hydrocoloeus minutus* was on Fujairah port beach 6 Mar (15th record). An adult winter **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* was at Mafraq rubbish tip 10 Jan (11th record) and was seen subsequently in Feb on several dates. An adult **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* migrating north over Al Qua'a fodder fields 26 Apr was the

first inland record while adults were seen 7 and 21 Jun on pelagic trips off Khor Kalba.

The fourth record of **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* was at Al Qua'a fodder fields 23 Feb. An **Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba* was seen near Abu Dhabi airport 23 Apr. An unseasonal **European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* was at Wamm farms 2 Jan. The **Mesopotamian Crow** *Corvus (cornix) capellanus* first recorded 26 Nov 2012 was last seen 27 Jan at Khor al Beida. A **Wire-tailed Swallow** *Hirundo smithii* was at Al Ain water treatment plant 2 Feb while another was at Ajban 21–22 Apr. The ninth record of **Streak-throated Swallow** *Petrochelidon fluvicola* (two birds) was at Al Warsan lakes 19 Jan. The eleventh record of **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* was at Mushrif palace gardens 7–11 May while another was at Abu Dhabi golf and equestrian club 16–17 May. A male **Caucasian Bluethroat** *Luscinia (svecica) magna* was in Al Mamzar park 20 Apr (first photographed record). The **Taiga Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicilla* originally found on 30 Nov 2012 in Safa park was still present 16 Mar having overwintered there. The **Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe* originally found on 15 Nov 2012 at Sila'a peninsula remained until at least 29 Mar. **Eastern Cinereous Buntings** *Emberiza (cineracea) semenowi* were present at Jebel Dhanna hotels 24 Mar but an even better find there was the first record of **Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia* (an adult male) which remained until 27 Mar. On 25 Mar a male **Red-headed Bunting** *Emberiza bruniceps* was at the Emirates Palace hotel (sixth record).

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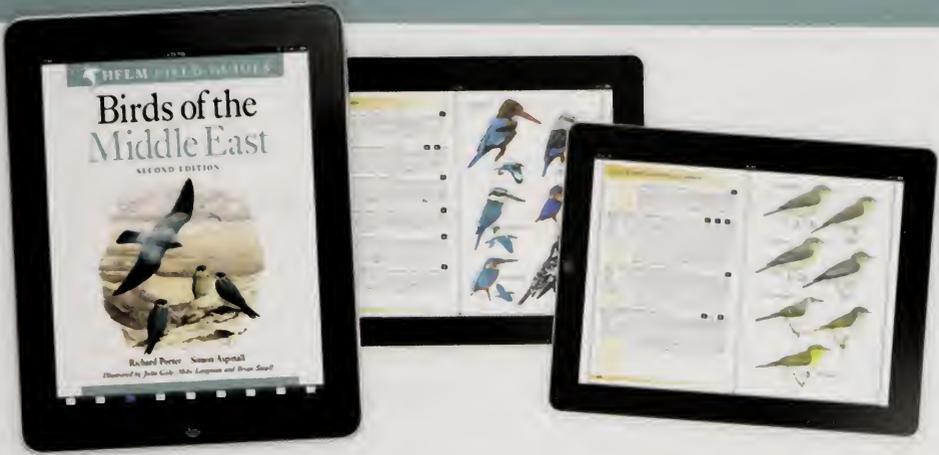
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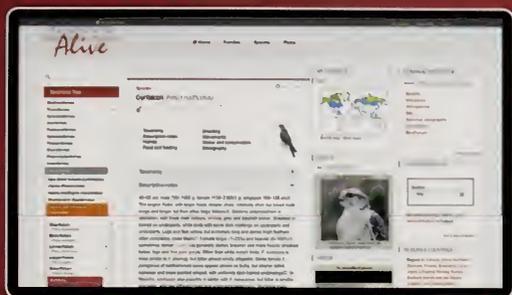
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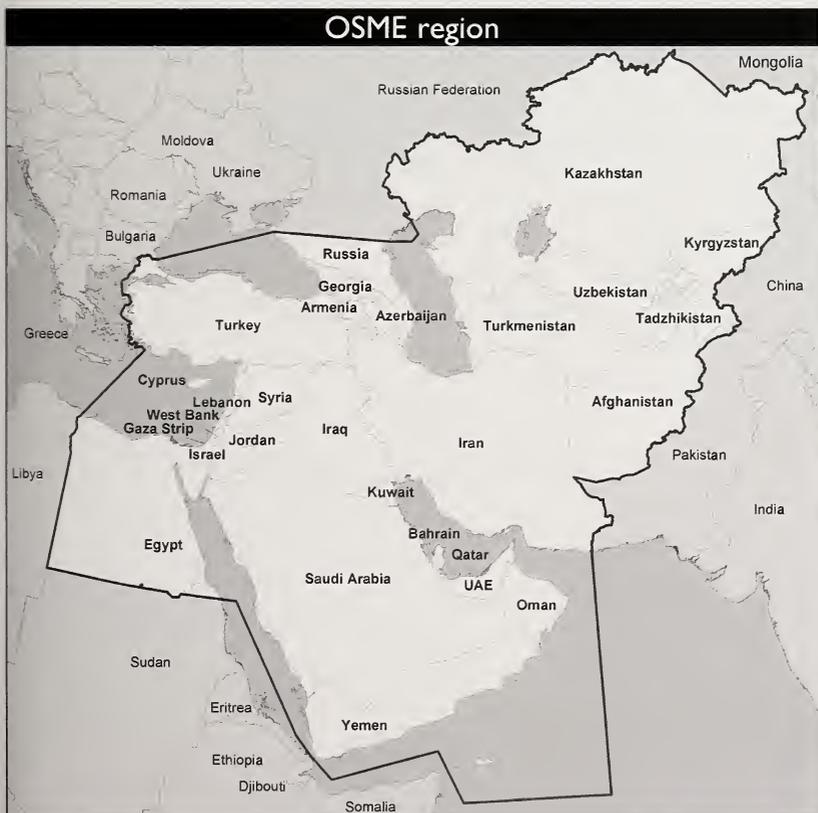
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The Editor will consider for publication papers and notes on the birds of the OSME region. 'Russia' on the OSME region map refers to the Russian Federation's North Caucasus (to 45°N). Papers which additionally include birds in areas outside the OSME 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.

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