SANDGROUSE

VOLUME 32(1) 2010

OSME

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

OSME

ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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

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

PUBLICATIONS

OSME publishes a scientific journal, Sandgrouse, containing papers, news and features on the ornithology of the OSME region.

MEETINGS

An Annual General Meeting is held at which guest speakers provide new perspectives on ornithology in the region.

PROJECTS

The Conservation & Research Committee grants funds to valuable projects that further knowledge and conservation of birds in the region. Priority is given to projects involving nationals from the OSME region.

MEMBERSHIP

OSME is open to all. For details of membership, subscription fees and how to join see www.osme.org.

MEBIRDNET

This is a discussion and information group moderated by OSME. To join see www.osme.org.

POSTAL ADDRESS

OSME c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK.

OSME CORPORATE MEMBERS

Avifauna
Greentours
NHBS
Rockjumper Birding Tours
Sarus Bird Tours
Sunbird

Registered charity no 282938

www.osme.org

SANDGROUSE VOLUME 32 (I) 2010

Photo above: Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus* Eilat, Israel, April. © *Paul Doherty*

Cover photo: Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* near Istanbul, Turkey, April. © *Haldun Savas*

Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* preying on White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* in Egypt

ATTILA D SÁNDOR & ISTVÁN MOLDOVÁN

The Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* is a large falconid that occurs throughout Africa, southern Europe and the Middle East (Cramp & Simmons 1980). Various studies have described the Lanner as an opportunistic bird-eater, feeding on a wide range of species. Its diet has been reported to include mostly birds, captured both in the air and on the ground (Jenkins & Avery 1999, Leonardi 2001). Both resident and migrant birds occur in its diet, usually small to medium-sized species such as Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* and sandgrouse *Pterocles* spp, but also pigeons and doves, waders, migrant passerines and corvids (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Leonardi 2001).

Little has been written on the prey preferences of the Lanner Falcon in northern Africa (Goodman & Haynes 1989, 1992). Most summaries of Lanner prey selection are from data collected during the breeding season in the north Mediterranean region (Morimando & Pezzo 1997, Leonardi 1999, 2001) and in southern Africa (Kemp 1993, Jenkins & Avery 1999). Although a number of gull species, Laridae, occur within its range and a Lanner was seen to take a Common Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* from a flock near Benghazi, Libya (Baker 1982), we have not been able to find any other reports of them preying on gull species.

On 8 June 2009 we observed a Lanner carrying a large prey item to a rocky hill close to Marsa Alam (24° 41′ N, 35° 04′ E), on the Egyptian coast of the Red sea. The Lanner appeared to be an adult female *F. b. tanypterus* based on its plumage and large size (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Cade 1982). Immediately after landing the falcon started to feed on its prey. After a few minutes of watching, we approached the bird in order to take photos (Plates 1 & 2) and to identify its prey. The bird flew away when we were *c*30 m away, leaving its prey behind, which was identified as an adult male White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* (sex identification on culmen length, see Storer & Goodman 1988). The falcon had already consumed most of the breast muscle, wings and legs, leaving intact only the head, neck, wingtips and feet. Although we waited at a distance in the hope that the bird would return to its kill, we did not see it again. However, later the same day we observed two adult Lanners *c*5 km away, in Wadi Gamal national park (24° 40′ N, 35° 10′ E).

We found the remains of an adult female White-eyed Gull in a wadi close to Hurghada (Al Ghardaqa 27° 05′ N, 33° 48′ E) the following day, 9 June. We had observed Lanners in

Plates 1 & 2. Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* with remains of White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus*, close to Marsa Alam, Egypt, 8 June 2009. © *István Moldován*

this area on several occasions, and the gull remains, which comprised an intact head and neck, wings, and one leg, were similar to the remains seen near Marsa Alam, and consistent with those of a bird killed and partially consumed by a Lanner. No other diurnal bird of prey was observed in the area, however, Pharaoh Eagle Owls *Bubo ascalaphus* had been observed there irregularly (IM unpublished).

These observations were made close to areas frequented by large numbers of White-eyed Gulls. Close to Marsa Alam, many gulls breed on the offshore islands of Wadi Gamal national park, while at Hurghada, the proximity of a rubbish dump (*c*500 m from the carcass found) attracts large number of these birds (PERSGA/GEF 2003).

Some other larger species have been recorded as prey of Lanner Falcon, such as bustards (de Swardt 2006) and ducks, herons and bitterns (Goodman & Haynes 1992). The mass of White-eyed Gulls, mean 360.0 g males and 321.2 g females (Storer & Goodman 1988), is substantially less than that of a Lanner (500–600 g males, 700–900 g females, Cramp & Simmons 1980, Jenkins & Avery 1999). Preying on large-bodied gulls may be a good foraging strategy for the Lanner on Egypt's hyper-arid Red sea coast.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank M McGrady, AR Jenkins and D Alan as well as two reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. The observations were made while ADS was in receipt of research funding from The International Osprey Foundation and OSME.

REFERENCES

Baker, N. 1982. Lanner Falcon preying on Black-headed Gull. *Ornithological Society of the Middle East Bulletin* 9: 7.

Cade, TJ. 1982. *The Falcons of the World*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.

Cramp, S & KEL Simmons (eds). 1980. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol 2. Oxford University Press, UK.

Goodman, SM & CV Haynes. 1989. The distribution, breeding season, and food habits of the lanner from the Eastern Sahara. *National Geographic Research* 5: 126–131.

Goodman, SM & CV Haynes. 1992. The diet of the lanner (*Falco biarmicus*) in a hyper-arid region of the eastern Sahara. *Journal of Arid Environments* 22: 93–98.

Jenkins, AR & GM Avery. 1999. Diets of breeding Peregrine and Lanner Falcons in South Africa. *Journal of Raptor Research* 33: 190–206.

Kemp, AC. 1993. Breeding biology of Lanner Falcons near Pretoria, South Africa. *Ostrich* 64: 26–31.

Leonardi, G. 1999. Cooperative hunting of Jackdaws by the Lanner Falcon (*Falco biarmicus*). *Journal of Raptor Research* 33: 123–127.

Leonardi, G. 2001. The Lanner Falcon. *Birds of the Western Palearctic Update* 3: 161–178.

Morimando, F & F Pezzo. 1997. Food habits of the Lanner Falcon (*Falco biarmicus feldeggii*) in Central Italy. *Journal of Raptor Research* 31: 40–43.

PERSGA/GEF. 2003. *Status of Breeding Seabirds in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden*. PERSGA Technical Series No. 8, PERSGA, Jeddah.

Storer, RW & SM Goodman. 1988. A comparison of structures related to foraging in two closely related gulls: *Larus leucophthalmus* and *L. hemprichii*. *Ostrich* 59: 145–149.

de Swardt, DH. 2006. Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus* attacking Black-bellied Bustard *Lissotis melanogaster*. *Gabar* 17: 22–23.

Attila D Sándor, Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Zoology, Clinicilor st. 5–7, RO-400084, Cluj, Romania. adsandor@gmail.com

István Moldován, Ráday street 56/47, HU-1092, Budapest, Hungary.

Migration of harriers and other raptors at Ashura Deh, Iran, April 2008

MAGNUS ULLMAN & MATTIAS ULLMAN

Ashura Deh is a small Iranian island in the extreme southeastern corner of the Caspian sea (Figures 1 & 2). It is separated by a small stretch of water from Mian Kahle to the west, a narrow 50 km long sand spit that separates Gorgan bay from the Caspian (Figure 3). During short visits to Mian Khale nature reserve and Ashura Deh on 24 April 2002, 20 April 2004, 21 April 2005 and 23 April 2007, Magnus Ullman witnessed a minor passage of harriers *Circus* spp and Black Kites *Milvus migrans*, most notably 26 Western Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* during 2–3 hours in the afternoon of 23 April 2007 at Ashura Deh.

Since harriers are less reluctant to cross large expanses of water than most raptors, they are normally not very numerous at the major raptor migration spots. Thus, only a mean of 4.2 Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus*, 3.8 Montagu's Harriers *Circus pygargus* and 8.4 Pallid/Montagu's Harriers were recorded at Eilat, Israel, per spring, 1969–1980 (Christensen *et al* 1981).

Inspection of the maps of Gorgan bay and the southeastern Caspian region suggested that reasonable numbers of harriers moving on migration from their African wintering grounds to Central (Middle) Asian breeding areas might follow the narrow Mian Kahle sand spit and concentrate at Ashura Deh before crossing the 2.5 km of the Caspian sea on a northeast or east-north-east heading. Other small or medium-sized raptors, notably Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus* and Black Kite, might also use the Mian Kahle 'flyway' to some extent.

However, to reach the southern shores of the Caspian sea, migrants arriving from the south must fly over the Elburz mountain range, which includes Damavand, the highest peak (5671 m asl) west of the Himalayas. This means that the vast majority of Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and other large raptors heading for

Figure 1. Africa, Europe and Asia. A red circle marks the position of Ashura Deh in the southeastern corner of the Caspian sea. © *Magnus Ullman*

Figure 2. The vast majority of raptors migrating from Africa towards Central Asia pass Iran on a broad front. A red circle marks the position of Ashura Deh in the southeastern corner of the Caspian sea. © *Magnus Ullman*

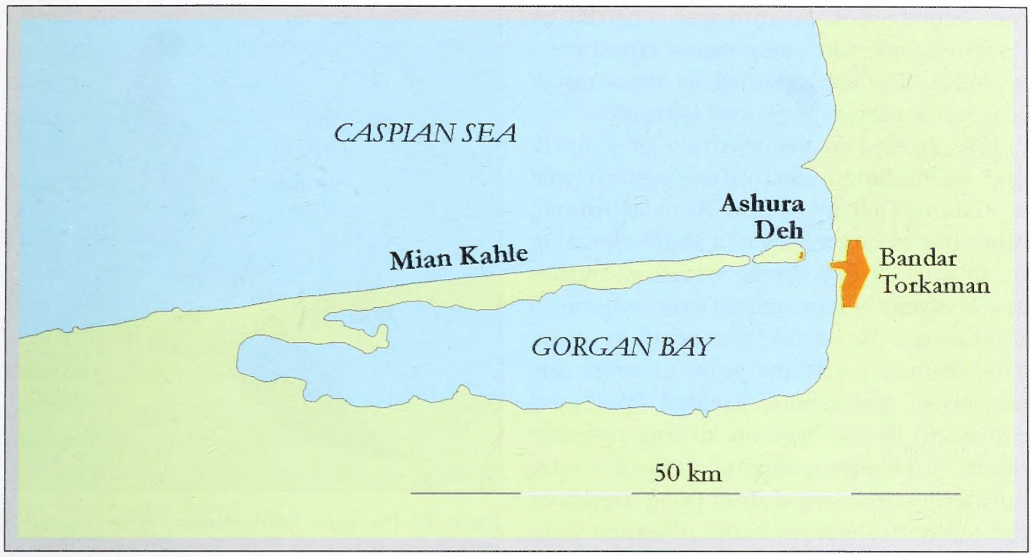


Figure 3. Raptors migrating towards the east along the southern shores of the Caspian sea move along the long sand spit Mian Kahle and will eventually pass Ashura Deh island. © *Magnus Ullman*

Plate 1. Golden Spot, Ashura Deh, Iran. From left: Alireza Hashemi, Ramezanali Ghaemi and Mattias Ullman watching westwards. © *Magnus Ullman*

Central Asia and Siberia will not cross the Elburz but continue along its southern slopes to the east. Thus, we did not expect any large eagles or vultures at Ashura Deh.

We decided to further investigate Ashura Deh as a migration spot for harriers and to see whether this island was used generally by raptors on their way north. We chose a period, 4–18 April 2008, which might correspond with both the Pallid and Montagu's Harrier peaks.

ASHURA DEH

Ashura Deh is a sensitive area for security being near the Iranian/Turkmenistan border and a nature reserve: access is obviously restricted. All the necessary permits were arranged by Ali Adhami of EcoTour-Iran, who also managed for us to stay in the warden's cottage where Hasan Almasi of Iran Department of the Environment/forester of the Ashura Deh nature reserve resided. Here we stayed together with Alireza Hashemi, who cooked our food and helped us in every way including scanning the sky for raptors. During

our second week, Alireza was replaced by Afshin Zareie. On many raptor count days we were also accompanied by Ramezanali Ghaemi, a very experienced naturalist.

We arrived in the morning of 4 April, and were shown around the eastern part of Ashura Deh by Hasan Almasi. Among other places he took us to a slight elevation in an area of dry dunes with low bushes and a marsh where we had excellent views right across the island from north to south. This seemed a vantage point to cover any migration, was named 'Golden Spot', and proved to be the best site during our stay (Plate 1). However, during days of strong northerly winds we shifted to an area near the southern shore for better coverage.

Plate 2. The male Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus* were gliding fast in the fresh afternoon wind. Third cy male Pallid Harrier, 10 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

The weather was similar throughout the period although we had gale force winds one afternoon and night; very dramatic for the local fishermen in their small boats. Usually, however, the weather was clear and calm in the morning after which the sky clouded over slowly and a westerly or north-westerly wind arose, often becoming quite fresh in the early afternoon (Plate 2). Towards the evening, winds lulled and by and by stars gleamed brightly from a clear sky. These weather conditions were probably influenced by local factors, such as the Caspian sea and Elburz mountains being separated by several km of flat lowland as well as enormous desert areas to the south of the Elburz.

RAPTOR COUNTS

On most days we actively watched for migrating raptors *c*08.00–18.00 h. Before 08.00 h, we watched from the veranda of the warden's cottage during breakfast and generally also spent some time looking for passerine migrants in the shrubberies of the eastern part of the island. Although we consider that few raptors left the island before 08.00 h, we may have missed single early morning birds. On several mornings one of us started raptor watching well before 8 (while the other checked for passerines). On some occasions when raptor movements were poor, we walked around the island looking for other birds. However, this still gave us good opportunities to cover raptor passage since the island is very flat and vegetation mainly is low shrubbery except for a vast marshy area just north of Golden Spot. A total of 2183 migrant raptors were recorded 4–18 April (Table 1).

PALLID HARRIER

Ashura Deh's potential as a hot spot for migrating harriers soon became obvious. On the first day with decent migratory weather, 5 April, we recorded 53 Pallid Harriers (Table 2), perhaps the largest single day Pallid Harrier migration count anywhere. Numbers fell the next few days (27, 15, 2) and we wondered whether Pallid Harrier migration was quickly tailing off. However, since adult males still constituted a substantial portion of the migrating birds we suspected that we were not yet near the end of Pallid Harrier migration. This proved correct. Daily figures of 26 (10 April) and 39 (12 April) were followed by a couple of more days with over 20 Pallid Harriers. In total, we recorded 263 birds in just two weeks (Plates 3–6).

Table 1. Daily totals of raptors at Ashura Deh, Iran, 4–18 April 2008.

Date	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Total
Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*		5	1	1			7	6	4	3	5	2	4	3	1	42
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*			11	28	2	1	38	5	6	4	6	2	7	3		113
Lesser/Common Kestrel *Falco naumanni/ tinnunculus*							31	29	13	16	21	9	20	11		150
Merlin *Falco columbarius*		5	1	1			2		1	3	2	1	2	2		20
Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*													2			2
large falcon *Falco sp*														1		1
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*			1	1			1	2		2	4			3		14
Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*														1		1
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*			17	71	4	3	34	7	5	7	10	47	186	31	2	424
Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*			1	1							1					3
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*		10	22	37	1		28	32	11	13	37	37	35	21		284
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*		1	6	7	1		6	5	6	1	6		2	1	1	43
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*	1	53	27	15	2	3	26	8	39	23	27	5	21	9	4	263
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*		2	3	1			2	1	5	5	3	2	8	6	1	39
Pallid/Montagu's Harrier *Circus macrourus/pygargus*								2	1				1			4
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*		1	1	2	1		1	2		2	3		4	3		20
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*		5	11	51	2	14	83	49	21	34	70	46	103	78		567
Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*		2	11	15	3	7	24	15	4	26	16	1	38	4	1	167
Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*			2			1	2	1		1	1		1			9
Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*				1			2	1	2	4			3	1		14
Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*								1			1					2
Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata*											1					1
Total	1	74	101	201	14	28	208	124	94	116	176	138	402	155	9	2183

Table 2. Daily totals of Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus* at Ashura Deh, Iran, 4–18 April 2008.

Date	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Total
Ad. male	1	12	7	6			7		9	1	4		3	1	1	52
3rd cy male		7	2				3	1	2	2	6		1	1		25
Ad. female		30	7	4	1		3		3	3	3		1	1		56
Female-type			4	2	1	1	7	3	9	7	6		2	1		43
2nd cy		4	7	3		2	6	4	16	10	8	5	14	5	3	87
Total	1	53	27	15	2	3	26	8	39	23	27	5	21	9	4	263

Table 3. Totals per hour (grand total for each hour 4–18 April) of Pallid Harriers *Circus macrourus* at Ashura Deh, Iran, 4–18 April 2008.

Time of day	pre 8	8–9	9–10	10–11	11–12	12–13	13–14	14–15	15–16	16–17	17–18	18–19	post 19	Total
Ad. male		2	1	3	6	1	2	2	9	9	12	5		52
3rd cy male		2	2	1		2	2		4	5	4	3		25
Ad. female	1	4	5	2	2	7	4	1	3	11	15	1		56
Female-type	1	1	4	6	4	2	4	3	4	6	2	6		43
2nd cy	2	9	7	5	5	6	4	6	8	17	14	4		87
Total	4	18	19	17	17	18	16	12	28	48	47	19	0	263

Plate 3. Adult male Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, 7 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Plate 4. Adult female Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, 5 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Plate 5. Second cy female Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. Second cy Pallid Harriers normally have moulted very little or nothing at all in spring. Dark iris shows this bird to be a female. 11 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Plate 6. Second cy male Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. Pale iris shows this bird to be a male. Male 2nd cy Pallid Harriers often confirm their sex by new grey axillaries quite early in spring (while Montagu's in the corresponding plumage shows axillaries with bold maroon bars similar to adult males). 5 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Pallid Harrier is not known to concentrate at the regular raptor migration hot spots and the main site with a substantial passage of Pallid Harriers is the strait of Messina, Italy, where 132 Pallids passed during the entire spring February–May 2001 and the highest day total is 45 birds on 20 April 1998 (Corso 2005). At Eilat, Israel, 113 Pallid Harriers passed in spring 1985 and the highest day total is 38 birds, 3 April 1983 (Shirihai 1996).

Since the figure was so high on our second day of counting and since there still was a good passage as we left the island, we might have been able to double our total, to over 500 birds, if we had covered the entire spring. Ashura Deh may well be the best spot for migrating Pallid Harriers in the world.

Although our coverage was slightly poorer before 08.00 h, we believe that few Pallid Harriers passed before that time. From 08.00 h the passage was surprisingly uniform during each and every hour until 14.00–15.00 h when a slight decline is apparent in our data (Table 3). But from 15.00 h, numbers increased considerably and 54% of all Pallid

Plate 7. We recorded much lower numbers of Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* than Pallid *C. macrourus*. Female Montagu's Harrier, 16 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Plate 8. Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* was the most common harrier at Ashura Deh, though only slightly more numerous than Pallid *C. macrourus*. Female-type Marsh Harrier, 6 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Harriers passed during the four hours 15.00–19.00 h (36% 16.00–18.00 h, no migrant Pallid Harriers were seen after 19.00 h). Fifty percent of adult males, 3rd calendar-year (cy) males, adult females and 2nd cy birds had passed by 15.00–16.00 h, while 50% of "female-type birds" had passed by 13.00–14.00 h, and 50% of 2nd cy birds by 14.00–15.00 h. This is surprisingly late in the day, since raptor migration generally peaks around noon or in early afternoon. Female-type birds (excluding adult females) and 2nd cy birds passed on average slightly earlier in the day than older birds. From 12.00–14.00 h, the Pallid Harriers passed quite high and were scattered and it is likely that some birds went unnoticed during these hours.

Of the 263 Pallid Harriers, 52 were identified as adult males and 25 as 3rd cy birds. This figure for 3rd cy birds is surprisingly high as 3rd cy is an age class that should comprise a very small part of the total population. This suggests that even some older males (4th cy and perhaps even older) may retain some of the darkish markings that normally are considered to define immaturity. It is likely that some of these birds were in fact 'adult'.

OTHER HARRIERS

We recorded less Montagu's Harriers and the grand total stopped at 39 birds (Plate 7). Even though we saw Montagu's nearly daily from 5 April, we perhaps missed both the peak and the majority of the birds. So we do not know how much later their passage is at Ashura Deh compared to the Pallid Harrier. We recorded virtually only adult Montagu's (exceptions: one 2nd cy male and 2 female-type birds of unknown age). This suggests that we experienced merely the beginning of the migration. It could be, of course, that Montagu's is considerably less numerous than Pallid Harrier at Ashura Deh. The wintering and breeding ranges of the two species are so similar that there is no reason to suspect that a larger proportion of Montagu's passage directed towards Central Asia should not occur at Ashura Deh.

Plate 9. A total of 43 Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* were recorded on migration at Ashura Deh. Yellow iris shows this bird to be a second cy male. 12 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

It was no surprise that the most numerous harrier was Marsh Harrier, totalling 284 birds (Plate 8). Moreover, Marsh was the only harrier to frequently roost and hunt on the island, probably because the marshy habitat was particularly suitable for the species.

We had not expected many Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus*, a species that, unlike the other three, does not migrate all the way to tropical Africa. However, Hen Harriers do winter in a quite large area of Iran and 43 birds were recorded on migration at Ashura Deh (Plate 9).

HARRIERS: SOME COMMENTS

Virtually all the harriers moved along a very well-defined corridor, from the west of Ashura Deh east-north-east via the central part of the island, or slightly north of it, and left the island by its eastern shore. On the morning we arrived, 4 April, we saw from the boat an adult Pallid Harrier heading north over Gorgan bay, but apart from that one all birds arrived from the west. Moreover, occasional harriers left the island along the northern shore on a more northeasterly heading. Most other raptors were more sensitive to the more or less northerly winds and to a greater extent moved along the southern shore of the island, especially the larger eagles.

On a very few occasions we had difficulties in distinguishing Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, essentially birds that were poorly viewed due to great distance or short observation time (in spring it is normally 2nd cy Montagu's females that cause most confusion with Pallid Harrier; we saw nearly no 2nd cy Montagu's). On several occasions, however, we were uncertain whether an approaching harrier was a Hen or a Pallid, before it got close enough for positive identification.

KESTRELS

A total of 305 kestrels migrated past Ashura Deh, including 150 birds, *c*50%, that were not identified to species, although Mattias in particular paid them a lot of attention. Kestrels *are* difficult to identify, especially as they often flew quite high. No single female Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* was identified. Only males or birds in flocks were noted as 'Lesser Kestrel'. Of those identified, Lesser Kestrel constituted 27% (42 birds) which may indicate that reasonably healthy stocks occur further northeast (Plate 10). Counting was complicated by the presence of hunting birds, either migrants on stop over, Common

Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* breeding on the island or visiting Lesser Kestrels from a large colony in Bandar Torkaman.

Plate 10. Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* were observed nearly daily (14 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran). © *Magnus Ullman*

OTHER RAPTORS

The most numerous raptor was Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, totalling 567 birds. Siberian birds winter in the Arabian peninsula and tropical East Africa, so the comparatively high figure does not come as a surprise. In fact, this sparrowhawk is not likely to concentrate to a great extent along Mian Kahle–Ashura Deh as it apparently migrates on a broad front across much of Iran.

However, we were somewhat surprised when the first Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* passed on 5 April, and even more surprised as 1–4 birds migrated past us nearly daily. We noted 20 Northern Goshawks in total, presumably Siberian birds on their way home from their wintering grounds that occur as far south as northwestern Iran (Mansoori 2001).

The second most numerous species was Black Kite (424 birds), which often came in nice, well spaced groups of occasionally up to 20–30 birds and on one occasion 38 in one loose flock. Black Kite also accounted for the largest day count of any species, 186 birds on 16 April. This fairly large figure indicates that very large numbers pass through Iran on their way from tropical Africa to Central Asia and Siberia (Plate 11).

The next most numerous species, excluding Marsh and Pallid Harrier, was Steppe Buzzard (167 birds). Steppe Buzzard is the most common raptor moving from Africa through the Middle East to Central Asia and Siberia and our comparatively low figure is presumably due to the fact that the majority pass Iran on a broad front. Wherever in the

Plate 11. The Black Kites *Milvus migrans* mainly passed quite high. Second cy bird, 10 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Iranian desert you turn your eyes to the sky you will see large numbers of Steppe Buzzards heading northeast. Considering our relatively low number of Steppe Buzzards, our 9 Long-legged Buzzards *Buteo rufinus* on migration must be regarded as quite a good figure.

Interestingly, 14 Steppe Eagles, 2 Eastern Imperial Eagles *Aquila heliaca* and 3 Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* had presumably flown over the Elburz mountains to follow the Caspian shore and Mian Kahle–Ashura Deh eastwards. Steppe Eagle is a numerous species that can be seen heading northeastwards almost anywhere in Iran (although the majority migrate earlier in spring). The 14 that passed us confirm that it is a very numerous bird.

Plate 12. A 2nd cy Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* headed east on 17 April 2008, Ashura Deh, Iran. © *Magnus Ullman*

Just like Goshawk and Hen Harrier (and unlike the other species in our study), Merlin *Falco columbarius* winters roughly to central Iran but not further south. Migrants were recorded more or less daily and the total was 20 birds, perhaps a surprisingly high figure considering that falcons are not as prone to follow migratory corridors as the larger raptors.

A 2nd cy Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* passed on 17 April (Plate 12). It is a very rare bird in Iran and has been reported only once before outside the southern and south-western provinces (Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh pers comm). The observation indicates the great potential of Ashura Deh.

Apart from the one migrating Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata* another turned back westwards and was excluded from our figures. A Shikra *Accipiter badius* showed up on one occasion and was probably a bird breeding in the Mian Kahle area. We also saw non-migrating Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* on a few occasions and Eurasian Hobbies *Falco subbuteo* roughly every other day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the aid of Ali Adhami, biologist and head of EcoTour-Iran (www.ecotour-iran.com) and his valuable and extensive contacts with the Iranian Department of the Environment, our project would have just remained a dream. Hasan Almasi, Ramezanali Ghaemi, Alireza Hashemi and Afshin Zareie assisted us in various ways on Ashura Deh. Houman Jowkar of EcoTour-Iran had repeatedly tried to persuade Magnus to visit Ashura Deh and was eventually successful.

REFERENCES

Christensen, S, O Lou, M Müller & H Wohlmuth. 1981. The Spring Migration of Raptors in Southern Israel and Sinai. *Sandgrouse* 3: 1–42.

Corso, A. 2005. *Avifauna di Sicilia*. L'Epos, Palermo.

Mansoori, J. 2001. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Iran*. Nashr Zehn Aviz, Tehran.

Shirihai, H. 1996. *The Birds of Israel*. Academic Press, London.

Magnus Ullman, Triangeln 13, SE-272 38 Brantevik, Sweden. ullman.apus@telia.com

Mattias Ullman, Sörby Möllebacken, SE-231 72 Anderslöv, Sweden. mattias.ullman@bredband.net

Notes on nest and breeding of Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae*, Bamiyan province, Afghanistan

SIMON BUSUTTIL, RAFFAEL AYÉ & CHRIS SHANK

Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda* (formerly *Montifringilla*) *theresae* is an endemic breeding species to Afghanistan, with specimens collected in winter in Turkmenistan and unsubstantiated records from Tajikistan (Tolstoy & Geypel 1990). The Afghan Snowfinch was first discovered for science in 1937 by R Meinertzhagen who collected specimens at the Shaibar Kotal and at Bamiyan (both Bamiyan province, Afghanistan). Niethammer (1967) observed this species breeding at 'about 3000 m' at Dasht-i-Nawar in the Koh-e-Baba range, Hindu Kush, in June 1965 and presented information on its breeding biology. This included the description of a nest *c*1 m under the ground at the end of a Souslik's *Citellus fulvus* burrow. It was constructed of animal hairs and feathers and contained five young, which were fed by both parents. The present note gives further information on the breeding of this species.

During ornithological fieldwork in 2008 in Bamiyan province, central Afghanistan, for the Wildlife Conservation Society, we found two nests of Afghan Snowfinch. Both were at Band-i-Amir, a proposed protected area in a westward extension of the Hindu Kush mountain range, 55 km west of Bamiyan town and 185 km north-northwest of Kabul.

Plate 1. Entrance of Pika burrow containing Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae* nest, Band-i-Amir, Afghanistan. © *Chris Shank*

Plate 2. Chris Shank pointing at entrance of Pika burrow (Plate 1) containing Afghan Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda theresae* nest, Band-i-Amir, Afghanistan. © *Simon Busuttil*

The first nest (Plates 1 & 2) was found at 11.30 h a.m. on 29 May at 34° 51.288′ N, 67° 12.852′ E, 3031 m asl (Garmin GPS 60, non-barometric). Our attention was brought to the site when an adult bird carrying food (unidentified invertebrates) paused adjacent to and then entered a hole in the ground. The hole was almost certainly that of an Afghan Pika *Ochotona rufescens* and was on an uncultivated gently sloping (*c*20%, estimated) south-facing slope between a fallow rain-fed wheat or barley field (known locally as 'lalmi') and a dirt road.

The second nest was observed on 11 June close to 34.82153° N, 67.18652° E at *c*2900 m asl, *c*300 m north of the Band-i-Amir ranger station in a relatively flat uncultivated area of steppe. The nest was in an old burrow, again almost certainly that of an Afghan Pika. The entrance of the pika burrow lay in a small hollow (*c*50 cm diameter, *c*15 cm deep). RA reached *c*25 cm into the pika burrow but did not reach the nest, positioned beyond. Both parents were in the vicinity, giving alarm calls and the male at least was carrying food, indicating that the young had already hatched.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Ian Dawson, RSPB Librarian, for help with references.

REFERENCES

Niethammer, G. 1967. On the breeding biology of *Montifringilla theresae*. *Ibis* 109 (1): 117–118.

Paludan, K. 1959. On the Birds of Afghanistan. *Videnskabelige Meddelelser Dansk naturhistorisk Forening* 122.

Tolstoy, V & E Geypel. 1990. [First finding of Afghan Snowfinch in Tajikistan]. *Ornithologiya* 24: 164. [In Russian]

Simon Busuttil, RSPB East Scotland Office, 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP, UK. Simon.Busuttil@rspb.org.uk

Raffael Ayé, Im Zimmerhof 7, 4054 Basel, Switzerland. raffael.aye@birding.ch

Chris Shank. c_c_shank@yahoo.com

Rare birds (*Streptopelia roseogrisea, Caprimulgus europaeus unwini, Iduna rama, Acrocephalus agricola*) at Eilat's ringing station, Israel, autumn 2008

NOAM WEISS & REUVEN YOSEF

We present details of four rare birds at the ringing station of the International Birding & Research Centre in Eilat, Israel, autumn 2008.

AFRICAN COLLARED DOVE
Streptopelia roseogrisea

On 12 September, an adult African Collared Dove was caught and ringed. This dove immediately drew our attention by its white belly and undertail coverts and its short tail. We have ringed more than 1500 Eurasian Collared Doves *S. decaocto* in the past two years and are aware that *c*0.5% have white bellies and undertail coverts, but this bird was different in the hand. We are alert to the differences between the two species, as African Collared Doves have previously been ringed at Eilat (Yosef *et al* 2004). However, all previous African Collared Dove records at Eilat were in spring. Identification was straightforward because a Eurasian Collared Dove was trapped simultaneously which allowed in-hand comparison of the two birds (Plate 1).

Plate 1. African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea* (left) alongside a Eurasian Collared Dove *S. decaocto* (right), 12 September 2008, Eilat, Israel. Note the pale undersides of *S. roseogrisea* and that its white undertail coverts completely cover the black tail markings. © *Noam Weiss*

Overall, the African Collared Dove was smaller than the Eurasian. The wing, 168 mm long, was shorter than a Eurasian Collared Dove's (175–180 mm when fully grown). The tail was relatively short, 112 mm long, and full grown. In comparison, Eurasian Collared Doves have a tail 120 (not fully grown)–140 (adults) mm long. The white undertail coverts completely covered the black tail markings (Plate 1). Wing-chord length was 168 mm. Legs were reddish pink and iris deep red with some brown in the very thin inner circle, suggesting a probable second-winter bird. A white eye ring was clear and conspicuous (Plate 2). The bill looked smaller and shorter than the Eurasian's. The forehead was steeper and the colour of the head much pinker,

Plate 2. African Collared Dove *Streptopelia roseogrisea*, 12 September 2008, Eilat, Israel. Note white eye-ring, steep forehead, pinkish tinge. © *Noam Weiss*

contrasting with the brown back. The back was sandy brown, warmer and somewhat darker in shade than the Eurasian's, and contrasted with the pink head and white belly. The lower back, rump and small and median coverts of the wing had a faint and broad scaly pattern. The secondaries, primary coverts and alula formed a grey area like that of the Eurasian Collared Dove's, but more contrasting. Primaries were dark. Underwing was white and grey. The chest was pink, just like the head, but contrasted with the white belly and undertail coverts.

The African Collared Dove inhabits sub-Saharan regions of Africa though it does breed in parts of Egypt and southern Arabia, and is known to be spreading north as recorded for Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*) in the 1980s (Shirihai 1996).

SYKES'S WARBLER *Iduna rama*

On the morning of 21 September we caught a little brown bird in one of our mist nets. While removing the bird it appeared to have the jizz of a *Phylloscopus* but colours of an *Acrocephalus* warbler. Once out of the net it was obvious that it was a '*Hippolais*' warbler, but not Eastern Olivaceous *Iduna pallida*, which we catch in large numbers. After years of examining short-winged Olivaceous Warblers and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers *I. p. elaeica* that we occasionally catch at the ringing station, it was clear that this bird was actually a Sykes's Warbler (see Helbig & Seibold 1999, Castell & Kirwan 2005).

Plate 3. Sykes's Warbler *I. rama* (left) and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *I. pallida* (right) in-hand, 21 September 2008, Eilat, Israel. The general colour of the Sykes's Warbler is more yellow-brown with a slenderer and shorter bill, broader supercilium and the outer tail feathers had a broad outer whitish fringe from bottom to top. © *Miguel Rouco*

The general colour was more yellow-brown than in Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, with silky white underparts (Plate 3). Head shape was round, resembling Upcher's Warbler (*Hippolais languida*). Ringers also know to check throat colour of '*Hippolais*' Warblers. It was yellower than Upcher's but more orange than that of Eastern Olivaceous. Legs looked short and had a horn-pink colour (Eastern Olivaceous has grey blue legs). The brown eye colour, worn tail and partially-worn primaries suggested it was an adult bird.

The bill was slenderer and shorter than that of an Eastern Olivaceous, but longer than that of Booted Warbler's *I. caligata*. The head pattern also differed from an Eastern Olivaceous and had a broader supercilium before the bill and some darkening above it which was hard to see from certain angles or even a short distance. Ear-coverts were whiter than the rest of the cheek. In addition, the outer tail feathers had a broad outer whitish shaft from bottom to top. Wing was rather rounded with Primary$_2$ = $P_{7/8}$. P_3, P_4, P_5 and P_6 were emarginated. The emargination on P_6 was faint but present (Table 1).

The bird was not an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler because of the round head shape and the shortish and slender looking bill, head pattern with a supercilium broad at base, general brown colour, *Phylloscopus*-like appearance, leg colour and tarsus length and tail pattern. In addition, the rather round wing formula where P_2 'falls' between $P_{7/8}$, emarginated P_6 (should be 5/6/7 in Eastern Olivaceous Warbler), and $P_1 > P_2$, $P_2 >$ tip, $P_6 >$ tip, $P_{10} >$ tip convinced us of the same.

Table 1. Biometrics (in mm) and wing formula of the Sykes's Warbler *Iduna rama* ringed 21 September 2008 in Eilat, Israel, and some corresponding details from the literature for Sykes's, Booted and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers (http://www.portlandbirdobs.org.uk/bi_hippolais_rama.htm).

	Eilat bird	*I. rama*	*I. caligata*	*I. p. elaeica*
Wing	61	59–65	57–64	60–71
Tail	50	48–56	43–50	48–59
Bill to skull	15.3	14.8–16.3	12.9–14.5	15–17.4
P1 > PC	5.7	6–10	6–10	3–7
P1 > P2	25.1			27–33
P6 > wing tip	2.7	1–3	1–3	3–6
P10 > wing tip	10.3	8–11	8–11	11–15
Emargination P6	Present	Present	Present	Absent
Additional biometrics				
Tarsus	19.3			
P2 =	P7/8			
P2 to wing tip	5.5			
Primary projection	14			

Separation of the bird from Booted Warbler was based on head pattern (no clear dark edge to upper supercilium, the paler area at ear-coverts and a 'not very *Phylloscopus* look') and, especially, on bill length (Table 1).

An odd measurement was P_1 > pc = 5.7 mm, 0.3 mm short of the minimum mentioned by the Portland Bird Observatory (www.portlandbirdobs.org.uk/birds). This could partly be a result of difficulty in straightening this small feather or the rather worn condition of P_1.

PADDYFIELD WARBLER *Acrocephalus agricola*

Following the first half of the autumn in Eilat, which was characterized by eastern birds passing through, with waves of Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus acredula*, Common Whitethroats *Sylvia communis icterops* and *S. c. rubicola* and the afore-mentioned Sykes's Warbler, another eastern vagrant appeared on the morning of 8 October, a Paddyfield Warbler.

Already in the net, the warbler looked unusual. It was similar to the Sykes's Warbler caught just two weeks previously, in shape, head pattern and colour, but was obviously an *Acrocephalus* warbler. Out of the net it showed its main features, a prominent and long eyebrow with darkish eye stripe and cap, warm brownish tones to the upper parts, a short primary projection and an *Acrocephalus* atrophied P_1. It was obvious that the bird was a Paddyfield Warbler.

At the ringing station a full description and biometrics were noted. The warbler was identified as a first year based on the olive-green eye, tongue spots and fresh plumage. The legs had a brown–horn colour and the feet were yellowish. The upper mandible was dark and lower mandible horn coloured but clearly dark towards the tip (Plate 4).

The face was strongly patterned with a wide and long light cream supercilium reaching well beyond the eyes to the end of the ear-coverts. A dark eye-stripe started at the lores and went all the way to the ears. The supercilium was bordered also from above by a dark stripe on the sides of the warm brown cap. Upper parts were warm brown with even rustier rump. The tail was warm brown. Wing coverts and flight feathers were warm brown and the tertials warm dark brown on the outer web, somewhat lighter on the inner web and clearly fringed cream. The underparts were creamy-white with sides of breast warm buff. Throat was whitish.

Plate 4. Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, 8 October 2008, Eilat, Israel. Identified as a first year based on the olive-green eye, tongue spots and fresh plumage. © *Shachar Alterman*

Biometrics helped confirm the identification: a short wing, 56 mm, which ruled out Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus* (shortest at Eilat 59 mm) and short primary projection of 9.8 mm. The wing formula (mm) showed a round wing with $P_2 = P_{7/8}$, P_1–PC = 2.1, P_1–P_2 = 26.1, P_1–tip = 30.1, secondaries (SS) 1–tip = 12.2. An important feature was the relatively long emargination on P_2 = 13.5. The notch on the P_3 reached P_{10}/SS. Other measurements (mm): tail = 52.0, bill to skull = 16.0, bill to feathers = 9.3, tail round = 0.6, tarsus = 21.5, hind claw = 6.1.

The Paddyfield Warbler breeds in the Danube delta (Romania), Ukraine, north Black sea region, Caspian sea area and east to central Asia. They winter in southern Asia and India. In the Middle East they breed in northeastern Iran, and are a rare to scarce migrant in east Iran, Kuwait and Oman, and a vagrant to Cyprus and Israel (Shirihai 1996). The Paddyfield Warblers of the Danube area are known to migrate not through Turkey but north of the Black sea (Snow & Perrins 1998).

This observation is the fifth record of this interesting warbler in Israel. All past records also involved trapped birds, mainly from Eilat in October. The previous individual was seen in late October 1992.

EUROPEAN NIGHTJAR
Caprimulgus europaeus unwini

On 27 October, a ranger of the Nature Reserves & Parks Authority brought to the IBRCE rehabilitation centre two nightjars that had crashed into windows in town. One was the usual European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus europaeus* but the other was much paler, with colours similar to those of Egyptian Nightjar *C. aegyptius* but the field marks were those of European Nightjar, such as the dark back stripes and the dark underwing coverts. The head pattern was of a classic *C. e. unwini*, lacking the dark moustachial stripe and faint streaks on the crown (Plates 5 & 6).

Plate 5. European Nightjars *Caprimulgus europaeus europaeus* (top) and *C. e. unwini* (bottom). © *Avi Meir*

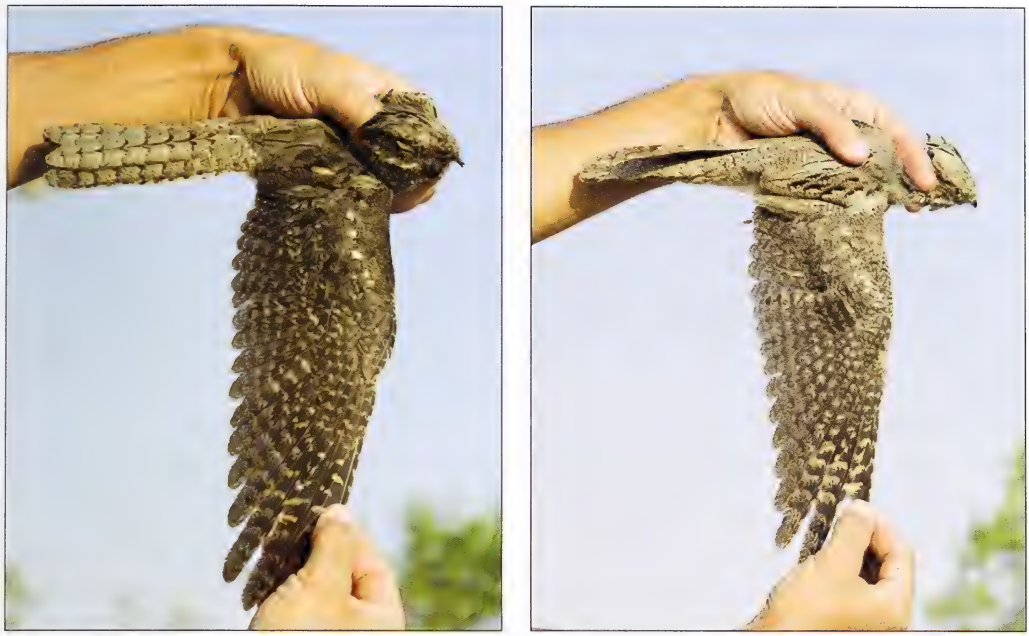


Plate 6. European Nightjars *Caprimulgus europaeus europaeus* (left) and *C. e. unwini* (right). © *Avi Meir*

Subspecies *unwini* is known as an uncommon visitor to the Persian gulf, and Shirihai (1996) considered it to be a scarce migrant in small numbers and rare winter visitor in Israel, identified mostly at Eilat. In recent years there have been no reports of *unwini* from Israel but a similar bird was seen at Neot Hakikar, in the southern Dead sea basin, on 22 September by NW.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Rami Mizrachi for help with identification of the Sykes's Warbler and Miguel Rouco, Shachar Alterman and Avi Meir for their photos.

REFERENCES

Castell, P & GM Kirwan. 2005. Will the real Sykes's Warbler please stand up? Breeding data support specific status for *Hippolais rama* and *H. caligata*, with comments on the Arabian population of 'booted warbler'. *Sandgrouse* 27: 30–36.

Helbig, AJ & I Seibold. 1999. Molecular phylogeny of Palearctic–African *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers (Aves: Sylviidae). *Molecular Phylogenetics & Evolution* 11: 246–260.

Shirihai, H. 1996. *The Birds of Israel*. Academic Press, San Diego.

Snow, DW & CM Perrins (eds). 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Concise edn. Oxford University Press, UK.

Yosef, R, M Rydberg-Hedaen, N Zilinova & K Meyrom. 2004. Biometric and plumage variation in African Collared Dove (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*) and Collared Dove (*S. decaocto*) at Eilat, Israel. *Sandgrouse* 26: 132–136.

Noam Weiss & Reuven Yosef, International Birding & Research Centre in Eilat, PO Box 774, Eilat, Israel. ibrce@eilatcity.co.il.

Spring migration of soaring birds over the Bosphorus, Turkey, in 2006

ÖZKAN ÜNER, KEREM ALI BOYLA, ERGÜN BACAK, ERTUĞRUL BIREL, İLHAN ÇELIKOBA, CEM DALYAN, EVRIM TABUR & ÜMIT YARDIM

The Bosphorus is one of the most important migration bottlenecks in the Middle East. However, most counts have been done during autumn and complete spring counts are very few. In spring 2006, a complete count of migrating soaring birds over the Bosphorus was carried out. We report a total of 100 051 birds, which consisted of 51 958 White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*, 16 185 Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo*, 15 232 Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina* and 9085 Honey Buzzards *Pernis apivorus*. The study demonstrates the importance of the Bosphorus for the spring migration of soaring birds.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey has major Western Palearctic migration crossroads, with corridors and bottlenecks for soaring birds in the northwestern (Bosphorus in Istanbul, Figure 1), northeastern (Borçka, Artvin province) and southern (Belen, Hatay province) parts of the country (Grimmett & Jones 1989). The Bosphorus is a well-known migration bottleneck for soaring birds due to its location at the junction between Europe and Asia. The whole population of eastern White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*, over 340 000 birds, flies over the Bosphorus. Zalles & Bildstein (2000) reported between 29 000 and 75 000 migrant raptors in autumn over the Bosphorus whereas a very recent multi-station but short survey has shown that more than 150 000 raptors use the area in autumn (Milvus Group 2008). Most of the world population of Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina* and Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipes*, at least in autumn, crosses into Asia via the Bosphorus (Kirwan *et al* 2008) using the east Mediterranean route (Shirihai *et al* 2000). Other important species, with their maximum autumn counts, are White Stork (210 000 in 1971), Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* (17 000 in 2008), European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (26 000 in 1971), Black Kite *Milvus migrans* (2700

Figure 1. Northwest Turkey showing the location of the Bosphorus.

in 1971), Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* (4600 in 2008) and Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (80 000 in 2008) (Shirihai *et al* 2000, Milvus Group 2008).

Most published work of complete and partial counts at the Bosphorus is from the autumn. Complete coverage was achieved in 1966 (Porter & Willis 1968), with partial counts by Alléon & Vian (1869–70), Steinfatt (1932), Nisbet & Smout (1957), Beaman (1973), Beaman & Jacobsen (1974), Somçağ (1981), Bijlsma (1990), Robel & Bräuning (1992) and Howes (1996). The autumn period has been covered for several reasons. Some species move through in larger flocks and pass through in shorter periods of time in the autumn. This is especially true of the most numerous species, the White Stork, the vast majority of which pass through in less than a few weeks. The Levant Sparrowhawk's migration, though, happens in a very short period of time in both spring and autumn (Shirihai *et al* 2000).

Spring migration over the Bosphorus is much more poorly documented (Shirihai *et al* 2000), with few publications: Mauve (1937), Collman & Croxall (1967), Ritzel (1980) and MME (1993). These publications provide a benchmark but, together with the older autumn studies, can suffer from identification problems as some of them predate the publication of modern raptor identification guides (especially Porter *et al* 1974). In some cases even individuals of some common species, such as European Honey Buzzard and Common Buzzard, might have been misidentified. The present study, in 2006, represents the first attempt to perform a reasonably complete census of the soaring birds passing over the Bosphorus in spring.

METHODOLOGY

Observation point

The census was conducted from a single observation point at 182 m asl at Keskin Viraj, between Sarıyer and Rumelifeneri on the European side in the northern part of Istanbul (41° 12′ N 29° 04′ E, Figure 2). It is reached from the road between Sarıyer and Rumelifeneri 950 m east of the entrance to Koç University. The area has a wide and fairly open view east to the Bosphorus and from Poyrazköy (on the Asian side) in the north to Maslak (on the European side) in the south. The area is covered with Mediterranean maquis scrub and Black Pine *Pinus nigra* plantations.

This location has been known to local birdwatchers since the 1990s and previous observations have shown it to be the best spring site. Most birds use the most northern part of the Bosphorus, north of the centre of Sarıyer, and a great majority of these arrive in the 5 km belt between the observation point and Garipçe village. As birds arrive over the European side of the Bosphorus, they are low and have lost altitude after crossing the water. Those arriving north of the observation point turn to the south to glide along the hillside to make use of thermals on the slopes of the Bosphorus. This involves circular as well as linear soaring. After flying over the observation point and passing south, they suddenly head west and enter the Rumelikavağı valley system. Strong thermals regularly occur in this area, enabling the birds to swiftly gain height by soaring and move east to the ridge just southwest of Koç University campus, and leave for the relatively flat area in the direction of Terkos lake (Durusu, Figure 2).

Observation period

Daily observations were made 18 March–31 May 2006, with the exception of 19 March, 8 April and 13 May, for a total of 72 days. Soaring birds were counted between 09.30 and 17.30 h on most days, but bad weather sometimes led us to abandon observations for some hours. A total of 538 hours was spent making observations of soaring birds. The change to local Summer Time, on 28 March, was ignored.

Figure 2. The Bosphorus region in northwest Turkey. The small black bar between Keskin Viraj and Sarıyer indicates the Rumelikavağı valley, just south of the observation point used in this study. The total length of the scale bar, bottom left, indicates 10 km.

At least two observers were present on all days (Plate 1). Most observers had 8× or 10× binoculars whilst a 20×60 telescope was used during the entire period. Two of us (ÖÜ and E Birel) used Nikon D70 and Canon 20D cameras, which allowed us to consider the identification of problematic individuals, especially of eagles and harriers.

Plate 1. Members of the Istanbul Birdwatching Society, count participants, at the Bosphorus observation point, Turkey, April 2006. © *Özkan Üner*

Weather

The weather 18 March–31 May was very variable. On 22 of the 75 days of the period conditions were generally sunny, on 47 days it was fully or partially cloudy and on 6 days misty. Though lower on misty days, visibility was generally satisfactory. Rain occurred on 11 days. Prevailing winds were from the north (52 of 75 days) and south-southwest (23 of 75 days). Wind speeds peaked between 09.00 and 16.00 h. In contrast to autumn, spring in Istanbul is wetter and cloudier, and weather conditions can change dramatically. When the wind direction changes from north to south the temperature can rise by 10°C.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From 18 March–31 May, a total of 100 051 soaring birds were counted, with White Stork, Common Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Eagle and European Honey Buzzard being the most numerous species (Table 1). The number of birds passing in each period of five days is shown by species in Figure 3 while Figure 4 presents the distribution of migrating birds in hourly intervals, by species, over the entire period.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*: 1118, peak 25 March when 207 passed. The migration period of the species had started before the study period and extended into June. A second peak, probably of non-breeders, was observed during mid-May.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: 51 958 (Plate 2), the most numerous species, with 9569 on 25 and 26 March combined, marking the peak. The route taken at the site by White Storks differed from that of most other species. Most passed 5 km north of the observation point, over Poyrazköy on the Asian side and Garipçe on the European side, and thus many birds might have passed undetected, making our total an underestimate of the real number of passing birds. Moreover, the species is known to use the coast of the sea of Marmara, as well as the Kapıdağ peninsula during spring migration where Tuncalı (*in litt*) counted 8 948 birds in spring 2008. The migration period of the species had started before the study period and extended into June. A second peak, probably of non-breeders, was observed during mid-May.

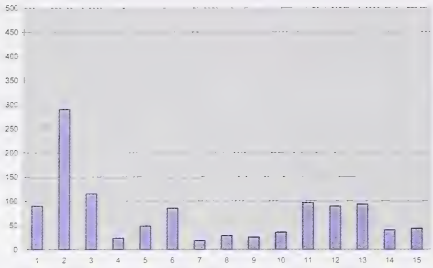
Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*: 62, 27 April–31 May. Passage coincided with the middle of the period of northerly winds and with peak wind strengths. Most passage occurred during May, peak 25 May. The species is known to stage at Manyas Gölü, south of the sea of Marmara, and fly across the sea. Tuncalı (*in litt*) counted a total of 39 734 Great White Pelicans over Kapıdağ peninsula in spring 2008 (Figure 1), probably the whole European population of 4100–5100 breeding pairs (Birdlife International 2004).

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: nine, mostly singles, 1–22 April.

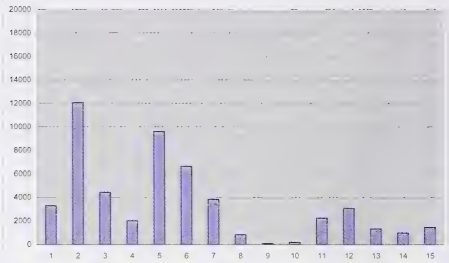
Table 1. Number of migrant soaring birds counted from the Bosphorus observation point, Turkey, 18 March–31 May 2006.

Species	Total
Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*	1118
White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*	51 958
unid. stork *Ciconia*	51
Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*	62
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*	9
European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*	9085
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*	223
White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*	2
Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*	11
Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*	9
Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*	1
Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*	473
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*	138
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*	92
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*	10
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*	12
unid. harrier *Circus*	7
Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*	16
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*	1701
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*	5
unid. sparrowhawk *Accipiter*	12
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*	16 185
Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*	28
Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*	2
unid. buzzard *Buteo/Pernis*	112
Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*	15 232
Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*	9
Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*	5
Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*	32
Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*	1
Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata*	161
Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciatus*	1
unid. eagle *Aquila*	25
unid. raptor *Accipitridae*	3082
Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*	55
Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*	50
Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*	64
Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*	1
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*	1
unid. falcon *Falco*	10
Total	100 051

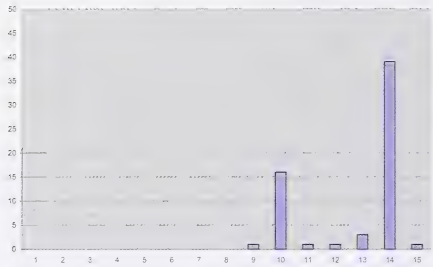
Black Stork



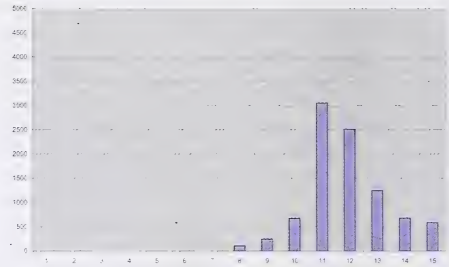
White Stork



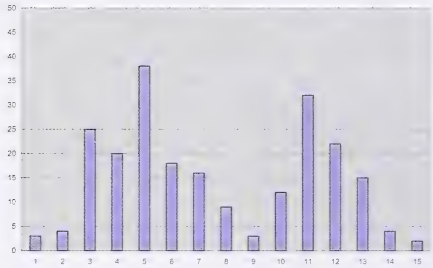
Great White Pelican



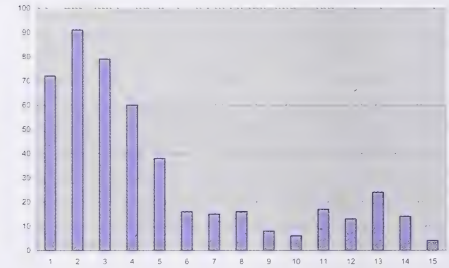
European Honey Buzzard



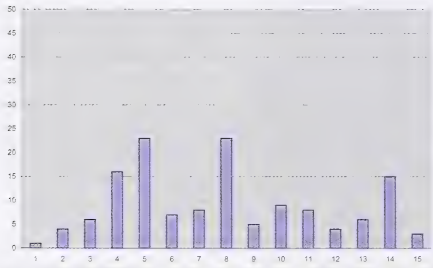
Black Kite



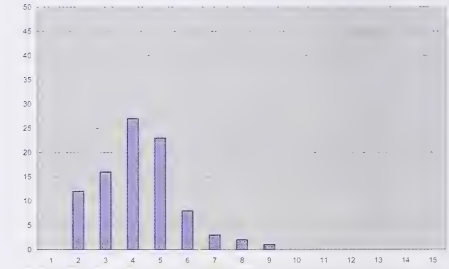
Short-toed Snake Eagle



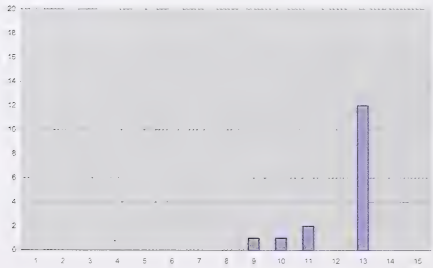
Western Marsh Harrier



Hen Harrier



Levant Sparrowhawk



Eurasian Sparrowhawk

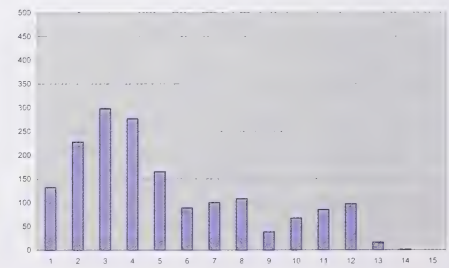


Figure 3. Total number of migrating birds, by species, passing the Bosphorus observation point (vertical axis) in each of 15 pentads (period of five days), 18 March–31 May 2006. Pentad 1 18–22 Mar*, 2 23–27 Mar, 3 28 Mar–1 Apr, 4 2–6 Apr, 5 7–11 Apr*, 6 12–16 Apr, 7 17–21 Apr, 8 22–26 Apr, 9 27 Apr–1 May, 10 2–6 May, 11 7–11 May, 12 12–16 May*, 13 17–21 May, 14 22–26 May, 15 27–31 May. Three observation days were missed: periods with * have totals for 4 days not 5.

Plate 2 (above). A group of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* crossing the Bosphorus south of the observation point, April 2006. © *Özkan Üner*

Plate 3 (right). A juvenile Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* on passage past the Bosphorus observation point, a rare sighting for Istanbul birdwatchers, 7 April 2006. © *Ertuğrul Birel*

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*: 9085. Although the first were observed on 12 April, the main bulk of the passage did not commence until 30 April with a peak of 1185 birds on 12 May. The migration period of the species extends into June. Only 1.3% of birds occurred before 1 May, whereas in Israel the first 5% moved between 20 April and 1 May (Shirihai *et al* 2000).

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*: 223, 21 March–31 May, with a single-day maximum of 21 on 7 May. However, peak passage occurred in late March. The migration period of the species had started before the study period and extended into June. A second peak, probably of non-breeders, was observed mid-May.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: singles, 16 April and 22 May.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*: 11, 23 March–23 May. Egyptian Vulture is a globally threatened species categorised as Vulnerable, with decreasing populations in Europe. BirdLife International (2004) estimated a total of 300–450 pairs in Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia). The passage is evenly distributed through the migration season.

Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*: nine, 27 March–23 May, 6 of them 27 March–12 April.

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*: one, 7 April (Plate 3).

Plate 4. (left) Short-toed Snake Eagles *Circaetus gallicus* occurred mostly in singles or pairs past the Bosphorus observation point (photo May 2006). © *Özkan Üner*

Plate 5. (right) Mostly singles of Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* occurred on passage past the Bosphorus observation point (photo April 2006). © *Ertuğrul Birel*

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*: 473 (Plate 4). Migration peaked on 26 March when 43 passed. One bird seemed to stay for 2–3 days, feeding on lizards and snakes found in the area. Most passage occurred in late March. Thereafter, daily numbers gradually decreased until late May. Presumably the flow of birds started before the study period and continued afterwards.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*: 138 with the largest single-day total of 14 on 22 April. Most passage occurred at the beginning of April but passage continued during May. The migration period of the species extends into June.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: 92, 23 March–28 April. Migration peaked on 10 April when ten individuals passed. Hen Harrier migration began in late March and gradually declined through April with the last birds at the end of the month. This is by far the largest total recorded at any watch point in the Middle East in either season (Shirihai *et al* 2000).

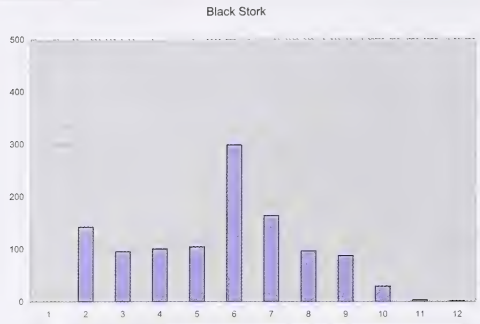
Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*: 10, mostly singles, 26 March–19 April.

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*: 12, 31 March–16 May, with a single-day maximum of five on 22 April.

Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*: 16, 31 March–19 May, with 12 on 19 May. Very few birds have been observed in spring, in contrast with thousands of birds passing annually in autumn. This species was previously known to occur in very low numbers over the Bosphorus during spring migration and therefore Shirihai *et al* (2000) suggested that Levant Sparrowhawk may prefer the eastern Black sea migration route in spring. However, R Tuncali (*in litt*) counted 1726 birds during spring 2009 over the Kapıdağ peninsula (Figure 1), which suggests that spring migration towards breeding grounds in the Balkan countries may still pass through northwest Turkey but not over the Bosphorus.

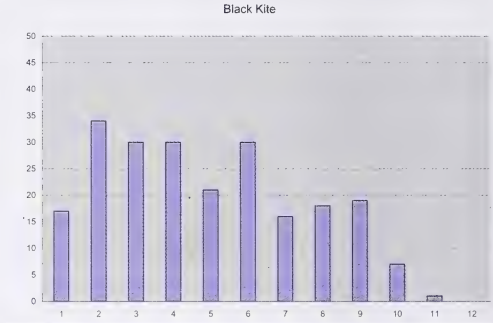
Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: 1701, 20 March–22 May (Plate 5). Eurasian Sparrowhawks peaked on 2 April with 125 birds. The migration period of the species started before the study period. Most passage occurred late March/April.

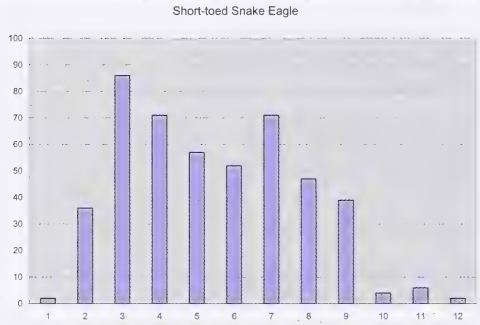
Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*: five singles, 20 March–24 May. Migration started before the study period.

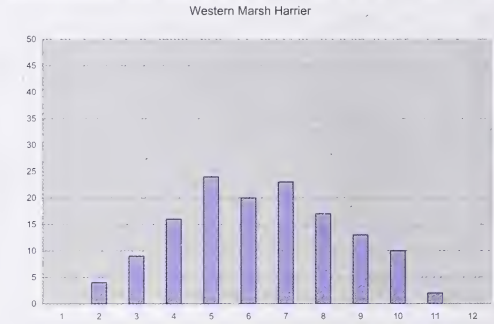

Black Stork
500
400
300
200
100
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

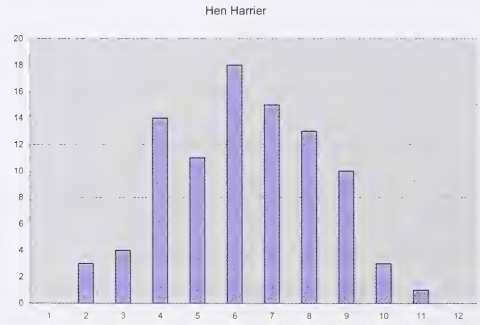

White Stork
10000
8000
6000
4000
2000
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12


European Honey Buzzard
2000
1800
1600
1400
1200
1000
800
600
400
200
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12


Black Kite
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12


Short-toed Snake Eagle
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12


Western Marsh Harrier
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12


Hen Harrier
20
18
16
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

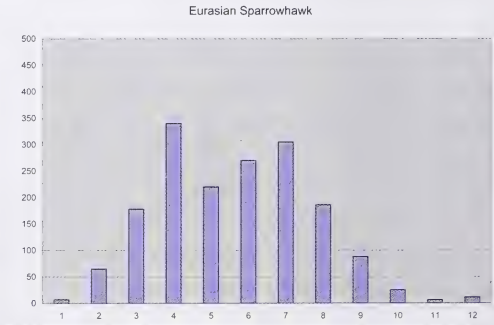

Eurasian Sparrowhawk
500
450
400
350
300
250
200
150
100
50
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Figure 4. Total number of migrating birds, by species, passing the Bosphorus observation point (vertical axis) in 12 hourly intervals during the day, 18 March–31 May 2006 (1 07.30–08.30, 2 08.30–09.30, 3 09.30–10.30, 4 10.30–11.30, 5 11.30–12.30, 6 12.30–13.30, 7 13.30–14.30, 8 14.30–15.30, 9 15.30–16.30, 10 16.30–17.30, 11 17.30–18.30, 12 18.30–19.30 h).

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: 16 185, with a single-day maximum of 1840 on 26 March. Common Buzzard was the most common raptor species and most passage occurred late March. Thereafter, daily numbers started declining slowly until late May when the passage seemed to cease. Passage at the Bosphorus starts mid-February and its peak could have been before the study period. The median peak day in Israel, 1977–1997, was calculated to be 1 April and its range 22 March–9 April (Shirihai *et al* 2000). Calculating the distance between Israel and the Bosphorus as 1500 km and a mean migration speed of 220 km/day, we could have expected peak passage one week after this period. However, peak passage at the Bosphorus, at least in 2006, was earlier than the one in Israel (Shirihai *et al* 2000). Possibly the main bulk of wintering birds in Turkey forms the birds observed over the Bosphorus or the majority of birds that fly over Israel may continue, rather, through northeast Turkey.

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*: 28, 20 March–31 May, with a clear peak in early April when the single-day maximum of 12 was recorded on 9 April. The migration period of the species had started before the study period.

Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*: two, 15 April. This species is a rare winter visitor in Turkey.

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*: 15 232 (Plate 6), with numbers peaking at the end of March and the single-day maximum of 3673 being noted on 31 March. Previous observers, in 1937, 1965 and 1978, failed to see large numbers though 27 407 were counted in spring 1993 (MME 1994). The migration period of the species had started before the study period and extended into June. A second peak, probably of non-breeders, was observed mid-May.

Plate 6 (top). A Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* gliding south along the Bosphorus before entering the Rumelikavağı valley, April 2006. © *Ertuğrul Birel*

Plate 7 (bottom). A juvenile Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* soaring on southern winds past the Bosphorus observation point, April 2006. © *Özkan Üner*

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*: nine, mostly singles, 28 March–3 May (Plate 7). Although this species is categorized as Vulnerable by BirdLife International, it is probably under recorded for several reasons. Identification problems still exist and individuals among the more common Lesser Spotted Eagle can escape even experienced eyes. Greater Spotted Eagles are known to be short-distance migrants and some are likely to have passed through the Bosphorus before the study period.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*: five singles, 9 April–11 May, of which four passed 9–15 April. The species is a regular but rare passage migrant over the Bosphorus.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*: 32, 30 March–24 May. The passage peaked in early May. Large numbers of migrants have not been observed in Israel in May, and our birds may relate to juveniles moving between populations in Turkey and southeast Europe. The

migration period of the species had started before the study period and migration of adults had most probably finished before the study period. In Israel, adults usually predominate in the first wave of migration (March–April) and juveniles follow in May (Shirihai *et al* 2000).

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: a single, 21 May.

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata*: 161, 22 March–31 May, with a maximum of 25 on 6 April. Most passage occurred in early April. The migration period started before the study period and extended into June.

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciatus*: a single, 11 April.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: 55, 22 March–31 May, with single-day maxima of four each on 2 and 11 April. The peak was observed in mid-April. A second peak, probably of non-breeders, was observed during mid-May. The migration period of the species extends into June.

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*: 50, 30 April–23 May, with a single-day maximum of 14 on 6 May. There was a very clear peak in early May when 43 (85% of the total) passed 3–7 May.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: 64 birds, 3 April–31 May. Migration peaked at the beginning of May, with 19, 1–5 May. Birds were observed to stage around the observation site and feed on migrant passerines. Sometimes distinguishing between passage birds and local residents was not possible. Birds seen toward the end of the migration period may well have been residents.

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*: a single, 24 May.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: one, 30 April.

Effect of wind and rain on bird numbers

During the study two general wind patterns were observed in the area: northerly winds and southerly winds. The flyway of birds generally shifted according to these two patterns. When the wind blew from the north, there were more birds observed flying south of Sarıyer, above the Maslak area (Figure 2). When the wind blew from the south, many birds flew between Garipçe and Rumelifeneri. On days with heavy rain showers, 24 and 30 March and 29 April, the migration almost ceased. However, light rain observed on other days did not seem to affect passage.

Height of migration

Birds usually flew low, between *c*10–100 m above the level of the observation point. There was little variation with time of day.

Time of day

During the day, the first birds were observed before 09.30 h but most birds were counted 10.30–17:30 h, with a third of the total passing 12.30–14.30 h. When looking at the distribution of migrating birds in hourly intervals during the day (Figure 4), two patterns can be identified. The first applies for most species, where the total number per hour increases until midday, reaching its peak at *c*13.00 h, when thermals are most abundant, and then slowly decreasing towards the evening. The other pattern applies to species such as European Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Booted Eagle. Their passage continues roughly with the same intensity, 09.00–16.00 h but decreases in late

afternoon. Cessation of passage at midday, as observed in Israel in autumn (Shirihai *et al* 2000), was not observed spring 2006, although it is very frequent during autumn migration over the Bosphorus.

Comparison with previous studies

This study produced a much higher total number of birds compared with previous Bosphorus spring counts. Mauve (1938) counted 1634 birds 16 March–24 April compared to 31 884 in this study for the same period. Collman & Croxall (1967) counted 2254 birds during 10 days 23 March–6 April, compared to 17 643 birds counted in the present study in 14 days during the same period. Ritzel (1980) counted a total of 2779 birds 20 March–4 April compared to 18 375 birds in our study in the same period. We assume the main reason to be lack of suitable ID literature and experience to identify passage birds and perhaps the poorer quality of optical equipment. They all failed to document the existence of significant numbers of Common Buzzard and Lesser Spotted Eagle, perhaps because they did not identify them and discarded unidentified birds. However the totals of some easily identifiable or familiar species, such as Common Kestrel, Black Kite, Egyptian Vulture, and Short-toed Snake Eagle are at a relatively similar level.

The only published modern census in spring for the Bosphorus is the counts in 1993 by the Hungarian Ornithological Society (MME 1993), and its results are similar to those of the present study. HOS recorded 27 514 birds in comparison to 23 936 during this study, 18 March–9 April. The source of the difference is mainly due to higher number of Lesser Spotted Eagles, MME counted 17 325 in comparison to 11 313 in our study.

We also compared the total number of migrating birds in our study with spring counts from northeast Turkey in 1993 (Faldborg 1994) and 1994 (M Henriksen *in litt*). The total number of migrant raptors in spring is much higher in northeast Turkey, Faldborg (1994) recorded 151 606 raptors in 25 days and M Henriksen (*in litt*) 57 920 birds in 30 days in comparison to 46 862 raptors counted in the present study in 72 days. Common Buzzard, European Honey Buzzard and Black Kite make up the biggest proportion of migrants in northeast Turkey and occur in much higher numbers, with maxima of 136 327, 29 323 (M Henriksen *in litt*) and 9069 (Faldborg 1994) respectively. Similarly, both authors recorded over 1000 Levant Sparrowhawks in spring, a figure much higher than the number of birds recorded at the Bosphorus. However, we recorded a higher number of Lesser Spotted Eagles, 15 232 in comparison to 277 recorded by Faldborg (1994) in northeast Turkey.

The total numbers recorded during the present study are probably far less than the actual number of birds crossing the Bosphorus. For example, *c*52 000 White Storks were recorded and yet there are 180 000–220 000 breeding pairs in Europe (Burfield & van Bommel 2004) and 200 000–350 000 birds have been counted in autumn over the Bosphorus (Porter & Willis 1968, Beaman 1973). Storks were frequently observed to cross the Bosphorus, over Garipçe, *c*4.5 km north of the study site. Many of those birds were probably missed from our observation point.

A single observation point is not sufficient to cover the whole migration front over the Bosphorus (Van den Bossche & Lens 1994). A recent study in autumn 2008 by the Milvus Group (2008) used a team of 17 persons and five watchpoints along the Bosphorus and counted 150 217 raptors, approximately four times higher than the *c*37 000 raptors counted in 1966 by Porter & Willis (1967). Similarly, at least four points are needed to cover the whole spring migration over the Bosphorus, and if combined with other count stations on the Kapıdağ peninsula and possibly the Dardanelles, spring counts in northwest Turkey could be an important tool for monitoring populations of east European storks, pelicans and raptors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study could not have been undertaken without the assistance of the following members of the İstanbul Birdwatching Club: Ahmet Kütükçü, Ali İlhan Tireli, Ayşegül Şanlı, Bahar Bilgen, Berrin Akyıldırım, Buğra Giritlioğlu, Cemil Gezgin, Ekrem Yanık, Emre Aybar, Eray Çağlayan, Esra Kartal, Fatih Sam, Ferda Aybar, Gökhan Özenoğlu, Haldun Savaş, İbrahim Erdem, Kemal Nuraydın, Koray Yeşiladalı, Luke Smith, Mehmet Çetinkoç, Nihal Önem, Oğuz Mülayim, Okan Koçyiğit, Özgür Ekincioğlu, Soner Bekir, Ümit Çakır. We thank them all for taking part in the census. Keith Bildstein kindly commented on the manuscript. Luke Smith shared his vast knowledge of the Bosphorus migration, data and references. Guy Kirwan supported this publication from the very early stages and gave valuable advice. Hilary & Geoff Welch provided constant support and encouragement.

REFERENCES

Alléon, A & J Vian. 1869–70. Des migrations des oiseaux de proie sur le Bosphore de Constantinople. *Revue et Magasin de Zoologie* 21: 258–273, 305–315, 342–348, 369–374, 401–409; 22: 81–86, 129–138, 161–165.

Ballance, DK & SLB Lee. 1961. Notes on autumn migration at the Bosphorus and in the Aegean. *Ibis* 103a: 195–204.

Beaman, M. 1973. Bosphorus migration, autumn 1971. *Bulletin of the Ornithological Society of Turkey* 8: 3–4.

Beaman, M & F Jacobsen. 1974. Bosphorus migration, autumn 1972. *Bulletin of the Ornithological Society of Turkey* 10: 10–11.

Bijlsma, RG. 1990. *Some raptor counts in the vicinity of Istanbul, autumn 1990*. SOVON, Beek-Ubbergen, Netherlands.

Burfield I & F van Bommel (compilers). 2004. *Birds in Europe: population estimates, trends and conservation status*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.

van den Bossche, W & L Lens. 1994. Soaring bird migration at the Bosphorus (Turkey): the need for a multi-station survey. *Gerfaut* 84: 51–62.

Collman, JR & JP Croxall. 1967. Spring migration at the Bosphorus. *Ibis* 109: 359–372.

Faldborg, J. 1994. *Birds in Çamlıhemşin–Ardeşen area, north-east Turkey, April–May 1993*. Dansk Ornitologisk Forening, Copenhagen.

Grimmett, RFA & TA Jones. 1989. *Important Bird Areas in Europe*. International Council for Bird Preservation, Cambridge, UK. .

Howes, A. 1996. Autumn migration across the Bosphorus. *Leicestershire & Rutland Ornithological Society Newsletter* 390: 5.

Kirwan GM, K Boyla, P Castell, B Demirci, M Özen, H Welch & T Marlow. 2008. *The Birds of Turkey*. Christopher Helm, London.

Mauve, L. 1938. Der Zug der Grossvögel über den Bosporus. *Journal für Ornitologie* 86: 261–301.

Magyar Madártaniés Természetvédelmi Egyesület (MME) 1993. Isztambuli madárszámlálás. *Heliaca* 1 (1): 17.

Milvus Group (2008). *Migration data Bosporus, autumn 2008*. www.milvus.ro. Last accessed 21 October 2009.

Porter, RF & IR Willis. 1968. The autumn migration of soaring birds at the Bosphorus. *Ibis* 110: 520–536.

Porter RF, IR Willis, BP Nielsen & S Christensen. 1974. *Flight Identification of European Raptors*. TAD Poyser, UK.

Ritzel, L. 1980. Der Durchzug con Greifvögeln and Störchen über den Bosporus im Frühjahr 1978. *Vogelwarte* 30: 149–162.

Robel, D & C Bräuning. 1992. Zum Greifvogelzug am Bosporus im September 1990. *Beitrage zur Vogelkunde* 38: 81–91.

Shirihai H, R Yosef, D Alon, G Kirwan & R Spaar. 2000. *Raptor migration in Israel and the Middle East*. International Birding and Research Centre in Eilat, Israel.

Somçağ, S. 1981. Autumn migration over the Bosphorus. *Bulletin of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East* 6: 6.

Steinfatt, O. 1932. Der Bosporus als Landbrüche für den Vogelzug zwischen Europa und Kleinasien. *Journal für Ornithologie* 80: 354–383.

Zalles, JI & KL Bildstein (eds). 2000. *Raptor watch: a global directory of raptor migration sites*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.

Özkan Üner, Kerem Ali Boyla, Ergün Bacak, Ertuğrul Birel, İlhan Çelikoba, Cem Dalyan, Evrim Tabur & Ümit Yardım, Susam Sok. 8/2, Cihangir Beyoğlu, Istanbul 34433, Turkey. kerem.boyla@gmail.com

Probable breeding of the Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica melanoleuca* on Cyprus

CHRISTOPH RANDLER & ALAN CRABTREE

The Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* of the subspecies *melanoleuca* [hereafter *melanoleuca*] breeds in the eastern Mediterranean region around Cyprus *eg* in Greece, Turkey, Jordan, Israel and Egypt (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997, Snow & Perrins 1998). However, there is no breeding record from Cyprus although there are suitable habitats and many migrating *melanoleuca* are observed during spring (Bannerman & Bannerman 1958, Flint & Stewart 1992, Randler *et al* 2010, Whaley & Dawes 2003).

Bannerman & Bannerman (1958) gave 21 April as the date of the last spring record. Flint & Stewart (1992) wrote "last seen early–mid May, once obtained late May . . ." Records from 2000–2008 provided by BirdLife Cyprus, show that the migration period of Black-eared Wheatear effectively ends in mid-May (Figure 1). There were two June records during this period: a single of unspecified sex at Anarita park 16 June 2001 (Gordon 2001) and a female at Kambia area 19 June 2007 (Richardson 2007). Whaley & Dawes (2003) wondered why *melanoleuca* does not breed on Cyprus, since it breeds in nearby countries of similar latitude, with similar habitats and altitude. They observed a male *melanoleuca* with unidentified juveniles near Armou on 9 June 1994, an apparent pair there on 28 April 1997 and a singing male with a nearby female near Inia on 7 April 1995.

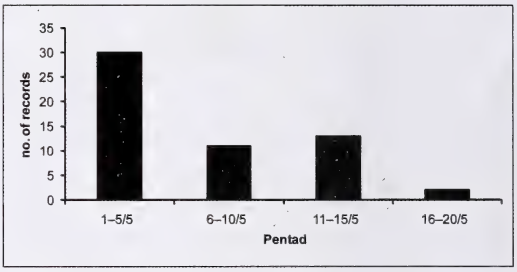


Figure 1. Records of Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* on Cyprus May 2000–2008 (BirdLife Cyprus), depicted in pentads (five-day-totals, N = 56 records).

CR found a singing male *melanoleuca* with a dark throat on 21 and 22 May 2009 near Androlikou village (Figure 2). The male was accompanied by a female there on 29 May. Both individuals were observed in an olive grove, used the olive grove tracks for feeding (Plate 2) and used parts of the surrounding valley, with less bush vegetation, for song posts (Plate 3). AC saw both the male and female (Plate 1) feeding on a track near the olive grove on 4 June. On 9 June, 06.30–10.30 h, neither bird was seen nor song heard, but on 14 June the female was seen briefly in the olive grove by AC. The birds were not detected on 20 and 27 June.

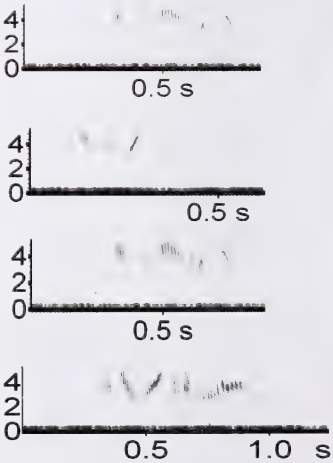


Figure 2. Sonograms of a singing male Black-eared Wheatear *O. h. melanoleuca* near Androlikou, Cyprus, 21 May 2009. X-axis time, y-axis frequency in kHz.

These observations of a *melanoleuca* pair strongly suggest a breeding attempt in 2009. In terms of the classification of the EBCC Atlas (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997), it is regarded as probable breeding (cat. B.3 "Pair observed in suitable nesting habitat in breeding season", and B.4 "Permanent territory presumed through registration of territorial behaviour (song, etc.) on at least two different days a week or more apart at the same place"). Some

Plate 1. Female Black-eared Wheatear *O. h. melanoleuca* near Androlikou, Cyprus, 4 June 2009. © *Gwen Crabtree*

Plate 2. (left) The olive grove and tracks near Androlikou, Cyprus. © *C Randler*

Plate 3. (right) The surrounding valley near Androlikou, Cyprus. © *C Randler*

previous authors supposed that the absence of *melanoleuca* is due to competition with the resident endemic wheatear, the common and widespread *O. cypriaca*, but *O. cypriaca* has different habitat preferences compared to *O. hispanica, O. oenanthe* and *O. isabellina* (Randler *et al* 2010). In nearby countries up to four *Oenanthe* species coexist (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

The present data indicate that *melanoleuca* might be a regular but scarce breeder on Cyprus. Further work should focus on areas in the lower hill regions and away from the coastal migration hotspots. To the west, on Rhodes, *melanoleuca* is most common from 0–600 m asl with a mean at 220 m (Jochen Hölzinger pers comm). The timing of the breeding season may well be similar to that of breeders of the surrounding eastern Mediterranean region, so singing males should be sought from mid-April and juveniles from the end of May until the end of June (Panov 2005). Special attention should be paid to possible hybridisation, which is common in the genus *Oenanthe* especially between Black-eared and Pied *O. pleschanka* Wheatears (Randler 2004).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Colin Richardson, bird recorder of BirdLife Cyprus, for providing the 2000–2008 migration period data. Dr Jochen Hölzinger gave detailed comments on the situation on Rhodes and encouraging words for searching for the Black-eared Wheatear on Cyprus.

REFERENCES

Bannerman, DA & WM Bannerman. 1958. *Birds of Cyprus*. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh.

Flint, PR & PF Stewart. 1992. *The Birds of Cyprus*. British Ornithologists' Union, Tring, UK.

Gordon, J (ed). 2001. *Annual Report 2001*. Cyprus Ornithological Society (1957), Paphos, Cyprus.

Hagemeijer, WJM & MJ Blair. 1997. *The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds*. T & AD Poyser, London.

Panov, E. 2005. *Wheatears of Palearctic. Ecology, Behaviour and Evolution of the genus Oenanthe*. Pensoft, Sofia.

Randler, C. 2004. Frequency of bird hybrids: does detectability make all the difference? *Journal of Ornithology* 145: 123–128.

Randler, C, C Teichmann & S Pentzold. 2010. Breeding habitat preference and foraging of the Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca* and niche partitioning in comparison with migrant *Oenanthe* species on Cyprus. *Journal of Ornithology* 151: 113–121.

Richardson, C (ed). 2007. *Cyprus Bird Report 2007*. BirdLife Cyprus, Nicosia.

Snow, DW & CM Perrins. 1998. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Concise edn. Oxford University Press, UK.

Whaley, DJ & JC Dawes. 2003. *Cyprus breeding birds atlas*. Privately published, Paphos, Cyprus.

Christoph Randler, University of Education Heidelberg, Biology, INF 561–2, D-69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Randler@ph-heidelberg.de

Alan Crabtree, Ringing Officer BirdLife Cyprus, PO Box 66282, 8840 Latsi, Polis, Cyprus. Crabtree@cytanet.com.cy

First record of Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris* in Iran and the Middle East

SAEED CHERAGHI & MOHAMMAD TOHIDIFAR

The Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris* is a breeding visitor to the Himalayas west to the mountains of northeast Afghanistan (Safed Koh). It winters in central and southern India but has straggled to Karachi (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). It has not previously been recorded in Iran (Scott *et al* 1975, Firouz 2005, Scott & Adhami 2006, Adhami 2008, Mansoori 2008) or the Middle East (Porter *et al* 1996).

On 25 April 2009 during a bird survey in Delbar oasis (35° 58′ 7.04″ N, 56° 3′ 49.537″ E), Touran biosphere reserve, Semnan province, northeast Iran, SC saw a small dark bird chasing Red-breasted Flycatchers *Ficedula parva*. First, it was thought to be a Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* but better views revealed otherwise. It had dark blue on its back with a glistening supercilium. More effort found two more conspecifics, near adjacent fig trees *Ficus carica*. In these three birds, forehead, cape, sides of head, neck, mantle and wings were deep blue in contrast with white underparts. The primaries appeared dark brown and there were white patches at the base of the tail. White supercilia were obvious and bill, eyes and legs were black. SC took photos (Plates 1–4) and inspection of the Handbook of Birds of India and Pakistan (Ali & Ripley 1998) helped us to identify them as male Ultramarine Flycatchers. The birds showed the features (white tail-base patches and supercilia) of the western form *F. s. superciliaris* (A Adhami *in litt*, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). No attempt was made to find female individuals.

Plates 1 & 2. Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*, 25 April 2009, Delbar oasis, Touran biosphere reserve, northeast Iran. © *S Cheraghi*

Plates 3 & 4. Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*, 25 April 2009, Delbar oasis, Touran biosphere reserve, northeast Iran. © *S Cheraghi*

These birds were presumably vagrants, being pushed too far west by easterly or southeasterly winds (DA Scott *in litt*). Captive origin of these birds seems unlikely as insectivorous birds are difficult to keep and probably few people do so in the region (Roth *et al* 2005). Another flycatcher from east of Iran, Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassinus*, was seen in extreme southeast Iran in late March 2001 (Roth *et al* 2005).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MT sincerely thanks Ali Adhami, Ian Harrison, Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh, Richard Porter and Derek A Scott for advice and consultation.

REFERENCES

Adhami, A (compiler). 2008. [*Encyclopedia of Birds: General views and zoogeographical regions*]. The Great Persian Encyclopedia Foundation, Tehran. [In Persian]

Ali, S & SD Ripley. 1998. *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. Second edn. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Firouz, E. 2005. *The Complete Fauna of Iran*. I.B. Tauris, London.

Mansoori, J. 2008. [*A guide to the birds of Iran*]. Farzaneh Publishing, Tehran. [In Persian]

Porter, RF, S Christensen & P Schiermacker-Hansen. 1996. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. T & AD Poyser, London.

Rasmussen, PC & JC Anderton. 2005. *Birds of South Asia*. Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

Roth, T, R Aye, R Burri & M Schweizer. 2005. Bird observations from Iran in February–March 2001, including a new species for the Middle East. *Sandgrouse* 27: 63–68.

Scott, DA & A Adhami. 2006. An updated checklist of the birds of Iran. *Podoces* 1(1/2): 1–16.

Scott, DA, H Moravvej Hamadani & A Adhami Mirhosseyni. 1975. *The Birds of Iran*. Department of the Environment, Tehran. [In Persian, with Latin, English and French bird names]

Saeed Cheraghi, Eco-researchers Society, Tehran, Iran.

Mohammad Tohidifar, Biodiversity & Habitats Division, Faculty of Environment & Energy, Science & Research branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran PO 16516–43711, Iran. mohammad_8463@yahoo.com

Status of East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla* (*alba*) *ocularis* in Kazakhstan

AREND WASSINK

In the Palearctic, East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla* (*alba*) *ocularis* breeds in north-central and eastern Siberia, west to the west-central Taimyr peninsula and (locally) the Yenisey river south to *c*60° N, and east to the Chukotka and Kamchatka peninsulas south to *c*57° N. There seems to be a rather broad zone of hybridization with nominate *alba* in central and western Taimyr and along the Yenisey river. It, *ocularis*, winters mainly on the Asian mainland, east to southern China, southward to Indochina, Thailand and Malaysia and west through Myanmar and northeast India as far west as Rajasthan (Alström *et al* 2003).

The East Siberian Wagtail is regarded as being a vagrant in Kazakhstan (Gavrilov & Gavrilov 2005, Wassink & Oreel 2007), with only two records up to 2006 (Wassink & Oreel 2007). However, there have been five records there subsequently, involving at least 12 birds. All records from Kazakhstan are listed below and their locations shown in Figure 1:

20 May 1998, adult male, Korgalzhyn (50° 35′ N, 70° 01′ E), Aqmola province (Heinicke *et al* 2006, Wassink & Oreel 2007).

12 May 2003, adult male, Kolshengel (44° 20′ N, 75° 33′ E), Almaty province (Gavrilov & Gavrilov 2005, Wassink & Oreel 2007).

7–11 May 2007, at least five birds, Kolshengel, Almaty province (Bird 2007, Hendriks 2007, Wassink & Oreel 2008).

26 May 2008, one first-summer bird, photographed, Aydarli (44° 06′ N, 75° 55′ E), Almaty province (Wassink 2009a).

7 May 2009, one first-summer bird, Kyzykol lake (43° 45′ N, 69° 30′ E), South Kazakhstan province (Wassink 2009b).

13–16 May 2009, at least three first-summer birds, Kolshengel, Almaty province (Wassink 2009b, Plate 1).

Figure 1. Biogeographical map of Kazakhstan (Wassink & Oreel 2007) showing locations of East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla* (*alba*) *ocularis* records. Aydarli and Kolshengel are indicated using a common star.

Plate 1. East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla* (*alba*) *ocularis*, first-summer, Kolshengel, Kazakhstan, 14 May 2009. © *Jos van den Berg*

Plate 2. East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla* (*alba*) *ocularis*, first-summer male, Topar lakes, Kazakhstan, 18 May 2009. © *Arend Wassink*

18 May 2009, two birds (including one singing first-summer male), Topar lakes (44° 58′ N, 75° 09′ E, Almaty province (Wassink 2009b, Plate 2).

In addition, an apparent adult male hybrid between *ocularis* and nominate *alba* was photographed at Korgalzhyn, Aqmola province on 15 June 2004 (Heinicke *et al* 2006, Wassink & Oreel 2007).

These records suggest that small numbers of East Siberian Wagtails regularly pass through Kazakhstan in spring, at least west to the Tengiz-Korgalzhyn region and Kyzylkol lake. The fact that this taxon has not been recorded on autumn migration in Kazakhstan can presumably be explained by the very low observer density during that period.

East Siberian Wagtail resembles nominate *alba* but shows a blackish eye-stripe and, on average, more white on the median and greater coverts than the eastern *'dukhunensis'* population of the latter. In some birds, the blackish eye-stripe is absent on the lores (Alström *et al* 2003). These might easily be mistaken for hybrids, especially in the case of first-summer birds showing retained juvenile outer greater coverts with extensive dark centres, resembling nominate *alba*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Jos van den Berg for allowing me to use his photograph and Nils van Duivendijk for discussing the age and moult of the birds photographed.

REFERENCES

Alström, P, K Mild & B Zetterström. 2003. *Pipits & Wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm, London.

Bird, S. 2007. *Kazakhstan*. Birdseekers trip report, www.travellingbirder.com.

Gavrilov, EI & AE Gavrilov. 2005. The birds of Kazakhstan. Abridged edn. *Tethys Ornithological Research* 2: 3–222.

Heinicke, T, G Eichhorn, J Kamp, A Koshkin, L Lachmann & H Schielzeth. 2006. *Checklist of the birds of the Tengiz-Korgalzhyn region, central Kazakhstan*. Unpublished (thomas.heinicke@gmx.net).

Hendriks, H. 2007. *Kazakhstan birding trip report*. www.travellingbirder.com.

Wassink, A & GJ Oreel. 2007. *The birds of Kazakhstan*. Arend Wassink, De Cocksdorp, Texel, Netherlands.

Wassink, A & GJ Oreel. 2008. Birds of Kazakhstan: new and interesting data. *Dutch Birding* 30: 93–100.

Wassink, A. 2009a. Birds of Kazakhstan: new and interesting data, part 2. *Dutch Birding* 31: 101–110.

Wassink, A. 2009b. *Kazakhstan trip report*. www.travellingbirder.com.

Arend Wassink, Postweg 64, 1795 JR, De Cocksdorp, Texel, Netherlands. arendwassink@texel.com

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* new to Yemen

SIMON ASPINALL & DAVID STANTON

Led by DS and his colleagues, Sanaa International School made its 13th annual autumn visit to the Bab Al Mandab, entrance to the Red sea, in late October 2008. Primarily an educational visit, part of the time has been given over annually to observe and count migrating raptors as they approached the crossing of the Red sea to Africa. SA gratefully accepted an offer to join the party and make daily counts.

A cyclone had hit the Aden coast late the previous week and the after-effects, violent electric storms and torrential rains, continued over the Bab al Mandab area during our stay. SA & DS had discussed the possibility of seabirds having been driven into the Red sea as a result and where might be a suitable headland to watch any movements. However, with so many raptors already passing and in need of counting the idea was dropped.

On 29 October 2008, the second day of observations in the Bab al Mandab area, DS joined SA at a vantage point on a low hill *c*400 m inland of the coast. By *c*09.30 h both Steppe Eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* were already passing overhead in numbers, initially being seen at a distance to our north spiraling upwards in dense kettles, these birds then making forward progress and passing the observers in a slow glide southwards.

At 10.40 h, SA noticed a frigatebird *Fregata* sp approaching in a flock of Steppe Eagles and alerted DS who quickly got onto the bird. Frustratingly there was no camera to hand. The bird remained in view for about 20 seconds, as it passed overhead. Notes were immediately made and a sketch drawn, which later confirmed the bird's identity as a Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*—a new species for Yemen.

Description: large with narrow pointed angled wings and pterodactyl-like outline, wingspan slightly less than that of adjacent Steppe Eagles (direct size comparison was possible as the bird was flying at the same level as the eagles), total length (bill to tail) was about the same as the nearest eagles. The tail was very deeply forked, the outer tail long thin and pointed. The chin was dark, but the chest was white (hence presumably a female or immature male) with the white extending in a point onto the armpits/underwing—a crucial feature in its specific identification (Porter *et al* 1996). The rest of the underparts were all dark. The bird did not flap.

Lesser Frigatebird has been recorded in the Middle East previously, with five confirmed records from Oman, on 9 August 1986, 5–8 July 1993, 30 October 1997, 22 September and 11 October 2002 (Eriksen *et al* 2003) and one from Kuwait, on 10 April 2008 (Lansdell *et al* 2008); several other frigatebird records from the region frustratingly remain specifically unidentified. The nearest breeding colonies of Lesser Frigatebird, the frigatebird species breeding closest to Arabia, are on the Indian ocean islands of Cocos (Keeling) and the Maldives, the latter much the closer at a minimum distance of *c*3200 km.

The cyclone of the previous week was presumably responsible for this frigatebird having found its way up the Red sea in the first instance. Its chance observation, moreover, in a flock of migrating Steppe Eagles heading south, made it a memorable observation for the two disbelieving observers.

REFERENCES

Eriksen, J, DE Sargeant & R Victor. 2003. *Oman Bird List*. Edition 6. Centre for Environmental Studies and Research, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat.

Lansdell, J, C Lansdell, A Wilkinson & L Gregory. 2008. A Lesser Frigatebird in Kuwait—the third Western Palearctic record. *Birding World* 21: 254.

Porter, RF, S Christensen & P Schiermacker-Hansen. 1996. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. T & AD Poyser, London.

SJ Aspinall, PO Box 45553, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. hudhud10@gmail.com

DB Stanton, Yemen Leopard Recovery Program, PO Box 7069, Sanaa, Republic of Yemen. yos@y.net.ye

Studies of Socotran birds V. On the validity of *Anthus similis sokotrae* and a few remarks on Arabian and northeast African populations of Long-billed Pipit *A. similis*

GUY M KIRWAN & ANDREW GRIEVE

Based on an analysis of plumage and mensural characters, we present rationale for the continued recognition of the race of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis sokotrae* endemic to the island of Socotra, despite overlap in many of the plumage features that have in the past been claimed as useful in separating *sokotrae* from mainland forms. Unlike Clancey (1986) but in agreement with Alström *et al* (2003), we consider most of southern Arabia to be inhabited by a single form of *A. similis*, but we find plumage differences between African *nivescens* and Arabian populations difficult to define, and there is a cline of increasing size from west (northeast Africa) to east (Oman), thus a fuller and more detailed analysis might lead to *arabicus* entering into the synonymy of *nivescens*.

INTRODUCTION

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* is widespread, if local, in the southern Middle East, as well as across sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent, with up to 19 recognised subspecies (Tyler 2004). One of these races, *Anthus similis sokotrae*, E. Hartert, 1917, is restricted to the island of Socotra, where it is a common and widespread resident, especially in the rocky interior (Kirwan *et al* 1996). As part of an ongoing re-evaluation of the taxonomic validity and status of taxa endemic or near endemic to Socotra (Kirwan 2004, Kirwan & Grieve 2007, Kirwan 2007, 2008), we reviewed the validity of *A. s. sokotrae*, principally on the basis of specimen material held at The Natural History Museum (NHM), Tring, UK, and the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA.

Measurements were taken using a standard wing-rule with a perpendicular stop at zero and digital callipers, according to standard parameters outlined in Svensson (1992). In addition to *A. s. sokotrae*, the text below discusses the following races listed north to south and west to east. *A. s. captus* occurs in the Near East, from Lebanon and Syria to southern Israel and western Jordan, whilst *A. s. nivescens* occurs from southeast Egypt (presumably, see below) and northeast Sudan south to northwest Somalia and northern Kenya. *A. s. arabicus* is found across the southern Arabian peninsula, except perhaps in northern Oman, from Muscat north to Musandam, where it is arguably replaced by *A. s. decaptus*, which otherwise is found as a breeder from southern Iran to western Pakistan (Alström *et al* 2003, Tyler 2004).

HISTORICAL TREATMENT

Hartert (1917) described *A. s. sokotrae* in very brief terms thus. "In coloration of the upperside the Sokotra form is intermediate between *arabicus* and *captus*, being dark brown with pale edges to the feathers, but underneath it is even lighter than *captus*. Unfortunately, the specimens collected by the Grant-Forbes expedition are all in very worn plumage." Subsequent commentators have all been content to uphold *sokotrae*, with Sclater (1930) passing no remarks on the Socotran form at all, and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960) more or less merely repeating Hartert (1917). Ripley & Bond (1966) passed no comment on its validity or otherwise, but Clancey (1986) also considered *sokotrae* diagnosable, being heavily streaked above with no trace of any reddish (unlike many continental races), whitish underparts heavily streaked dark brown, and size closest to *A. s. nivescens*. Fry *et*

al (1992) treated *sokotrae* as most similar to *A. s. nivescens*, with blacker and more distinct upperparts streaking, a shorter wing and relatively long bill. Most recently, Tyler (2004) also considered *sokotrae* to be most similar to *nivescens* (whose range is generally restricted to northeast Africa, from southeast Egypt to northern Kenya, but see below), albeit generally greyer with well-defined dark centres and pale edges to the feathers of the upperparts. It should be mentioned that Alström *et al*'s (2003) extremely detailed monograph of the pipits and wagtails unfortunately did not extend to treating the African taxa, meaning that they did not re-evaluate *sokotrae*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our own analysis of specimen material suggests that *sokotrae* is diagnosable, albeit the differences, other than the mensural characters, are not especially well marked from either *nivescens* or *arabicus* (another Hartert name, traditionally recognised for most or all Arabian populations). It seems doubtful whether *sokotrae* would pass muster for recognition as a separate lineage under a phylogenetic species concept, but it can be upheld subspecifically under the Biological Species Concept, though its mensural characters provide a better means for separation (see below, and Figure 1). Comparing material from similar seasons and state of wear, *sokotrae* is on average marginally paler below, especially on the belly, but all three forms, particularly *arabicus* and *nivescens* can be extensively suffused with sandy-buff below (Plates 1 & 5). The underparts streaking of *sokotrae* is on average slightly better defined than the other two races, but there is probably too much overlap to be definitive on this point. In terms of the upperparts, the streaking is, as remarked by many previous commentators, slightly more clear-cut and darker than on *nivescens* and *arabicus*, especially on the crown, nape and mantle, although again there is some slight overlap. The background colour averages very slightly paler than continental African or Arabian birds (Plate 2). The centres to the wing-coverts and tertials, especially, are darker and set-off by slightly whiter and broader fringes, whereas in *nivescens* and *arabicus* the fringes are obviously buffier, or sandier, with generally less darkly contrasting centres (Plate 3). The

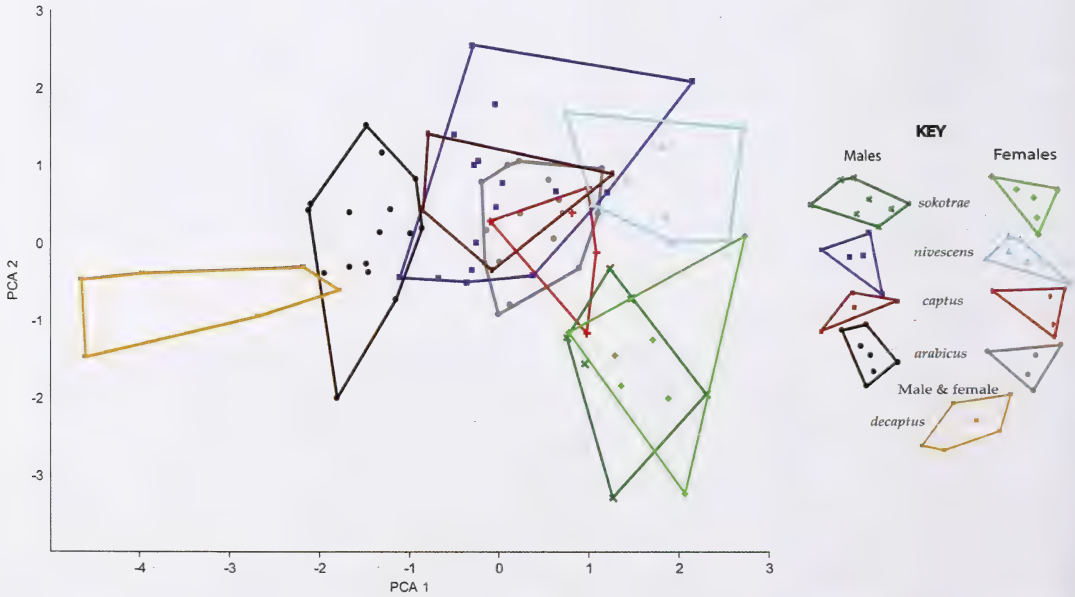


Figure 1. Scatter plot diagram of first (PC1) and second (PC2) principal components for a Principal Components Analysis of five morphometric measurements from five taxa of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* (Table 2).

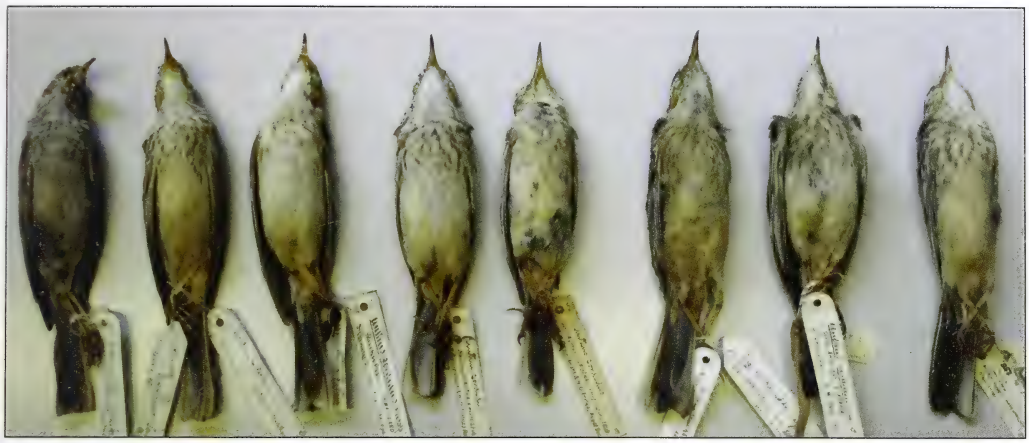


Plate 1. (top) Ventral view of specimens of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*, showing from left to right: three *A. s. nivescens* from northeast Africa, two *A. s. sokotrae* (Socotra), two *A. s. arabicus* (southern Arabia) and an *A. s. captus* (Palestine). *Guy M Kirwan / © The Natural History Museum, Tring*

Plate 2. (bottom) Dorsal view of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* specimens, showing from left to right: three *A. s. nivescens* from northeast Africa, two *A. s. sokotrae* (Socotra), two *A. s. arabicus* (southern Arabia) and an *A. s. captus* (Palestine). *Guy M Kirwan / © The Natural History Museum, Tring*

fringes of the rectrices are also paler and whiter in *sokotrae,* and in the outermost pair the pale wedges on the inner webs are also paler and closer to grey-white than in the African and Arabian birds (Plate 4).

Although sample sizes are relatively limited (Table 1) *sokotrae* is separable from other relevant subspecies based on its smaller wing and tail, and larger bill size. These differences are shown in the Principal Components Analysis scatter plot diagram (Figure 1), the first three principal components accounting for 89.8% of the original variation (Table 2).

We compared songs of *sokotrae* (recorded by P Davidson and J Hornbuckle) with vocal material from across a broad sample of the species' overall range (*eg* India, Iran, Israel, Malawi, Pakistan, South Africa and Zambia), but like Alström *et al* (2003) we found no evidence of any significant geographical (rather than individual) variation. The Socotran birds' song is, like for instance populations in Israel, a simple series of single or doubled whistles and churring notes, interspersed by uneven pauses (compare Figure 2 with, for instance, the notes given by a perched Long-billed Pipit of the subspecies *captus,* from Israel, in Alström *et al* 2003: 210).

Table 1. Morphological measurements of five taxa of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*, range (mean; SD; sample size). Measurements were taken (by AG at NHM, and GMK at NMNH) using a standard wing-rule with a perpendicular stop at zero (accurate to 0.5 mm) and digital callipers (accurate to 0.01 mm). Culmen length was measured to skull.

	Male	**Female**
Wing	92–98 (95.1; 2.66; 4)	89–91 (89.6; 0.89; 5)
Tail	70.5–78 (75.7; 3.15; 5)	69.5–77 (73.5; 3.12; 5)
Bill	18.6–20.4 (19.8; 0.73; 5)	18.1–20.1 (19.5; 0.81; 5)
Tarsus	24.1–25.7 (24.9, 0.62; 5)	24.5–25.6 (25.2; 0.61; 5)
Hindclaw	8.7–10.9 (9.7; 0.81; 5)	9.2–10.9 (9.6; 0.77; 5)
Tail/wing ratio	0.77–0.80 (0.79; 0.02; 5)	0.78–0.85 (0.82; 0.03; 5)
***A. s. captus* Israel (The Natural History Museum, Tring)**		
Wing	96–101 (98.5; 1.23; 17)	89–95 (92.4; 1.72; 18)
Tail	76–80 (77.9; 1.32; 17)	68–76 (72.7; 2.45; 18)
Bill	18.5–20.9 (19.7; 0.65; 16)	17.4–19.7 (18.6; 0.60; 17)
Tarsus	25.3–27.9 (26.6; 0.83; 17)	24.7–26.8 (25.5; 0.50; 18)
Hindclaw	8.8–11.6 (9.7; 0.71; 17)	9.4–11.0 (10.1; 0.52; 17)
Tail/wing ratio	0.77–0.82 (0.79; 0.01; 17)	0.74–0.82 (0.79; 0.02; 18)
***A. s. arabicus* Yemen (The Natural History Museum, Tring)**		
Wing	84–93 (87.6; 2.16; 21)	80–89 (85.3; 2.47; 17)
Tail	62–76 (70.1; 3.36; 21)	62–72 (67.8; 2.86; 17)
Bill	19.1–21.9 (20.7; 0.95; 21)	19.1–22.8 (20.2; 0.95; 17)
Tarsus	24.5–26.1 (25.1; 0.58; 7)	24.0–26.4 (25.1; 0.99; 7)
Hindclaw	9.2–11.1 (10.1; 0.64; 6)	9.4–10.5 (10.1; 0.42; 7)
Tail/wing ratio	0.76–0.81 (0.78; 0.02; 7)	0.73–0.83 (0.79; 0.03; 7)
***A. s. sokotrae* Socotra (The Natural History Museum, Tring, and NMNH, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC)**		
Wing	88–97 (94.1; 2.88; 20)	85–92 (89.0; 2.32; 14)
Tail	70–80 (75.6; 2.87; 20)	69–76 (70.9; 1.90; 14)
Bill	17.9–20.7 (19.4; 0.80; 21)	17.0–20.8 (18.5; 0.94; 13)
Tarsus	22.4–26.6 (24.5; 0.96; 21)	22.7–24.4 (23.6; 0.51; 14)
Hindclaw	8.6–10.8 (9.6; 0.61; 21)	8.6–10.4 (9.6; 0.56; 14)
Tail/wing ratio	0.76–0.84 (0.80; 0.02; 19)	0.77–0.83 (0.80; 0.02; 14)
***A. s. nivescens* Sudan and Somalia (The Natural History Museum, Tring)**		
Wing	101–104 (102.7; 1.53; 3)	94–97 (95.3; 1.53; 3)
Tail	88–89 (88.7; 0.58; 3)	81–87 (83.3; 3.21; 3)
Bill	20.1–21.1 (20.6; 0.53; 3)	19.9–21.1 (20.3; 0.65; 3)
Tarsus	28.3–30.7 (29.4; 1.24; 3)	27.7–28.0 (27.8; 0.14, 3)
Hindclaw	9.4–10.5 (9.9; 0.55; 3)	9.7–9.8 (9.8; 0.03; 3)
Tail/wing ratio	0.85–0.88 (0.86; 0.02; 3	0.85–0.92 (0.87; 0.04; 3)
***A. s. decaptus* northern Oman (The Natural History Museum, Tring)**		

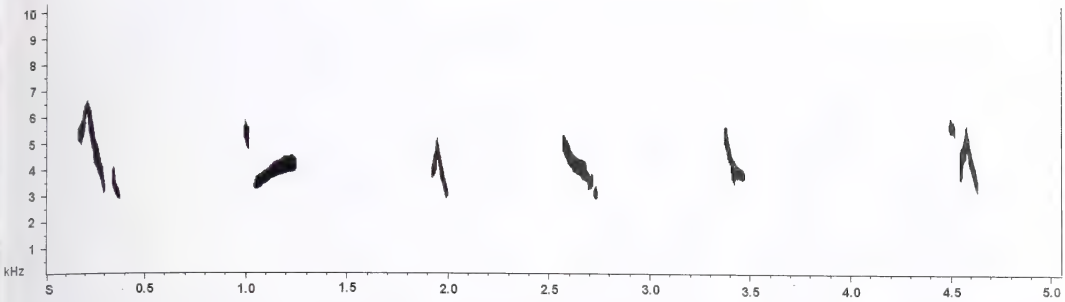


Figure 2. Sonogram of the several strophes of the perched song of a Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis sokotrae* recorded on Socotra in January 2007. © *Jon Hornbuckle*

Plate 3. Lateral view of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* specimens, showing from left to right: two *A. s. nivescens* from northeast Africa, two *A. s. sokotrae* (Socotra), two *A. s. arabicus* (southern Arabia) and an *A. s. captus* (Palestine). *Guy M Kirwan / © The Natural History Museum, Tring*

Table 2. Character loadings on principal component axes for a Principal Components Analysis of five morphological measurements taken from five taxa (Table 1) of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*.

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3
Wing length	-0.592	0.232	0.107
Tail length	-0.606	0.157	0.051
Culmen length	-0.119	-0.647	-0.667
Tarsus length	-0.517	-0.349	0.027
Hind claw	0.040	-0.618	0.735
Eigenvalues	2.330	1.166	0.883
% variation explained	47.772	23.907	18.091

Two other remarks are worth making on the basis of our research. We agree with Alström *et al* (2003) concerning the diagnosis useful for separating southern Arabian birds from those in Israel (*A. s. captus*). The latter authors purposely did not compare *A. s. arabicus*, E. Hartert, 1917, with *A. s. nivescens*, Reichenow, 1905, but noted that Clancey (1986) had 'extended' the range of the latter form to Arabia, where he considered it to occur in the "south of North Yemen (at Taizz) and in South Yemen in the Amiri highlands east to western Hadramaut", and that of *arabicus* to Africa, from the "Red Sea hills of southeastern Sudan (at Erkowit), south to Eritrea and … Ethiopia." Clancey (1986) also stated that *arabicus* and *nivescens* intergrade in North Yemen. In common with

Plate 4. (left) Dorsal view of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* specimens to show outer tail feather, from left to right: *A. s. sokotrae* (Socotra), *A. s. arabicus* (Yemen) and *A. s. nivescens* (northeast Africa). *Guy M Kirwan / © The Natural History Museum, Tring*

Plate 5. (right) Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis sokotrae*, Socotra, January 2007. © *Jon Hornbuckle*

Alström *et al* (2003), we consider that there are no marked differences, beyond those pertaining to wear and individual variation, in these southern and western Arabian populations that demand recognition of more than one subspecies on the peninsula. However, we also concur with Clancey (1986) that many mainland northeast African birds seem impossible to separate from those in Arabia, and given that Long-billed Pipit populations in the latter region are apparently resident (Jennings 1995) immigration into Africa can be largely discounted. In agreement with Grieve *et al* (2001), we consider that other than some subspecifically recognised populations not considered herein, northeast African birds can be assigned to one subspecies, although no specimens are available from Egypt. However, unlike Grieve *et al* (2001), who did not examine specimens (but merely reported from the previous literature), we find plumage differences between African *nivescens* and Arabian populations difficult to define, whilst mensural data indicate a cline of increasing size in all sampled characters from west to east (see Table 1), and would suggest that a more rigorous analysis of specimen material than we have attempted, following a strict definition for recognising subspecies (Barrowclough 1982, Haffer 1997), might result in *arabicus* entering into the synonymy of *nivescens*. If confirmed, this finding would mirror other recent research that suggests that at least some subspecies previously recognised for Arabian populations of mainly Afrotropical birds are better treated as synonyms of taxa on mainland Africa (*eg* Kirwan 2007).

On the other hand, like Clancey (1986) and Alström *et al* (2003), we agree (on the basis of the small available sample at NHM) that birds in northern Oman and the United Arab Emirates can be treated either as *A. s. decaptus* Meinertzhagen, 1920, which otherwise occurs from Iran to northwest India, or as an intergrade population. Given that northern and southern Omani populations of Long-billed Pipit are seemingly geographically separate (Eriksen & Sargeant 2000), it appears quite appropriate to consider these northern birds as *decaptus* rather than intergrades.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the following museum curators and librarians for permitting us to examine specimens in their care and for access to library: Robert Prŷs-Jones, Mark Adams, Katrina Cook and Alison Harding (Natural History Museum, Tring), and James P Dean and Christina Gebhard (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC). Work by GMK in North American collections was partially sponsored by a grant from OSME and a scholarship from the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. We thank Alan Knox for his careful review of our manuscript. Jon Hornbuckle generously provided additional vocal and photographic material for *Anthus similis sokotrae*.

REFERENCES

Alström, P, K Mild & D Zetterström. 2003. *Pipits and wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm, London.

Barrowclough, GF. 1982. Geographic variation, predictiveness, and subspecies. *Auk* 99: 601–603.

Clancey, PA. 1986. The eastern and north-eastern African subspecies of *Anthus similis* Jerdon. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 106: 80–84.

Eriksen, J & DE Sargeant (eds). 2000. *Oman bird list: the official list of the birds of the Sultanate of Oman*. Fifth edn. Oman Bird Records Committee, Muscat.

Fry, CH, DJ Pearson & PB Taylor. 1992. Motacillidae, wagtails, pipits and longclaws. *In*: Keith, S, EK Urban & CH Fry (eds). *The birds of Africa*. Vol 4. Academic Press, London.

Grieve, A, M Baha el Din & SM Baha el Din. 2001. The occurrence of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* in Egypt. *Sandgrouse* 23: 39–43.

Haffer, J. 2003. Avian zoogeography, speciation and the museum tradition. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* Suppl. 123A: 7–25.

Hartert, E. 1917. A few notes on the birds of Yemen. *Novitates Zoologicae* 24: 452–462.

Jennings, MC. 1995. *An interim atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia*. National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, Riyadh.

Kirwan, GM. 2004. Some remarks on the taxonomy of Nubian Nightjar *Caprimulgus nubicus*, with particular reference to *C. n. jonesi* Ogilvie-Grant & Forbes, 1899. *Bulletin of the African Bird Club* 11: 117–125.

Kirwan, GM. 2007. Studies of Socotran birds IV. Synonymization of six endemic bird taxa, with comments on the name *Onychognathus blythii creaghi*. *Sandgrouse* 29: 135–148.

Kirwan, GM. 2008. Studies of Socotran birds III. Morphological and mensural evidence for a 'new' species in the Rufous Sparrow *Passer motitensis* complex endemic to the island of Abd 'Al-Kuri, with the validation of *Passer insularis* Sclater & Hartlaub, 1881. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 128: 83–93.

Kirwan, GM & A Grieve. 2007. Studies of Socotran birds II. One, two or three species: towards a rational taxonomy for the Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus*. *Bulletin of the African Bird Club* 14: 159–169.

Kirwan, GM, RP Martins, KM Morton & DA Showler. 1996. The status of birds in Socotra and 'Abd Al-Kuri and the records of the OSME survey in spring 1993. *Sandgrouse* 17: 83–101.

Mackworth-Praed, CW & CHB Grant. 1960. *African handbook of birds. Birds of eastern and north eastern Africa*. Vol 2. Second edn. Longmans, London.

Ripley, SD & GM Bond. 1966. The birds of Socotra and Abd-el-Kuri. *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections* 151(7): 1–37.

Sclater, WL. 1930. *Systema avium Æthiopicarum*. British Ornithologists' Union, London.

Svensson, L. 1992. *Identification guide to European passerines*. Privately published, Stockholm.

Tyler, SJ. 2004. Family Motacillidae (pipits and wagtails). *In*: del Hoyo, J, A Elliott & DA Christie (eds). *Handbook of the birds of the world*. Vol 9. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.

Guy M Kirwan, 74 Waddington Street, Norwich NR2 4JS, UK. GMKirwan@aol.com

Andrew Grieve, 3 Miriam Close, Second Avenue, Caister on Sea, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk NR30 5PH, UK.

Observations on the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* in Yemen, May 2009

WERNER MÜLLER

The Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* is a small flycatcher (Plate 1) which breeds in Africa from Mali and the Ivory Coast to Somalia and Kenya and in southwestern Arabia. It was first described in 1901 from a specimen from Gambaga in northeastern Ghana. The species is said to be rare to uncommon in Africa (Urban *et al* 1997), and it is described as a breeding summer visitor to drier parts of the southwestern highlands and foothills (locally numerous in acacia woodlands, more rarely in juniper) of Arabia (Jennings 1995). Salewski *et al* (2003b) recently found evidence for migration of this species in western Africa based on data from the Ivory Coast.

In April 2009 only two photos of the Gambaga Flycatcher were present, and of rather poor quality, in the large African Bird Club bird-photo database (www.birdquest.

Plate 1. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The field characteristics are clearly visible: yellowish-orange lower mandible, faint 'washed-out' breast streaking and little streaking on forehead. The bird is sitting quite upright, often the carriage is more horizontal. © *Werner Müller*

Plate 2. A Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* in its habitat, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The species inhabits dry Acacia woodlands. © *Werner Müller*

Plate 3. Nest, under construction, of Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. The nest is in a fork of an acacia tree and the female is sitting in the nest as if incubating. © *Werner Müller*

net/afbid). During my visit to Yemen in May 2009, with Yousuf Mohagebh, I had the opportunity to observe the Gambaga Flycatcher and to take photos of this poorly known species.

HABITAT AND NEST SITE

In the area between Sana'a, Al Mahweet and Manakhah, west of Sana'a, we found the Gambaga Flycatcher in all acacia woodlands, even in small patches of only a dozen trees, as well as in villages with trees. The lowest site was in Wadi Sarieh (west of Al Mahweet) at *c*700 m asl, the highest in Al Ahjur (close to Kawkaban) at *c*2300 m asl. We recorded the highest density in an open acacia/cultivated area near Al Ahjur with 3 pairs within *c*4 ha (Plate 2). On 10 May we recorded nest building in a wooded area of Al Mahweet. The nest was situated *c*3 m above the ground in a fork of an acacia tree (Plates 3 & 4).

Few nests have been found previously: two in the Ivory Coast in February were located in similar parts of trees as our nest (Salewski *et al* 2003b). In Saudi Arabia,

Plate 4. Location of the Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae* nest of Plate 3 in a fork of an acacia tree, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. © *Werner Müller*

Plate 5. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. The species has no distinctive markings in flight except for the wing bars. © *Werner Müller*

Plate 6. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Wadi Sarieh, Yemen, May 2009. Typical are the round head, short bill and 'washed-out' breast. The carriage here is quite horizontal. © *Werner Müller*

Castell *et al* (2001) found four nests, all in juniper trees, two on lateral branches and two in forks. Two nests in Kenya (Urban *et al* 1997) were sited in a hollow at the end of a small dead tree and in the middle of an acacia bush respectively. The height above ground differed from 1–4 m, mostly 2–3 m.

Plate 7. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009. Here the short wings and orange lower mandible are clearly visible. This bird is sitting very upright. © *Werner Müller*

HABITS

During 9–11 May the birds were mostly in pairs, very active and often calling and sometimes singing. They were neither shy nor elusive, often sitting openly on branches and could be approached to less than 5 m. When landing, most of the birds were flicking their wings. This also was often done when calling. During the observation time of 1.5 h at the nest in Al Mahweet only the female was bringing nest material to the nest site. The male was singing no further away than 20 m and accompanied the female when she was flying to the nest site.

Wing flicking is noted in most of the descriptions of the species, only Sinclair & Ryan (2003) say that it rarely flicks its wings. The foraging techniques and habitat selection of Gambaga Flycatchers wintering in Ivory Coast were described in detail by Salewski *et al* (2003a): the authors compared it with the wintering Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* and with a number of African species. The Gambaga Flycatcher showed the highest niche overlap with the Pied Flycatcher in both foraging substrates and techniques as well


Plates 8 & 9. Comparison between Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009 (left) and Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Tsavo East, Kenya, November 2007 (right). Clearly visible are the differences in the streaking of the forehead and length of primary projection. © *Werner Müller*


Plates 10 & 11. Comparison between Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Ahjur, Yemen, May 2009 (left) and Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Yemen, October 1996 (right). Difference in bill colour is obvious but also in head shape (round in Gambaga, more pointed in Spotted) and breast streaking. © *Werner Müller*

as microhabitat, but used more open habitats than the other species. They also found aggressive interaction between the two flycatcher species.

IDENTIFICATION

It is said that the Gambaga Flycatcher is not well known because of confusion with its close relative, the Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* (*eg* Urbań *et al* 1997). In Yemen the Spotted Flycatcher is a common passage migrant and in October 1996 we saw many of them though none in May 2009. The easiest way to separate the two species seems to be the following (Plates 1 & 5–11): the Gambaga Flycatcher is smaller, has a more rounded head (Plates 10 & 11), its bill is not totally black but the lower mandible is yellowish-orange (Plate 7) and its wings are shorter (Plates 8 & 9). Additionally, the breast is less streaked though streaking does vary (compare Plates 6 & 7). If there are streaks on the breast they

are less distinctive and more 'washed-out' than in Spotted Flycatcher (Plates 10 & 11). On the forehead the streaks are quite distinctive in the Spotted Flycatcher (Plates 9 & 11) and much less (Plate 8) or lacking in the Gambaga (Plate 6). In flight, except for the wing bars, there are no distinctive markings (Plate 5).

In most descriptions (*eg* Porter *et al* 1996, Urban *et al* 1997) it is said that the Spotted sits more upright and the carriage in the Gambaga is more horizontal, but we have seen both postures in the Gambaga and think this should not be used for identification (compare Plates 6 & 11 with Plates 1 & 7). Of the *c*50 individuals seen we could only distinguish one female. It was the bird building the nest accompanied by the singing male. The female was duller, more greyish and had almost no streaking on the breast (Plate 12). The bill seemed to be shorter than in many other birds we saw. We do not know if this is just individual variation or a distinct plumage characteristic of females. In the literature there is almost nothing to be found on sexual dimorphism in plumage of the Gambaga. Generally, the description of the Gambaga Flycatcher in Porter *et al* (1996) is good, but the best illustration of the species, compared with our observations and photos, is the one in Zimmerman *et al* (1996).

Plate 12. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*, Al Mahweet, Yemen, May 2009. This is the female which was nest constructing accompanied by the singing male. Even though the bird is not in the sun, this individual is duller and a bit more greyish and has almost no streaking on the breast. © *Werner Müller*

Unfortunately, the calls and songs of Gambaga Flycatcher could not be recorded. The call was much sharper and shorter than Spotted Flycatcher and seemed higher pitched. The song was much more varied than that of Spotted with a number of notes on a different level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Yousuf Mohagebh of Arabian Eco-tours, Sana'a, Yemen (aet@y.net.ye) for perfectly organizing my study trip. I am very grateful to him and Martin Weggler for their comments on a draft of this note.

REFERENCES

Castell, P, J Coburn, B Pleasance & S Williams. 2001. Notes on the breeding biology of some Arabian species. *Sandgrouse* 23: 49–58.

Jennings, M. 1995. *An Interim Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia*. National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, Riyadh.

Porter, RF, S Christensen & P Schiermacker-Hansen. 1996. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. Poyser, London.

Salewski V, F Bairlein & B Leisler. 2003a. Niche partitioning of two Palearctic passerine migrants with Afrotropical residents in their West African winter quarters. *Behavioral Ecology* 14: 493–502.

Salewski, V, K-H Falk, F Baierlein & B Leisler. 2003b. Gambaga Flycatcher *Muscicapa gambagae*: evidence for migration in Africa? *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 123: 48–51.

Sinclair, I & P Ryan. 2003. *Birds of Africa south of the Sahara*. Struik, Cape Town.

Urban, E, CH Fry & S Keith. 1997. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol 5. Academic Press, San Diego.

Zimmerman, DA, DA Turner & DJ Pearson. 1996. *Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania*. Christopher Helm, London.

Werner Müller, c/o SVS/BirdLife Switzerland, Wiedingstr. 78, PO Box CH-8036 Zurich, Switzerland. werner.mueller@birdlife.ch

First record of White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* in Saudi Arabia

GRAHAM R LOBLEY & PHILIP ROBERTS

We arrived at dawn on 30 October 2009 to start bird watching at Sabkhat al-Fasl, Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The Sabkhat is a natural sabkhah (salt flat) area that has been modified with sand embankments to take sewage effluent from the nearby industrial city of Jubail. This excellent wetland site has been recognised as an Important Bird Area (Evans 1994) and its breeding birds have been documented (Meadows 2004). The site includes tall fringing *Phragmites australis* reedbeds, with several enclosed inaccessible pools. Closer to the seaward side sedges predominate and halophytic plants border the drier edges.

We arrived close to a major pipe discharge into the site. Upon driving slowly along the embankment, at *c*06.15 h, we had an obscured view of a medium-sized black and white waterbird within the reedbed at the opposite side of a small circular pond adjacent to the pipe discharge. One of us recognized it as a probable White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* and we decided to move our vehicle to a position that might present better views of the bird. From this more eye-level position, at *c*25 m range, clear views and photography were possible though we saw the bird for only about another minute before it disappeared into the reeds and did not reappear. Although the light conditions were poor, with an overcast sky, using 400 ASA camera settings produced some clear identification shots (Plates 1 & 2). The species is unmistakable (*eg* Porter *et al* 1996) and one of us had seen it before at Bharatpur, India.

The bird seemed to be about Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*-sized, but slightly daintier. Notable features in addition to the extensive white face and breast were yellowish legs and feet and a lemon-yellow bill with a reddish base to the upper mandible. The upperparts were dark slaty grey, with a hint of brown. A conspicuous chestnut vent was also apparent and the bird's red iris was visible even at our viewing range.

The species is largely Oriental in distribution (King *et al* 1983), ranging from India to south China and the Philippines. This first record for Saudi Arabia is significantly further

Plate 1. White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, 30 October 2009, Sabkhat al-Fasl, Saudi Arabia. © *Philip Roberts*

Plate 2. White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, 30 October 2009, Sabkhat al-Fasl, Saudi Arabia. © *Graham R Lobley*

north than previous Arabian records, though it has also been recorded in Qatar. In Oman there are more than 50 records and it is considered an uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor there. The United Arab Emirates has over 25 records. Its occurrence in the Arabian peninsula seems to be centred to the east, hence perhaps the lack of previous records in Saudi Arabia and just the odd record from Qatar and Yemen (J Eriksen, M Jennings pers comms).

REFERENCES

Evans, MI. 1994. *Important Bird Areas of the Middle East*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.

King, BF, EC Dickinson & MW Woodcock. 1983. *Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*. Collins, London.

Meadows, B. 2004. Sabkhat al-Fasl, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. *Phoenix* 20: 12–16.

Porter, RF, S Christensen, P Schiermacker-Hansen. 1996. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. T & AD Poyser, London.

Dr Graham R Lobley, Box 6291, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. grlbretagne@yahoo.co.uk

Philip Roberts, Box 11507, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. phil0562000@yahoo.co.uk

Observation of apparent tool use by an Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus* on Socotra, Yemen

RF PORTER

On 27 October 2007 whilst carrying out a survey of breeding birds on Socotra I saw an Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus* carrying a short thin stick or spine in its bill. My colleague Ahmed Saeed Suleiman and I were systematically surveying a well-vegetated wadi at 260 m asl in the central part of the island as part of a joint Socotra Conservation and Development Programme and BirdLife International project.

At first I thought the white-eye might be carrying material for nest building but then it started to probe with the end of the stick or spine into holes or spaces in the bark of a frankincense tree *Boswellia elongata*. The stick was thin and very short, about twice the length of the bill, and when using it as a probe it was held almost straight as if it were an extension of the bill. It poked it into the bark of both the trunk and a branch, in at least six different places, before flying off still carrying the stick in its bill. I was not able to see if it found any invertebrates, nor did a cursory examination of the bark a few minutes later reveal any. However, the bark of *Boswellia* is known to host a wide range of invertebrates including ants, crickets and molluscs that could be dislodged with the aid of a stick (Kay Van Damme pers comm).

This is the first time I have witnessed such behaviour by any bird species on Socotra (or elsewhere) despite having made ten visits to the island for detailed bird observation and recording since 1993. Subsequent to the observation I took care to observe the behaviour of white-eyes October and November 2007 and in the same period 2008.

The Abyssinian White-eye is a common and widespread bird on Socotra with a population provisionally assessed at 24 000 individuals (Porter & Suleiman in prep). In the 1960s this species was reported as trapped and eaten by the local people but this practice has presumably discontinued since a wider diet has become available to the islanders (Jennings 2010).

Whilst it is one of only five species of insect-eating passerines on the island, and the only white-eye, competition for insect food particularly during the dry and inhospitable southwest monsoon of the summer months might give white-eyes with a habit of using tools a competitive advantage—but this is pure speculation. Typically, Abyssinian White-eyes search for invertebrates on leaves, in flowers or on the bark of trees (pers obs, Jennings 2010). Their diet on Socotra also includes seeds and fruits, especially date palm *Phoenix dactylifera* fruit (Jennings 2010, Ahmed Saeed Suleiman pers comm), and probably nectar from *Trichocalyx* flowers (AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan pers comm).

Tool use in birds is rare. Amongst the passerines the best-known example is 'Darwin's' Woodpecker Finch *Camarhynchus pallidus* on the Galapagos islands which uses a cactus spine or wooden splinter to dig invertebrates out of holes (Grant 1986). Caledonian Crows *Corvus moneduloides* can also use sticks as tools (Hunt 2000) and Green Jays *Cyanocorax yncas* in Texas have been observed using twigs to extract food from crevices (Gayou 1982). The only North American bird to habitually use tools is the Brown-headed Nuthatch *Sitta pusilla* which uses bits of bark to pry off other bits of bark when it searches for insects; these nuthatches have been observed flying from place to place carrying the tools (del Hoyo *et al* 2008). Australian sittellas, Neosittidae, which look and behave like nuthatches in many

ways but are not related to them, also use tools. They dip strips of wood into cavities to evict hiding insects (Green 1972).

Among the non-passerines the best example of a tool-using species is the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, which throws stones to break open ostrich *Struthio* eggs (van Lawick-Goodall & van Lawick-Goodall 1966). Interestingly, Socotra probably holds the highest concentration in the world of this globally-endangered vulture, with a population in the order of 1700 individuals (Porter & Suleiman in prep). Such egg-breaking behaviour is unlikely to be observed on an island where ostriches are not part of the fauna, although, interestingly, Egyptian Vultures have been seen throwing stones at the eggs of captive ostriches in an enclosure near Riyadh (Jennings 2010). Insights and discussion of tool-using behaviour and the way it may have developed can be found in Bird & Emery (2009) and Hansell & Ruxton (2008).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Kay Van Damme and Ian Dawson for helpful discussion, and Ahmed Saeed Suleiman for his companionship in the field.

REFERENCES

Bird, CD & NJ Emery. 2009. Insightful problem solving and creative tool modification by captive nontool-using rooks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106: 10370–10375.

Gayou, DC. 1982. Tool use by Green Jays. *Wilson Bulletin* 94: 593–594.

Grant, PR. 1986. *Ecology and evolution of Darwin's Finches*. Princeton University Press, NJ.

Green, C. 1972. Use of tools by Orange-winged Sittella. *Emu* 72 (4): 185–186.

Hansell, M & GD Ruxton. 2008. Setting tool use within the context of animal construction behaviour. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 23: 73–78.

del Hoyo, J, A Elliott & DA Christie (eds). 2008. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol 13. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.

Hunt, GR. 2000. Tool use by the New Caledonian crow *Corvus moneduloides* to obtain Cerambycidae from dead wood. *Emu* 100: 109–114.

Jennings, MC. 2010. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25: in press.

van Lawick-Goodall, J & H van Lawick-Goodall. 1966. Use of tools by the Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. *Nature* 212: 1468–1469.

Porter, RF & AS Suleiman. In prep. *The population and distribution of the breeding birds of Socotra*. BirdLife International/SCDP.

Porter RF, c/o BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 ONA, UK. richardporter@dialstart.net

Observation of a large flock of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* in southeast Egypt

ATTILA D SÁNDOR, CRISTIAN DOMȘA & ISTVÁN MOLDOVÁN

The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* is a globally threatened species breeding in the grassland steppes of southern Russia and central Kazakhstan, though formerly more widespread, and wintering in northeast Africa and India (BirdLife International 2008). It is thought that its breeding range and numbers have been drastically reduced as a result of habitat alteration (*eg* the conversion of steppes to arable lands in early Soviet times) and later the reduction of short grass steppes due to the large scale collapse of collective livestock farming (Watson *et al* 2006).

This species is listed as Critically Endangered since its population has undergone a very rapid reduction in recent decades and this decline was believed to be continuing (Eichhorn & Khrokov 2002, BirdLife International 2008). Recent fieldwork carried out in Kazakhstan, Syria and Turkey has shown that there is a substantially larger population than previously thought (Watson *et al* 2006, Biricik 2009) and the population might have stabilized (R Sheldon pers comm). Recent research has led to a greater understanding of the species' breeding habitat requirements (Kamp *et al* 2009), although there are still big gaps in our knowledge relating to migration routes and wintering grounds.

During an inventory of water birds in Wadi Gamal national park, a flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings was observed at a mangrove reconstruction (plantation) area at Wadi Lahmi on 8 October 2009 (Plates 1 & 2), close to the Red sea shore (24° 13′ N, 35° 25′ E). The birds were observed feeding and resting in the shallow littoral zone (0.30 m deep). The birds formed a compact group which took flight and landed together on any occasion when disturbed. Other birds present were at least eight Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, one Curlew *Numenius*

Plate 1. Part of the flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* seen at Wadi Lahmi mangroves, southeast Egypt, on 8 October 2009. © *Attila D Sándor*

arquata, one Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and two Greater Sand Plovers *C. leschenaultii*. The Sociable Lapwings stayed together and were observed for a period of *c*30 minutes and were at the same spot *c*2 hours later. They were still present 11–18 October (P Nash pers comm).

Plate 2. Part of the flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* seen at Wadi Lahmi mangroves, southeast Egypt, on 8 October 2009. © *István Moldován*

The Wadi Lahmi mangrove area is part of the coastal reserve of the Wadi Gamal national park and has some healthy mangrove patches and areas where tidal fluctuations have created a wetland containing several shallow lagoons interspersed with young and mature Black Mangrove *Avicenna marina* stands. The area is an important breeding and migratory stopover site for several threatened bird species such as Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*, Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* and Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* (PERSGA/GEF 2003).

The Sociable Lapwing is a rare passage visitor in Egypt, with most observations in the Nile delta and valley and on the Red sea coast. A total of 15 records are listed in Goodman & Meininger (1991), and 3 more are published on the Birding in Egypt webpage (www.birdinginegypt.com). Most observations relate to one or two individuals; all larger groups were observed along the Red sea coast, especially in the mangroves of Wadi Gamal national park. The largest group previously observed, of 24 individuals, was *c*15 km to the north in Hamata mangroves on 13 November 1982 (Goodman & Meininger 1991). The observation of a flock of 37 birds in the same region suggests an important but overlooked staging area of the species in southeast Egypt.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank P Nash for the data provided. The observations were carried out while ADS was in receipt of research funding from The International Osprey Foundation and OSME, CD was a POSDRU 6/1.5/S/3 fellow and IM was sponsored by Rufford Small Grants.

REFERENCES

BirdLife International 2008. *Threatened birds of the world 2008*. CD-ROM.

Biricik, M. 2009. Unexpectedly large number of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* on autumn migration in Turkey and some remarks on the stopover site. *Sandgrouse* 31: 15–17.

Eichhorn, G & VV Khrokov. 2002. Decline in breeding Sociable Plover *Chettusia gregaria* in the steppes of Naurzum and Korgalzhyn, Kazakhstan. *Sandgrouse* 24: 22–27.

Goodman, SM & PL Meininger. 1991. *The Birds of Egypt*. Oxford University Press, UK.

Kamp J, RD Sheldon, MA Koshkin, PF Donald & R Biedermann. 2009. Post-Soviet steppe management causes pronounced synanthropy in the Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*. *Ibis* 151: 452–463.

PERSGA/GEF. 2003. *Status of Breeding Seabirds in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden*. PERSGA Technical Series No. 8. PERSGA, Jeddah.

Watson, M, JM Wilson, M Koshkin, B Sherbakov, F Karpov, A Gavrilov, H Schielzeth, M Brombacher, NJ Collar & W Cresswell. 2006. Nest survival and productivity of the critically endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*. *Ibis* 148: 489–502.

Attila D Sándor & Cristian Domșa, Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Ecology and Taxonomy, Clinicilor st. 5–7, RO-400084, Cluj, Romania. adsandor@gmail.com

István Moldován, Ráday street 56/47, HU-1092, Budapest, Hungary.

Bird Sites of the OSME Region 6—Birding the Palmyra area, Syria

DA MURDOCH

The oasis of Palmyra (Figure 1) lies in the centre of the Syrian *Badia*, the northern end of a vast desert that extends continuously through the Arabian peninsula to the Indian ocean. Twice a year, hundreds of millions of migrants pass along the eastern Mediterranean flyway, breeding in eastern Europe and western Asia and wintering in Africa, and these drylands constitute a formidable barrier for them. As a large oasis far into the desert, Palmyra has always attracted migrants, but until recently birders were unable to visit Syria. The situation has now changed and ecotourists are welcome; and even with limited coverage, the desert round Palmyra has emerged as one of the best birding areas in the OSME region.

The recognition of Palmyra is closely linked to the discovery of its most famous bird, the Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*. After 1989, when the last birds of the colony at Birecik, Turkey, were taken into captivity (van den Berg 1989), Northern Bald Ibis was believed extinct in the eastern Mediterranean; and in 1994 it was placed on the IUCN Critically Endangered list. But in 1999, a famous local hunter, Adib al-Asaad (AA), shot and ate a large black bird that he did not recognise in the hills near Palmyra (it tasted disgusting). A few years later, by then a passionate conservationist, he leafed through an identification guide belonging to Gianluca Serra (GS) and found an illustration that matched the bird he had shot. There had been no Syrian records for 40 years but he

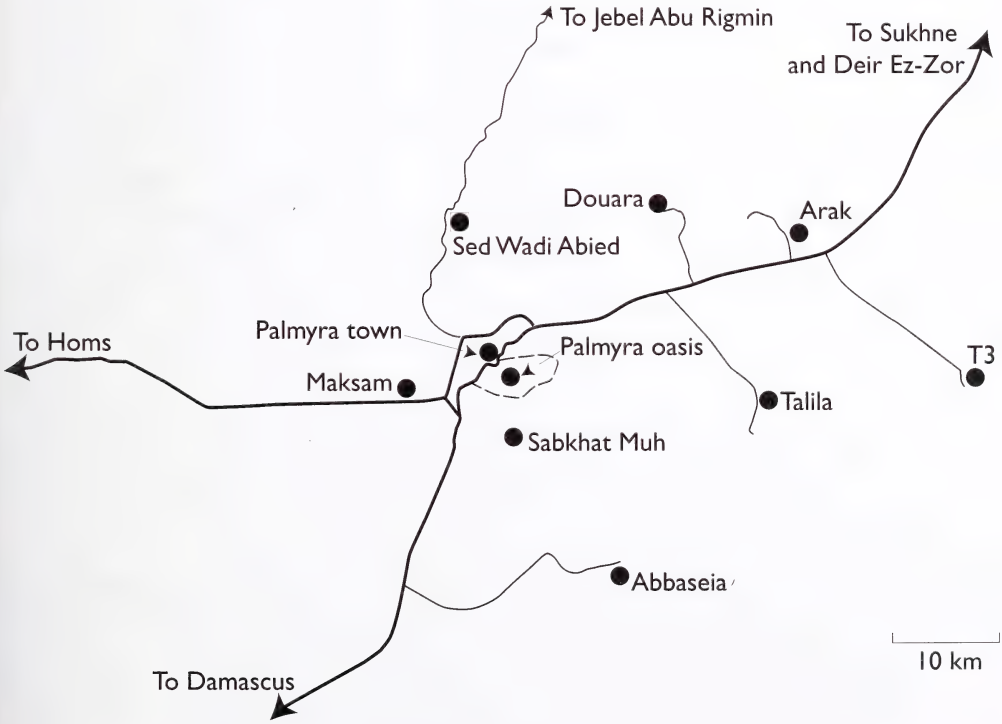


Figure 1. The Palmyra area, Syria.

Table 1. GPS coordinates of sites asterisked* in the text.

Palmyra		
Tourist centre	34° 33' 19.30" N	38° 16' 34.65" E
Palmyra Ruins	34° 32' 55.35" N	38° 16' 18.58" E
Oweyna	34° 31' 43.77" N	38° 14' 32.41" E
Sed Wadi Abied and road north		
Turning to SWA on Palmyra bypass	34° 34' 10.67" N	38° 14' 33.61" E
Mazrab plains	34° 37' 38.98" N	38° 12' 18.37" E
Sed Wadi Abied: W end of dam	34° 39' 51.67" N	38° 13' 01.15" E
Jebel Abu Rigmin	34° 52' 14.84" N	38° 18' 41.53" E
Reea al-Hawa	34° 51' 15.43" N	38° 26' 19.73" E
DesRes	35° 05' 16.80" N	38° 13' 23.88" E
Isriye	35° 22' 09.95" N	37° 46' 32.75" E
Maksam		
Turning off main road	34° 31' 05.26" N	38° 11' 34.27" E
The Magic Mulberry	34° 31' 27.70" N	38° 11' 26.84" E
Sites along Deir road		
Turning to Talila	34° 36' 19.04" N	38° 26' 34.36" E
Talila entrance	34° 31' 38.43" N	38° 31' 34.10" E
Turning to Douara	34° 36' 40.18" N	38° 27' 55.85" E
Douara cliffs	34° 40' 21.92" N	38° 27' 01.77" E
Douara oasis	34° 40' 02.53" N	38° 28' 07.02" E
Turning to Arak	34° 37' 42.73" N	38° 33' 55.56" E
Arak dam	34° 39' 45.37" N	38° 31' 20.37" E
Turning to T3 station	34° 38' 09.84" N	38° 36' 07.70" E
T3 pumping station	34° 31' 54.68" N	38° 44' 22.56" E
Feda Wadi Balhan	34° 42' 01.28" N	38° 40' 58.65" E
Turning to Sukhne dam	34° 51' 19.43" N	38° 50' 32.74" E
Sukhne dam/house	34° 51' 33.84" N	38° 48' 35.69" E
Main turning to Sukhne	34° 51' 48.97" N	38° 51' 07.71" E
Central Sukhne turn	34° 53' 04.57" N	38° 52' 11.43" E
North Sukhne junction	34° 53' 23.44" N	38° 52' 20.53" E
Sukhne café	34° 52' 31.22" N	38° 54' 03.86" E
Deir road sand dunes	34° 56' 04.21" N	39° 20' 50.78" E
Routes north of Sukhne		
Kadim junction	35° 02' 53.73" N	38° 24' 35.71" E
Junction to Latom and Taybeh	35° 02' 54.42" N	38° 54' 44.43" E
Zamla junction	35° 28' 21.53" N	38° 53' 07.88" E
Rasafa fortress	35° 38' 01.69" N	38° 45' 20.51" E
Sites along Damascus road		
Turning to Abbaseia	34° 22' 02.38" N	38° 10' 33.02" E
Abbaseia	34° 23' 04.35" N	38° 23' 18.05" E

remained convinced that he had shot a Bald Ibis. GS organised the searches that resulted in the discovery in 2002 of the Syrian colony (Serra *et al* 2003). Since then GS has played a central role in its protection and the colony's fortunes have focussed international attention on Palmyra.

THE PALMYRA AREA: GEOLOGY, CLIMATE AND GENERAL WILDLIFE

Much of the centre of Syria is a low-relief undulating plain roughly 250–500 m asl. As the Arabian tectonic plate thrusts north into the south of Turkey, this has created the Palmyride fold, a geological feature *c*400 km long and up to 100 km wide that extends southwest to northeast across the centre of Syria. The fold appears as a series of whaleback ridges up to 1400 m asl and 400–900 m above the surrounding area, broken up by sheer limestone cliffs and a complex system of wadis. The rocks are sedimentary (limestone, marl and sandstones)

with gravels along the valleys (Serra *et al* 2009a). Syrians call this complex series of ridges the Jebel Amur after the tribe of nomads who live in the mountains, though Government maps refer to it as Jebel Tadmor al Shamaliayeh; the impressive escarpment that runs for *c*50 km just north of the Palmyra–Damascus road is the Jebel Tadmor al Janoubiyeh. Palmyra is immediately south of the mountains at 400 m asl and owes its existence to the many springs that watered the oasis; the most famous, the Eqfa, was close to the Temple of Bel. The climate is continental: summers are dry and hot with daily temperatures of at least 40° C in mid-summer, sometimes reaching 50°. Winters vary greatly in severity but can be bitter; there is often snow on the ridges and heavy snow has fallen on Palmyra within living memory. In January–February 2008, night-time temperatures were well below zero for almost a month; populations of resident species such as larks were probably seriously reduced. Palmyrans welcome the regular evening breeze but it can become very windy at night. Rainfall is relatively high at *c*120 mm per year—thus by some definitions the Badia does not count as desert—but it is unpredictable and can be very localised; most of it falls in winter, often in torrential downpours that wash away any remaining topsoil. There is no running water except after heavy rains; agriculture cannot be sustained without water drawn from wells. Seasonal wetlands include *khabbra*, shallow freshwater lakes sometimes miles long, forming on flats with rock-hard soils and no vegetation, and holding water for months; *sale*, flash floods in dry valleys that can be very dangerous, as there may be no clouds overhead; *sabkhat*, shallow salt-lakes such as Sabkhat Muh; *feda*, smallish pools that form after rains in gullies or along roadsides, often providing excellent birding; and *gahdeer*, natural pools, often up to 2 m deep, narrow with stony sides and bottoms. The Government has dug dozens of freshwater reservoirs, referred to as *sed*, for watering livestock; they are often dry and their steep sides can deter birds but they are always worth checking, particularly if there is vegetation round their edges. Sand storms are common in spring and autumn and increasingly severe; they used not to happen in summer but they were frequent in 2009, presumably a result of drought, overgrazing and erosion. March is the critical month for the desert vegetation and for birders: after heavy rains, annual plants are plentiful and birds disperse throughout the Badia; poor rains (or none) and all is parched; good rains and shallow pools appear at regular sites, excellent for pipits, wagtails, warblers and many other migrants. The last two springs (2008, 2009) have been exceptionally dry with severe consequences for humans and wildlife.

Jebel Amur was once extensively wooded but was completely cleared early in the twentieth century. The present vegetation cover consists in most places of dwarf perennial shrubs with annuals appearing after spring rains; *Artemisia* spp are the principal components of the shrub-steppe of the lowlands with *Salsola* spp in the highlands (Serra *et al* 2009a, b). There is now intense and unsustainable pressure on its fragile ecosystems, particularly from the herds of Bedouin sheep and goats and the Bedu practice of uprooting slow-growing shrubs for firewood. In many areas, the regular traffic of heavy lorries and even bulldozers has further destroyed the desert surface, turning it to powder and worsening erosion. The region once had an interesting faunal community belonging to the Turo-Iranian zoogeographic region but little remains; many species probably disappeared with the woodlands. There is only one surviving species of amphibian, the Eastern Spadefoot Toad *Pelobates syriacus*, but 23 species of reptile, including the increasingly rare monitor lizard *Varanus griseus* and 12 species of snake: the commonest are the Diadem Snake *Sphalerosophis diadema* and Sand Racer *Psammophis schokari*. All snakes are considered dangerous and heavily persecuted, but only two are actually venomous and they rarely attack humans: the False Horned Viper *Pseudocerastes persicus fieldi* and the Black Cobra *Walterinnesia aegyptia*. The Common Chameleon *Chamaeleo chamaeleon* still occurs on Jebel Abu Rigmin but is now very rare. Mammalian herbivores include Libyan Jird *Meriones*

libycus and Lesser Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus*, gerbils *Gerbillus* spp, the Long-eared Hedgehog *Hemiechinus auritus*, Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* and perhaps Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indica*. A tiny number of Sand Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa marica* still survive in the remotest areas. The present status of most of the carnivores is unknown. There are two fox species, Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*, two species of cats, Wildcat *Felis silvestris lybica* and Sand Cat *Felis margarita*, and possibly Marbled Polecat *Vormela peregusna*. Asiatic (Golden) Jackals *Canis aureus* are common scavengers round human habitations; Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena* and the Wolf *Canis lupus* still occur but are heavily persecuted. This is essentially a relict mammal fauna; in the twentieth century alone Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr*, Nubian Ibex *Capra nubiana*, Mountain Gazelle *Gazella gazella* and Asian Wild Ass *Equus hemionus* were hunted to extinction. Elderly Amur men still remember when the hills held flocks of hundreds of Sand Gazelle hunted by Leopard. The mammal that increasingly monopolises every available resource is, of course, *Homo sapiens*.

Birds are hunted for pleasure and for the pot. The avifauna has probably suffered massively but unfortunately there are no studies to provide baseline data. A century ago, the desert was graced by the Asian subspecies of Ostrich *Struthio camelus syriacus*; it is now globally extinct. Eastern Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*, common 70 years ago, has been hunted out and the sandgrouse, vultures and Northern Bald Ibis seem to be following; even Eurasian Stone Curlews *Burhinus oedicnemus* are now rare. Many hunting parties have been reduced to shooting larks. A Presidential decree has outlawed hunting; the ban is generally ignored though the threat of summoning the police is a useful deterrent. A recent development is to use mist nets to catch migrants, particularly in September, which are then sold via refrigerated trucks to up-market restaurants in the major cities, the 'Figbird Trade' (Murdoch 2008). Visiting birders are asked to record, photograph and report this illegal trade to the Desert Commission in Palmyra.

THE CITY OF PALMYRA AND THE TOWN OF TADMOR

Palmyra is a Roman name meaning 'city of palm trees' but Syrians refer to it by its ancient Semitic name 'Tadmor'. 150 km to the west is the fertile valley of the Ghab, the most northern extension of the Rift Valley, through which runs the river Asir (in Greek times the Orontes); 150 km to the northeast is the Euphrates. Thus Palmyra is halfway across the desert between the Mediterranean basin and Mesopotamia. It has always been a stepping stone for people as well as for birds, with trade its livelihood; the first historical reference is in the 2nd millennium BC. The ancient city reached its zenith in the third century CE when its legendary queen Zenobia challenged Rome for control of the eastern Mediterranean; she was crushed and dragged through Rome in chains of gold. Until 100 years ago, Palmyra had only a tiny population which sought refuge in the Temple of Bel from marauding Bedouin; a visit is said to have required a five days' journey across the desert and an armed escort. With the French mandate, the new town of Tadmor developed to the northeast of the Roman city. Tadmor is expanding very fast; it now has a population of at least 60 000. This has caused huge strain on the fragile desert ecosystem: the water table is falling fast (apparently 15 m in 10 years) and the present farming schemes, which are totally dependent on pumped water, are unlikely to be sustainable. Many farmers are now leaving the land because the cost of running pumps has become prohibitive.

Tourist Palmyra now has hotels to suit all tastes and a variety of restaurants and cafes along the main tourist street* [* see Table 1 for GPS coordinates]. An evening drink on the patio of the Zenobia hotel, on the very edge of the ancient city, is a pleasant way to watch the sun setting on the ruins in splendour; unfortunately, prices are high and the service often lethargic. Prices for rooms vary wildly according to the number of tourists in town

and time of year, with peak seasons roughly coinciding with migration: mid-March to mid-May and mid-September to October. Be prepared to bargain. There are usually many empty beds but do not try to stay during the near-annual Palmyra Desert Festival; the town is booked out. The town is very safe—as is the rest of Syria—though some street kids have become a nuisance.

VISITING SYRIA—GENERAL

One of the greatest pleasures of a visit to Syria is the genuine friendliness of the people; most Syrians treat visitors as guests rather than as foreigners. Hospitality is a central pillar of Islam; I remember standing freezing by a reservoir counting Coot *Fulica atra* in the cold, and cursing when some farmers approached us—and then appreciating that they had brought us a pot of hot, sugary tea. And we had never even seen them before! If you are in the desert, there is a good chance that Bedouin will ask you and your Syrian guide to stay for tea—and possibly a meal—an invitation not to miss, time permitting; the food will be excellent and the friendship genuine. Just make sure that you behave as your Syrian guide advises; there is a clear code of conduct. It is a good opportunity to show the Bedouin your bird books (especially the larger falcons) and to find out what is around; they know many of the larger species well.

Many foreign birders dismiss the idea of visiting Syria because they think it is too dangerous. It is actually a safe destination, precisely because of extensive security. The police keep a close eye on visitors in many areas, notably the Euphrates valley and the Jazira (the northeast), but if you behave sensibly and explain that you are interested in birds, you are unlikely to have any trouble. As a general rule, I encourage everyone to look through my binoculars—cries of 'Aaah!'—and I show them an identification guide, starting with Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* ('hudhud' in Arabic and specifically protected in the Koran) and bee-eaters (W'rwar), and then moving to the larger falcons (all called Sak'r), which always provoke intense excitement. Understanding is assured, friendships made and invitations to tea often follow.

In the last 30 years, there has been a huge expansion in the road network with good access far into the desert. I rent a car from an international firm and pay by credit card in the UK. It is possible to hire a car in Tadmor though I have never done so; I once hired a 4WD for a day. Petrol is widely available but it is wise to keep your tank at least half full; there are very few stations outside Palmyra, even on the main road. Garages charge a standard rate, which in September 2009 was 40 Syrian Pounds per litre, about 50 pence sterling. The roads are usually excellent, with little traffic outside towns, but beware the many long-distance coaches, driven at high speed with little regard for cars. Minimise driving in Damascus and Aleppo, it is not for those of a weak constitution. Do not drive at night except in well-lit areas; many vehicles do not use their lights. One interesting feature of Syrian roads is that some local people drive the wrong way down the road, usually but not always on dual carriageways—particularly ancient trucks, motor bikes and tractors. Thus it is possible after dark to meet an unlit tractor plodding up your side of the road. This is best avoided. Avoid sleeping in your car at night unless you really have to; local people always seem to notice and may alert the police, who will check to make sure you are not a smuggler or a terrorist. There are many checkpoints along border roads; accept them with resignation.

There is now a bank in Palmyra (but no ATM). ATMs are rare, even in major cities, and then they may not work or accept your card. Do not bother with traveller's cheques; no-one will change them. I happily carry around a wad of cash; there is little crime in Syria, theft is rare and violent crime almost unknown.

Plate 1. Palmyra ruins, 23 May 2007. © *David Murdoch*

PALMYRA RUINS AND OASIS

The fabulous ruins of the ancient city* (Plate 1) cannot be missed, even by the most narrow-minded birder, as the road actually goes through their centre. Rewards include the resident Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe lugens* (common) and records of wintering Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* and Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*; migrant raptors often fly over. Sadly, excessive water abstraction has lowered the water table and the spring that was the life source of the ancient city, the Eqfa, dried up 15 years ago; a dusty thicket remains, not worth visiting. The palmerie itself is an atmospheric place, a vast maze of date palms, olive trees, meandering lanes and high, white walls; it is an enjoyable place to wander but difficult birding and usually unrewarding. Eastern Olivaceous Warblers *Iduna pallida* and Laughing Doves *Stigmatopelia senegalensis* are characteristic species. It is very under-watched and there may well be discoveries to make—interesting records include several observations of White-cheeked Bulbuls *Pycnonotus* (*leucogenys*) *leucotis* in the 1970s (Kinzelbach 1986), though there have been no claims for many years; the first breeding records for Syria of Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* in 2007 (Murdoch & Betton 2008); and several sightings of Namaqua Dove from the south of the oasis at Oweyna*. Possible sightings of Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* in late spring deserve to be followed up; there are no recent Syrian records but few birders visit at this time of year and a small breeding population could be overlooked. It looks good habitat for Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* too. The orchards open out towards the eastern edge and the birding is better, with fields good for pipits and wagtails; but if time is limited it is best spent in smaller oases.

To the southeast of the oasis lies Sabkhat Muh, a seasonally flooded salt-lake up to 20 km long with scattered tamarisk *Tamaricus* sp round its edges (Evans 1994). It is usually dry but can fill overnight after heavy rains; Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and duck such as Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* and Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* then appear. A

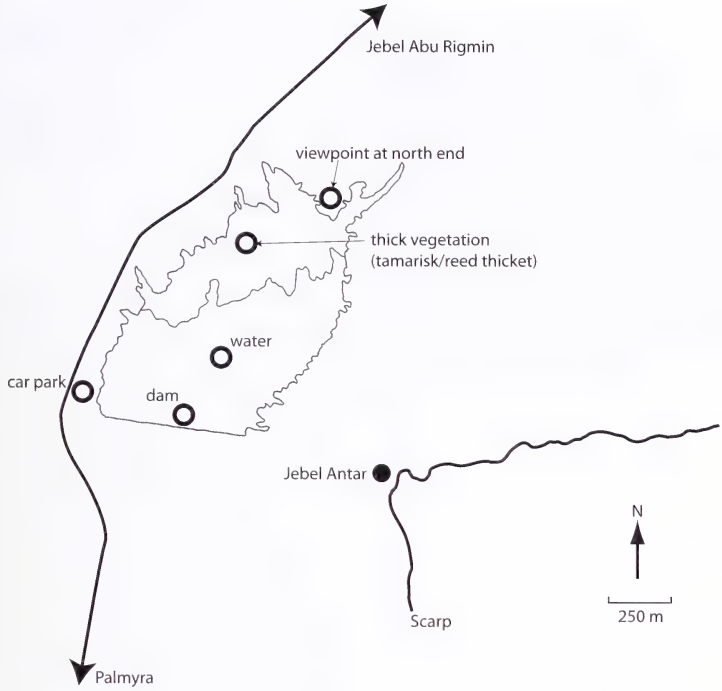


Figure 2. Sed Wadi Abied, Palmyra area, Syria.

small flock of Common Cranes *Grus grus* winters in the area. Few foreign birders have visited; driving is tricky and should only be attempted with Syrian guides.

SED WADI ABIED (FIGURE 2)

About 13 km to the north, but 20 km by road, is Sed Wadi Abied*—literally the 'dam in the white valley'. SWA (Plate 2) is the largest water body for over 100 km in all directions and is exceptional for its range and volume of migrants: huge numbers of passerines in the bushes, waders, storks and herons along the shore, terns over the water, duck on it, and raptors overhead.

The reservoir is *c*1 km long and roughly triangular. The water level varies widely; in some summers (including 2009) it is completely dry. The edge closest to the road is muddy with extensive areas of reeds, fringed by dense tangles of tamarisk bushes often fizzing with migrants. A large area of thickets at the back often holds roosting passage raptors such as Black Kite *Milvus migrans* or harriers; there are large winter roosts of Common Linnets *Carduelis cannabina*, Desert Finches *Rhodospiza obsoleta* and Dead Sea Sparrows *Passer moabiticus*, hunted by Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* and Merlins *Falco columbarius*. Through the thick stuff passes a stony wadi; the muddy area where it enters the reservoir can be outstanding for waders—recent records include Terek *Xenus cinereus* and

Plate 2. Sed Wadi Abied and Jebel Antar from the north side, 15 June 2003. © *David Murdoch*

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*. Crakes are regular on passage. Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* nest when the water level is high and Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*, Garganey *Anas querquedula* and Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* have probably bred (there are no confirmed breeding records of the last two species for Syria). Though it is far into the desert, it boasts the first breeding record for Syria of Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* (Tavares *et al* 2000)! A small flock of Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* wintered in 2001/2002 until one was shot.

The best way to work SWA is to park on the small area of tarmac by the west end of the dam* and to work along the near edge towards the back, all the way round if possible to the bluffs on the east side that overlook the north end. The dam itself and the further side are less interesting. It is possible with care to drive right round the back of the thickets onto the bluffs. The valley is lined by impressive cliffs with the majestic crag of Jebel Antar dominating the Sed. Visitors should check the skyline constantly: this is the most regular site in Syria for Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Little Swift *Apus affinis* and Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*. Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* still breed locally and Eurasian Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* sometimes visit; Chukar *Alectoris chukar* are heard but rarely seen; Desert Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* breeds in the ravines nearby. Mid-morning flurries of passage raptors can yield ten species in an hour. During migration, SWA deserves a daily visit, which can easily absorb a morning.

Sadly, disturbance is rapidly increasing. There is still some hunting (though local conservationists are trying bravely to stop it), grazing pressure is intense, the reeds are used for fodder and sometimes burnt, and permanent habitations are now appearing in the valley close by. SWA could be a spectacular centrepiece for educating Palmyrans about wildlife and nature conservation; it deserves full protection and formal designation as a nature reserve.

SWA is easy to reach; from the town centre, take the road on the north side of the castle to a junction on the ring road 3 km to the northwest. The turning* is now well sign-posted; it is distinguished by a sign in English that states 'White Vally Damp' and another in Arabic and English that proclaims 'Bald Ibis Reserve', 'Birds Breeding Area' and 'No Hunting'—if only! A blind summit 4 km from the turning must be negotiated with care as large trucks thunder over it at high speed. The Mazrab plains*, 2 km short of SWA, are good lark country, with resident Bar-tailed *Ammomanes cinctura* and Temminck's Larks *Eremophila bilopha*, Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* in season, and a farm with trees that attract migrants.

THE HILLS NORTH OF PALMYRA

An attractive road winds northwest from Palmyra, past SWA, over broken ridges in the direction of Aleppo; this is the only access by asphalt to an intriguing area ripe for exploration. The ridges were once densely wooded with Atlantic Pistachio *Pistacia atlantica* but huge numbers were felled in Ottoman times, it is said to have fed the fires of the Hejaz railway. Today, there are just the bare bones of the hills, overgrazed by hordes of sheep; occasional pistachios survive, but often with branches lopped for firewood. Seedlings have no chance. This is clearly an ecological tragedy needing serious and sustained government action to remedy. The highest ridge, Jebel Abu Rigmin* (Plate 3), is noticeably cooler than the plains, with frosts in winter and scattered trees. It is worth pausing to check the pistachios and gullies for passerine migrants but the area flatters to deceive—it is popular with Bedu and their herds, particularly in the hot season, and any tender vegetation is quickly nibbled away. I have walked the ridges looking for species such as Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe* (*xanthoprymna*) *xanthoprymna* or Cinereous Bunting *Emberiza cineracea*, which are found in similar habitat in Turkey, but so far without success. Otherwise, there

are few birds except Brown-necked Ravens *Corvus ruficollis* and the occasional Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*.

Off the road, 4WD and an expert guide are essential. Most of the area is *terra incognita* to birders. I spent a day here in May 2006 with AA, striking east through an area known as Reea al-Hawa* ('Place of Fresh Air'), thence through a broad valley with much larger numbers of pistachios, giving a parkland feel that I have never experienced elsewhere round Palmyra, and northeast to the main road at Arak*. Observations included significant numbers of singing Isabelline Wheatears *Oenanthe isabellina* and Pale Rockfinches *Carpospiza brachydactyla*, substantial colonies of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* and Rock Sparrows *Petronia petronia*, several European Rollers *Coracias garrulus* and, in the pistachios, singing Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*. Sadly, a young plantation had recently been felled, presumably for firewood. The scenery was magnificent and we had a warm welcome and a delicious meal in a Bedouin tent. This is an area that you should explore.

Plate 3. Jebel Abu Rigmin, 10 September 2007. Scattered pistachios *Pistacia atlantica* still survive but are not regenerating. © *David Murdoch*

THE ISRIYE ROAD

The road beyond Jebel Abu Rigmin to Isriye is the wildest and most beautiful road I have yet found in the Badia, but it should not be tackled without a Syrian guide familiar with it and not in the afternoon; there are no people, no signposts and several junctions. Travel with a full tank of petrol, plenty of water (there is none en route), a mobile phone (though there may be no reception) and, if possible, a GPS (which is theoretically illegal in Syria). Do not drive more than 60 km/h if you cannot clearly see the road in front of you as it can hide unpleasant surprises. I have twice come across bridges or culverts washed away by flash floods and the improvised track round was barely passable in daytime; there was no sign that the road was about to end in a 2 m vertical drop, except for small piles of rocks on the road that were easy to ignore. Do not attempt this route in the dark. However, for the adventurous traveller, this is a wonderful road through majestic scenery that cuts straight across the wild lands north of the Jebel Amur.

It first descends a steep, disintegrating stretch of tarmac onto a plateau almost always empty of people—the solitude of this area is one of its greatest attractions. About 20 km beyond Jebel Abu Rigmin and 2 km to the east of the road, a large reservoir is set in stark desert hills, the 'DesRes'*; tracks lead down towards its edge and in dry weather a saloon car driven carefully can reach a few fields often buzzing with migrants. The reservoir is at least 2 km long and excellent for waders; there are usually a few duck and often terns and raptors. Human disturbance has been minimal on the few occasions I have visited. It is easy to spend a couple of hours here. The road continues through Fasadh, a settlement with a police station and some forlorn trees; this is probably the only place to seek help. Beyond, there is a complicated zigzag of roads to negotiate before an excellent stretch reaches a major road junction at Isriye*, a small settlement with an impressive Roman temple and two cafes, but (in September 2009) no garage and no petrol. If you cross the main road and continue north, you eventually pass via the Khanasser valley and the western shores of Sabkhat Jabbul to the dusty town of Sfire* and, finally, Aleppo; this road

is excellent and direct. By road, the distance from Palmyra to Isriye is only *c*150 km, though it feels much longer; from Isriye to Sfire is *c*100 km.

The route is excellent for wheatears and larks, for instance Greater Hoopoe *Alaemon alaudipes*, Temminck's and Lesser Short-toed *Calandrella rufescens*. The few bushes or trees are worth checking for migrants. This is prime habitat for Houbara and sandgrouse but I fear that they have been hunted out. Migrant raptors such as harriers and eagles can appear at any time; Short-toed and Golden Eagles probably breed. The scenery and solitude on this road are overpowering.

THE NORTHERN BALD IBIS COLONY

For obvious reasons, I cannot disclose the breeding sites used by this iconic bird—the very last wild colony of the migratory eastern population, which is now known to winter in the Ethiopian highlands (Lindsell *et al* 2009). Visitors must take a guide. The range of birds in the area depends very much on the recent rainfall. In 2003, a wet spring, there were large numbers of larks including Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* (Murdoch *et al* 2005a) probably breeding, Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* and Desert Finch. A Basalt Wheatear (said to be a black morph of Mourning Wheatear) was in the gullies below the nesting cliff in 2007. The springs of 2008 and 2009 were very dry, the sheep grazed any edible vegetation away, there were very few birds and in both years the Ibis failed to raise any young. Attempts may be made to supplement the population with young birds from the semi-feral colony at Birecik in Turkey; this is the last chance to save the colony. If you want to see wild individuals of this charismatic bird in their natural environment, go very soon; it is worth it.

MAKSAM FARM

The Dowa valley just west of Palmyra supports several farms irrigated by artesian water. The closest, Maksam* (Plate 4), is an excellent site for migrants; it is well watered, with thick, lush vegetation, and it has one remarkable tree. It is off the Palmyra–Homs road, 2 km from the Palmyra bypass and *c*8 km from the centre of Palmyra: good in spring for a visit before breakfast. Turn off at a pile of stones* on the north side of the road, drive north along a poor sandy track for *c*700 m and listen (in spring) for Ménétries' Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*, a male of which seems to sing regularly in the bushes. Entering an area of scattered farm buildings, park discreetly and ask anyone on site for permission to look round—showing a bird guide always helps. You may be offered a cup of tea. Most of the farm is a warren of orchards, olives, dates and pomegranates, hiding warblers such as Barred *Sylvia nisoria* and Olive-tree *Hippolais olivetorum*; its size (10–20 ha) means that birds, once lost, are difficult to find again. The olives thin out down the hill, creating clearings good for flycatchers and pipits. Water flows down open channels, creating wet grassy areas popular with skulking species such as Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* and River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis*. Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* breeds as, probably, does Namaqua Dove—there have been several reports. Back towards the main road are several tiny fields, well-watered and good for pipits and butterflies. Maksam is a good site for

Plate 4. Maksam, 11 May 2006. An excellent site for passerine migrants. © *David Murdoch*

Desert Finch; the distinctive flight call is the best way to pick up this handsome bird. The star spot of all is the 'Magic Mulberry'*, a tree at the far (western) end of the farm buildings by a smelly water pump, that fruits abundantly in May and is an irresistible attraction to hungry migrants (and to me). In the one tree at one time I have had 50 Olivaceous Warblers and 20 Eurasian Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla*; up to four Eurasian Golden Orioles *Oriolus oriolus*; Rose-coloured Starlings *Pastor roseus* twice; and the only Syrian records of Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* (in May 2006 and 2007). Sadly, I have had to remove netting from the lower branches; birds are trapped even here. Maksam is drier in autumn and does not hold birds quite as well. Irrigated farms, plantations and cereal fields continue for at least 10 km further towards Homs; the area deserves fuller exploration.

THE MAIN ROAD FROM DAMASCUS THROUGH PALMYRA TO DEIR EZ-ZOR

This beautiful road is often of outstanding interest for birds. Much of the interest is in diurnal migrants moving through the Badia but a major feature after a wet spring is the damming effect of the asphalt, which produces a series of *feda*, roadside pools that can hold water well into May. These are always worth checking if time allows. From Palmyra towards Damascus, there is a large pool at the junction with the Baghdad road, *c*145 km from Palmyra, and another 19 km short of Palmyra. Northeast from Palmyra, Feda Wadi Balhan* (*c*35 km) is a good spot. The village of Arak*, *c*25 km from Palmyra towards Deir ez-Zor, and the town of Sukhne*, *c*45 km further, have gardens and orchards, worth checking if time allows, and reservoirs. The Arak dam* is in the hills about 8 km from the main road; I have only been there once and was not impressed, it was steep-sided with a few bushes and a lot of disturbance. There is (usually) petrol at two of Sukhne's roadside cafes; it is worth stopping for tea in the café* on the eastern edge of Sukhne as the surrounding trees attract migrants into the small olive grove behind. For those unlucky enough to miss Hoopoe Lark round Palmyra, an area of well-vegetated sand dunes* *c*110–115 km along the Deir road is worth a look. This section of the road appears prone to sand storms. A flat valley at Shola, *c*190 km from Palmyra and just 20 km short of Deir ez-Zor, is outside the strict remit of this article, but when it floods, a shallow splashy wetland up to 1 km wide is formed, a magnet for waders and ducks that can easily absorb an entire morning.

The distance from Damascus to Palmyra is *c*250 km; allow 3 hours as it is easy to take the wrong turning leaving Damascus. From Palmyra to Deir is *c*210 km, an excellent fast road, less scenically stunning than the first section but still wild and exciting; allow 2½ hours. If the birding is good, it can take double the time!

ROUND SUKHNE

Sukhne is a dusty town on the Deir road *c*70 km from Palmyra (see above). A sewage ditch runs out into the desert on the south side of the road; it stinks but attracts migrant passerines and a few desperate waders. If you have a couple of hours to spare, Sukhne dam can be very good. Coming from Palmyra, the turning* is on the left 1.2 km before the main turn into Sukhne; it is distinguished by about six blue signs including to Katkat and Kadim. The asphalt road is old and full of potholes; this is a good area for Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*. Fork left after *c*1 km, keeping on the old road, which bends up after 3 km to a house* with a small orchard worth checking and the reservoir bed below; it is courteous to greet the family. The reservoir was dry in the autumns of 2008 and 2009 but the dense knee-high plants attracted huge numbers of small migrants—warblers, larks, chats—hunted by predators such as shrikes and harriers. The valley 'upstream' was green and looked good as well. If you bear right at the fork, a new asphalt road of variable

quality heads northwest through glorious desert scenery; on your left (to the south) are the mountains of Jebel Amur and on your right a sheer cliff 10 km long. Desert Wheatears and Hoopoe Larks are common. After *c*55 km, turn left* (west) just after the village of Kadim and a good road takes you straight to Isriye, *c*130 km from Sukhne. I presume that if you continue north at Kadim you will head up to the Euphrates valley—I have not been that way yet. Any greenery can be very productive, but ask permission from the local people as it is usually their garden; I dislodged five reluctant Golden Orioles from a melon patch in September 2009.

A fine desert road runs north from Sukhne to the mid-Euphrates valley via the magnificent late Roman fortress of Rasafa. Enter Sukhne via the main turning* and follow the road, which becomes a dual carriageway, for *c*3 km; 200 m after a sharp bend to the right, turn left* in the town centre and head 500 m north to the junction* on the north side of town. If you get lost, ask a local 'Alla Kawm?' ('What is the way to Kawm?'); few people speak English here. Sukhne is a warren of narrow streets and the only place in Syria that I have felt any hostility. But once you are through town, the road is excellent and newly tarmacked; it passes through miles of empty desert to a junction*, easily missed, 24 km from the main road and signposted straight on (west) to Al Latom and right (north) to At Taybeh. Take the north turn, passing through a string of desolate villages, including Kawm, to a junction* at Zamla, *c*77 km from Sukhne, where you take a left turn for Rasafa. Again, check any greenery; Zamla has two large gardens with trees good for migrants. Rasafa* is *c*100 km from Sukhne, the Euphrates valley at Mansura (on Ba'ath lake) another 27 km. The city of ar-Raqqa, *c*60 km from Rasafa, has good hotels.

DOUARA

Douara is the Arabic word for 'circle'; the reason is clear on entry to this magnificent amphitheatre of cliffs* (Plate 5). This may be the last colony of Griffon Vultures in Syria, with *c*8–15 nests along several km of precipice; a flock of 17 was seen in autumn 2008 (AA pers comm). Unfortunately, there are no firm data as to whether numbers are stable or decreasing; a formal annual count with documentation of breeding success is much needed. However, the terrain is formidably broken and monitoring the nests would be a real challenge. A survey is important as the Griffons were until recently persecuted by the Bedouin, who accuse them of eating young lambs; one was killed and its body parts sold for medicines in Tadmor in 2008. Further, although Douara is ferociously hot and almost devoid of vegetation, even here there is human disturbance: a prefabricated base for oil workers was erected in spring 2008 directly beneath the breeding cliffs. It has now been removed but a well and a settling tank remain. Two tiny patches of vegetation* close to buildings can be full of migrant passerines and deserve a look if there is time. There are few other birds—Egyptian Vultures, Rock Doves *Columba livia*, Brown-necked Ravens, sometimes Little Swifts and Lesser Kestrels—and an autumn visit may not be very productive. The area has always looked good for Hooded *Oenanthe monacha* and White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, both of which have been reported from the Palmyra area. The turning* to Douara, a yellow sign followed by a white sign to 'Musadira', is off the

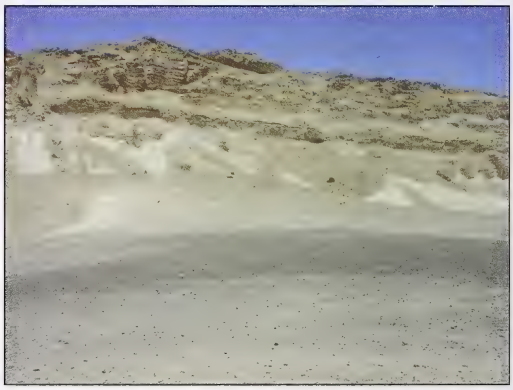


Plate 5. Douara, 12 April 2006. The cliffs hold Syria's last colony of Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*. © *David Murdoch*

Deir ez-Zor road, *c*20 km from Palmyra and *c*2 km beyond the turning to Talila; Douara is easy to combine with a visit to Talila. The track runs north and is initially grit; I have seen Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Lark here. Good tarmac starts after 5 km, just as you enter the circle; take the left turn at the junction 1 km further on.

Ecotourism is the best hope for the survival of this beleaguered but strategic colony. Birders to Palmyra during the breeding season are asked to visit Douara and to highlight its importance to the relevant authorities. PSPEW members (see below) plan to set up a 'vulture restaurant' on site; they are looking for funding to buy a small truck for transporting animal carcasses to the cliffs. This will be a potential tourist attraction as well as a safe source of food for the breeding birds.

TALILA

Syria's first formal protected area, Talila was set up in 1992 and covers 220 km^2 (Serra *et al* 2009a); it was chosen as a representative area of Badia still in relatively good condition. It was fenced in the early 1990s to allow the vegetation to regenerate, since when the plant cover inside the reserve has made a remarkable recovery (Plate 6). It lies on a low ridge with undulating plains forming the main habitat, small sand dunes in the west and many wadis, rich in plants, running across it. With this variety of habitats, it holds the highest diversity of perennial plants in the Palmyra area and a rich annual flora (grasses, legumes and forbs) that act as an important seasonal food supply for herbivores. Herds of Sand Gazelles and Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* have been 'reintroduced' to a fenced inner reserve but they are fed daily by reserve staff. Talila was the site of a co-operative project between the Italian and Syrian governments in 1996–2004; GS was the wildlife officer for the project from 2000–2004 and trained several Palmyrans in nature conservation techniques. With a combination of habitat conservation and good coverage, Talila has many outstanding records. A small flock of 100–200 Common Cranes winters in the general area. It is excellent for larks: Hoopoe Larks and Bar-tailed Larks are common in the sandy areas with Temminck's, Desert and Lesser Short-toed Larks on stonier ground. Isabelline and Desert Wheatears breed and Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii* is common in winter. Small numbers of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* were seen in 2001–2004, the only recent records from the Palmyra area (Murdoch & Serra 2006). The area is good for shrikes, with records of Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius* (*meridionalis*) *pallidirostris* (Syria's first, in February 2004) and Northern Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*. Most of Syria's records of Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* were made here in February 2004 during the Syrian Wetland Expedition (Murdoch *et al* 2005b); this species is easy to miss and may winter in small numbers in the Badia. There is a recent report of Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* breeding in the Badia close to Talila and an immature Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus* was in the area in October 2008 (GS pers comm).

The turning to Talila* on the Deir ez-Zor road *c*18 km from Palmyra centre is well signposted. A 4WD is needed for full access—much of the reserve is very sandy and saloon cars will not take kindly to the tracks. The access road is 12 km long and often excellent birding: it is a good area for Hoopoe Larks, I have seen Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* chicks close

Plate 6. Talila fence, April 2009. This shows clearly the effect of overgrazing. © *Gianluca Serra*

to the road in April and dozens of Cream-coloured Coursers on passage in early May. The tarmac creates *feda*, small pools of water with grassy edges good for pipits and wagtails. The scattered trees by the entrance* are excellent for passage migrants and often hold roosting raptors; I watched a flock of 500 Eurasian Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* here in May 2006. Any water source should be carefully checked; there used to be a leaking pipe with a patch of splashy grass that always held skulking migrants. A site for Desert Eagle Owl close to the entrance is a fine way to end a day's birding.

THE BADIA SOUTH AND EAST OF PALMYRA

The drylands south and east of Palmyra are rarely visited and a day in the Badia, checking out the tiny settlements and reservoirs scattered through the desert, can be memorable. In particular, the Hamad plateau close to the Iraqi border is remote and exciting. The habitat is mostly flat, stony plains, rock pavements, low hills and shallow wadis; there is little sand and no areas of towering romantic rolling dunes. Where vegetation survives, it consists of dwarf perennial shrubs with tamarisk along wadis; the annuals that appear in wet springs are soon grazed away. Birding during migration can be exceptional: one group found 15 species of warbler in a small oasis on an early October morning with a strong supporting cast including both species of Rock Thrush and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. AA enthuses about al-Waar, a rocky area with deep valleys 40 km from the Iraqi border; I have not yet been there because of potential security problems. He reports that the area holds Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* and *Ammoperdix* partridges, probably See-see Partridge *A. griseogularis*; Spotted Sandgrouse chicks were found here in 2008. A large reservoir, deep and stony, holds water throughout the summer and is excellent for migrants. In the years when Iraq and Syria had very poor relations, the strip of no-man's-land along the border was off limits and the vegetation rapidly recovered, becoming thick and lush. AA saw a Caracal *Caracal caracal* here in the 1980s but relations have improved and the border zone is again heavily grazed. AA also reports a Dark Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates* in the Hamad in the 1990s—and as he correctly identified the 1999 Northern Bald Ibis several years later, I believe him. Coverage in winter has been very poor but the desert may hold substantial numbers of Eurasian Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*; Sociable Lapwing must be a possibility in early spring. It is superb raptor country; all four harriers pass through in season, feeding on exhausted migrants, and small numbers of Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* winter, probably with the occasional Steppe Eagle.

You should not contemplate leaving the asphalt road without a Syrian guide who is highly experienced and knows the area intimately; also take a mobile phone, GPS and plenty of water. Make sure your hotel staff know of your plans in case you get into trouble. However, 4WD is not essential if the ground is dry and your guide is satisfied with a saloon car. But the dangers are much less than they once were as you will rarely be far from humans—often much closer than you might wish: in the last generation, Bedouin encampments have sprung up throughout the Badia, supported physically by tankers carrying water and financially by the high price of Syrian lamb. As a result, areas once free of humans for most of the year now support a semi-permanent presence, particularly after wet springs. The situation is not sustainable; the surface of the desert is cracking up and blowing away. On the positive side, there are several small reservoirs, though they are often dry, and water points at regular intervals, with vegetable gardens and melon beds to succour thirsty migrants and, usually, somewhere, a dripping tap.

Several oases are accessible for those unwilling to travel off the asphalt. T3*, *c*40 km east of Palmyra, is the third pumping station on the oil pipeline from Iraq to the Mediterranean; the turning* is *c*35 km along the Deir road and the access road *c*18 km long. There is a

long-established settlement here but also an army base, so any birding should be done with discretion. Abbaseia* is famous for its sulphur pools and boasts an up-market hotel. The turning* is *c*26 km towards Damascus from Palmyra centre; the approach road winds for *c*23 km through high-quality desert—mainly flat gravel plains and hard earth with scattered bushes—good for Temminck's, Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Larks, migrant wheatears and Tawny Pipits *Anthus campestris*. A water point 9 km along the road is worth a stop. Unfortunately, when I visited the hotel in September 2009, there seemed to be very few migrants in the bushes. When I entered the foyer, the staff were sitting on the floor making snares for falcons. They showed me the corpses of the 'figbirds' they had netted that morning—nearly 100, including several species of warbler, Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*, Thrush Nightingale and Golden Oriole. They sell the birds for consumption as a delicacy in the major cities (Murdoch 2008). The general rules are that smaller oases are easier to work; the more remote the better; always explain to local people what you are doing and show them an identification book; and any source of water will be a magnet.

BIRDING THE PALMYRA AREA THROUGH THE YEAR

Few birders have visited in mid-winter and information is limited; the temperature and recent rainfall will greatly influence what birds are around. The palmerie holds wintering Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* and Common Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs*, Eurasian Blackbirds *Turdus merula* and Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*; many 'chiffchaffs' make odd calls suggesting that they may be of Caucasian origin. Sed Wadi Abied attracts small numbers of duck and much larger flocks of passerines that roost in the thickets at the back; these in turn bring in raptors such as Merlin and Hen Harrier. After heavy rainfall, Sabkhat Muh fills and waterbirds soon appear. Siberian Stonechats *Saxicola maurus* of several forms and Finsch's Wheatears are common in open areas and Bluethroats *Luscinia svecica*, White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* and Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta* feed along water edges. At least three 'forms' of Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus sensu lato* winter in Syria: 'Turkestan Shrike' *L.* (*i.*) *phoenicuroides* is probably commoner than 'Daurian Shrike' *L.* (*i.*) *isabellinus* and 'Chinese Shrike' *L.*(*i.*) *arenarius* has recently been found to winter, notably in the Euphrates valley. Talila is worth searching for 'grey' shrikes and Asian Desert Warblers. A few Pallid Harriers hunt the Badia where flocks of Eurasian Dotterel and a few Eastern Imperial Eagles winter. Great Bustards *Otis tarda* were common into the 1990s in an area of undulating, stony plains north of Palmyra known as Shmal Araq until the Lebanese started hunting them with machine guns; a few still winter but they are still hunted by Bedouin (AA pers comm). More data on wintering birds would be valuable, particularly from the Badia.

Spring migration starts in February with the first diurnal migrants: Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harriers and a few hirundines. Expeditions into the Badia have found huge mixed flocks of Calandra *Melanocorypha calandra* and Bimaculated Larks *Melanocorypha bimaculata*. The Northern Bald Ibises return to their breeding sites in the second half of the month; it is vital not to disturb them while they settle down to breed. Large numbers of migrants are passing through by mid-March. Flocks of wary, long-winged, grey-brown birds the size of sparrows are worth careful inspection: Pale Rockfinches are easy to overlook. Later in the season, when they have set up territory, their weird buzzing song, similar to that of a grasshopper, is an excellent way to locate them. They are probably very under-recorded though their numbers appear to fluctuate from year to year. Visitors to the Badia should watch out for Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* and Sociable Lapwing; there are occasional records of both species but their true status is not yet clear. A bewildering variety of wheatears passes through: there are recent records of ten species including

Cyprus *Oenanthe cypriaca*, which appears to be regular in early spring, Pied *Oenanthe pleschanka* and several recent observations in March of Rufous-tailed Wheatear.

Most birders choose to visit Palmyra in April, and with good reason: the weather is usually pleasantly warm, resident species are breeding and migration is at its best. GS (Serra *et al* 2005a, b) has gathered excellent data on the timing of migration through the Palmyra area. Diurnal migrants such as hirundines, bee-eaters and raptors pass throughout the day and it is important to keep an eye on the sky at all times. Raptor passage in particular is not predictable; concentrations can suddenly appear anywhere including Lesser Spotted *Aquila pomarina*, Steppe, Short-toed, Booted *Aquila pennata* and occasional Eastern Imperial Eagles, Black Kites, Eurasian *Accipiter nisus* and Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipes*, and huge numbers of Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus*. The numbers of Pallid Harrier tail off but they are replaced by Montagu's Harriers *Circus pygargus*; Western Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* pass throughout the season. There is a concentrated passage in April of Lesser Kestrels, which breed locally in several small colonies. Nine species of heron have been recorded in spring; they can appear anywhere, often flying over, but the best site is SWA. Western White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* are scarce—most seem to follow the coastal ridge—and Black Storks *Ciconia nigra* very rare. Spotted Crakes *Porzana porzana* and Little Crakes *Porzana parva* skulk along the muddy edges of SWA. Greater Sand Plovers breed in small numbers on dry flats but seem to move away before the summer heat. Dunn's Lark is an elusive species; its status is still unclear but it is probably only irruptive, appearing (and probably breeding) in wet springs. There have been no records for several years.

The mix of migrants is different in May. Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* passage peaks in the first half of the month, the last of all the raptors. May is the best month for Olive-tree, Marsh *Acrocephalus palustris* and probably Barred Warblers; all three were still passing through in the third week of May 2006. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and Masked *Lanius nubicus* and Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* are also notably late migrants. The Maksam mulberry is in fruit.

Almost no birders visit in mid-summer (June to August) so it is possible that species such as Egyptian Nightjar are overlooked. Other species breed in spring but move away as the desert fries and food becomes scarce. Breeding raptors include Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, the occasional Golden and Short-toed Eagle in the mountains, the Griffons at Douara and Egyptian Vulture, which is probably declining but still widespread. Stone Curlews are increasingly scarce, as they are shot for food, but Cream-coloured Coursers are common—they are not good to eat and are not hunted. Little Swifts have been recorded from several sites in the mountains, particularly SWA; the first breeding record for Syria was from a mountain cave in the Jebel Amur in 2009. Please record all observations of these species so that trends in their numbers can be monitored. Eastern Olivaceous Warblers are common in the palmerie and Ménétries's Warblers breed in bushy areas. The Northern Bald Ibises fledge any young in June and the flock temporarily becomes more mobile; they leave in late July. The adults winter in Ethiopia but the movements of the young birds are not yet understood.

There are few data on the timing of autumn passage; the best source of information is again Serra *et al* (2005a, b). Water is scarce, making birding easier. Huge numbers of passerines pass through between mid-August and late October, concentrating in fewer sites, where the quality and quantity of species can be excellent. Shrikes of six species can be found in September. Recent visits have revealed a good passage of Red-breasted Flycatchers *Ficedula parva* in early October. Raptor passage is significantly later and at its best in early October; Montagu's Harriers are the first, starting in late August, followed by Honey Buzzards and Black Kites in late September, then Lesser Spotted Eagles and Steppe

Buzzards. Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harriers and Long-legged Buzzards are late and can move through in early November. However, the bulk of the movement may be along the coastal ridge of western Syria; co-ordinated counts are needed to resolve the issue. September is the month for the larger falcons and the desert fills with hopeful falconers; a female Saker Falcon can sell for millions of Syrian Pounds in Riyadh though Lanners *Falco biarmicus* are worth far less. Trapping has reached unsustainable levels: fewer than ten Sakers are now caught annually in the entire country and Lanner is almost certainly extinct as a Syrian breeding species. There is a detailed discussion in Serra *et al* (2005a). There have been several reports of Lappet-faced Vulture *Aegypius trachielotos*, a healthy population of which breeds in the north of Saudi Arabia (Jennings 1995); the Palmyra area is well within their dispersal range.

THREATS TO THE ENVIRONMENT ROUND PALMYRA

Several current or potential developments present massive threats to the best wildlife areas round Palmyra. The Government has stated its commitment to environmental protection but it has a difficult balance to strike: Syria has few resources and many hungry people, and it clearly feels that the Badia has to be used to the fullest extent. An Ibis protected area exists on paper but few of the necessary management objectives are yet implemented. This protected area needs to be enlarged to include the Jezel area, which is still in good condition and where the Ibis regularly feed; this is also the best area for the few remaining wild Sand Gazelles. The northeast of Syria has extensive oil deposits and there has been a recent drive to look for oil, with test drills close to several highly sensitive sites, including the cliffs at Douara, and worse still, one of the two Ibis nesting cliffs—in the core of the 'Ibis Protected Area'. Bulldozers have a disastrous impact on the soil of the Badia: their tracks cause massive damage to the vegetation—already severely compromised by overgrazing—and destroy the soil crust, worsening erosion and accelerating desertification.

The status of Talila as a protected area has not prevented the construction of a line of pylons across the dunes of the western sector in 2004–2006 (Plate 7). Leaving aside the visual impact, it is well known that pylons cause considerable bird mortality; for instance, three Northern Bald Ibises released from Birecik in 2008 were electrocuted by power lines in Jordan. One wonders how many vulnerable soaring birds these pylons have killed in what is supposedly a protected area. Talila and Sabkhat Muh were recently under grave threat from a proposed road bypassing Palmyra/Tadmor to the south—even though there is already a bypass on the northern side—but after many representations it appears to have been rerouted. A zoo has been proposed at the entrance to Talila, a development that would reinforce the belief of many Syrians that animals are content to exist in cages. Syrians need to be weaned away from this idea; the funding would be much better spent making the reserve more accessible to ordinary Syrians and providing more information on its wildlife. Many Palmyrans are seriously interested in their environment (see below) and show great natural aptitude and enthusiasm. A proper training programme for ecoguides and wardens would benefit local people and the remaining wildlife.

Plate 7. Talila pylons, July 2009. © *Gianluca Serra*

A more insidious threat is the gradual shift in attitudes and beliefs in the local population: each generation perceives as 'normal' the environment it remembers from its youth, not what earlier generations knew. This concept, known as the Shifting Baseline Syndrome (Pauly 1995), predicts a continual lowering of expectations: gradual deterioration over decades is missed and a grossly degraded environment becomes seen as 'natural'. A grim example is the Jebel Amur, heavily wooded a century ago but now almost bare of vegetation; the elderly remember ibex, leopard and flocks of gazelle, but today's children see a barren wilderness, unproductive and empty of wildlife. The result: a highly degraded Badia with little biodiversity is seen as 'normal' and acceptable. The best counter would be the declaration of a national park in the Palmyra area; this would demonstrate that the Syrian government is seriously committed to preserving the natural environment. There is as yet not a single national park in the whole of Syria and nowhere better to choose.

THE PALMYRA SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE (PSPEW)

The environment round Palmyra is under serious threat and many people from Tadmor want to do something about it. Syria's first local conservation society, PSPEW, was founded in 2006 by local Palmyrans; it has many plans, notably to protect SWA and to establish a vulture restaurant at Douara, both excellent flagship projects for local conservation. Visiting birders are urged to give it their support. The website (for which OSME provided essential funding) provides valuable information on the birds and wildlife of the area (the words 'palmyra society' in a search engine will be enough). In return, visitors are asked to submit their records and photographs so that PSPEW can develop a comprehensive database on the local wildlife.

AUTHENTICATING RECORDS

I deliberately describe well-authenticated observations as 'records' and those less fully documented as 'reports'. Describing an observation as a report does not imply rejection: local conservationists have made many important anecdotal observations without taking formal field notes—the 1999 Northern Bald Ibis is a classic example. Assessing these reports poses a serious dilemma for records committees, examined in a lucid *Sandgrouse* editorial by Blair (2005). The same applies to many older reports by visiting birders, often made decades before their potential significance was realised. Nowadays, foreign visitors may not appreciate the rarity in Syria of a species with which they are familiar, for instance, a recent report of Red Knot *Calidris canutus* by highly experienced birders at SWA. These are significant difficulties, nevertheless record-keeping has to be treated rigorously as a scientific discipline with a high standard of documentation. Information on the status of species in the Palmyra area is now available: Serra *et al* (2005a, b) produced a comprehensive annotated list of the birds of the central Syrian desert and an updated Syrian list was published in a *Sandgrouse* supplement in 2008 (Murdoch & Betton 2008). Visitors are requested to take detailed field notes of interesting observations, particularly of Red Data Book species, as per Murdoch & Betton (2008), and to make formal descriptions as needed. A rarities report form can be downloaded from the OSME website (www.osme.org).

IN SUMMARY

The Palmyra area has been little watched yet its list includes nine species of heron, ten wheatears, 14 larks, 34 raptors and at least 35 species of wader. Much of the area is ornithologically unknown and there are still major discoveries for enterprising birders to

make—but anyone can make valuable observations anywhere in Syria, it is a very under-watched country. Wherever you go, record everything carefully, take copious field notes and let me know!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Haian Dukhan, Mahmud Abdallah and especially to Gianluca Serra and Adib al-Asaad for helping me with much valuable information.

REFERENCES

van den Berg, AB. 1989. Bald Ibis. *Dutch Birding* 11: 128–131.

Blair, M. 2005. Editorial. *Sandgrouse* 27: 2.

Evans, MI. 1994. *Important Bird Areas in the Middle East*. Birdlife International, Cambridge, UK.

Jennings, MC. 1995. *An Interim Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia.* National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development, Riyadh.

Kinzelbach , R. 1986. The White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, a resident of the Palmyra Oasis, Syria. *Zoology in the Middle East* 1: 73–74.

Lindsell, JA, G Serra, L Peske, MS Abdallah, G Al-Qaim, A Kanani & M Wondrafrash. 2009. Satellite tracking reveals the migration route and wintering area of the Middle Eastern population of Critically Endangered Northern Bald Ibis. *Oryx* 43: 329–225.

Murdoch, DA. 2008. Bird-trapping in Syrian oases; the 'fig-bird' trade. *Sandgrouse* 30: 102–103.

Murdoch, DA, I Andrews & R Hofland. 2004. The Syrian Wetland Expedition 2004: a summary. *Sandgrouse* 26: 94–104.

Murdoch, DA & KF Betton. 2008. A checklist of the birds of Syria. *Sandgrouse* Supplement 2.

Murdoch, DA & G Serra. 2006. The status of Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* in Syria. *Sandgrouse* 28: 58–61.

Murdoch, DA, G Tyler, G Serra, C Bowden & M Abdallah. 2005a. A record of Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* from Syria. *Sandgrouse* 27: 78–79.

Murdoch, DA, R Vos, A Abdallah, M Abdallah, I Andrews, A Al-Asaad, R van Beusekom, R Hofland, T Roth, B Saveyn, G Serra & C Wells. 2005b. *A winter survey of Syrian wetlands. Final report of the Syrian Wetland Expedition, January–February 2004.* Privately published, London. (www.osme.org)

Pauly D. 1995. Anecdotes and the shifting baseline syndrome. *Trends in Ecology & Environment.* 10: 430.

Serra, G, M Abdallah, A Abdallah, G Al-Qaim, T Fayed, A Assaed & D Williamson. 2003. Discovery of a relict breeding colony of Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* in Syria: still in time to save the eastern population? *Oryx* 38: 1–7.

Serra, G, M Abdallah, AK Al-Asaad, G Al-Qaim & AK Abdallah. 2005a. A long-term bird survey in the central Syrian desert (2000–2003) part 1. *Sandgrouse* 27: 9–23.

Serra, G, G Al-Qaim, MS Abdallah, A Kanani & AK Al-Asaad. 2005b. A long-term bird survey in the central Syrian desert (2000–2004) Part 2—a provisional annotated checklist. *Sandgrouse* 27: 104–125.

Serra G, M Mirreh, H Kaddour, T Razzouk, A Al Jundi, A Kanani, C Batello & D Williamson. 2009a. *Assessment and characterization of Al Talila Reserve and surrounding Palmyran desert.* IUCN/DGCS Project report. IUCN publication.

Serra G, MS Nahaz, M Idan, L Peske, A Savioli, C Bruschini & K Alomari. 2009b. *Assessment and characterization of the Ibis Protected Area in the Palmyra desert. A proposed 5-year management and development framework.* IUCN publication.

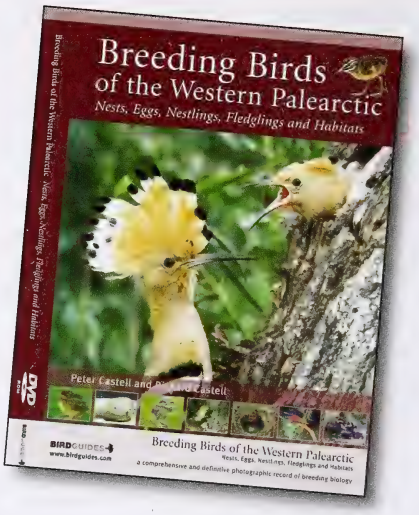
Tavares, J, P Sa Pessoa & F Brito e Abreu. 2000. The first breeding record of Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* in Syria. *Sandgrouse* 22: 145–146.

Dr DA Murdoch, Flat 3, 5 Eaton Crescent, Bristol BS8 2EJ, UK. damurdoch@hotmail.com

Reviews

Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic—Nests, Eggs, Nestlings and Habitats

Peter Castell & Richard Castell
BirdGuides Ltd. 2009.
DVD.
£99.95
ISBN 987–1-89811–050–5



Of the specialist publications on breeding birds of the Western Palearctic, this DVD is outstanding for its originality of concept and ambitious content. Never have the images of so many species been brought together with so much single-minded intensity, and covering such a large area. The DVD covers the birds' habitats, nests, eggs and young, with *c*9000 photographs of 736 of the 756 species considered to nest in the region.

Between one and 59 photographs cover the breeding of each of the 736 species, with text for all 756. For *c*100 British breeders, data from the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Nest Record Scheme are also summarised. Twenty species are represented only with text, these ranging from Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti* to Abyssinian Roller *Coracias abyssinicus*. Many of them breed in the Middle East, especially Iran. Amongst the 20 are three woodpeckers, two accentors, a bee-eater and an owl.

The photographs, in a full species sequence, begin with habitat(s), followed by adult at or near its nest, then nests and eggs in the wild showing variations in construction, egg colour and size, and finally, chicks from newly hatched to fledglings or juveniles. Around 600 species are covered well, whereas others have museum pictures only of eggs, photographed by the Natural History Museum. Not only common birds are well represented. Scarce breeders receive the same level of attention. There are *c*500 species with adults photographed at or near their nest, or in breeding habitat. The photographs were taken over 40 years, and quality naturally varies but is consistently good and often, stunning.

The disc is very simple to use. Photographs are grouped by family or species, and the search facility quickly locates either. But the 'species search' should have extended to scientific names. I particularly liked the 'compare' function which enables you to examine chicks of similar species side by side (perhaps this could be expanded to show more than two images), helpful for comparing, *eg*, warbler chicks.

A modern passion for bird nesting and recording, untouched by the 'dead hand' of egg collecting, is not common, but can play a significant role in conservation, education and even taxonomy. The comprehensive introduction to the DVD begins on a personal note, an expression of the excitement that has propelled the authors on their odyssey through an impressive list of countries. There is an obvious sense of personal achievement with the results. The sheer effort involved in reaching some nests and their persistence in assembling the huge number of images can only be imagined.

The boundaries of the Western Palearctic are set out, but not debated. This work, as the authors' note, is probably not the forum to discuss whether the Arabian Tihama plain is Western Palearctic, or whether the boundary in Russia should be the Urals or the Yenisey river (but an expansive interpretation is adopted). The introduction also explains how photographs have been chosen to show

intraspecies variation and how this can operate across a species' range. A Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* can nest in a tree, in reeds or on the ground, and there are many other examples of birds varying their nest sites and building materials with local conditions. The purpose of displaying as many of these variations is to reduce misidentification of nests; all too easy, even for the experienced!

There are many egg collections in museums, and unfortunately a few still in private hands; obviously the chicks that would have hatched could not be described. This DVD goes a long way to correct this imbalance and the introduction concisely explains the general characteristics, differences and development between precocial and altricial chicks.

The value of responsible nest recording is introduced with particular reference to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme. Nest recording can help identify problems due to habitat loss, persecution and environmental pollution. Mention is made of the contribution that it can make to the Important Bird Area (IBA) initiative and the Arabian Breeding Bird Atlas (ABBA).

Dr Dave Leech outlines the use to which data collected for the Nest Record Scheme is put, especially in conjunction with the other BTO initiatives described in their own section of the introduction. The latter concludes with acknowledgements, separate from a list of 103 photographers of which *c*50% are from outside the UK. Information as to who is responsible for any photograph, its date and location, is available by clicking on the icon at the corner of the screen image.

Some images are from outside the region. Mongolia and Kazakhstan are now relatively accessible and have provided several species of Siberian taiga and forest steppe; south and central Africa a valuable Afrotropical contingent, while Canada has some examples of high Arctic species. Given the project's scale probably only a die-hard purist would insist that all 9000 images be from the Western Palearctic.

This DVD represents a coherent project with a strong aesthetic theme. When photographing, it is in the code of conduct to restrict time spent at the nest to the absolute minimum. It is really only with this DVD that the beauty, complexity and variety of so many nests and their contents can be compared and appreciated.

There are 20 species of which the authors have been unable to locate wild-taken pictures or the eggs are unvarying white (see above). Some incomplete sequences comprise museum images of eggs alone. These may be species for which it is difficult to access an active nest without causing damage, such as woodpeckers. Other nests are just plain hard to find. Eleven gamebird species, of a total 27, have few images of nest site, contents and chick development. These range from Caucasian Snowcock *Tetrogallus caucasicus* through See-see *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Rock *Alectoris graeca*, Philby's *A. philbyi* and Arabian Partridges *A. melanocephala* to Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*. Of the 11, nests in the wild are shown for only two (nine are reliant on museum data and two of the four sets of chicks are in captivity). Only Caucasian Snowcock has an image of the nest site. Similarly, with nightjars, of the seven species breeding in the region, four are represented by museum eggs and none of young. Many of these poorly represented species breed in the Middle East, especially Iran. In contrast, some birds are very well covered, *eg Sylvia* warblers and buntings.

Zoos and private collections hold a wide variety of gamebirds, wildfowl and even waders, and the authors have used these, enabling them to assemble good sequences of chicks and juveniles that can be fairly accurately aged in captivity.

The photographs commence with habitat and, of course, there are never enough. I have found Woodlarks *Lullula arborea* breeding from near sea level on heaths in Britain to 2100 m asl in a crater in Turkey, and just about anywhere in between. More habitat pictures from a wide geographical range would be desirable and preferably should include the actual nest site. Helpfully, some habitat pictures have the nest location artificially highlighted.

The nest photographs contain many comprehensive examples of intraspecies egg variation, *eg* for Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*. The latter species really shows the value of multiple images illustrating the striking differences in eggs and chicks at

a colony. The collage arrangement permits the full range of variation to be viewed simultaneously. Not only is variation within species shown but, using the 'compare' facility, eggs of different species that are similar can be viewed together. The key point is that you cannot always identify a nest without watching for an adult. I know from personal experience that lark species in rocky desert can easily trip you up.

I found the images of chicks most interesting, as I cannot recall such a range of photographs assembled for so many species. The authors have visited nests to photograph chicks ideally at the 'newly hatched' stage, and from then until fledging. This would have been impossible without huge dedication, bearing in mind that there is generally no firm information of when eggs, randomly found, will hatch. Re-scheduling your flight home, waiting for that all-important hatching event is not for the half-hearted.

Even intraspecifically, the plumage coloration of chicks is sufficiently variable to cause misidentification. Once again the 'compare' key is useful to check related species such as Common and Arctic Terns *Sterna hirundo/paradisaea* or Spotted and Little Crakes *Porzana porzana/parva*.

The species texts do not describe eggs or young, as the photographs show the important identification indicators. Instead, the texts describe breeding season, number of broods, clutch size, role of adults in nest duties, and incubation and nestling periods.

Without doubt this DVD matches hard work and determination with digital technology, to set a standard for similar efforts to come for different regions. It also should encourage others to fill in the gaps. But why spend almost £100 on it? On the international level this work really comes into its own. Additional to the nests and contents, photographs are images of adults of some very scarce Western Palearctic birds, which should appeal to any birdwatcher interested in breeding biology or not. Contributors to the BTO Nest Record Scheme will find the DVD very useful, and if you are interested in breeding biology, either in an amateur or professional capacity, it really has to be on your shopping list.

Bernard Pleasance

Important Bird Areas in Kazakhstan—Priority Sites for Conservation

Edited by SL Skylarenko, GR Welch & M Brombacher
The Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan. 2008.
Softback. 318 pages, seven colour plates, 141 black-and-white photographs, 164 maps.
ISBN 9965–32–686-X
Available from NHBS Environment Bookstore (www.nhbs.com)

Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world with huge areas of natural habitat and 32 threatened bird species. Categorising the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) for a country the size of Western Europe must have been a daunting task given limited resources. The results are explained in the 66-page introduction dealing with the IBA rational, data-gathering process, biomes in Central Asia (illustrated by the only colour photographs in the book), IBA criteria, and the ornithological importance of Kazakhstan. The inventory details 121 IBAs covering 149 862 km^2 (a lower percentage of land area than many other countries at 5.5%) and each IBA is covered in 1–2 pages detailing coordinates, area, habitats and tables of key species. Extra detail is provided for 'birds' and 'conservation issues', and there is a boundary map for each IBA. As part of the book's corporate design

the same blue is used extensively in the text headings and there is also a blue caste to the black-and-white photographs, which probably would have been more pleasing aesthetically if reproduced 'normally'.

There is an extensive bibliography for each IBA, and for the whole book, whilst the appendices contain a full list of 528 species and their relevant IBA criteria for Central Asia. Also useful are the maps showing the distribution of IBAs for 29 of the 32 threatened species, which will be welcomed by anyone wanting to see these species in the region.

Some quirks have arisen in the English names of birds, leaving aside taxonomic changes which have resulted in several species not being included such as Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*, with, amongst others, Himalayan Cuckoo for Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus* and Rufous-streaked Accentor for Himalayan or Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana* likely to confuse, although Pale-backed Pigeon for Eversmann's Dove *Columba evermannsi* is more 'acceptable'.

It was surprising not to see the marshes and spits on the south side of Alakol lake, with their tern and gull colonies including Relict Gull *Larus relictus*, and the extensive wetlands between lakes Alakol and Sasolkol, with their breeding White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala*, included as IBAs. It is inevitable that some potential IBA areas will have been missed, but it is surprising that the wetlands, saxual forest and salt desert south of the Ily river, from Kapchagay reservoir towards the Chinese border, have not been included given qualifying numbers of Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Pale-backed Pigeon and Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*. As is the nature of these inventories, additional sites and site extensions can be added later.

The ultimate judgement will be whether the IBAs are still viable in the long term and this publication should greatly facilitate this. It is a tremendous contribution to the conservation of bird biodiversity in Central Asia and, in the absence of anything else, will also serve as a *de facto* site guide for intending visitors.

Andrew Grieve

A Birdwatching Guide to Lesvos

Steve Dudley
Arlequin Press. 2009.
Softback. 272 pages, over 90 colour photographs and over 45 maps.
£19.99
ISBN 978–1-905268–06–1

Lying just off the west coast of Turkey, the Greek island of Lesvos has been a popular birding destination since the mid 1990s. What makes Lesvos so good are the diverse habitats including saltpans, freshwater pools, olive groves and deciduous woodland, and its position in the Aegean. Spring birding can be fantastic with impressive falls of migrants at times and, although fewer birders visit at this season, an autumn visit can be just as rewarding.

I made my first trip in 1994 and used the excellent site guide by Marjorie Williams (published 1992) and later the more comprehensive and well-illustrated book by Richard Brooks (published 1995). It's a shame Dudley does not mention either of these books, nor the considerable effort by Richard Brooks to really put Lesvos on the birding map. The updated (1998) edition of Richard's book and subsequent paper updates are heavily drawn upon.

Steve Dudley's site guide to Lesvos includes a useful 47-page introduction covering when to go, where to stay and an outline of the birding year. There is a detailed guide to >60 of the best birding areas, including many sites not previously published. There are over 45 maps, and although these are clear and well presented I'm not sure they will help you find your way, because the number of minor roads and rough tracks on Lesvos make interpreting any map difficult! The descriptive access information is generally good and the advice given under 'Areas to search' will help you make the most of your visit to a given site.

The checklist of species found on Lesvos runs to almost 40 pages and offers an excellent review of the status of species on the island. Steve has worked with the Hellenic Rarities Committee (HRC) to produce the checklist, which separates rarities into those accepted by HRC and those that are not. Many of the unusual records from the 1990s have not been formally accepted, partly due to the

lower profile of the HRC at the time. I was surprised to see that the three records of White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus* have not been included (Brooks supplement) and can only assume Steve decided not to include them.

Lists covering butterflies, dragonflies, orchids, mammals will also be really useful for many visitors, as will be the list of scientific, Dutch and Greek bird names. The list of local place names and hints on pronunciation are useful although the title is missing at the top of the page.

There are >90 photographs showing sites, habitats and species, offering a good flavour of what the island has to offer. It could just be the quality of the paper used, but many of the photos do look rather 'flat'. The book suffers from a number of typographical errors throughout and there is a chunk of text missing on page 60, which is unfortunate. Another annoying mistake is the frequent use of "were" instead of "where". Such minor points aside, the book provides an excellent up-to-date guide to Lesvos and will undoubtedly prove very useful for any visitor; thoroughly recommended.

Dawn Balmer

OSME News

Geoff Welch

Conservation and Research Fund: change to sub-committee members

Due to pressure of work, Ramaz Gokhelashvili has had to retire from the committee and he is replaced by Vasil Ananian from Armenia. Vasil is a regular contributor to *Sandgrouse* and one of the most active birdwatchers in the Caucasus.

Increased funding for work in the United Arab Emirates

OSME is pleased to announce that additional funding for conservation and research projects in the United Arab Emirates, and occasionally elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula, is now available thanks to the establishment of a partnership with the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi). Applications for funding will be considered following the existing CRF guidelines—see the OSME website www.osme.org for details. This partnership provides an opportunity to support more small projects in the region or, where of outstanding need or importance, larger projects. Recipients will be expected to provide a report suitable for publication in the Group's monthly newsletter *Focus* or in its annual refereed journal *Tribulus* and, if possible, to give a presentation to the Group if in the Emirates.

The OSME Region List of Bird Taxa (ORL)

We are aware that not all of our members have reliable and fast access to the internet and therefore the ORL team has produced a printed version of the List that is available from OSME, price £8 including post and packing. To order a copy, please contact OSME Sales, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK (sales@osme.org).

The ORL team has also produced a simplified version of the List, which provides a quick reference to the recommended names and systematic order of the birds occurring in the OSME region. Copies are available as above or by download from the OSME website.

OSME Summer Meeting and AGM 2010

This year's Summer Meeting and AGM will again be held at the BTO Headquarters (The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU, UK) on Saturday 10 July. There is ample free parking. The bus station is about 10 minutes walk away and the railway station about 15 minutes. Road access is via the A11 London–Norwich road, connecting with the A14 from the north and Midlands. There are regular trains on the Birmingham–Norwich line, and also from Cambridge and London Kings Cross. Full details of the day are given in the enclosed programme.

OSME raffle 2009 and 2010

The winners of the 2009 raffle to raise funds for OSME's core activities and the Conservation and Research Fund were:

- 1st prize Ron Herbert—Opticron telescope and tripod kit
- 2nd prize John Bartley—Naturetrek holiday voucher
- 3rd prize C Northwood—Country Innovations coat
- 4th prize Clare Stringer—Birds of the Western Palearctic interactive DVD
- 5th prize Ron Herbert—British Birds interactive DVD
- 6th prize Mike Jennings—Mule pack
- 7th prize Mark Day—Wildlife Recorder computer programme
- 8th prize Chris Spooner—Birds of Turkey book

Congratulations to the above and very many thanks to the companies that donated the prizes and to everyone who bought tickets.

We are running another raffle this year and a book of tickets is enclosed (UK addresses only). As explained last year, under UK Gaming legislation, raffle tickets can only be sold in the UK so we apologise to all of our overseas members that they are unable to participate, though those with access to a UK bank account are able to buy tickets. Extra books of tickets can be obtained from Chris Lamsdell, 4 Hardings Close, Iver, Bucks SL0 0HL, UK (ads@osme.org).

This year's prizes are:

- 1st prize Opticron Imagic BGA SE 8x42 binoculars
- 2nd prize Naturetrek £250 holiday voucher
- 3rd prize Country Innovations New Venture waistcoat
- 4th prize BirdGuides Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic DVD
- 5th prize A&C Black Birds of Turkey
- 6th prize A&C Black Birds of the Middle East (new edition)

A small number of members contacted OSME last year expressing a preference not to receive raffle tickets unsolicited. Unfortunately, because of the way the mailing of *Sandgrouse* is organized, it is not possible to omit inserts from individual mailing envelopes so we express our apologies to those affected and hope that they will appreciate that the raffle is a cost-effective way of raising money to support OSME's work and, importantly, no-one is under any obligation to purchase tickets.

Gift Aid

Approximately half of OSME's UK members have completed a Gift Aid declaration form which allows OSME to reclaim from HM Revenue and Customs 28 pence for every £1 paid in membership subscriptions or as donations at no additional cost to the members involved. With this year's increase in subscription rates and anticipated changes in UK taxation arrangements in 2011, OSME is keen to maximize the benefits to the Society that this simple means of income generation offers. Therefore if you are a UK taxpayer and have not yet completed a Gift Aid form, please contact the OSME Treasurer, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK (treasurer@osme.org).

News & Information

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

EGYPT

Tom Coles Memorial Training events

In memory of Tom Coles, who passed away in January 2008, his family and friends have created a Memorial Training Events fund for use in Egypt, administered by Nature Conservation Egypt. The first event provided training in raptor identification for 25 Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency rangers and others at Ayn Sokhna in April 2009. Further training events in bird ID and census techniques are scheduled for 15–18 April 2010. (Source: Moldován István)

Local group impact on Qarun lake

Egypt's first IBA Local Conservation Group/ Site Support Group has persuaded one of the country's largest construction groups to end the dumping of waste at Qarun lake, which holds regionally important numbers of waterbirds in winter. The construction company has also pledged to restore an area of saltmarsh, destroyed by tourism development along the lake shore, as a bird sanctuary. Because of deleterious environmental changes, the local subspecies of Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala norrisae* is now extinct. The Lake Qarun Protected Area LCG/SSG was established by Nature Conservation Egypt (BirdLife Partner) in 2008, with a grant from the Aage V Jensen Charity Foundation.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, which began breeding in the 1990s, has now reached *c*8500 pairs at Qarun lake whilst numbers of breeding Spur-winged Lapwings *Vanellus spinosus* also meet IBA criteria, as does the wintering population of Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*. A salt extraction processing plant has been set up, which over time will improve water quality and permit habitats to be restored, as well as providing local employment. However, unregulated tourist developments along the southern shores of the lake are destroying the best waterbird habitats, particularly mudflats and saltmarshes, and result in increased disturbance to birds. Hunters, including organised parties from Europe, regularly ignore the lake's protected status.

The SSG was set up to enhance biodiversity conservation and benefit-sharing with local communities, in recognition that local people could make a significant contribution towards conservation efforts by reducing exploitation and hunting in the protected area. SSG members have removed shooting blinds erected by duck hunters, and plan to erect signboards with information about the lake's protected status, and its importance as an IBA. They are also involved in awareness raising and education activities with schoolchildren. The local government has an ecotourism strategy for Qarun lake, which is increasingly seen as a premium tourist destination. The SSG has proved to be an important point of contact between the lakeside community and the Protected Area authority, and also the Egyptian government. (Source: BirdLife International)

GEORGIA

Website change

The Batumi raptor count project has a new website, www.batumiraptorcount.org, where regular updates can be found. (Source: Pieter Vantieghem)

IRAQ

Hunting Houbara Bustards in Iraq

The open shrubby steppes and flat arid habitats in Iraq are favoured wintering grounds of migrant Houbara Bustards *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. This species is classified by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable because it has undergone rapid population declines over three generations (20 years) owing largely to unsustainable hunting levels. Because of the absence of wildlife protection legislation under the newly-established Iraq government, many

areas around the country are witnessing over-hunting activities. "A recent hunting expedition in Iraq reportedly killed over 100 Houbara Bustards alone" said Omar Fadil from Nature Iraq. As a result, Nature Iraq are calling for restrictions on the transport of hunting birds entering or leaving Iraq and requesting that the Iraq government enact wildlife protection legislation and establish hunting limits and/or bans for specific species like Houbara Bustard. They are also asking for more support and education to help the Iraqi security forces actively control hunting activities. (Source: BirdLife International)

ISRAEL

Help needed for Griffon Vultures

Help is needed with a Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* nest surveillance project at Gamla Nature Reserve in the Golan Heights. The project runs December 2009 until the end of June 2010. Daily observations are carried out during daylight hours (8 hours a day). Volunteers are asked to work 6 days a week (including weekends) and will have one day off. Accommodation and transport to the reserve will be provided. Volunteers should have some background in birdwatching and/or nature conservation, and volunteers will have to commit to at least four successive weeks. The volunteers should be able to communicate in at least basic English, have some Excel skills, have valid permission (visa) to stay in Israel and should be fully covered with life/health insurance. For more information please write or telephone Gamla Nature Reserve ++972-4-6822282, fax 4-6822285, yaelch@npa.org.il.

RUSSIA

Sociable Lapwing survey

Five teams have been involved in surveying Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* at Manych in September 2009, just north of the OSME region. The second international expedition to the Kumo-Manych depression in south Russia (Stavropolskij krai and republic of Kalmykia) was organized in September 2009 to survey this vast wetland area for this species. From 3–16 September the area was surveyed by five independent field teams, consisting of members of the RSPB, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan, Stavropol State University and local ornithologists. Around 4000 Sociable Lapwings were recorded with up to 2000 birds considered to be different individuals. The highest single day count reached 900 birds. Only one bird was found with colour-rings, ringed as a juvenile in Kostanaj region July 2009. These counts confirm the importance of this area for Sociable Lapwings as a major stopover site along the western migration route, crucial for refueling before they leave for their wintering grounds in northeast Africa. (Source: Maxim Koshkin)

SAUDI ARABIA

ABBA Report

Mike Jennings has published a new report 'Wintering Birds in Northern Saudi Arabia: February 2009' (ABBA Survey 40). The report is available as a PDF free to Phoenix subscribers. Hard copies are available for £10 plus postage from Mike at Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, UK (ArabianBirds@dsl.pipex.com).

SYRIA

Photographs required for book

Ahmad Aidek has written an identification book in Arabic about the birds, flowers and mammals of northeast Syria. He plans to print 1000 copies and distribute them for free. Information in Arabic is clearly enormously important in a country where awareness about wildlife is very limited. Photographs are being included and there are still some gaps to be filled. The species required are See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*, Wolf *Canis lupus*, Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*, Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena* and Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indica*. Anyone willing to help can contact Paul Doherty at paul@birdvideodvd.com. (Source: Paul Doherty)

TURKEY

Sermon helps conserve wetland

Lake Burdur is internationally important for wintering and passage waterbirds and has been threatened in recent years by pollution, urban development and unsustainable agricultural practices. In response, Doğa Derneği—the BirdLife Partner Designate for Turkey—recently drafted a sermon to educate the local community of Burdur on the importance of conserving their lake. It is estimated that through the sermon Doğa Derneği reached *c*52 000 people at over 1000 mosques in the villages, towns, districts and provincial centre of Burdur. The first of its kind in Burdur, the sermon highlighted the responsibility of humans in protecting the environment and wildlife and was a collaborative effort between Doğa Derneği, Burdur's provincial mufti and Burdur Centre Ulu Mosque Imam Nuri Çınar.

The lake is facing degradation pressure due to the unrestricted use of water resources that feed the basin, leading to its rapid retreat and a marked decrease in crop productivity and soil quality. Poor management of water resources continues to threaten the ecosystem's balance, its ecological integrity and the species which depend on it. To raise awareness about the ecological importance and natural assets of Burdur lake and to achieve conditions for sustainable management of the site in the long-term, Doğa Derneği implemented the 'Conserving Lake Burdur Project' with support from the Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project. The recent sermon has been the latest activity to educate local people about the importance of the lake, its unique ecology, and how it should be managed.

Through the WOW project, Doğa Derneği and its partners have been actively raising awareness about the lake's importance across Burdur and have trained 1524 farmers from 44 villages on the use of drip irrigation systems. Doga Dernegi have also been working with the Ministry of Education, local volunteers, bird watchers and teachers, to create a special education programme tailored for children ages 6 through 14 years. Initially rolled out in four elementary schools, the education programme includes a multitude of activities to foster an appreciation of wetland habitats and wetland-dependent species. This includes an art exhibition featuring over 200 pictures, a poster and bird checklist for use in school gardens and a school-wide water conservation campaign.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

New flamingo breeding colony

A new breeding colony of the Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* was discovered by a team of biologists from the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD). The colony was discovered within the 'Bul Syayeef' Marine Protected Area during a routine monitoring survey of the coastal areas west of Abu Dhabi. The biologists counted 1954 nests and 800 chicks at two sites in the new colony and also recorded more than 18 000 flamingos in intertidal areas between Musaffah and Bul Syayeef Musaffah.

This discovery demonstrates the importance of the area. It also highlights the urgency with which such areas need to be protected, as rapid development engulfs the coastal areas of Abu Dhabi, particularly in the coastal area of Musaffah. Dr Salim Javed, EAD's Deputy Manager, Bird Conservation, said "The entire inter-tidal mudflat and salt marsh areas to the west of the Musaffah channel are highly important for the flamingos as well as many other shorebirds. Importance of the newly discovered breeding site was already recognized based on satellite tracking of flamingos, undertaken by EAD since 2005." EAD is also collaborating with the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council on coastal profiling of areas earmarked for protection within the Abu Dhabi capital area. (Source: EAD)

OTHER NEWS

Update on ABBA

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia is with the publishers. Despite this important stage of the ABBA project being reached the ABBA database and *Phoenix* are continuing. Those resident in or visiting Arabia in the last 12 months are invited to send details of their observations of breeding or potentially breeding birds to the ABBA project so that these can be included in the database. It is important that changes in species range, fluctuations in species and regional numbers,

species ecological factors and conservation aspects, effects of climate change *etc etc* are recorded as they occur so that this resource can always be as complete and up to date as possible. Notes on actual breeding occurrences, ecological aspects, food, habitats, conservation, behaviour *etc* are welcomed for *Phoenix*. Those wishing to receive information from the ABBA database should state the region, time period or species they are interested in. Data is passed on free for research, conservation or personal use. Please contact Mike Jennings at the address above.

EcoMENA web community

An EcoMENA web community has been established (www.EcoMena.com). It covers environmental issues in the Middle East and North Africa region and everyone is welcome to join. (Source: Fares Khoury)

Extinction threat to Middle East's most threatened bird

Conservationists trying to prevent the extinction of the Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* are distraught that one of the last remaining wild birds in the Middle East has been shot by a hunter in Saudi Arabia, bringing the known wild Middle Eastern population of this Critically Endangered species to just four individuals.

A satellite-tracking project led by BirdLife International and the IUCN, in collaboration with the Desert Commission of the Syrian government, established that the Syrian adults migrate to the Ethiopian highlands each winter, but the wintering area of younger birds remains a mystery. This migration across the deserts of the Middle East to northeast Africa puts these birds under threat from the region's many hunters. Researchers from BirdLife, the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and IUCN, trying to find out more about the movements of the young birds, fitted two birds with satellite tags, and it is one of these birds, a female, which was shot. "We were excited that tagging a sub-adult ibis may have helped us to solve the mystery of where young ibises spend the winter, but now we may never know" said Eng. Ali Hamoud of the Syrian Desert Commission. "The shooting of a young bird from such a tiny population is devastating news and it shows that hunting is a major threat to this species."

Three birds from a semi-captive population in Turkey were released in 2008 to see if they would migrate. They flew south as far as Jordan but subsequently were found dead. Initially, it was feared they had been poisoned, but later it was realised that the birds had been electrocuted, emphasising that other threats can have a devastating impact on the future of the Northern Bald Ibis in the Middle East. More satellite-tagged birds released from Turkey in 2009 flew south as far as Saudi Arabia but they too disappeared not much more than 100 km from where the Syrian bird was shot. Although their fate has not been established, researchers believe these birds too may have succumbed to hunters.

The hunting of Northern Bald Ibis is not allowed in Saudi Arabia. HH Prince Bandar Bin Saud, Secretary General of NCWCD (National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development) said that "Upon hearing the news of Northern Bald Ibises in Saudi Arabia, NCWCD immediately reacted and dispatched a team to search for the birds. Local people reported to the commission that an ibis had been shot illegally by hunters."

As a response to the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme, HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco became Species Champion for Northern Bald Ibis providing crucial support to this challenging programme through the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation. BirdLife is more determined than ever to conserve this emblematic species that has braved the Middle East and North African deserts for millennia inspiring cultures and religions of the region. (Source: BirdLife International)

The Nature of Iraq—from Marshes to Mountains

A story in pictures and words of the work of Nature Iraq in a forgotten wildlife paradise will be displayed at the Birdscapes Gallery at Glandford, Norfolk, UK from 4–25 July 2010. It is hosted by Nature Iraq and BirdLife International. Contact richardporter@dialstart.net for further information. (Source: Richard Porter)

OBC celebrates 25 years

Congratulations to the Oriental Bird Club who celebrated their 25th anniversary in 2009.

Slender-billed Curlew: the search intensifies

Given the extreme rarity of the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, a concerted global effort to try to 'rediscover' the species was launched by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (SBCWG) in December 2009. This effort is encouraging birdwatchers to visit all known and potential passage, wintering and moulting sites to search for the species. This focus on non-breeding sites is considered to offer greater chances of success compared to efforts to locate a probable handful of birds on a vast area of potential breeding habitat. Additionally, detailed and up to date information on the field identification of the species has been produced to aid observers. Further information on how to assist in this search is available from www.slenderbilledcurlew.net and the following publications:

- Cleeves, T, N Crockford & P Köhler. 2008. Die größte feldornithologische Herausforderung Europas: Die Suche nach dem Dünnschnabelbrachvogel [The Slender-billed Curlew Quest: the greatest European birding challenge]. *Der Falke* 55 (11): 419–428.
- Cleeves, T, N Crockford & P Köhler. 2009. The Slender-billed Curlew quest. *Birdwatch* 199: 43–47. (this and the next publication are available at www.slenderbilledcurlew.net)
- Delany, S (ed). 2009. Special Slender-billed Curlew issue! *International Waterbird Census Newsletter* 12: 1–15.

The report of the unsuccessful Slender-billed Curlew expedition to Ayaqaghitma lake, Uzbekistan, in spring 2008, partially funded by OSME and which included the playing of Slender-billed Curlew calls from the top of a lorry located *c*300 m from the shoreline, can be downloaded from the latter website. The RSPB has awarded Sadegh Sadeghi Zadegan 2000 US$ for surveys in Iran to search for the species.

Request for biometrics. In collaboration with SBCWG, the RSPB are drafting a proposal to search bird markets all around North Africa and the Middle East. This will include practical guidelines, with details of possible confusion species, to facilitate measurement and identification of possible curlews for sale in the markets. Details of morphometrics (bill length, bill + skull, tarsus, wing length, wing formula *etc*) of Slender-billed Curlew, Steppe Curlew *Numenius arquata suschkini* and Steppe Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris* are required. If you are able to help please contact Nicola Crockford at nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk.

Request for photos. As part of the SBCWG's work, investigation is currently being made into the identification of several forms of *Numenius* in the Palearctic region and adjacent areas. The group is therefore seeking photos of the following taxa: *N. tenuirostris*, *N. a. arquata*, *N. a. orientalis*, *N. a. suschkini*, *N. p. phaeopus*, *N. p. alboaxillaris*, *N. p. variegatus* and *N. p. hudsonicus*. Due to a lack of data and ambiguity associated with *Numenius* from eastern Europe/western Asia, photos from this area are particularly sought. All photos should be sent to Ross Ahmed (rossahmed@gmail.com) and correspondence should include any relevant details such as photographer, date taken and location. Photos should preferably not be manipulated before sending, although edited photos are also welcome.

ERRATUM

Review: The Birds of Turkey (*Sandgrouse* 31 (1): 80–81, 2009).

The order of authors presented at the head of the review reflects that shown in the cover scan received from the publishers to accompany the review but not that of the actual book as published. The reviewer had submitted the author order correctly but I, the editor, altered it to match the scan. The correct citation details are: Guy M Kirwan, Kerem A Boyla, Peter Castell, Barbaros Demirci, Metehan Özen, Hilary Welch & Tim Marlow. 2008. *The Birds of Turkey*. Christopher Helm, London.

CORRIGENDUM

Prior, R & C Conroy. 2009. The Ras Baalbek semi-desert: Lebanon's aridland area and its birds. *Sandgrouse* 31: 140–145.

The authors apologise for incorrectly attributing Plates 2 & 3 which, in fact, were photographs by Karen Wade.

Around the Region

Dawn Balmer & David Murdoch (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 2009 unless stated otherwise.

Records and photographs for Sandgrouse 32 (2) should be sent by 15 June to atr@osme.org.

AFGHANISTAN

As we receive few records, all records from Richard Seargent, Helmand province, are included. A **Merlin** *Falco columbarius* was at Camp Bastion on 4 Dec, a **Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* at Camp Bastion on the late date of 22 Dec, three **Long-legged Buzzards** *Buteo rufinus* were at Pimon 18 Nov and an adult **Tawny Eagle** *Aquila rapax* at Nad Ali 1 Dec. At least 5000 **Crowned Sandgrouse** *Pterocles coronatus* were north of Wahid 17 Nov and 15+ were over Camp Bastion 23 Nov. On 1 Dec a **White-throated Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* and a **Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* were at Nad Ali. A **Hume's Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella acutirostris* was at Silab 20 Nov, a **Hume's Whitethroat** *Sylvia althaea* at Camp Bastion 23 Nov and a **Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* at Nad Ali 1 Dec. A **Taiga Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicilla* was at Pimon and 36 **Spanish Sparrows** *Passer hispaniolensis* were at Camp Bastion 21 Nov. A **Sykes's Wagtail** *Motacilla flava beema* was at Nad Ali 02 Dec and **Water Pipits** *Anthus spinoletta* at Wahid 17 Nov and Nad Ali 2 Dec.

BAHRAIN

There were 3300 **Greater Flamingos** *Phoenicopterus roseus* between Tubli, Sitra and east of Alba on 30 Nov. Two **Black Storks** *Ciconia nigra* were at the southern outflow 30 Nov and are the second record for Bahrain, two **Eurasian Spoonbills** *Platalea leucorodia* were also present. A **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* was at Hamalah experimental farm 30 Oct. Good numbers of **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* were at Barber 8 Nov.

CYPRUS

A pair of **Red-crested Pochards** *Netta rufina* present for several weeks at Oroklini marsh, Larnaca, appeared with 10 chicks on 1 Jun, the first breeding record for Cyprus. A total of 366 **Glossy Ibises** *Plegadis falcinellus*, in 8 flocks, were recorded flying south around the Akamas peninsula on 8 Aug, a good count for the early date. A **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* was at Phasouri reed beds 7 Oct. Around 300 **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* flew southeast over Paphos foothills at sunset 21 Aug, the earliest large migrant flock for over 10 years. **Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* is less than annual in Cyprus so one at Mandria 17 Aug and one Polis beach 10–21 Aug was a good show. The sixth record of **Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* involved a bird at Paphos headland, 27 Aug–11 Nov, and could be the same bird that has appeared every August since 2007. Two **Terek Sandpipers** *Xenus cinereus* at Chrysochou bay, Polis, on 8 Aug was only the 10th record since 1997 and a **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* at Akrotiri, 26 Sep–6 Oct, was a notable record. The first record of **Baird's Sandpiper** *Calidris bairdii* involved a first-winter bird at Lady's Mile 2–5 Dec and a **Pectoral Sandpiper** *Calidris melanotos* at Akhna dam 30 Sep–1 Oct was the fourth record for the island. A **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni*, a rare migrant, was at Akhna dam 13 Aug. An adult **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaetus* was at Larnaca salt lake 12 Dec, a **Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* at Akhna dam 18–20 Jun and a **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* at Zakaki marsh 12 Nov.

A **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* at Mandria on 3 Nov will be the seventh record if accepted. **Savi's Warblers** *Locustella luscinioides* are very rare in autumn: one at

Zakaki marsh 27 Oct. Also unusual was a **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* at Agia Napa sewage works area on 23 Aug, which will be the 12th record and the first for 3 years. Most previous records were of birds in the hand, trapped by ringing teams so a bird identified in the field is unusual. At least ten juvenile **Barred Warblers** *Sylvia nisoria* at Agia Napa sewage works area 18 Aug is the largest group on record in Cyprus. **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas galactotes* were at Marathounta 21 Aug and Agia Napa sewage works area 22 Aug. This is the third consecutive year that **Rock Sparrows** *Petronia petronia* have occurred in winter: from 6 Nov birds were recorded in the Marathounta area, with a maximum of 12 on 11 Nov; surprisingly there was only one previous country record prior to 2007. Four **Richard's Pipits** *Anthus richardi* were at Patriki pools 15 Sep and two at Mandria 1 Oct. A **Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella* was at Phasouri reed beds 8 Nov and a first-winter **Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza cineracea* at Pissouri cliffs 13 Sep.

EGYPT

Two **Egyptian Geese** *Alopochen aegyptiaca* were on the east side of Elephantine island, Aswan, 8–10 Sep, eight **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca* were along the west bank, opposite the botanical gardens, Aswan, 23 Nov 2009. A **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* at West Aswan 24 Nov is a notable record as this species does not winter here, also *c*10–15 **Yellow-billed Storks** *Mycteria ibis* were at Abu Simbel 7–8 Sep. A **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* was found dead at Sharm el-Sheikh sewage pools on 17 Nov and it was wearing a ring from the Hiddensee ringing scheme, Germany. A group of 95 **Glossy Ibises** *Plegadis falcinellus* was on a sandbank at Aswan 2 Nov. A flock of 110 **Great White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* descended to overnight in the Blue Canyon, St Katherine city 18 Nov. On 17 Nov at Sharm el-Sheikh sewage pools, ten **Levant Sparrowhawks** *Accipiter brevipes*, two **Lesser Spotted Eagles** *Aquila pomarina*, a first-year **Eastern Imperial Eagle** *Aquila heliaca* and a light phase **Booted Eagle** *Aquila pennata* were

Plate 1. Black Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas podobe podobe*, Wadi Gamal, Egypt, 24–26 Nov 2009 at least. © *Moldován István*

recorded. An **African Swamphen** *Porphyrio madagascariensis* was seen from the Tut Amon Village road, Aswan, 8–10 Sep and 2 adults and one juvenile **Common Crane** *Grus grus* were at Sharm el-Sheikh sewage pools 17 Nov. At least 80 **Crab-plovers** *Dromas ardeola* were at Hamata mangroves 13 Sep and 36 **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* at Wadi Lahami 11 Oct, 10 birds there 18 Oct. **Collared Plovers** *Charadrius tricollaris* were found in the fishponds along the Tut Amon Village road south of Sahara City, by Aswan, with one 9 Sep and three the following day. At least 5–6 **Greater Painted Snipes** *Rostratula benghalensis* were at the fishponds, Aswan, 8–10 Sept, one bird was along the Nile (west side) in a muddy area, road to Gharb Sahel (Siheil) village, and a female was at West Aswan, both 17 Nov. A **Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinerea* was at Wadi Lahami 25 Nov. On 27 Nov at Zafarana, 25 **Yellow-legged Gulls** *Larus michahellis*, 20 **Armenian Gulls** *Larus armenicus* and 20 **Slender-billed Gulls** *Larus genei* were recorded. An adult **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaetus* was above the Nile, Aswan, 17 Nov. About 20 **Swift Terns** *Sterna bergii* were at Zafarana 27 Nov. At least 6–8 **African Collared Doves** *Streptopelia roseogrisea* were along the main road Hamata–Wadi Lahami feeding in the desert and around acacias in mid-Sep and two were ringed at Wadi Gamal 14 Oct. Three **Namaqua Doves** *Oena capensis* were at Wadi Lahami 12 Oct and one at Equinoxe El Nabaa hotel (30 km N of Marsa Alam) mid Sep.

A **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius pallidirostris* was at Abu Simbel 22 Nov, a **Fan-tailed Raven** *Corvus rhipidurus* at Wadi Gamal 12 Oct and two **Armenian Stonechats** *Saxicola* (*maurus*) *armenicus* were at Sharm el-Sheikh sewage pools 17 Nov. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* was at Wadi Feiran 19 Nov, two **Cyprus Warblers** *Sylvia melanothorax* at Wadi Gamal 24 Nov and two **Fieldfares** *Turdus pilaris* at Wadi Dome 28 Nov. A **Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe podobe* was at Wadi Gamal 24–26 Nov at least (Plate 1). A male **Rufous-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthoprymna* was at Giza (Pyramids) 16 Nov, a male at St Katherine city two days later, and a male Wadi Gamal 26 Nov. A singing male **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* was at Wadi Dome 28 Nov. A **Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius* was at Giza 16 Nov and at St Katherine 18 Nov, a male **Palestine Sunbird** *Cinnyris osea* in fresh breeding plumage was at St Katherine city 18 Nov, a male **Red Avadavat** *Amandava amandava* was nest building in the large reed massifs around Crocodile island, Luxor, 10–12 Sept and two **African Pied Wagtails** *Motacilla aguimp* were at Abu Simbel 22 Nov. A flock of 15 **Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes githagineus* was in West Aswan, 17 Nov, where they are rarely recorded.

IRAQ

In May and June Nature Iraq biologists again carried out detailed surveys of the country's birdlife in order to help assess the most important sites for wildlife conservation—the Key Biodiversity Areas. The surveys were the most comprehensive ever made in Iraq, achieving widespread coverage. They were the fifth summer survey undertaken in the southern marshes, the second in Kurdistan and the first in the west at this season. The known breeding range of over 80 species was extended, mostly in the little-known west and Kurdistan, where two species were added to the Iraq list: **Grey-necked Bunting** *Emberiza buchanani* and **Pale Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne obsoleta*, the latter observed nest building. The surveys also revealed that Iraq's three near-endemic species, **Iraq Babbler** *Turdoides altirostris*, **Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus* and the globally endangered **Basra Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus griseldis* had all extended their known breeding range. The globally vulnerable **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* was discovered breeding at 13 sites in good numbers. Whilst ten sites were in the southern marshes, where the species is known to breed, those in the north and west represent a range extension. Over 1000 birds were counted, with 585 at one site in the marshes. The near-threatened **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* and **Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufina* were found for the first time breeding in Iraq: the Ferruginous Duck at six sites in the southern marshes with an impressive 1100 individuals at one of them. The endemic subspecies of **Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* was recorded in high numbers in the marshes at 13 sites, with a high count of 275 at one locality, representing

5% of its population. As in previous surveys, the population of herons and their allies appeared healthy, with 8 species breeding. **Darters** *Anhinga rufa* were found at two sites.

The high densities and species diversity of birds of prey in Kurdistan were impressive: 17 species breeding or probably breeding, including **Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus* (13 sites), **Short-toed Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus* (ten sites), **Levant Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter brevipes* (eight sites), **Booted Eagle** *Aquila pennata* (eight sites), **Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus* (one site), **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* (three sites), **Steppe Buzzard** *Buteo buteo vulpinus* (16 sites) and **Hobby** *Falco subbuteo* (one site). Birds of prey are very good indicators of the health of the environment. The globally endangered **Egyptian Vulture** *Neophron percnopterus* was found at 20 sites, totalling over 70 individuals. This demonstrates very clearly the importance of Kurdistan and west Iraq for this species. The globally vulnerable **Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni* was breeding or probably breeding at a total of 14 sites, with over 110 birds recorded.

Amongst the wading birds, large colonies of breeding **Collared Pratincoles** *Glareola pratincola* were discovered throughout the country and the population of **White-tailed Lapwing** *Vanellus leucurus* in the southern marshes showed that it is of global importance for this little studied species. **Slender-billed Gulls** *Larus genei* were present at over ten sites in the south and two in Kurdistan, where one colony held 1600 pairs and the other 2400 pairs—over 2% of the world population.

Once again important discoveries were made about the **Basra Reed Warbler**. Over 200 were recorded during the marshland surveys and a new breeding site—and range extension—was discovered in the north. Two more globally near-threatened species were observed at localities where they were probably breeding: **European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* at 20 sites and **Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza cineracea* at eight sites. However it was not possible to confirm whether the ten pairs or territories of the near-threatened **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* found in April were nesting birds or migrants. The findings of these important KBA surveys demonstrate that there are many exciting discoveries to be made in Iraq.

ISRAEL

A female **Baikal Teal** *Anas formosa* was reported at Hula lake on 6 Nov and will be the first for Israel if accepted. Four family parties of **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca* were in the Judean plains during July and two **Red-throated Divers** *Gavia stellata* were at Acre 23 Dec till years' end and are the fourth record for Israel. A first-calendar year **Striated Heron** *Butorides striata* was at Ma'agan Michael on 4 Nov and is the northernmost record in Israel. A **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* was off Eilat's North Beach during Dec. Several **Crested Honey Buzzards** *Pernis ptilorhyncus* were noted on migration during the Northern Valleys Migration Survey in Sept and one returned to Eilat for its third winter during Nov. An adult **Black-winged Kite** of the Asian form *vociferos* was at Eilat 29 Sept–1 Oct and another of the same form was at Hula 29 Nov–1 Dec representing the 10th and 11th records. An **African Swamphen** *Porphyrio madagascariensis* remained at Hula all Dec. An adult **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo* flew over Vardun, S Judean plains, on 30 Sep, a first calendar year bird was at Hula 11 Nov and one was there 20 Dec onwards. A **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* was at Hula 13 Dec, two **White-tailed Lapwings** *Vanellus leucurus* were at Mitzpe Ramon 27 Sep, a **Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* was at Ashdod 31 Oct–1 Nov and one at Tishlovet reservoir, Jizreel valley, 11 Nov. **Bar-tailed Godwits** *Limosa lapponica* were recorded from En Hamifraz fishponds, Zvulun valley, 20 Sep and from Nahsholim, Carmel coast, 25 Sep whilst two **Terek Sandpipers** *Xenus cinerea* were at Ma'agan Michael 15–16 Aug and En Hamifraz fishponds, Zvulun valley, 29 Aug–3 Sep. A **Pectoral Sandpiper** *Calidris melanotos* was at Ma'agan Michael 30 Sep–6 Oct and is the ninth for Israel. An adult **Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* returned to Acre for its fourth winter on 2 Dec and was joined by a first calendar-year bird 25 Dec. There were 20 **Bridled Terns** *Onychoprion anaethetus* off Eilat's North Beach 18 Jul, 10 on 11 Aug and eight 31 Aug. In addition, as in summer 2008, a pair returned to Nachlieli island off the N Mediterranean coast and attempted to breed within a colony of Common Terns *Sterna hirundo*, but did not succeed.

Daurian Isabelline Shrikes *Lanius i. isabellinus* were at Rishpon, Mediterranean coast, 18 Sep, Maoz Hayim 15–16 Oct and Ein Shahak, Arava, 23 Oct. There was an intriguing record of a **White-winged Lark** *Melanocorypha leucoptera*, heard but not seen, over Bahad 1, central Negev, 20 Nov. A **Paddyfield Warbler** *Acrocephalus agricola* was ringed at Ma'agan Michael and present 1–2 Dec, the seventh record for Israel, and a **Green Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochiloides nitidus* was ringed at Netiv Halamed-He, Judean plains, 14 Oct, fourth for Israel. There was an amazing fall of **Siberian Stonechats** *Saxicola maurus* with 129 at Eilat 9 Nov, the highest number ever recorded in Israel. A **Rufous-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthoprymna* was at Belvoir, east Galilee, 20 Nov, two **Common Rosefinches** *Carpodacus erythrinus* were ringed at Hula 19 Dec and a **Rustic Bunting** *Emberiza rustica* was at Nafha, central Negev, 14 Nov.

JORDAN

Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea* were at Ghawr As Safi 14 Aug and two at Azraq wetland 5 Nov. Two new sites were discovered for **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor*; three were between Fifa and Tafila on 3 Sep and up to four were in Wadi Eheimer, near Rahma, Wadi Araba, 27 Sep. A **European Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* was at Aqaba pools 17 Nov, three **Little Crakes** *Porzana parva* at Azraq wetland 18 Aug and a flock of **Eurasian Stone-Curlews** were singing at sunset at Pella 9 Aug. Two adult **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* were in the airport area, 25 km south of Amman, on 17 Nov and were the third record since the 1960s if accepted by JBRC. Three **Ruffs** *Philomachus pugnax* were at Aqaba pools 17 Nov, **Namaqua Doves** *Oena capensis* were recorded near Baptism Site 12 Aug, at Wadi Feifa on 14 Aug and Azraq wetland 18 Aug. A **Barn Owl** *Tyto alba* was at Madaba city centre 5 Aug, a **Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* at Ghawr As Safi 15 Aug and **Pied Kingfishers** *Ceryle rudis* at Ziglab dam 10 Aug and three there 8 Nov. A **Green Bee-eater** *Merops orientalis* was at Suweila, Jordan valley, near King Hussein bridge border crossing 15 Nov, two **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** *Merops persicus* were at South Shuna 6 August and one Azraq wetland 18 Aug and a **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* was at Suweila, Jordan valley, near the King Hussein bridge border crossing 15 Nov. There are very few autumn records of **Bimaculated Lark** *Melanocorypha bimaculata* so *c*100 at Ruweished 19 Oct is notable. Three **Woodlarks** *Lullula arborea* were at Kufrinja 6 Nov and a family group of **Arabian Babblers** *Turdoides squamiceps* was at Wadi Hasa 15 August. There are few recent records of **Red-rumped Wheatear** *Oenanthe moesta* so a pair with a nest in the Dlagha area, south of Petra, 15 Apr is noteworthy. On 18 Nov an **Olive-backed Pipit** *Anthus hodgsoni* was recorded at Aqaba and will be the second record if accepted. Around 60 **Syrian Serins** *Serinus syriacus* were in the *Artemisia* highland steppe, 20 km north of Wadi Musa/Petra, on 6 Nov.

KAZAKHSTAN

An adult **Indian Pond Heron** *Ardeola grayii* at the Sorbulak lake system, 80 km NW of Almaty, on 16 July was the first record for Kazakhstan. A **Laughing Dove** *Streptopelia senegalensis* on the northeastern edge of the Priaralskye Karakumy sand massif on 6 June was *c*200 km north of its usual breeding range and a breeding pair of **Eastern Black-eared Wheatears** *Oenanthe* (*hispanica*) *melanoleuca* in the very south of Kostanay region on 10 June were *c*700 km northeast of the species' known breeding areas on the Mangyshlak peninsula.

KUWAIT

Two **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* were at Shuaiba golf course 14–18 Nov, the second record for Kuwait (Plates 2 & 3). A **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* was at Doha South reserve 5 Nov (sixth record) and one at Jahra Pool reserve (JPR) 13 Nov and 2 Dec (seventh record). Three **Great Crested Grebes** *Podiceps cristatus* were at JPR 14 Dec and two **Bitterns** *Botaurus stellaris* were at the Manchester club site 2 Dec. The first **Indian Pond Heron** *Ardeola grayii* for Kuwait was at Al Abraq on 7 Nov. A **Socotra Cormorant** *Leucocarbo nigrogularis* was at Khiran Pearl city 4 Jul, with eight there 8 Aug and 15 on 5 Sept, the highest daily count since Aug 2000. Two **Darters** *Anhinga melanogaster* at JPR 20 Sep were the first record for Kuwait. A **Merlin** *Falco columbarius* was at the Pivot Fields 28 Oct and the 11th record of **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* was there 17 Sep

Plates 2 & 3. Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*, Shuaiba golf course, Kuwait, 14–18 Nov 2009. © *Pekka Fågel*

with another record at Al Abraq 23 Oct. The first **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* for Kuwait was at JPR 25 Nov. Twenty **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** *Gyps fulvus* were at JPR 20 Oct and one Jahra East Outfall 31 Oct. A **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* was at the Pivot Fields 3 Dec, a **Shikra** *Accipiter badius* and a **Levant Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter brevipes* at Al Abraq 2 Oct and a **Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* at JPR 20 Oct. At Jahra East Outfall a **Purple**

Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* was present 14 Sep and a **Common Crane** *Grus grus* 17 Sep. The fifth record of **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* involved two birds at the Pivot Fields 8–13 Nov, the sixth record of **Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria* was at the Pivot Fields 1 Nov and two there 13 Nov. A **Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa* was at Sulaibikhat 17 Jul and a **Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger* was still present Sulaibikhat bay 4 Jul. In Jahra bay a **Pomarine Skua** *Stercorarius pomarinus* and a **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* (second record) were recorded 1 Jul. The seventh record of **Oriental Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia orientalis* was at the Pivot Fields 6 Nov and 30 Nov. Up to two **Indian Rollers** *Coracias benghalensis* were at Jahra Farm Jul and Aug and one Pivot Fields 20 Oct and 4 Nov.

The first **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* of the winter was a group of nine at Jahra Farm 21 Oct and a flock of 60+ was on Green Island 30 Nov. A **Sombre Tit** *Poecile lugubris* at Messila Beach 4 Sep was the first Kuwait record and a **Woodlark** *Lullula arborea* was at Jahra Farm 4 Dec. **Basra Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus griseldis* was recorded breeding for the first time in Kuwait and a juvenile photographed at Jahra East Outfall 18 Jul. Another juvenile was at JPR 12 Sep. There were two records of **Mountain Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus sindianus*, one at Al Abraq 16 Oct and one Jahra East Outfall 22 Oct. The first **Dusky Warbler** *Phylloscopus fuscatus* for Kuwait was at Jahra Farm 29 Oct, a **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* at Jahra East Outfall 21 Oct, a **Greenish Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus* Al Abraq 2 Oct and a **Common Babbler** *Turdoides caudata* at Sulaibikhat 7 Aug. At Sabah Al-Ahmed natural reserve a **Red-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe chrysopygia* was recorded 21 Oct and the eighth record of **Hume's Wheatear** *Oenanthe albonigra* was there 12 Dec. The ninth **Dead Sea Sparrow** *Passer moabiticus* was at JPR 4 Nov. A **Richard's Pipit** *Anthus richardi* was at Jahra East Outfall 17 Sep, a **Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* Jahra Farm 4 Dec and a **Common Rosefinch** *Carpodacus erythrinus* at Al Abraq 4 Sep. A **Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla* was at Al Abraq 6 Nov along with Kuwait's second **Rustic Bunting** *Emberiza rustica* 56 years after the first record.

LEBANON

Two **Peregrine Falcons** *Falco peregrinus* were present at Ehden reserve 8 Nov. **Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* has been proved to breed: a pair was found with at least one recently hatched chick near Tripoli 23 Jun. Other pairs demonstrating territorial behaviour were recorded at Dbayeh and north of Cheikh Zennad. There were single **Whimbrels** *Numenius phaeopus* 17 Oct and 27 Nov and 20 **Ruddy Turnstones** *Arenaria interpres* 20 Oct at El Mina, Tripoli. A **Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* was a good find at Cheikh Zennad on 29 Jul, the 7th country record. Six **Hawfinches** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* were at Balamand, near Tripoli, 16 Nov and ten at Amioun 28 Nov.

OMAN

The highlight was Oman's first **Dusky Warbler** *Phylloscopus fuscatus*, on Mahawt island near Barr Al Hikman 31 Oct; this species has been recorded in the UAE and Yemen. A single **Greater White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons* was at Sohar Sun farms 15 Nov while in the south, two were at Khor Mughsayl 27 Nov and six Khor Rouri 28 Nov. On 15 Nov, six **Greylag Geese** *Anser anser* were at Sohar Sun farms and one at nearby Liwa. Individuals of the rarely recorded **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** *Puffinus pacificus* were seen off Ras Janjari in southern Oman 16 Jul (one), 17 Jul (three) and 18 Jul (two). Also off Ras Janjari were up to 500 **Persian Shearwaters** *Puffinus persicus* 16–17 Jul, a single **Sooty Shearwater** *Puffinus griseus*, a rare species, 16 Jul, 8000–10 000 **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** *Puffinus carneipes* per hour 17 Jul, two **Swinhoe's Storm-petrels** *Oceanodroma monorhis* 18 Jul and three off Mirbat 20 Oct. **Amur Falcons** *Falco amurensis* were seen at Khor Mughsayl 9 Nov (one), near Tawi Attair 29 Nov (seven including two adult males) and Jebel Qara 10 Dec (six). A lateish adult **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor* was on Jebel Qamar 27 Nov and a **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* at Ras Al Hamra 21 Oct. A sub-adult female **Shikra** *Accipiter badius* was at Salalah 16 Jul, an interesting date. Two **European Honey Buzzards** *Pernis apivorus* were at Salalah 1 Dec (this species is irregular in Oman) and one **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* was at Khor Taqah 8 Nov. A single **Greater Spotted Eagle** *Aquila clanga*

was at Salalah nature reserve 16 Jul, a very unusual date for a migrant and winter visitor. Two **Purple Swamphens** *Porphyrio porphyrio* at Khor Rouri 30 Jul were the 5th Oman record, the first since 1995 and a single **Red-knobbed Coot** *Fulica cristata* there 3 Nov and 8 Nov was the 6th record. Single **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were at Rahab farm, near Marmul, 11–17 Oct, Khor Sawli 25 Oct, Jarziz farm, Salalah, 29 Oct and Khor Rouri 8 Nov; the last three sightings were probably of the same bird. A juvenile **Crab-plover** *Dromas ardeola* at Qurm, 18 Oct, is now unusual at this site. A **Jack Snipe** *Lymnocryptes minimus* was at Muntasar 24 Oct and another Qurm park 1 Nov. Two adult **Sooty Terns** *Onychoprion fuscata* were off Ras As Sawadi 13 Jul and two off Mirbat 20 Oct. Two **Sooty Noddies** *Anous tenuirostris* were off Ras Janjari 17 Jul and one 18 Jul. A **Rufous Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia (orientalis) meena* was at Muntasar 24 Oct. **Asian Koel** *Eudynamys scolopaceus* is unusual in the north; a single female was at Muscat 18 Dec. An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was at Al Beed farm 23 Oct, another Muntasar 28 Oct and a third Khor Mughsayl 3 Nov.

A **Lesser Grey Shrike** *Lanius minor* was at Natih 15 Oct. A single **Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus*, a male, was at Ayn Hamran 17 Oct, one Muntasar 28 Oct and four Thumrait 17 Dec. A **Brown-throated Martin** *Riparia paludicola*, a very rare visitor to Oman, was at Qurm park on 1 Nov. A **Dunn's Lark** *Eremalauda dunni* was at Muntasar 14 Jul; this elusive species is rarely seen. Two **Oriental Skylarks** *Alauda gulgula* were at Sohar Sun farms 25–26 Oct and one 29 Oct. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* was at Ayn Hamran 28 Nov. A **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* at Al Beed in the central desert on 23 Oct and another at Ayn Hamran 25 Oct were the first records since 2004. A flock of 20 **Spanish Sparrows** *Passer hispaniolensis* was on Masirah island 12 Nov. Two **Forest Wagtails** *Dendronanthus indicus* were on Masirah 28–29 Oct; this species seems to be becoming more regular. A single **Masked Wagtail** *Motacilla (alba) personata* was on Masirah 19 Sep though is most frequently recorded at Sohar Sun farms where six were seen 3 Nov. A **Blyth's Pipit** *Anthus godlewskii* was on Masirah 30 Oct and a **Little Bunting** *Emberiza pusilla* at Qitbit 19 Oct.

QATAR

At least two pairs of **Squacco Herons** *Ardeola ralloides* successfully bred at Abu Nakhla wastewater area in June, the first Qatar breeding record. An adult male **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* at Arakhiya farm 4–6 Dec and a juvenile there 18 Dec (Plate 4) were the first and second records for Qatar.

Plate 4. Juvenile Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*, 18 Dec 2009, Arakhiya farm, Qatar. © *John Thompson*

Plate 5. Juvenile Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*, 30 Oct 2009, near Al Kharrarah, Qatar. © *Dileep Kumar*

Plate 6. Juvenile Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*, 30 Oct 2009, Abu Nakhla, Qatar. © *Gavin Farnell*

Other first records were a juvenile **European Honey-buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* over Al Khor aerodrome 10 Oct and a juvenile **Levant Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter brevipes* on a small farm near Al Kharrarah 30 Oct (Plate 5). A **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* at Arakhiya farm 4 Sep–2 Oct is the second Qatar record. Three observations at different locations of **Short-toed Snake-eagle** *Circaetus gallicus* 3 Oct–26 Nov were the first sightings since 1988. A juvenile **Eastern Imperial Eagle** *Aquila heliaca* at Abu Nakhla 30 Oct (Plate 6) had been ringed and tagged with a yellow oval tag 28 Jul in Naurzum nature reserve, Kostanay, Kazakhstan; another second record for Qatar. Two pairs of **Pied Avocets** *Recurvirostra avosetta* successfully bred at Al Kharaanah wastewater lagoons in June; the only previous breeding record was in 1984. Eight **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* at Arakhiya farm 20–28 Nov were the first since 1985; four were still present 18 Dec.

RUSSIA

Manych wetland lies just to the north of the OSME region but is close enough to entice members to venture that little further for spectacular birding. In March **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* numbered *c*14 500 but **Red-breasted Goose** *Branta ruficollis* numbers totalled just 132; the visit was clearly too early for the large influx of spring migrants from the Danube delta. A count of *c*5010 **White-headed Ducks** *Oxyura leucocephala* on 2 Apr was the highest in recent years. The first **Pallid Harriers** *Circus macrourus* started to move through around this date and the first **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were on territory; summer migrants such as **Eurasian Hoopoe** *Upupa epops* and **Western Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla* (*flava*) *flava* had started to appear. By 11 Apr just one Greater White-fronted Goose remained and numbers of White-headed Duck were down to *c*3800. On 14 Apr a third nesting pair of **White-tailed Eagles** *Haliaeetus albicilla* was discovered. On 9 May a flock of *c*3600 **Red-necked Phalaropes** *Phalaropus lobatus* was seen on the northeast of the main Manych lake north of Divenoe island. The first **Booted Warbler** *Iduna caligata* and the second **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** *Iduna pallida* for the area were seen 12 May. Counts in September included *c*12 000 **Northern Lapwings** *Vanellus vanellus*, *c*10 000 **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* and *c*35 000 **Ruddy Shelducks** *Tadorna ferruginea*. On 26 Nov 124 **Whooper Swans** *Cygnus cygnus* were seen but just one **Bewick's Swan** *Cygnus* (*columbianus*) *bewickii*. About 1500 **Greater White-fronted Geese** but only two **Red-breasted Geese** had returned by 28 Nov; *c*450 **White-headed Ducks** were still present with an impressive *c*1500 **Smews** *Mergellus albellus*. *Many thanks to Jeff Gordon for his last bulletin from Manych.*

Within the OSME region, a large tit flock at Essentuki lake 10 Nov included a single **Marsh Tit** *Poecile palustris*, the first in five years of almost daily visits to this site.

SAUDI ARABIA

A **White-breasted Waterhen** *Amaurornis phoenicurus* at Sabkhat al Fasl, Jubail, on 30 Oct was the first country record. Other good records from this site included **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* on several dates 23 Oct–19 Nov with a maximum of seven 30 Oct, at least 30 **Purple Swamphens** *Porphyrio porphyrio* on most visits, a flock of 15 **Crab-plovers** *Dromas ardeola* 6 Nov, two **Caspian Plovers** *Charadrius asiaticus* 4 Sep with a single 9 Oct, a single **Spur-winged Lapwing** *Vanellus spinosus* 30 Oct and 6 Nov and a single **White-tailed Lapwing** *Vanellus leucurus* 9 Oct, 30 Oct and 6 Nov. An adult male **Crested Honey**

Buzzard *Pernis ptilorynchus* was at Dhahran on 4 Dec; there are few confirmed records from Saudi Arabia. A web search then revealed a picture of an individual in flight at al-Hamrah, Jeddah, 13 Nov. A juvenile **Honey Buzzard** *Pernis apivorus* was at Qaryat al Ulya 19 Nov. A **Purple Swamphen** seen intermittently 15 Oct–11 Dec was the first record from the *Phragmites* lakeside reedbed at Dhahran. The winter roost of **Cattle Egrets** *Bubulcus ibis* at Dhahran peaked at 153 on 2 Dec with 110 present 31 Dec. A **Great Black-headed Gull** *Larus ichthyaetus* in winter plumage at north Khobar 31 Dec was early. Four **Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles exustus* were near the domestic oil refinery at Yanbu 2 Aug. An **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was near Dhahran effluent lake at dusk 11–12 Sep and up to four were at Sabkhat al Fasl 7 Aug–4 Sep. A **White-breasted Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* was at Sabkhat al Fasl 21 Aug and 4 Sep. A male **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* was present 22 Oct–20 Nov at Dhahran effluent lake and a female was at Sabkhat al Fasl 23 Oct. *Many thanks to Graham Lobley; this is his last bulletin from Saudi Arabia.*

SOCOTRA

During a visit 24 Dec 09–6 Jan 2010 a number of vagrants were recorded, notably a **Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*, **Black Kite** *Milvus migrans*, two **Eurasian Oystercatchers** *Haematopus ostralegus*, one, possibly two, **Marsh Sandpipers** *Tringa stagnatilis*, four **Slender-billed Gulls** *Larus genei*, a single **Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius* and a **Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola*. It would appear that up to five **Indian Pond Herons** *Ardea grayii* were present (at three sites) and there must be a real possibility of this species breeding on the island. Two **Caspian Terns** *Sterna caspia* were of note during the visit as was a flock of 105 **Sanderlings** *Calidris alba* at Ditwa lagoon—Yemen's first Ramsar site.

SYRIA

As usual, there were very few birding visitors in the second half of the year; this is a pity, as autumn migration is as exciting as spring but much less is known about it. Large numbers of passerines were passing through in mid-September but raptors were not yet moving in large numbers; **Montagu's Harriers** *Circus pygargus* were regular but the only **Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus* was a male at Mheimideh 21 Sep. The desert was exceptionally dry and all the reservoirs were empty—there was only a muddy puddle in Sed Wadi Abied—but there seemed to be more larks than in September 2008: **Hoopoe Larks** *Alaemon alaudipes* and **Bar-tailed Larks** *Ammomanes cinctura* were widespread. Some spectacular passages of hirundines, **Alpine Swifts** *Tachymarptis melba* and **European Bee-eaters** *Merops apiaster* were seen along the coastal mountains. A 'chittering' flock of at least 22 **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis* at Sed Wadi Abied 14 Sep is probably the largest count from Syria and the strongest evidence yet that they breed somewhere on the massive cliffs surrounding the Sed. A pair of **White-cheeked Bulbuls** *Pycnonotus* (*leucogenys*) *leucotis* was at Mohassan 21 Sep; this is a new site, about 10 km downstream from the classic site by the Deir ez-Zor footbridge. There have been two records from Mheimideh, 10–15 km upstream, so this species is clearly not limited to the city of Deir ez-Zor. Common migrants in the desert oases included **Barred Warbler** *Sylvia nisoria*, **Masked Shrike** *Lanius nubicus* and **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva*, with the occasional **Olive-tree Warbler** *Hippolais olivetorum*. Seven species of shrike were noted including a female-type '**Turkestan Shrike**' *Lanius isabellinus phoenicuroides* at Talila 22 Sep and Syria's second **Steppe Grey Shrike** *Lanius pallidirostris* at Mohassan 21 Sep. A **Great Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* flushed into a bush at Talila on 21 Sep received an unpleasant surprise: a **'Northern' Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor* was already in the bush. The shrike chased the Great Reed Warbler, flicked it over, killed and ate it.

TAJIKISTAN

A **White-tailed Lapwing** *Vanellus leucurus* in the Chapayev fish ponds 18 Oct was a late record. Among the **Common Black-headed Gulls** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* on the Syrdarya river in Khujand 30 Oct, there were eight **Brown-headed Gulls** *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*, far to the northwest of their known distribution in Tajikistan. **Tibetan Sandgrouse** *Syrrhaptes tibetanus* were seen near Qarakul 7 Jul and near Khargushi pass 24 Jul. These seem to be the only records of the

species in recent years, although it is probably resident. A male **Plumbeous Water Redstart** *Rhyacornis fuliginosa* was in Khorugh 20–22 Jul and 31 Jul, adding to the small number of recent records. A male **Bluethroat** *Luscinia svecica* at Khorugh 23 Jul was probably an early migrant.

TURKEY

Fifteen **See-see Partridges** *Ammoperdix griseogularis* were seen near Şanlıurfa 21 Jul and five at Birecik 29 Jul. Unusually large numbers of **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea* were roosting at Mogan Gölü, Ankara, end of November with a maximum of 1224 on 29 Nov. In the Kızılırmak delta there was an impressive count of 400 **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca* 25 Nov, two **Common Eiders** *Somateria mollissima* 17 Aug–20 Sep and an early record of two **Velvet Scoters** *Melanitta fusca* 1 Aug. The Kızılırmak delta also had a late record of four **Purple Herons** *Ardea purpurea* 28 Nov. Autumn migration of **Great White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* produced two notable counts from the Hatay region with 890 north of Samandağ 24 Sep and 608 at Ziyaret Dağı 3 Oct. Two **Pygmy Cormorants** *Phalacrocorax pygmeus* at Mogan Gölü 28–29 Nov were unusual. Autumn raptor migration produced several notable records including a **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* in Istanbul 14 Nov and two at Denizli 22 Nov; a **Black-shouldered Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* at Beykoz, Istanbul, 24 Sep (11th record for Turkey); single **White-tailed Eagles** *Haliaeetus albicilla* at Aşkale, Erzurum, 25 Oct and 3 Dec; six **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** *Gyps fulvus* at Yayladağ, Hatay, 3 Oct; a **Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus* at Bahçeköy, Istanbul, 25 Oct; notable counts of **Lesser Spotted Eagles** *Aquila pomarina* from Hatay with at least 951 in three hours at Aylibeycağili 26 Sep and 516 at Ziyaret Dagi 3 Oct; single **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* at Bahçeköy 29 Sep, the Meriç delta 25 Oct, Ziyaret Dağı 2 Oct, Yayladağ 3 Oct, Toygartepe, Istanbul, 7 Oct and the Göksu and Gediz deltas 22 Nov, with two Antakya 30 Sep; **Steppe Eagles** *Aquila nipalensis* at Subaşı, Antakya, 21 Sep and Uzundere, Erzurum, 24 Sep; and single **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca* at Beypazarı 13 Sep, Göynük, Bolu, 22 Sep and Hafik, Yeniçağa and Uzundere all 24 Sep. A **Great Bustard** *Otis tarda* at Toygartepe on 11 Jun was an exceptional record, as were **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* in Istanbul on 9 Nov and Trabzon 15 Nov. **Corncrakes** *Crex crex* were recorded in Samsun 15 Aug and Birecik 10 Oct and a **Baillon's Crake** *Porzana pusilla* was at İğneada, Kırklareli, 30 Jul. There were unseasonal records of **Black-winged Stilts** *Himantopus himantopus* at Kızılırmak delta with six 30 Nov and five 3 Dec. Other interesting waders were **Eurasian Dotterel** *Charadrius morinellus* at Büyükçekmece lake, Istanbul, 27 Aug and Saltukova, Zonguldak, 16 Sep, with two in the Kızılırmak delta 29 Sep; a **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* at Mogan Gölü 9 Aug; a **Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus* Gediz delta 23 Aug; a **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* Sinop 26 Sep; and single **Broad-billed Sandpipers** *Limicola falcinellus* at Samandağ 29 Aug and Ayvalık, Balıkesir, 19 Sep. An exceptional 128 **Cream-coloured Coursers** *Cursorius cursor* were counted along a 10 km section of road between Ceylanpınar and Akçakale 6 Aug; more typical were groups of four near Şanlıurfa 21 Jul and 21 Sep. A **Black-winged Pratincole** *Glareola nordmanni* was in Erzurum 27 Sep. Two **Audouin's Gulls** *Larus audouinii* at Samandağ on 5 Aug were the first record for this area; a **Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* was back in Haydarpaşa, Istanbul, 30 Oct; and up to five **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyaetus* were roosting at Mogan Gölü late November. Single **Arctic Skuas** *Stercorarius parasiticus* were at Filyos, Zonguldak, 6 Sep and Riva, Istanbul, 13 Dec. Six **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** *Pterocles alchata* were near Şanlıurfa 21 Jul. A **Eurasian Eagle Owl** *Bubo bubo* was at Birecik 21 Jul; there were single records of **Brown Fish Owl** *Ketupa zeylonensis* from the south 4 Jul and 30 Sep and a **Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* in the Kızılırmak delta 24 Nov. The maximum count of **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis* in the period was 12 at Subaşı, Antakya, 3 Oct. Four **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** *Merops persicus* were seen 97 km west of Akçakele 6 Aug.

Great Grey Shrikes *Lanius excubitor* were in Edirne 25 Oct, Ceylanpınar 2 Nov and Yamak, south of Ankara, 28 Nov. A **Desert Lark** *Ammomanes deserti* was at Birecik, a regular locality, 7 Jul. **Paddyfield Warblers** *Acrocephalus agricola* were ringed at the Aras ringing station in Iğdır 13 Aug and 6 Sep.

Ten **Iraq Babblers** *Turdoides altirostris* were at Birecik 7 Nov. A **Rufous-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe xanthoprymna* in the Hatay 7 Nov was notable, as were a **Mongolian Finch** *Bucanetes mongolicus* in Van 10 Jun and three **Desert Finches** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* at Kırıkhan, Hatay, 7 Aug.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

An **Arabian Partridge** *Alectoris melanocephala* in Masafi Wadi 3 Nov was a surprise find away from Al Ain, where released birds have previously been seen. A bird showing characteristics of **Eastern Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus (ibis) coromandus* at Wamm farms 8 Aug–11 Sep was the first UAE record of this form. A **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* off Khor Kalba harbour 19 Jun–16 Sep, joined by a second bird 26 Aug, were the 10th and 11th record for the UAE. What was presumably the same bird was off Ra's Dibba 11 Sep. Up to four **Lappet-faced Vultures** *Aegyptius tracheliotos* were in the Dubai Desert conservation reserve 12 Sep–18 Nov and a first-winter **Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Aquila pomarina* was at various Dubai sites 29 Oct–14 Nov. A female **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* at Ghantoot 17 Dec was the 12th UAE record. Single **Sooty Falcons** *Falco concolor* were at Wamm farms 23 Aug and 19–20 Sep, with another bird Dubai Pivot Fields (DPF) 11 Sep. The only record this winter of **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* was of six photographed 19 Nov at Khor Kalba beach, an unusual location. Two **Eurasian Dotterels** *Charadrius morinellus* at Ghantoot 11–17 Dec were the 22nd UAE record. A **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* at Wamm farms 22 Sep was the 11th UAE record and a **Red Knot** *Calidris canutus* at Khor al-Beida 2 Nov was the 9th UAE record. Two **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* were at Wamm farms 4–12 Sep. A **Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger* at Wamm farms 22–28 Aug was the 12th UAE record. A **Spotted Sandgrouse** *Pterocles senegallus* at Al Ain water treatment plant (Al Ain WTP) 24–27 Oct was the 5th recent UAE record. One **Little Swift** *Apus affinis* was over DPF area 2–9 Dec. An adult male **Brown Shrike** *Lanius cristatus cristatus* returned to DPF from 3 Oct till at least late December. Only one definite **Pale Martin** *Riparia diluta* was reported, from Al Ain WTP 11–18 Dec. A **Moustached Warbler** *Acrocephalus melanopogon* at Al Ain WTP 3–5 Nov was the 14th UAE record and a **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* on Lulu island 24 Oct was the 15th UAE record. A first-winter male **Pied Stonechat** *Saxicola caprata* at Wamm farms 11–21 Sep was the 14th UAE record. A **Forest Wagtail** *Dendronanthus indicus* Safa Park 21–23 Oct was the 8th record away from Abu Dhabi island. Up to five **Olive-backed Pipits** *Anthus hodgsoni* were in Safa Park 23 Oct–year's end; one 23 Oct showed characteristics of the nominate form.

YEMEN

An adult **Shikra** *Accipiter badius sphenurus* was filmed feeding on an adult male Hadhramawt Agama *Acanthocercus adramitimus* in Wadi Sharif 4 Sep. A total of *c*150 mostly juvenile **Steppe Eagles** *Aquila nipalensis* were found 22–25 Dec around chicken farms at Sanhan where they were observed feeding on chickens, in sacks, that had apparently died from the cold; one, possibly two juvenile **Greater Spotted Eagles** *Aquila clanga* and at least two juvenile **Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca* were also present. A male **Arabian Bustard** *Ardeotis arabs* was filmed in the northern Tihama 7 Sep. **Hume's Owls** *Strix butleri* were calling in Wadi Yowr, Jebel Milhan, 30–31 Dec.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following assisted in the compilation of this review:
Pierre-André Crochet, Korsh Ararat, Simon Aspinall, Raffael Ayé, Jamie Buchan, Mohammed Dhessat, Cisti Domsa, Adrian Drummond-Hill, Hugues Dufourny, Omar Fadil, Pekka Fagel, Brian Foster, Jeff Gordon, Barak Granit, Ian Harrison, Dick Hoek, Shady Indary, Moldován István, Brendan Kavanagh, Fares Khoury, Howard King, Anssi Kullberg, Graham Lobley, Daniel Mauras, Mary Megalli, Christian Monnerat, David Murdoch, Lajos Nemeth, Mike Orr, Tommy Pedersen, Yoav Perlman, Mike Pope, David Porat, Richard Porter, Richard Prior, Feras Rahahleh, Colin Richardson, Mudhafar Salim, Attila D Sandor, Richard Seargent, David Stanton, Karen Wade, Geoff Welch, Pamela Anne Williams, Nizamettin Yavuz.

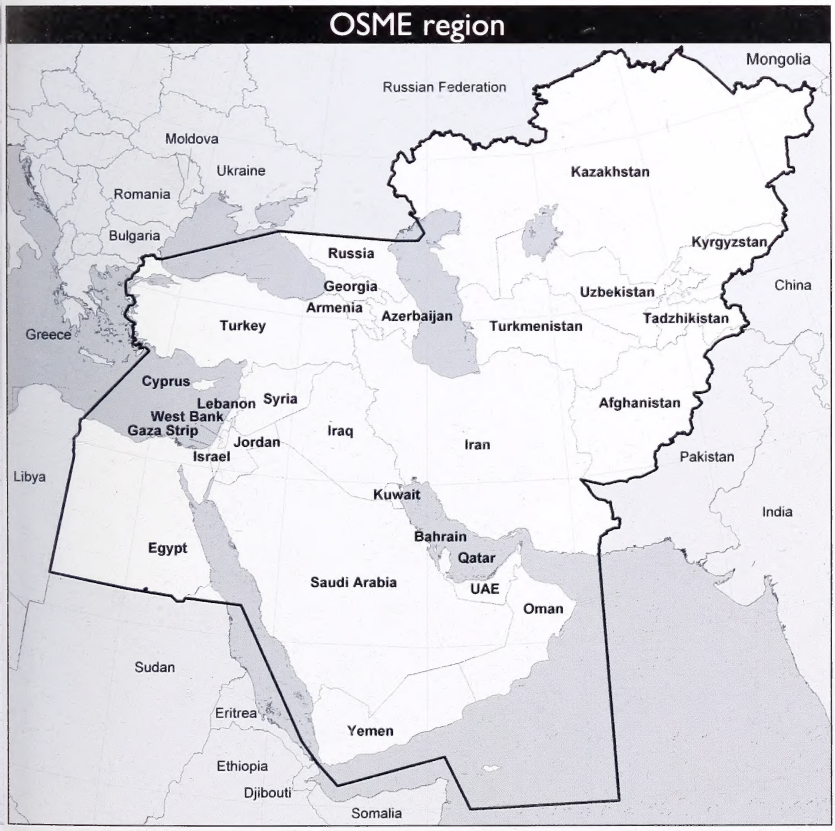
Dawn Balmer, 7 Fisher Way, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2LD, UK. dawn.balmer@bto.org

David Murdoch, Flat 3, 5 Eaton Crescent, Bristol BS8 2EJ, UK. damurdoch@hotmail.com

ADVICE FOR AUTHORS

The Editor will consider for publication papers and notes on the birds of the OSME region. 'Russia' on the OSME region map refers to the Russian Federation's North Caucasus (to 45°N). Papers which additionally include birds in areas outside the OSME region or which are concerned with the birds of areas of which the OSME region, partially or completely, is an important part *eg* the Saharo-Sindian region or Siberian–African flyways, will also be considered. Please consult the Editor if in doubt about the suitability of material.

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



ISSN 0260-4736

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

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

Printed by Crowes of Norwich, UK sales@crowes.co.uk