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THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA



ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Photo above: Thick-billed Lark *Ramphocoris clotbey* Arava valley, Israel, 20 March 2010. © Amir Ben Dov

Cover photo: Cory’s Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* Eilat, Israel, 30 April 2010. © Amir Ben Dov

The birds of Wadi Rima: a permanently flowing mountain wadi in western Yemen revisited after 20 years

PAUL SCHOLTE

In September 2007 and February 2008, I carried out systematic counts and observations where I had conducted similar counts in and around Wadi Rima downstream of Medinat ash Shirq in 1988–1990. The numbers of birds dependent on the wadi bed, Hamerkops *Scopus umbretta*, egrets, herons, waders and wagtails, were well within their 1988–90 range. The degradation of the *Commiphora kataf-Berchemia discolor* woodland, hitherto protected by its remoteness, suggests that without (community) conservation measures this vegetation and the African Grey Hornbills *Tockus nasutus*, Hamadryas Baboons *Papio hamadryas* and Verreaux's Eagles *Aquila verreauxii* that depend on it, will disappear. High counts of wadi-dependent birds, the discovery of three bird species new to the area and an impressive passage of Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* testify to the continuing ornithological importance of the area. Despite the dramatic social and demographic changes that occurred in Yemen during the 20 years that had elapsed, the cultivated parts of Wadi Rima and their avifauna had remained remarkably intact.

INTRODUCTION

From January 1988 through January 1990, I carried out systematic, almost monthly, bird counts along a 25 km stretch of Wadi Rima, western Yemen (Figure 1), and made observations in surrounding mountain areas (Scholte 1992). In September 2007 and February 2008, I had the opportunity to revisit the area, allowing comparison with those counts and observations of twenty years earlier.

Yemen underwent profound changes in the 20 years that had elapsed. In May 1990, four months after the end of my counts, the former North and South Yemens united. Despite this, Yemen encountered various turbulent moments. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War (1991), hundreds of thousands of Yemeni guest workers returned, many of whom settled in rural areas. Possibly the most significant change of the period was the doubling of Yemen's rapidly growing human population.

I was particularly interested to know if after all these changes, Wadi Rima still offered the "paradise-like aspect with trees and sparkling water, completed by the occurrence of egrets, waders, pigeons, waxbills and many similarly unexpected birds" that I had previously described (Scholte 1992).

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Passing the town of Medinat ash Shirq (Figure 1) through the sparsely vegetated 'Medium Altitude Mountains' (Scholte *et al* 1991), I was once again struck by the green valley of Wadi Rima with its sparkling water and lush vegetation dominated by *Cordia abyssinica* trees shading maize, coffee and other crops. The cultivated areas of Suq al Ithnein (transect section III, 12–14 km downstream of Medinat) and Suq al Khamis (section V, 15.5–20 km downstream), with broad wadi beds and extended cultivated wadi terraces, strongly resembled their appearance of 20 years previously. The 'Gorge', where Wadi Rima passes beside 'Baboon Hill' (section VI, 20–25 km downstream), used to be lined by a riverine vegetation of *Breonadia salicina*, *Tamarindus indica* and *Ficus salicifolia*. Their density has decreased because of (excessive) pruning and aging without regeneration. The loss of tree cover on the surrounding mountain slopes along the transect was striking, particularly in section VI that used to be dominated by open *Commiphora kataf-Berchemia discolor* woodland (Scholte *et al* 1991) and now only carries some scattered low shrubs.

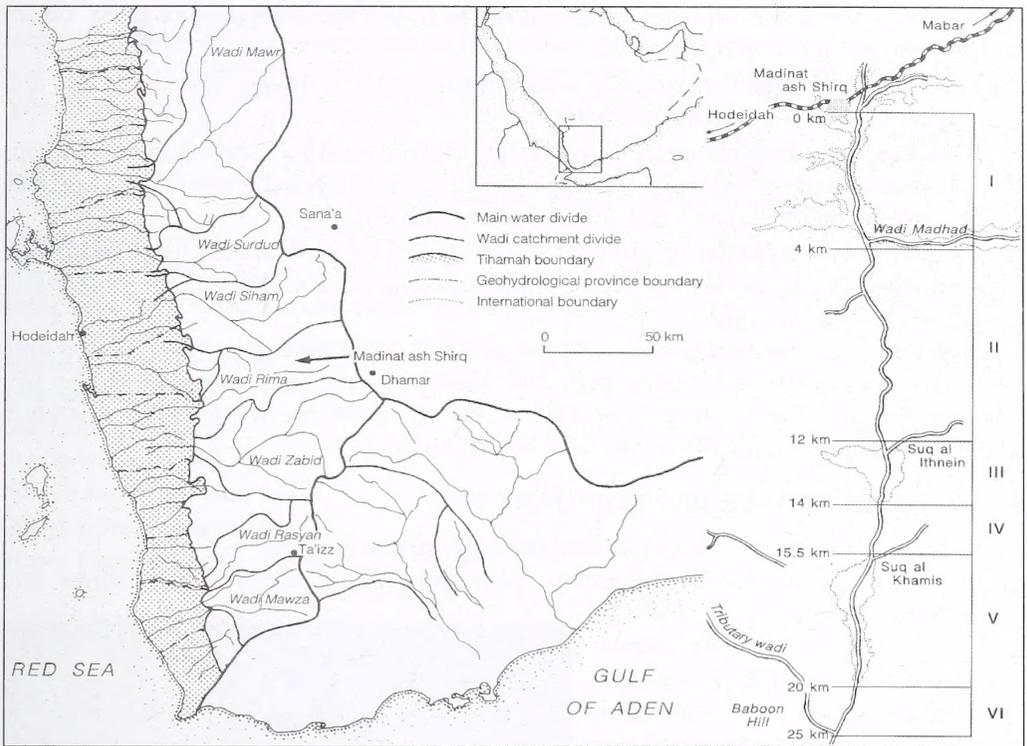


Figure 1. Location of the west-flowing Wadi Rima, Yemen, and map of the transect route in the wadi (from Scholte 1992).

The construction of an asphalt road that follows Wadi Rima, but above its wadi bed, for 12 km downstream of Medinat ash Shirq has caused the abandonment of about the first half of the former wadi-bed track, *ie* sections I (0–4 km downstream), II (4–12 km downstream) and the first 0.7 km of section III. The new counts and comparisons in the present paper therefore deal with the second, lower, half of the 1988–1990 transect only, where the track passes through sections III–VI, *ie* 12.7–25 km downstream of Medinat (Figure 1, Plate 1).

I counted, this time assisted by my family, by driving at a speed of $c5$ km/h following the wadi stream, while noting numbers and location (distance from Medinat) of each bird observed (for count dates and period of the day see Table 1). Below, I compare the findings of these recent four counts with the 35 day and 10 night counts conducted 1988–1990. In addition, observations were made outside the transect, concentrating on the Gorge and Baboon Hill 20–25 km downstream of Medinat, as in the late 1980s.

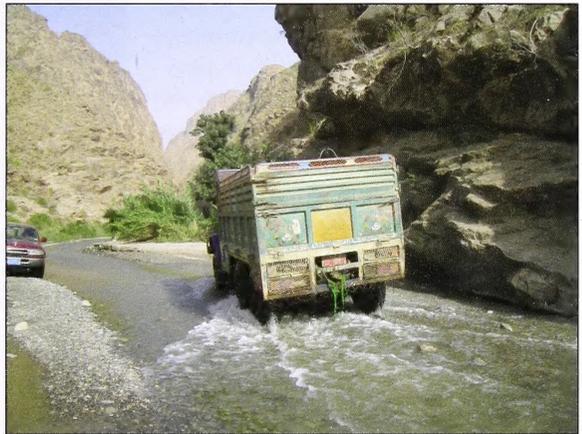


Plate 1. Until recently, wadi beds in Yemen constituted the most convenient passage for traffic, allowing relatively quick bird counts that could be repeated over time (photo taken in Wadi Rima section VI, February 2008). © Paul Scholte

As in Scholte (1992), I present findings for each of three categories of birds, which utilise the wadi bed differently:

1. Birds foraging in and around the wadi stream and bed: herons, egrets, waders and wagtails, covered by the transect only.
2. Birds especially attracted by the lush vegetation of the wadi bed, staying there for a considerable part of the year: pigeons, bee-eaters, hornbills, flycatchers, weavers, waxbills, *etc*, covered by the transect and additional observations.
3. Birds from the neighbouring mountain areas visiting the wadi stream for drinking and washing only: doves, several raptor species, ravens *etc*, covered by the transect and additional observations.

Numbers indicated (categories 2, 3) are the highest number observed for the area indicated, often surveyed during both late afternoon and early morning of the two consecutive days of either September 2007 or February 2008. Species observed only once, and of single individuals, 1988–1990, have been omitted.

RESULTS SEPTEMBER 2007/FEBRUARY 2008

Category 1. Birds foraging in and around the wadi stream and bed

Of the four species previously present year-round, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* and Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* (Plate 2) were observed in all four counts whereas the nocturnal Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* and Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis* were, as expected, not recorded (Table 1). All regularly observed species in the 1988–1990 day counts were observed again and in numbers toward the higher end of their 1988–1990 range. Of those species observed more than once 1988–1990, only Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* was not seen, despite its prominent presence in September 1989. However, Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* were much more prominent this time (Table 1).



Plate 2. Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta* remains the most conspicuous bird in the well-watered parts of Wadi Rima, Yemen (section IV, September 2007). © Paul Scholte

Category 2. Birds attracted by the lush vegetation along the wadi

Below are those species observed September 2007 and/or February 2008, with their status 1988–1990 (Scholte 1992) in [].

Dusky Turtle Dove *Streptopelia lugens*. Common in *Ficus* trees Sep 07, four Gorge, section VI Feb 08 [only in winter].

Red-eyed Dove *Streptopelia semitorquata*. Several Sep 07 and Feb 08 [most common dove, present all year].

Laughing Dove *Stigmatopelia senegalensis*. Several Sep 07 [common all year].

Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia*. One, Gorge, section VI, 8 Feb 08 [regular especially near Gorge].

Green Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*. Not observed [rather common resident Baboon Hill].

Table 1. Numbers of observed birds of category 1 (dependent on the wadi stream and bed for foraging, see Methods). The 2007–2008 counts covered only half of the transect length of the 1988–1990 counts.

Species	Count dates and periods				Range in numbers observed /mean over 35 day counts 1988–1990
	27 Sep 2007	28 Sep 2007	7 Feb 2008	8 Feb 2008	
	mid-day	morning	mid-day	morning	
Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	0	0	0	0	0–9/0.4
Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	1	0	0	0	0/0
Black-crowned Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	0	0	0	0	3–26/10.9 night counts only
Squacco Heron <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	0	0	1	0	0–2/0.2
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	0	0	16	3	0–25/4.7
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	4	2	3	1	1–10/1.9
Little Egret <i>Egretta egretta</i>	0	1	0	5	0–25/7.8
Western Reef Heron <i>Egretta gularis</i>	0	0	0	0	0–2/0.2
Hamerkop <i>Scopus umbretta</i>	5	2	8	4	1–24/5.8
Spotted Thick-knee <i>Burhinus capensis</i>	0	0	0	0	0–41.3 night counts only
Common Snipe <i>Gallinago galinago</i>	0	0	0	0	0–2/0.2
Common Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>	0	0	0	1	0–8/0.4
Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>	0	1	11	10	0–25/5.5
Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	4	7	0	1	0–8/2.0
Grey-headed Kingfisher <i>Halcyon leucocephala</i>	2	0	0	0	0–15/1.0
Yellow Wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>	12	4	0	2	0–4/0.3
Grey Wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	0	0	0	0	0–9/1.0
White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	0	0	16	10	0–32/6.0

African Grey Hornbill *Tockus nasutus*. Six individuals recorded Gorge Sep 2007, three Gorge Feb 2008 [very common resident].

African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis*. One Gorge, section VI, 8 Feb 08 [3 observations of 1–2 birds close to Tributary Wadi].

White-spectacled Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*. Present Sep 07, Feb 08 [very common all year].

Arabian Babbler *Turdoides squamiceps*. Not observed [not uncommon].

Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus*. One Tributary Wadi, end of section VI, Feb 08 [common in wadi trees].

Shining Sunbird *Cinnyris habessinicus*. One in Gorge, section VI, Feb 08 [common resident on slopes].

Rüppell's Weaver *Ploceus galbula*. Present Sep 07 [summer breeder].

Arabian Waxbill *Estrilda rufibarba*. Group of 30, Feb 08 [resident breeder].

African Silverbill *Lonchura cantans*. Five along wadi Sep 07 [five in Feb 1989].

Category 3. Birds visiting the wadi for drinking and washing

Below are species observed September 2007 and/or February 2008, with their status 1988–1990 (Scholte 1992) between [].

Arabian Partridge *Alectoris melanocephala*. Three, Sep 07 Baboon Hill.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*. 20, Sep 07 and 25, Feb 08 [common all year].

Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*. Feb 08, four above Gorge, section VI, colony 40 km upstream from Medinat again occupied and eight individuals seen there [regularly seen around Baboon Hill. The upstream colony with an estimated 30 nests had been abandoned in 1989].

Gabar Goshawk *Micronisus gabar*. One observed Sep 07, section VI [single, Tributary Wadi 23 June 1989].

Shikra *Accipiter badius*. Not observed [probably resident breeder, five times observed].

Steppe Buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*. >1000 birds in Sep 07, 6 in Feb 08 [After a visit to the area 26 Sep 1989 I concluded that this part of Wadi Rima appears to not have an important autumn passage of Steppe Eagle or Steppe Buzzard].

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*. Single Sep 07 and one Feb 08 [present but scattered in December, tens in October 89].

Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii*. Not observed despite camping close to its former nesting site [one resident pair commonly seen in the 20–25 km section downstream of Medinat, with confirmed breeding in 1989–1990].

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata*. One on migration Sep 07 [not observed].

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. One Sep 07 and one Feb 08 [probably resident breeder in higher mountains].

Rock Dove *Columba livia*. Some 30 drinking in wadi Sep 07 and again Feb 08 [common resident].

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*. Not observed [common in summer].

Little Swift *Apus affinis*. Not observed [common in summer].

Fan-tailed Raven *Corvus rhipidurus*. Observed Sep 07 and Feb 08 [present all year].

Rock Martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula*. Present Gorge, section VI, Feb 08.

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*. Present Gorge, section VI, Sep 07 [several observed only 23 June 1989].

Tristram's Starling *Onychognathus leucogaster*. Common in the Gorge, section VI, Sep 07, seen entering crevice Feb 08 [present all year, juvenile fed 23 June].

Arabian Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens lugentoides*. Only observed in higher mountains (Sep 07) [common resident in the higher parts].

Blackstart *Cercomela melanura*. One, Gorge, section VI, and three counted along wadi transect Feb 08 [common resident].

Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis*. One Sep 07 [not observed].

Cinnamon-breasted Bunting *Emberiza tahapisi*. Three, Gorge, section VI, Feb 08 [common in Tributary Wadi].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The continuing construction downstream of the road that bypasses the upper wadi bed suggests that soon the second half of the original Wadi Rima transect will no longer be used by vehicular traffic and become impassable, as upstream. This was probably the last occasion that (parts of) the transect could be surveyed using the 1988–90 methodology (Plate 3). This situation also arose when I attempted to resurvey the Yemen-wide raptor transects of Thiollay and Duhautois (1976) in 2007 but had to abandon because many wadi-bed tracks had been replaced by (asphalt) roads.



Plate 3. A road is being carved out of the mountainside (background) and will soon take over from the wadi bed track of the second, lower, half of the Wadi Rima transect (foreground), Yemen, (section V, September 2007). © Paul Scholte



Plate 4. With only aging trees remaining in the wadi bed and a much reduced *Commiphora kataf-Berchemia discolor* tree cover on the slopes, the non-cultivated parts of Wadi Rima, Yemen, have lost some of their avifauna, including African Grey Hornbill *Tockus nasutus* and Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxii* (section VI, September 2007). © Paul Scholte

Three species, the migratory Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* and Booted Eagle and the resident Long-billed Pipit were newly observed, showing that this inventory is not yet exhaustive. The impressive migration on 27 September 2007, with a thousand Steppe Buzzards observed in only an hour of adequate view, refuted my earlier conclusion (see above).

The comparison between four diurnal counts in 2007–08 and the 35 day and 10 night counts in 1987–1989 can only give an impression of changes in avifauna in and around Wadi Rima. Yet counts of birds depending on the wadi bed showed numbers were well within, and sometimes in the upper part, of the range of their numbers in 1988–90 (Table 1). Black-crowned Night Heron and Spotted Thick-knee were exclusively nocturnal in 1988–1990, and their absence in the 2007–08 day counts was expected. The absence of Grey Wagtail was countered by a strong presence of Yellow Wagtail, both migratory species.

With the exception of Verreaux's Eagle, Green Bee-eater and Arabian Babbler, all regularly observed resident species occurring in the wadi vegetation or higher up the mountain were resighted. For Verreaux's Eagle, I attribute this to the decline in numbers of Hamadryas Baboons *Papio hamadryas hamadryas*, its main prey in the area (see below), whereas for the absence of the latter two the decline of *Breonadia salicina* and *Ficus salicifolia* trees in the wadi bed may be a (partial) explanation (Plate 4). The abundance of observed birds in 2007–08 seems to be rather comparable with 1988–1990, with the exception of African Grey Hornbill that used to be much more common. I attribute this to the degradation of the *Commiphora kataf-Berchemia discolor* open woodland on the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Despite its limited timber and charcoal value, the decline in number of trees is likely caused by cutting (Plate 4), whereas grazing pressure seems to have remained relatively low. In the late 1980s Wadi Rima was found to have, together with Jabal Bura, further west, the best example of this open woodland in a Yemen-wide survey (Scholte *et al* 1991). This beautiful orchard-like vegetation with its high African Grey Hornbill and baboon densities, is now only found in Jabal Bura protected area (Hall *et al* 2008). It is, however, possible that with the diversion of the traffic out of the wadi bed, this area will regain its 'remoteness' and, if reinforced by (community) conservation, its protection.

In contrast to birds, the area has witnessed a notable decline of its Hamadryas Baboon population over the last 20 years. The only observation I made this time was on 28 September when I observed a small group of some five baboons in the most inaccessible part of the Gorge. In 1988–1990, when I estimated the population at some 10 groups of 20–30 individuals, there was not a single day that I had not seen or at least heard baboons. An inhabitant of Tributary Wadi, who did not recognize me, related that baboons had become rare whereas “20 years ago they used to be abundant, luring a European from Dhamar to regularly pass by to look for them”. Although the area is still not densely inhabited by people, it is likely that increasing crop damage has led inhabitants to shoot any baboon approaching their fields.

The baboon decline may have had an impact on Verreaux’s Eagle, concerning which I had earlier noted that “A local farmer reported that young baboons are the main food, being knocked from the cliffs” (Scholte 1992). The near-absence of Hyrax *Procapra capensis* in the area, often the exclusive prey of Verreaux’s Eagle (Gargett 1990), already hints at this explanation. Further circumstantial evidence has been provided by Zinner & Pelaex (1999) who reported alarm behaviour of Hamadryas Baboons towards Verreaux’s Eagle in Eritrea, differing markedly from its behaviour towards the smaller Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* and Black Kites. They postulated that baboons up to three years old, with a weight of less than 5 kg, similar to that of Hyrax, are especially vulnerable (Zinner & Pelaex 1999).

Two bird inventories in wadis south of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, were conducted in the early 1990s (Newton *et al* 1994, Felemban 1996). Largely descriptive, they spanned a much larger altitudinal range than the Wadi Rima transect, but showed a striking resemblance in avifauna with Wadi Rima. It would be fascinating to repeat their surveys to understand changes in land use and their impact on the avifauna of the otherwise largely comparable wadi environment.

The comparable count results of wadi-dependent birds, species found new to the area and the impressive passage of Steppe Buzzards testify to the continuing ornithological importance of the Wadi Rima area. The decline in *Commiphora kataf-Berchemia discolor* open woodland shows, however, that Wadi Rima’s remoteness no longer protects this special habitat of African Grey Hornbill, Hamadryas Baboon and Verreaux’s Eagle, calling for community conservation actions. Despite all the major changes that occurred in Yemen over the 20 years, the cultivated wadi parts and their avifauna have remained remarkably intact.

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Distribution, habitat and differentiation of the poorly-known black morph of Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens lugens* in Jordan

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The black morph of Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens* was studied in Jordan and compared with the typical nominate form during 2007–2009. The extremely low density of black morph Mourning Wheatears and the presence of unpaired adults during the breeding season in our study area suggests that this morph, which occurs only in the basalt desert of northeast Jordan and southern Syria, is highly endangered and probably at the edge of extinction, at least in Jordan. The two forms of nominate Mourning Wheatear barely overlap in their geographical distribution in Jordan. The black morph occurs exclusively in black lava desert during the breeding season. Both forms choose similar structural habitats that include rock boulders, rock piles and cliffs, steep slopes or man-made vertical structures. With the exception of coloration, the morphology of both is generally the same, suggesting rather low taxonomic differentiation of the black form. Nevertheless, differences in plumage coloration between the two morphs are also present at the juvenile stage as demonstrated by photos of a black morph juvenile.

INTRODUCTION

The Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens* has a distribution ranging from northwest Africa to Iran and is generally split into three distinctive subspecies. Populations inhabiting North Africa belong to the subspecies *Oenanthe lugens halophila*, those inhabiting Egypt and the Near East, including Jordan, are assigned to the nominate subspecies *O. l. lugens* and birds which live on the Iranian plateau are *O. l. persica* (Panov 2005). In most of its range, the Mourning Wheatear is an inhabitant of semi-deserts or deserts, where it prefers steep rocky and stony, often barren, hillsides (Panov 2005). In Jordan, it is a typical member of the bird community found along the Rift margins. It is also found breeding locally in the sandstone mountains of the Rum desert and along limestone escarpments in the eastern desert of Jordan (Andrews 1995, Figure 1). However, in northeast Jordan and southern Syria, a rare and poorly known but distinctive and endemic black morph of Mourning Wheatear is restricted to the black lava desert at least during the breeding season, suggesting colour adaptation to local conditions. This black form was assigned to Mourning Wheatear *O. l. lugens* by L Cornwallis (in Cramp 1988) based on the 'typical *Oenanthe lugens lugens* wing pattern' after formerly being believed to be *O. picata opistholeuca* (Wallace 1983b). The status of true geographic subspecies was not supported by Tye (1994) due to reports that stated a broad overlap

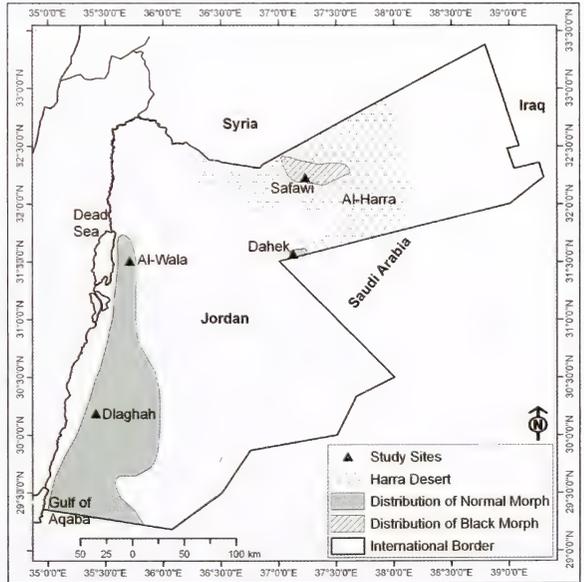


Figure 1. Breeding distribution of Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens* in Jordan. The black morph breeds only in the Harra basalt desert of northeast Jordan, where the typical/normal morph has been recorded only occasionally, mainly outside the breeding season (after Andrews 1994, modified).



Plate 1. Adult normal morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, east of Wadi Mujib, west Jordan, August 2007. © M Förschler

Plate 2. Adult black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, east of Safawi, northeast Jordan, June 2008. © M Janaydeh

in the ranges of the black and typical forms, occasional inter-breeding and the absence of intermediates (Wallace 1983a, Cramp 1988). However, the limited geographic range and habitat of the black form and the absence of observations of mixed pairs other than Cornwallis' evidence suggests that interbreeding is rare and in conflict with the argument for morph status (Andrews 1994).

In this study we compared habitat variables and morphological measurements of both forms in Jordan with the aim of describing the possible distinctiveness of the black morph and providing further data that may contribute to clarifying its status. Furthermore, we give an update on the current distribution of the black form in Jordan and on possible threats for this locally endemic bird in the future.

METHODS

Study species

The typical form of Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens* is a small insectivorous passerine (weight 22–28 g, Plate 1) that is fairly widespread in Jordan in arid areas. These areas vary in rainfall and productivity. It is a typical bird of the Rift margins of western Jordan and is also found locally on low limestone escarpments and wadis in the eastern desert of Jordan. In contrast, the black morph (Plate 2) in Jordan is restricted at least during the breeding season to the undulating basalt desert landscape of the northeast (Plate 3) where it inhabits areas with wadis, road cuttings and boulder piles (Andrews 1994, 1995). In nominate *lugens* there is no obvious sexual dimorphism (Panov, 2005). Although considered a resident bird in Jordan (Andrews 1995), the Mourning Wheatear is not strictly sedentary there (FK pers obs): most individuals carry out seasonal movements, some apparently moving to slightly higher areas in June–August, *ie* after the breeding season, and many usually move to lower areas for the winter. Breeding territories are usually occupied by March and the breeding season extends to June.

Study areas

Field observations were carried out at four study sites, along the Rift margins and in the eastern desert (Figure 1). The regions inhabited by normal morph birds have differing rainfall (National Atlas of Jordan 1984) and vegetation (Alberts *et al* 2004).

The northwest-facing slopes above **Wadi al-Wala** (c31° 30' N 35° 43' E, 415–625 m asl) have a mean annual precipitation of c250 mm falling mainly November–March. Vegetation cover is moderate, dominated by various dwarf shrubs, and with a relatively rich annual

cover during spring. The vegetation is generally a mosaic of Mediterranean-type (semi-steppe batha) and Irano-Turanian *Artemisia* steppe. Grazing pressure is high during winter and spring when the study site is used as rangeland for goats and sheep by semi-nomadic Bedouins and locals from a nearby village. Only typical morph birds are found breeding in this area.

The arid mountains of **Dlaghah** and **Jebel Mas'uda** (c30° 12' N 35° 27' E, 990–1600 m asl), south of Petra, have an annual precipitation in the range 120–200 mm. Rain (and snow) falls in this area mainly November–March. The vegetation on the stony and rocky mountain slopes is sparse, dominated by dwarf shrubs. Grazing pressure is high, and most of the area is densely populated during the winter by nomadic Bedouin who own large sheep herds. Again, only normal morph birds are found breeding in this area.

Al-Dahek (31° 34' N 37° 09' E, 500–550 m asl), in the eastern desert of Jordan, is a limestone escarpment where a population of 5–10 pairs of typical morph Mourning Wheatears breed. The wheatears here hold their breeding territories along barren limestone slopes and cliffs that border on an open flood plain that is covered with large patches of dry salt marsh dominated by low *Tamarix* sp shrubs. The mean annual precipitation is c50 mm, falling November–May.

The second study area in the eastern desert is located in the undulating Al Harra basalt desert **near Safawi** (32° 10' N 37° 30' E, 670–700 m asl), where black morph birds dominate numerically over normal morph birds. The mean annual precipitation is c80 mm, falling mainly November–March. Vegetation is scarce in the black basalt desert and dominated by dwarf shrubs that are usually confined to small depressions and wadi beds. Grazing pressure by sheep is rather high along the wadis.

Field methods

Breeding habitats were described for territories of pairs and occasionally of single foraging birds during the breeding season, April–early June 2008 and 2009. Habitat description included of structural features (presence of rock boulders, rock piles, slopes, cliffs, water runnels and wadis) and the estimation of substrate variables related to vegetation and overall stone and rock cover within the territories of pairs and territorial males or to a distance of 100 m from foraging birds if territory boundaries were not determined. Rock coloration was classified as 1 for pale rocks (eg limestone), 2 for intermediate or mixed pale–dark and 3 for very dark rocks as in basalt lava rocks (Plate 3). Habitat descriptions for the normal morph were carried out in the two study areas along the Rift margins (16 territories) and in the eastern desert at al-Dahek (5 territories).

Habitat descriptions for the black morph were carried out for 1 pair and 4 single birds that were either territorial or using a particular area for feeding during the breeding season. This was carried out in the basalt desert, mainly around Safawi.

Morphology

Mourning Wheatears were trapped for morphological measurements using clap nets and mealworms as bait (permission granted by RSCN-Jordan). After handling and ringing, the birds were released at the capture site. Typical form birds were trapped in western Jordan, from Wadi Wala south to Wadi Rum, during the summers of 2007 and 2009 and black morph birds in the basalt desert east of Safawi 2007 and 2008. In addition to measurements taken from live birds, some morphological data for black morph birds collected in Jordan were obtained from the literature (Andrews 1994) and from two specimens in the collection of the Natural History Museum at Tring, England (collection numbers 1947.14.214 and 81.5.1.933).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution and current status of the black morph

Most (c80%) of the Mourning Wheatears recorded during this study in the basalt desert were of the black morph. During extensive studies March–June 2008, we recorded the black morph of the Mourning Wheatear only in two areas of the basalt desert: east of Safawi between Safawi and Wadi Rajel along the main road to Ruweished and Iraq (one pair, later with two fledged juveniles, and three single adult birds), and at the village of Mithnat Rajel (Jawa) near the Syrian border (1 single adult bird). The breeding pair and one territorial male were constantly present in their territories east of Safawi late March–early June 2008. Later, these birds apparently dispersed elsewhere.

Although most of the basalt desert north of the main road to Ruweished was covered by driving a total off-road distance of 300 km March–May 2008, no Mourning Wheatears of either form were found in the interior, fairly undisturbed, areas of mainly featureless, rolling, boulder fields. Even the major wadis and areas of moderate relief in the basalt desert covered, eg Wadi Salma, Tal El-Abed, Wadi Suwei'ed (Wadi Al-Awsaji), Wadi Ghussein and Burqu', did not harbour black morph birds, although normal-type (probably wintering) birds occurred singly at the latter two sites. Wheatears are usually conspicuous birds and less conspicuous bird species were recorded frequently along the wadis eg the dark form of Sand Partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*, Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti annae*, Bartailed Desert Lark *Ammomanes cinctura*, Thick-billed Lark *Ramphocoris clotbey*, Temminck's Horned Lark *Eremophila bilopha* and Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*. Two other wheatear species also breed in the basalt desert of Jordan, where they are more common than Mourning Wheatear. The Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* is usually present in flat areas and wide wadi beds with sandy patches and some low scrub vegetation. The White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* has recently spread into the basalt desert (Andrews *et al* 1998) and was frequently recorded during 2008, mostly as pairs along wadis including Wadi Suwei'ed where L Cornwallis (Ian Andrews pers comm) recorded black morph Mourning Wheatears in the 1980s. The lack of observations in large parts of the basalt desert in this study suggests a severe decline of the black morph population of Mourning Wheatear at least in Jordan.

Breeding habitats of both morphs

The Mourning Wheatear in Jordan generally inhabits arid areas where mean annual precipitation is in the range 50–250 mm. Mountains, hills and escarpments with steep rocky sides and stony areas are preferred for breeding, but shrubby, flat areas may be included within the territories and are often used for foraging (eg at Al-Dahek). There are differences between forms in some substrate habitat variables (Table 1). Although the basalt desert landscape is generally flat or undulating (Plate 3), black morph habitats had significantly higher overall rock cover than normal morph habitats (Table 1). The small patches of ground that were not covered by basalt rocks and stones, were often used for foraging. All black morph habitats were located in areas with very dark lava rocks and always contained large rock boulders, stone and rock piles (Plate 3, Table 1, Figure 2). Additionally, the territories/feeding habitats of black morph birds always contained man-made vertical structures that were frequently used by the birds for perching and as singing posts; these structures included telephone poles, bridges, road signs and barriers, fences and even at one site, a small house at the edge of a village (Mithnat Rajel). These vertical structures possibly compensated for the lack of steep slopes and cliffs available to typical morph birds (Figure 2). Additionally, black morph birds often foraged along the sides of tarmac roads where there were open spaces, not covered by the usual stones and rocks,

Table 1. Means (\pm SD) of substrate variables in the breeding habitats of normal (black and white) morph and black morph Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe l. lugens* in Jordan.

	typical morph	black morph	t-test/U-test statistic
N	21	5	
Rock (%)	34.9 \pm 9.9	57.0 \pm 4.5	t = 4.8 p < 0.001
Stone (%)	22.9 \pm 7.2	24.0 \pm 5.5	t = 0.3 p = 0.74
Soil/Gravel (%)	42.4 \pm 9.7	19.0 \pm 7.4	t = 5.0 p < 0.001
Colour of rocks	1.4 \pm 0.6	2.8 \pm 0.4	U = 4.0 p < 0.001
Total vegetation* (%)	23.7 \pm 14.3	8.4 \pm 4.2	t = 2.3 p = 0.03

* total vegetation cover = cover of herbaceous plants + dwarf shrubs + shrubs

and where productivity (due to run-off) and prey abundance appeared to be higher than in the surroundings.

Morphological differentiation of the morphs

Table 2 summarizes the main morphological measurements of both forms. There were no significant differences in the length of wing, tail, bill and tarsus. Numerous other measurements of the black morph were within the range of those taken for the typical morph (data not shown). Black morph juveniles have been described as having 'smoky' plumage (Cramp 1988). Indeed, coloration of most of the body plumage is quite different between juveniles of the two morphs (Plates 4 & 5). In contrast to the dark juveniles of the black morph, juveniles of the normal morph have very pale juvenile body feathers even in those parts that are mostly black in the adults, *ie* throat, mantle, scapulars and wing coverts (Plate 5). The weak sexual dichromatism in the adults of black morph birds is equivalent to what is known for the normal morph. In the field the slight dichromatism is obvious only when male and female are observed together: females have slightly paler/more brownish primaries than males and this was noted for a black morph pair during prolonged observation.

Conservation and future studies of the black morph

Currently, the very low population density and the presence of unpaired males (possible Allee effect, *ie* low chance of pairing due to extremely low density) indicate that the population of the black morph of the Mourning Wheatear in Jordan is highly endangered. Andrews (1994) mapped the distribution of the normal morph of Mourning Wheatear

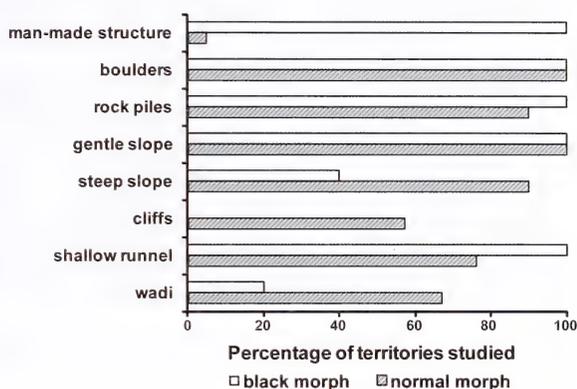


Figure 2. Presence of structural habitat features of normal and black morph Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe l. lugens* during the breeding season in Jordan.



Plate 3. Breeding habitat of black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, east of Safawi, northeast Jordan, April 2008. © M Janaydeh

Table 2. Means (\pm SD) of selected morphological measurements (mm) taken for typical (black and white morph) and black morph Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe l. lugens* from Jordan. Number of samples in brackets.

	normal morph	black morph	t-test statistic
Wing length	93.0 \pm 1.1 (10)	95.6 \pm 3.4 (8)	t = 1.1 p = 0.3
Range	88–99	92–100	
Tail length	64.6 \pm 3.7 (10)	66.9 \pm 3.9 (7)	t = 1.2 p = 0.3
Bill length*	19.5 \pm 0.7 (9)	20.5 \pm 1.6 (7)	t = 1.8 p = 0.1
Tarsus length	25.7 \pm 0.9 (9)	25.9 \pm 0.7 (7)	t = 0.7 p = 0.5

* to skull



Plate 4. Juvenile black morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, east of Safawi, northeast Jordan, June 2008. © M Janaydeh



Plate 5. Juvenile normal morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*, near Wadi Al-Wala, west Jordan, June 2009. © M Janaydeh

in west/southwest Jordan and indicated locations of records of both forms outside that area. Records of the black morph came mostly from the road east of Safawi. There are a few large wadis in the basalt desert in Jordan that appear to be suitable habitat for black Mourning Wheatears. However, during our study, most of these areas were either vacant or occupied by White-crowned Black Wheatears. The latter species has expanded into this area in the last two decades (Andrews *et al* 1998).

One reason for the rarity or total absence of black morph Mourning Wheatears in the few major wadis (except for Wadi Rajel) with apparently suitable habitat in the basalt desert, might be the prolonged drought in the last 5 years combined with overgrazing that may have led to a decrease in plant biomass and thus arthropod density. In our study the few records came from areas with human impact (roadsides, borders of a village), most likely because these sites had sufficient food due to higher productivity (run-off along roads) and excreta of livestock that attracted insects. Further, there might be some impact by the White-crowned Black Wheatear, which may be better adapted to the increasingly harsh desert conditions. Due to its larger size this species would be expected to be dominant over the Mourning Wheatear and might therefore easily exclude the black morph from breeding sites and food places. However, during observations that lasted for up to 5 hours, aggressive interactions were not recorded between a black morph male that defended a territory and an adult White-crowned Black Wheatear with overlapping territory.

In Syria, five black morph birds including a pair were recently observed during one day within an area of 50 km diameter (Nico Martinez pers comm, see two photos by Martinez in Balmer & Murdoch 2009). These birds were in the basalt desert east of Jebel Druz, the extension of the Harra basalt desert of northeast Jordan. Martinez's records suggest that the black morph in southern Syria may currently be more common than in Jordan, perhaps due to somewhat higher rainfall and associated productivity that

generally increase towards the north. A study of the distribution of the two morphs in Syria would be of especial interest.

The results of the present study suggest that black and normal morphs of the Mourning Wheatear select breeding habitats that differ in rock cover and colour. However, both choose habitats that have certain features in common: rock boulders and piles are usually included, combined with steep slopes, cliffs, and/or man-made vertical structures; these structures are used as song and foraging perches. There was a significant difference in rock coloration, normal morph birds selected habitats that vary in rock coloration, but the breeding sites of the black morph were confined to areas with very dark basalt rocks (Table 1). As an adaptation to this difference in habitat selection, we confirm that the overall dark coloration of the black morph is not only found in adult birds, but also in juveniles, evidence that the melanism of the black form is an adaptation to the dark environment. In contrast, juveniles of the normal morph have very pale juvenile body feathers even in those parts that are mostly black in the adults (Plate 5). The similarity of other morphological features suggests that the two forms are close in body structure and ecology.

We suggest that the so-called black morph might be better treated as having an independent taxonomic status from the typical morph of nominate *lugens*. Future research has to test how long the two forms have diverged from each other or if regular gene flow occurs. Additionally, behavioural experiments with dummies and playback might reveal if a prezygotic reproduction barrier exists. Given the rarity of the black morph at least in Jordan we suggest a breeding survey be carried out urgently in the basalt desert of southern Syria followed by regular monitoring in both countries.

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New Important Bird Areas in Lebanon—a research and community conservation project March 2005–February 2008

NABIL H KHAIRALLAH & COLIN CONROY

In the three years between March 2005 and February 2008, staff from two Lebanese environmental organisations visited 31 sites in different parts of Lebanon and carried out surveys of resident and migratory bird populations. As a result eleven of these sites have now been designated as Important Bird Areas by BirdLife International. This brings the IBA total for Lebanon to 15. Reasons for the designation of sites included congregations of soaring birds on migration, assemblages of biome-restricted breeding species and breeding species of global conservation concern or restricted-range. In addition, important first steps have been made towards the protection of these sites, including formation of Local Conservation Groups and the training of local people in bird identification and monitoring.

At each site surveyed the major threats to bird life were assessed. Uncontrolled hunting of birds was identified as the major threat in the majority of sites and it is suspected that the long history of hunting pressure in Lebanon is one of the main reasons for sites not qualifying as IBAs.

Although we conclude that this project has been a success in terms of satisfying its original objective, it is argued that the system of IBAs for the identification of sites important for bird conservation, based on international criteria, should be augmented by a national scheme that develops national biodiversity criteria for the designation of sites as important for protection on a national rather than international basis. In the absence of such a scheme, the conservation approach known as the Hima concept has been applied to sites that met IBA criteria and those sites that failed to reach IBA status but were deemed important for national bird conservation.

INTRODUCTION

A Rocha Lebanon and the Society for Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, the BirdLife International partner for Lebanon) initiated a study to identify new Important Bird Areas (IBA, www.birdlife.org) in Lebanon during the years 2005–2008. Prior to that, Lebanon had only four sites designated as IBAs by BirdLife International (Evans 1994): Palm Islands Nature Reserve (NR), Shouf Cedar NR, Horsh Ehden NR and Aammiq Wetlands. These four sites are of significance to the biodiversity of the country, containing a broad cross-section of habitats. However, it was believed by many, in particular those studying birds in Lebanon that these four sites did not render a full representation of the diverse habitat mosaic of the country, since many more potential IBA sites exist in Lebanon worthy of conservation, the ultimate goal of this designation.

Thus the main aim of this project was to identify new IBAs in Lebanon that would provide a more comprehensive reflection of its varied habitats and broad biodiversity

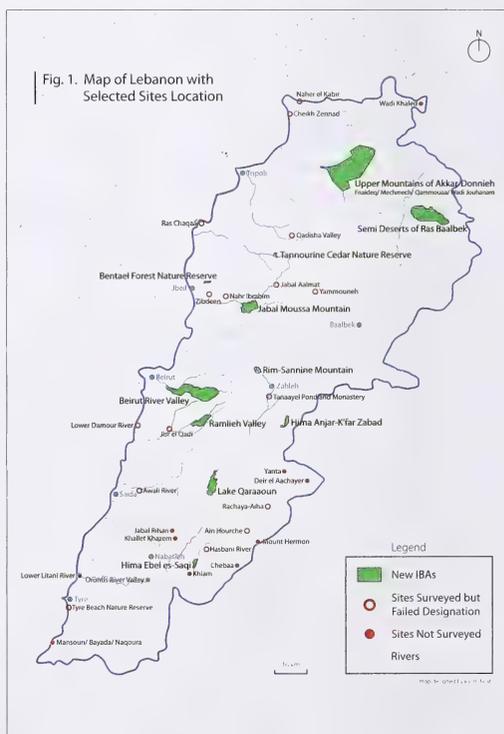


Figure 1. Map of Lebanon showing location of the 11 new IBAs. Sites not surveyed (Table 2) or that failed designation (Table 1 excluding sites of Table 4) are also shown.

aiding in its preservation. The project consisted of two components; ornithological field research and a community-based outreach programme. The latter included setting up Local Conservation Groups for each site, training local representatives from each new IBA on bird identification, introducing conservation and site monitoring, the forming of site management committees, putting forward site management statements that mitigate threats affecting the site, and preparing an updated checklist of the birds of Lebanon. Unlike the 1999 checklist (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999) and its subsequent update (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008), the new list does not include detailed status notes, but does include species' names in three languages and the scientific name.

METHODOLOGY

Site investigation

42 sites (Figure 1), representing the majority of the eco-geological zones of the country, were selected for study during the project period, March 2005–February 2008. Of these, 31 sites were surveyed (Table 1) but 11 could not be, due to change of use or for security

Table 1. Sites surveyed 2005–2008 with brief habitat statement, Lebanon.

Year 1	Anjar-K'far Zabad	Wetland, woodland
	Lake Qaraaoun	Reservoir
	Rim-Sannine Mountain	High mountain site
	Tannourine Cedar Nature Reserve	Cedar forest
	Ebel es-Saqi	Pine woodland, olive groves
	Ain Hourche	Open mountain slope
	Lower Beirut River Valley	Lowland river valley, mixed forest
	Ras Chaqaa	Coastal headland, oak forest
	Cheikh Zennad	Coastal saltpans
	Nahr el Kabir	Lowland river valley
	Rachaya-Aiha	High mountain site
Tanaayel pond and monastery	Man-made pond, farmland	
Year 2	Semi Deserts of Ras Baalbek	Semi-desert
	Upper Beirut River Valley	Mixed woodland, cliffs, river
	Bentael Forest Nature Reserve	Mixed forest, cliffs
	Ramlieh Valley	Pine forest, orchards
	Jisr el Qadi	Pine forest, shallow river
	Lower Damour River	Scrub, agriculture, river mouth
	Tyre Beach Nature Reserve	Coastal sand dunes
	Awali River	Scrub, agriculture, woodland
	Hasbani River	Agriculture, woodland, river
Yammouneh	High plateau, agriculture, scrub	
Year 3	Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh:	
	Qammouaa	Montane forest, scrub
	Fnaideq	Oak woodland
	Mechmech	Cultivated terraces, woodland, scrub
	Wadi Jouhanam	Deep valley, mixed forest, scrub
	Jabal Moussa Mountain	Mixed montane forest, scrub, terraces
	Jabal Aalmat	Mixed montane forest, scrub, terraces
	Nahr Ibrahim	Mixed forest, agriculture, cliffs, river
	Zibdeen	Scrub, cultivated terraces
	Qadisha Valley	Rocky gorge, mixed woodland, scrub, cedar forest
	Lower Damour River	Scrub, agriculture, river mouth

and safety reasons following the 2006 war (Table 2). Each surveyed site was visited at least 6 times during the year, but 8 visits was the norm. Every effort was made to carry out visits in the breeding and spring and autumn migration seasons; judgement was used to decide if certain locations required more visits.

Site visits did not follow any systematic survey methodology, but were of an opportunistic nature to attempt to record the maximum possible number of birds inhabiting and overflying the area. However, transect lines and point count locations were

Table 2. Sites not surveyed 2005–2008 with very brief description of cause.

Khallet Khazem	Converted into a quarry
Orontis River Valley	Security reasons
Lower Litani River	Security reasons
Yanta	Security reasons
Deir el Aachayer	Security reasons
Jabal Rihan	Security reasons
Khiam	Security reasons
Chebaa	Security reasons
Mount Hermon	Security reasons
Mansouri/ Bayada/ Naqoura	Intensive military activity
Wadi Khaled	Security reasons

Table 3. IBA criteria for sites in the Middle East (www.birdlife.org).

A: Important Bird Areas—Global importance

A1. Species of global conservation concern

The site regularly holds significant numbers of a globally threatened species, or other species of global conservation concern.

A2. Restricted-range species

The site is known or thought to hold a significant component of the restricted-range species whose breeding distributions define an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) or Secondary Area (SA).

A3. Biome-restricted species

The site is known or thought to hold a significant assemblage of the species whose breeding distributions are largely or wholly confined to one biome.

A4. Congregations

- i. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 1\%$ of a biogeographic population of a congregatory waterbird species.
- ii. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 1\%$ of the global population of a congregatory seabird or terrestrial species.
- iii. The site is known or thought to hold, on a regular basis, $\geq 20\,000$ waterbirds or $\geq 10\,000$ pairs of seabird of one or more species.
- iv. The site is known or thought to be a 'bottleneck' site where at least 20 000 storks (Ciconiidae), raptors (Accipitriformes and Falconiformes) or cranes (Gruidae) regularly pass during spring or autumn migration.

B: Important Bird Areas—Middle Eastern importance

B1: Regionally important congregations

The site may qualify on any one of the three criteria listed below:

- i. The site is known or thought to hold $\geq 1\%$ of a flyway or other distinct population of a waterbird species.
- ii. The site is known or thought to hold $\geq 1\%$ of a distinct population of a seabird species.
- iv. The site is a 'bottleneck' site where over 5000 storks, or over 3000 raptors or cranes regularly pass on spring or autumn migration.

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

The site is one of the five most important sites in the country/territory for a species with an unfavourable conservation status in the Middle East (threatened or declining throughout all or part of their range in the region) and for which the site-protection approach is thought to be appropriate.

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

The site is one of the five most important sites in the country/territory for a species with a favourable conservation status in the Middle East but with its global range concentrated in the Middle East, and for which the site-protection approach is thought to be appropriate.

established in many cases as a basis for future monitoring. Birds were noted as observed although some extrapolation of results was used in a few cases of soaring bird migration to allow for the fact that visits can usually only be made to any one site on a fraction of all the days that birds are passing through.

Interruption of field work by war, civil disturbances and other events resulted in the postponement of some site visits to the following year or being deleted altogether.

Site designation

Data from possible sites were forwarded to BirdLife International to be scrutinized for IBA designation based on their internationally adopted criteria (Table 3).

IBA definition and criteria

IBAs are “key sites for conservation—small enough to be conserved in their entirety and often already part of a protected-area network. They do one (or more) of three things:

- Hold significant numbers of one or more globally threatened species.
- Are one of a set of sites that together hold a suite of restricted-range species or biome-restricted species.
- Have exceptionally large numbers of migratory or congregatory species.”

In the Middle East there are two levels of IBAs, which distinguish between sites of Global Importance (A-level sites) and those that do not meet the criteria for Global Importance but which nonetheless are of Middle Eastern Importance (B-level sites). The criteria for both levels of IBA are shown in Table 3.

Local Conservation Groups (LCGs)

During the scientific field assessments, contacts with interested individuals from the community were established. Upon the official declaration of the new IBAs, those affiliates were approached asking them to nominate representatives from their sites to attend the IBA community workshop, preparing them for the stewardship of the newly assigned area.

Community Training Workshops

Two or more individuals were selected from each designated IBA, based on the recommendation of the site contacts. A two-day training workshop was organized, which included on the first day an introduction on birds, their importance, bird ecology and bird identification skills. The second day covered an explanation of the IBA programme, international criteria, and conservation issues. Further, the IBA monitoring procedure was clarified to the participants to facilitate initiatives at their sites to identify new threats and determine the success of conservation measures. The workshop techniques covered both theoretical presentations coupled with a birdwatching session in the field on the first day, and exercises on IBA assessment, stakeholder analysis, and IBA monitoring on the second day.

Site Management Committee

Community work included forming management committees with representatives from the municipal council and community leaders in the region. The main role of this committee is the setting of a management plan for the conservation of the IBA-declared site in order to mitigate threats affecting it.

Site Management Statement

This was a brief document presenting a site description, its importance for birdlife and biodiversity, conservation objectives and key management issues, all based on field findings and threats encountered.

Updated Checklist for the Birds of Lebanon

Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* (1999) was the only bird checklist for the country, but since that time many advances have taken place in ornithology in Lebanon mostly facilitated by the termination of civil hostilities affording safer access into the field and increased interest in the avifauna. This called for an updated reference to rely on. This update was based on Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* (1999) and other published and unpublished ornithological data for the country, and incorporated the findings of the present study. Unlike the 1999 checklist and the subsequent update, published since the end of this project (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008), this list does not include detailed species status notes but does include names in three languages (English, French and Arabic) as well as scientific names. Arabic names were based on the standardized nomenclature of the BirdLife partners in the Arabic-speaking region as adopted in Porter *et al* (2006).

RESULTS

The names of sites surveyed, with a very brief habitat statement, are listed in Table 1. Sites not surveyed, for various reasons, are listed in Table 2. Site locations are shown in Figure 1. The eleven newly designated IBAs are presented below and their names listed in Table 4. Coordinates generally refer to the entrance or point-of-access of the site.

Hima Anjar-K'far Zabad (Plate 1)

BirdLife IBA Criterion A1—Species of global conservation concern
33° 45' 09.45" N, 35° 57' 23.30" E; 865 m asl; 326 ha.

Located in the eastern Bekaa valley at the foot of the arid Anti-Lebanon mountain range, the Anjar-K'far Zabad IBA consists mostly of freshwater wetland with some mixed woodland and cultivated fields. There is open scrubby hillside and several commercial fish farms in the southern half of the site.

At least 15 pairs of Syrian Serins *Serinus syriacus* breed in the woods at the southern end of the site. This species is classified as Vulnerable in the 2008 IUCN Red List and is also a restricted range species, found mostly in the Levant, with its breeding stronghold in Lebanon and nearby areas of Jordan and Syria (www.birdlife.org). Although the IBA designation of the site is due to the Syrian Serins, the wetland habitats are included because of their importance in national terms. The reedbeds and grassland hold

Table 4. List of the eleven newly designated IBAs for the Lebanon.

Global	Hima Anjar-K'far Zabad
	Lake Qaraaoun
	Rim-Sannine Mountain
	Tannourine Cedar Nature Reserve
	Hima Ebel es-Saqi
	Beirut River Valley
	Semi Deserts of Ras Baalbek
	Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh
	Jabal Moussa Mountain
Regional	Bentael Forest Nature Reserve
	Ramlieh Valley



Plate 1. Different habitat types in Hima Anjar-K'far Zabad IBA, April 2008. © Jiro Ose

good numbers of breeding wetland birds and reedbed warblers. Many other birds use the IBA as a migration stopover site or wintering ground. Various species of soaring birds occur on migration, including storks and pelicans in moderate numbers, while raptors are usually relatively few. Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* and Long-legged Buzzards *Buteo rufinus* are regularly seen outside the migration seasons although neither is confirmed as breeding. The farmland, woods and hillside at the periphery of the site hold a broad range of typical commoner species, both on migration and breeding.

Conservation and threats

The northern half of the site has been protected since 2004 by the municipality of K'far Zabad, which has banned hunting (previously a problem of immense significance here) and carried out various habitat restoration activities with the help of SPNL. The northern half is designated as a Hima, a traditional Arabian system of community-led management, which is being promoted by SPNL in several sites around Lebanon. The southern half of the area, which previously had no formal protection, was added to the Hima in 2008. The biggest threat to birds in the IBA is hunting, which is a very popular national pastime. However, with the declaration of the Hima, work is ongoing to promote positive attitudes to conservation and to discourage hunting. Other threats include disturbance to birds, water abstraction, agricultural intensification, grazing and eutrophication.

Lake Qaraaoun (Plate 2)

BirdLife IBA Criterion A4iv—Congregations

33° 34' 32.25" N, 35° 41' 10.32" E; 850 m asl; 1190 ha.

Lake Qaraaoun is a man-made reservoir, created by the damming of the Litani river. Surrounding the lake itself are woodland, orchards, and low-growing scrub. The water levels fluctuate severely in the course of the year and there is little or no submerged or emergent vegetation. Qaraaoun lake is the largest body of freshwater in Lebanon and located at the southern end of the Bekaa valley (a continuation of the Great Rift valley, a well-documented flyway for raptors and other soaring birds: Frumkin *et al* 1995, Yeshem & Yom-Tov 2008). Observations suggest that over 20 000 soaring birds, including raptors, storks, pelicans and others pass over the lake annually (CC pers obs). Several species of conservation concern (2008 IUCN Red List) have been recorded here in recent years such as Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*, Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*, Great Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* and Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* on migration. It is also the most important site in Lebanon for wintering waterfowl (CC pers obs, Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008).

Conservation and threats

Currently there is no formal protection or conservation management for any part of the IBA. The site falls under several different municipalities and multiple private ownership. However, local people have been trained through the IBA programme, and ongoing efforts with the key municipalities have been initiated. Indiscriminate hunting is a major threat as is water pollution coming into the lake from upstream. Disturbance to birds from the



Plate 2. Lake Qaraaoun IBA viewed from Saghbine, June 2005. © Marius Teeuw

extensive recreational activities and the high level of grazing by sheep and goats on the lake shore are a cause for concern and it is possible that the latter is one of the factors leading to the lack of marginal vegetation.

Rim-Sannine Mountain (Plate 3)

BirdLife IBA Criteria A3 and A4iv—Biome-restricted Species and Congregations

33° 53' 20.40" N, 35° 51' 43.20" E; 1470 m asl; 244 ha.

This site consists of mountain slopes and rocky valleys on the southern slopes of Lebanon's second highest mountain, mount Sannine, in the west Bekaa. In most years there is snow on the ground November–May. At least 5 Biome-restricted Species from the Mediterranean biome breed on site: Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*, Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*, Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*, Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia* and Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*, as well as one from the Irano-Turanian Highlands biome: Western Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer*. Records from 2004 and 2005 indicate that well in excess of the required 20 000 soaring birds pass over the site in spring and autumn. These include White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* and 19 species of bird of prey the most numerous being European Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus* and Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*.



Plate 3. Rim-Sannine mountain, Rim-Sannine Mountain IBA, March 2005. © Richard Prior

Conservation and threats

Currently there is no formal protection. The IBA is mostly under the ownership of a private water company, with whom discussions about proposed conservation measures are still at an early stage. However, the proprietors have initiated some positive measures including tree planting and access restriction. The site has suffered much degradation from overgrazing and off-road vehicles, which has led to soil erosion. The biggest threat to birds is indiscriminate hunting, as evidenced by the presence of large numbers of spent cartridges.



Plate 4. A Cedar of Lebanon in the Tannourine Cedar NR IBA, May 2005. © Marius Teeuw

Tannourine Cedar Nature Reserve (Plate 4)

BirdLife IBA Criteria A1 and A4iv—Species of Global Conservation Concern and Congregations

34° 12' 28.34" N, 35° 56' 01.93" E; 1790 m asl; 600 ha.

Tannourine Cedar NR is part of the largest remaining cedar forest in Lebanon (www.moe.gov.lb/protectedareas) and is situated on the western flanks of the Mount Lebanon range, just to the south of the famous Qadisha valley. The forest is dominated by Cedar of Lebanon *Cedrus libani* but is mixed with a good range of other broad-leaved and coniferous species, and with more open areas of sparse scrub and some rocky cliffs. A seasonal stream

forms the northern boundary of the reserve. A very high breeding density of Syrian Serins was reported here in 2001 and 2002 (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 2002). At least 15 species of soaring bird are known to migrate over this site including large flocks of White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*. The Biome-restricted White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*, which is known to breed at only three other sites in Lebanon, has bred for several years on the boundaries of the reserve.

Conservation and threats

The area is protected as a nature reserve, with guards employed to prevent hunting and other unauthorised uses of the site. Sign-boards and footpaths are in place for education and awareness raising. Although hunting is forbidden inside the reserve, soaring birds are still at risk from hunting outside the boundaries of the protected area. Fire is also a major threat, as in other forested areas of Lebanon.

Hima Ebel es-Saqi (Plate 5)

BirdLife IBA Criteria A1, A3 and A4iv—Species of Global Conservation concern, Biome-restricted Species and Congregations

33° 21' 47.67" N, 35° 37' 50.40" E; 720 m asl; 219 ha.

Located in south Lebanon north of the Hasbani river, Ebel es-Saqi IBA consists of a mixture of habitats, with olive groves, arable agriculture, scrub and pine woodland. Like the Anjar-K'far Zabad IBA, this site has been declared a hima by the municipality. The count of c60 000 Common Cranes *Grus grus* over a 72 hour period in February 2005 was enough to qualify the site as an IBA but good numbers of White Storks in spring and 21 raptor species in autumn, the most abundant being European Honey-buzzard, show that the site is an important migration bottleneck for other species too. A number of globally and regionally threatened bird species pass through on migration, such as Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Pallid Harrier, Greater Spotted Eagle Eastern Imperial Eagle and Corncrake *Crex crex*, which stresses the importance of this site for conservation. Four Mediterranean Biome-restricted Species—Masked Shrike *Lanius*



Plate 5. A general view of the hima terrain in Hima Ebel es-Saqi IBA, September 2004. © Nabil H Khairallah

nubicus, Sardinian Warbler, Cretzschmar's Bunting and Black-headed Bunting—breed on-site as well as one Irano-Turanian species, Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*.

Conservation and threats

Following the declaration of the site as a hima, hunting was officially banned, grazing restricted and a management plan put in place for the IBA. However, hunting continues to be a serious threat to birds on the peripheries of the site. This area has a high human population which is the source of other problems, the main ones being dumping of domestic garbage, agricultural intensification and overgrazing.

Beirut River Valley (Plate 6)

BirdLife IBA Criterion A4iv—Congregations

33° 50' 50.57" N, 35° 38' 07.34" E; 95–1520 m asl; 8096 ha.

This site is a deep river valley carved by the Beirut river, extending 20 km eastwards from the outskirts of Beirut on the western slopes of the Mount Lebanon range. The river itself is shallow and fast flowing, and lined with tall deciduous trees and dense undergrowth. The northern slopes are dominated by pine woodland while the southern slopes are mostly scrub and cultivated land with a number of scattered settlements. High rocky cliffs dominate the eastern end. The Beirut River Valley IBA, and particularly its upper reaches, is undoubtedly one of the most important locations for raptor migration in Lebanon. Over 70 000 soaring birds of 33 different species were counted



Plate 6. The lower valley slopes with soaring bird cliffs and roosts, Beirut River Valley IBA, April 2005. © Nabil H Khairallah

over Bhamdoun (33° 48' 33.72" N, 35° 39' 35.22" E; 1080 m asl) during the 2006 autumn count alone. This included 51 000 European Honey-buzzards and over 5000 each of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*, Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* and Lesser Spotted Eagle. Ten records of Crested Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* will be the first for the country if accepted by the Lebanese Rare Birds Committee. It is also important for soaring birds in the spring, with White Stork and White Pelican being the major species recorded (c8000 and 3500 respectively recorded in spring 2006). Other migrants, principally European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* and Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* also pass through in large numbers. Nine species with unfavourable conservation status have been recorded here on migration: Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus*, Lesser Kestrel, Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus*, Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, Red Kite *Milvus milvus*, Egyptian Vulture, Pallid Harrier, Greater Spotted Eagle and Eastern Imperial Eagle.

Conservation and threats

The IBA stretches across several municipalities and currently does not have any formal protection. While hunting has an obvious direct effect on birds, there are many other threats which pose a potential or actual risk to the habitats in the IBA. These include fire, urban development, deforestation, water pollution and overgrazing.

Semi Deserts of Ras Baalbek (Plate 7)

BirdLife IBA Criterion A3—Biome-restricted Species

34° 17' 55.30" N, 36° 25' 31.02" E; 760–1200 m asl; 7814 ha.

This IBA is situated in the northeast of the country in the Bekaa valley, just north of the village which gives it its name. It consists of flat or gently undulating stony arid land extending up into the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. A small proportion of the land is used for arable agriculture although the exact extent varies from year to year. Ten Biome-restricted Species, mostly from the Saharo-Sindian Desert biome breed here: Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*, Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cinctura*, Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*, Temminck's Lark *Eremophila bilopha*, Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*, Spectacled Warbler, Western Rock Nuthatch, Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*, Pale Rockfinch *Carpospiza brachydactyla* and Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*. Of these species, 7 are rare or unknown as breeders elsewhere in Lebanon. Several other species breed here commonly which are also scarce or rare breeders elsewhere in the country (Prior & Conroy 2009).



Plate 7. Wadi Mrah Rafi in the Semi Deserts of Ras Baalbek IBA, May 2006. © Richard Prior

Conservation and threats

The area currently has no formal protection. The biggest threats to wildlife are excessive hunting and probably overgrazing but the latter has yet to be thoroughly assessed.

Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh (Plates 8a–d)

BirdLife IBA Criteria A1, A2 and A3—Species of Global Conservation Concern, Restricted Range Species and Biome-restricted species

34° 26' 55.62" N, 36° 12' 27.66" E; 665–1890 m asl; 5270 ha.

Located at the northern extremity of the Mount Lebanon range, The Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh IBA is made up of four adjoining sites: Qammouaa, Fnaideq, Mechmech and Wadi Jouhanam. It is mostly mountainous with a broad range of habitats. Fir *Abies cilicica*, Cedar and Juniper *Juniperus* spp forests dominate the higher elevations giving way to Turkey Oak *Quercus cerris* and other oak species, with Calabrian Pine *Pinus brutia* found at the lower altitudes. There are also cultivated lands interspersed with mixed woodland, scrub and open grassland. At the highest altitudes, a sub-alpine community is found, while permanent fast flowing streams run through Wadi Jouhanam. There is a healthy breeding population of Syrian Serins and several other globally-threatened species have been recorded here on migration. Thirteen breeding Biome-restricted Species breed here: Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*, Masked Shrike, Sombre Tit *Poecile lugubris*, Upcher's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Western Rock Nuthatch, White-throated Robin, Black-eared Wheatear, Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*, Pale Rockfinch, Syrian Serin, Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguineus* and Black-headed Bunting as well as very healthy populations of many commoner species. Although there is apparently little soaring bird migration in the spring, the site is more important in the autumn when large flocks of White Stork, White Pelican, Levant Sparrowhawk and Common Crane have been seen passing over.

Conservation and threats

Although there is currently no formal protection the site is part of a proposed new national park and various awareness-raising campaigns have been carried out to try to encourage interest in environmental protection among the local populace, who are mostly very poor.



Plate 8a. Juniper trees and overview of the Qammouaa section in the Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh IBA, March 2007. © Assad Serhal



Plate 8b. The Turkey Oak wooded area in Fnaideg, Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh IBA, May 2007. © Nabil H Khairallah



Plate 8c. Mechmech terraced farmland, Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh IBA, October 2007. © Nabil H Khairallah



Plate 8d. Wooded river valley in Wadi Jouhanam, Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh IBA, September 2007. © Nabil H Khairallah

As well as the ubiquitous hunting, problems include deforestation and high levels of grazing which together have led to soil erosion in some parts of the area.

Jabal Moussa Mountain (Plate 9)

BirdLife IBA Criterion A4iv—Congregations

34° 03' 05.94" N, 35° 45' 54.80" E; 1100 m asl; 3787 ha.

This site consists of a mountain extending westwards from the main Mount Lebanon chain south of Nahr Ibrahim. It is mostly covered by wood and scrublands with a limited cultivated area. This site is most important for soaring migratory birds, with extrapolated numbers exceeding the 20 000 threshold. White Storks are the most common in spring while birds of prey dominate autumn passage.

Conservation and threats

Much of the mountain is now protected by a local NGO (The Association for the



Plate 9. Southern slope of Jabal Moussa, Jabal Moussa Mountain IBA, Oct 2007. © Colin Conroy

Protection of Jabal Moussa)—hunting, tree felling and quarrying are banned therefore. However, there is evidence of overgrazing/browsing, deliberate persecution of birds, hunting, quarries, tree felling and occasional wood cutting for charcoal production around the periphery of the protected area.

Bentaël Forest Nature Reserve (Plate 10)

BirdLife IBA Criterion B1iv—Regionally Important Congregations

34° 08' 18.00" N, 35° 41' 41.00" E; 550 m asl; 150 ha.

The IBA at Bentaël is steep-sided valley mostly covered with dense oak and pine forest with some steep cliffs and caves located northeast of Beirut in the hills above the town of Jbeil on the Mediterranean coast. The southward passage of raptors in autumn over this site exceeds 3000 (based on extrapolation of the data from 2007), most common of which are European Honey-Buzzards and Levant Sparrowhawks.

Conservation and threats

About one third of the IBA, on the northern side of the valley, is Lebanon's smallest protected area, Bentaël Forest NR *sensu stricto*, where damaging activities such as hunting and charcoal burning are banned. However, in the rest of the site there is no protection and deforestation and dumping of garbage are serious threats to the ecosystem.



Plate 10. Bentaël valley from the west, Bentaël Forest NR IBA, March 2007. © Colin Conroy

Ramlieh Valley (Plate 11)

BirdLife IBA Criterion B1iv—Regionally Important Congregations

33° 44' 49.20" N, 35° 39' 00.00" E; 660 m asl; 928 ha.

Ramlieh is a wide upland valley in the Shouf region of the Mount Lebanon range southeast of Beirut. It is part of the Safa river valley, and contains pine woodland, terraced orchards, low scrub and some bare rocky cliffs. The village of Ramlieh falls entirely within the site. There is an estimated annual passage of raptors exceeding 3000, most significant of which are European Honey-Buzzards, Levant Sparrowhawks, Common Buzzards and Lesser Spotted Eagle.

Conservation and threats

The site is currently unprotected although the organisation AFDC (Association for Forest Development and Conservation) have carried out various community-based projects aimed at the conservation and restoration of the natural habitats in the area, and are also encouraging the development of eco-tourism. One of the biggest threats is fire, as there have been several extensive or serious forest fires in nearby areas and even within the Ramlieh valley in recent years. Human activities, notably hunting, quarrying and uncontrolled development, are also serious threats.



Plate 11. A view north from el Mechrefe, Ramlieh Valley IBA, October 2007. © Helen Demopoulos

Eleven Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) were identified, one for each of the new IBAs and at least two key members from each LCG were trained in basic bird identification skills, site monitoring, site management and conservation advocacy. Key contacts and/or management committees were identified in the 11 declared IBAs, one group for each site. A detailed report containing a brief description of the site, list of bird species of significance found there, existing and potential threats and some basic conservation objectives was prepared for each newly designated IBA. The new checklist containing 376 bird species known to have occurred in Lebanon was produced and can be accessed on the SPNL website (www.spnl.org).

DISCUSSION

Although the main purpose of this paper is to list and describe the new IBAs designated as a result of the joint SPNL/A Rocha Lebanon project, there are some comments to be made about the project, its results and the usefulness of the BirdLife IBA designation procedure to small overcrowded countries such as Lebanon.

1) This project has increased our knowledge of the avifauna of Lebanon and has led to the recognition of eleven new sites as being important for avian conservation. This in turn has led to significant first steps being made towards the protection of these sites. However, of the sites which did not qualify as IBAs, there are some which would still be judged to be worthy of protection using other criteria. Some of these sites, notably the coastal ones, may never qualify as IBAs owing to the bias in the IBA criteria towards migrating soaring birds and Globally Threatened/Biome Restricted breeding Species. However, the primary importance of most coastal sites in Lebanon is for migratory species of passerines and waders and winter congregations of gulls, while the largest numbers of soaring birds pass further inland during spring and autumn. While it might never be appropriate for these sites, such as the salt pans at Cheikh Zennad or the wooded headland at Ras Chekka, to be designated as IBAs, it was felt that there should be some system for the declaration of sites of national importance for nature conservation in Lebanon. This led to the revival of the 'Hima' concept through the involvement of the local community in conserving such sites. The Hima is a traditional approach for the conservation of natural resources. It was initiated within the tribal system in order to maintain a sustainable use of natural resources. SPNL is reviving this community-based conservation approach through collaboration with municipalities and local authorities, thus ensuring the conservation of significant sites that have failed to reach IBA status or to augment designated IBAs.

2) Hunting of birds was identified as a threat of either critical or major significance in 9 of the 11 newly declared IBAs, and in 20 out of the 31 sites surveyed during the three years of the project. It seems likely that many more species of birds, particularly raptors, waterbirds and colourful species such as bee-eaters and rollers, bred in Lebanon in the past. Hunting is the most likely cause for the loss of many of these as breeding species and until it is controlled, the chances of successful and lasting recolonisation, particularly by large raptors, is low. Without this factor it is possible that several more sites would have qualified as IBAs on the basis of breeding birds of conservation concern.

3) There are still gaps in our knowledge of the routes taken by soaring birds, particularly to the south of the bottleneck site at Bhamdoun in the Beirut River Valley IBA. None of the sites visited in that area (Ramlieh, Jisr el Qadi and Awali river valley) had anything like the volume of raptor passage in the autumn that might have been expected given the size of the passage over Bhamdoun in 2006. It could be that the birds pass by a different route which is not visible from any of those watch points, or it could be that it was just sampling error that the bulk of the passage did not coincide with the days when surveys were being

undertaken. In either case, more research is needed to establish the routes taken by the birds in spring and autumn.

4) Political instability and security issues severely limited the sites that could be visited and several very promising sites had to be abandoned or not included in the first place. Follow-on projects to the areas missed would be desirable although many of the above discussed problems are likely to carry on for some time to come.

CONCLUSIONS

The main aim set for this three-year study was met and 11 new IBAs were internationally designated for Lebanon. Most sites worthy of preservation appear to have been identified, threats to each location were outlined, protection in a number of areas was instigated, and awareness was dissipated among the local communities all leading to the advancement of nature conservancy. However, two significant, yet independent outcomes were highlighted.

1) Hunting was recognized as the single most destructive threat to bird life in Lebanon, although urban sprawl and disturbance to birds is not insignificant. Here it should be clarified that the government issued a new anti-hunting law in February 2004 advocated by SPNL and conservation NGOs; however; this is yet to be made effective through the development of application decrees.

2) It is recognized that the IBA global and regional criteria provide an excellent base for the designation of a suite of sites that need to be conserved in the country. However, certain sites important at national level for the conservation of biodiversity fall outside of this designation procedure. Therefore, it is argued that a set of national biodiversity criteria should be developed. Currently, the revival of the Hima concept has been applied for the conservation of important biodiversity rich sites that meet global or regional IBA criteria and those that do not but are recognized to be important nationally.

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First confirmed breeding record of Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* for Lebanon, 2009

SHADI INDARY

The first documented record of Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* in Lebanon was in 1875 by Van Dyck (Kumerloeve 1962). It is considered a common species in Lebanon during spring migration, but scarce in summer and autumn (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). Its breeding has been confirmed in the nearby countries of Cyprus, Israel, Turkey and Syria (Huë & Echecopar 1970, Porter *et al* 1996, Kirwan *et al* 2008, Murdoch & Betton 2008) but it has not been recorded breeding in Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008).

In Lebanon, Little Ringed Plovers can be seen in many coastal locations, particularly where there are shallow ponds or salt-pans but it can also be seen on migration at inland sites including Aammiq, Tel el Akhdar and Qaraoun lake. Also, a male was seen in display flight at Cheikh Zennad, April 2007 (Richard Prior pers comm).

On 23 June 2009 while checking salt ponds in the region of Enfeh, north Lebanon, I saw a chick running along the shore of one of the ponds. As I came closer the chick sat still, allowing me to take several mobile-phone photos (Plate 1). At the same time, two adults were flying around and were very vocal, with one of them being only 3 m away from me. Its yellow eye ring and lack of white wing bar allowed confirmation of identity as Little Ringed Plover. The area is located to the north of the town of Enfeh, and consists of several salt ponds surrounded by fallow land and colonized by riparian shrub species. Insects, mainly mosquitoes, flourish in the area, especially in the muddier parts of the ponds where the chick was seen.

At Enfeh salt ponds the following day, two adults were seen and were initially relatively quiet, until one of the birds started using the broken-wing display 20 m away from the observers. Several further visits followed but chicks were not found. Fresh tracks and droppings from dogs and goats were seen in the area. The chick had perhaps died due to these animals.

Several areas in Lebanon show great potential as possible breeding sites for the Little Ringed Plover. More observations are required to ascertain the actual status of this species in Lebanon.



Plate 1. Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* chick, Enfeh, north Lebanon, 23 June 2009. © Shadi Indary

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Eradication of the House Crow *Corvus splendens* on Socotra, Yemen

AHMED SAEED SULEIMAN & NADIM TALEB

The House Crow *Corvus splendens* is an invasive species which has caused severe ecological and economic damage in areas where it has become established outside its native range. The year of its arrival on Socotra is uncertain but was probably 1994 aboard a ship travelling from Aden. A small colony became established near the capital and the population reached at least 15 individuals. In 1999 an eradication programme was started but first attempts failed. Then, between 2002 and 2008, the numbers of adults were successfully controlled by financially rewarding children for taking young from the nests and bringing them to conservation staff to be killed. In April 2009 two professional snipers were hired to kill all the adults and this was accomplished in one week and hopefully ends the story of this alien crow on Socotra. The total cost of the control and eradication programme, excluding time, was US\$ 20 500.

INTRODUCTION

Situated in the Arabian sea, some 350 km south of the Yemen mainland, the Socotra archipelago is famed for its unique flora and fauna. Over 350 species of plants, 21 species of reptiles and 10 species of birds are endemic (Cheung & DeVantier 2006, Porter & Suleiman in prep). This high degree of endemism ranks Socotra among the top ten oceanic islands in the world for biodiversity. The biological richness of the islands encouraged UNESCO to declare Socotra a World Heritage Site in 2008.

However, the biodiversity of the archipelago faces a number of threats, and in 1998 the Socotra Biodiversity Project, supported by GEF/UNDP, started a research and conservation programme to help address them. One such threat was that posed by the House Crow *Corvus splendens* (Plate 1) and the following year BirdLife international, who were guiding the islands' breeding bird research and survey programme, recommended that the Environmental Protection Authority of Yemen (EPA) take immediate action to

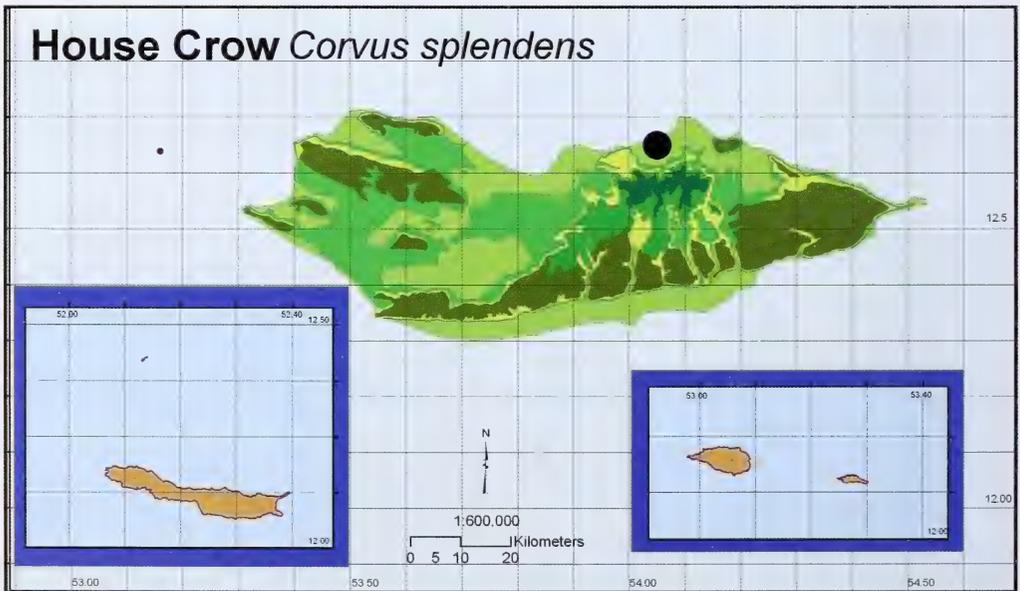


Figure 1. The breeding distribution of the House Crow *Corvus splendens* on Socotra, 1999–2009. Courtesy SCDP/ BirdLife International (Porter & Suleiman in prep)



Plate 1. House Crows *Corvus splendens*, Yemen © RF Porter



Plate 2. Wadi Hadibu, Hadibu, showing the habitat of the House Crow *Corvus splendens* on Socotra. © AS Suleiman

eradicate it from the island, because of the serious threat it posed to the native wildlife.

HISTORY OF THE HOUSE CROW IN ARABIA

The House Crow's native range extends throughout the Indian subcontinent from Sri Lanka north to Nepal, west to southern Iran and east to Yunnan. Since the mid 1800s it has spread to much of the Indian ocean rim including the Arabian peninsula, eastern and southern Africa, some Indian ocean islands and parts of southern Asia. Much of the spread has almost certainly been ship assisted. The first records of House Crows in Arabia were in Aden, where they were probably introduced deliberately in the 1840s. The crow is now a common and increasing resident in many coastal cities, towns and settlements along the gulf of Oman and Arabian gulf, more sparsely along the southern Arabian coast, with a large population in Aden, and also along the Red sea coast from the Bab al-Mandab to the gulf of Aqaba (Ryall 2010). In many places in Yemen it has reached pest proportions.

In the Aden area an eradication programme in the 1980s, although ultimately unsuccessful, succeeded in destroying an estimated 250 000 birds but made little impact on the overall population. Despite this the Yemen population in the early 2000s was estimated at 350 000 pairs (Ryall 2010).

The story goes that in April 1994 (though there is some debate that this might have been 1996) a ship belonging to the Yemenia Ports Company arrived at Hadibu, the capital of Socotra, after a four day journey from Aden (see acknowledgements). It was loaded with foodstuffs for the National Home Company (Socotra branch) and aboard were two adult House Crows and a nest with eggs or young which the parents attended. On arrival at Hadibu the crows flew from the port to nearby Wadi Hadibu at the edge of the capital. Here the 7–12 m high palm trees along the wadi provided good nesting sites, while the nearby settlements and fishing beach meant there was a ready supply of food including dead fish and animals (Plate 2). This breeding and feeding habitat proved ideal and by 2000 the population had reached at least 15 birds. Interestingly, the crow was only seen once away from Wadi Hadibu, at nearby Wadi Sirhan, a distance of less than 2 km and where there were no settlements. It took up its residence at the edge of the capital, close to the

Table 1. Highest counts of adult and fully fledged House Crows *Corvus splendens* at the Hadibu colony 1999–2009, Socotra. No count 2005. The highest count in 1996 was 3.

1999	9
2000	15
2001	13
2002	24
2003	26
2004	14
2006	15
2007	14
2008	12
2009	13

Table 2. The number of fledging House Crows *Corvus splendens* collected by children on Socotra, 2002–2007.

	2002–2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
January		0	0	0	0
February		0	0	0	0
March		15	7	2	13
April		4	3	15	8
May		12	7	0	23
June		7	6	3	2
July		14	0	0	9
August		0	2	5	4
September		0	0	0	0
October		0	0	4	0
November		0	0	0	0
December		0	0	0	0
	77	52	25	29	59

Total 242

sea and remained there during its 15 years as an island alien (Figure 1). It is unclear what damage they caused to the native wildlife but crows were seen to take young Southern Grey Shrikes *Lanius meridionalis* from the nest, and also to harass the local chickens and to take chicks from hens. The population of crows was counted regularly by the Socotra Conservation and Development Programme (EPA) and BirdLife International and the highest annual counts are shown in Table 1.

THE CONTROL AND ERADICATION PROGRAMME

In 1999, under the guidance of the SCDP and BirdLife International, an eradication programme was started. Five attempts were made, the first three were unsuccessful, the fourth succeeded in controlling the population, and the fifth achieved the goal of eradication.

The first attempt deployed Larsen traps which were shipped by BirdLife to Socotra from the UK. The Larsen trap is a humane, wire-mesh trap with two compartments, one to hold a decoy bird, the other with a trap door into which hopefully a crow could be attracted with food. The plan was to trap three House Crows to use as decoys (one in each trap) then place the traps at the edge of Hadibu where House Crows were known to feed. Unfortunately it proved impossible to catch any House Crows to use as decoys and so this attempt was abandoned. The total cost of this failed project, excluding time, was approximately US\$1500 (cost of traps and shipping costs).

The second attempt was equally unsuccessful. In 2000 a crow trap was built using a design from the UK (Plate 3). This large wooden-framed trap was baited with fish and other food items to attract crows through its funnel-like roof, any bird caught then being humanely dispatched. The trap was sited on a roof near to the coast in Hadibu where House Crows were known to breed and feed. Again, after five months of trying not a single crow was caught! It is worthy of mention that three fledging crows were put in the trap as decoys but even that failed to entice any birds. The cost of this failed project was c\$700 for material for constructing the trap.

Following these failures attempts by army officers to shoot the birds were also unsuccessful. Four soldiers worked for four days in the wadis but without success. House



Plate 3. Crow trap on a roof top in Hadibu, Socotra, in 2000; it failed to catch any House Crows *Corvus splendens*. © RF Porter



Plate 4. Nadim Taleb and Ahmed Saeed Suleiman after receiving young House Crows *Corvus splendens* from children, Socotra. © AS Suleiman.

Crows are very canny birds and even the sight of a gun causes them to fly and hide in the palm trees. The cost of this third failed attempt was approximately \$800.

For the fourth attempt it was decided to try to simply keep the population under control by encouraging schoolchildren to search for nests and rewarding them for bringing nests and young birds to be humanely dispatched by SCDP or EPA staff. At first the children brought nests with eggs and during 2000 and 2001 a total of 161 eggs were collected. However it was soon apparent that taking eggs only resulted in the crows laying again and so this practice was stopped and the children were asked to collect only nests with fledglings (Plate 4).

As a reward for bringing these young birds to SCDP the children were given 1000–1500 Yemeni Riyals (c\$6–9) for each crow, depending on its age; and 2000 Riyals (c\$12) for an adult .

During 2002–2007 a total of 242 young House Crows were collected and killed by the SCDP/EPA team (Table 2). This control programme, which cost a total of \$2500 in reward payments, was successful in keeping the population under control and below 15 birds by the time it was fully operating (Table 1).

In addition to control of crow numbers, analysis of the data in Table 2 shows that the breeding season was at least from March to August with the highest number of young in May.

Despite the successful control programme, it was still necessary to eradicate the remaining adults. Thus it was decided in 2008 to engage InGrip-Consulting & Animal Control (Germany) with funding from the UNDP Small Grants Program (SGP) through its coordinator, Dr Omar Al-Saghier. In April 2009 Peter Haverson, a professional sniper, and Guntram Meier from InGrip arrived on the island to kill the birds following the approval and permission of H.E. Abdulrahman Al-Eryani Minister of Water and Environment and the Minister of Interior. Working closely with the SCDP/EPA team, nine birds were shot in the first day and three in the next few days. After a week the team from InGrip flew back to Sana'a. However, monitoring continued and it was discovered that a single bird still remained; so Peter Haverson flew back to Socotra to dispatch it. This final successful effort to eradicate the House Crow cost \$15 000 and brought to an end a potentially serious threat to Socotra's wildlife.

CONCLUSIONS

The removal of any alien invasive species can be a long and costly exercise. Not only in terms of finance and man-power, but also the government and international input that is necessary. We therefore strongly recommend much greater security and checking at air and seaports to ensure that no alien organisms—be they animal or plant—arrive on Socotra. There are important lessons here for local communities and young conservationists, not only in Socotra, but elsewhere in the world.

Now that the House Crow has been eradicated from Socotra it is important that any stow-away birds on ships travelling to the island are not allowed to come ashore. Such mistakes could easily happen due to the lack of environmental education and awareness, and a programme about the dangers of alien invasive species is urgently needed for this World Heritage Site and is currently under discussion.

We know, for example, that there are 65 alien plant species in Socotra, mainly being grown by people in home gardens, and of these 21 have the potential to become invasive. Most of the mammals that have been introduced to Socotra are domesticated, controlled and provide an important food resource, but four that are alien and invasive (to a greater or lesser extent) are the domestic cat, lesser Indian civet cat *Viverricula indica*, the black rat *Rattus rattus* and the Norway rat *Rattus norvegicus* (Banfield *et al* 2010). The most serious threat to birds, especially breeding seabirds is that posed by rats. The extent of this is not known, but is a priority for investigation under an invasive alien species programme.

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On the validity of the ‘Steppe Grey Shrike’ as an independent species

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The large grey shrikes inhabiting northeastern Iran, Kazakhstan and the Central [Middle] Asian republics of the former USSR, northern Mongolia and northwestern China are regarded by Lefranc & Worfolk (1997) as belonging to the eastern population of the polytypic Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*, representing the geographical race *L. m. pallidirostris* (Figure 1). The same status is assigned to the taxon in the review of true shrikes, Laniidae, in volume 13 of *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (Yosef 2008). Both sources support the view presented in earlier fundamental works, in particular *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (Roselaar in Cramp & Perrins 1993) and a number of others. At the same time, one may readily find numerous publications on the Internet where the taxon is presented under the name Steppe Grey Shrike *L. pallidirostris* (eg www.birds.kz, www.oiseaux.net). How did this view of these birds as an independent species arise and to what extent are species status and the imposed name supported?

Although it is difficult to trace the very first step in assigning species status to the taxon, we suppose that it would be the *Checklist of the Birds of Eurasia* compiled by BF King in 1997 (King 1997). It is important to note that there is no explanation in that work of the author’s reason for elevating the taxon from subspecies to the rank of independent species. It can only be assumed that the decision by King was based on differences in the external morphology of *pallidirostris* compared to other subspecies of the Southern Grey Shrike (in particular, in their colour patterns). At the same time, it should be pointed out that these differences are often overestimated, largely because the bird is not well known to western ornithologists.

Within the framework of zoological systematics, it is difficult to justify separating the form *pallidirostris* as an independent species as it interbreeds freely with its more westerly counterpart *L. m. aucheri*, so that an intermediate population has been formed in the northeast of Iran (Meinertzhagen 1954, Vaurie 1955, 1959, see also Dubois 2000 and Figures 2 and 3).

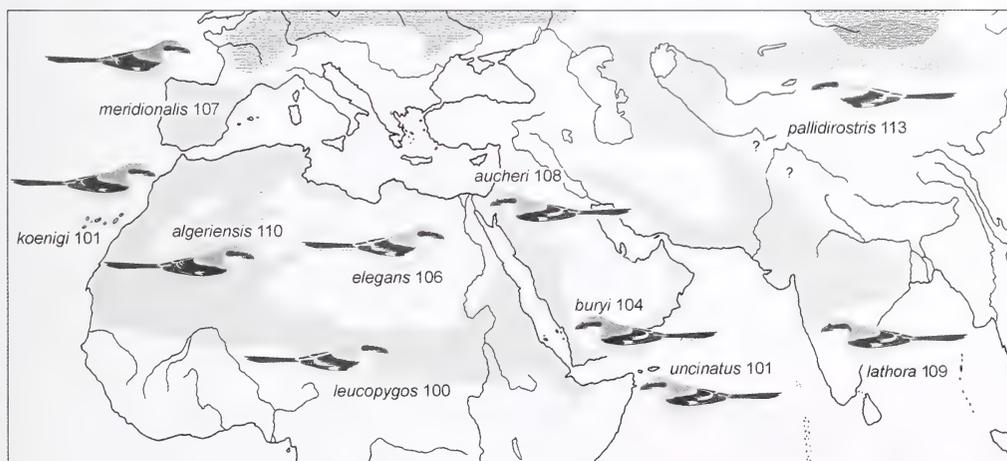


Figure 1. Range of the Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*. Figures denote mean wing length (mm) in males. The different shading style at the top shows southern parts of the Great Grey Shrike’s *Lanius excubitor* range (after Panov 2010).

EVIDENCE FROM MOLECULAR STUDIES

Other sources for the treatment of *pallidirostris* as a full species derive from comparative molecular studies, the reliability of the inferences from which needs examination. The first notion of assigning the rank of full species to *pallidirostris* was in a short paper by Hernández *et al* (2004). This proposed splitting the Southern Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis* into at least two independent species: a western one composed of the subspecies *meridionalis* (Iberian peninsula) and *koenigi* (Canary islands), and an eastern one including the races *aucheri* (Middle East) and *pallidirostris*. Later, two papers appeared almost simultaneously¹ in which this topic was discussed on the basis of other molecular markers.

Where the validity of *L. m. pallidirostris* as a full species is discussed from the molecular point of view (eg Hernández *et al* 2004, Gonzalez *et al* 2008), a problem arises from the proposed genetic parphyly of *L. meridionalis* and Great Grey Shrike *L. excubitor* though the case for two taxa parphyly itself seems far from clear.

Indeed, one can see that in all trees, both mitochondrial and nuclear, the subspecies of Southern Grey and Great Grey Shrikes are intermixed with each other and the American Loggerhead Shrike *L. ludovicianus*. On the tree based on the nuclear introns *ode*

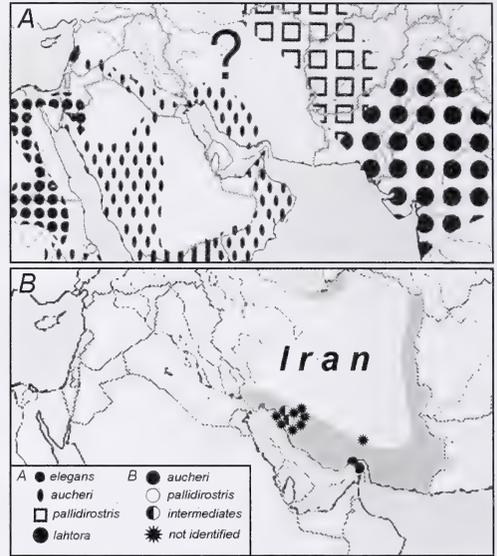


Figure 2. Distribution of the Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* in the Middle East and western Asia. A—from Lefranc and Worfolk 1997; B—from Mansoori 2001 and Dubois 2000. In B—shaded area depicts range of ‘residents’ (Mansoori 2001).

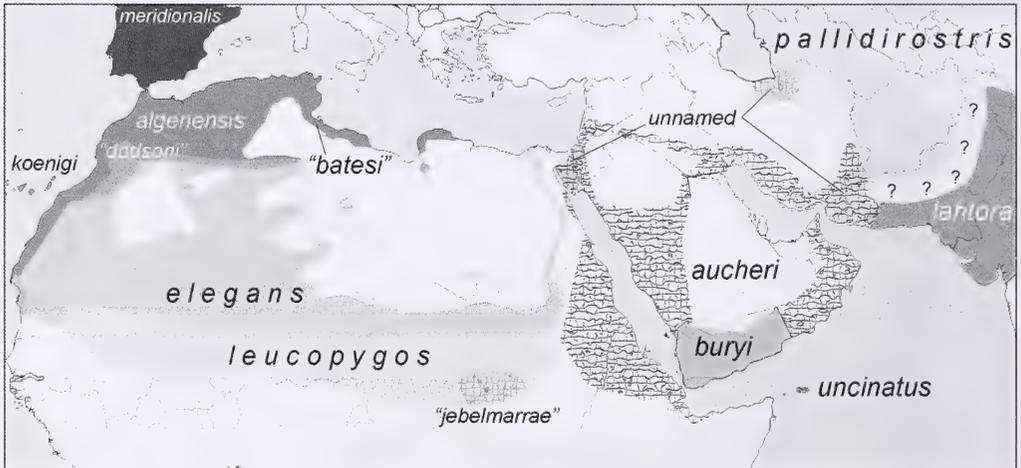


Figure 3. Clinal geographical variation in the range of the Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*. Intermediate (hybrid) populations at boundaries of subspecies’ ranges are denoted by names in quotation marks or are labelled ‘unnamed’ (after Panov 2010).

¹ Gonzalez *et al* (2008): ms received 6 June 2007, published online 8 March 2008; Klassert *et al* (2008): ms received 28 February 2007, available online 16 March 2008.

and *myo*, *L. m. meridionalis* forms a group with the nominate race of the Great Grey Shrike *L. e. excubitor*, though the bootstrap support for this grouping is, in fact, very low. At the same time, other forms with a vulnerable molecular phylogenetic position, such as *L. e. invictus*, *L. m. algeriensis* and *L. ludovicianus*, were not examined by nuclear markers and are absent from the tree. As for the clustering of *L. m. meridionalis* with the American race of the Great Grey Shrike *L. e. invictus*, this is, for the time being, also a result of mitochondrial studies only (Gonzalez *et al* 2008, Klassert *et al* 2008).

On the mitochondrial trees (Gonzalez *et al* 2008, Klassert *et al* 2008), *L. m. algeriensis* and *L. m. koenigi* form a single group with a very low level of molecular differentiation, which is in good agreement with the geographical proximity of their ranges. The association of the clade *L. m. algeriensis* + *L. m. koenigi* with *L. e. excubitor* from Poland, on the other hand, is obscure, taking into account the obvious spatial distance between both. In any case, the distribution of the taxa studied in the trees discussed clearly contradicts zoogeographical considerations of these taxa, including the firmly established fact that the Great Grey and Southern Grey Shrikes are independent species and completely isolated reproductively in the zones of contact and overlap of their ranges (eg Panov 1995, 2010, Lefranc 1999).

An apparent discordance between the biological species boundary of the Great Grey and Southern Grey Shrikes and the mtDNA genotype might be attributed to ancient introgressive hybridization preventing molecular divergence. The invasion of 'foreign' mtDNA genotypes through hybridization is well known in animals and birds in particular (eg Irwin *et al* 2009). However, the potential probability of this phenomenon was not taken into account by the authors of the papers analysed.

To sum up, the limited number of reconcilable DNA results and the lack of concordance with biological species boundaries is easily explained by the limitation of geographical samples and restricted local samples (down to just 1 specimen), which may have resulted in a strong bias of the phylogenetic signal when studying widely distributed and seasonally migrating taxa.

The recent molecular study by Olsson and co-workers (2010) dealt with the same genetic loci as Gonzalez *et al* (2008) and Klassert *et al* (2008). This paper differs in a positive way from those discussed above. Firstly, a wider range of taxa and populations was studied, and almost all specimens examined were collected at or near their breeding places. A large number of museum specimens was used, which gives confidence in the correctness of their specific and subspecific identifications. Secondly, the possibility is admitted that ancient hybridization may have influenced the molecular divergence revealed. And, finally, there is some important discussion concerning the question of correctness and objectivity of results.

In particular, Olsson *et al* (2010) emphasize the danger of relying on a single molecular marker, such as mtDNA, in taxonomic revisions though they contradicted this philosophy in the abstract to the paper by concluding that: ". . . the *Lanius excubitor* complex may be divided into at least six species, *L. borealis*, *L. elegans*, *L. excubitor*, *L. lahtora*, *L. meridionalis*, and *L. uncinatus*" ie the Southern Grey Shrike discussed here is proposed as comprising four independent species—*L. meridionalis*, *L. elegans*, *L. uncinatus* and *L. lahtora* (= *lahtora*+*pallidirostris*). It should be mentioned, however, that the authors ended their suggestion in the abstract by saying that 'other taxonomic treatments are also possible'.

FURTHER OBJECTIONS TO THE ARGUMENTATION PRESENTED IN MOLECULAR STUDIES

To return to the question of the possibility of assigning the rank of full species to some subspecies of Southern Grey Shrike (and the race *pallidirostris* in particular), there are further contradictions. Based on mtDNA tandem repeats, Hernández *et al* (2004) recognized

a pair of southern European and African subspecies (*L. m. meridionalis* + *L. m. koenigi*) and a pair of Asian subspecies (*L. m. pallidirostris* + *L. m. aucheri*). Later, however, Gonzalez *et al* (2008) were unable to confirm the inference about the closeness of *L. m. meridionalis* and *L. m. koenigi*. They found instead that these forms ‘differed significantly’. At the same time, Gonzalez and co-authors did not find evidence to distinguish the Canarian subspecies, *L. m. koenigi*, from *L. m. algeriensis* on the African mainland (Tunisia). It was suggested that these races together correspond to a separate species, other than *L. meridionalis sensu stricto* from the mainland. Klassert *et al* (2008) suggested that *L. m. meridionalis* should be elevated to species status, while *L. m. koenigi*, *L. m. algeriensis*, *L. m. aucheri* and *L. m. pallidirostris* ‘should be reviewed and assigned to different species’.

This latter suggestion appears ambiguous. Should all these forms be assigned to any one species, or is the idea to distinguish several species (two to four)? From what is known by ornithologists to date about interrelations of the forms *L. m. algeriensis*, *L. m. aucheri* and *L. m. pallidirostris*, it can be inferred that all of them are interconnected through a chain of intermediate (hybrid) populations (Meinertzhagen 1954, Vaurie 1955, 1959, Roselaar in Cramp & Perrins 1993, Shirihai 1996, Figure 3). In other words, geographical variation in the section of the Southern Grey Shrike’s range covering North Africa, the Middle East and part of Central Asia is strongly clinal. Bearing this in mind, any attempt to divide this apparently genetically unified whole into two or more species seems to make no zoological sense.

Moreover, we do not believe that the category ‘species’ is so simple that it may be based only on mitochondrial genetic distances. Especially in so far as there is no rational and careful taxonomic synthesis on this topic for birds, unlike that already implemented by a number of studies for mammals (eg Bradley & Baker 2001, Baker & Bradley 2006). Caution in proposing new species of shrikes based on *cytb* genetic distances is especially relevant because of limited information on nuclear sequences for some crucial forms in the present studies.

The same important idea is clearly expressed (though see above) by Olsson *et al* (2010). They highlight the possible danger of relying on a single molecular marker, eg mtDNA, in taxonomic revisions and phylogenetic inference, as the following quotation explains: “Since the mitochondrial gene tree deviates substantially from the (non-cladistic) interpretation of relationships based on morphological and ecological characteristics, and there are indications that the gene tree might not fully conform with the organismal phylogeny, any proposed taxonomy is uncertain”.

Besides, taking into account the complexity of subspecific identification and a limited range of samples from different geographical areas, one must be careful about accuracy in any general conclusions. For unbiased comments about the relationships between shrikes of the *L. excubitor/L. meridionalis* species group one needs an extensive sample of their geographical races². In other words, treating *L. m. pallidirostris* as a separate species (*L. pallidirostris*) on the basis of the molecular studies published so far cannot be justified.

NOMENCLATURE ASPECTS

The history of distinguishing Southern Grey Shrike as an independent species is portrayed by Klassert *et al* (2008) as follows: “. . . *Lanius meridionalis* has been proposed and accepted at international level as a separate species (British Ornithologists’ Union,

²As Gonzalez and co-authors (2008) wrote “. . . only one sample of *L. m. algeriensis* was available and, due to shortage of DNA, we could only sequence the cytochrome *b* gene. Consequently, in order to validate these results, further sampling will be necessary especially in North African populations. The systematic relationships of other African populations that possibly are closely related, for instance, *L. m. elegans* and *L. m. leucopygos*, remain unknown, and they may represent key taxa [the italics are ours] in this issue”.

1997)". What needs to be made clear is that statements and decisions in the BOU Records Committee Report (July 1996) referred to here (British Ornithologists' Union 1997) were based on a review of the relevant recent literature, including the first (Isenmann & Bouchet 1993, Panov 1993, 1995) to propose that "the *excubitor* and *meridionalis* groups of races are better treated as separate species". It should be noted that in the two 1993 papers cited, the Southern Grey Shrike was erroneously named *Lanius elegans* (after the North African race *elegans*). However, as P Isenmann informed ENP later, the correct name of the taxon is *meridionalis*, since Swainson proposed the name *elegans* in 1831, ie 11 years after Temminck's work (1820, in which a subspecies *meridionalis* had been described as the first representative of this species).

And then, Klassert and co-workers wrote: "Furthermore, Harris and Franklin (2000)³ and Hernández *et al* (2004) have suggested the existence of three species (*L. excubitor*, *L. meridionalis* and *L. pallidirostris*)". We have shown above that the evidence put forward by Hernández *et al* in favour of *L. pallidirostris* as an independent species simply lacks weight.

Even if one accepts these proposals, a new eastern polytypic species ('Steppe Grey Shrike')⁴ cannot be named *pallidirostris*, as the order in which the subspecies were described is as follows: *uncinatus* 1881, *leucopygos* 1828, *elegans* 1831, *lahtora* 1832, *algeriensis* 1839, *pallidirostris* 1852, *aucheri* 1853, *buryi* 1901. So, even from this point of view, the name *L. pallidirostris* is invalid. Olsson *et al* (2010) introduced a necessary correction in their paper. They assigned to the pair of forms *meridionalis* and *lahtora*, similar in respect of cytochrome *b*, a second name *lahtora*, which corresponds to the rule of taxonomic priority and so makes use of the name *Lanius pallidirostris* ('Steppe Grey Shrike'), as often encountered now in publications on the Internet, inappropriate.

And, finally, turning to the vernacular name 'Steppe Grey Shrike' of *L. (m.) pallidirostris*. Although not all those who use 'Steppe Grey Shrike' also treat it as an independent species, this nevertheless leads to still more confusion. As said above, the name, now widely used in many publications (in particular, on the Internet), is misleading since there may be confusion with *L. excubitor homeyeri*, called Steppe Grey Shrike by Dement'ev & Gladkov (1968: 38). In the latter book (p45), the common name for *L. meridionalis* [then *excubitor*] *pallidirostris* is Desert Grey Shrike (*Lanius pallidirostris* Cassin, 1852, originally described from wintering individuals in northeast Africa). In reality, *pallidirostris* is rather a desert than a steppe bird (eg Panov 2010).

We should like to touch on two points in conclusion. First, if each population or a local cluster of them is considered as a species because of its differences from other large local populations (as in the paper by Olsson *et al* 2010), the main pragmatic aspect of classification of the lower-level taxa (in particular, an idea of their hierarchical arrangement) will be lost. And, secondly, it is unfortunate that changes tend to be proposed not by local researchers carrying out thorough studies on a given taxon, but by people who are prepared to make judgements 'from a distance'. There is evidence of this in the case under discussion; for a similar example in shrike systematics see Panov (2009).

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³As M Wilson kindly informed us, Harris and Franklin (2000) stated only: ". . . the race *pallidirostris*, or 'Steppe Grey Shrike', deserves greater attention . . ." because of differences in its vocal/behavioural repertoire.

⁴Although the BOU in 1997 used the name 'Steppe Shrike', most other authors, including more recently, appear to favour 'Steppe Grey Shrike'.

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First record of Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor* in the United Arab Emirates

OSCAR CAMPBELL

Al Wathba wetland reserve comprises a large saline lake some 40 km east of Abu Dhabi city. It is managed by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD) and is the single most important non-estuarine site in the United Arab Emirates for waterbirds, regularly holding in excess of 10 000 waders, ducks, Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber* and roosting gulls in mid-winter. On the afternoon of 3 January 2010 during one of my regular visits to the main lake I found a Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*. With perseverance, I managed to get some quite close (but rather brief) views before it flew out into the middle of the lake to join a party of swimming Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. The following field-notes were made immediately after the sighting:

General structure and appearance: compared to (memories of) both Red-necked Phalaropus *lobatus* and Grey Phalaropes *P. fulicarius*, plumage much greyer and less contrasty than either and bill longer and even thinner than Red-necked. Compared to Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, rather smaller; probably a little smaller than Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Bill as long as Marsh Sandpiper's but even thinner and finer.



Plate 1. Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Graham Talbot



Plate 2. Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Graham Talbot



Plate 3. Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Steve James



Plate 4. Wilson's Phalarope *Steganopus tricolor*, January 2010, Al Wathba WR, United Arab Emirates. © Steve James

Short legged; in flight very little leg extension but structure otherwise similar to Marsh Sandpiper, *ie* rather long winged and much more relaxed and bigger than the calidrid-like Red-necked (or Grey) Phalarope.

Plumage in flight: obvious large, seemingly square, white rump patch; tail seemingly rather pale too. No white slash up back. Wings plain, no wingbar but there seemed to be a diffuse, thin, paler trailing edge to inner secondaries.

Plumage on the water: Definite 'phalarope-mark' on head *ie* eye patch present and clear but grey, not black and not striking or contrasty at long range. Also, crown marking rather extensive and dark grey; hence rather narrow pale line between crown and eye patch. From behind, neck extensively shaded grey, hence seemed all grey from crown to saddle; not exhibiting a white nape with narrow blackish central line as on Red-necked or Grey Phalaropes. Saddle and wings rather uniform grey.

Bare parts: bill all dark. Legs only seen briefly and at longish range; seemed olive or greenish and certainly rather pale; similar in tone to adjacent Marsh Sandpipers.

The relative brevity of the views and the fading light meant that a thorough analysis of feather detail was not possible. The following afternoon I returned to the lake with several other observers but the phalarope proved very elusive and was only seen briefly and distantly. However, on 9 January EAD kindly granted access to the site for all UAE birdwatchers and reasonable views were obtained by some 15 observers. Although the bird remained generally unpredictable and somewhat distant, some photographs were obtained (Plates 1–4). The bird was last seen on 10 January; despite being in active primary moult, intense coverage over the following weeks failed to relocate it.

The bird proved impossible to age. Views and photos were insufficient to detect any worn, retained juvenile wing feathers (if present). Unusually for a migratory wader from the northern hemisphere, the majority of first-winter Wilson's Phalaropes have a complete moult in their wintering quarters, which is generally completed in January–March (Cramp & Simmons 1983). This makes any birds in active wing moult in winter unageable (at least on this character) as all adults follow the same strategy.

Wilson's Phalarope breeds across the interior of North America, from southwestern Canada east to Ontario and south to Kansas and northern California. Breeding populations appear to be declining, perhaps as a result of changes in land use. They are long-distance migrants, spending the winter in Peru and Argentina. The species has a history of far-flung vagrancy, appearing annually in western Europe and has reached southern Australia, the Falkland islands and even Antarctica (Cramp & Simmons 1983). It has been recorded on four previous occasions in the Middle East, most recently in 1997. There are two records each from Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008) and Oman (Jens Eriksen pers comm).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank EAD, and in particular Salim Javed, for arranging public access to the site once the bird had been discovered. Steve James and Graham Talbot provided useful reference photographs and Jens Eriksen supplied details on the Omani records.

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First record of White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* for Iraq

MUDHAFAR SALIM

During the 2010 winter survey of the Key Biodiversity Areas project of Nature Iraq, the team was surveying Sawa lake (31° 19' 03.6" N, 44° 59' 35.9" E, Figure 1), Muthanna governorate, Iraq, on 19 February 2010. Sawa lake is a small, closed, brackish lake with neither water inlet nor outlet, as it is fed by underground water. It looks like a large oasis but with no plant cover at its margins save for surrounding desert shrubs and neighbouring palm groves.

While birding there that day with Kadhum Jawad and Mohammed Turki, I spotted a black-and-white wheatear that I first thought was a dark morph Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*. As it flew I noticed that the bird did not have the black terminal tail band of most wheatears. The bird was observed for about ten minutes, from a vehicle and whilst following it among rocks. The bird was not easily approached and was observed from c15–50 m away. Photos were taken (Plates 1 & 2). The weather during the observation was clear and sunny, and with no wind.

During the observation, the bird was shy, very restless and cautious of any sudden or close movements, and silent as well. It was a comparatively large-sized wheatear with black head, neck, and underparts that reached down to the thigh. The bird had a short white line above an eye. The back was black extending to the white rump. The vent and undertail coverts were white. The

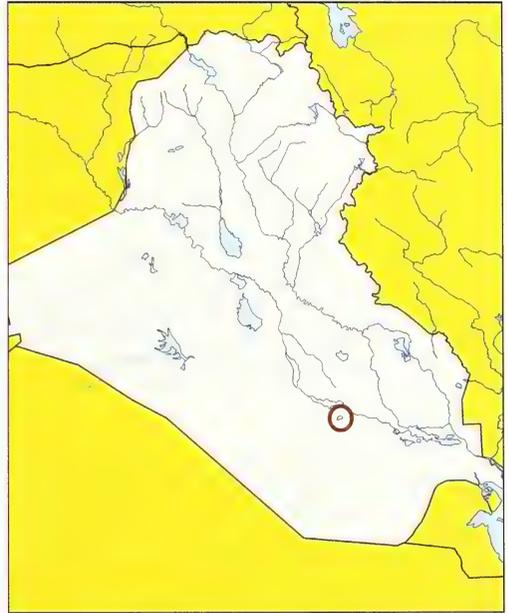


Figure 1. Red circle indicates location of Sawa lake, site of Iraq's first record of White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*. Surrounding countries are shown in orange and the head of the Gulf is lower right.



Plates 1 & 2. White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* at Sawa lake, southern Iraq, 19 February 2010.
© Mudhafar A Salim/Nature Iraq

central feathers of the tail were black, while the outer ones were white and there was no black terminal tail band. The black colour of the upper and under parts was glossy but the primaries had a brownish shade. Legs were black and so was the bill. It was an immature White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*. The record has been accepted by the Iraqi Bird Recording Committee, IBRC, as the first for Iraq.

The White-crowned Black Wheatear occurs in desert habitats over North Africa and eastwards to northern Saudi Arabia (Jennings *et al* 2009) and southern and western Jordan (Andrews 1995). The species has been claimed twice for Syria (Murdoch & Betton 2008) and it is a rare visitor to Kuwait (Gregory 2005). Allouse referred to the possibility of occurrence of this species in Iraq after it was found in Ahwaz, southwest Iran (Allouse 1953, 1963) though Scott & Adhami (2006) listed *O. leucopyga* as a vagrant to Iran with no records for at least 50 years.

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Shikra *Accipiter badius* breeding in Armenia

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The Shikra *Accipiter badius* is a widespread *Accipiter* with a predominantly Asian and African distribution. Throughout its range the species is represented by several races, with the northernmost and migratory *A. b. cenchroides* found from extreme southeastern Transcaucasus and northern Iran east to Kazakhstan and northwest India (Dementiev & Gladkov 1951, Cramp 1980, del Hoyo *et al* 1994).

In the Transcaucasus, the Shikra is known in Azerbaijan from old records at Vel village, near Lankaran city (southeast Azerbaijan), where three birds including one near a nest on 3 June were collected (year not specified, Dementiev & Gladkov 1951). In Little Kizil Agach bay, c15–20 km north of Lankaran city, one bird was collected on 13 May 1953, while a nest with eggs of probably this species was found in 1964 in Avrora village, c10 km SSW from Lankaran city (Patrikeev 2004). More recently, in May 2007, Alan Lewis observed and photographed (VA has copies) a breeding pair in 'the main part' of Azerbaijan (per Chris Batty *in litt* 2010). Subsequently, breeding was reported for 2008 from southeast Azerbaijan (Heiss & Gauger 2009). Our observations in the Transcaucasus extend the known breeding range of *A. b. cenchroides* west to Armenia.

OBSERVATIONS

In spring/summer 2009 we conducted pilot surveys of Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* nests in several parts of Armenia, including parks in Yerevan city. The surveys included locating and monitoring active nests.



Plate 1. Male Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 30 June 2009. © Vasil Ananian



Plate 2. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 18 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

First pair

On 29 June 2009 VA and GJ were out in a Yerevan city park. After one and a half hours of walking the trails, they heard unfamiliar calls at about 09.30 h coming from a densely wooded patch 40–50 m away and moved to the area of the calls. The calls were heard again and shortly after, at 09.40, VA spotted an *Accipiter* perched c15–20 m away on a branch c5 meters above the ground. The bird was sitting in bright sun facing the observers and showed overall pale coloration with pale grey head/visible parts of mantle and shoulders, very pale underparts with uniform background and barely noticeable horizontal vermiculation and, most strikingly, bright orange-red irises strongly contrasting with its black bib—a combination not encountered in Levant Sparrowhawk. The bird was observed for less than a minute and immediately after it flew L Janoian and KA were contacted by phone and informed about the observation of a probable male Shikra. VA and GJ soon found a second bird of apparently female-type plumage and emitting similar calls. After the arrival of the co-observers with



Plate 3. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius* on nest, Yerevan, Armenia, 30 June 2009. © Vasil Ananian



Plate 4. Female Shikra *Accipiter badius* at the second nest, Yerevan, Armenia, 22 July 2009. © Siranush Tumanyan



Plate 5. Site in a Yerevan park containing the first Shikra *Accipiter badius* pair's nest, Armenia, 10 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

telescopes, the birds were still present at the site exhibiting territorial behaviour and were well seen through optics at various distances (15 and more m) and perched and in flight. The birds were photographed (and on subsequent visits) and positively identified as male and female Shikras (Plates 1 & 2). Next morning the site was revisited and both birds were found displaying strong territorial behaviour suggesting breeding. A nest-like heap of twigs was spotted in a poplar tree, which proved to be the Shikras' nest containing downy young (Plate 3).

Second pair

On 20 July 2009, ST and another field worker visited another city park of Yerevan to check an active Levant Sparrowhawk nest and to look for an additional nest of the species which seemed possible in the park. At c10.15 h an accipiter was spotted perched on a branch of a poplar c8 m away and c7 m above the ground. The bird was quickly identified as a female Shikra. Shortly after it flew, it was relocated perched on a nest in a poplar (Plate 4). At c11.50 h characteristic Shikra calls of a second bird were heard, at which time the female had left the nest and immediately came back with prey and presumably started to feed nestlings, which were not visible from the ground. Two days later a female and male were observed at the nest.

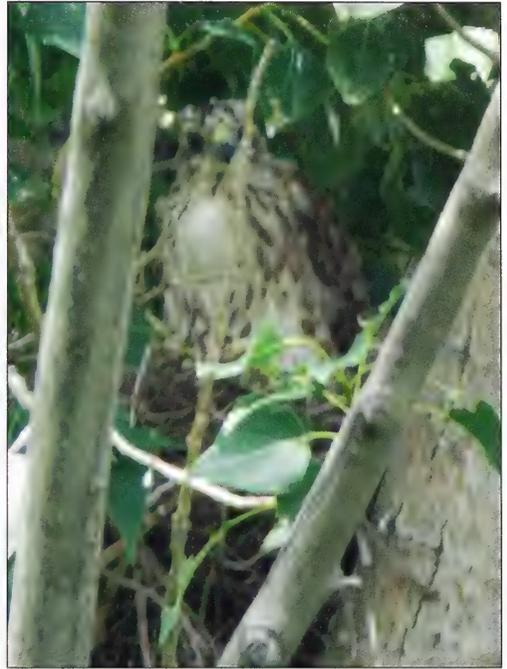


Plate 6. Juvenile Shikra *Accipiter badius*, Yerevan, Armenia, 18 July 2009. © Vasil Ananian

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Both nest sites were visited opportunistically thereafter. The parks where the nests were found are between 1000–1300 m asl and share similar characteristics in having wooded areas with light understory, interspersed with grassy clearings and patches with exposed ground and rock. Most trees, up to 25–30 m high, and shrubs of the parks were planted poplar *Populus*, ash *Fraxinus*, maple *Acer*, elm *Ulmus*, false acacia *Robinia*, honeysuckle *Lonicera*, privet *Ligustrum* and elder *Sambucus*.

The two nests were on 25–30 m high poplars at the edge of planted areas (Plate 5). Both were situated at the main trunk c12 and 19 m above the ground, and exteriorly were similar to the nest of Hooded Crows *Corvus corone*.

Feeding behaviour was observed on several occasions at both nests. Males with prey called females and passed prey to them on trees 10–30 m from the nests. The females were seen both consuming prey themselves and feeding prey to their young. At each nest, one of the parents was always present near the nest. When females were consuming delivered food the males replaced them on the nest. Prey items included small passerines and a vole *Microtus* sp. No prey remains or pellets were found under the nests.

The adults seemed relatively indifferent to the presence of people at the nest sites though a bit more wary than Levant Sparrowhawks in similar circumstances. Hooded Crows, Magpies *Pica pica* and, in one instance, Woodpigeons *Columba palumbus* appearing in the vicinity of the nesting tree were actively attacked and chased by the Shikras. The attacks were always accompanied with loud vocalizations. In contrast, a Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* perched c40–50 m from one of the nests was ignored by the female Shikra.

The birds were highly vocal at their nests, more so than Levant Sparrowhawks. The usual contact call was a loud, high-pitched, clear 'ki kie' that faded on the second syllable. Similar calls were emitted by male and female when they chased other birds from the breeding territory and during prey-passing. The calls were easily distinguished from those of Levant Sparrowhawks (see Cramp 1980).

Adult birds appeared to be moulting both body and flight feathers. At the first nest, on 29 June, male and female had the outer pair of rectrices grown to two fifths of their length. On 18 July in the female these feathers had reached four fifths of the full length. The female was also missing several inner primaries. On 22 July at the second nest the male exhibited no moult in the rectrices whereas the female was missing its outermost rectrices. A number of flight and body feathers of adults were collected under the first nest on 18 July.

We did not monitor chick development. The first nest contained downy young on 29 June, the day it was found. On 18 July, the three chicks in this nest were ready to fledge (Plate 6). They fledged between 19–22 July. At the second nest, on 17 August, three chicks were fed by the female in the nest; on 20 August two of them were seen at about 20 m from the nest soaring with the female, whereas one was still in the nest.

To our knowledge our observations represent the first documented records of Shikras in Armenia. A sighting of a first-year male Shikra on 23 September 1995 in southern Armenia is mentioned in Adamian & Klem (1999). However, we were unable to locate full documentation for that observation.

We believe that the appearance of Shikras in Armenia is a recent event that reflects the species' expansion further west into the Caucasus. As well as Yerevan, large areas of the Arax valley may contain suitable habitat for the establishment of this species.

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Breeding ecology of the White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* in two localities of Turkey

ÇAĞRI GÖCEK, AYŞEGÜL ÇİFTÇİ, MEHMET SIKI & PIOTR TRYJANOWSKI

The White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* is a summer visitor and passage migrant in Turkey. Although widespread in the breeding season near wetlands, there has been no tradition of research involving regular monitoring of their nests in Turkey. Here we present data on the breeding ecology of White Storks from central and western Turkey, carried out over several years. About 15 pairs were observed annually near Ankara and between 15 and 36 pairs near Izmir and their breeding success was examined. No significant difference was noted in mean brood size between the two localities over three common study years. The mean reproductive output, given as mean number of young fledged per occupied nest, was 2.57 for Ankara (5 years), and 2.38 for Izmir (3 years). Significant differences in brood size between nest locations (roof, chimney, electricity and telephone poles) were found. Contrary to previous studies outside Turkey, in Ankara the mortality rate was higher in nests with smaller brood sizes. Also in Ankara, early breeders had significantly higher breeding success than late breeders, confirming previous research elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

The White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* is a summer visitor and passage migrant in Turkey. The country provides important feeding and resting areas not only for Turkish White Storks but also for the eastern European White Stork population. The latter population has been estimated at 552 000 individuals (Schulz 1999) and, according to the results of the last International White Stork Census, c74% of the world population migrates south through the Bosphorus at Istanbul (NABU 2006, Kai-Michael Thompsen pers comm), then passes diagonally across Turkey and leaves at the Belen pass in the south. As many as 315 000 White Storks have been counted over the Bosphorus in one migration season (Kasperek & Kilic 1989) and Can (2001) counted 13 000 individuals during a single day in March at the Belen pass in Hatay.



Plate 1. ÇG observing a White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* nest, Kizilcahamam, Ankara, Turkey, May 2006. © Ezgi Göcek

Between 1970 and 1990 the breeding population of the White Stork in Turkey was estimated to be between 15 000 and 35 000 pairs and apparently declined by over 50% (Parr *et al* 1997, IUCN 2006). According to the results of the last International White Stork Census in 2004/2005, the Turkish breeding population was estimated to be c6195 pairs (NABU 2006), though the results may not adequately reflect the actual number of White Storks breeding in Turkey.

It is well known that several factors affect White Stork breeding success, such as age of breeders, time of breeding, habitat, year and even where the nest is sited (Schulz 1998). However, the breeding ecology of the Turkish population is poorly known. The main purpose of the present paper is to provide information on breeding success of the White Stork in relation to year, nest placement and phenology at two localities in Turkey, near Ankara (40° 28' N, 32° 39' E, central Turkey) and Izmir (38° 44' N, 27° 05' E, coastal western Turkey).



Plate 2. A White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* nest platform constructed above a chimney, Kizilcahamam, Ankara, Turkey. © Osman Erdem

STUDY AREAS AND METHODS

Ankara: the study area is in the Kizilcahamam district. The White Stork population there is principally located at the Kizilcahamam industrial estate, partially in the vicinity of human settlement (Plates 1–3). The study area is mainly open with scattered trees, covering c1580 km². The Kirmir stream is the main foraging area for the storks (Göcek 2006). At the study area there were 15 nests, most of which were occupied every year. The study was carried out for five breeding seasons, 2003–2007. During 2004 and 2005, the study area was visited principally two days per week; for the rest of the study period, field observations were conducted one or two times a month.

Since the male and female storks of the same nest could not be distinguished and different pairs could not be recognized individually, nest-based identification was used by numbering the nests from 1 to 15, based on location. In the breeding seasons 2004 and 2005, the number of breeding and non-breeding pairs, occupation dates of each nest, numbers of eggs, hatchlings and fledglings were recorded but during the years 2003, 2006 and 2007 only data on numbers of hatchlings and fledglings were collected. The nest occupation date was defined as the first day on which the second bird (presumably mainly females, Tryjanowski *et al* 2004) was seen on the nest. The presence of two individuals was accepted as proven occupation.

For 2004 and 2005, besides breeding success of the nests, the behaviour of the pairs and chicks was recorded and will be published separately. Clutch size and brood size were established sometimes using a telescope and binoculars from a distance (*eg* Plate 1) and sometimes by climbing directly to the nest. In some cases, data on clutch and brood size could not be obtained.

Izmir: the study plot is located in the Gediz delta (c20 400 ha) and includes 13 villages of the Menemen, Cigli and Foca districts. The delta has various habitats such as brackish and freshwater marshes and arable fields. It is one of the most important wetlands in the Mediterranean region, becoming a RAMSAR site in 1998. The number of White Stork pairs under observation changed from 15 to 36 due to extending the area of interest by adding new villages to the analysis each year. The White Storks preferred to forage close to corn and cotton fields (relatively less disturbed habitats near the settlements), which provided a

Table 1. Variation in breeding success of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* among study years in Ankara, Turkey. See Study Areas and Methods for explanation of symbols. HPm% = HPm as % of HPa. SD = standard deviation of breeding success (JZm). Min/Max, minimum and maximum number of fledged chicks.

Year	HPa	HPm%	JZG	JZa	JZm	SD	Min/Max
2003	9	77.8	21	2.33	3.00	1.80	0–5
2004	14	71.4	42	3.00	4.20	2.15	0–5
2005	15	46.7	17	1.13	2.43	1.41	0–4
2006	15	86.7	47	3.13	3.62	1.25	0–5
2007	15	100	48	3.20	3.20	1.01	1–5
Mean				2.57	2.43	1.70	
Total	68		175				

large variety of food (Ciftci 2006). The data on the nestling and chick counts in the villages were obtained from the beginning of March till the end of August, 2005–2007.

White Stork nestlings fledge at 58–64 days old (Haverschmidt 1949 in Cramp & Simmons 1977). The date of fledging per nest used in our study was the midpoint between the last observation of no flight and the first observation of chick flight.

Population data: the following statistics were calculated for the Ankara (Table 1) and Izmir (Table 2) populations. Their abbreviations are conventional ones introduced by Schüz (1952) based on definitions in German.

- The number of nests occupied by a pair for longer than one month, between 14 April and 15 June (HPa).
- The number of pairs that fledged young (HPm).
- Total number of young fledged in a local population in a given year (JZG).
- The mean number of young fledged per HPa nest ($JZa = JZG/HPa$).



Plate 3. White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* nest on platform close to cables, Kizilcahamam, Ankara, Turkey. © Dorota Szul-Guziak

Table 2. Variation in breeding success of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* among study years in Izmir, Turkey. See Study Areas and Methods and Table 1 for explanation of symbols.

Year	HPa	HPm%	JZG	JZa	JZm	SD	Min/Max
2005	15	86.7	34	2.27	2.62	1.16	0–4
2006	22	90.9	61	2.77	3.05	1.23	0–4
2007	36	88.9	79	2.19	2.47	1.19	0–4
Mean				2.38	2.71	1.21	
Total	73		174				

- The mean number of young fledged per nest with breeding success (JZm = JZG/HPm).

Data for egg and hatchling numbers per pair were obtained for the Ankara population allowing additional analysis.

Nest site (Table 3) was categorized as: chimney, roof, electricity pole, telephone pole. We included nests located on the top of mosques (two cases) in the second category and excluded the one nest on a tree from the analysis.

All statistical analyses followed Zar (1999) using SPSS/PC version 12.0.

RESULTS

Number of breeding pairs and breeding success

In the Ankara study area (Table 1) in 2004–2007 the number of breeding pairs was almost stable (14–15 pairs). In Izmir (Table 2), extended monitoring added additional pairs to the study each year.

In contrast to the stable number of breeding pairs, HPm% (HPm as % of HPa) changed sharply between years in Ankara (Table 1). The year 2005 had the lowest percentage of successful breeders (HPm%), both for the Ankara and Izmir localities (46.7% and 86.7%, respectively, Tables 1 & 2). White Storks breeding in the Ankara and Izmir study areas did not differ significantly in brood size (JZm) (data available for three common years 2005–2007; mean \pm SD = 2.49 ± 1.55 vs 2.38 ± 1.21 , Ankara and Izmir respectively, Mann-Whitney U-test, $Z = -0.665$, $P = 0.506$). In Ankara, 2004 had the highest variation in the number of fledglings per nest, this occurred in Izmir in 2006 (Tables 1 & 2).

Nest site and year effects

We tested the importance of nest site and the effect of year on breeding success for both localities. The total number fledging (JZG) and the mean number of fledglings per occupied nest (JZa) varied annually in Ankara: 2005 had the lowest JZG (17, Table 1). A similar variation was seen for the Izmir locality in JZa values (Table 2). There was a

Table 3. Percentage (%) of White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* nests in different locations, at Ankara and Izmir study sites, Turkey.

Study area	# nests	Chimney	Roof	Electricity Pole	Telephone Pole
Ankara	69	30.4	21.7	36.2	11.6
Izmir	74	1.4	5.4	91.9	1.4
Mean		15.4	13.3	65.0	6.3
Total	143				

significant difference in chick production among years (two-way ANOVA, $F = 27.14$, $P < 0.002$).

The number of fledged young (JZm) in both study areas was affected by nest site ($F = 2.75$, $P < 0.003$) and year ($F = 5.63$, $P < 0.001$) with no significant interaction between these parameters. Although there were some changes in nest site in Ankara by year, nests were mostly built on electricity poles and chimneys; less often on roofs and telephone poles (Table 3). Nests of White Storks in Izmir were principally built on electricity poles, with far fewer on roofs (Table 3). During the study years, nest platforms on poles were gradually exchanged for safer platforms mounted higher above exposed cables, on the same poles (Plate 4).

Relation between date of nest occupation and breeding success

The date of nest occupation (generally the end of March to the middle of May) and breeding success (JZm) were examined for the Ankara locality. A significant negative correlation (partial correlation to control effect of year, $r = -0.505$, $P < 0.007$) between date of nest occupation and number of fledglings was found *ie* storks that commenced nesting earlier reared more chicks.

Chick mortality

Chick mortality in relation to initial number of hatchlings was assessed for the Ankara locality over 5 years of the study. There were four classes: nests with two ($n = 8$), three (14), four (12) and five (10) initial hatchlings. Chick mortality refers to deaths from hatching to fledging of chicks from the nest (percentage of hatchlings that failed to fledge). Nests with two and three chicks had higher chick mortality than those with four and five chicks, 18.8, 21.4, 6.2 and 8.0% respectively. However, these differences were not statistically significant, presumably due to small sample size ($\chi^2 = 4.88$, $df = 3$, $P = 0.181$).

DISCUSSION

Number of breeding pairs and breeding success

These local populations of the White Stork seemed to be stable during the study period. However, the number of pairs without breeding success changed, which is quite typical for this species, presumably mainly due to weather conditions in different breeding seasons (Tryjanowski *et al* 2004). This is also confirmed by the variability in the number of fledglings. Moreover, changes in local chick productivity may be also affected by changes in habitat structure (Tryjanowski *et al* 2005), and/or ageing structure of the local population (Medina *et al* 1998, Vergara *et al* 2006). A good example of year differences is 2005 which, according to Schulz (1998), may be named 'a disturbance year', *ie* with adverse weather conditions and a lack of food supply when a large proportion of the storks do not establish themselves as breeders or they start to breed very late with a reduced number of



Plate 4. A White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* nest platform in Sasali, Izmir, Turkey, re-mounted higher above cables. © Ömer Döndüren

fledglings and a very low per pair breeding success. In contrast to 2005, in the following year (2006) there was a remarkable increase in the number of young that were fledged successfully from the nests.

Interestingly, the mean breeding success (JZa) of the studied populations in Turkey was higher than some European White Stork populations. For example, in Poland and eastern Germany (n = 407 breeding attempts, 1983–2001), the heartland of the eastern European population of the White Stork, there was a mean of 2.08 and 1.91 chicks per breeding pair respectively (Schaub *et al* 2005).

Relation between nest occupation time and breeding success

It is well known that natural selection favours early arrival and higher breeding success in the White Stork (Tryjanowski *et al* 2004). Starting to breed earlier influences reproductive output (Massemin-Challet *et al* 2006). As the season progresses migrant birds produce smaller clutch sizes (Drent & Daan 1980) and their reproductive success declines (Profus 1991, Goutner & Tsahlidis 1995) as a result of decreasing amount of food supply and/or the quality of the parents (Drent & Daan 1980, Tortosa *et al* 2003). In terms of 'quality' the age of parents may also play an important role. It is known that younger individuals are more likely to arrive later than the older ones (Barbraud & Barbraud 1999) and the older and more experienced adults have a higher breeding success.

The studied local populations of White Stork in Turkey seemed to be performing healthily and are not of urgent conservation concern. However, we believe that this study does not reflect the situation of the Turkish population as a whole. Observations revealing large numbers of old unoccupied nests and interviews with local people living nearby suggest that the number of breeding White Storks in Turkey is still in decline. Probable reasons are: decrease in quality and quantity of wetlands, abandonment of traditional agricultural practices, electrocution and collision with cables, less potential nest sites and less favourable attitudes of man. Urgent countrywide research is needed.

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Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*, a new breeding species for Egypt in a temporary artificial wetland near Aswan

DICK HOEK, HAITHAM IBRAHIM & KHALED NOBY

On 24 April 2010 in the fishpond area near the High Dam, Aswan (Figure 1), southern Egypt, we observed 40 Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea*, passing both north and south. This is a high number as the only known colony of Purple Herons in Egypt is found on Bahrif island (Hoek 2007) 22 km north of these fishponds with an estimated 10–20 nests in 2010. This large number raised the suspicion of another, larger, colony in the area. About 10 days later we found a small artificial wetland with arriving and departing Purple Herons. On 7 May 2010 at the latter site there were various bird species present including Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca* with downy young.

This artificial wetland is situated 9 km south of Aswan city, near the international airport and High Dam and along the road to Abu Simbel. It has an area of c140 acres and consists largely of an almost inaccessible reed marsh though in the southern part of the site there are some shallow pools (Plate 1). It is largely surrounded by desert, but urban developments are taking place everywhere, and it owes its existence to water from a sewage water treatment plant of nearby Sahary (Figure 1).

The dominant plant species is reed *Phragmites australis* with, especially along the edges, tamarisk *Tamarix nilotica* and some date palm trees *Phoenix dactylifera*. The central part of the reed marsh seemed to be rather undisturbed, but along the edges in some places the vegetation has been affected by fire and grazing. The water of the shallow pools is covered with a duckweed species. West of the reed marsh some concrete-lined ponds have been constructed but vegetation is absent along their banks. How long the reed marsh has been in existence is unknown and it is likely that in the short term it will be cultivated and trees planted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Immediately after we entered the site on 7 May adult Ferruginous Ducks were flushed from the shallow pools. Four Ferruginous Ducks (Plates 2–4), but also some Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos*, continued to circle around us, some others landed in the centre of the reed marsh. We glimpsed

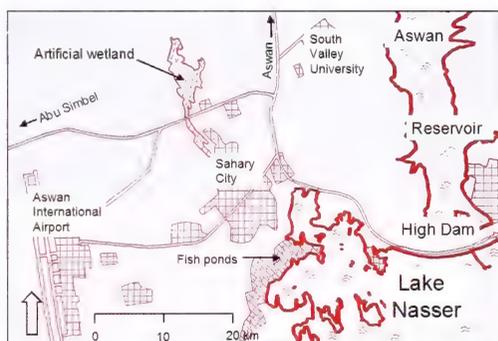


Figure 1. Locality of the artificial wetland near Aswan, southern Egypt. © Dick Hoek



Plate 1. Southern part of the artificial wetland near Aswan, Egypt, with shallow pools where Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca* with downy young were observed (photo 11 May 2010). © Haitham Ibrahim



Plate 2. Adult Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca*, male (above) and female, 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek



Plate 3. Adult Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca*, male (above) and female, 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek



Plate 4. Adult female Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek

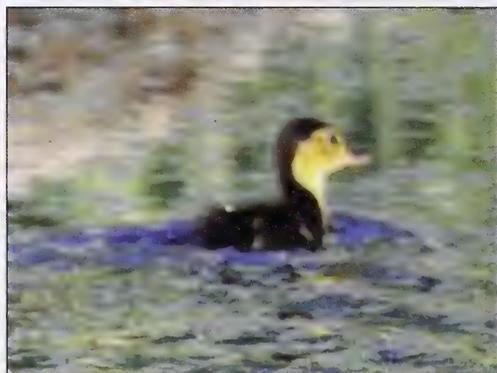


Plate 5. Downy young Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek

three ducklings disappearing in the dense vegetation on one of the pools. One was photographed confirming it was a young Ferruginous Duck duckling (Plate 5). A photo of another duckling of this species was taken on 11 May (Plate 6).

These are the first breeding records of Ferruginous Duck for Egypt. Goodman & Meininger (1989), for example, mentioned Ferruginous Duck in Egypt only as a “fairly common passage and winter visitor from (mid-August) late September to mid-April (mid-May).” The main breeding area of the species is southern and eastern Europe and southwestern Asia. In northern Africa it has bred in isolated areas from Morocco east to Libya, in Asia continuing eastwards to northeast Pakistan (del Hoyo *et al* 1992). Aswan fits with this pattern, but is probably the most southern breeding documented. Breeding range may fluctuate considerably from year to year as a result of variable water levels (BirdLife International 2010).



Plate 6. Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* duckling 11 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Ahmed Ebaid



Plate 7. Adult male Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek

Plate 8. Adult Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* 7 May 2010 at the artificial wetland, Aswan, Egypt. © Dick Hoek

Though the world population is estimated at 163 000–257 000 birds, Ferruginous Duck is listed as Near Threatened on the Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2010) due to its decline in most European countries. The situation of the larger populations in Asia is unclear.

Observations of other interesting species

This artificial wetland appears important for many other scarce or local breeding species of Egypt. Below are those records of ours at the site which supplement Goodman & Meininger (1989) and the recent ‘Provisional Checklist of the Birds of Egypt’ (Moldován & Blair 2010).

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Since 1989 it has become clear that Mallard is a regular breeding species in the Nile valley in Cairo and surroundings (Moldován & Blair 2010). On 7 May there were at least 10 birds, 6 males and 4 females, which suggests breeding at this very southern site of at least 6 pairs (Plate 7). On 29 May 4 males and 3 females and on 15 June 1 adult were seen and DH observed a pair 20 March in the fishpond area.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

An adult bird with a juvenile was recorded and photographed end of May. In the nearby First Cataract Islands protectorate the species has been regularly recorded as a breeding species (Moldován & Blair 2010).

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

On 7 May during a 30 minute period in the morning, 39 Purple Herons left the reed marsh heading south in the direction of Lake Nasser and exactly 39 arrived from the south. All were adults (Plate 8). On 29 May, one hour before sunset, a maximum of c100 birds were recorded. This clearly suggests the presence of a larger breeding colony than that on Bahrif island.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

On 29 May, 6 adults were observed landing in the reed bed. Again, this suggests breeding. For Egypt there is only one documented nesting record—from 1918 in the Zoo in Giza, near Cairo (Goodman & Meininger 1989). Several potentially-breeding individuals have

been recorded from Aswan in various years, including 2010, in the period March–June, but a nest has never been found.

Other wetland species observed were: Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiaca* (pair with 5 young), Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* (1 pair), Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* (max 57), Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* (max 11), Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* (max 7), Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* (max 56), Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* (1), Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, African Swampphen *Porphyrio madagascariensis*, Senegal Thick-knee *Burhinus senegalensis*, Spur-winged



Plate 9. Lake Nasser (near Crocodile island, Aswan), Egypt, with partly-drowned Tamarisks *Tamarix nilotica*, 11 December 2008. © Dick Hoek

Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*, Little Stint *Calidris minuta*, Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*, Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava sensu lato* and Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*. The heron and egret species may well be breeding, aided by the relative absence of disturbance (no boats, centre nearly inaccessible), relatively stable water level (allows reeds to grow providing important shelter) and the presence of lake Nasser as a feeding ground.

In the Nile valley around Aswan small reed marshes are common, but disturbance is nearly always high, even in the small reed-rich protectorate of First Cataract Islands. In lake Nasser disturbance is less, but the distribution of reeds is limited probably as an effect of depth of floodwater, which can be above 10 m at high flood. Besides this, the dominance of tamarisk everywhere along the shores (Plate 9) may prevent the development of reed marshes (see Springuel & Ali pp366–367 in Fraser & Keddy 2005). Further small anthropogenic wetlands might exist and attract opportunistic breeders in the area but remain to be discovered.

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Western Rock Nuthatches *Sitta neumayer* feeding their nestlings bread, Armenia

ROLF NESSING

Western Rock Nuthatches *Sitta neumayer* feed on invertebrates, plant seeds and fruit (Adamian & Klem 1997, Cramp & Perrins 1993, Dementyev 1954). The invertebrate diet consists principally of beetles (Coleoptera) as well as butterfly (Lepidoptera) larvae. The stomach contents of 14 birds studied revealed 44 items (Adamian & Klem 1999): 20 beetles (45.5% by number), 13 larvae, nymphs, flies (Muscidae), ants (Formicidae) and moth larvae (29.5%), as well as 11 pieces of grass and Lime tree *Tilia* seeds (25.0%).

Western Rock Nuthatch nestlings in east Georgia are fed mainly on geometer moths (Geometridae) and butterflies, especially the Small White *Pieris rapae* (Chinchiladze 1960). Studies of stomach contents and neck-ring samples of nestlings in Armenia revealed 55 items: 43 caterpillars (81%), the rest consisting of snails (Pulmonata), beetles and ants (Adamian 1965). Kull in Löhrl (1967) reported rock nuthatches, *Sitta neumayer* or *S. tephronota*, in September in Persia that pecked at bread crumbs or melon seeds, in any event remains of human meals.

On 3, 4 and 6 June 2009, for several hours daily, I observed an occupied Western Rock Nuthatch breeding cavity in the Noravank gorge (39.70° N, 45.21° E), Armenia. The breeding cavity was c10 m above the ground in a cliff face, directly opposite a restaurant (the information centre of the Noravank IBA).

Both adult birds fed their nestlings on several occasions with pieces of Armenian unleavened bread 'lavasch', which they collected from the ground and restaurant tables. Large pieces of bread, up to 10 cm in length, were also flown to the nest cavity in the cliff face, broken up with pecks of their beaks, and then fed to the almost fledged nestlings in the nest entrance.

On 4 June, both adult birds were observed flying and climbing repeatedly, heads upwards, from the bottom to the top of the cliff face foraging for food (insects). These adults were never observed foraging head downwards like the Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*. I have observed the latter species foraging head downwards in Armenia. Löhrl (1967) commented that the Western Rock Nuthatch is a clumsier climber than the Eurasian Nuthatch and can hardly climb head-first downwards.

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I thank my friend, the committed vulture and leopard conservationist Vardges Gharakhanyan (Areni, Armenia) for his hospitality, without which my observations would not have been possible.

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REVIEWS

Checklist of the Birds of Israel

Compiled by Yoav Perlman & Jonathan Meyrav

Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.

Softback. 30 pages.

ISBN-13: 9789653710108

This well-presented booklet lists all 540 species and distinct forms recorded in Israel. For each species, the English, scientific and Hebrew names are given, along with their status and distribution, and a handy check box to keep your list! Small colour photographs with informative captions enhance the layout. A map shows many of the key birding sites and birdwatching centres in Israel. Contact addresses for the latter and a useful list of references and websites are also provided. Well worth getting before your next visit, the checklist is available from NHBS (www.nhbs.com) or the Israeli Ornithological Center (ioc@inter.net.il).

Dawn Balmer

Cyprus Bird Report 2008

BirdLife Cyprus. 2009.

Softback. 168 pages, colour photos, line drawings, graphs and tables.

£15

Available from OSME Sales

Following the relative glut of new species in 2007 (see *Sandgrouse* 31: 193), just one addition to the Cyprus avifauna was made



in 2008, a Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, trapped by a group of visiting English ringers in April. Other rarities included only the second-ever Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* (and first for 40 years), which might seem surprising given the species' relative abundance in Turkey. Indeed comparisons with the latter country are inevitable and interesting to make throughout. Quite a number of Cypriot rarities registered during 2008 are abundant breeding birds just to the north, eg Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* and Rook *Corvus frugilegus*, whilst Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* chalked up its 14th record in Cyprus in 2008, yet remains unknown in Turkey. Other comparisons are perhaps more humdrum for the visitor, but arguably far more fascinating. For instance, why and how does Common Swift *Apus apus* seem to reach Cyprus so much earlier than in Turkey? We are informed under Little Owl *Athene noctua*, "The race *lilith* occurs but does not predominate". Given that the question of which taxon occurs on Cyprus has baffled taxonomists for over a century (with, for instance, Vaurie 1960 tentatively assigning the population to *A. n. indigena*, and Koenig *et al* 1999 'ducking' the issue altogether), this statement demands clarification or justification, especially given the recent proposal to recognise multiple species within *A. noctua*. If more than one subspecies really occurs on the island, as is implied here, then one hopes some enterprising Cypriot resident is working on the question?

Guy M Kirwan

OSME NEWS

Geoff Welch

OSME—the old and the new

After many months if not years of discussion and planning, there have been significant developments over recent months in creating a digital archive of OSME publications and in upgrading the website.

Many early issues of *Sandgrouse* and the *OSME Bulletin* are no longer available for purchase as back copies so work is already underway on getting these converted to pdfs and it is hoped that these will soon be made available for viewing and downloading from the website. The long term intention is that all OSME publications, with the exception of the most recent issues, will eventually be available via the website providing a valuable source of information.

As many members will already have discovered, the OSME website, www.osme.org, was significantly overhauled in the spring

thanks to the hard work of many Council members and, especially, AbdulRahman Al Sirhan. As well as giving the site a new look, all of the information has been checked for accuracy and is being regularly updated. The initial work has concentrated on getting the site functioning effectively but this is very much viewed as a 'work in progress' and new features and additional information will be added gradually over the coming months.

With the internet being most people's starting point for finding information, OSME recognises the importance of having a website that is accurate, topical, useful, accessible and attractive and it is hoped that these recent developments will contribute to this. All of this work is aimed at making OSME more accessible to members and others interested in birds and conservation in the region.

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NEWS & INFORMATION

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

AFGHANISTAN

Large-billed Reed Warblers discovered breeding

The breeding site of one of the world's least known birds, Large-billed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*, has been discovered in the remote and rugged Wakhan Corridor of the Pamir mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. The first specimen of the species had been discovered in India in 1867, with more than a century elapsing before the second discovery of a single bird in Thailand in 2006 first reported by BirdLife International.

In 2008, Rob Timmins from WCS was conducting a survey of bird communities along the Wakhan and Pamir rivers when he immediately heard a distinctive song coming from a small, olive-brown bird with a long bill. Timmins taped the bird's song. He later heard and observed more birds of the same species. Initially, Timmins assumed these birds to be Blyth's Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, but a visit to the Natural History Museum at Tring in the UK to examine bird skins suggested his birds were another species. In summer 2009, WCS researchers returned to the site of Timmins' first survey, this time with mist nets used to catch birds for examination. The research team broadcast the recording of the song, a technique used to bring curious birds of the same species into view for observation and examination. The recording brought in Large-billed Reed Warblers from all directions, allowing the team to catch almost 20 of them for examination and to collect feathers for DNA analysis. Later laboratory work comparing museum specimens with measurements, field images, and DNA confirmed the exciting finding: the first-known breeding population of Large-billed Reed Warblers. "Almost nothing was known about this species and it was consequently listed as Data deficient by BirdLife on the IUCN Red List, so the discovery of a breeding population marks a major step forward", said Dr Stuart Butchart,

BirdLife's Global Research and Indicators Coordinator.

"This is great news from a little-known species from a remote part of the world and suggests that there may be more discoveries to be made here", said Mike Evans, BirdLife's compiler of the Important Bird Areas of the Middle East. (Source: Birdlife International)

ARMENIA

Bird of the Year

Within its 'Bird of the Year' annual campaign, the Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds (ASPB) has announced the Common Crane *Grus grus* to be the Bird of 2010 in Armenia. ASPB had carried out a public opinion poll, and respondents mentioned six bird species, namely Common Crane, Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*, Caucasian Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczzi*, and Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

Lesser Kestrel breeding success

Research into the breeding success of Lesser Kestrels showed that 28-30 pairs of Lesser Kestrels bred in Gorayk IBA in 2009. Ten pairs occupied nest holes in the new artificial breeding tower mounted for these birds by ASPB. The Lesser Kestrels nesting in the cavities in the roof of a local TV tower in Gorayk are poorly monitored due to their inaccessibility. In the 10 nests placed in the artificial breeding tower, 26 eggs were laid and 23 chicks hatched and later fledged successfully. Additionally, about 11 juvenile birds have been ringed using aluminum rings in order to find out whether they will return to their breeding grounds. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

Black Vulture movements

In August of 2009 the ASPB and Alexander Gavashelishvili (Ilia Chavchavadze University, Georgia) fitted a three month old Cinereous

Vulture *Aegypius monachus* with patagial wing tags and a PTT satellite unit. This effort follows up on the juvenile vultures tracking programme launched by ASPB in 2006 using wing tags and satellite tagging units. Up to now, a total of four Cinereous Vulture juveniles have been tagged. According to the data received via satellite, the juvenile vulture tagged in August of 2009 stayed within Armenia until November and then began migrating in the second half of the month, when it moved near to the town of Morvarid in Iran. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

EGYPT

Birding Egypt on Facebook

Birding Egypt have opened a new forum on Facebook for all those interested in birds, birdwatching and bird conservation in Egypt. (Source: Mindy Baha El Din)

Lake Qarun under threat

Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) warns that the Qarun lake protected area in the Fayoum oasis, one of Egypt's richest and most treasured natural landmarks, is at grave risk of being destroyed. Rather than protecting this natural treasure, NCE asserts that the Egyptian government's policies encourage overdevelopment and other destructive activities.

A wave of tourism development is destroying the shoreline at Qarun lake, animal and bird habitats are being ruined and the water is being severely polluted. Lake Qarun's most prominent recent tourist development is Byoum, a massive complex of more than 120 villas, a five-star hotel and hunting lodge. It is being built by well-known Egyptian developer Samih Sawiris, chairman of Orascom Hotels and Development.

According to Egypt's law protecting nature reserves, it is illegal to destroy, remove or pollute a reserve's natural resources—its wildlife, plants, rocks, even soil. However, this law is subject to a final clause that states "... unless permission is obtained from the relevant authorities." The Egyptian government has given Orascom this permission at Qarun lake.

During a recent meeting with NCE, Orascom chairman Sawiris promised to work with NCE to help protect the environment by forbidding hunting, building a bird sanctuary, restricting water sports and providing fishermen access to the lake. To date, however, none of these promises have been met.

The northern part of Qarun lake, around Gebal Qatrani, contains one of the world's most complete fossil records of terrestrial primates and marshland mammals, critical to understanding of mammalian including human evolution. The lake is also an internationally designated Important Bird Area, providing food, shelter and breeding grounds for a wide variety of resident and migrating birds, including several endangered species. Despite all this, however, Egypt's Tourism Development Authority (TDA) has plans to build on hundreds of acres along the lake's northern shore—even though this area of rolling, untouched desert is protected land.

On the southwestern shore, Orascom's Byoum development will cover around 300 acres of prime lake property. Already a huge cement embankment protrudes into the lake, covering the shoreline and destroying a key bird habitat. Byoum's promotional materials, featuring a silver-engraved, antique, rifle, promote hunting as a major activity, although hunting is illegal in the protectorate. Byoum also denies local fishermen access to the lake. It has been suggested that letters of objection should be sent to the following Egyptian agencies: the Environment Agency (www.eeaa.gov.eg) eeaa@eeaa.gov.eg and the State Information Service info@etf.org.eg/etf@etf.org.eg.

GEORGIA

Batumi Raptor Count 2010

Since 2008 the autumn migration of raptors at Batumi on the east side of the Black sea has been monitored by teams of volunteers. Over 830 000 raptors have been counted in eight weeks. More information about the results and the history of the project can be found on its website: www.batimiraptorcount.org. The 2010 counts will run from 17 August to 16 October and will also include a pilot count in

Kazbegi. To register your interest please visit the website.

IRAN

Waterbird monitoring in 2009

In January 2009, a group from Foundation Working Group International Waterbird and Wetland Research (WIWO) and the Iranian Department of Environment (DoE) took part in the International Waterbird Census to count birds in the most important wetlands in Iran. The 2009 census covered eight of the 30 provinces of Iran and produced a wealth of information, and the counters were lucky enough also to find the first Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* for Iran. The full results have been published by Amini & van Roomen (2009 Tehran/Zeist 520pp) and summarised by Winkel *et al* (2010 *Dutch Birding* 32: 171–188).

Prior to the fieldwork, a workshop covering counting methods and identification issues was held, together with the opportunity for a fieldtrip in the south-central province of Fars. Around Persepolis a wide range of species were seen including Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*, Eastern Imperial Eagle *A. heliaca*, Rock Martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula pallida*, Radde's Accentor *Prunella ocularis*, Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*, Hume's Wheatear *O. albonigra*, Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius longirostris*, Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronota dresseri* and Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*. A visit to Dasht-e Konar in the south of Fars produced Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*, Plain Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus*, See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus bogdanovi*, Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus harterti/indicus*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes doriae*, Radde's Accentor, Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* and Levant Grey Shrike *Lanius lahtora aucheri*, Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* and a juvenile Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (rare this far south). A search for Pleske's Ground Jay *Podoces pleskei* at Bahram-e Gur in the east of Fars produced just brief views of one.

After the workshop, the group split into nine groups to cover eight provinces (two teams covering Hormuzgan). In Gilan, in the north, 263 350 waterbirds of 71 species were recorded, with Anzali wetland proving to be the most important area. Within Gilan, there were impressive numbers of Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* (1298), Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* (5530), Common Teal *Anas crecca* (67 452), Gadwall *A. strepera* (36 335), Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (620), Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus* (440) and Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (40). Two Sociable Plovers *Vanellus gregarius* were the first winter observation in northern Iran.

Mazandaran, along the southern coast of the Caspian sea, is the most important province for waterbirds, in terms of both total numbers and species found. An aerial survey was carried out over Miankaleh and Gorgan bay areas and produced large flocks of Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* (778 970), Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* (52 710), Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (14 755) and Smew *Mergellus albellus* (4880), the latter mainly at sea. Elsewhere, counts of raptors were impressive with 252 White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla* and 573 Western Marsh Harriers. At Fereydon Kemar Damgah there was a sighting of the last wild Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* of the western population, accompanied by a female from the Russian re-introduction programme.

In Golestan, in the northeast of Iran, many of the sites had suffered the effects of drought over the last two years and in January 2009 only 174 000 waterbirds were counted (c230 000 in a typical winter). Eurasian Coot (78 484) and Greater Flamingo (45 461) were the most numerous species. Also of interest, nine White-winged Larks *Melanocorypha leucoptera* and two wintering Chinese Shrikes *Lanius arenarius* were at Bibi Shirvan fish pond (rare this far north). Three White-winged Grosbeaks *Mycerobas carnipes* were found in Golestan national park.

In Sistan Baluchestan, in southeast Iran, 36 549 waterbirds were counted. Numbers are lower due to few suitable habitats. There is a large wintering population of Dalmatian Pelicans (1523) which is about 11% of the estimated world population. There were also important counts of Great Black-headed Gull

Larus ichthyaetus (4501), Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* (82) and Great Stone-curlew *Easacus recurvirostris* (54). The first Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* for the province was also found. The best bird was undoubtedly a first-winter Amur Falcon seen on 24 January at Lipar seasonal marsh; the first record for Iran.

Counts in central Hormuzgan, in southern Iran, produced an actual count of 87 000 waterbirds and an estimated count of 154 000 waterbirds (69 species). One of the most important findings was the number of Broad-billed Sandpipers *Limicola falcinellus* (848 counted, 3621 estimated) which confirms the importance of especially Khouuran strait as a key wintering site. Also of interest were the numbers of Crab Plover (7222), Lesser Sand Plover *C. mongolus* (3539 counted, 19 407 estimated) and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinerea* (3271 counted, 9480 estimated).

In east Hormuzgan, a total of 72 248 waterbirds of 69 species were counted, plus 22 raptor species. The most numerous were Slender-billed Gulls *Larus genei* (9068), Caspian/Barbara Gull *L. cachinnans/barabensis* (8833), Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (4731), Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini* (4337) and Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (4115). Important numbers of Dalmatian Pelican (2255), Terek Sandpiper (2018), Crab Plover (1262), Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (282) and Broad-billed Sandpiper (121) were also found. Away from counting waterbirds, six Oriental White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* were found (at Khor-e Azini and Khor-e Neyzei), 29 juvenile Socotra Cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* at Khor-e Kuh Mobarak (rare winter visitor), Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica* at Jask and a Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra* c 1km off the coast of Khor-e Chal (third for Iran).

Bushehr, in southern Iran, yielded 54 000 birds. Most numerous in 2009 were Great Cormorant (13 000), Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (12 000), Common Teal (3700) and Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* (3000). A flock of 26 Macqueen's Bustards were at Mond protected area.

In Khuzestan, just over 100 000 waterbirds were counted, compared with nearly 500 000 in 2007. Only Greater Flamingo had higher numbers than in 2007 (14 236 versus 1986). Other numerous birds were Eurasian Coot

(18 391), Common Teal (12 614) and Common Pochard *Aythya farina* (9634). At Bennynameh, 153 Marbled Ducks were counted. Seven Spur-winged Lapwings *Vanellus spinosus* at three different locations were notable (rare in Iran).

In Fars, only 42 980 waterbirds were counted compared with almost 180 000 in 2007. The reduced counts, as in many areas, were presumably a reflection of the extreme drought. A group of 14 Greater White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons* on a lake behind Sivand dam was a notable record.

New bulletin for Iran

A new bulletin, *Balaban*, aimed to encourage Iranian birders and ornithologists to publish results of their works in their native language and introduce a place to transfer ornithological papers, notes and news regarding Iranian birds and ornithology has been launched. This will complement *Podoces*. Although most of the texts are in Persian, summaries in English are provided. Small number of paper copies (30 pp, A4 sized) are available. Please contact Mohammad Tohidifar (mohammad_8463@yahoo.com) or Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh (akhaleghizadeh@gmail.com) for further information.

KYRGYZSTAN

An excellent article on birding in Kyrgyzstan by Vincent van der Spek and Machiel Valkenburg was recently published in *Dutch Birding* (32: 10–20 2010).

SOCOTRA (YEMEN)

Prize for Socotra Project website

The Socotra Governance & Biodiversity Project website (www.socotraproject.org) has been awarded the gold prize in the Yemen Web Awards 2009. The SGBP website received first place within the second largest category of Projects & Government Websites beating the Official Yemen Tourism & Hadhramaut Governorate Website. Winning in Yemen Web Awards means that the SGBP website has qualified for the Middle East finals to be held in Oman in May 2010. OSME encourages them to host conservation stories and news items and provides bird checklists and

relevant *Sandgrouse* papers. (Source: Bohdana Rambouskova, SGBP)

SYRIA

Mheimideh under immediate threat

Mheimideh is probably the best birding site along the Syrian Euphrates; all who visit come away astonished that such a rich site can exist in the middle of a village. It has an outstanding list of breeding species, notably three RDB species of duck (White-headed *Oxyura leucocephala*, Ferruginous *Aythya nyroca* and Marbled Ducks *Marmaronetta angustirostris*), White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* and Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, with good numbers of Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus spinosus* and Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*. But the pressure on it is massive including illegal hunting and every year more good habitat round its edges disappears under houses. An application has again been lodged for the whole site to be drained for agricultural and housing purposes. On this occasion the application is likely to be refused, but at some stage soon it will be accepted unless there is international pressure and a long-term plan for its conservation.

The Ministry of State for Environment Affairs and the Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife are very keen to mount a campaign to save Mheimideh and to develop it as an educational nature reserve, ensuring that there are significant benefits for the local people (in terms of jobs, ecotourist income and prestige). This will require major involvement by the international conservation community and significant funding.

Mheimideh has exceptional potential as a flagship nature reserve that can serve as a major education point for local people. Illegal hunting is widespread along the Syrian Euphrates and directly impacts many species, notably the Critically Endangered Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius*. Thus a conservation presence at Mheimideh is very important. Dr David Murdoch will be contacting potential supporters in the near future to elicit support for the Syrian stakeholders' campaign. (Source: David Murdoch).

OTHER NEWS

Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia project reaches a very important stage this year with the publication of the Atlas. The last records were added to the Atlas in April 2010 and it will be published later this year. It will cover 273 proven breeding bird species in Arabia and a further 24 not-quite-proven breeders. For each of the breeding species there is a lengthy text arranged in four paragraph blocks. These cover the species and its taxonomy; status in Arabia generally and in each country, including population estimates; the species' ecological requirements and finally breeding aspects. For each subject great care has been taken to ensure that only Arabian information is provided, thus avoiding the repeat of data from standard works. For each breeding species there is at least one map showing confirmed and probable breeding and presence records against two different time periods (by use of coloured symbols), up to and after 1 January 1984, and a line drawing. The evidence for breeding of the not quite proven species is given but these are not illustrated or mapped. There are lengthy introductory general chapters on bird distribution in Arabia, including several general maps and over 100 colour photos of habitats, conservation issues and about 50 birds. The Atlas will be published as volume 25 of journal of the *Fauna of Arabia*, a hardback A4 format journal published by the Senckenberg Institute in Frankfurt, and it will be approximately 750 pages long.

Reaching this important stage does not mean the end of the ABBA project. The database will continue to be added to and records collected from all sources, including current and past observers, literature sources and museums and archives. It is intended to revamp the database in the coming months to reflect changes in taxonomy and nomenclature and to migrate it to more modern software, to enable the project to be completely re-launched, including a new website. However, in the meantime, observers

are asked to email the project coordinator Mike Jennings (ArabianBirds@dsl.pipex.com) to obtain a set of the project instructions and forms to enable them to complete report sheets for the current breeding season. It cannot be emphasised enough that the project is not just interested in the new and exciting developments regarding breeding/resident birds in Arabia but is also interested in repeat breeding of common birds, population levels, conservation issues, land use and habitat details. All these aspects can be reported. Contributions on all aspects of Arabian birds are also welcomed for publication in *Phoenix* the project newsletter. (Source: Mike Jennings)

New satellite-tracking links between Europe and Africa

New links have been added to the satellite-tracking pages of the West African Ornithological Society website (<http://malimbus.free.fr/trakindx.htm>) for Purple Heron, White Stork, Eurasian Hobby and Eleonora's Falcon. There is also a link to a Wetlands International page that has satellite tracking and colour banding links from all over the world. (Source: Joost Brouwer)

WorldWaders

The second module of the Shorebird Mapping Project of WorldWaders is now available. The first module, for nesting shorebird mapping, was introduced recently and has been well received. Now the Beta version of the Non-breeding Shorebird Mapping Project is online. The module will help identify unidentified key sites for their better protection. Visit www.worldwaders.org for more information. (Source: Gyorgy Szimuly)

Zoology in the Middle East

Congratulations to *Zoology in the Middle East* who publish their 50th volume later in 2010. It is one of the largest collections of zoological

papers related to the Middle East (www.kasperek-verlag.de/ZME-allgem.htm).

REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

Photos for Worldwaders

Good quality images (for online use only) of wader eggs, nests and chicks are sought. The photos will be used to assist wildlife artist Szabolcs Kokay in painting the identification plates for a new book. The images will be used for reference only and will not be published. More details can be found at <http://shorebirdeggsandchicks.posterous.com>. Images can be sent by email to post@shorebirdeggsandchicks.posterous.com with the image attachment only in the body of the e-mail. The subject of the mail should be the name of the species and the location (eg Red Knot, Alaska). No text is needed with the e-mail. It is requested that images of eggs and chicks of the same species are put into one email. (Source: Gyorgy Szimuly (Szimi)/WorldWaders www.worldwaders.org)

Photos for *Owls of the World*

In 2012, A&C Black will be publishing a definitive photographic guide dedicated to the world's 250 species of owls, and the process of sourcing and selecting photographs is now well underway. *Owls of the World* is being written by Finnish owl expert Heimo Mikkola, and the publishers would like to invite photographers and birders from around the world to submit images (preferably digital) for use in the book, which will be placing particular emphasis on plumage variation and racial separation. Photographs of young birds, island endemic races and adults in flight are particularly welcome. If you think you might be able to help, please send an email in the first instance to Ellen Parnavelas at eparnavelas@acblack.com.

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 2010 unless stated otherwise.

Records and photographs for *Sandgrouse* 33 (1) should be sent by 15 Dec to atr@osme.org.

AFGHANISTAN

Records were received from Richard Seargent, Camp Bastion, Helmand province. He recorded many common migrants during the spring including 20+ **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* overhead on 10 Mar, four **White-tailed Lapwings** *Vanellus leucurus* on 17 Mar, a **Scrub Warbler** *Scotocerca inquieta* singing and holding territory 26–30 Mar, a **White-throated Robin** *Irania gutturalis* on 30 Mar and a **Rosy Pipit** *Anthus roseatus* 21 and 26 Jan. Away from Camp Bastion, three **Red Crossbills** *Loxia curvirostra* were at Cha-en Anjir, Helmand, 26 Jan.

ARMENIA

A **Greater Scaup** *Aythya marila* was recorded at Lake Sevan during mid-winter counts and is the third or fourth record for Armenia.

BAHRAIN

A **Purple Swamphen** *Porphyrio porphyrio* in the reeds of the effluent outfall behind Dilmen Poultry plant, Hamalah, on 23 Jan was the first for Bahrain. There were five **Cream-coloured Coursers** *Cursorius cursor* at Busateen mid-May. A sizeable breeding colony of **Turtle Doves** *Streptopelia turtur* was located to the south of Al Areen wildlife park this spring. This site was known to hold birds in the 1980s and 24 nests were recorded this spring, all in desert broom bushes. Also recorded for the first time in several years were nesting **Namaqua Doves** *Oena capensis* at two sites; one in the south of the island and one in the Hamala experimental station. The second **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* for Bahrain was at A'Ali agriculture farm on 20 Feb; the previous record was 20–27 March 1986. There was a significant roost of **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* in

southeast Jasra within the grounds of a royal palace. The roost had over 200 birds in Dec 2009 and numbers dropped to less than 100 birds by the end of Jan and only 10s of birds by the end of Feb. A **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* was at Awali 24 Apr.

CYPRUS

An adult **Gannet** *Morus bassanus* was off Paphos lighthouse 30 Mar, a **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug* at Akrotiri on 8 Mar, followed by birds at Phinikas 1 Apr and Mandria the next day. A **Little Crake** *Porzana parva* was at Aspro dam pools 14 Jan and single **Baillon's Crakes** *Porzana pusilla* at lower Xeros valley 2–5 Apr and Aspro dam pools 11–15 Apr. At Karpas peninsula 22–24 Mar one **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo* and 350 **Common Cranes** *Grus grus* were recorded. A peak of 10 **Greater Sand Plovers** *Charadrius leschenaultii* was at Spiros pool on 13 Mar, one **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* was at Paphos airport 3 Apr, two were at Larnaca airport 4 Apr, and a male at Mandria 10 Apr, joined by a female the next day and one was at Larnaca sewage works fields 12 and 15 Apr. On 21 Mar a **Eurasian Dotterel** *Charadrius morinellus* was at Akrotiri GP and six were at Akrotiri salt lake 29 Mar. Also at Akrotiri GP were three **Cream-coloured Coursers** *Cursorius cursor* 19–25 Mar and one there 4 and 27 Apr. A **White-tailed Plover** *Vanellus leucurus* was at Pissouri 20 Mar, the 8th record since 2000. Four **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyaetus* at cape Zevgari on 15 Mar was a good count. Five **Laughing Doves** *Streptopelia senegalensis* seen flying in from the sea at Mandria 11 Apr will be only the second wild record if accepted and a female **Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis* was at Lara, Akamas, 5 May, the second for Cyprus if accepted as

wild. Two **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis* flushed from the ground at Agios Filon, Karpas peninsula, 8 Apr, was only the 6th record in the last 10 years. A **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* at Asprokremmos dam 13 Jan was the earliest record for five years. A **White-throated Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* was reported at Akrotiri salt lake 29 March.

The thirteenth record of **Asian Desert Warbler** *Sylvia nana* was at Akriotiri 9 Mar and the fourteenth at Akhna dam 19 Apr. There was a good showing of **Wallcreepers** *Tichodroma muraria* with one at Avagas gorge 10 Jan, at least one at Kensington cliffs 1–8 Mar, with 2 there 7 Mar. An adult **Rose-coloured Starling** *Sturnus roseus* was at Asprokremmos dam 4 Apr. There was a good run of interesting wheatears at Karpas peninsula 22–24 Mar with c40 **Isabelline Wheatears** *Oenanthe isabellina*, c50 **Cyprus Wheatears** *Oenanthe cyprica* and two **Pied Wheatears** *Oenanthe pleschanka*; the latter will be the second record if accepted. There were at least 63 **Desert Wheatears** *Oenanthe deserti* on the south coast 6–12 Mar. A **Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa striata* at Paphos airport 1 Jan was unseasonal. Three **Semi-collared Flycatchers** *Ficedula semitorquata* were recorded on the island 26 Mar. The first **White-winged Snowfinch** *Montifringilla nivalis* for Cyprus was reported at Macheras forest 3 Jan. There were c200 singing **Corn Buntings** *Emberiza calandra* at Karpas peninsula 22–24 Mar, a **Trumpeter Finch** *Bucanetes githagineus* at Mandria on 31 Mar and a **Pine Bunting** *Emberiza leucocephalos* reported at Troodos on 2 Jan will be the sixth record if accepted. There were single **Cinereous Buntings** *Emberiza cineracea* at Agia Napa sewage works 22 Mar, Amathus 25 Mar and cape Greco 2 Apr.

EGYPT

Up to 12 **Yellow-billed Storks** *Mycteria ibis* were at Abu Simbel 4–6 Apr, 46 **Black Storks** *Ciconia nigra* were roosting in the desert north of Hurgghada 29 Apr and a **Eurasian Bittern** *Botaurus stellaris* was at Abu Simbel 5 Apr. A pair of **Three-banded Plovers** *Charadrius tricollaris* was at Aswan 24 Apr and on 1 May two pairs and a probable juvenile were seen. A male **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* was at El Gouna golf course 4 Apr and two **Black-**

winged Pratincoles *Glareola nordmanni* were seen there on the same date, with another at Abassa 17 Apr. A **Pharaoh Eagle Owl** *Bubo ascalaphus* was at Kom Ombo temple 7 Apr, two **Hooded Crows** *Corvus cornix* at Naama Bay 10 Mar and one at Nuweiba, Sinai, two days later. On 11 Mar a **Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus* was at Nabi, Sinai, a **Savi's Warbler** *Locustella luscinioides* at Sharm el Sheikh sewage works 12 Apr and a male **Rüppell's Warbler** *Sylvia rueppelli* was seen near Feiran oasis 9 Mar. The first **Yellow-throated Sparrow** *Gymnoris xanthocollis* for Egypt was at Marsa Alam's Brayka Bay resort 5–6 Jun. Eleven **Sinai Rosefinches** *Carpodacus synoicus* were at Santa Katarina monastery, Sinai, 12 Mar, a **Corn Bunting** *Emberiza calandra* at Naama Bay 10 Mar and a **House Bunting** *Emberiza striolata* at Santa Katarina monastery 15 Apr. A survey in the rarely visited area of Gebel Elba was carried out in Apr and provided excellent baseline information for future visits. **Rosy-patched Bush-shrikes** *Rhodophoneus cruentus* were seen in two locations; one in Wadi Adeib and a pair in Wadi Akwamatra but the report (<http://birdinginegypt.com/trip-reports.php>) suggests a decline in numbers of this species.

GEORGIA

A list of unusual bird records in Georgia during 2009 is presented on the unofficial website of the Bird Conservation Union of Georgia (www.bcug.narod.ru/2009.html) and records from 1997–2008 are also on the site eg a **Hobby** *Falco subbuteo* was recorded 2 Dec 2009 in Batumi, Ajaria, southwest Georgia, a very late record of this species.

IRAQ

During the 2010 winter surveys in Kurdistan, Iraq, there were several interesting findings including 630 **Lesser White-fronted Geese** *Anser erythropus* (nearly 3% of the world population), two **Red-breasted Geese** *Branta ruficollis*, two **Pine Buntings** *Emberiza leucocephalos*, three **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* (the first recorded in Iraq since 1940s), 246 **Great Black-headed Gulls** *Larus ichthyæetus*, 14 **Alpine Accentors** *Prunella collaris*, nine **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca*, one **Red Kite** *Milvus milvus* and 20 **Eurasian Siskins** *Carduelis spinus*.



Plate 1. Marbled Ducks *Marmaronetta angustirostris* en masse, 5 February 2010, Baghdadiya, Iraq. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq



Plate 2. Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida* on nest, May 2010, Iraq. © RF Porter



Plate 3. White-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla nivalis*, June 2010, Piramagroon mountain, Kurdistan, Iraq. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq



Plate 4. White-winged Snowfinches *Montifringilla nivalis*, June 2010, Piramagroon mountain, Kurdistan, Iraq. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

The central and western deserts of Iraq are one of the main migration routes for raptors in Iraq. In spring, over 450 **Lesser Kestrels** *Falco naumanni*, 500 **Black Kites** *Milvus migrans* and **Black-eared Kites** *Milvus migrans lineatus*, four **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca* and six **Pallid Harriers** *Circus macrourus* were seen.

In the unique, regenerating, southern marshes several amazing findings were recorded including 7000 **Greater Flamingos** *Phoenicopterus roseus*, 30 000 **Northern Shovelers** *Anas clypeata*, 41 000 **Marbled Ducks** *Marmaronetta angustirostris* (more than the known world population, Plate 1), 19 000 **Eastern Greylag Geese** *Anser anser rubirostris*, 9000 **Red -crested Pochards** *Netta rufina*, 2500 **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca*, 6000 **Black-tailed Godwits** *Limosa limosa*, 6000 **Pygmy Cormorants** *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, 8000 **Dead Sea Sparrows** *Passer moabiticus*,

and seven **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus*. **White-crowned Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucopyga* was also added to the Iraq bird list.

In Mar 2010, Nature Iraq conducted the Critically Endangered **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* survey. Thirteen sites were surveyed and signals were obtained from one of the satellite-tagged Sociable Lapwings inside Iraq, near Haditha. Although no lapwings were found, 177 **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo*, 220 **Western Yellow Wagtails** *Motacilla flava*, 15 **Citrine Wagtails** *Motacilla citreola* and a **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* were observed.

In May and June Richard Porter joined Nature Iraq's bird team during Key Biodiversity Areas survey and the Nature Iraq/BirdLife International annual training course. Many new breeding areas were found and first breeding was proven in Iraq for **Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*, **Upcher's Warbler**

Hippolais languida (Plate 2) and **Eastern Orphean Warbler** *Sylvia crassirostris* (found breeding at six and two sites respectively) were recorded. A total of 26 pairs of **Egyptian Vultures** *Neophron percnopterus* were located, as well as two pairs of **Peregrines** *Falco peregrinus*, two pairs of **Rufous-tailed Wheatears** *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna*, two pairs of **Barbary Falcons** *Falco pelegrinoides* and a singing **Eastern Bonelli's Warbler** *Phylloscopus orientalis*. **Great Reed Warblers** *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* were nesting at two sites, and at one **Sedge Warblers** *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* were on territory—if breeding is proved this would be new for Iraq. A pair of **Mourning Wheatears** *Oenanthe lugens* was on territory at Piramagroon and **European Rollers** *Coracias garrulus* were breeding at nine sites.

In addition, **Cinereous Buntings** *Emberiza cineracea* of the eastern form *semenowi* were found at 12 sites (60 pairs in total). **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis* were breeding in two colonies of over 10 and 50 pairs in caves at Chami Razan and Dukan respectively and **Alpine Swifts** *Tachymarptis melba* at two colonies, at Ahmed Awa and Bekhal waterfall. Six **Desert Finches** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* were found at three sites and were probably nesting.

Nature Iraq did an ecotourism trip to Piramagroon mountain, one of the most important IBAs in Kurdistan. Important breeding discoveries were made including **White-winged Snowfinch** *Montifringilla nivalis* (Plates 3 & 4), **Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*, **Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus*, **Winter Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* (first breeding record for Iraq) and **Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros*.

ISRAEL

Four **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* were at Shomrat, northwest Galilee, 13 Jan and two were at Zohar, south coastal plains two days later. A **Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*, the fourth record and present since Dec 2009, remained to 12 Feb. The fifth record of **Great Shearwater** *Puffinus gravis* was off Jaffa 3 Feb. There were good numbers of **Leach's Storm Petrel** *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* with 15 off Jaffa on 25 Jan and also recorded 4 Feb. A **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* remained off Eilat's North Beach Feb–May at least and the

overwintering **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhynchus* remained at Eilat throughout Feb until 21 Mar at least. A **Black-winged Kite** *Elanus caeruleus* of the African form *caeruleus* was found exhausted at Wadi Paran, north Arava, on 22 Feb but died the next day and an adult **Verreaux's Eagle** *Aquila verreauxii* was observed on several occasions during Apr over the Eilat mountains. A **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo* remained at Hula during Feb and at least eight were recorded on migration throughout the country in Mar. A **Lesser Sand Plover** *Charadrius mongolus* at KM20 pools, Eilat, 14–24 Mar will be the third for Israel if accepted. At least eight **Caspian Plovers** *Charadrius asiaticus* were recorded during Mar in Yotvata and Eilat, a **Great Snipe** *Gallinago media* was at Hula lake on 24 Apr and two were there 20 May and one at Hazor 21 May. A **Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* at Shlomi, northwest Galilee on 15 Jan was unseasonal. First-winter **Audouin's Gulls** *Larus audouinii* were at Maoz Hayim, Bet Shean valley, on 10 Jan and at Ashdod 13 Jan, a second-winter was at Ashdod 26 Mar with one also there 26 Apr. An adult **Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* remained at Acre during Jan and an **Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea* was off Eilat's North Beach 10 Apr. The fifth **Oriental Turtle Dove** *Streptopelia orientalis* (race *meena*) for Israel was at Ashdod 27 Feb.

On 6 June there were five chough sp *Pyrrhocorax* at mount Hermon. Following exceptional winter rainfall, several tens of pairs of **Thick-billed Larks** *Ramphocoris clotbey* were found breeding in the Eilat mountains, S Negev, and Arava during Mar and this number rose to perhaps several hundred pairs during April. By Jun just single birds remained in the area. There was a **Dunn's Lark** *Eremalauta dunni* at Hameishar, south Negev, 26 Mar and during Apr a major breeding event was recorded with perhaps several tens of pairs in the Arava valley, the largest such since 1989. A **Sykes's Warbler** *Iduna rama*, fifth for Israel if accepted, was at Eilat 8 Apr and a singing male **Western Orphean Warbler** *Sylvia hortensis* at Ein Gedi 13 Apr will be the first for the country if accepted. There was a good number of **Menetries's Warblers** *Sylvia mystacea* with one at Yotvata, 15–22 Mar, one at Eilat 22 Mar and two ringed at IBRCE, Eilat,

in early Apr. There were two **Black Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas podobe* at Yotvata 13–17 Mar and six were recorded during Apr at Eilat and south Arava valley. There were two at Yotvata on 7–8 May and an unusual summer record at Hazeve 2 Jun. A female **Rufous-tailed Wheatear** *Oenanthe (xanthoprymna) xanthoprymna* was at Heftziba quarry, Harod valley, during Feb, a **Pied Wheatear** *Oenanthe pleschanka* at Yotvata, 18–22 Mar and one at Makhtesh Ramon, central Negev, 18 Mar. Six **Cyprus Wheatear** *Oenanthe cypriaca* were seen during Mar at Nizzana, Eilat, Ketura and south Dead Sea. A **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* at En Afek, northwest Galilee on 4 Jan was unseasonal. There was a large invasion of **Pale Rockfinches** *Carpospiza brachydactyla* with hundreds of pairs moving into central and east Negev in Mar and breeding during Apr following exceptional winter rain. By Jun many pairs were completing their third breeding attempt in the high Negev mountains. A **Blyth's Pipit** *Anthus godlewskii* at Hameishar on 22 Mar will be the fourth record for Israel if accepted and the second **Red-headed Bunting** *Emberiza bruniceps* for Israel was a male at Nizzana on 15 May; the first was in 1976.

JORDAN

At Aqaba there were 20 **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca* 24 Dec 2009 and three **Brown Boobies** *Sula leucogaster* offshore there on the same date, with up to three 21–25 Mar. Also at Aqaba, there were two **Black Kites** *Milvus migrans* 25 Dec 2009. There was a **Greater Spotted Eagle** *Aquila clanga* at Al Humayna 26 Dec 2009 and one at Kerark 29 Dec 2009 and three **Steppe Eagles** *Aquila nipalensis* and two **Eastern Imperial Eagles** *Aquila heliaca* at Aqaba 24 Dec 2009. The first **Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla* for Jordan, a juvenile, was at Aqaba 23–25 Dec 2009. Birders also recorded numerous wintering *brevirostris*-type **Chiffchaffs** *Phylloscopus collybita* at Aqaba in Dec 2009. There were five **Arabian Warblers** *Sylvia leucomelaena* in Aqaba mountains in Mar, single **Black Scrub Robins** *Cercotrichas podobe* at Aqaba allotments 21 and 26 Mar, a male **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* in Aqaba palm plantations in Mar and a singing male **Pale Rockfinch** *Carpospiza brachydactyla* in Aqaba mountains Mar. Four

Tree Pipits *Anthus trivialis* at Aqaba on 24 Dec 2009, and another there next day, were unseasonal.

KAZAKHSTAN

A summary of recent news from Kazakhstan has been published in Wassink *Dutch Birding* 32: 128–130. Highlights are presented below. A first-winter **Velvet Scoter** *Melanitta fusca* at Karashengel hunting reserve, Almaty province, 19 Dec 2008 and a **Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* at Karakol lake, Mangghystau, 14 Dec 2008 were both first winter records for Kazakhstan. The first **Indian Pond Heron** *Ardeola grayii* for the country, an adult, was at Sorbulak lake, Almaty province, 16 July 2009 and an immature **Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus* at Karatau mountains near Shetpe, Mangghystau province, on 11 May 2009 was the first record for western Kazakhstan. There was an exceptional show of **Lesser Sand Plovers** *Charadrius mongolus* 21 May 2009 with flocks of 14 and 151 birds found at Fetisovo plateau and peninsula, Mangghystau, respectively and, on 24 May, 39 birds were still present at the latter location. There have been only eight previous records. The first winter record of **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* involved eight birds 14 Dec 2008 at Karakol lake, Mangghystau province. **Black-tailed Godwits** *Limosa limosa* of the eastern subspecies *melanuroides* were found on 4 May 2009 (one male) and 7 May 2009 (two males) at Kyzylkol lake, south Kazakhstan province; the fourth and fifth records of this subspecies. Two **Eurasian Curlews** *Numenius arquata* were recorded 14 Dec 2008 at Karakol lake, Mangghystau province, and are the first winter record for the country.

A first-summer **Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla* was photographed from a ship on 21 and 25 April 2008 in Kazakh territorial waters in the northern Caspian sea and what was likely to be the same bird was seen on 30 Apr and 1 May 2008 in the Caspian sea off Bautino, Mangghystau province; this is a new species for Kazakhstan. The fifth record of **Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus* was seen 13 May 2009, an adult, at the Caspian coast at Fetisovo, Mangghystau province. A **Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus fuscus* (Baltic Gull) was found dead 28 June 1982 southeast of Ebeyti, Aqtöbe province.

It was ringed as a nestling in Finland 26 Jul 1981. This is the first record of Baltic Gull (and Lesser Black-backed Gull of any subspecies). A first-summer female **Pied Bush Chat** *Saxicola caprata* was recorded 17 May 2009 at Kenderli, Mangghystau province, and another female was photographed at Kenderli 24 May 2009; these are the first records for western Kazakhstan. Between 12 Apr–3 May 2009 seven **Semi-collared Flycatchers** *Ficedula semitorquata* were found at Kenderli, Mangghystau province, and on 25 April 2009, a first-summer male was at Fetisovo plateau, Mangghystau province; these are the second and third records for the country. The first winter record of **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis* involved 15 birds on 14 Dec 2008 at Karakol lake, Mangghystau province. Two **Masked Wagtails** *Motacilla personata* were found 13 Jan at Slavnov, Zhambyl province, and were the second winter record for the country. Several **Two-barred Crossbills** *Loxia*

leucoptera were found amongst flocks of **Red Crossbills** *L. curvirostra* at Tautekeli valley, southern Altai, 27 Jan 2008 and were the fourth record for Kazakhstan and first record in winter.

KUWAIT

An adult **Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor*, the second for Kuwait, was at Sulaibikhat bay 16–27 Jan and a **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* was at Sabah Al-Ahmed NR 1 May. The first **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* for Kuwait was photographed at SAANR 29 May (Plate 5). Several hundred **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* were recorded from 19 Mar, with a peak of 70 at SAANR (Plate 6). There are only four previous records. It is thought they were blown from their normal western Arabian peninsula migration route to the east coast by the gale force westerly winds at the time. The first breeding record of **White-tailed Lapwing** *Vanellus leucurus* in Kuwait



Plate 5. Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis*, 29 May 2010, Sabah Al-Ahmed NR, Kuwait. © Mohammed Khorshed



Plate 6. Demoiselle Cranes *Anthropoides virgo*, 23 March 2010, Sabah Al-Ahmed NR, Kuwait. © AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan



Plate 7. Ashy Drongo *Dicurus leucophaeus*, 10 April 2010, Jahra Farms, Kuwait. © AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan



Plate 8. Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe albonigra*, 5 February 2010, Kuwait. © AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan

occurred in Jahra Pools reserve in May and the first **Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus* for Kuwait and Western Palearctic was at Jahra Farms 3–10 Apr (Plate 7). A **Hume's Wheatear** *Oenanthe albonigra* was still at SAANR on 29 Jan and present 5 Feb (Plate 8). A **Desert Finch** *Rhodospiza obsoletus* was at Al Abraaq 30 Apr.

OMAN

Highlights were two first records: a **Melodious Warbler** *Hippolais polyglotta* at Ayn Hamran, near Salalah, 18 Jan, and a **Basra Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus griseldis* at As Sayh, Musandam, 1 May (the latter the same week as one in Abu Dhabi). A juvenile **Common Hawk Cuckoo** *Hierococcyx varius* seen and photographed at Hilf, Masirah island, 14 Jan was only the 2nd record; the first, in 1988, was also from Masirah.

There were 11 **Greater White-fronted Geese** *Anser albifrons* at Khawr Rawri 19 Jan and 23 Feb and a single bird at Al Mughsayl 20–21 Jan, presumably the same birds as in December 2009. **Ferruginous Ducks** *Aythya nyroca* wintered in good numbers at several localities in the Salalah area, with a maximum of 23 at Khawr Rawri 19 Jan. Sea-watching at Ras al Hadd 29–31 May produced the 8th record of **Sooty Shearwater** *Puffinus griseus* (30 May), a rarely seen **Swinhoe's Storm Petrel** *Oceanodroma monorhis*, 950 **Persian Shearwaters** *Puffinus persicus*, 95 **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** *Puffinus carneipes*, 12 **Jouanin's Petrels** *Bulweria fallax*, 3000+ **Bridled Terns** *Onychoprion anaethetus* and two **Arctic Skuas** *Stercorarius parasiticus*. A count of 13 **Black-necked Grebes** *Podiceps nigricollis* at Khawr Ghawi was an unusually high figure. A single **Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor* at Qurryat 25 Feb–1 Mar was the first for northern Oman. **Red-billed Tropicbirds** *Phaethon aethereus* are rarely seen from shore during the winter months, so two off Raysut cliffs 22 Feb was noteworthy. **Black Stork** *Ciconia nigra* was considered a vagrant but for the past few years small numbers have been occurring regularly at the coastal khawrs of southern Oman; up to three were at Khawr Rawri in Jan, with five 10 Feb and two 23 Feb. **Abdim's Storks** *Ciconia abdimii* are irregular in winter at farms in the Dhofar region; 16 were at Salalah lagoons 11 Jan. **Intermediate Egrets** *Egretta*

intermedia were at Mugsayl (one, 21 Jan and one, 23 Feb) and Khawr Rawri (five, 24 Apr). **Crested Honey Buzzard** *Pernis ptilorhyncus* has recently become something of a regular winter sighting in the south; single birds were at East Khawr 11 Jan, Salalah lagoons 12 Jan, Darbat 13 Jan, and Jarziz farms (two 16–17 Feb and one 20 Feb). Over 300 **Steppe Eagles** *Aquila nipalensis* were at Raysut rubbish dump 17 Feb with >1000 **Western White Storks** *Ciconia ciconia*. A **Greater Spotted Eagle** *Aquila clanga* at Qurryat 29 Apr was unusually late. A single **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* was at Dawkah 22 Jan with four there 19 Feb. Single **Barbary Falcons** *Falco (peregrinus) pelegrinoides* were at Wadi Uyun 16 Feb, Jarziz farms 14 and 20 Feb, and Liwa, northern Oman, 28 Feb. The 1st sighting for 2010 of **Sooty Falcon** *Falco concolor* was of eight birds over the Royal Palace, Muscat, 23 Apr.

A **White-breasted Waterhen** *Amaurornis phoenicurus* and five **Common Cranes** *Grus grus* were at Dawkah 22 Jan. A male and a female **Little Crake** *Porzana parva* were at Mugsayl 23 Feb. Record numbers of **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* were present at farms in southern Oman during Jan (max 48 at Sahnwaht farm 9 Jan and 29 at Jarziz farms 22 Jan). An **Asian Koel** *Eudynamis scolopaceus* was at Hilf, Masirah, 14 Jan with one at Al Balid farm 18 Feb. There were 15 **Arabian Scops Owls** *Otus (sengalensis) pamelae* at Wadi Darbat 15 Feb, an unusually high count, and a single **Arabian Spotted Eagle Owl** *Bubo (africanus) milesi*. Two **Hume's Owls** *Strix butleri* were at Wadi Ashawq 14 Feb and two at Wadi Ash Shuaymiyyah 21 Feb. The **Indian Roller** *Coracias benghalensis* is one of the most ubiquitous birds in northern Oman but a single at Jarziz farms 11 Jan was very surprising. A **Malachite Kingfisher** *Alcedo cristata* at Wadi Mughsayl 11 Jan was only the 4th for Oman.

Up to three **Red-backed Shrikes** *Lanius collurio*, **Lesser Grey Shrikes** *Lanius minor*, **Woodchat Shrikes** *Lanius senator* and **Masked Shrikes** *Lanius nubicus* were present from mid-April to early May at As Sayh and Sall Ala, Musandam, with much larger numbers of **Daurian Shrikes** *Lanius isabellinus*, **Turkestan Shrikes** *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides* (max 35) and **Southern Grey Shrikes** *Lanius meridionalis* (max 25). Four to five **Oriental**

Skylarks *Alauda gulgula* were at Sun farms, Sohar, 25–27 Feb. A **Wire-tailed Swallow** *Hirundo smithii* at Qurryat 20–25 Feb and two at Al Lansab lagoons 23 Feb were the 5th and 6th records. Rare warblers included a **Moustached Warbler** *Acrocephalus melanopogon mimicus* at Qurryat 7 Feb (8th record and the first since 1999), a **Hume's Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus humei* at Ain Hamran 28 Jan (8th record) and a **Savi's Warbler** *Locustella luscinioides* at Thumrait air base 26 Jan–22 Feb (10th record). Up to three **Barred Warblers** *Sylvia nisoria* were at Sall Ala and As Sayh, 16–24 Apr. A **Common Nightingale** *Luscinia megarhynchos* was heard singing at Jarziz farms 21–25 Feb. **White-throated Robins** *Irania gutturalis* are regular in spring at Musandam; up to seven were at Sall Ala 20–24 Apr, but a **Black Scrub Robin** *Cercotrichas podobe* there 18–20 Apr was only the 3rd record. One male and three female **Eversmann's Redstarts** *Phoenicurus erythronotus* were at As Sayh 15 Jan. A '**Caspian Stonechat**' *Saxicola maurus variegatus* was at Rahab farm 22 Feb and a **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* at Sall Ala 22 Apr. Two **Richard's Pipits** *Anthus (novaeseelandiae) richardi* were at Jarziz farms 21 Feb. Up to five **Blyth's Pipits** *Anthus godlewskii* at Sun farms, Sohar, 7–17 Feb and one at Jarziz farms 17–18 Feb were the 5th and 6th records. **Meadow Pipits** *Anthus pratensis* are possibly overlooked in Oman; up to three birds at Sun Farms 7–11 Feb and one at Muntasar 18 Feb were only the 9th and 10th records. A **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* was at Sun farms 10 Jan, the 6th record. An **Olive-backed Pipit** *Anthus hodgsoni* was at Jarziz farms 20 Feb. A **Grey-necked Bunting** *Emberiza buchanani* was at As Sayh 1 May (4th record). A record count of 129 **Ortolan Buntings** *Emberiza hortulana* was at As Sayh 23 Apr with 12 **Black-headed Buntings** *Emberiza melanocephala*.

QATAR

New species for Qatar were **Variable Wheatear** *Oenanthe (picata) picata* at Al Ruwais 27 Nov 2008 and **Cretzschmar's Bunting** *Emberiza caesia* at Sealine beach resort 19 Mar. At least two pairs of **Purple Herons** *Ardea purpurea* have been found breeding at Abu Nakhla, the first breeding records for Qatar and the Gulf. An adult male **European**



Plate 9. Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*, 12 March 2010, Arakhiya farm, Qatar. © Dileep Kumar

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* at Al Khor Community 26 Apr was the 2nd record. An adult female **Merlin** *Falco columbarius* was at Arakhiya farm 30 Jan–5 Feb. A juvenile **Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator glandarius* at Arakhiya farm 12 Mar was the 3rd record and the first since 1982 (Plate 9). An **Alpine Swift** *Tachymarptis melba* was at Al Corniche, Doha, 9 Jan. An adult **White-throated Kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* Al Dhakira 5 Feb was the 2nd record and the first since 1991. The first proven breeding record of **Bar-tailed Lark** *Ammomanes cinctura* was from southern Qatar 26 Mar. Other good records included a **Garden Warbler** *Sylvia borin* at Arakhiya farm 7 May; a female **Eastern Orphean Warbler** *Sylvia crassirostris* at Ras Abrouq 26 Mar; a **Finsch's Wheatear** *Oenanthe finschii* at Fuwairit 6 Feb; a female **Hooded Wheatear** *Oenanthe monacha* at Fuwairit 12 Feb; and a pair of **Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes githagineus* at Fuwairit 12 Feb, the 2nd record.

SAUDI ARABIA

A survey of an oilfield area in the eastern Rub al Khali in late May/June found 12 potentially-breeding species, nine of which were present presumably because they can utilise man-made habitats. A wastewater site had **Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus* with chicks as well as two or three pairs of **Red-wattled Lapwings** *Vanellus indicus*. The latter were not frantic enough to be breeding at the time but their presence suggested they might well breed later in the season or in future years; this species has been gradually spreading westward in the UAE. **Turtle**

Doves *Streptopelia turtur* of the race *arenicola* were courting and likely to breed. Migrants included a **Striated Heron** *Butorides striata* unusually far inland (and possibly the first for western Saudi Arabia) and a flock of 13 **Red-necked Phalaropes** *Phalaropus lobatus*.

SYRIA

Several contributors acknowledge the invaluable support of the **Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW)** and the **Desert Commission in assisting with their visits**. More birders visited Syria this spring than ever before and the quality of the records was correspondingly high; outstanding records included the second reports of **Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor*, **Red-breasted Goose** *Branta ruficollis* and **Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus*, the first **Demoiselle Cranes** *Anthropoides virgo* and **Radde's Accentors** *Prunella ocularis* for many years and two **Baillon's Crakes** *Porzana pusilla*, the first apparently since 1905! However, the story of the Palmyra colony of the **Northern Bald Ibis** *Geronticus eremita* appears to be coming to a sad end: of five birds in 2009, two 'disappeared' on migration. Three birds made it back, one pair is breeding in the hills north of Palmyra and one young has left the nest. On the positive side, huge counts of the RDB Endangered **White-headed Duck** *Oxyura leucocephala* at Sabkhat al-Jabbul confirm that a major proportion of the world population winters there. Several exciting new areas were explored. Sabkhat Rawda is a huge and remote lake on the Iraqi border visited as part of a survey for **Lesser White-fronted Geese** *Anser erythropus*. It held an

incredible c24 000 **Ruddy Shelducks** *Tadorna ferruginea* in Feb and on a brief visit 17 Apr **Avocets** *Recurvirostra avocetta* showed signs of breeding, **Great Sand Plovers** *Charadrius leschenaultii* were common and a large flock of **Greater Flamingos** *Phoenicopterus roseus* could barely be discerned through the heat haze. This is clearly an area of exceptional potential; there is no hunting (it is too close to the Iraqi border) and it could easily hold a breeding colony of Greater Flamingos.

Surveys of the protected areas at Abu Qubeis (coastal mountains), Jebel Abdul Aziz (in the Jazira) and Foroulloq (near Kassab) yielded valuable results, emphasising their conservation importance. **See-see Partridges** *Ammoperdix griseogularis* were at Karakozak dam (4) and Lower Khabur reservoir dam (2) in March and Jebel Abdul Aziz (2) 12 Apr, as well as the 'usual' site at Halabbiyah. At least four **Black Francolins** *Francolinus francolinus* were heard near the Palm Village hotel, Damascus, 4–5 May; this is very surprising as their nearest known locality is the Euphrates valley, 400 km across the desert. Perhaps they were released. Four **Mute Swans** *Cygnus olor* were at lower Khabur reservoir 9 Apr. Up to 72 **Lesser White-fronted Geese** *Anser erythropus* were at Sabkhat al-Jabbul this winter; this RDB Vulnerable species clearly winters regularly in northern Syria. Two **Red-breasted Geese** *Branta ruficollis* were at Jabbul 16 Feb. At least 2300 **White-headed Ducks** *Oxyura leucocephala* were at Jabbul 19 Feb with 1850 still present 3 Mar; these counts are by far the highest from Syria. Single figures at Mheimideh on several dates included a



Plate 10. Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*, 11 April 2010, Arak dam, Syria. © Bernhard Herren



Plate 11. Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*, April 2010, Syria. © Bernhard Herren

female with 6 young 18 Apr. A **Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus* was at Sabkhat al Jabbul 20 Jan. Very little is known about Syria's coastal birds. Two **Cory's Shearwaters** *Calonectris diomedea* were off Lattakia 27 Apr. A flock of over 520 **White Pelicans** *Pelecanus onocrotalus* flying north 2 km off the coast at Lattakia 27 Apr is possibly the largest count from Syria. A **European Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus* was near Slunfe 18 Apr but sadly the colony at Douara, Palmyra, was deserted this year; this is (or was) the last known colony in Syria. Possible reasons include disturbance (unlikely), shooting (unlikely that all have been shot) or, of course, poisoning by diclofenac or similar veterinary agents (quite possible). On the more positive side, a huge roost of **Lesser Kestrels** *Falco naumanni* round the communications tower immediately west of Palmyra held at least 1000 birds 11 Apr and 13 Apr; are these Syrian birds pairing off or migrants staging? Visitors to Palmyra next April are asked to check the site out in the late dusk (after sunset). A **Saker** *Falco cherrug* was near the Damascus–Palmyra road 31 Mar. A **Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* above Palmyra 5 Apr was exceptional in the desert; a male was in Jebel Abdul Aziz 7 Apr. Large flocks of **Common Cranes** *Grus grus* were over Sabkhat al-Jabbul on several dates in early March (maximum of over 3600 3 Mar); Jabbul may be a regular migration stopover. A **Demoiselle Crane** *Anthropoides virgo* was resting at a desert wetland between Raqaa and Hama 5 Apr; another found injured at lower Khabur reservoir 9 Apr was taken into care but was thought unlikely to survive. Six **Great Bustards** *Otis tarda* were in a regular site in the Jazirah 5 Mar; local guards saw up to 17 during the winter. A **Macqueen's Bustard** *Chlamydotis macqueenii* was seen in March. Two **Baillon's Crakes** *Porzana pusilla* were at Arak dam 11–12 Apr (Plate 10). There were at least ten reports of **Little Crakes** *Porzana parva* but only one of **Spotted Crane** *Porzana porzana*, at the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor, 9 Apr. A **Water Rail** *Rallus aquaticus* was in suitable breeding habitat at Mheimideh in June; this species may well breed in low numbers in the Euphrates valley. A pair with young of **Great Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultii* were at the entrance to Talila, a known breeding site, 13 Apr. A **Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

was at Jabbul 19 Feb. Searches for the RDB Critically Endangered **Sociable Lapwing** *Vanellus gregarius* turned up a total of 431 birds at many sites 19 Feb–9 Mar. A flock of 15 **Black-winged Pratincoles** *Glareola nordmanni* were at lower Khabur reservoir 9 Apr and two at Jabbul 16 Apr. There were five records of up to 14 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis*, a scarce winter visitor (six records in the last ten years), but only two of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** *Pterocles alchata*, formerly a very common resident; gross overhunting is probably the main cause for their decline. Sadly, all owls are persecuted in Syria as harbingers of bad luck, so most species are scarcer than they should be. Interesting records included **Long-eared Owls** *Asio otus* at Deir ez-Zor in Mar and Jun, with one at Bloudan 14 Apr, three calling **Scops Owls** *Otus scops* and four calling **Tawny Owls** *Strix aluco* near Kassab 24–25 Apr. A young Tawny Owl at Forouloq forest 24 Apr was the first confirmed breeding record for Syria. There are less than ten records of all three species though the last two are probably widespread in the wooded coastal mountains. Long-eared Owl has not yet been proven to breed in Syria but the conifers at Deir seem a good place to look. Single **White-breasted Kingfishers** *Halcyon smyrnensis* were at Sabkhat al-Jabbul 18 Jan and on the Euphrates at Abu Kemal on the Iraq border 16 Apr with a pair near Lattakia in Jun; there are few records from the Euphrates valley or the coast.

Single **Steppe Grey Shrikes** *Lanius pallidirostris* were at Shaddia 24 Feb and Talila reserve, Palmyra, in March, the 3rd and 4th records. This year's winter rains were exceptional and the desert south of the Euphrates was green. Several observers noted 'fields full of larks', including thousands of **Bimaculated Larks** *Melanocorypha bimaculata* in at least four areas in Mar, and in Apr an abundance of **Lesser Short-toed Larks** *Calandrella rufescens* (Plate 11) and **Bar-tailed Larks** *Ammomanes cinctura* (but, to my knowledge, no **Dunn's Eremalauda dunnii**). In contrast, the Jazira (north of the Euphrates) was dry and almost lark-less. Two **Zitting Cisticolas** *Cisticola juncidis* were singing at Apamea 4 Apr; there are few recent records and its Syrian distribution is little known.

An adult male **Rufous-tailed** ('Kurdish') **Wheatear** *Oenanthe (xanthropygna) xanthropygna* was at Ruweira 6 Mar; this is probably a scarce and overlooked migrant, mainly in Mar. A fall at Palmyra 13–14 Mar included 30+ **Cyprus Wheatears** *Oenanthe cyprica*, **Rüppell's Warbler** *Sylvia rueppelli* and both subspecies of **Ménétries's Warbler** *Sylvia mystacea* (the nominate subspecies is rarely reported from Syria).

Single **Rüppell's Warblers** were at Nashme 10 Mar (early) and singing on Jebel Abu Rigmin 12 Apr. Large numbers of territorial Rüppell's Warblers were found in coastal maquis west of Kassab and at Umm al-Tuyyur headland to the south in late Apr, increasing the known breeding population from low single figures to tens (if not hundreds) of pairs. Further, several birds were singing near Slenfe 18 Apr and a singing bird was seen for a second year at high altitude in Abu Qubeis reserve (coastal mountains), indicating that a population may breed well inland; these exciting observations need to be followed up. Territorial **Ménétries's Warblers** were found in the Palmyra palmerie (common, even next to the temple of Baal), several sites in the Euphrates valley (in spite of the intensive agricultural regime), at 400 m up the Jebel Shuah and at Ain Dara northwest of Aleppo; these sightings confirm that this species is widespread and common in the Syrian interior, though often elusive. A female **Semi-collared Flycatcher** *Ficedula semitorquata* was at Der ez-Zor in March and a male in Hasakah city 12 Apr; a **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* was in Hasakah 1 Apr. **Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* is a scarce winter visitor; singles were at Deir ez-Zor 26 Feb and Nashme 10 Mar. **White-cheeked Bulbuls** *Pycnonotus leucotis* were seen at seven widely distributed sites from Mheimideh downstream to Abu Kemal; this species is clearly widespread throughout the lower Syrian Euphrates. A **Radde's Accentor** *Prunella ocularis* was near the summit ridge of Jebel Abdul Aziz 3 Apr and another on the summit ridge of Abu Qubeis 24 Apr; these are the first records for over 25 years. The only **Pale Rockfinches** *Carpospiza brachydactyla* were singles below the Citadel, Palmyra, 8 and 12 Apr; numbers of this elusive species appear to fluctuate dramatically. At least 20 **Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes githagineus* were

feeding fledged young round the Citadel, Palmyra, in mid-April; there were several observations from Jebel Abdul Aziz. A pair of the eastern race of **Cinereous Bunting** *Emberiza cineracea semenowi* was in suitable breeding habitat in Jebel Abdul Aziz 5 Apr with a female there 10 Apr; could this RDB Vulnerable species be breeding in this little-watched area?

TAJIKISTAN

Eight **Large-billed Reed Warblers** *Acrocephalus orinus* were caught at three sites in the western and southern Pamirs in July 2009. Breeding was suspected at all sites and proven at one, the first definite breeding record of the species.

TURKEY

There were three records of **Red-breasted Geese** *Branta ruficollis* during the winter with singles at Filyos, Zonguldak, 26 Jan and the Gediz delta 17 Feb, and five at Sarikum lake, Sinop, 16 Feb. Turkey's second **Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor* was at the Gediz delta 24 Jan. Three **Little Bustards** *Tetrax tetrax* were seen at the start of the year with singles at Filyos 26 Jan, the Göksu delta 7 Feb and the Kızılırak delta 2 Feb. A flock of 55 **Sociable Lapwings** *Vanellus gregarius* at Urfa Bozkırları 11 Mar continued the annual run of records and highlighted the importance of this region of Turkey for this globally threatened species. A report of a **Pacific Golden Plover** *Pluvialis fulva* in the Kızılırmak delta 1 Oct 2009 is the 2nd for Turkey. A **Caspian Plover** *Charadrius asiaticus* near Kaldırım, Çukurova, 19 Apr was



Plate 12. Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*, 6 February 2010, Kızılırmak delta, Turkey. © Nizamettin Yavuz

a notable record, as was a **Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudatus* in Mersin harbour 22 Dec 2009. Two **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** *Pterocles alchata* at Urfa Bozkırları 11 Mar is an early date. A **Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* was seen in Rize 9 Jan and one was ringed at the Kızılırmak delta 21 Mar. The second Turkish breeding locality for **Spectacled Warbler** *Sylvia conspicillata* was found 1 May near Kırıkhan, Hatay, with at least six birds present. A **Cyprus Warbler** *Sylvia melanothorax* was seen at the Göksu delta 19 Apr. Turkey's second **Buff-bellied Pipit** *Anthus (rubescens) japonicus* was at Milleyha, Hatay, 14 Feb. The first record was at the same location 22 Nov 2008. Another 2nd record was a **Lapland Longspur** *Calcarius lapponicus* at İğneada 12 Feb. A **Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis* was in the Kızılırmak delta 6 Feb (Plate 12).

UZBEKISTAN

Three significant records have recently come to light. Two **Red-wattled Lapwings** *Vanellus indicus* were seen near Zhylytyrbas lake, southern Priaralye, 3 Jun 2009. This species is a rare vagrant with the last record from this

area being in 1933. A **Heuglin's Gull** *Larus heuglini* on the southern part of Kuyumazar reservoir 15 Nov 2009 was also notable. The only other record of the species in the Bukara region was one at EcoCenter Jeyran Dec 1991. Most exciting was the first record of **Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus* for Uzbekistan, with several small groups totaling at least 15 birds seen in Baday-Tugay nature reserve on the right bank of the Amudarya river, 70 km southeast of Nukus, 31 Oct 2008.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

There were three 'firsts' for the UAE: two **Shikras** *Accipiter badius* on Sila'a peninsula 26 Dec 2009 are presumed wild (the Shikras breeding in the Dubai area are suspected of being escapes). 2010 started with a **Wilson's Phalarope** *Phalaropus tricolor* at Al Wathba lake 3–11 Jan. A **Basra Reed Warbler** *Acrocephalus griseldis* was singing in Mushrif palace garden 26–27 Apr.

A **Flesh-footed Shearwater** *Puffinus carneipes* off Khor Kalba harbour 11–12 Jun was the 2nd for UAE. Up to two **Sooty Shearwaters** *Puffinus griseus* were seen off Fujairah and Kalba 17 Apr–29 May. An **Eastern Cattle Egret**



Plate 13. Red-wattled *Vanellus indicus* and Spur-winged Lapwings *V. spinosus*, 2 March 2010, Al Ain water treatment plant, United Arab Emirates. © Tommy Pedersen



Plate 14. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, April 2010, Dubai Pivot Fields, United Arab Emirates. © Mike Barthl www.pbase.com/barty63



Plates 15–17. Ashy Drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*, 3 March 2010, Safa park, United Arab Emirates. © Tommy Pedersen

Bubulcus ibis coromandus (the 1st UAE record, first seen Aug 2009) appears to have wintered at Wamm farms. This taxon and **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus i. ibis* are almost inseparable in non-breeding plumage, so when it became white in Sep 2009 it was undetected or absent until it developed its orange plumage again and was then seen 26 Mar–17 Apr. One **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* (15th record) on the east coast 28 May was joined by two more at Khor Kalba the next day. Two **Masked Boobies** *Sula dactylatra* were at Khor Kalba 29 May (12th record). An **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis* at Al Qua'a fodder field 29 Dec was the 11th record. Two **Spur-winged Lapwings** *Vanellus spinosus* were at Al Ain water treatment plant 13–14 Feb with a single bird until 6 Mar (Plate 13). One at Al Quoz stables 28 Feb–7 Jun was the 3rd record. Interesting records of larids (all of singles) included: **Brown Noddy** *Anous stolidus* at Jebel Dhanna 4 May (the first off the west coast) with another off Fujairah 25 May; **Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla* on Fujairah port beach 11–12 Feb (4th record); **Little Gull** *Hydrocoloeus minutus* in Khor Kalba harbour 11–20 Mar (14th record); **Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea* on Fujairah port beach 7 May (2nd record); **Roseate Tern** *Sterna dougallii* off Ra's Dibba 11 Jun (3rd record) and immature **Sooty Tern** *Onychoprion fuscata* off Khor Kalba harbour 9 Jun (7th record). A **Pied Kingfisher** *Ceryle rudis* was in Dubai city 6 Jan–1 Feb with another in Ruwais 5 Mar.

The male **Brown Shrike** *Lanius cristatus* wintered at Dubai Pivot Fields until 21 Apr for its second year (Plate 14). **Bay-backed Shrike** *Lanius vittatus* had a good spring, with

singles Wamm farms and Ra's al-Khaimah mountains 19–20 Mar and Wamm farms 3 Apr (14–16th records), and the first breeding record, an adult with two juveniles in Masafi wadi 7–12 Jun. **Hypocoliuses** *Hypocolius ampelinus* were on Lulu island and in the Western Region on Dalma island, Jebel Dhanna and Sila'a peninsula until 13 Apr with a maximum count of 30 birds. An **Ashy Drongo** *Dicrurus leucophaeus* at Safa park 14–15 Jan and 2–17 Mar (3rd record, Plates



Plates 18 & 19. Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*, February 2010, Al Ain WTP, United Arab Emirates. © Mike Barth



Plate 20. Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii*, February 2010, Al Ain WTP, United Arab Emirates. © Dave Clark



Plate 21. Wire-tailed Swallow *Hirundo smithii*, February 2010, Al Ain WTP, United Arab Emirates. © Huw Roberts

15–17) was probably the bird from Al Warsan 21 Dec. An unidentified **Drongo** *Dicrurus* sp was seen briefly in Abu Dhabi 11 Apr. Up to 33 **Pale Martins** *Riparia diluta* were at Al Ain WTP until 12 Apr (Plates 18 & 19). Other interesting passerines included singles of **Wire-tailed Swallow** *Hirundo smithii* at Al Ain WTP 6–12 Feb (9th record, Plates 20 & 21); **River Warbler** *Locustella fluviatilis* in Mushrif palace garden (11th record); **Icterine Warbler** *Hippolais icterina* in Al Mamzar park 4 Apr (14th record); **Redwing** *Turdus iliacus* on Sila'a peninsula 8 Jan (8th record) and **Eurasian Siskin** *Carduelis spinus* on Sila'a peninsula 19 Mar (the first since 2005).

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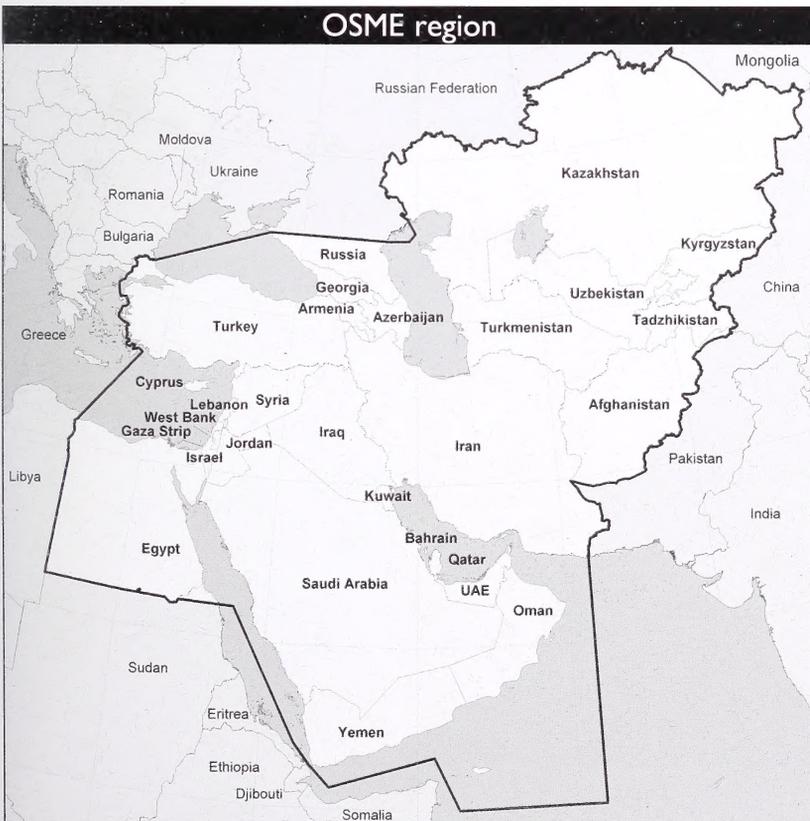
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