

**REPORT ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL TRAINING  
PROGRAMME FOR IRAQIS  
AND  
BIRDS RECORDED IN SYRIA  
JANUARY 20-29, 2005**

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**Canada-Iraq Marshlands Initiative  
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## **1. Background**

In January 2005, the Middle East Office of BirdLife International organised a one-week training course for Iraqi wetland biologists in Syria as part of an Environmental Training Programme for Iraqis. This course complements a preliminary course held in Jordan during November 2004 (Evans 2004). The programme is led by the University of Waterloo (Canada) and Environment Canada under the Canada-Iraq Marshlands Initiative (CIMI) that is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency.

Eight Iraqi participants were drawn from the Iraq Ministry of the Environment, the Iraq Nature Conservation Society and Iraqi universities. The main focus of the training course was on wetland survey techniques, with special emphasis on the identification and census of waterbirds. Trainers in this course included Mr. Richard Porter of BirdLife International, United Kingdom; Mr Clayton Rubec, Canada-Iraq Marshlands Initiative, University of Waterloo (Canada) and Environment Canada; and Dr. Derek A. Scott, Consultant, United Kingdom. Two Syrian experts facilitated all aspects of the training course: Ms. May Abido, Biodiversity and Protected Areas Unit, Ministry of Local Administration and Environment; and Mr. Walid Attar, Bird Specialist, Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW).

The itinerary for this programme is outlined in Annex 2.

## **2. Site Observations**

During the training course, two important wetlands were visited: (a) Bahrat Homs (Lake Qattine) – a large freshwater lake near the city of Homs – well-known as an important wintering area for ducks and coots; and (b) Sabkhat Al-Jabbul, a large salt lake near Aleppo, important for wintering Greater Flamingos and Common Shelducks and designated as a Ramsar Site. A considerable amount of time was spent at these two sites, locating concentrations of waterbirds, identifying all species encountered and, as far as possible, making accurate counts. Observations and training on rapid habitat condition assessment were also undertaken at these sites. Details were kept of all other species of birds recorded during the fieldwork. After the training course, with Iraqi and Canadian participants having returned home, the Syrian and British members of the team spent a further three days in the field. They visited several interesting sites around Palmyra, including the recently discovered breeding site of Bald Ibis, and also visiting a seasonal wetland on the edge of the desert near Damascus.

This report gives a summary of all birds recorded during the training course and in the following three days over the January 20-29, 2005 period. Full details of all waterbird counts have been submitted to the coordinator of the International Waterbird Census (Western Palearctic Region) at Wetlands International in The Netherlands. Thus, only a summary of the waterbird counts is given here (see Annex 1 and Section 4 below). Almost 87,000 waterbirds of 52 species were recorded during the surveys: 67,900 birds of 29 species at Bahrat Homs; 18,000 birds of 45 species at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul; and a total of 1,000 birds of 17 species at three other sites (Sabkhat Muh and Wadi Abiad Dam near Palmyra, and Lake Al Atibah near Damascus). These surveys have

confirmed the great international importance of Bahrat Homs and Sabkhat Al-Jabbul for wintering waterbirds, with both sites fulfilling the Ramsar criteria in January 2005. Bahrat Homs qualified on the basis of the total number of waterbirds present (well over the qualifying level of 20,000 individuals), on the presence of 1% of the flyway population of Eurasian Wigeon (3,000 present; 1% threshold 3,000), and on the presence of well over 1% of the flyway population of Northern Shoveler (at least 25,000 present; 1% threshold 4,500). Sabkhat Al-Jabbul, which has already been designated as a Ramsar Site, qualified for its numbers of Greater Flamingos (at least 5,000 present; 1% threshold 2,900), Common Shelducks (6,940 present; 1% threshold 750), and White-headed Ducks (725 present; 1% threshold 75).

Undoubtedly the most interesting finding during the present survey was the discovery of a concentration of 725 White-headed Ducks on a fresh-brackish lagoon near the northwestern corner of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul. This globally threatened species (in the category 'Endangered') has shown a marked decline in southwest Asia in recent years, following the drainage of Burdur Golu in Turkey, formerly much the most important wintering site for the species. The global population of the White-headed Duck is currently estimated at only about 8,000-13,000 individuals, and the East Mediterranean and West Asian population at only 5,000-10,000 individuals (Wetlands International 2002). The concentration of 725 individuals at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul thus constitutes at least 7% and perhaps as much as 14.5% of the estimated regional population. This appears to be the largest number of White-headed Ducks ever recorded at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul. Gianluca Serra (pers. com.) recorded a total of 160 near the south-east corner of the lake in February 2003, but the highest count in February 2004 was only nine (Murdoch *et al.* 2004). There is no evidence that the White-headed Duck occurred in large numbers at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul in the past. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) list only two records of single birds in March 1965 and June 1994, respectively, while Scott (1995) notes only that the White-headed Duck has occurred on spring passage in very small numbers. It seems likely that recent changes in the hydrology of the lake (*i.e.* higher and more stable water levels and lower salinities) resulting from the discharge of surplus irrigation water into the lake have created new habitats which are more suitable for White-headed Ducks than the highly saline conditions and widely fluctuating water levels of the past. Clearly, this situation should be monitored closely, as Sabkhat Al-Jabbul may now be one of the most important wintering areas for the White-headed Duck in the world. The possibility that the species breeds in the area should also be investigated, as local villagers report seeing ducks with white heads during the breeding season.

In the following systematic list of species recorded during the survey, the sequence and composition of families follow Morony, Bock and Farrand (1975) *Reference List of the Birds of the World*. The sequence and treatment of species within families and the scientific nomenclature mostly follow Sibley and Monroe (1990) *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World*. The English names mostly follow Beaman and Madge (1998) *Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic*.

### **3. Training Outputs and Accomplishments**

Site assessments were undertaken to enable completion of BirdLife IBA and Ramsar site recording data sheets. Forms were tested and successfully completed using data gathered by the team from two large and internationally important wetland sites. This provided a good grounding in the type of recording necessary for any important area for biodiversity. These site assessments included detailed discussions and inputting data on habit identification, land (and water) use, threats and conservation measures. They also covered the use of photographic recording and cataloguing and the importance of information gathered from local people.

Bird identification, counting methods and techniques and field recording formed a major part of the training course. The main focus was on waterbirds because of their importance as biological indicators of the health of a wetland site. Annex 1 provides the detailed waterbird counts made by the team and reflects the wealth of wildlife encountered and thus available for study.

The teams were also introduced to the International Waterbird Census undertaken each winter through Wetlands International. Census forms were completed for the Syrian wetlands visited and the Iraqi team were encouraged to take part in this census in future in Iraq.

The use, maintenance and care of equipment for biological recording was covered by the course. The team had been provided with eight pairs of binoculars, two telescopes and tripods, two digital cameras, one camcorder and a water quality monitor.

General techniques for recording data on landscape and water features, site conditions, local input by residents, other fauna and fish observations, and potential management issues for sites were discussed and recorded.

Detailed discussions were held on the logistical and other arrangements necessary for the survey of the Mesopotamian Marshes planned by the Iraqi team starting in mid-February 2005. These discussions covered such topics as transport and the great importance of safety.

The presence of two colleagues from Syria (representing the Ministry of the Environment and the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife) enabled useful discussions to be held on the formation and aims of an Iraqi wildlife conservation NGO. This contact with a like-minded organisation is likely to be of great benefit in the future.

### **4. Systematic List of Birds Observed**

The following species and information were compiled by the field team during the Training Course in Syria January 21-29, 2005.

#### **PODICIPEDIDAE**

**Little Grebe** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*): At least nine, including several calling birds, at Sabkhat Al-

Jabbul on 24 January, and three at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

**Great Crested Grebe** (*Podiceps cristatus*): 110 at Bahrat Homs on 22 January, and 60 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

**Black-necked Grebe** (*Podiceps nigricollis*): Six at Bahrat Homs on 22 January, and 10 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

## PHALACROCORACIDAE

**Great Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax carbo*): A total of 11 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and two at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

## ARDEIDAE

**Little Egret** (*Egretta garzetta*): About 70 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and five at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Grey Heron** (*Ardea cinerea*): A total of 31 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, seven at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and one at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

**Great Egret** (*Casmerodius albus*): A total of 12 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and about seventy at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24-25 January.

**Cattle Egret** (*Bubulcus ibis*): About 60 in small parties on agricultural land around Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found only small numbers (total 55) during their extensive surveys in January and February 2004.

**Little Bittern** (*Ixobrychus minutas*): A single male over *Phragmites* reed-beds by the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 25 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) also found a single over-wintering Little Bittern in Syria in January 2004.

**Great Bittern** (*Botaurus stellaris*): One found dead on the causeway across Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 January, and four individuals in flight over the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 25 January.

## THRESKIORNITHIDAE

**Eurasian Spoonbill** (*Platalea leucorodia*): A single immature in flight over the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 25 January.

## PHOENICOPTERIDAE

**Greater Flamingo** (*Phoenicopterus ruber*): A minimum of 5,000 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January. The actual number present was almost certainly considerably higher, as much of the eastern half of the lake (and the most saline portion) was not covered. Also eight immatures at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded over 12,000 Greater Flamingos in an incomplete count of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 10-12 February 2004.

## ANATIDAE

**White-headed Duck** (*Oxyura leucocephala*): At least 126 were counted on the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 24 January, during a period of very strong winds and

rough water, when counting was extremely difficult. A return visit the next day, during ideal calm conditions, revealed the presence of 725 individuals, mostly resting in several large flocks. About one third of the birds were adult males.

**Ruddy Shelduck** (*Tadorna ferruginea*): Two flocks totalling 35 individuals in flight over Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January, and a flock of 15 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January.

**Common Shelduck** (*Tadorna tadorna*): Two at Bahrat Homs on 22 January, a total of at least 6,940 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and 130 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded 13,000 in an incomplete count of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 10-12 February 2004.

**Eurasian Wigeon** (*Anas Penelope*): At least 3,000 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, a total of about 180 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24-25 January, and 27 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January. The high count at Bahrat Homs may be unusual, as Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found only 2,310 during their very extensive surveys of wetlands in Syria in January and February 2004.

**Gadwall** (*Anas strepera*): About 20 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and eight on the fresh-brackish lagoon at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24-25 January.

**Common Teal** (*Anas crecca*): One concentration of about 650 near the southwest corner of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, about 170 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, 80 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January, and two at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

**Mallard** (*Anas platyrhynchos*): A total of 195 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, 35 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-24 January, 270 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January, and 12 at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

**Northern Pintail** (*Anas acuta*): About 120 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and a total of 310 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Northern Shoveler** (*Anas clypeata*): An exceptional concentration of at least 25,000 near the western end of Bahrat Homs on 22 January. Many of the 20,000 unidentified ducks in this area were probably also Northern Shovelers, suggesting that there could have been as many as 35,000 or 40,000 birds present. Also about 110 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24-25 January, one at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January, and 20 at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found only 7,850 during their very extensive surveys of wetlands in Syria in January and February 2004.

**Red-crested Pochard** (*Netta rufina*): A loose flock of 21 on the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 24 and 25 January.

**Common Pochard** (*Aythya farina*): At least 20 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, a single concentration of 1,050 on the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 23-25 January, and 105 on Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

**Ferruginous Duck** (*Aythya nyroca*): A flock of 15 near the west end of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and a single male on Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January. This is apparently a fairly common winter visitor to Syria, as Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded over 1,000 during their three surveys in January and February 2004.

**Tufted Duck** (*Aythya fuligula*): About 245 near the south shore of Bahrat Homs on 21 January.

## ACCIPITRIDAE

**Black Kite** (*Milvus migrans*): Three on the drive from Homs to Aleppo on 23 January.

**Eurasian Griffon Vulture** *Gyps fulvus*: Two resting on a cliff ledge at the Bald Ibis cliffs north-

west of Palmyra on 28 January.

**Western Marsh Harrier** (*Circus aeruginosus*): About 20 around Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, at least 17 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and one at Lake Al Atibah south-east of Damascus on 29 January.

**Hen Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*): Two at Bahrat Homs on 21 January, a total of four (including one adult male) around Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, one at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January, and an adult male at Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

**Pallid Harrier** (*Circus macrourus*): A single 'ring-tail' over desertic steppe between Damascus and Palmyra on 27 January, and an adult male and two 'ring-tails' on the drive back from Palmyra to Damascus the next day. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded three in January 2004 and 13 in February 2004, and concluded that this was a scarce winter visitor to Syria.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** (*Accipiter nisus*): Single birds recorded on eight occasions, mostly in cultivated areas with scattered trees.

**Long-legged Buzzard** (*Buteo rufinus*): A single bird near Bahrat Homs on 21 January, a single bird near the south shore of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January, two on the drive from Damascus to Palmyra on 27 January, three at Talila Reserve near Palmyra on 28 January, and about six in the Lake Al Atibah area south-east of Damascus on 29 January.

**Imperial Eagle** (*Aquila heliaca*): Close views of a fine adult on rolling desertic steppe about 20 km north-west of Palmyra on 28 January.

## FALCONIDAE

**Common Kestrel** (*Falco tinnunculus*): Common and widespread: a total of 22 sightings of single birds.

**Merlin** (*Falco columbarius*): An immature male was watched hunting in close association with an adult male Hen Harrier on the steppic plains to the south of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

## RALLIDAE

**Water Rail** (*Rallus aquaticus*): At least two calling from reed-beds at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 and 25 January.

**Purple Swamphen** (*Porphyrio porphyrio*): Three in tall *Phragmites* reed-beds by the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al-Jabbul village on 25 January.

**Common Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus*): Eight in marshy areas and ditches near the northwest end of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Eurasian Coot** (*Fulica atra*): At least 15,000 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, a total of 1,900 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and 60 at Wadi Abiad Dam on 28 January.

## RECURVIROSTRIDAE

**Black-winged Stilt** (*Himantopus himantopus*): A total of 31 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January. This appears to be a scarce winter visitor in Syria, as Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found only 12 during their very extensive surveys in January and February 2004.

**Pied Avocet** (*Recurvirostra avosetta*): A total of 38 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and a

single bird at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January.

## CHARADRIIDAE

**European Golden Plover** (*Pluvialis apricaria*): Two with a flock of 21 Northern Lapwings on the mudflats at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January. This appears to be a very scarce winter visitor to Syria. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found only nine during their three surveys in January and February 2004.

**Common Ringed Plover** (*Charadrius hiaticula*): A total of 27 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Kentish Plover** (*Charadrius alexandrinus*): About 60 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and 57 at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January.

**Northern Lapwing** (*Vanellus vanellus*): At least 475 on the cultivated plains around Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, a flock of about 200 on the cultivated plains near Al-Jabbul village on 25 January, 21 on the mud at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January, and 120 in scattered small flocks at Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

## SCOLOPACIDAE

**Common Snipe** (*Gallinago gallinago*): Five in the marshes at Bahrat Hoims on 21 and 22 January, and five in the sewage pools at Al-Jabbul village on 25 January.

**Eurasian Curlew** (*Numenius arquata*): A flock of 13 flying west along the south shore of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

**Spotted Redshank** (*Tringa erythropus*): A flock of 20 in the marshes at the southwest end of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and a single bird at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 January.

**Common Redshank** (*Tringa tetanus*): A single bird near the west end of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, at least 90 on the mudflats at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January, and a single bird at Sabkhat Muh on 27 January.

**Marsh Sandpiper** (*Tringa stagnatilis*): At least nine on the mudflats at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Green Sandpiper** (*Tringa ochropus*): A single bird on the north side of Bahrat Homs on 22 January, and a single bird on the south shore of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January.

**Common Sandpiper** (*Actitis hypoleucos*): A single bird on the south shore of Bahrat Homs on 21 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found two over-wintering birds in January 2004 and a total of eight in February 2004, although the latter may have included some early migrants.

**Little Stint** (*Calidris minuta*): At least 225 on the mudflats at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Temminck's Stint** (*Calidris temminckii*): A single bird on the south shore of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 25 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded 19 during their two surveys in February 2004, but some, if not all, of these may have been early migrants.

**Dunlin** (*Calidris alpina*): At least 90 on the mudflats at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23-25 January.

**Ruff** (*Philomachus pugnax*): A flock of 20 in the marshes at the southwest end of Bahrat Homs on 21 January.

## LARIDAE

**Yellow-legged Gull** (*Larus cachinnans*): Approximately 80 large gulls at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January were either this species or *L. armenicus*. Eight *cachinnans* were observed at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 January, alongside two *armenicus*. Four other large gulls at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 January were either *cachinnans* or *armenicus*.

**Armenian Gull** (*Larus armenicus*): Two adults with eight *cachinnans* near Al Jabbul village on 24 January, and a single adult on the south side of Sabkhat al-Jabbul on 25 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) found this to be the commonest 'large white-headed gull' during their surveys in January and February 2004.

**Black-headed Gull** (*Larus ridibundus*): At least 2,000 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, mainly near the west end of the lake.

**Slender-billed Gull** (*Larus genei*): One at the northwest end of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23 January, 12 in the same area on 24 January, and about 460 at various localities around the lake on 25 January. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded only about 460 during their three surveys throughout Syria in January and February 2004.

**Little Gull** (*Larus minutes*): An adult and an immature at Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and an immature at the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 25 January. According to Baumgart *et al.* (1995), there have been few records of this species in Syria, while Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded only five during their three surveys in January and February 2004

## TERNIDAE

**Whiskered Tern** (*Chlidonias hybridus*): Apparently a common winter visitor. At least 480 at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, and about 85 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 and 25 January.

## COLUMBIDAE

**Rock Dove** (*Columba livia*): Three apparently pure Rock Doves at the Bald Ibis cliffs near Palmyra, and a party of seven at Talila Reserve on 28 January. Feral Pigeons were abundant in the towns and throughout agricultural areas.

**Laughing Dove** (*Streptopelia senegalensis*): Common in all cities and larger towns, especially Homs, where a concentration of over 200 birds was recorded, but seldom encountered in rural areas.

**Collared Dove** (*Streptopelia decaocto*): Surprisingly uncommon. Recorded only at Al Jabbul village (one on 25 January), in irrigated plantations near Palmyra (three on 27 January and 20 on 28 January), and near Damascus (one on 28 January).

## STRIGIDAE

**Little Owl** (*Athene noctua*): One at a rubbish tip by Al Jabbul village on 23 January.

## ALCEDINIDAE

**Common Kingfisher** (*Alcedo atthis*): At least three around the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 24 and 25 January.

**Pied Kingfisher** (*Ceryle rudis*): About eight around the fresh-brackish lagoon at Sabkhat Al Jabbul on 24 and 25 January.

## ALAUDIDAE

**Greater Hoopoe Lark** (*Alaemon alaudipes*): A pair and a single individual in the desert near Palmyra on 28 January.

**Calandra Lark** (*Melanocorypha calandra*): Two with a flock of Eurasian Skylarks near Talila Reserve on 28 January, and one in song over agricultural land near Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

**Lesser Short-toed Lark** (*Calandrella rufescens*): One on the drive from Damascus to Palmyra on 27 January, and a flock of 40 coming in to drink at Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

**Crested Lark** (*Galerida cristata*): Fairly common and widespread in cultivated areas and around human habitation in the desert.

**Eurasian Skylark** (*Alauda arvensis*): Remarkably common, occurring in large flocks in cultivated areas and also in semi-desertic steppe. At least 650 were recorded in the Palmyra area on 28 January.

**Temminck's Horned Lark** (*Eremophila bilopha*): Three individuals in the desert between Damascus and Palmyra, and a flock of ten by Sabkhat Muh on 27 January. Three on the rolling plains below the Bald Ibis cliffs and one on the drive back to Damascus on 28 January.

## MOTACILLIDAE

**White Wagtail** (*Motacilla alba*): Fairly common around Bahrat Homs (up to 10 in a day) and around Sabkhat Al-Jabbul (also up to 10 in a day), but the only others were one in Damascus on 26 January, and one in the steppe north-west of Palmyra on 28 January.

**Citrine Wagtail** (*Motacilla citreola*): A single bird near the south-west corner of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and at least three individuals by the sewage ponds at Al Jabbul village on 25 January. Baumgart *et al.* (1995) list only three records for Syria, but Murdoch *et al.* (2004) recorded eleven individuals at two sites in January and February 2004. In view of the recent westward expansion in the breeding range of this species, an increase in frequency of occurrence in Syria might be expected.

**Meadow Pipit** (*Anthus pratensis*): Common in cultivated areas and marshes around Bahrat Homs, with at least 100 on 21 January and at least 50 on 22 January, and also present in small numbers at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul (ten on 23 January and two on 25 January).

**Red-throated Pipit** (*Anthus cervinus*): At least six along the south side of Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and three along the north side of the lake on 22 January. One near Al Jabbul village on 23 January and again on 25 January, and a second bird in fields along the south side of the lake on 25 January. This would appear to be a commoner winter visitor in Syria than Baumgart *et al.* (1995) suggest.

**Water Pipit** (*Anthus spinoletta*): One at Bahrat Homs on 21 January, and at least 20 at Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 and 25 January.

## LANIIDAE

**Southern Grey Shrike** (*Lanius meridionalis*): One in Talila Reserve near Palmyra on 28 January. This showed features of *L. pallidirostris* (Steppe Grey Shrike) and *L. aucheri*, and may well have been an intergrade between the two subspecies. It differed from typical *pallidirostris* in having black lores joining across forehead, a somewhat darker bill and darker upperparts. It differed from typical *L. aucheri* largely in pale sheen to bill, whitish underparts and noticeable white supercilium. Murdoch *et al.* (2004) report seeing Steppe Grey Shrike in this area in January/February 2004 – apparently the first for Syria.

## TROGLODYTIDAE

**Winter Wren** (*Troglodytes troglodytes*): One by the causeway across Sabkhat Al Jabbul on 24 January.

## TURDIDAE

**European Robin** (*Erithacus rubecula*): One in a small village near Bahrat Homs on 22 January, and one in a village along the south side of Sabkhat al-Jabbul on 25 January.

**Bluethroat** (*Luscinia svecica*): Single individuals at Bahrat Homs on 21 and 22 January, an adult male, probably Red-spotted, at the extreme northwest end of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23 January, and four along the causeway near Al Jabbul village on 24 January.

**Black Redstart** (*Phoenicurus ochruros*): Fairly common and widespread. At least 18 individuals were recorded on seven dates.

**Common Stonechat** (*Saxicola torquata*): Common and widespread in cultivated areas and around wetlands. Over 30 individuals were recorded on seven dates. No attempt was made to identify the subspecies involved.

**Mourning Wheatear** (*Oenanthe lugens*): Two individuals near the Bald Ibis breeding cliffs and a single bird at Talila Reserve near Palmyra on 28 January.

**Finsch's Wheatear** (*Oenanthe finschii*): Common in the desert between Damascus and Palmyra and in the Palmyra area. Sixteen (15 males and one female) were recorded during the drive from Damascus to Palmyra on 27 January, and 12 (nine males and three females) were recorded in the Palmyra area on 28 January.

**Isabelline Wheatear** (*Oenanthe isabellina*): One in Talila Reserve near Palmyra on 28 January, and one near Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

**Blackbird** (*Turdus merula*): Three at the entrance to Tailila Reserve on 28 January.

## SYLVIIDAE

**Graceful Prinia** (*Prinia gracilis*): One near the south side of Bahrat Homs on 22 January, two near Al Jabbul village on 24 January, and two at Walid Attar's farm southeast of Damascus on 29 January.

**Cetti's Warbler** (*Cettia cetti*): At least three in reed-beds by the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 25 January.

**Moustached Warbler** (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*): At least four in reed-beds by the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 24 and 25 January.

**Common Chiffchaff** (*Phylloscopus collybita*): One in a garden in Damascus on 20 January, one near the west end of Bahrat Homs on 22 January, three in a small park in Damascus on 26 January, and one in a plantation near Palmyra on 27 January.

**Spectacled Warbler** (*Sylvia conspicillata*): One on the edge of a cultivated area in the desert near Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

## REMIZIDAE

**Eurasian Penduline Tit** (*Remiz pendulinus*): One in reed-beds by the fresh-brackish lagoon near Al Jabbul village on 25 January.

## EMBERIZIDAE

**Common Reed Bunting** (*Emberiza schoeniclus*): One near Al Jabbul village on 24 January, and two in the same area on 25 January.

**Corn Bunting** (*Miliaria calandra*): At least 100 in agricultural land near the northwest corner of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 23 January, and about 15 near Al Jabbul village on 25 January.

## FRINGILLIDAE

**Common Chaffinch** (*Fringilla coelebs*): A flock of 15 on waste ground near the village of Dbeen (south-west corner of Bahrat Homs) on 22 January, one near Al Jabbul village on 24 January, and a party of eight in a plantation near Palmyra on 27 January.

**European Serin** (*Serinus serinus*): One near the village of Dbeen (Bahrat Homs) on 22 January.

**European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*: Two in Homs and two at Dbeen (Bahrat Homs) on 22 January, and six in cultivated land on the south side of Sabkhat al Jabbul on 25 January.

**Common Linnet** (*Carduelis cannabina*): Common in small flocks in cultivated areas around Bahrat Homs and Sabkhat Al-Jabbul, and also recorded near Palmyra and at Walid Attar's farm south-east of Damascus.

**Desert Finch** (*Rhodopechys obsoleta*): At least 10 near Al Jabbul village on 23, 24 and 25 January, and a party of four in the tamarisks at Lake Al Atibah on 29 January.

## PASSERIDAE

**House Sparrow** (*Passer domesticus*): Common to abundant in all areas with human habitation.

**Spanish Sparrow** (*Passer hispaniolensis*): A single male with a flock of Corn Buntings near the north-west corner of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 22 January, and a single male at Walid Attar's farm south-east of Damascus on 29 January.

**Dead Sea Sparrow** (*Passer moabiticus*): Three single birds, a flock of eight and a flock of 20 feeding along the edge of the causeway across Sabkhat Al-Jabbul on 24 January.

## STURNIDAE

**Common Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*): Small parties recorded on many occasions in agricultural land around Bahrat Homs and Sabkhat Al-Jabbul, but the only large flocks were recorded on 25 January, when at least 400 birds flew east along the south side of Sabkhat Al-Jabbul. Also a flock of 20 at Lake Al Atibah near Damascus.

## CORVIDAE

**Hooded Crow** (*Corvus (corone) cornix*): Fairly common and widespread, with the largest numbers (flocks of up to 30) being recorded in the cities.

**Common Raven** (*Corvus corax*): A pair on the rolling steppe northwest of Palmyra and a single individual at the Bald Ibis cliffs on 28 January.

## 5. References

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### Annex 1: Waterbird Counts in Syria : 21-29 January 2005

| Site  | Homs    | Jabbul  | Muh  | Abiad | Atibah | Total  |
|---|---------|---------|------|-------|--------|--------|
| Date  | 21-22/1 | 23-25/1 | 27/1 | 28/1  | 29/1   |        |
| Little Grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>        |         | 9       |      | 3     |        | 12     |
| Great Crested Grebe <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>     | 110     | 60      |      |       |        | 170    |
| Black-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>    | 6       | 10      |      |       |        | 16     |
| Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>        | 11      | 2       |      |       |        | 13     |
| Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>                   | 31      | 7       |      | 1     |        | 39     |
| Great Egret <i>Casmerodius albus</i>              | 12      | 70      |      |       |        | 82     |
| Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>              | 70      | 5       |      |       |        | 75     |
| Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>                 | 60      |         |      |       |        | 60     |
| Little Bittern <i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>          |         | 1       |      |       |        | 1      |
| Great Bittern <i>Botaurus stellaris</i>           |         | 5       |      |       |        | 5      |
| Eurasian Spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>     |         | 1       |      |       |        | 1      |
| Greater Flamingo <i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>      |         | 5,000   | 8    |       |        | 5,008  |
| Ruddy Shelduck <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>          |         | 35      | 15   |       |        | 50     |
| Common Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>            | 2       | 6,940   | 130  |       |        | 7,072  |
| Eurasian Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>              | 3,000   | 180     | 27   |       |        | 3,207  |
| Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>                      | 20      | 8       |      |       |        | 28     |
| Common Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>                    | 650     | 170     | 80   | 2     |        | 902    |
| Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>                 | 195     | 35      | 270  | 12    |        | 512    |
| Northern Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>                | 120     | 310     |      |       |        | 430    |
| Northern Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>            | 25,000  | 110     | 1    | 20    |        | 25,131 |
| Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>           |         | 21      |      |       |        | 21     |
| Common Pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>               | 20      | 1,050   |      | 105   |        | 1,175  |
| Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i>             | 15      |         |      | 1     |        | 16     |
| Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>                | 245     |         |      |       |        | 245    |
| White-headed Duck <i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>      |         | 725     |      |       |        | 725    |
| Unidentified ducks                                | 20,000  |         |      |       |        | 20,000 |
| Water Rail <i>Rallus aquaticus</i>                |         | 2       |      |       |        | 2      |
| Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>         |         | 8       |      |       |        | 8      |
| Purple Swamphen <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>        |         | 3       |      |       |        | 3      |
| Eurasian Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>                  | 15,000  | 1,900   |      | 60    |        | 16,960 |
| Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>   |         | 31      |      |       |        | 31     |
| Pied Avocet <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>         |         | 38      | 1    |       |        | 39     |
| Northern Lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>         | 475     | 200     | 21   |       | 120    | 816    |
| European Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> |         |         | 2    |       |        | 2      |
| Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>         |         | 27      |      |       |        | 27     |
| Kentish Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>     |         | 60      | 57   |       |        | 117    |
| Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>           |         | 13      |      |       |        | 13     |
| Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>         | 20      | 1       |      |       |        | 21     |
| Common Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>             | 1       | 90      | 1    |       |        | 92     |
| Marsh Sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>         |         | 9       |      |       |        | 9      |
| Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>            | 1       | 1       |      |       |        | 2      |
| Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>        | 1       |         |      |       |        | 1      |
| Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>           | 5       | 5       |      |       |        | 10     |

|  |                |                |             |              |               |               |
|--|----------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Little Stint <i>Calidris minuta</i>                |                | 225            |             |              |               | 225           |
| Temminck's Stint <i>Calidris temminckii</i>        |                | 1              |             |              |               | 1             |
| Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>                      |                | 90             |             |              |               | 90            |
| Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>                     | 20             |                |             |              |               | 20            |
| <b>Site</b>  | <b>Homs</b>    | <b>Jabbul</b>  | <b>Muh</b>  | <b>Abiad</b> | <b>Atibah</b> | <b>Total</b>  |
| <b>Date</b>  | <b>21-22/1</b> | <b>23-25/1</b> | <b>27/1</b> | <b>28/1</b>  | <b>29/1</b>   |               |
| Unidentified small waders                          | 50             |                | 60          |              |               | 110           |
| Yellow-legged Gull <i>Larus cachinnans</i>         |                | 3              |             |              |               | 3             |
| Armenian Gull <i>Larus armenicus</i>               |                | 8              |             |              |               | 8             |
| Unidentified gulls ( <i>cachinnans/armenicus</i> ) | 80             | 4              |             |              |               | 84            |
| Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ridibundus</i>          | 2,000          |                |             |              |               | 2,000         |
| Slender-billed Gull <i>Larus genei</i>             |                | 460            |             |              |               | 460           |
| Little Gull <i>Larus minutus</i>                   | 2              | 1              |             |              |               | 3             |
| Whiskered Tern <i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>          | 700            | 85             |             |              |               | 785           |
|  |                |                |             |              |               |               |
| <b>Total waterbirds</b>                            | <b>67,992</b>  | <b>18,019</b>  | <b>673</b>  | <b>204</b>   | <b>120</b>    | <b>86,938</b> |
|  |                |                |             |              |               |               |
| <b>Other wetland species</b>                       |                |                |             |              |               |               |
| Western Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>    | 20             | 17             |             |              | 1             | 38            |
| Hen Harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>                  | 2              | 4              |             | 1            | 1             | 8             |
| Common Kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i>             |                | 3              |             |              |               | 3             |
| Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i>                |                | 8              |             |              |               | 8             |