

OSME Home Page -> Trip Reports -> Syria



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

SYRIA TRIP REPORT 19th - 26th SEPTEMBER 2002

The main objective of our trip to Syria was to see Iraq Babbler, a species only recently found to be present along the river Euphrates around Deir-es-Zor, hundreds of miles from known nest sites in Iraq. The prospect of good numbers of migrants and the chance to make an ornithological discovery in this very underwatched country also appealed.

Despite its negative image in the West, we found Syria to be among the most friendly countries either of us had ever visited, and almost everyone seemed to go out of their way to make us feel welcome. The only unpleasant attention we experienced all week was from children on our first visit to Deir-es-Zor. An exchange rate of around 80 Syrian Pounds to £1 Sterling, or 50 to the US Dollar, meant that a little money went a long way. A bottle of local beer cost less than a pound, filling snacks like Falafels about 20p, and a tank of petrol about £9.

Our hire car turned out to be a Renault Clio, booked from the UK with Hertz. It cost US\$ 309 for the week with unlimited mileage, and apart from a puncture we had no problems. Don't waste your time trying to find unleaded petrol as there isn't any. Our Clio ran adequately (if rather sluggishly) on the standard "Super" sold at all filling stations.

Before leaving the UK I had contacted Gianluca Serra by email (gianlu@scs.scs-net.org), whose contact details I had gleaned from a previous trip report by David Murdoch that I had found on the OSME website. We were extremely grateful for his hospitality, in fact we ended up staying in his apartment in Palmyra for most of the week. The task he faces as probably the only western conservationist resident in Syria is immense, and if you are going to Syria I would urge you to contact him, and help increase awareness of Syria's incredible avifauna by submitting all bird records.

Gianluca's project to reintroduce Arabian Oryx and Desert Gazelle to the Talila Reserve near Palmyra has recently taken a back seat to his much-publicised discovery this year of three pairs of Bald Ibis, plus an additional bird, which under close monitoring by Gianluca and his team reared three young. Unfortunately for us, the Ibises had already departed by the time we arrived, however their return next year and the possibility of discovering further relict colonies is eagerly anticipated.

Gianluca also arranged our visit to the Hamad desert under the expert guidance of Adeeb, a local hunter turned conservationist who is now contributing greatly to awareness of environmental issues among the desert people. It was truly remarkable how Adeeb navigated us through hundreds of kilometres of flat, featureless desert without once getting lost, such is his knowledge of the terrain.

During the week we encountered a few problems and inconveniences, as you would expect on any reasonably adventurous birding trip abroad! Foremost among these was the delay to our baggage, followed by the loss of one of our return plane tickets, a puncture, running out of petrol when returning from the desert, and a bout of food poisoning late in the week. Overall, however, Syria comes highly recommended for anyone looking to go somewhere a little different and add some excellent birds to their Western Palearctic lists !!

Itinerary :

Thursday 19th September : Arrived Damascus mid afternoon, drove to Palmyra to meet Gianluca Serra, arriving shortly after dark.

Friday 20th September : Spent the early morning birding around Palmyra, then drove to the Deir-es-Zor area where we spent the afternoon.

Saturday 21st September : Morning around Palmyra, in the afternoon a visit to Abu Golla lake about 50km from Palmyra with Gianluca.

Sunday 22nd September : After an hours birding around Palmyra early morning, the rest of the day spent driving to Damascus to collect our baggage and get our lost return ticket re-issued.

Monday 23rd September : Most of the day in the Deir-es-Zor area, late afternoon around Palmyra.

Tuesday 24th September / Wednesday 25th September : Two days in the Hamad desert with Adeeb.

Thursday 26th September : Departed Palmyra for Damascus airport and flight home.

Detailed account of the week :

Thursday 19th September : We arrived on the flight from Vienna at about 3pm local time, and collected our hire car from Hertz with no problems. Due to the short transfer time in Vienna, our luggage had not made the flight to Damascus. We were told it would arrive later that evening, however we had all our optics in our hand luggage and the thought of hanging around in Damascus while there were birds to be seen did not appeal, so we hit the road to Palmyra.

You are almost guaranteed to get lost negotiating Damascus, as the excellent dual carriageway from the airport deteriorates after about 20km into chaotic, road-sign-free mayhem. The best advice I can give is to try to drive parallel to the range of hills you can see to the north-east of the city, keeping them on your left. Otherwise you just have to follow your nose. Keep to main roads if at all possible, as on the back streets all the signs are in Arabic. Once out of Damascus the road quickly empties of traffic, and you should be able maintain a steady 100-120 km/h without any difficulty, but try to avoid driving at night which can be hazardous.

Gianluca Serra's base is at the Hotel Odeinat, which we quickly found in the centre of town. He kindly offered to put us up for the night, so after a very average meal and a couple of beers in the "Tourist Restaurant" opposite the museum, we turned in early in anticipation of the birding delights ahead.

Friday 20th September : Up at dawn to check the Palmyra area for migrants. We started in the oasis, but we found this a relatively unproductive area during the week. This is a large area with a lot of cover and the birds can be very elusive, however we did manage to find a couple of Tree Pipits, a Garden Warbler and a Spotted Flycatcher, evidence at least of migration. The ruins were much better, with a couple of Mourning Wheatears, an Isabelline Shrike, a Woodchat Shrike, 4 Rock Sparrows and 3 Short-toed Larks, plus a flock of European Bee-eaters overhead. We stopped occasionally for birds on the drive to Deir-es-Zor, and recorded another Isabelline Shrike, the first Hoopoe Larks of the trip, a few Isabelline Wheatears, and the first surprise of the week, a first-winter Cyprus Pied Wheatear, which we later learned occurs fairly regularly on passage. Two Black Kites just outside Deir-es-Zor city were another addition to the trip list.

First stop in Deir-es-Zor was the suspension bridge, where Iraq Babbler was said to be common and easy to find - however, we did not see it there on this occasion, and the bridge was very crowded with inquisitive locals, children etc. making birding tedious. We then headed west on foot, along the south bank of the Euphrates, through a huge bazaar where we again encountered much unwelcome attention, including a gang of children throwing stones at us. However along the river we did see 4 Little Bitterns, one Common and 3 Pied Kingfishers, 2 White-winged Terns, 3 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, a Great Reed Warbler and a few Graceful Warblers.

It was a relief to leave Deir-es-Zor and head out of town to Mheidemeh marsh, which had sounded very promising in all the trip reports we had read. To get there, cross the Euphrates via the road bridge just east of the suspension bridge, then take the next major turning on the left to head west along the north bank of the river. There are many houses along this road, however after about 15 minutes you will see an open marshy area on your right with an unmade track heading across it.

We took the track and had only got as far as the first bend when two or three babbler-shaped birds flew across into the reeds on the left. We stopped the car and eventually got excellent and prolonged views of at least 4 birds, although probably about 8 were present in the area. We ascertained that they were indeed Iraq Bblers, the main distinguishing features from Common Babbler being the unstreaked breast with quite warm rufous-buff breast sides, warmer grey-brown and less streaked above, and the call which was given frequently and which closely resembled

the call of Little Grebe. Although the birds frequently spent long periods hidden in the reeds, they did show well on occasion, and even when not calling their presence was given away by the loud cracking of the reeds as they foraged for insects.

Mheidemeh proved to be quite simply an awesome wetland. As the dirt track turned to the right towards a small village, 50 yards from the main road, we forked off on another track to the left, past the babbler reedbed and into an apparently man-made area of small hillocks and marshy pools. Birds were everywhere here, and after 100 yards or so the terrain opened up slightly to give good views of a reed-fringed lagoon, where we stopped the car and spent an hour or so looking at the birds. Frustratingly we could not use our telescopes as our tripods were still in transit from Vienna, but we knew this was somewhere we definitely wanted to return to after we had reclaimed our baggage! Large numbers of herons and egrets, including Squacco and Purple Herons and Great White Egrets, stood near the lagoon. Probably the most impressive aspect of the lagoon were the large numbers of globally threatened wildfowl. We saw at least 25 Marbled Ducks, 25 Ferruginous Ducks and 15 White-headed Ducks, illustrating how significant this totally unprotected wetland is for birds like these. Other birds in the area : 4 Marsh Harriers, 2 Water Rails, 2 Purple Gallinules, 20+ Slender-Billed Gulls, several Little, Black and White-winged Terns, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Roller, 4 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, 10+ Pied Kingfishers, Graceful Warbler and one each of Lesser Grey, Red-backed and Isabelline Shrikes.

Passage and resident waders were everywhere, including 3 Spur-winged and 40+ White-tailed Plovers (probably breeding here), Little Ringed Plover, 3 Black-winged Stilts, 3 Temminck's Stints, Little Stints, Wood Sandpipers and Spotted Redshanks.

Although we didn't see any shotgun cartridges, indiscriminate shooting of birds may well occur here. This is a fairly small area almost completely surrounded by villages, which may well lead to excessive disturbance, it was clear that sheep/goat herders regularly took their animals onto the marsh.

Back to Palmyra in the evening, and another meal in the Tourist Restaurant opposite the museum.

Saturday 21st September : Not quite such an early start this morning. Along with the usual Crested Larks, Mourning Wheatears etc. in the ruins, we had a Rock Thrush, a very incongruous Wood Warbler (in a small patch of low vegetation among the rocks), a Wryneck on rocks near the grounds of the Cham Palace Hotel, and 4 Cream-coloured Coursers on open ground between the hotel and the ruins.

Olive and Palm groves behind the Cham Palace Hotel revealed very little except a few Garden Warblers, Blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats, and brief views of an unidentified Hippolais warbler.

We went to see Gianluca in his office in the town, where he showed us slides of the Bald Ibises. It was fascinating and eerie to see this tiny relict population on their nests, and to learn that while great efforts were being made in the 1980s to save the tiny and doomed Birecik colony, there were still hundreds of pairs in Syria, which would have made a far more sensible and realistic conservation prospect if only they had been "discovered" in time.

After lunch, Gianluca took us to Abu Golla, a large desert lake about 50km NW of Palmyra. As we neared the lake we had good views of our first definite Temminck's Horned Larks of the week, a bird which later proved to be abundant in the Hamad desert.

We spent a couple of hours scanning for birds at the lake, which we viewed from a blockhouse building which gave commanding views of the area. Birds seen included a Squacco Heron, 3 juvenile Black Storks, 2 White Storks, small numbers of Teal and Garganey, a male and a juvenile Montagu's Harrier, 4 Cream-coloured Coursers, good numbers of waders of a variety of species including Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, Little and Temminck's Stints, Dunlin, Wood, Green and Curlew Sandpipers, Spotted Redshank, Ruff and Snipe, and about 8 White-winged Terns. Other birds on the banks of the lake included a Roller, a Hoopoe, 2 Short-toed Larks, many Yellow and one Citrine Wagtail, Isabelline and Desert Wheatears.

On the way back to Palmyra we stopped at cliffs where Desert Eagle Owl was known to occur. We stayed till dark but failed to score, but did see 2 Steppe Buzzards, a lone Lesser Kestrel which provided an ID headache for a while, 2 Ravens, at least 20 Alpine and one Little Swift.

Again to the Palmyra tourist restaurant in the evening - by now they must have been getting as sick of the sight of us as we were getting sick of the food they served. Chicken kebab, houmous and chips every night may be bland, but at least we could rely on not waking up with acute food poisoning the next morning!

Sunday 22nd September : Most mornings in Palmyra we had breakfast in the Tower Hotel, along the main drag, which offered the standard fare with the added bonus of a fifth floor dining room with a panoramic view of the ruins. The price gradually decreased from SYP 350 to SYP 200 as the week wore on and we got to know Mohammed, who will also exchange US Dollars into Syrian Pounds for you at good rates.

Today was designated baggage collection day, so after breakfast in the Tower Hotel and a brief look at the oasis which produced a Marsh Warbler among the commoner migrants, we headed to the filling station on the Deir-es-Zor road. Here, they fixed our hire car's puncture, including supplying a new inner tube and tea while we waited, for the incredible price of SYP 200. From here, it was the long road to Damascus in the heat of the day. If you are hiring a car, ensure that it comes with air conditioning as I don't think we would have survived without.

We had intended to make it back as far as Deir-es-Zor by nightfall for an early start there the next day, but it took longer than we had expected to claim our luggage and get Miles's lost return plane ticket re-issued (this involved a hair-raising drive into the centre of Damascus, where ironically, amid the horn-blasting mayhem, we were cautioned for running a red light!).

Palmyra again in the evening for a couple of beers, and food at the Tourist restaurant.

Monday 23rd September : The early drive to Deir-es-Zor produced the first signs of what was to be an excellent day for passage raptors, with several Steppe Buzzards, Pallid and Montagu's Harriers along the roadside.

The suspension bridge was our first port of call, to try to establish whether Iraq Babblers were no longer to be seen there, or whether we were just unlucky on our first visit. Our other target species was the White-cheeked Bulbul, a Western Palearctic tick for us, and another bird we had missed here first time around.

The bridge was much less crowded with people at this time of the day, and we did manage to see both the above species without difficulty. A group of four White-cheeked Bulebuls showed well in the small playground and surrounding trees at the north end of the bridge, and while we were watching them at least four Iraq Babblers fed in reeds directly below us.

A few raptors drifted through, including a Honey Buzzard, and the usual species seen from the bridge included Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Pied and Common Kingfishers and Little Bittern.

We were itching to check out Mheidemeh marsh with our scopes, now our tripods had been rescued from Damascus. We took the dirt track off the main road to the same spot, and as soon as we arrived, we were treated to the sight of large waves of migrating Steppe Buzzards passing overhead. Mixed in with them, an adult Steppe Eagle showed well, plus the surprise addition of a Goshawk.

The usual wildfowl and waders were on show, with slightly smaller numbers of Marbled, Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks. New for the trip was a Marsh Sandpiper, and 2 Whiskered Terns completed the trio of marsh terns on view here, along with good numbers of Little Terns, while a Citrine Wagtail showed briefly. Miles had brief views of a Little / Baillon's Crake as it disappeared into the reeds. After an hour or so, we drove round in the car through the village to the east side of the marsh (see map below), where several Kentish Plovers showed with the usual waders, and a Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Honey Buzzard drifted over in another wave of Steppe Buzzards. By early afternoon, we felt we had seen most of the birds there, and we were keen to try somewhere new. Although basic, our road map of Syria seemed to indicate a small lake just to the north-east of the Euphrates bridge at Deir-es-Zor, which we failed to find (it may have dried up). Human and traffic disturbance in this area was high, so we hit the road again, back towards Palmyra.

A brief café stop just outside Deir-es-Zor revealed hundreds of Black Kites circling in the scorching heat, but we didn't stop again until we were about 15km from Palmyra, where a turning on the left is signposted to the Talila reserve (where Gianluca is working to reintroduce the Arabian Oryx).

We cruised slowly down this quiet road for about 2km, stopping for birds, and enjoyed several hours of late afternoon raptor passage. Pallid, Montagu's and Marsh Harriers passed in small numbers, with Steppe Buzzards higher up, along with a single Booted Eagle. The desert around the road was surprisingly good, I think we benefited from spending time in the same spot in decent habitat. Along with the usual Temminck's Horned and Crested Larks, there were also several Lesser Short-toed and Hoopoe Larks, Desert and Isabelline Wheatears, two Cream-coloured Coursers, a Whinchat and, bizarrely, a male Redstart. A Great Grey Shrike, the fifth shrike species of the week, showed distantly on telegraph wires.

The Ishtar Hotel was our destination in the evening, one of the few establishments in Palmyra to serve beer. After a

few cold ones, Gianluca prepared some delicious Italian home cooking, as a very welcome break from the Tourist restaurant.

Tuesday 24th September : We were woken at 06.30 (as was the rest of the street) by Adeeb loudly sounding his horn. It was the day of our trip to the desert, and after a few errands around Palmyra we headed east out of town on the Deir-es-Zor road in the back of his ancient Datsun pick-up.

We soon got tired of sitting in the back, and opted instead to sit up front in the cab where it was somewhat less dusty and windswept. After about 20km we turned off the main road, heading south along a minor road towards the desert. We stopped for tea (the first of very many such stops) in a small village, where a small flock of 5-6 Levant Sparrowhawks, including a male, passed overhead and a migrant Tree Pipit fed by the roadside. After the village, the tarmac road continued as far as a couple of man-made desert reservoirs, where many Montagu's and Pallid Harriers came to water (and to traps set for them by falcon hunters). Before long we were on a rough track, and our next stop was at a large Bedouin tent where we again had a few glasses of tea and a decent breakfast of bread, eggs, aubergines, marmalade and houmous. At the tent we also met our first falcon hunters, who had a captive juvenile Montagu's Harrier which they used to try and lure the falcons. The harrier had its eyes sewn shut and meat was placed in the harriers' talons along with loops of wire to ensnare any falcon tempted to try and steal an easy meal. We were assured that the harriers eyes are opened and they are released after a few days service, as they become lethargic and depressed if kept in captivity too long.

All the hunters, wherever we stopped, were fascinated by Adeeb's copy of the Collins bird guide, which not so mysteriously always seemed to be open on the pages featuring Saker, Gyrfalcon, Lanner and Peregrine. This was not at all surprising as the larger falcons fetch a king's ransom in Damascus when sold to the Saudis - a decent female Saker worth up to 140,000 US Dollars is the real prize, with Lanners the next most favoured, followed by Peregrine. Adeeb himself caught a female Peregrine last year which earned him \$20,000. By contrast, a small male may fetch only \$200.

Adeeb told us he could remember the days when the three large falcons were resident in Syria, and many Sakers were caught annually for the falconry trade. Now, resident populations are almost totally extinct, and the large numbers of hunters who congregate in the Hamad desert each year rely on migrant birds, which get rarer every year. Their rarity, allied to the fact that they are very difficult to catch and inexperienced hunters are frequently unsuccessful, means that few are now caught each year.

Due to the large amounts of money involved, cessation of the falconry trade seems a very distant goal (Syria will probably run out of falcons first). However Adeeb has made great progress in encouraging the hunters not to indiscriminately shoot migrant birds, and it was clear that everyone we met in the desert held Adeeb in very high regard, so I think he had started to make a real impact.

Birding in the desert was at times frustrating, but often very rewarding. Sometimes we didn't see anything for many miles, only to find concentrations of birds in areas with sparse vegetation or artificial reservoirs. One such reservoir held a flock of 14 Black-necked Grebes, a Garganey and a White-winged Tern, with often spectacular concentrations of the three harrier species (Pallid most numerous) as they came to drink. Some of the more interesting migrants seen, apart from those mentioned below, included singles of Great Grey Shrike, Roller, Icterine Warbler and Pied Wheatear. Of the true desert species, Temminck's Horned Larks were by far and away the most numerous, with regular Crested and Hoopoe Larks, a few Lesser Short-toed and only a single Bar-tailed Desert Lark seen. Isabelline and Desert Wheatears were also frequently encountered, though some (most?) of these could have been passage birds.

On several occasions we encountered a majestic Steppe Eagle perched on the ground, visible from far away, but the raptor highlight today was the subadult Greater Spotted Eagle which gave incredibly close views overhead. Some of the eagles remained unidentified, though I suspect that most of them were Steppe.

Migrant-wise, an afternoon tea stop at one of the two wells in the Hamad provided a taste of what was to come the next morning. The habitat - a small vegetable patch, a few sparse shrubs, a couple of buildings and a few small pools of water, enclosed by a wire fence, was very unremarkable, but as the only patch of cover and shade for miles around it was a magnet for tired migrants. It soon became clear just how many birds the sparse cover could conceal. The highlight was a Richard's / Blyth's Pipit, which never allowed a close enough approach for a conclusive identification, and a thorough grilling of the area produced a respectable warbler list including two or three Willow Warblers, two

each of Garden, Reed and Wood Warblers, and single Olivaceous Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackcap and Chiffchaff. Also here were about ten Spotted Flycatchers, three Red-backed Shrikes, two Golden Orioles, single Redstart and Whinchat, and four Ortolan Buntings.

It was only when I suddenly started feeling dizzy and nauseous that I realised we had spent a couple of hours in the heat of the day being roasted by the desert sun. Thankfully we adjourned to a bedouin tent nearby and enjoyed an awesome meal of salty rice and stewed vegetables, washed down with copious amounts of tea and bottled water, and after an hour or so the heatstroke had subsided and we were able to continue.

Later, as the light faded, we made our way to the site of the second well, which was to be our overnight halt. By the time we arrived, it was too late to check for any migrants, although the area looked to be at least as promising as the first well we visited. There were more buildings, a very well-developed vegetable garden, at least a dozen shrubs and small trees, and a marshy area just outside the fenced compound with a spring and low, relatively lush vegetation, although the total area did not exceed 100 square metres. As we were to discover the next morning, the area surpassed even our best expectations.

Dinner of rice and ropery old chicken was taken in a nearby tent with a large group of falcon hunters, whilst our accomodation was on the floor of one of the blockhouse buildings in the well compound. We learnt that we were within 20km of the Iraq border, which given the current political situation was about as close as we wanted to get! Before retiring for the night, we took some time to look at the night sky, which was as beautiful as you would expect in a place so far from any sources of light pollution

Wednesday 25th September : Awoken at first light by Adeeb, who had seen a flock of strange birds flying around looking for somewhere to land. They turned out to be Night Herons, nine birds in total including five adults. It was frustrating waiting for the light to improve as everywhere we could hear birds fluttering in the bushes, I guessed that new birds were arriving all the time looking for somewhere to rest. It wasn't long before we were looking at the day's first Spotted Flycatchers (at least 30 in the area in total during the morning), Red-backed Shrikes (20+) and Common Redstarts (12+). I knew it was going to be an exceptional morning when I came face-to-face with a Barred Warbler in a bush just outside the toilet window! When I emerged, it turned out that Miles had been watching an Olivaceous Warbler and a very showy Marsh Warbler in the other half of the same bush, plus legions of Garden Warblers, Blackcaps and Lesser Whitethroats.

Many of the birds lingered in the area and we saw them repeatedly during the morning, while others were seen only once, presumably continuing their journey by day. My favourite find of the morning came shortly after the discovery of the Barred Warbler, when I noticed a phylloscopus warbler with a single wing-bar perched on the wire fence surrounding the compound. Calling Miles over, we had excellent views of the bird in full view on the fence for several minutes : having established the bird's identity as a Greenish Warbler, it disappeared from view round the corner of a bush, never to be seen again.

We then had split-second views of a "mystery bird" on the ground in the vegetable patch, which then flew towards the marshy area just outside the compound. We grilled this area thoroughly but failed to relocate the bird, however ample compensation was provided by a Great Reed Warbler, one Tawny and three Red-throated Pipits (which departed shortly after we found them), several Short-toed Larks and Yellow Wagtails.

An adult male and female Pallid Harrier quartered the boundary fence, ready to snatch up any unwary migrants, while a splash of colour was provided by two Golden Orioles, a Kingfisher and two brief Rollers.

Back in the compound, we were able to tick off an unlikely "double". First, we encountered a first-year Rock Thrush on the boundary fence, then Adeeb drew our attention to an adult male Blue Rock Thrush on the roof of the blockhouse, which obligingly gave excellent views for most of the morning. Wheatears also featured, the usual Desert and Isabelline Wheatears accompanied by at least two Pied and three Black-eared Wheatears, including a "black-throated" male.

We eventually caught up with our "mystery bird", which confirmed earlier suspicions that it was a Thrush Nightingale by perching on a mound of earth in the open for about ten minutes, quite unlike the earlier brief showing. We did have brief views of a female-type Pied / Collared Flycatcher species on the fence but could not relocate it. Nearby three Ortolan Buntings, including a male, gave close views on mounds of earth along the boundary fence.

Mid-morning, as the sun rose higher in the sky, we dragged ourselves away to continue our "desert tour". An

artificial reservoir not far away produced excellent views of various raptors gathered on its banks, including three Steppe Eagles in a single scope view, while a single Citrine Wagtail fed with the Yellows. Also here were familiar migrant species including Little Stint, Dunlin, Green Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Garganey, Shoveler and Teal. Our luck appeared to be on the wane as we dipped both Desert Eagle Owl and Macqueen's Bustard at known sites, however the latter species at least is almost extinct in the Hamad owing to excessive persecution. Caspian Plover is another regularly occurring passage bird that we failed to connect with, although luck is undoubtedly required with such large areas of habitat available.

South-west of Palmyra, not long before joining the tarmac road, a desert escarpment produced five Lesser Kestrels, with three Cream-coloured Coursers and an unidentified Desert / Bar-tailed Desert Lark briefly nearby.

We rejoined the main Damascus - Palmyra highway, and were about 10km outside Palmyra when Adeeb's trusty Datsun pick-up spluttered to a halt, having run out of fuel. Very embarrassing for our expert desert guide, and Miles and I were left pondering our good fortune that it didn't happen in the middle of the desert, which could have had very serious implications!! Instead, Adeeb flagged down a passing truck, returning ten minutes later on the back of a motorbike with a full container of petrol. In reflective mood we arrived back in Palmyra, and Adeeb seemed grateful for his payment of 200 US Dollars for his services, money which I felt would ensure he continued to take western visitors to the desert, thus contributing to conservation in the area.

Our final evening was again spent in the Tourist Restaurant in Palmyra. Unfortunately Gianluca had been called to Damascus at short notice so we were unable to see him. That night, long overdue, I was to see most of my dinner again as the long overdue dose of Syrian Stomach finally wreaked its terrible revenge.

Thursday 26th September : Stomach troubles meant an unpleasant journey back, however the journey was relatively hassle-free. After a late morning departure from Palmyra, we arrived back at Heathrow late evening.

Systematic List :

Little Grebe : about 10 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Great Crested Grebe : 3 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Black-necked Grebe : flock of 14 on a Hamad desert reservoir on 24/9.

Little Bittern : seen only beside the Euphrates at Deir-es-Zor, with 4 on 20/9 and 2 on 23/9.

Night Heron : 2 at Deir-es-Zor on 23/9. A flock of 9 in Hamad on 25/9.

Squacco Heron : 1 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Little Egret : about 40 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and 23/9, 10 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Great White Egret : 5 at Mheidemeh on both 20/9 and 23/9.

Grey Heron : common at Mheidemeh and Abu Golla.

Purple Heron : the only record was of one at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

White Stork : 2 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Black Stork : 3 juveniles at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Teal : small numbers at Abu Golla on 21/9. Flock of 7 on a Hamad reservoir on 25/9.

Garganey : seen in ones and twos at Mheidemeh, Abu Golla and in Hamad.

Pintail : 2 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Shoveler : 10 at Mheidemeh on 23/9 and 4 in Hamad on 25/9.

Marbled Teal : excellent numbers at Mheidemeh with 25 on 20/9 and 8 on 23/9.

Ferruginous Duck : seen only at Mheidemeh with 25 on 20/9 and 5 on 23/9.

White-headed Duck : at Mheidemeh, 15 on 20/9 and 10 on 23/9.

Greater Spotted Eagle : subadult bird in Hamad on 24/9.

Lesser Spotted Eagle : single at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Steppe Eagle : one at Mheidemeh on 23/9. A fairly common migrant in Hamad, with 3 on 24/9 and at least 6 on 25/9, plus 3+ unidentified aquila eagles which were probably this species.

Booted Eagle : a dark phase bird along the entrance track to Talila reserve on 23/9.

Black Kite : 2 at Deir-es-Zor on 20/9, with at least 200 there on 23/9. In Hamad, 10 on 24/9 and 2 on 25/9.

Marsh Harrier : resident / passage birds commonly seen, high count of 15 in Hamad on 24/9.

Pallid Harrier : one adult female seen beside the road to Deir-es-Zor and a pair along the entrance track to Talila

reserve on 23/9. Common migrant in Hamad with high count of at least 15 (including 8 males) on 24/9.

Montagu's Harrier : adult male and juvenile at Abu Golla on 21/9. Less common than Pallid in Hamad with high count of about 8 (including one male) on 25/9.

Common Buzzard : occasional dark brown individuals may have been dark Steppe Buzzards.

Steppe Buzzard : 2 on the outskirts of Palmyra on 21/9. Abundant on 23/9 with over 500 birds seen, mainly at Mheidemeh and the entrance track to Talila reserve. Also noted in small numbers over Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Honey Buzzard : only seen on 23/9 loosely associated with the Steppe Buzzard movement, with 1 seen from the Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge and 1 at Mheidemeh .

Goshawk : 1 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Sparrowhawk : 1 at Palmyra on 21/9. 3 singles associated with the large raptor movement of 23/9.

Levant Sparrowhawk : small flock of 5-6 birds, including an adult male, on the outskirts of Hamad on 24/9.

Lesser Kestrel : 1 on the outskirts of Palmyra on 21/9. 5 in Hamad on 25/9.

Kestrel : 1 along Talila entrance track on 23/9. Occasional singles seen in Hamad.

Water Rail : 2 seen at Mheidemeh on 20/9, heard there again on 23/9.

Little / Baillon's Crane : a small crane seen very briefly at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Moorhen : recorded at Mheidemeh but no counts made.

Coot : as previous species.

Purple Gallinule : 2 at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Black-winged Stilt : at Mheidemeh, 3 on 20/9 and 5 on 23/9.

Cream-coloured Courser : small numbers seen at several sites, with 4 near Palmyra ruins and 4 at Abu Golla on 21/9, 3 along the entrance road to the Talila reserve on 23/9, 1 in Hamad on 24/9 and 3 there on 25/9.

Little Ringed Plover : 1 at Mheidemeh on 20/9, 10 at Abu Golla on 21/9 and 1 in Hamad on 25/9.

Ringed Plover : 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Kentish Plover : 3 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Spur-winged Plover : seen only at Mheidemeh with 3 on 20/9 and 6 on 23/9.

White-tailed Plover : abundant at Mheidemeh (presumed breeding) - c.40 on 20/9 and c.100 on 23/9.

Dunlin : 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9 and 1 in Hamad on 25/9.

Curlew Sandpiper : 3 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Temminck's Stint : probably a fairly common migrant. 3 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and at least 4 at Abu Golla the following day.

Little Stint : 3 at Mheidemeh on both 20/9 and 23/9, with 30 at Abu Golla on 21/9 and 16 in Hamad on 25/9.

Wood Sandpiper : 2 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and 5 there on 23/9. 5 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Green Sandpiper : 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9, 5 at Mheidemeh on 23/9 and 2 in Hamad on 25/9.

Common Sandpiper : only one seen, on the Euphrates near Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Spotted Redshank : 5 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and 23/9. 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Redshank : 10 at Mheidemeh on 23/9, present there but no count made on 20/9.

Greenshank : present at Mheidemeh on both 20/9 and 23/9.

Marsh Sandpiper : 1 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Black-tailed Godwit : 2 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Ruff : abundant at Mheidemeh, also 5 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

Snipe : seen at Mheidemeh and Abu Golla.

Slender-billed Gull : the only gull species seen, c.20 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 with 50 there on 23/9.

Little Tern : 2 at Mheidemeh on 20/9 and 8 there on 23/9.

Black Tern : the same individual at Mheidemeh on both 20/9 and 23/9.

White-winged Tern : the commonest tern, seen in the Euphrates valley, Abu Golla and in Hamad, with highest count of 15 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Whiskered Tern : the only birds were 2 at Mheidemeh on 23/9.

Laughing Dove : common e.g. in Deir-es-Zor and Palmyra towns.

Collared Dove : as above.

Woodpigeon : only seen from Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge, with about 4 there on 20/9 and 23/9.

Great Spotted Cuckoo : 1 at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Little Swift : 1 around cliffs near Palmyra on 21/9.

Alpine Swift : 20 with Little Swift on 21/9. 2 over Palmyra town the following day.

Common Kingfisher : singles from the Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge on 20/9 and 23/9. 1 in Hamad on 25/9.

Pied Kingfisher : common in Euphrates valley. Up to 15 could be seen together at Mheidemeh.

Hoopoe : 1 at Abu Golla on 21/9.

European Bee-eater : small numbers daily around the Palmyra oasis, and in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9. Absent from Euphrates valley where replaced by Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater : common in Euphrates area, e.g. Mheidemeh and Deir-es-Zor, where replacing European Bee-eater.

Roller : singles at Mheidemeh on 20/9, Abu Golla on 21/9 and Hamad on 24/9, with 2 in Hamad on 25/9.

Wryneck : 1 near Palmyra ruins on 21/9.

Crested Lark : common around settlements, even far out in Hamad desert.

Short-toed Lark : 3 around Palmyra ruins on 20/9, 2 at Abu Golla on 21/9, 5 at Mheidemeh on 23/9 and fairly frequent migrant in Hamad with at least 20 on 25/9.

Lesser Short-toed Lark : two records : 2 along road to Talila reserve on 23/9, and a party of 20 beside a Hamad desert reservoir on 24/9.

Bar-tailed Desert Lark : just one definite record of a single in Hamad on 24/9. An unidentified desert lark sp. In Hamad on 25/9.

Temminck's Horned Lark : abundant in desert, where most numerous away from human habitation.

Hoopoe Lark : scattered singles seen during the week, the most seen in a single day was 6 in Hamad on 24/9.

Sand Martin : common migrant.

Swallow : common migrant as above. Surprisingly, no other hirundine species seen.

Tawny Pipit : 3 by the second Hamad oasis and 2 elsewhere in Hamad on 25/9 were the only records.

Richard's / Blyth's Pipit : 1 by the first Hamad oasis on 24/9.

Tree Pipit : ones and twos daily around Palmyra oasis, singles in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Red-throated Pipit : 3 around second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Yellow Wagtail : a common migrant. Most not ascribed to race but majority probably m.f.feldeggi.

Citrine Wagtail : probably a regular migrant in small numbers. A first-winter seen at Abu Golla on 21/9, two fly-overs at Mheidemeh on 23/9, and one in Hamad on 25/9.

Yellow-vented Bulbul : two seen from the car on the outskirts of Damascus on 19/9.

White-cheeked Bulbul : 4 at Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge on 23/9.

Thrush Nightingale : 1 at second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Common Redstart : a male along the road to Talila reserve on 23/9, 1 in Hamad on 24/9 and at least 12 at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Northern Wheatear : a few migrants seen in Hamad but outnumbered by Isabelline.

Isabelline Wheatear : common migrant, 5-10 seen on most days.

Desert Wheatear : a male at Abu Golla on 21/9, 5 along Talila entrance road on 23/9. In Hamad, common with at least 10 seen on 25/9.

Black-eared Wheatear : at least 3 in Hamad on 25/9 including a black-throated male, plus a few others not specifically identified as being this species or Pied Wheatear.

Pied Wheatear : a female in Hamad on 24/9. Several at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9. A few other probables in Hamad not specifically identified (see above).

Cyprus Pied Wheatear : a first-winter beside the road to Deir-es-Zor on 20/9. This species is said to be a regular migrant in Syria.

Mourning Wheatear : seen only around Palmyra ruins, where it was quite common.

Whinchat : one near Talila reserve on 23/9. 5+ daily in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Rock Thrush : first-winter birds at Palmyra ruins on 21/9 and at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Blue Rock Thrush : male at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Garden Warbler : a common migrant in the Palmyra oasis and in Hamad, high count 10 on 25/9.

Barred Warbler : 1 at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Lesser Whitethroat : a few migrants at Palmyra and in Hamad.

Whitethroat : small numbers of migrants in Hamad only, peak of 6 on 25/9.

Blackcap : small numbers seen at Palmyra and in Hamad.

Graceful Warbler : common in Euphrates valley, heard but not seen at Palmyra on 21/9.

Cetti's Warbler : heard at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Reed Warbler : common in reeds along Euphrates, migrants seen in ones and twos in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Marsh Warbler : 1 in Palmyra oasis on 22/9. 1 exceptionally showy bird at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Great Reed Warbler : 1 at Deir-es-Zor on 20/9. 1 at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Icterine Warbler : 1 in Hamad on 24/9. An unidentified Hippolais warbler seen briefly in Palmyra oasis on 21/9 could well have been this species.

Olivaceous Warbler : 1 at first Hamad oasis on 24/9 and 1 at the second oasis on 25/9.

Willow Warbler : small numbers of passage migrants in Hamad.

Wood Warbler : 1 in Palmyra ruins on 21/9. 1-2 at first Hamad oasis on 24/9.

Greenish Warbler : 1 at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Chiffchaff : a few migrants in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Spotted Flycatcher : common migrant. Highest count 30+ in Hamad on 25/9.

Pied / Collared Flycatcher : 1 briefly at the second Hamad oasis on 25/9.

Red-backed Shrike : common migrant. Highest count 20+ in Hamad on 25/9.

Isabelline Shrike : 3 birds seen, all on 20/9 ; 1 in Palmyra ruins, 1 beside the road to Deir-es-Zor, and 1 at Mheidemeh.

Woodchat Shrike : a male in Palmyra ruins on 20/9.

Lesser Grey Shrike : 1 at Mheidemeh on 20/9.

Great Grey Shrike : 3 records : 1 near the Talila reserve entrance on 23/9, and singles in Hamad on 24/9 and 25/9.

Iraq Babbler : about 10 at Mheidemeh in 20/9. At least 4 in reeds below Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge on 23/9.

Magpie : apparently uncommon, noted only around Deir-es-Zor suspension bridge.

Hooded Crow : very few, mainly seen from car near Damascus.

Raven : 2 over cliffs near Palmyra on 21/9 were most probably this species, although Brown-necked Raven not ruled out.

Golden Oriole : 2 at first Hamad oasis on 24/9 could have been the same birds seen at the second oasis the following day.

House Sparrow : small numbers at most sites.

Rock Sparrow : 4 at Palmyra ruins on 20/9 was the only record, apparently absent from much of Syria despite suitable habitat.

Ortolan Bunting : 4 at the first Hamad oasis on 24/9, with 3 at the second oasis the following day.

Total Species Seen : 138

Dominic Le Croisette and Miles Wheeler

Email contact

Syria

- go back to start of trip report for Syria

Trip Reports

- view another trip report from the OSME region

OSME Home

- return to OSME home page contents