

MY SECOND SYRIAN TRIP (10 – 19 June 2003): REPORT

'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun...' (apologies to Noel Coward)

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General comments

I don't apologise for changing this section little from my previous trip report (February – March 2002). So little information is available for the Syrian avifauna that the distribution maps in bird guides are hopelessly inaccurate. Mike Evans wrote a chapter on Syria in the Birdlife International book ('Important Bird Areas in the Middle East'; 1994) which is essential reading. The trip reports on the OSME website are also essential but emphasise the huge gaps in our knowledge. I would like again to thank those intrepid birders: Remco Hofland from the Netherlands (1994), Jan Wester from Sweden, who cycled through the desert in the spring of 1998, and Frank Vandemeutter and Jan Soors from Belgium (2001). Again, **I am extremely grateful to Gianluca Serra** for his hospitality and for a memorable day ibis-watching in the desert steppes on 14 June. Gianluca is probably the only foreign birder resident in Syria; he found the Syrian Bald Ibises and he is training and inspiring Syria's first wildlife conservationists in the Palmyrean desert, so he will probably be recognised as the 'founding figure' of Syrian ornithology.

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Abbreviations: N -North S -South W -West E -East SW -South-west etc.

Visiting Syria is no problem. A visa should take about 5 working days for UK subjects once the passport is at the Embassy; it costs £34 for a single entry visa (and £54 for multiple entries). As I live outside London, I use the services of Travcour (Tempo House, 15 Fallon Road, Battersea SW11 2PJ; 0207 2235295; www.travcour.com), who have always been very helpful and efficient; including their fee (£20) and the (essential) Registered Post for the passport's return, the cost rises to £59, but it saves a day in London!

Syria is still portrayed as hostile to the West, but this is rubbish; it is fast opening up and **now is a golden time to visit** (before the tourist hordes ruin it).

It is:

- Very safe – most Syrians are extremely honest and I have never felt threatened, even walking around Damascus at 2 a.m.;
- Very cheap; at £80 Syrian to £1 sterling, money goes a long way!
- Full of exceptionally pleasant people, longing to practice their English and to talk to an outsider – the only places where I have had unpleasant hassle were at the Damascus Bus Stations and Palmyra (the Palmyra children are becoming obnoxious), and once from kids at Mheimideh;
- Full of outstanding archaeological remains (only Turkey compares).

Further, it has:

- Excellent and varied food, with wine (of variable quality) and good beer;
- Outstanding shopping opportunities in the souks of Damascus and Aleppo;
- Good general guides – Rough Guide and Footprint recommended;
- A very good infrastructure, with hotels widely available; I paid £Syrian 250-1100 Syrian (£3-£15 sterling)

for rooms with en-suite shower and (usually) toilet;

- Amazingly good roads and an outstanding (comprehensive and very cheap) public transport system.

For birders who can't afford to rent a car, a combination of luxury Pullmans (long-distance coaches), minibuses and taxis will get you most places very cheaply and will give you a great chance to meet Syrians - in minibuses they will often insist on paying your fare!

On the down side:

- Car hire is possible but drivers have to be VERY experienced in the ways of the Middle East – lorries play 'chicken' with each other on major roads and often ignore cars. But traffic is very light off the major roads as very few Syrians can (yet) afford a private car. If you want to get to most birding places at first light, your own car (or one driven by a Syrian) is probably needed. I've now done it and the only bad places were the major cities and the Lattakia-Aleppo road....

PUBLIC HEALTH WARNING AVOID THE LATTAKIA-ALEPPO ROAD IF YOU POSSIBLY CAN

I have driven in several Middle Eastern countries, and even in Italy, and I have never been on such a dangerous road – it is packed with lorries that won't give way and car drivers that push their way past, on a narrow road that twists and turns and goes up and down and has poor camber. If you find yourself on this road stuck behind a line of lorries plodding up a hill, with cars trying to overtake them, pull off and have a cup of tea; it isn't worth it.

- The internal security situation has been very tight (though it is now much more relaxed); **avoid talking about politics completely!**

Photos of the ex-President and his sons adorn all public buildings and all businesses;

- Much of the country is almost devoid of birds, through a combination of intensive agriculture, pesticide use and shooting. Anyone looking for wildlife apart from birds would have a miserable time, except in the mountains (which are a different matter altogether!);
- The alphabet is, of course, Arabic, making comprehension often difficult, and few people outside towns speak English. But I have always got by, even in pretty wayout places; and most road signs (when they exist) have place names in Arabic and Latin.

Generally, I thoroughly recommend Syria for any reasonably adventurous traveller/birder, particularly anyone who wants to do some pioneering birding, and my second trip (when I drove myself) has only confirmed my feelings.

How to behave

I do not want to sound like a nanny, but it is very important for visiting birders to see themselves as cultural ambassadors and therefore to act with the greatest courtesy – even if it is a hot, tiring day. The vast majority of Syrians are delighted to meet Westerners and it is usually a pleasure to meet them – but you have to develop the art of extricating yourself from invitations to tea!

- Learn a few words of pidgin Arabic, it is useful and people appreciate it
- Take time to talk to people, shake everyone's hands and be open and not Anglo-Saxon
- If you are birding and you see Syrians looking at you, particularly if they look concerned, go and chat to them. Recent Syrian history has been pretty unpleasant and so any anxiety is understandable
- After an unpleasant incident on day 2, I carried the Collins guide in my backpack to show to people – who usually reacted with amazement and great pleasure. I recommend p. 221,

which has lots of large, pretty, conspicuous birds, for instance, Hoopoe ('hud' in Arabic; specifically mentioned, I believe, in the Koran). And if you really want to thrill them, show them the pages with Peregrine, Lanner, Saker and Gyr Falcon.....

- If you are using your binoculars, let Syrians look through them – you will make them friends for life. The combination of the Collins guide illustrations and close views of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters really turned the kids on at Mheimideh - I believe that many Syrians could become interested in what is their wildlife

- Never put your feet up or point the soles of your shoes at Syrians – you may not mean to, but this is an insult. It is inadvisable even to cross your legs when you are sitting on a chair. An American who lived in Damascus made a useful Syrian contribution to a well-known series, 'Culture shock! A guide to customs and etiquette' – recommended if you have not visited an Arab country before.

Evidence of hunting

I have been to countries such as Greece and watched 'hunters' blaze away at anything that moved; the places in Syria I have visited are not like that, I have never seen a civilian toting a gun. As birds such as Marbled Duck would quickly be wiped out by hunting, it is important to record any evidence that it is still happening.

2 cartridges Fields above Kassab, 11.6

2 cartridges Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

A kid with a wicked-looking catapult Euphrates valley but I can't remember where

Maps

(1) National maps: awful. I never saw one in the country, though I didn't look hard; I used a 1:800,000 GeoCenter (Freytag & Berndt, Vienna), which was adequate for long distances but useless for fine detail (and inaccurate as well). I would strongly recommend buying a map **BEFORE** you travel (in UK e.g. from Stanfords), as otherwise you could have a really serious problem finding your way around.

(2) Of birding sites: I have no pretensions to be a mapmaker and it would be very helpful for future crews to make maps of key sites, e.g. Bahrat Homs, the Kassab area, Mheimideh.

Accommodation (£S80 to £1 sterling)

All of these hotels are mentioned in the Rough Guide, are acceptable or better and had English-speaking staff.

Place	Hotel	Cost	Comments
Damascus	Sultan	1100	Close to Hejaz station; very good value
Kassab	Amir / Princess	300	Nice people, basic
Palmyra	Citadel	250	Nice people, very central, very good value (if basic)
Deir ez-Zor	Raghdan	675	Nice people, AirCon (vital!)
Aleppo	Al Boustan	630	Helpful with taxi to airport

Sites I would recommend:

Sabkhat al-Jabbul (IBA 006) is a huge, shallow salt-lake about 40 km. SE of Aleppo; it is probably the largest and most important site of its type in the country. I was only able to visit a small area at the SW corner and to drive onto one of the large islands in its centre; I would estimate that its 'coastline' might now measure 100 km., much only accessible by four-wheel drive. There are many islands that would need a motor boat to reach; this would be very worthwhile to search for breeding colonies of Flamingoes, terns (Gull-billed, Little, Caspian and Common), Slender-billed Gulls and waders (Avocets, Pratincoles, Great Sand Plover, Stilts). I saw no duck on my June visit but that means little. The centre of Aleppo could be used as a base as al-Jabbul is little more than an hour away. Access: take the motorway heading E from Aleppo towards Raqqa, then the turning right to Sfire (easy to miss). Head

straight down what is at first a good road, but when you hit a roundabout with a golden teapot in the centre, it deteriorates and of course there are no road signs. Continue on in a straight direction, and with luck you will finally get out of the place 2 km. after the golden teapot. You will soon be aware of the lake on your left but drainage ditches often make the shore difficult to reach. I slept on a hillock 5 km. beyond the S edge of Sfire and found a reasonable access point about 2 km. beyond. There were some reeds along this stretch, with Gull-billed Terns, Stilts etc. breeding on the shore. 3 km. beyond is a village, Hakla, where you can drive down close to the shore; there were a lot of loafing gulls and terns at this point, the most SW corner of the lake. 1 km. further, a driveable causeway 2 km. long took me over to a large, barren island with miles more of 'coast-line'. The area is vast.

Ba'ath Lake (IBA 008): a reservoir on the Euphrates built in the 1960s that appears largely to have silted up, creating square miles of prime wetland habitat. I had only a morning here, but it was bliss – almost as good as Mheimideh! The key access is via the railway viaduct (the Deir-Aleppo line), which gives superb access right into the middle of the wetland. **Getting there:** Just W of a depressing town called al-Mansurah is another depressing village called ?Hneideh. A deep cutting that looks like a river, but is actually for the railway line, lies (I think) between the two. Drive (precariously) along the W side of the railway down onto the marsh, and then along the side of the railway out for about a mile to the very end of the embankment - to where the bridge itself starts. On the W (upstream) side of the embankment, there are at least 2 stone groynes running out into the marsh at right angles to the embankment; they give you a superb opportunity to look out over the marsh from a reasonable height.

Birds: large numbers of breeding Purple and Squacco Herons and Little Bitterns (but, oddly, only one egret and no ducks – why? Shooting?). Singing Savi's Warblers and a colony of Bearded Tits (both second breeding records for Syria). Iraq Babblers (heard only, but the call is very distinctive); a 100 mile range extension. In the scrub on the E side, Olivaceous and Menetries' Warblers and (bizarrely) many flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse coming to drink! This would be an excellent site for a ringing expedition. Elsewhere several pairs of Great Crested Grebe (first Syrian breeding record) and Common Terns everywhere. Not bad for 4 hours! And I have hardly scratched the surface of a very exciting site.

R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (part of IBA 010: Euphrates valley): the pedestrian footbridge at Deir, a famous beauty spot, forms a natural lookout point for wetland species and would be an excellent migration watchpoint; along it are several islands fringed by reeds that hold **Iraq Babbler (common)** and Dead Sea Sparrow (dirt common), and, in February 2002, **White-cheeked Bulbul** (twice) and wintering Bluethroat. The reeds are extensive and the larger islands have orchards that look interesting; the riverside trees hold wintering Night Herons. It is well worth walking upstream along the road on the S side of the footbridge; 1 km. upstream, outside the city, there are lush orchards and quiet fields with Olivaceous Warblers and Iraqi Babblers, and a colony of Yellow-throated Sparrows is breeding in the tops of the telegraph poles! They are not called Sparrows for nothing....I have called this island al-Furat Island (not its official title) because this is the name of the huge Syrian petroleum company that apparently owns much of it - this probably explains why it is such a beautiful and unspoilt area!

On the N side of the river, the University's Agricultural Research Station has a large area of mature, thick conifers and orchards, forming (for the Euphrates valley) an exceptionally safe and shady habitat; I have found White-cheeked Bulbul, Yellow-throated Sparrow and Wood Pigeon on its edges, all (at present) major rarities for Syria. Also on the N side of the river is a funfair, with a short footpath running past it between the Agricultural Station and the river; I found singing Upcher's and breeding Olivaceous and Ménétries's warblers on this trip, White-cheeked Bulbul, a large flock of Siskins (!) and Penduline Tits on my previous trip, and Dead Sea Sparrows and Babblers on practically every visit.

Mheimideh – Sfeira Tahtani (part of IBA 010: Euphrates valley): (very close together, forming part of the same old oxbow of the Euphrates). Mheimideh (transliterated as Muhaymiddah by Hofland and Vandemeutter & Soors) is a village on the N side of the river ~15km. NW from Deir ez-Zor towards Ar-Raqqa; when there is a village sign in Latin on the main road, the wetland is on your right. The turning to Sfeira Tahtani is shortly before Mheimideh (coming from Deir). The wetland is sickle-shaped, with the deep water on its outer

edge, but hidden from view from the road that curls round the site by a thick belt of 15 ft. Arundo. The central area has many small, shallow lagoons, with very irregular, muddy edges and many stands of reeds (Phragmites and some Arundo), hummocks that act as islands on which birds can rest, hide and breed, and Juncus heavily grazed by goats in saline marsh. There are several areas of shallow, open water. In short, the site looks as if the RSPB planned it! However, counting the birds (or even getting adequate views) is extremely difficult; the birds are wary and distant, and the hummocks and reedbeds break up views. My counts on this trip are only approximate as I was not prepared to disturb breeding birds. Winter: good numbers of herons / egrets (6 species) and duck (8 species); Pygmy Cormorant; **Iraq Babbler** (seen by Vandemeutter & Soors but not by me); waders. **Breeding: Red Data Book species: Marbled, White-headed, Ferruginous Duck.** Summering Garganey and Pochard (Were they breeding? It's never been proven for either species in Syria). Black-winged Stilt (at least 20 pairs), White-tailed Plovers (10 pairs), Spur-winged Plovers (10 pairs). Purple Gallinule present (probably breeding). Whiskered Tern (50+ pairs); Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters (20 pairs). Regular visits would definitely turn up much more; I just scratched the surface of this wonderful place. The area is densely populated but the birds could not survive if the villagers did not give the wildlife considerable protection. For instance, I estimated 50 Marbled Ducks on this trip, so shooting pressure cannot be intense!

This site has exceptional potential as an educational nature reserve.

A reserve at Mheimideh could be a flagship project for Birdlife International and its Syrian counterpart, with outstanding opportunities to:

- interest the locals in the outstanding wildlife on their doorstep**
- give them a source of income by attracting Western ecotourists.**

A reserve centre situated in the middle of the oxbow would give a superb 180 degree view round the site; it would be easily accessible from the road and only 20 minutes drive from Deir.

Gianluca has thoroughly trained several Syrians in his Palmyra project; if any of them were interested, it would be a logical step to become a nature reserve warden at a place like Mheimideh.

Bahrat Homs (Lake of Homs / Lake Qattine; IBA 017): a reservoir SW of Homs that used to hold large numbers of wintering duck, notably White-headed Duck; recently it appears to have been little visited. I checked out a small section of the SW corner round the village of Moudan, recording 6 species of heron/egret, including large numbers of Little Egrets and Squacco Herons; Glossy Ibis; and a large colony of Black-winged Stilts. I could see several permanent islands well out in the lake that could easily be (relatively safe) breeding sites for terns, waders and herons/egrets; in particular, one large island a mile out was fringed by low scrub, the sort that would hold an egret very comfortably. The north side is apparently much steeper and less interesting but the whole of the S side would need to be walked to census it properly. Again, another site with a long coastline needing several days to work properly, and a motor boat in the breeding season to census colonies.

Palmyra / SE desert (IBA 018): the Palmyra oasis holds breeding (?resident) Ménétries's Warblers and the sabkhat (salt-lake) dunes Temminck's and Hoopoe Larks. Palmyra is the base for Gianluca Serra, who is at present setting up a desert reserve at Talilah to reintroduce Arabian Oryx and Desert Gazelle; more importantly, he and his team found and are protecting the tiny colony of Bald Ibises that yet survives in the mountains near Palmyra. OSME is very anxious to develop ecotourism in Syria, to finance the core of Syrian conservationists that Gianluca has trained, so that they can develop and lead a Syrian conservation movement. There are some superb trips (day-long or overnight) that can be organised from Palmyra – and the money that the guides earn will make a major difference to them! The guides are easily contacted via www.GuidedBirding.com, a website developed to link national guides

with birders anxious for on-site experts. So, if you are going birding in Syria, please visit this website and contact them!

Aqra Mountains (no specific IBA status – yet): an idyllic area of continuous, mature pine and spruce forests covering a huge area extending into Turkey. **Places to go:** I would like to have spent much more time in the mature pine forests 2 km. below Qastal Ma'af, in the valley below Kassab and in the Fouroq Forest on the road to Rabeia. Access: Just pick a spot while you are driving, there are miles of forest! And the cork oak scrub and fields round Kassab have different birds again. I managed to access the fields by heading up the steep hill past the Princess Hotel; at the top of the hill, taking a half-right on a rough track; walking 200 yards along a flat stretch with a white house on the right; and then, in a gully, taking a sharp turning right through thick scrub up an unmade track. There were a lot of birds in this area, in the scrub (and invisible), in the primitive field system and on the rocky slopes above. The top of the valley as you head down to Ras el-Basset was excellent but sadly I didn't have the time to follow the road down to the coast. **Birds:** in the forests, 4-6 new breeding species for Syria in 24 hours. The area is likely to hold significant populations of raptors – I had Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Sparrowhawk. The area immediately round Kassab had Olive-tree and Rüppell's Warblers, Woodchat and Masked Shrike, Rock and Cretzschmar's Buntings – and, I am sure, far more that I missed. If you included the coast (IBA 009 – Umm al-Tuyyur), the area is easily worth a week's birding.

Syria is pioneering birding. PLEASE take comprehensive details of the birds (and ALL wildlife) that you see and PLEASE make sure that your valuable records are made available to others via the net!

Species of special interest: further possibilities

If Iraqi Babblers and White-cheeked Bulbuls can breed in the Syrian Euphrates valley, I suggest that several other Mesopotamian species could do so: for instance, Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*, and Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus*. Go in May; Hypocolius are almost certain to be summer visitors. I am now much less optimistic about Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* than before this trip as Common Rollers are so rare. Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe alboniger* breeds in Iraq and might be found in some of the more remote desert mountains of Syria. As a long shot, somewhere there might just be wintering Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*; I am sure that the Euphrates valley has suitable habitat similar to their former wintering sites in Morocco.

Route followed during trip

Baumgart (1995) refers to the 'Birds of Syria' by Baumgart, Kasperek and Stephan. Abbreviations: N -North S -South W -West E -East SW -South-west etc.

9 June: Airport - Damascus. Arrived on British Airways flight to Damascus slightly late – Hertz rep. NOT there as arranged to pass car keys on to me – thank you very much, Mr. Hertz, half a day's birding (and ££ for the hotel room) wasted. I managed to get the last Airport bus into the centre, then stumbled around central Damascus for an hour before finding Hotel Sultan close to the Hejaz Station, as recommended by Rough Guides - £S1100 (about £15), clean, very reasonable. Luckily, you can wander round night-time Damascus in reasonable safety.

10 June: Damascus – Homs – NW coast. Contretemps with unhelpful Hertz staff (and found that my car did not have Air Conditioning as promised) and then had to drive out of Damascus – not a pleasant experience. Drove up Damascus-Homs motorway (easy, pleasant scenery, little traffic); eventually reached S side of Bahrat Homs (Lake of Homs; Lake Qattine) by late morning, which managed to be hot but extremely windy at the same time. 2 Desert Finches on disused fields. Spent a LONG time trying to get down to lakeside – no signposts, of course, and map useless – eventually finding a very productive 'estuary' in the SW corner of the lake just E of villages of Lahouz / Moudan: breeding Black-winged Stilt (>100), Spur-

winged Plover, Ménétries's Warbler, Dead Sea Sparrow. 6 spp. heron interesting, including >>100 Little Egret, >>50 Squacco Heron, ~10 Night Heron. The only Glossy Ibis and Cattle Herons of the trip, a water snake, a huge and evil black land snake, terrapins, an orgy of dragonflies and a multitude of frogs. It was the kind of place that could support a multitude of White Storks if people didn't shoot them. The only ducks were a pair of Mallard that flew at about 500 yards' range. Considering I visited only one small area and the hopelessly unsuitable weather, this was a good haul. Most interesting was to scope some of the islands in the lake (which is BIG): several looked to have considerable potential as reserves (one day). One arid island half a mile offshore looked good for terns, another 1-2 miles out with a large bushy fringe looked highly suitable for an egret. The locals have boats.

God knows how to get there – I was totally lost going and medium lost getting back. The maps are rubbish, the roads have no signs and very few villages had names. Don't try to go W round the S side of the lake, you'll end up in Lebanon. I eventually escaped by finding a village called Argoun, travelling more or less due E on a good, straight road, hitting a town that might have been al-Quseir, and driving 16 km. NE on a bigger road, whereupon I hit the Homs-Damascus motorway 5 km. S of the Lattakia turning. You might just be able to repeat this in reverse. I then drove past Lattakia into the hills towards Kassab, which is in the Aqra mountains and right on the Turkish border. I wanted to sleep in the car but had trouble finding somewhere quiet; eventually found what I thought was a suitable olive grove and crashed out.

11 June: NW coast – Kassab. Woke up to find myself in a stunningly beautiful valley (??Wadi ad-Dammit), lushly carpeted with olive groves and orchards and fringed by 600 ft. hills covered in impenetrable scrub: yummy! A distant ribbon of gallery forest following the line of the stream looked extremely interesting. Idyllic area with Turtle Doves, Black-headed Buntings and no doubt lots more. At 0700, I was in an olive grove when the farmer appeared looking extremely angry (highly unusual for Syrians, who usually treat foreigners as royalty); he frogmarched me off his land and down to his farm. For a few minutes, everything appeared very unpleasant (neither could speak the other's language), till he understood I was just a dumb tourist, and I realised the reason for the aggro: the Presidential villa crowned a hill a mile away, I had been taking photos and the Secret Police might well have arrested me! So we had some pleasant cups of tea on his patio, I admired the stunning view down to the sea, and then I got out of the area as quickly as possible! [HINT: have your bird guide handy!]

I drove back to the main road and spent a happy hour thrashing the superb gallery forest lining the stream and surrounded by orchards – lots of thickets and dead trees, clearly not 'managed' at all. I believe this area could still hold Brown Fish Owl; I don't know if anyone has ever seriously checked it out, it deserves a proper look.

Next up into the **Aqra mountains**, cloaked in continuous and mature pine forest - a refreshing sight in the Middle East! A Golden Eagle soared above a reservoir; 200 White Storks (the only record of the trip) rode a thermal. Memorably beautiful woods round the village of Qastal Ma'af: clearings full of butterflies and deep, dark valleys choked with thickets; superb wild country. And very few people. Dominant species Chaffinch, but Coal Tit and Chiffchaff were common – possibly the first Syrian breeding records for these two! Rock Buntings also common but, sadly, a Sparrowhawk was the only other raptor. Patches of mature oaks held Blue Tits but I could not find a host of species that 'should' have been there – no Treecreepers, Nuthatches, Woodpeckers, Goldcrests, Spotted Flycatchers; I had one possible singing Mistle Thrush but he didn't stop to say hello. I could identify most of the butterflies as they are widespread across Europe (Cleopatra, Ilex and Blue-spot Hairstreaks, Large Wall Brown), and in fact half even reach England (Holly Blue, Large Skipper, Silver-washed Fritillary, Wall Brown etc.).

Eventually by mid-afternoon I reached **Kassab**. Kassab is a summer resort town halfway up a hillside, the top of which is in Turkey; it isn't pretty but it is an excellent base for exploring the area. I stayed in (and would recommend) the Hotel Princess (or Amir), run by a pleasant Armenian family, for £S300 (about £4); fine for crews of birders but probably a bit basic for bird tours. There are several good restaurants in town as well as Red-rumped Swallows and Rock Buntings. I didn't do this idyllic area justice, it is worth a week for the birds alone. Above

the town is a belt of dense cork-oak scrub (previously visited by Baumgart, who found breeding Olive-tree Warblers here in 1986), stony fields full of wheat and butterflies, and a rocky hillside with scattered bushes above – again, a prime wildlife area. Birding was frustrating because it was difficult to get adequate views – I found 2 cartridges, probably the reason why; Lesser Whitethroats, Rüppell's Warblers and Linnets gave it a distinctive character. I drove a short way down the road that leads to the coastal resort of Ras el-Bassit, into an idyllic valley lush with orchards and full of birds: Corn, Black-headed and Cretzschmar's Buntings, Olive-tree and Rüppell's Warblers in 30 minutes. Finally, as the day was ending, I drove east along the border road through thick forest and found more Rock and Cretzschmar's Buntings, a hunting Short-toed Eagle, and, in the twilight, a large dog-sized predator that looked like a Hyena; I still haven't identified it. A pretty memorable day.

12 June: Kassab – Fouroq Forest (– al-Jabbul). Up early to thrash the cork-oak scrub above Kassab again; frustrating as many birds were heard but not seen; singing Woodchat was the best. The area deserves a full morning. Another brief visit to the valley on the Ras el-Bassit road, which again scored heavily: at least 3 Olive-tree Warblers heard singing, and one seen very well for quite a while; the only Masked Shrikes of the trip; and Blue Tit (always welcome!). After breakfast, I spent an idyllic 2 hours in the beautiful pine forests that cover the flattish valley bottom below Kassab, a mile from the Turkish border: probably the first Syrian breeding records of Spotted Flycatcher, Long-tailed Tit and Serin, a small deer, a reasonable variety of butterflies, and a stretch of pristine deciduous woodland bordering an idyllic stream. More Brown Fish Owl habitat? Reluctantly at lunchtime I headed off the Lattakia road E towards Rabeia and Aleppo, and spent too little of that afternoon in another superlative pine forest that stretched for miles – the **Fouroq(?) forest**. Not the right time of day for birding, with Spotted Flycatcher the only 'big' bird (and again no Woodpeckers, Nuthatches etc., in spite of miles of pristine habitat), until I checked out a stream at the bottom of a deep ravine – three pairs of Grey Wagtails, another addition to the Syrian breeding list! This area is only 20 minutes' drive from Kassab and deserves days and days birding.

I followed the beautiful road down out of the mountains and watched a stunning river loop its way below me – miles more of excellent habitat. And then the payback: the Lattakia – Aleppo road (see above), the most dangerous road I have ever driven along. Crossing the Jebel az-Zawiyah near the end of the old road, I had had enough and slipped off for some peace; I was rewarded by a family party of Black-headed Buntings and another Short-toed Eagle, this time carrying a snake in its talons!

My original plan was to go north from Aleppo to the Dead Cities and the Turkish border, areas that may never have been visited by birders. Sadly, hopeless road maps, absent road signs and Father Time stopped that one, and as it was getting late, I decided to do **Sabkha al-Jabbul** the next morning instead. It was not a pleasant evening; I got lost in the suburbs of Aleppo, I couldn't find food or a phone (to contact Gianluca) and I had to drive through a hole called Sfire, a sprawling suburb of Aleppo. Eventually, I found the edge of the Sabkha and crashed out in the car, hoping for some peace and quiet. Even so, a local came up to the car after midnight and tried to be hospitable!

13 June: al-Jabbul – Palmyra. Up very early and found myself half a mile from an enormous lake, with a series of villages strung along its edge, flat fields and no bushes or trees at all; a depressing landscape. But good birding around a village called Kabtain and down to the SW corner of the lake – several breeding species of wader (including Great Sand Plover) and a colony of Gull-billed Terns, with Flamingoes, Pratincoles, 3 other species of tern and 5 species of lark also seen. I drove across a causeway to what I thought was the other side of the Sabkha – and realised that it was a large island (5 miles wide) in a HUGE lake stretching SE out of sight! Dotted with islands, some flat and ideal for terns, some conical and rocky, and everything yellow-dry. There are probably breeding Common, Little and Caspian Terns here, as well as Avocets and Slender-billed Gulls; God knows what winters, but Sea Eagles have been recorded in the last 10 years, and the Sabkha is so enormous that they would have the space to survive. A proper survey would take a week and need boats.

Then a pleasant drive along good, almost empty roads south to Hama and east through the Badia, the desert steppe of northern Syria, to **Palmyra**. A few bits and pieces along the road

and a magnificent thunderstorm. I stayed in a cheap and basic hotel, the Citadel, for only £S250 (£3); thoroughly recommended for the bottom end of the market, as it is clean and central, and the owner changes money at a good rate, speaks excellent English and has a great sense of humour!

14 June: Desert near Palmyra. To my relief, Gianluca Serra had been forewarned of my appearance. He already had 2 English birders with him – is nowhere free of English birders? – who had a mission in life: to catch a Bald Ibis and to attach a satellite transmitter. Chris Bowden works for the RSPB and has done a massive amount of work to save the Moroccan population; Glen Tyler is an expert on catching difficult species. With Mahmud Abdallah from Palmyra, who I had met on my previous trip, we headed out (I can't say where) to the **Ibis area**, ticking off Red-billed Chough (a flock of 80; supposedly extinct in Syria!) and Lesser Kestrel on the way. We spent a magical day in the shade of a Bedouin tent, watching Bald Ibis at a reservoir while being plied with sweet tea and amusing the Bedu children, and all in a stunningly beautiful desert mountain landscape. Throw in 4 species of Swift, some good raptors and a real Bedouin meal, and it was a pretty exceptional day already. I missed the Namaqua Dove – probably a new species for Syria and possibly the most northerly record ever – but we scored on the way back with superb views of Dunn's Lark (a lifer and another probable first for Syria), a flock of Trumpeter Finches, a family party of Temminck's Larks, Desert Wheatear etc. etc. This area of desert steppe was astonishingly good for birds, and, with the cultural interest of a day (and meals) with a Bedu family, it would be a memorable trip for any group of birders. We stopped at a reservoir on the way back and added Whiskered and Little Terns. That night we got drunk on Chianti.

15 June: Desert near Palmyra – Deir ez-Zor. Well it couldn't possibly get better but it stayed good! An early morning thrash round **Sed Wadi Abied**, a desert reservoir, turned up more excellent desert birds and some seriously unexpected stuff, notably Garganey, Little Swift and the first breeding season record for Syria of Black-necked Grebe – in suitable breeding habitat... And also Desert and Trumpeter Finch, 5 species of lark, Coursers (common), Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – but this was a fairly dull morning for this particular trip.

An easy drive to **Deir ez-Zor**, the major city on the Euphrates, was enriched by Hoopoe Lark. I headed down to the river, as it was the heat of the day, and at once hit the jackpot: a Sparrow on a telegraph wire had two wing bars and a Yellow Throat. Another new species for Syria.... By now I was in a daze. I walked across the elegant footbridge to the Funpark on the north side of the river, and scored with Ménétries's Warbler in song flight, Olivaceous feeding young and a singing Upcher's seen well; I include a full description of the Upcher's. Also unexpected was Wood Pigeon (seen several times in the next 2 days; first Syrian breeding record), but Iraqi Babblers were difficult to see and White-cheeked Bulbuls didn't show at all.

16 June: Mheimideh – Deir ez-Zor – Euphrates valley towards Iraq. I decided to sleep out near **Mheimideh** to hit it before sunrise and I had the best birding of an amazing trip. At first light, I drove across the (100 yard) causeway at the eastern end and immediately saw to my left a Ferruginous Duck with 9 ducklings (possibly the second Syrian breeding record), immediately followed by a White-headed Duck with 2 ducklings (the first Syrian breeding record). At the same time I was being distracted by groups of Marbled Duck flying past me and a flock of about 30 Marbled Duck to my right. At the end of the causeway, on the very edge of the village, a pair of White-tailed Plover clearly had chicks; daddy stood on the road and shouted at me so I photographed the parents. As I photographed some more White-headed Ducks, first more Ferruginous, then a female Pochard (second Syrian breeding season record) swam into my camera view. The air soon became full of busy Whiskered Terns (the colony has over 50 pairs) while Spur-winged Plovers and Black-winged Stilts scolded me. In the central area, the sand hills held a friendly colony of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and I had good views of Stilts, Little and Gull-billed Terns, Pratincoles and Little Bitterns. The only downer was the shortage of Egrets, but a Purple Gallinule in the reeds was the first Syrian breeding season record for decades. (I mention the Syrian aspect of these records because I want to emphasise how little is known about Syria's birds and how easy it is to do really exciting pioneering birding – in the Western Pal!) Reeling, I went down to the river 3 km. away but found very little – some large carnivores, possibly jackals, and the only

Roller of the trip. The rest of the day had to be less astonishing but I found another colony of Yellow-throated Sparrows on the N side of the river. An afternoon heading 50 km. **down the Euphrates** was a bit disappointing (but realistically you can't expect much on a hot afternoon near the end of the breeding season). I made various stops and found an interesting area of man-made pools about 30 km. down the valley from Deir (breeding Little Tern, Stilt, Kentish and Little Ringed Plover) and some gravel working on the Euphrates above the town of Mayadin, where I had my best views of Iraqi Babbler (notably silent), more LR Plovers and some Little Bitterns in the reeds. There was very little habitat away from the river and far too many people! It was particularly sad that so little scrubby growth (that would be fit for warblers) still existed – all tidied away to make space for houses or fields...

That night I treated myself to a room in the Raghdan, a pleasant, crumbling hotel overlooking a branch of the Euphrates – easy to find, pleasant people, AirCon and £S675 a night; recommended.

17 June: Mheimideh / Deir. The one day that didn't fizz. Another start at first light at **Mheimideh** was not so stupendous, just a Great White Egret, definitive proof of breeding by Marbled Duck (at least 3 family parties; first Syrian breeding record?), several broods of Ferruginous and good views of White-headed Duck. Another session round the **funpark** by Deir footbridge turned up Ménétries's Warbler in song-flight, more displaying Wood Pigeons and a delightful brood of Olivaceous Warblers just out of the nest and VERY stupid. Back to the Yellow-throated Sparrows, where to my glee there were at least 5 birds with a pair nesting noisily in the top of a telegraph pole... But sadly by mid-morning something I had eaten – or drunk – was at work – I will spare you the details – and I crawled back to the Raghdan, where luckily there was a bed; and that was the end of that day.

18 June: Deir – Euphrates valley – Ba'ath Reservoir. I woke after sleeping 15 hours and gently birded **al-Furat island**, photographing another nest of Yellow-throated Sparrows, this time with vocal young. I spent some time in the lush orchards at the north end of the island, hearing Iraqi Babblers and finding a Eurasian Bee-eater (in suitable breeding habitat and way out of its range). Finally, a day late, I headed upstream on the N bank of the river, the idea being to sample the riverside birds at regular intervals and to search out good sites for future visits. I found one excellent oxbow lake just downstream of a largish town, **Jazara**, that had breeding White-tailed Plover, a male Ferruginous Duck looking suspicious, two White-winged Black Tern and (the biggest surprise) a male Shoveler - the first breeding season record for Syria, and in suitable breeding habitat. Yet another site visited briefly in the heat of the day that deserves much more attention! Otherwise, the day was fairly disappointing, though I had 10 sightings of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, that's always nice! Eventually I reached the **Ba'ath reservoir** (IBA 008), gingerly taking the car down a 'track' to the edge of the marsh, and tried to crash out. A wizened ancient found the car in the darkness and tried to take me home with him.

19 June: Ba'ath Reservoir – Aleppo. Up at first light - excellent numbers of Purple Herons (minimum of 10 pairs), Squacco Herons (minimum of 50 pairs) and Little Bitterns. I realised that I could drive along the railway embankment that crosses the valley; that way, I had direct access into the middle of a mile-wide wetland. Further, the stone groynes that stuck out into the marsh gave even better viewpoints – and also breeding Ménétries's Warblers! As I worked my way along the embankment, 5 Pygmy Cormorants flew along the N side of the valley and I heard the distinctive rippling trill of Iraqi Babbler and the reeling of Savi's Warblers; and I kept on hearing a familiar 'pinging' call, but I couldn't believe it till I saw a Bearded Tit in flight – and then lots of them! One of the most ecstatic moments of the trip. Several paths head out into the reeds, but sadly I didn't have the time to check them out; I am certain that I would have added considerably to my list (e.g. Water Rail, Moustached Warbler). It is easy to walk under the bridge at the far end of the embankment. Downstream (on its E side), there is an excellent area of scrub and wet ground; in one (hot and sweaty) hour, I had lots of birds, including Olivaceous and Ménétries's Warblers and (bizarrely) many flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse coming to drink! Elsewhere I had several pairs of Great Crested Grebe (first Syrian breeding record) and Common Terns were common; there must

be a substantial colony somewhere close. Yet another site that deserves several days' hard birding!

By this time it was seriously hot and I had to return the car to Hertz. There is little reason to stop between the Euphrates and Aleppo. In central Aleppo I found a cheap and pleasant hotel, the al-Boustan, and spent a fun evening in the amazing souks – a shopper's paradise, they are 5 miles long. The next morning, before dawn, the hotel arranged a cheap taxi to the airport (don't pay more than £200!) and that was the end of the most exciting birding trip I have ever enjoyed ...

Syria is pioneering birding. PLEASE take comprehensive details of the birds (and ALL wildlife) that you see and PLEASE make sure that your valuable records are made available to others via the net!

SYSTEMATIC LIST – BIRDS

Baumgart (1995) refers to the 'Birds of Syria' by Baumgart, Kasperek and Stephan.

Abbreviations:

N -North S -South W -West E -East SW -South-west etc.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

At least 5 pairs (including pair with 2 small young) over a wide area of Ba'ath Reservoir, 18-19.6

Will probably turn out to be a common breeding bird on Ba'ath Reservoir and Lake Assad
Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

One, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Probably the first breeding season record for Syria

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

1 pair at Bahrat Homs, including 4 very freshly hatched young, 10.6

1, reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

1, Sed Wadi Abied, 14.6

A common breeding bird at some sites along the Euphrates:

- ~10 pairs at Mheimideh, many with small young, 16-17.6
- 5 pairs, several with small young, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6
- ~10 pairs with young, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

However, not seen on the Euphrates itself, whether due to time of day, habitat or persecution I don't know

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

5 flying along the N shore of Ba'ath Reservoir in the direction of Lake Assad, 19.6

According to Baumgart (1995), 'a rare visitor'

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

Widespread along the Euphrates; seen at Deir ez-Zor footbridge (1 on 16.6), Mheimideh (>>10; very common), gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin (3 on 16.6), Jazara oxbow (1 on 18.6), railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir (5 on 19.6)

Clearly breeding at many sites in Euphrates valley

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

8, Bahrat Homs, 10.6 - the only record

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

Very common (>>50 birds seen), Bahrat Homs, 10.6

1, reservoir, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Very common (estimate 50 pairs+), railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 18-19.6
Clearly breeding at Bahrat Homs and Ba'ath Reservoir

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

~10, Bahrat Homs, 10.6 – the only record

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Abundant (hundreds of birds), Bahrat Homs, 10.6

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6 - the only heron or egret at this site

4, noticeably wary, Mheimideh, 17.6 (none seen 16.6)

4, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Very localised; not seen in many apparently suitable areas such as Ba'ath Reservoir – why???

Clearly breeding at Bahrat Homs

Great White Egret *Casmerodius/Egretta albus*

1, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

1, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

2 singles, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Up to 6, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

3 on sandbank, Euphrates at al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), 16.6

1, Deir ez-Zor footbridge, 17.6

3, Euphrates at Jazara, 18.6

1 only, Ba'ath Reservoir, 18.6

Clearly widespread but not common – where are the heronries?? Probably on the bankside vegetation of secluded islands in the Euphrates

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

10 sightings (with maximum 5 at one time), Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Very common, with up to 3 separate birds in the air at once, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 18-19.6

Estimated > 10 pairs; one bird constantly returning to same area of reeds close to viaduct clearly with nest

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

~200 soaring on S edge of Aqra Mountains, 11.6. Where they going N or S??

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

4, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

First breeding season record for decades

Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*

7 seen very well, mountainous area near Palmyra, in the company of Gianluca Serra, 14.6.

Whoopee!!!

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*

About 80, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

1 pair, Bahrat Homs, 10.6 – the only record

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

2 pairs, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

1, Mheimideh, 16.6

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

1 male, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Suitable breeding habitat. Probably the first breeding season record for Syria

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

Common at Mheimideh where I had a flock of at least 30 at dawn on 16.6 and at least 3 family parties on 17.6

I estimated >50 birds on site. Noticeably more wary than the other duck there – are they better eating?

This may be the first documented breeding record for Syria

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

1 female, Mheimideh, 16.6

Suitable breeding habitat. Probably the second breeding season record for Syria

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Common, Mheimideh, 16-17.6, including female with 9 well-grown ducklings at first light on 16.6 and 2-3 other (smaller) family parties and 2 pairs without young, 17.6. Minimum 5 pairs on site.

1 male in suitable breeding habitat, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Probably the second breeding record for Syria (breeding proven by Hofland in 1994 at al-Ashara)

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

Female with at least 2 well-grown ducklings, first light at Mheimideh, 16.6 – but not seen again

Two pairs often visible in open water at Mheimideh, 16-17.6 - strong feel that they were failed breeders

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*

1 immature, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

1 adult, Palmyra - Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

2 single females, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

2 birds at once, Sed Wadi Abied, 14-15.6 – potential breeding habitat

~10 sightings of 1-2 birds, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 18-19.6; must be breeding there

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

1 calling bird soaring over pine forest, Aqra mountains 2 km. below Qastal Ma'af, 11.6

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*

1 very dark bird, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

1 by roadside, desert on edge of Euphrates valley ~50 km. upstream from Mheimideh, 18.6

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

1 2nd-year bird soaring over pine forest on S edge of Aqra mountains, 11.6

Short-toed (Snake) Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

1, clearing in mountain forest ~5 km. E of Kassab on Turkish border, 11.6

1, flying with snake (presumably carrying food to nest), stony hillside, Jebel az Zawiyah, 15 km. W of Ariha, 12.6

Common (Rock) Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Only seen along Euphrates valley, where widespread on the desert fringes:

- 1 female, Mheimideh, 16.6

- 1 male, 40 km. upstream from Deir, NE side of river on desert edge, 18.6

- 1 by roadside in desert, ~50 km. upstream from Mheimideh, 18.6
- 1 male, roadside, 10 km. W of Karamun, just E of ar-Raqqa, 18.6
- 2 singles, desert edge, 3 km. W of ar-Raqqa, 18.6
- 2 males, road 5 km. E of al-Mansura, 19.6

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumannii*

1 male, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

1 pair only (should have been much commoner), Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Present, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Fairly common in Euphrates valley but often not seen when suitable habitat was present:

- Pairs with young, Euphrates at Deir, 15-18.6
- Present with young, but not particularly common, Mheimideh, 16-17.6
- Present, Euphrates near Mheimideh, 16.6
- Pair with young, gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6
- 2 pairs with young, Jazara oxbow, 18.6
- 1 juvenile, Euphrates at Jazara, 18.6

Purple Gallinule (or Swampphen for the politically correct) *Porphyrio porphyrio*

1, agitated (unfortunately I didn't have enough time to wait for firm evidence of breeding), Mheimideh, 16.6

'Considered extinct for Syria' (Baumgart, 1995) though seen at al-Jabbul in March 2001

Coot *Fulica atra*

4, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Up to 10, Sed Wadi Abied,, 14-15.6

Up to 100, Euphrates at Deir, 15-18.6

40+, Mheimideh, 16.6

Present, gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6

Present, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

4, Euphrates near Mheimideh, 16.6

1, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

200, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

At least 10 (but no firm evidence of breeding), SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Never yet proven to breed in Syria

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

110 at one count, including 10 birds on nests, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

>100, many agitated adults, chicks seen, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

21, including at least one bird on nest, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

>20 pairs, many with young, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

3 on sandbank, Euphrates at al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), 16.6

3-10 pairs including birds on nest, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

3 pairs breeding, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

4 (not breeding), pond in fields at Malchisiyeh, 10 km. E of Karamun, 18.6

2 flying over, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Still a common breeding bird when there is suitable habitat

Several colonies were near villages (Moudan, Mheimideh), so it can't be heavily persecuted

Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus*

1 pair, island in Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6; surprisingly the only record

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*

Up to 6, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

4, Mheimideh, 16.6

3 on sandbank, Euphrates at al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), 16.6

2 hawking over canal, steppe area by main road 10 km. SE of Deir, 16.6
Must be breeding somewhere!

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*

Common in the desert steppes near Palmyra, 14-15.6

Seen 4 times in less than 2 days, including family party with 3 very recently fledged young

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

1 displaying, Euphrates near Mheimideh, 16.6

2, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

1 pair, gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Very common with up to 50 visible at once, newly fledged juveniles, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

1 pair, agitated, and at least one other recently fledged bird, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

1, saline oxbow, 40 km. upstream from Deir on NE side of Euphrates, 18.6

2, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Widespread breeding bird in suitable habitat

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

Very common, with loose groups of up to 20, at SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Several birds very agitated, clearly with nests / young

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus/Chettusia leucura*

Common (at least 10 pairs; agitated parents with chicks), Mheimideh, 16-17.6; one pair right by the roadside!

1 pair with chicks, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

May well be a relatively widespread breeding bird along Syrian Euphrates

Probably the second breeding record for Syria – apparently proven breeding by Baumgart et al. in 1996

Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus/Hoplopterus spinosus*

3-4 territorial birds, very agitated and clearly with young, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Common (at least 10 pairs), with agitated parents with chicks, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

1, steppe area by main road 10 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

1, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

1, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

1, pond in fields at Malchisiyeh, 10 km. E of Karamun, 18.6

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

2, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

1, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

2, Mheimideh, 16.6

2, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

1, pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

300 but no direct evidence of breeding, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

1, Mheimideh, 16.6

1, Deir ez-Zor footbridge, 17.6

2, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

1, Ba'ath Reservoir 19.6

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna (Gelochelidon) nilotica*

>100, including freshly fledged young and adults clearly with active nests, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

1, Mheimideh, 16.6

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

3 together and a single, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

2, Mheimideh, 16.6

Common at Ba'ath Reservoir with up to 6 birds at three different sites, 18-19.6

No Syrian breeding records but there is likely to be a colony at Ba'ath Reservoir and probably elsewhere too

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*

1, with large numbers of terns and gulls, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

~50, apparently loafing rather than breeding, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

7, Sed Wadi Abied, 14.6

Present, Mheimideh, 16.6

3 pairs (including 2 sitting birds and 1 pair displaying), pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

1 adult flying across road carrying a fish, steppe area by main road 10 km. SE of Deir, 16.6

10, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Probably a widespread breeding bird

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*

1, Sed Wadi Abied, 14.6

50+ pairs actively feeding young, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopteros*

2, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*

1, 50 km. W of Palmyra on Homs road, 13.6

15, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

5, Palmyra – Deir road 30 km. W of Deir, 15.6

>100 coming to drink, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Frequent in Deir Agricultural University area, with 1-2 individuals in display flight on several occasions, 15-17.6

1, small island on Euphrates, 10 km. W of ar-Raqqa, 18.6

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Feral birds common

A pair of probably real birds on the edge of the Euphrates valley 5 km. SW of Mayadin, 16.6

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Widespread in the E of Syria but not seen in the W

1, Baghdad / Palmyra / Homs road junction, 13.6

2, Palmyra-Deir road 10 km. E of Palmyra, 15.6

1, Euphrates at Deir, 15.6

Common, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

Several, gravel workings by the Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6

1, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

1, Jazara town, 18.6

1, Euphrates 10 km. W of ar-Raqqa, 18.6

Present, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

1 calling, olive groves, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

1 in thick spruce forest on Turkish border, 11.6

Widespread and common round Kassab – heard in cork oak scrub and pine forests, 12.6

1, scrub at railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Still widespread in suitable habitat (unlike England). All seen were VERY wary

Laughing (Palm) Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

1, Sfire town (SW of Aleppo), 13.6

1, S edge of Aleppo, 13.6

1, Palmyra, 14.6

Several, Aleppo, 19.6

All observations are recorded; NOT seen in Euphrates valley (in spite of looking for it)

[Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*]

I missed on these exceptional records: Gianluca, Glen Chris and Mahmud all had separate sightings of single Namaquas in the days before my visit but no-one saw it (or them) on 14 June. There are apparently no Turkish records, so this probably constitutes the most northerly record of this sub-Saharan species. As most Western Pal records have come from the Rift Valley south of the Dead Sea, this is a dramatic range expansion! And I missed it!

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

1, desert steppes near Palmyra, 15.6 – the only record!

Common Swift *Apus apus*

Common, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Common breeding bird in Deir ez-Zor, seen widely in local area, 15-18.6

Aleppo, 19.6

Definitely under-recorded

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*

Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Present, Deir ez-Zor, 18.6

Little (/House) Swift *Apus affinis*

10, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Alpine Swift *Tachybaptus melba*

5, mountains near Palmyra, 14.6

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

Only seen along the Euphrates valley, where widespread but not common:

- Present, Euphrates at Deir, 15-17.6, with family party on 15.6
- 1-2, Mheimideh, 16-17.6
- Present, Euphrates near Mheimideh, 16.6
- ~10, including family party, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

- 1, Euphrates at Jazara, 18.6
- 1, Euphrates just W of ar-Raqqa, 18.6
- 2 singles, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Eurasian Roller *Coracias garrulus*

1 male seen briefly flying over Euphrates at Mheimideh carrying food, 16.6
 Sadly this was the only individual seen – have they been poisoned or shot?

Eurasian Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*

Two singles in suitable breeding habitat, al-Furat island, Deir ez-Zor, 18.6
 Supposedly no longer breeds in Syria, and certainly not on the lower Euphrates (Baumgart, 1995)

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus /superciliosus*

Widespread along Euphrates valley (usually at some distance from human habitations) but not seen elsewhere

Colony of at least 20 pairs, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

1 pair, breeding on desert edge 5 km. SE of Mayadin (Euphrates valley), 16.6

Ten separate observations while driving up the Euphrates valley between Mheimideh and Ba'ath Reservoir,

between 1000 and 1730, 18.6:

- 1 by roadside 15 km. upstream from Mheimideh
- 4 (2 with food) by roadside 20 km. upstream from Mheimideh
- 1 male, 40 km. upstream from Deir, NE side of river on desert edge
- 1 pair at desert bridge, 60 km. above Mheimideh
- ~10, Jazara oxbow
- 1, Euphrates at Jazara
- 3 separate birds, Jazara – ar-Raqqa
- 1, Euphrates 10km. W of ar-Raqqa
- 1, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

1, desert plain, Homs-Palmyra road, 13.6

1, Mheimideh, 16.6

1 pair, forestry plantation near al-Mansura, Ba'ath Reservoir area, 18.6

Only seen well away from humans and surprisingly scarce – does it get shot like everything else??

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Common in all open areas visited - near settlements, along all roads (even well into desert areas) and even in

the desert steppes round Palmyra. Definitely under-recorded

Seen at: fields S of Bahrat Homs; coast N of Lattakia; Sabkha al-Jabbul; desert reservoir near Palmyra; Sed Wadi Abied; desert steppes near Palmyra; Euphrates at Mheimideh;

Mheimideh itself; pools by main road 30 km. SE of Deir; edge of Euphrates valley 5 km. SW of Mayadin; Jazara oxbow; Malchasiyeh; railway viaduct, Ba'ath reservoir

Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Present, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Flock of 10, desert edge 5 km. SW of Mayadin (Euphrates valley), 16.6

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens*

Common, lakeside edge, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Seen several times in desert steppes near Palmyra, 14-15.6

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*

Common, desert steppes near Palmyra, 13-15.6

Bar-tailed Desert Lark *Ammomanes cincturus*

Seen several times, including family parties, desert steppes near Palmyra, 15.6
Twice, Palmyra – Deir road (70km. and 30 km. W of Deir), 15.6

Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni*

2 in mixed flock of Trumpeter Finches, Temminck's and Lesser Short-toed Larks, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Several singing, fields S of Bahrat Homs, 10.6
Common, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Temminck's (Horned) Lark *Eremophila bilopha*

Common, including freshly fledged young, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

A single, Palmyra – Deir desert road, 70 km. W of Deir, 15.6

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Definitely under-recorded; widespread but noticeably absent from the mountains
Seen at Sabkha al-Jabbul (widely); Sed Wadi Abied; Euphrates at Deir, al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), Mayadin and gravel workings 5 km. upstream of Mayadin; Jazara oxbow; Malchasiyeh; railway viaduct, Ba'ath reservoir

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*

Common round Kassab, in the town and over the fields, 11.6. Not seen elsewhere

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

1, Kassab, 11.6

Common, Deir – almost certainly breeding in the city, 16-18.6

Very common, railway viaduct (probably breeding under the bridge), Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Present, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Present, Euphrates near Mheimideh, 16.6

Very common, gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6

Present, al-Furat Island, 18.6

Present, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Common, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

A pair feeding young by road bridge over stream, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

1, reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Three pairs, at least two with young, on almost dry river bed, Fourq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of race *feldegg*

Common, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Common, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Common, Mheimideh, 16-17.6

Common, Jazara oxbow, 18.6

Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*

1 singing, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15-17.6

1 singing, al-Furat Island (on S side of Euphrates), 15.6

Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes*

1, desert steppes near Palmyra, 15.6
1, desert edge SW of Mayadin (Euphrates valley), 16.6
1, low vegetation on desert edge near Mheimideh, 16.6
2 (at different places), shoreline, Jazara oxbow, 18.6
1 singing bird, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6 – surprisingly the only record

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*

2 males, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

1, Palmyra ruins, 14.6

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Present in olive groves and gallery forest, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Common, cork oak scrub above Kassab + head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6
Common in the Aqra Mountains conifer forests, but very elusive (clearly much hunted!), 11-12.6

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Present in olive groves and gallery forest, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Common, cork oak scrub above Kassab + head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6
Common in the Aqra Mountains conifer forests, 11-12.6

Fan-tailed Warbler (Zitting *Cisticola* for the politically correct) *Cisticola juncidis*

Singing in fields S of Bahrat Homs, 10.6 - the only record

Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis*

One of the most widely distributed birds in Syria; able to make use of a very wide variety of scrubby habitats
Singing in olive groves, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Present, reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Singing male, clearing in mountain pine forest on Turkish border E of Kassab, 11.6
Present, pine forests below Kassab, 12.6
A few, fields, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6
Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6
Common and widely distributed along Euphrates valley; seen or heard at Mheimideh (common),
Euphrates at Deir, al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), and near Mheimideh, the gravel workings by the Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, and the pools by the main road 30 km. SE of Deir, 16-17.6
Common at the railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*

At least two singing males, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6
Second breeding record for Syria

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Singing, gallery forest along stream, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Common and widely distributed along Euphrates valley: singing birds recorded from Euphrates at Deir, al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), and 10 km. above ar-Raqqa, and at Mheimideh, 16-18.6
Common, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

A very common bird in suitable habitat
2 pairs, Bahrat Homs, 10.6
Present, river E of Rabeia, 12.6
Present, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6
Common, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6
Common, Euphrates at Deir, 15-17.6
Common, Mheimideh, 16-17.6
Present in reeds at Jazara oxbow, 18.6
Present, reeds just W of ar-Raqqa on Euphrates, 18.6
Very common, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Common, Bahrat Homs, 10.6
Common, reeds fringing SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6
Common, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6
Very common, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6
Oddly not definitely seen round Euphrates at Deir or elsewhere along Euphrates – absent or stopped singing?

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Singing males, olive groves and riverine forest, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppellii*

Singing male, cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6
Female with food, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11.6

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*

Several singing, cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11-12.6

Ménétries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*

Common round fishponds where 3 pairs were feeding young in the nest, Bahrat Homs, 10.6
One pair feeding young, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15-17.6
Singing male, fields at Malchasiyeh, 10 km E of Karamun on Ar-Raqqa-Aleppo road, 18.6
Common, scrub round railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6
Widely distributed in suitable habitat; probably present in most scrubby areas in the interior of Syria

Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida*

One singing in gallery forest along stream, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Present, reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Several pairs with freshly fledged juveniles, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15-17.6
Common in orchards on al-Furat Island, Deir, 17.6
Common in scrub around the railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*

Common, cork oak scrub above Kassab and head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6
Singing in thick hillside scrub, bushes along the road and in a garden!
The slow, deep song suggests a slow-motion Great Reed Warbler and is the best way to find them

Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

One singing male seen well, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15.6
A quick description is given as this was a surprising record and Hippolais warblers are not easy to identify!
Hippolais with uniform clean grey crown and back, suspicion of a pale wing panels on 2^{os}, long dark tail moved a bit sideways, dark tips to primaries, weak supercilium to just behind

eye, strong orange-pink bill.

Song: scratchy, mid-range, neither Olivaceous nor Olive-tree Warbler (both seen and heard well in the previous 4 days)

Size: too large for Olivaceous and too small for Olive-tree (I am familiar with all three; Olivaceous present at this site)

Watched for 5 minutes at 10 yards' range; not seen on 3 later visits to this site - perhaps a failed breeder moving S?

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

One of the characteristic birds of the Aqra Mountains pine forests; the Syrian population is in the thousands of pairs

Seen/heard in the pine forests above and below Qastal Ma'af, below Kassab and in Fourq Forest, 11-12.6

Singing in the cork oak scrub above Kassab, 12.6

At least two pairs feeding young, also recently fledged birds common

Astonishingly, probably the first breeding record for Syria

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

At least 3 pairs (one pair with food for young) in mature pine forest in valley below Kassab, 12.6

1, Fourq Forest, 12.6

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Great Tit *Parus major*

Present in olive groves and gallery forest, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

Widely distributed in Aqra Mountains; recorded below and above Qastal Ma'af, in the cork oak scrub above Kassab, the head of the valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), and in Fourq Forest, 11-12.6

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*

Recorded only in Aqra Mountains, where they were noticeably scarcer than Great Tit

1, oak wood 2 km. above Qastal Ma'af, 11.6

1, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11.6

1, Fourq Forest, 12.6

Coal Tit *Parus ater*

Recorded in the Aqra Mountains pine forests below and above Qastal Ma'af and below Kassab, 11-12.6

One of the less commonly recorded forest species, but this could be due to time of day, year etc.

At least two pairs feeding young

Astonishingly, probably the first breeding records for Syria

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

A family party in old pine woods in valley below Kassab, 12.6

Probably the first breeding record for Syria and about the third Syrian record

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*

A noisy colony (size hard to estimate but minimum of 5 pairs), railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Probably the second breeding record for Syria

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*

1 seen briefly and many (briefly) calling birds not seen, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15-18.6

1 seen well (but did not call), gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6

1 heard but not seen, orchard on al-Furat Island, Deir, 18.6

Several calling birds (not seen), railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

The behaviour of these birds was dramatically different from those I watched in February

2002; instead of forming noisy, highly visible groups and making frequent contact calls, they were almost silent and extremely wary. This contrast (being shy and retiring in the breeding season but conspicuous and noisy at other times) is very similar to Long-tailed Tit.

Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*

Heard but not seen (very wary) in the olive groves, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6; only locality

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*

Singing male, fields above Kassab, 12.6 – the only record

Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*

1 pair, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 12.6

Magpie *Pica pica*

Only seen along the Euphrates valley, where it was very common throughout
Seen at Mheimideh; Euphrates at Deir, Mheimideh, al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), and gravel workings 5 km. upstream of Mayadin; edge of the Euphrates valley 5 km. SW of Mayadin; Euphrates 10 km. W of ar-Raqqa; railway viaduct, Ba'ath reservoir

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Heard, Aqra Mountains pine forests, 11.6

Seen in Kassab town and cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6

(Red-billed) Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

A noisy flock of 70-80 messing around mountain ridge near Palmyra, 14.6

Supposedly extinct as a breeding bird in Syria (Baumgart, 1995)!

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone*

Seen at Bahrat Homs; coast N of Lattakia; reservoir in Aqra mountains; river on E edge of Aqra mountains; Mheimideh; Euphrates at Mheimideh, Mayadin and gravel workings 5 km. upstream of Mayadin; oxbow in Euphrates 40 km above Mheimideh; Euphrates at Jazara; Malchasiyeh; Euphrates 10 km. W of ar-Raqqa; railway viaduct, Ba'ath reservoir

Definitely under-recorded but apparently absent from higher parts of Aqra mountains and the Palmyra area

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

6, desert steppes near Palmyra, 15.6 - the only record

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common almost anywhere where there were people; definitely under-recorded

Seen at: fields S of Bahrat Homs; Bahrat Homs; olive groves and woods, coast N of Lattakia; reservoir, Aqra mountains; cork oak scrub above Kassab; Sabkha al-Jabbul; reservoir, desert near Palmyra; Deir ez-Zor and Euphrates at Deir; Mheimideh; Euphrates at Mheimideh; edge of the Euphrates valley 5 km. SW of Mayadin

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*

A very common bird in almost all suitable habitat (scrubby vegetation near water) found on this trip

10-20, Bahrat Homs, 10.6

20+, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Very common along the Euphrates valley, found at eight sites: Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15-18.6; Euphrates at al-Hassan (between Deir and Mheimideh), 16.6; gravel workings by Euphrates 5 km. upstream of Mayadin, 16.6; orchards on al-Furat Island, 17-18.6; Euphrates at Jazara, 18.6; Euphrates just above ar-Raqqa, 18.6; railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6; roadside scrub E of al-Mansura, 19.6

Yellow-throated Sparrow (or Chestnut-shouldered Petronia-Gymornis?) *Petronia / Gymornis xanthicollis*

A colony 1 km. upstream of S end of Deir ez-Zor footbridge, by the Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor, 15-18.6

Two nests (one with noisy young) in tops of roadside telegraph poles. Mating noted, 0930-1000, 18.6

Another bird seen on telegraph wire, 0.5km. further upstream, 17.6

At least 4 'singing' males on N side of Euphrates (in trees lining the road heading N from Deir footbridge), 16.6

These observations suggest a substantial colony with an absolute minimum of 5 pairs
Almost certainly a new species for Syria (and therefore the first breeding record)

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common in olive groves, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

Abundant (the dominant bird) in Aqra Mountains pine forests round Qastal Ma'af and Kassab, 11-12.6

Common, cork oak scrub above Kassab and head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6

Not seen afterwards!

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Several, fields S of Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Present, olive groves, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

Present, cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6

Common, pine forests below Kassab and Fourouq Forest, 12.6

Present, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 15.6

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

2, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11.6

Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Common, with at least one family party, in fields and cork oak scrub above Kassab, and head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*

2 on weedy field, S of Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Several, with young birds being fed by adults, desert steppes near Palmyra, 14.6

Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

Serin *Serinus serinus*

At least 3 males (singing from woodland edges where the pines had been cleared and orchards planted) and a female feeding recently fledged young (in woodland glades with thick undergrowth) in the valley 1 km S of Kassab, 12.6

Probably the first breeding record for Syria

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*

Common, desert steppes near Palmyra, with flock of at least 20 and newly fledged juveniles, 14.6

Present, Sed Wadi Abied, 15.6

'Breeding.... has never been proved' (Baumgart, 1995) - this may be the first documented breeding record for Syria

Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia*

Singing male, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11.6

Singing male, clearing in pine forest on Turkish border E of Kassab, 11.6

Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

Singing male in olive grove, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6

Singing male, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11-12.6

Singing male, fields above Kassab, 12.6

2 singing males, Rabeia, 12.6

Family party, stony hillside, Jebel az Zawiyah, 15 km. W of Ariha, 12.6

Family party, fields, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Family party, fields at Malchasiyeh, 10 km. E of Karamun on Ar-Raqqa-Aleppo road, 18.6

Still widespread

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Fairly common in the Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Males sang from roadside telegraph wires deep into the pine woods as long as there were open areas close by

Singing in Kassab gardens and cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Singing, fields S of Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Singing, head of valley leading to Ras el-Basset (1-2 km. W of Kassab), 11.6

Present, cork oak scrub above Kassab, 12.6

Common, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Possible / probable species

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* 1 heard very briefly (and not seen), railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* 1 probable heard (two 'cuc's), hillside above Kassab, 11.6

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* 1 probable singing but not seen, hillside above Kassab, 11.6

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* 1 probable singing but not seen, pristine pine forest in Aqra Mountains, 11.6 – sadly very elusive and a record I am not going to claim without a clear sighting!

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* Several singing but not seen, hillside above Kassab, 11.6.

Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*

An *Acrocephalus* halfway in size between Reed Warbler and Great Reed Warbler flew into some reeds near Mayadin – but not out again – 16.6. I have seen Basra Reed before, in the field and in the hand, and it looked pretty good. It would need to be ringed or photographed to make the identification secure.

IN SUMMARY - 138 species in about 8 days' birding, not a long list, of which only one (Yellow-throated Sparrow) is almost certainly a new species for Syria; Gianluca has apparently seen Dunn's Lark before.

10-20 new BREEDING species for Syria, showing how appallingly incomplete our information is about Syrian birds.

Looking at individual groups:

- 8 species of heron/egret, at least 4, probably 6, breeding (none were previously known to)
- 7 species of duck, 3 proven breeding
- Only 7 species of raptor – sadly not a surprise; some are still to be found in the coastal mountains
- 15 species of wader, 7 probably / proven breeding
- 6 species of tern, 3 proven breeding – the other species probably breed as well
- 4 species of swift

- 9 species of lark, 6 proven breeding, of ~14 in the country
- 3 species of wagtail, all proven breeding
- Only 3 species of wheatear, and only 6 records in all – extremely surprising
- 14 species of warbler
- 4 species of tit, all breeding (?2 first Syrian breeding records)
- Only 2 species of shrike, and both single observations – worrying
- 7 finches and 4 buntings.

A 10-day birding holiday in May, checking these sites, the coast and the anti-Lebanon mountains W of Damascus, should find 150-200 species without difficulty.

Species NOT seen that might reasonably have been expected

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Chukar *Alectoris chukar*

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*

Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*

Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli*

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

ANY Woodpeckers, Nuthatches or Treecreepers in the Aqra Mountains! (They must be there...)

SYSTEMATIC LIST - MAMMALS

Limited, I'm sorry to say – Syria isn't exactly a large-mammal friendly society!

Deer

1 in valley below Kassab, 12.6

Dog-sized carnivore

1 in the twilight, road running through huge coniferous forest, Turkish border E of Kassab, 11.6

Dog-sized carnivore (?jackal)

1 pair, Euphrates at Mheimideh, 16.6

Fox

1 at first light, railway viaduct, Ba'ath Reservoir, 19.6

SYSTEMATIC LIST - BUTTERFLIES

I was able to identify most of the butterflies I saw, mainly because they were widespread and familiar species – so widespread that over half reach Britain! So if you took a copy of Tolman, which covers as far as the Bosphorus (though not Turkey), you would probably be able to identify most Syrian butterflies.

Generally, the mountains were wonderful and everywhere else was almost a write-off, with the odd Swallowtail or

White usually the only species. But I didn't specifically look for butterflies except around Kassab, and there were probably many that I missed, for instance around Bahrat Homs.

Swallowtail *Papilio machaon*

A few scattered individuals in dry habitats, moving fast and rarely seen well

Present, Bahrat Homs, 11.6
1, SW corner of Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6 – the most closely seen individual.

Large White *Pieris brassicae*
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 12.6

Bath White-type *Pontia* sp.
Bahrat Homs, 11.6

Cleopatra *Gonepteryx cleopatra*
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 11-12.6

Clouded Yellow sp. *Croceus* sp.
Not necessarily our species, and I didn't catch one to be certain of its identity
Bahrat Homs, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 11.6

Wood White sp. *Leptidea* sp.
Specimen collected and in England - but not yet identified!
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Ilex Hairstreak *Nordmannia ilicis*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Blue-spot Hairstreak *Strymonidia spini*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Long-tailed Blue *Lampides boeticus*
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 12.6

Silver-studded Blue *Plebejus argus*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Open area in pine forests below Kassab, 11.6

Holly Blue *Celastrina argiolus*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests below Kassab, 11.6

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*
Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Painted Lady *Cynthia cardui*
Bahrat Homs, 10.6
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Silver-washed Fritillary *Argynnis paphia*
Identified from photographs
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Pine forests below Kassab, 12.6
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Marbled White *Melanargia galathea*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11-12.6
Cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Meadow Brown *Maniola jurtina*
Reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 12.6
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Gatekeeper *Pyronia tithonus*
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*
Riverine woods, coast N of Lattakia, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 12.6

Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11.6
Pine forests below Kassab, 12.6

Large Wall Brown *Lasiommata maera*
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11-12.6
Fouroq Forest near Kassab, 12.6

Plain Tiger *Danaus chrysippus*
At least 2, Deir ez-Zor funpark footpath, 17.6
The only butterflies I remember seeing along the Euphrates valley!

Large Skipper *Ochlodes venata*
Specimen collected and identified in England
Pine forests round Qastal Ma'af, Aqra Mountains, 11-12.6

Small Skipper-type *Thymelicus* sp.
Pine forests below Kassab, 11-12.6
Cork oak scrub above Kassab, 11.6

In addition to the above 24 species (of which 20 were fully identified), I recorded only 4 that were distinctive but too briefly seen to be identified. So 20 out of ~28 species have been fully identified; I have seen 15 in England!

SYSTEMATIC LIST - DRAGONFLIES

The best sites were the fishponds at Moudan, Bahrat Homs, and the ditches round Sabkha al-Jabbul, but there were some up in the Aqra Mountains as well. On the Euphrates, I was far too busy birding to take notice of the dragons! This list is therefore a bit of a joke; hopefully I will be able to do some justice to Syria's Odonata on a future trip.

Vagrant Emperor *Hemianax ephippiger*
Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Skimmer *Orthetrum* sp.
Bahrat Homs, 10.6

Violet Darter *Trithemis annulata*
Bahrat Homs, 10.6
Reservoir, Aqra Mountains, 11.6

Scarlet Darter *Crocothemis erythraea*
Sabkha al-Jabbul, 13.6

Ishnura sp.
Bahrat Homs

Onychogomphus sp.
1 clearly territorial, pine forest below Kassab, 11.6

OTHER WILDLIFE

There was a lot of other animals, particularly the reptiles, that I would like to have identified:

- Water Snakes at Bahrat Homs and Mheimideh
 - A large black snake, terrapins and lots of lizards at Bahrat Homs, as well as abundant frogs (Stork-food but no Storks)
 - Lots of frogs (or toads) in the desert near Palmyra which the Bald Ibis were eating
- So bring your books on odonata, butterflies and herpetology!

Contact Details...