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SYRIA TRIP REPORT

24 February to 8 March 2002

Syria is completely off the birding map, with very little information on its avifauna; the distribution maps in bird guides are hopelessly inaccurate and almost the only useful information I could find were the four trip reports on the OSME website and the Birdlife International book on Important Bird Areas of the Middle East (MI Evans, 1994), which makes abundantly clear the huge gaps in our knowledge. I would like immediately to thank the 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), to whom, I believe, must go the credit of finding Iraq Babbler in Syria. I am extremely grateful to Gianluca Serra for his hospitality and for taking me out into the desert SE of Palmyra for a memorable last day. Gianluca may well be the only foreign birder resident in Syria and is doing a superb job (against huge odds) in trying to get Syria's first wildlife reserve operational – a major contribution to Syrian ornithology.

Contacts:

Gianluca Serra gianlu@scs.scs-net.org

OSME website www@osme.org

Visiting Syria is no problem, as long (of course) as you have NEVER visited Israel (economy with the truth may be needed here). A visa should take less than a week to arrange.

Though it is often portrayed as very hostile to the West, Syria is:

- Very safe – I never felt threatened, even walking around Damascus at 2a.m.;
- Very cheap; at £71 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 that I got unpleasant hassle were at Damascus Bus Stations and Palmyra (I fear that this will change as more tourists go there), and kids at Mheimideh;
- Full of outstanding archaeological remains (only Turkey compares);
- Has excellent and varied food, with wine (of variable quality) and good beer;
- Has outstanding shopping opportunities in the souks of Damascus and Aleppo;
- Has good general guides – Footloose recommended;
- Has a very good infrastructure, with hotels widely available; I paid £500-1500 Syrian (£7-£20 sterling) for rooms with en-suite shower and (usually) toilet;
- Has 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), minibuses and taxis will get you most places when you want, very cheaply, and giving you a great chance to meet locals (they often pay your fare in minibuses!). Car hire is possible but would be very hairy – lorries play 'chicken' with each other on major roads and just ignore cars; any drivers would have to be VERY experienced in the ways of the Middle East. But if you want to get to remote places at dawn, your own car would probably be needed.

On the down side,

- The internal security situation has been very tight (though it has now relaxed significantly), and discussion of politics should be avoided completely. They detest the Israelis, with good reason; I would not let anyone know if you

have been there. 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 perhaps in the mountains;
- The alphabet is, of course, Arabic, making comprehension often difficult, and few people outside towns speak English. But I always got by, even in pretty way-out places; and most road signs have place names in Arabic and Latin.

Generally, I thoroughly recommend Syria for any reasonably adventurous traveller/birder.

My trip was in two parts: a tour group for 7 days (24.2-2.3), in which we did a huge loop right round the country; birding was sporadic and secondary to the movements of the group. I was able to get in some reasonable time at St. Simeon's Monastery (NW of Aleppo), Rasafa/Resafe (in the desert south of the Euphrates valley), Halabbiyyeh (28.2) and Dura Europos in the Euphrates valley, and (early morning) at Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge. These are all reasonable sites, to which I would add Qalaat Saladin (inland from Latakia), where we endured driving rain and bitter cold!! This was followed by 5 days' serious birding on my own (4.3-8.3), in the Euphrates valley round Deir ez-Zor (thoroughly recommended) and the Jazira, the arid region to the north of the Euphrates valley (now mostly an ecodesert). This was an excellent compromise for a culture vulture, as we ticked most of the major archaeological sites in the first week, and by its end I felt confident that I could happily survive on my own.

What I saw of Syria (+ time I spent in each area):

The coastal plain (a few hours only): intensively cultivated, very lush. Birds VERY wary.

The mountains (a few hours only): attractive with good habitat, but apparently hunting pressure on raptors is intense.

The Ghab, the wet, low-lying valley of the Orontes (one hour crossing it): would have been superb before drainage in the 1950s but now looks almost birdless: for instance, I saw not a single egret.

Hama – Aleppo – Lake Assad - upper Euphrates valley (6 hours driving): dense human populations, monocultures of cotton, very few bushes and trees, little habitat and almost no birds at all. Again, birds such as herons and egrets should have been obvious but were absent.

Euphrates valley round Deir ez-Zor (several days): densely inhabited but far more varied and less intensively farmed; characterised by small fields with far more trees, bushes, orchards, vegetable patches and even hedges! Frequent walled gardens with orchards. Many riverine islands fringed by reeds and trees. Altogether a far more attractive and bird-friendly landscape.

The Jazira (48 hours): flattish, rolling steppe, very dry, densely inhabited, 98% cultivated (nearly all cotton), very few shrubs or trees, very few birds of a very limited range; no habitat left, I fear, for steppe birds such as bustards or sandgrouse, even before shooting pressure is taken into account. I checked the bed of the major river, the Khabur, at two places; it enters Syria at Ras al-Ayn, where it just about contains enough water to flow but looks like a sewage ditch, oily, with no riverside vegetation and clearly disgustingly polluted. 300km. downstream at Marqadeh, 50km before it enters the Euphrates valley, the river was no longer flowing and water pumps were busily sucking dry the remaining pools.

Valley of River Tigris (Dajleh in Arabic) (2 hours): impressive foothills but heavily eroded; remaining pockets of woodland rapidly being removed; good riverine plain out-of-bounds as it is a very sensitive international border.

I made a special effort to visit IBA 001 (Ras al-Ayn), described in the IBA Compendium as 'a vast area of steppe' with e.g. Great and Little Bustards as likely winter visitors and Black Francolins as 'common residents'. I did not have a car and I was in the area for less than a day, on the border road from Qamishle and round the town, but the area was no different from the rest of the Jazira: cotton monoculture with no bushes or trees, villages and farmsteads everywhere (at 500m intervals), and pesticides seen being sprayed. The IBA describes a 100-ha. Salix woodland at Ras al-Ayn 'likely still to be intact'; but now a strip at most 100m. wide and covering perhaps 2 ha. survives, full of rubbish and with evidence that trees have recently been cut down; the water level has clearly dropped and the site has largely dried out. The birds were very wary. I don't think this wood – the only one I saw in the area – will last many more years. The visit was very depressing.

Sites I would recommend:

R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor As above – the Suspension Bridge forms a natural lookout point for riverine species and for upriver migration; it is also well worth walking upstream along the roadside on the SW side of the bridge and the short path past the playground on the NE side. There are many islands fringed by reeds that hold Iraq Babbler (common), wintering Bluethroat and Dead Sea Sparrow (might be only wintering); the reeds appear to extend as far as the eye can see upstream. The larger islands have orchards that look interesting – but could be heavily hunted. There are many riverside trees that held White-cheeked Bulbul (twice) and a large flock of Siskins (!); also Grey Herons and Night Herons – is there a heronry nearby? On the north side of the river, the University's Agricultural Research Station had many planted but mature conifers and orchards (with White-cheeked Bulbul), forming an exceptionally shady area for the Euphrates valley.

Mheimideh – Sfeira Tahtani (I was taken to these sites separately but I think they are probably very close together). Mheimideh (transliterated as Muhaymiddah by Hofland and Vandemeutter & Soors) is a village on the NE side of the river ~15km. NW towards Ar-Raqqa from Deir ez-Zor; when there is a village sign in Latin on the main road, the wetland is on your right. Sfeira Tahtani is about 1 km. to the NE off the main road, with the turning (I think) shortly before Mheimideh. They are small (?~10ha.), shallow lagoons, semi-circular (I suggest old loops of the Euphrates) with very irregular, muddy edges and many stands of reeds (some Phragmites and some ?Arundo up to 6m. high). Mheimideh has many hummocks that act as islands on which birds can rest / hide / potentially breed, and Juncus heavily grazed by goats in saline marsh. Both sites have several hectares of shallow, open water. In short, both sites look as if they were dreamt up by the RSPB! However, counting their birds (or even getting adequate views) is very difficult; the birds are wary and distant, the hummocks and reedbeds break up views and birds are regularly spooked by Marsh Harriers! My counts are really more in the nature of species lists: at Sfeira Tahtani (4.3) I had only 45 minutes (harassed by an irate taxi-driver) and 3 hours at Mheimideh (7.3), often surrounded by kids, so neither has been properly assessed – but both are gems.

Red Data Book species: Pygmy Cormorant / Marbled Duck / White-headed Duck / (Ferruginous Duck).

Iraq Babbler seen at Mheimideh (7.3) by Vandemeutter & Soors but not by me.

Also good numbers of herons / egrets; 8 other spp. duck; good variety of waders with suitable breeding habitat for White-tailed and Spur-winged Plovers.

Needless to say, the sites should have IBA status; they could have tremendous potential as educational reserves.

Dura Europos About 90 minutes' drive down S bank of R. Euphrates towards Iraq. Ancient Roman fortress easily visible from the main road, with impressive riverine cliffs that (may) hold a colony of Lesser Kestrels. Wonderful views of the Euphrates valley, so a good migration watchpoint. Sadly I only had 70 minutes there!

Qalaat Saladin (inland from Latakia): impressive Crusader castle with gorges on most sides; looks as if it should be good for e.g. Bonelli's Eagles (though they have probably been shot), but should hold passerines such as Upcher's Warbler.

Ain Diwar (mainly for Red-wattled Plover) With a lot of luck, I got from Qamishle (on the Turkish border) and back in 6 hours, but it could have been a lot longer. The birds are right on the international border with Turkey, and the two countries nearly went to war 4 years ago, so BE VERY CAREFUL if you visit this site, don't show your binoculars or any cameras, leave the 'scopes behind, and express great interest in the Roman bridge - the excuse that will let you get there. You will need a local guide to help you through police formalities and to find you the bridge, and a 4-wheel drive or microbus to get you there as the road is dreadful – I don't think an ordinary taxi or a hire car would make it. You have to register with the local police in the last village, al-Malkyeh, have a cup of tea etc., and then again at the border post overlooking the river, where they took away my passport. It is then another 7km. over a heavily rutted road to the very, very tip of Syria, only a few km. from the Turkish town of Cizre, where you can pretend to look at the bridge (in fact, it's well worth it). I suggest climbing on the furthest remaining pile of the bridge and surreptitiously looking down to the river, where there will be a lot of bird activity; the plovers were very obvious on ploughed fields between the bridge and Cizre. On the way back, you must stop at the local police station AND at al-Malkyeh again. The valley is very beautiful and near the police post there is a restaurant that overlooks the river; a cup of coffee here would be very enjoyable, but be VERY careful if you want to scan around. Syrian prisons do not have a good reputation....

Sabkhat al -Jabbul (IBA 006) is a large, shallow salt-lake SE of Aleppo. I was unable to get there, but from the trip reports I have seen, this appears to be the largest and most important site of its type in the country.

Bahrat Homs (IBA 017), a reservoir SW of Homs, used to hold large numbers of duck, notably White-headed Duck.

Palmyra / SE desert (IBA 018): the Palmyra oasis holds breeding (?resident) Menetries's Warblers and the sabkhat (salt-lake) dunes have 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; he (and his Syrian Rangers) were delighted to meet me and to take me far out (~100km.) into the SE desert for a day's exhilarating lark-bashing – an experience I strongly recommend. Both sides benefited; I think Gianluca often feels very isolated and he greatly values contact with outside birders. So, if you are going to Syria, contact him!

Species of special interest

Iraq Babbler (Unfortunately I lost my notebook with detailed notes on plumage, calls etc!!)

This species was common and easily located in the reeds along the Euphrates round Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge and just upstream from it; I recorded it 8 times in about 4 hours of observations on 4.3 and 7.3. I also had one group feeding in a small garden with orchard about 50m. from the reeds – but across a road; the garden did have some reeds. There are miles of reeds stretching along the Euphrates round Deir ez-Zor, so there could be a substantial population. Recorded by Vandemeutter & Soors at Mheimideh, but not by me.

Description: occurring in vocal parties of long-tailed birds of distinctive body shape; clearly a babbler. Body size little larger than House Sparrow, with short wings and tail almost body length with ragged end; total length 20-25cm.

Plumage: generally uniform with muted colours and no clear features such as supercilium or wing-bar. Cap, back, wings and tail fawn-buff, with indistinct short browner streaks only visible at short range, fading through lighter (unstreaked) flanks to underparts cream-buff with no distinct streaks. Throat white. Short, brown legs. Strong

decurved 2cm. bill. Calls: a rippling trill (similar to Little Grebe but more melodious) was a very easy way to pick up groups. Also a high-pitched, excited 'ti-ti-ti'. Habits: in small groups of 4-6 birds moving noisily (suggestive of Blackbird) through reed litter less than 1m. from ground level. Hopped on ground or made distinctive short flights.

Not wary.

White-cheeked Bulbul

Singles seen on three occasions (suggesting less common than Iraq Babbler): once on island tree close to Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3), about 5-10m. off ground; once heard in tree in playground (just upstream from NE end of bridge) (4.3); once seen in trees in Agricultural Research Station 500m. from river (7.3). On all occasions located by song/call, a typically Bulbul rich, melodious warble; identification easily confirmed by white cheek patch, white tips to tail feathers and yellow vent. I did not find any walking round fields, gardens etc. on the outskirts of Deir ez-Zor, so this bird may be local.

Further possibilities

Birds If Iraqi Babblers and White-cheeked Bulbuls can breed in the Syrian part of the Euphrates valley, I suggest that several other Mesopotamian species may do so: for instance, Common Babbler *Turdoides caudatus*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* and Grey Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus*. Go in April or May; the last two are or might be summer visitors. Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe alboniger* breeds in Iraq and might be found in some of the more remote desert mountains of Syria. The species that would cause the greatest excitement would be Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita*; so many areas in the Middle East have been unwatched for so long (e.g. SE Turkey, N Iraq, most of Syria), and there have been so many unexplained, scattered records, that undiscovered colonies must be a real possibility. As a long shot, somewhere there might just be wintering Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*; I am sure that the Euphrates valley held suitable wintering habitat in the long-distant past, but I have not yet seen any of the damp, grassy wetland edges on which I saw the Moroccan population.

Sites

I am very pessimistic about many areas of Syria because of the intense human pressure on the environment and the almost total disregard that Syrians feel for it. Much of the Euphrates valley is cotton monoculture, for instance the stretch below Lake Assad, but where there are oxbow lakes similar to Mheimideh, waterfowl and waders may be able

to survive. If birders are searching for interesting farmland and woodland birds, my very limited experience would suggest that the Euphrates valley around Deir ez-Zor might be the most productive. The coastal mountains appear to have been little visited, and the guidebooks suggest that the area around Kassab on the Turkish border is lush and thinly populated.

Systematic List 123 species (quality not quantity!)

Unfortunately, I managed to lose my notebook on 1.3!! Luckily I have been able to remember most or all of the important records, but detailed sightings on e.g. Corn Bunting, Laughing Dove, White Wagtail and Skylark were lost.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

1, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (4.3); 10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3);
10, Mheimideh (7.3)

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

1, Apomea reservoir (26.2)

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

2, Halabbiyyeh (28.2); 2, Dura Europos (1.3)

Pygmy Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*

Two singles, Mheimideh (7.3), flying in and out of reeds – could have been the same bird

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

1m, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (4.3)

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

1, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3); 3, suspension bridge (4.3)

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

1, Mheimideh (7.3)

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

20, Dura Europos (1.3); >10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 50+, Mheimideh (7.3)

Great White Egret *Casmerodius albus*

10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); >10, Mheimideh (7.3)

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

1, Halabbiyyeh (28.2); 5, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3, 4.3);
>10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); ~100, Mheimideh (7.3)

The absence of herons and egrets from huge areas of the Euphrates and the Ghab can only be due to pesticides or shooting – there are huge areas of habitat present.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

1 soaring near Aleppo (27.2)

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

3 distant singles, Mheimideh (7.3), could have been the same bird

White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

80 overhead, Lake Assad (2 km. above dam on S side) (28.2),
with a flock of ~300 grey geese far out on the reservoir probably of this species

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

7, Apomea reservoir (26.2)

Ruddy Shelduck *Casarca ferruginea*

1 pair, on R. Euphrates at Dura Europos (1.3)

Wigeon *Anas penelope*

4, Halabbiyyeh (28.2); 1m, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 50-100, Mheimideh (7.3)

Teal *Anas crecca*

~50, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); present, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3);
20-100, Mheimideh (7.3)

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

1 pair, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1 pair, Mheimideh (7.3)

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Several records lost. 4, Apomea reservoir (26.2); 4, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3);
2, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3); >20, Mheimideh (7.3).

Pintail *Anas acuta*

>10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); >20, Mheimideh (7.3)

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

~10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 20+, Mheimideh (7.3);
2, desert reservoir SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

present (probably 8 but spooked by Marsh Harrier!), Mheimideh (7.3)

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

1f, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3)

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

>30, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1f, Deir ez-Zor bridge (7.3); 20-100, Mheimideh (7.3)

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

10, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 4, Mheimideh (7.3)

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

8, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 10, Mheimideh (7.3)

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

1m, Mheimideh (7.3)

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Common along Euphrates valley with maximum counts of 10 at
Dura Europos (1.3) and 20 at R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3).
Occasional W of Euphrates and in Jazira

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

1f, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 3, Mheimideh (7.3)

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

1m, Dura Europos (1.3); 1, Deir ez-Zor to Hassakeh (4.3);
1, Mheimideh (7.3); 1f, desert 10km. SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*

1m, near al-Malkyeh (in far NE of Jazira) (8.3)

Unidentified harriers *Circus sp.*

1, Rasafa (28.2); 1, Deir ez-Zor to Hassakeh (4.3); 3 singles in Jazira 4-5.3

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

common; 1, Krak des Chevaliers (25.2); common along Euphrates valley, where about 10 records, all of single birds, seen daily.

Not seen in 48 hours in Jazira.

Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*

7 widely distributed singles

Large Aquila sp.

2 overhead in desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Widely distributed, seen most days. Maximum count 4 at Dura Europos (1.3)

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

fairly common in Euphrates valley but very wary; 2, Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Coot *Fulica atra*

Abundant along Euphrates valley where flocks of 100-1,000 were often the only waterbirds visible! Obviously no-one eats them and it seems they don't shoot them either. Not seen elsewhere.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

1, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 5+, Mheimideh (7.3).

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

1 pair displaying, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Flock of ~30 from bus, Hama-Aleppo, 26.2

Red-wattled Plover/Lapwing

~10, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3),

Vanellus/Hoplopterus indicus with several birds clearly territorial on ploughed field 100 yards from river

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus/Chettusia leucura*

2, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 2, Mheimideh (7.3) (1 bird territorial)

Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus/Hoplopterus spinosus*

2, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 8+, Mheimideh (7.3)

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

1, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii*

1, Mheimideh (7.3)

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

5, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 2, Deir ez-Zor (7.3);

10-20, Mheimideh (7.3)

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

1, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 5, Mheimideh (7.3)

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

5, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 2, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3); 7+, Mheimideh (7.3)

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

1, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 7, Mheimideh (7.3)

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

2, Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3)

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

~50, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 40+, Mheimideh (7.3); 2, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

5, Dura Europos (1.3); 1, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 1, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3); ~10, Mheimideh (7.3); 3, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

30, Lake Assad (2 km. above dam on S side) (28.2); 4, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3);
10, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3); ~10, Mheimideh (7.3). Several records lost.

Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus*

4, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3); present, Dura Europos (1.3);
4, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*

1, Dura Europos (1.3)

Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus*

2 singles, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (7.3)

(Medium-sized gulls in a variety of plumages were usually present in low numbers at Deir-ez Zor but were often not fully identified.)

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

4, Deir ez-Zor suspension Bridge (4.3); 2, suspension bridge (7.3)

Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

common

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common along Euphrates valley with maximum counts of 20+ at Sfeira Tahtani (4.3) and Mheimideh (7.3).

Common, Ras al-Ayn (5.3).

4, roadside 10km. NE of Palmyra (8.3).

Laughing (Palm) Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*

Common in Damascus and Aleppo.

Seen elsewhere but very under-recorded; most records lost

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

1 pair, Rasafa (28.2); 1, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3);

1 pair, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3). Several records lost.

Common Swift *Apus apus*

Widespread in flocks of up to 20 from start of holiday (24.2) onwards, usually clearly flying N; seen 5-10 times. Some flocks were seen from taxis etc. and Pallid Swifts *Apus pallidus* could not be excluded.

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*

Still a common bird. 2, Halabbiyyeh (28.2); 5, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3, 4.3); 4, Dura Europos (1.3); 5, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1, R. Euphrates at al-Zouwea (4.3); 1, R. Khabur at Tell Halaf (5.3); 3, R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3); 8, Mheimideh (7.3)

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

1 near Aleppo (26.2); 1, Rasafa (28.2); 1, Euphrates valley near Mheimideh (7.3); 4 singles, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Several records lost but widely distributed; present Apomea (26.2); Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Common near settlements, all roads (even well into desert areas) and even far into desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

Several flocks of up to 20 birds in desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Several flocks of up to 100 birds in desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*

Two flocks of 20 and 200 in desert SE of Palmyra (8.3).

Melanocorypha larks Total of ~1,000 on 8.3

Temminck's Horned Lark *Eremophila bilopha*

Most widespread bird in Hamad desert region SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Desert Lark *Ammomanes desertii*

Two singles, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3); - surprisingly scarce

Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*

Three singles, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Singles seen commonly in Euphrates valley and Jazira.

Already territorial with several singing birds in Deir ez-Zor (4.3, 7.3)

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

1 single over Deir ez-Zor city (7.3)

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

2 singles, Mheimideh (7.3)

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*

2, Rasafa (28.2)

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

3, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 10+ Mheimideh (7.3). Several records lost

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Widespread and fairly common, even in densely cultivated steppe where few other birds seemed able to survive. Many records lost so no detailed picture

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

2, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3); 1, suspension bridge (4.3);

1, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

5-10 of race *feldegg*, Mheimideh (7.3)

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

1m, R. Euphrates at al-Zouwea, feeding on floating vegetation (4.3)

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

1, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3); 5, Ras al-Ayn (5.3);

2, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (7.3)

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Many records lost, but most ruins held singles, some singing; ~10 sites in all. Highest count 5, Ras al-Ayn (5.3).

Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*

common and found widely throughout Euphrates valley and Jazira;

10 sightings involving ~15 birds, often in pairs; maximum count 5 at Mheimideh (7.3). Male showing characteristics of race *variegata* well seen at Markadeh on R. Khabur (4.3).

Unidentified wheatears *Oenanthe spp.*

frequently seen from minibuses etc. along Euphrates valley and in desert

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Several records lost; probably 5 records of about 10 birds

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

1, Rasafa (28.2); 20+, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3); many probables elsewhere

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

4+, Palmyra ruins (2.3) only definite records

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

1, St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); 5, Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (4.3);

5, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 3, Euphrates above Deir ez-Zor (7.3);

1, Research station, Deir ez-Zor (7.3)

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

1, St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); 1, Mari (1.3); 5-10, Palmyra oasis (2.3);

1 in desert SE of Palmyra (8.3). Some records lost.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common and widely distributed when suitable habitat available.

Krak des Chevaliers (25.2); St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); Mari (1.3); Palmyra oasis (2.3); Ras al-Ayn (5.3);

Research Station, R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3)

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Singing, Qalaat Saladin (25.2); St. Simeon's monastery (27.2);

several singing, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 1, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

1, Deir ez-Zor just N of suspension bridge (4.3); 1, Ras al-Ayn (5.3);

2, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

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

Several singing birds, Ugarit (26.2)

Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis*

Common and widely distributed along Euphrates valley; seen or heard at Dura Europos (1.3), around R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (4.3) (common), Sfeira Tahtani (4.3) and Mheimideh (7.3) (common).

1 singing, Markadeh, R. Khabur (4.3). 1 singing, Ain Diwar, R. Tigris (6.3)

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Common and widely distributed along Euphrates valley; seen or heard at Dura Europos (1.3), around R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (common),

Sfeira Tahtani (4.3) and Mheimideh (7.3) (common).

Still surviving in remnant habitat at Ras al-Ayn (5.3).

Singing at R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*

1m, Palmyra ruins (2.3)

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

1, Qalaat Saladin (25.2); 1, Ugarit (26.2); 1, ruins of Apomea (26.2)

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

1, desert reservoir SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Unidentified Acrocephalus sp.

Several singing in reeds, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3)

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Very common and widely distributed, with over 20 in favourable habitat, for instance Euphrates reedbeds

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

1, desert reservoir SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

1-2, St. Simeon's monastery (27.2)

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

2 in reed edges, R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3)

Great Tit *Parus major*

Krak des Chevaliers (25.2); Qalaat Saladin (25.2); several, Ugarit (26.2); several, St. Simeon's monastery (27.2).

None in Euphrates valley or Jazira

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*

Common in reeds along R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (4.3 and 7.3);

see above for fuller notes

Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*

Heard but not seen, Ugarit (26.2)

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys*

Recorded three times round R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (4.3 and 7.3);

see above for fuller notes

Turkestan (Isabelline) Shrike *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides*

1m seen well on telegraph wires, Mheimideh (7.3)

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

100, desert near Rasafa (28.2); 100, Turkish border between Qamishle

and Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 60, Turkish border 50km. E of Qamishle (6.3)

Magpie *Pica pica*

Not seen W of Euphrates. Very common throughout Euphrates valley, with at least 10 a day; scarce in Jazira, with singles only at Ras al-Ayn (5.3) and R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3)

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Flock of ~100 just W of al-Malkyeh (6.3)

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone*

Fairly common in Euphrates valley; several records lost, no details available

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common almost anywhere where people found, except in desert

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

1m 15km. E of Aleppo (28.2); large colony of >50 birds just above Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (1.3, 4.3)

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*

Group of 5 in reeds, R. Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor (7.3)

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

~5 feeding on split grain, Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Widely distributed in flocks of <10 birds: Krak des Chevaliers (25.2); St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); Mari (1.3); Palmyra oasis (2.3); Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (4.3); Ras al-Ayn (5.3); Mheimideh (7.3)

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Present, Ugarit (26.2); present, St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); present, plantations on S. side of L. Assad (28.2); 1, Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

1, Ugarit (26.2); 1, Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Siskin *Carduelis spinus*

A flock of ~100 feeding on willow-like trees, north bank of Euphrates just above Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge (7.3)

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Small flocks (<10) at Ugarit (26.2) and Apomea (26.2)

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*

5, Rasafa (28.2); 4 on roadside wires, 10km. NE of Palmyra (8.3)

Serin *Serinus serinus*

Singing birds at St. Simeon's monastery (27.2); plantations on S. side of L. Assad (28.2); Ras al-Ayn (5.3)

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Abundant in open steppe-type country (and one of the few birds recorded in that type of habitat!) throughout eastern Syria, with >50 seen Qamishle-Ras al-Ayn (5.3) and >50 Qamishle- al-Malkyeh (6.3). Many records lost so detailed picture unclear

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

1, Sfeira Tahtani (4.3); 1, R. Euphrates at al-Zouwea (4.3);

12 feeding on seeds, Ras al-Ayn (5.3); 1, R. Tigris at Ain Diwar (6.3);
2, Mheimideh (7.3)

Other animals (notable by their absence!)

Fox *Vulpes* sp. 1 seen briefly, desert SE of Palmyra (8.3)

Butterflies

Quite a few butterflies seen in W, including:

'Orange-tip' *Anthocharis* sp. St. Simeon's Monastery (27.2)

White sp. ?Small White *Pieris napi* Ugarit (26.2) + elsewhere

Clouded Yellow-type *Colias* sp. ?where

Painted Lady *Cynthia cardui* 2, Dura Europos ((1.3)

David Murdoch, Flat 3, 5 Eaton Crescent, Bristol BS8 2EJ, England

damurdoch@hotmail.com

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