

NEWS & INFORMATION

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

EGYPT

Tom Coles Memorial Training events

In memory of Tom Coles, who passed away in January 2008, his family and friends have created a Memorial Training Events fund for use in Egypt, administered by Nature Conservation Egypt. The first event provided training in raptor identification for 25 Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency rangers and others at Ayn Sokhna in April 2009. Further training events in bird ID and census techniques are scheduled for 15–18 April 2010. (Source: Moldován István)

Local group impact on Qarun lake

Egypt's first IBA Local Conservation Group/Site Support Group has persuaded one of the country's largest construction groups to end the dumping of waste at Qarun lake, which holds regionally important numbers of waterbirds in winter. The construction company has also pledged to restore an area of saltmarsh, destroyed by tourism development along the lake shore, as a bird sanctuary. Because of deleterious environmental changes, the local subspecies of Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala norrisae* is now extinct. The Lake Qarun Protected Area LCG/SSG was established by Nature Conservation Egypt (BirdLife Partner) in 2008, with a grant from the Aage V Jensen Charity Foundation.

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, which began breeding in the 1990s, has now reached c8500 pairs at Qarun lake whilst numbers of breeding Spur-winged Lapwings *Vanellus spinosus* also meet IBA criteria, as does the wintering population of Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*. A salt extraction processing plant has been set up, which over time will improve water quality and permit habitats to be restored, as well as providing local employment. However, unregulated tourist developments along the southern shores of the lake are destroying the best waterbird habitats, particularly mudflats and saltmarshes, and

result in increased disturbance to birds. Hunters, including organised parties from Europe, regularly ignore the lake's protected status.

The SSG was set up to enhance biodiversity conservation and benefit-sharing with local communities, in recognition that local people could make a significant contribution towards conservation efforts by reducing exploitation and hunting in the protected area. SSG members have removed shooting blinds erected by duck hunters, and plan to erect signboards with information about the lake's protected status, and its importance as an IBA. They are also involved in awareness raising and education activities with schoolchildren. The local government has an ecotourism strategy for Qarun lake, which is increasingly seen as a premium tourist destination. The SSG has proved to be an important point of contact between the lakeside community and the Protected Area authority, and also the Egyptian government. (Source: BirdLife International)

GEORGIA

Website change

The Batumi raptor count project has a new website, www.batumiraptorcount.org, where regular updates can be found. (Source: Pieter Vantieghe)

IRAQ

Hunting Houbara Bustards in Iraq

The open shrubby steppes and flat arid habitats in Iraq are favoured wintering grounds of migrant Houbara Bustards *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. This species is classified by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable because it has undergone rapid population declines over three generations (20 years) owing largely to unsustainable hunting levels. Because of the absence of wildlife protection legislation under the newly-established Iraq government, many

areas around the country are witnessing over-hunting activities. "A recent hunting expedition in Iraq reportedly killed over 100 Houbara Bustards alone" said Omar Fadil from Nature Iraq. As a result, Nature Iraq are calling for restrictions on the transport of hunting birds entering or leaving Iraq and requesting that the Iraq government enact wildlife protection legislation and establish hunting limits and/or bans for specific species like Houbara Bustard. They are also asking for more support and education to help the Iraqi security forces actively control hunting activities. (Source: BirdLife International)

ISRAEL

Help needed for Griffon Vultures

Help is needed with a Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* nest surveillance project at Gamla Nature Reserve in the Golan Heights. The project runs December 2009 until the end of June 2010. Daily observations are carried out during daylight hours (8 hours a day). Volunteers are asked to work 6 days a week (including weekends) and will have one day off. Accommodation and transport to the reserve will be provided. Volunteers should have some background in birdwatching and/or nature conservation, and volunteers will have to commit to at least four successive weeks. The volunteers should be able to communicate in at least basic English, have some Excel skills, have valid permission (visa) to stay in Israel and should be fully covered with life/health insurance. For more information please write or telephone Gamla Nature Reserve ++972-4-6822282, fax 4-6822285, yaelch@npa.org.il.

RUSSIA

Sociable Lapwing survey

Five teams have been involved in surveying Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* at Manych in September 2009, just north of the OSME region. The second international expedition to the Kumo-Manych depression in south Russia (Stavropolskij krai and republic of Kalmykia) was organized in September 2009 to survey this vast wetland area for this species. From 3–16 September the area was surveyed by five

independent field teams, consisting of members of the RSPB, Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan, Stavropol State University and local ornithologists. Around 4000 Sociable Lapwings were recorded with up to 2000 birds considered to be different individuals. The highest single day count reached 900 birds. Only one bird was found with colour-rings, ringed as a juvenile in Kostanaj region July 2009. These counts confirm the importance of this area for Sociable Lapwings as a major stopover site along the western migration route, crucial for refueling before they leave for their wintering grounds in northeast Africa. (Source: Maxim Koshkin)

SAUDI ARABIA

ABBA Report

Mike Jennings has published a new report 'Wintering Birds in Northern Saudi Arabia: February 2009' (ABBA Survey 40). The report is available as a PDF free to Phoenix subscribers. Hard copies are available for £10 plus postage from Mike at Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, UK (ArabianBirds@dsl.pipex.com).

SYRIA

Photographs required for book

Ahmad Aidek has written an identification book in Arabic about the birds, flowers and mammals of northeast Syria. He plans to print 1000 copies and distribute them for free. Information in Arabic is clearly enormously important in a country where awareness about wildlife is very limited. Photographs are being included and there are still some gaps to be filled. The species required are See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*, Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*, Wolf *Canis lupus*, Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*, Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena* and Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indica*. Anyone willing to help can contact Paul Doherty at paul@birdvideodvd.com. (Source: Paul Doherty)

TURKEY

Sermon helps conserve wetland

Lake Burdur is internationally important for wintering and passage waterbirds and has been threatened in recent years by pollution, urban development and unsustainable agricultural practices. In response, Doğa Derneği—the BirdLife Partner Designate for Turkey—recently drafted a sermon to educate the local community of Burdur on the importance of conserving their lake. It is estimated that through the sermon Doğa Derneği reached c52 000 people at over 1000 mosques in the villages, towns, districts and provincial centre of Burdur. The first of its kind in Burdur, the sermon highlighted the responsibility of humans in protecting the environment and wildlife and was a collaborative effort between Doğa Derneği, Burdur’s provincial mufti and Burdur Centre Ulu Mosque Imam Nuri Çınar.

The lake is facing degradation pressure due to the unrestricted use of water resources that feed the basin, leading to its rapid retreat and a marked decrease in crop productivity and soil quality. Poor management of water resources continues to threaten the ecosystem’s balance, its ecological integrity and the species which depend on it. To raise awareness about the ecological importance and natural assets of Burdur lake and to achieve conditions for sustainable management of the site in the long-term, Doğa Derneği implemented the ‘Conserving Lake Burdur Project’ with support from the Wings Over Wetlands (WOW) Project. The recent sermon has been the latest activity to educate local people about the importance of the lake, its unique ecology, and how it should be managed.

Through the WOW project, Doğa Derneği and its partners have been actively raising awareness about the lake’s importance across Burdur and have trained 1524 farmers from 44 villages on the use of drip irrigation systems. Doga Dernegi have also been working with the Ministry of Education, local volunteers, bird watchers and teachers, to create a special education programme tailored for children ages 6 through 14 years. Initially rolled out in four elementary schools, the education programme includes a multitude of activities to foster an appreciation of wetland habitats

and wetland-dependent species. This includes an art exhibition featuring over 200 pictures, a poster and bird checklist for use in school gardens and a school-wide water conservation campaign.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

New flamingo breeding colony

A new breeding colony of the Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* was discovered by a team of biologists from the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD). The colony was discovered within the ‘Bul Syayeeef’ Marine Protected Area during a routine monitoring survey of the coastal areas west of Abu Dhabi. The biologists counted 1954 nests and 800 chicks at two sites in the new colony and also recorded more than 18 000 flamingos in intertidal areas between Musaffah and Bul Syayeeef Musaffah.

This discovery demonstrates the importance of the area. It also highlights the urgency with which such areas need to be protected, as rapid development engulfs the coastal areas of Abu Dhabi, particularly in the coastal area of Musaffah. Dr Salim Javed, EAD’s Deputy Manager, Bird Conservation, said “The entire inter-tidal mudflat and salt marsh areas to the west of the Musaffah channel are highly important for the flamingos as well as many other shorebirds. Importance of the newly discovered breeding site was already recognized based on satellite tracking of flamingos, undertaken by EAD since 2005.” EAD is also collaborating with the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council on coastal profiling of areas earmarked for protection within the Abu Dhabi capital area. (Source: EAD)

OTHER NEWS

Update on ABBA

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia is with the publishers. Despite this important stage of the ABBA project being reached the ABBA database and *Phoenix* are continuing. Those resident in or visiting Arabia in the last 12 months are invited to send details of their observations of breeding or potentially breeding birds to the ABBA project so that these can be included in the database. It is important that changes in species range, fluctuations in species and regional numbers,

species ecological factors and conservation aspects, effects of climate change *etc etc* are recorded as they occur so that this resource can always be as complete and up to date as possible. Notes on actual breeding occurrences, ecological aspects, food, habitats, conservation, behaviour *etc* are welcomed for *Phoenix*. Those wishing to receive information from the ABBA database should state the region, time period or species they are interested in. Data is passed on free for research, conservation or personal use. Please contact Mike Jennings at the address above.

EcoMENA web community

An EcoMENA web community has been established (www.EcoMena.com). It covers environmental issues in the Middle East and North Africa region and everyone is welcome to join. (Source: Fares Khoury)

Extinction threat to Middle East's most threatened bird

Conservationists trying to prevent the extinction of the Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* are distraught that one of the last remaining wild birds in the Middle East has been shot by a hunter in Saudi Arabia, bringing the known wild Middle Eastern population of this Critically Endangered species to just four individuals.

A satellite-tracking project led by BirdLife International and the IUCN, in collaboration with the Desert Commission of the Syrian government, established that the Syrian adults migrate to the Ethiopian highlands each winter, but the wintering area of younger birds remains a mystery. This migration across the deserts of the Middle East to northeast Africa puts these birds under threat from the region's many hunters. Researchers from BirdLife, the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and IUCN, trying to find out more about the movements of the young birds, fitted two birds with satellite tags, and it is one of these birds, a female, which was shot. "We were excited that tagging a sub-adult ibis may have helped us to solve the mystery of where young ibises spend the winter, but now we may never know" said Eng. Ali Hamoud of the Syrian Desert Commission. "The shooting of a young bird from such a tiny population is devastating news and it shows that hunting is a major threat to this species."

Three birds from a semi-captive population in Turkey were released in 2008 to see if they would migrate. They flew south as far as Jordan but subsequently were found dead. Initially, it was feared they had been poisoned, but later it was realised that the birds had been electrocuted, emphasising that other threats can have a devastating impact on the future of the Northern Bald Ibis in the Middle East. More satellite-tagged birds released from Turkey in 2009 flew south as far as Saudi Arabia but they too disappeared not much more than 100 km from where the Syrian bird was shot. Although their fate has not been established, researchers believe these birds too may have succumbed to hunters.

The hunting of Northern Bald Ibis is not allowed in Saudi Arabia. HH Prince Bandar Bin Saud, Secretary General of NCWCD (National Commission for Wildlife Conservation and Development) said that "Upon hearing the news of Northern Bald Ibises in Saudi Arabia, NCWCD immediately reacted and dispatched a team to search for the birds. Local people reported to the commission that an ibis had been shot illegally by hunters."

As a response to the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme, HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco became Species Champion for Northern Bald Ibis providing crucial support to this challenging programme through the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation. BirdLife is more determined than ever to conserve this emblematic species that has braved the Middle East and North African deserts for millennia inspiring cultures and religions of the region. (Source: BirdLife International)

The Nature of Iraq – from Marshes to Mountains

A story in pictures and words of the work of Nature Iraq in a forgotten wildlife paradise will be displayed at the Birdscapes Gallery at Glandford, Norfolk, UK from 4–25 July 2010. It is hosted by Nature Iraq and BirdLife International. Contact richardporter@dialstart.net for further information. (Source: Richard Porter)

OBC celebrates 25 years

Congratulations to the Oriental Bird Club who celebrated their 25th anniversary in 2009.

Slender-billed Curlew: the search intensifies

Given the extreme rarity of the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, a concerted global effort to try to 'rediscover' the species was launched by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (SBCWG) in December 2009. This effort is encouraging birdwatchers to visit all known and potential passage, wintering and moulting sites to search for the species. This focus on non-breeding sites is considered to offer greater chances of success compared to efforts to locate a probable handful of birds on a vast area of potential breeding habitat. Additionally, detailed and up to date information on the field identification of the species has been produced to aid observers. Further information on how to assist in this search is available from www.slenderbilledcurlew.net and the following publications:

- Cleeves, T, N Crockford & P Köhler. 2008. Die größte feldornithologische Herausforderung Europas: Die Suche nach dem Dünnschnabelbrachvogel [The Slender-billed Curlew Quest: the greatest European birding challenge]. *Der Falke* 55 (11): 419–428.
- Cleeves, T, N Crockford & P Köhler. 2009. The Slender-billed Curlew quest. *Birdwatch* 199: 43–47. (this and the next publication are available at www.slenderbilledcurlew.net)
- Delany, S (ed). 2009. Special Slender-billed Curlew issue! *International Waterbird Census Newsletter* 12: 1–15.

The report of the unsuccessful Slender-billed Curlew expedition to Ayaqaghitma lake, Uzbekistan, in spring 2008, partially funded by OSME and which included the playing of Slender-billed Curlew calls from the top of a lorry located c300 m from the shoreline, can be downloaded from the latter website. The RSPB has awarded Sadegh Sadeghi Zadehan 2000 US\$ for surveys in Iran to search for the species.

Request for biometrics. In collaboration with SBCWG, the RSPB are drafting a proposal to search bird markets all around North Africa and the Middle East. This will include practical guidelines, with details of possible confusion species, to facilitate measurement

and identification of possible curlews for sale in the markets. Details of morphometrics (bill length, bill + skull, tarsus, wing length, wing formula etc) of Slender-billed Curlew, Steppe Curlew *Numenius arquata suschkini* and Steppe Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus alboaxillaris* are required. If you are able to help please contact Nicola Crockford at nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk.

Request for photos. As part of the SBCWG's work, investigation is currently being made into the identification of several forms of *Numenius* in the Palearctic region and adjacent areas. The group is therefore seeking photos of the following taxa: *N. tenuirostris*, *N. a. arquata*, *N. a. orientalis*, *N. a. suschkini*, *N. p. phaeopus*, *N. p. alboaxillaris*, *N. p. variegatus* and *N. p. hudsonicus*. Due to a lack of data and ambiguity associated with *Numenius* from eastern Europe/western Asia, photos from this area are particularly sought. All photos should be sent to Ross Ahmed (rossahmed@gmail.com) and correspondence should include any relevant details such as photographer, date taken and location. Photos should preferably not be manipulated before sending, although edited photos are also welcome.

ERRATUM

Review: The Birds of Turkey (*Sandgrouse* 31 (1): 80–81, 2009).

The order of authors presented at the head of the review reflects that shown in the cover scan received from the publishers to accompany the review but not that of the actual book as published. The reviewer had submitted the author order correctly but I, the editor, altered it to match the scan. The correct citation details are: Guy M Kirwan, Kerem A Boyla, Peter Castell, Barbaros Demirci, Metehan Özen, Hilary Welch & Tim Marlow. 2008. *The Birds of Turkey*. Christopher Helm, London.

CORRIGENDUM

Prior, R & C Conroy. 2009. The Ras Baalbek semi-desert: Lebanon's aridland area and its birds. *Sandgrouse* 31: 140–145.

The authors apologise for incorrectly attributing Plates 2 & 3 which, in fact, were photographs by Karen Wade.