

Unexpectedly large number of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* on autumn migration in Turkey and some remarks on the stopover site

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On 12 October 2007, the author and Ercan Aslan went to Ceylanpınar district, SE Turkey, to attempt to locate a satellite-tracked Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*. The satellite-derived coordinates, 37° 00' N, 39° 39' E, 503 m asl, were received from Dr Özge Balkız, a scientist at Doğa Derneği [Society for Nature], Ankara.

We reached the location about midday and although many kilometres around were checked, with the aid of 20–60×80 telescopes, no Sociable Lapwings were seen. The area was inside the Ceylanpınar State Farm for Agriculture (CSFA), very close to its northern boundary. There was a clear dissimilarity in landscape between the two sides of the northern border. Outside, the landscape consisted of small private fields between villages, whereas within were very large flat field blocks of brownish clayey soil with few settlements. Some uncultivated patches in the farm, especially on low hills, were using by grazing sheep.

Ceylanpınar SFA is c80×40 km and near Syria (Figure 1, Plate 1). Over 151 500 ha of CSFA are used for agriculture, of which c65% are fields and c30% natural steppes mainly used as meadow. Only c7% of the cultivated area is irrigated. Main grains/pulses produced are wheat and lentils, constituting c49% and c8% of the fields, respectively. The district has a dry continental climate, with a temperature range of -8.2 to 47.0°C and average annual precipitation of 267.8 mm though rainfall is rare early June to end of September (TIGEM 2008). CSFA is a Turkish Important Bird Area (Kılıç & Eken 2004) and Key Biodiversity Area (Eken *et al* 2006).

We decided next to check a neighbouring area in CSFA, where a number of Sociable Lapwing flocks had been observed in spring 2007 (Bozdoğan *et al* 2007). En route, through an area of large post-harvest ploughed fields, we did not detect our quarry species but did

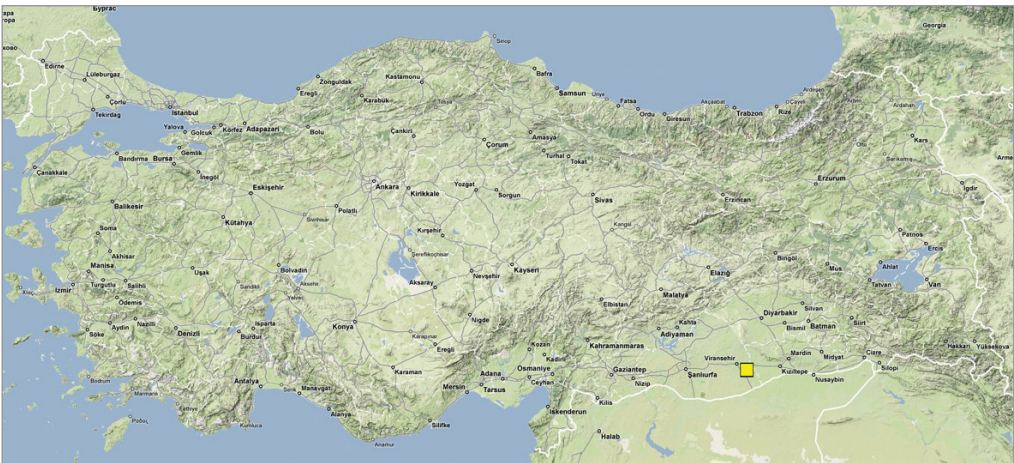


Figure 1. Location of the Ceylanpınar State Farm of Agriculture, indicated by the yellow rectangle, in Turkey.

find a flock of six Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor*, a scarce summer visitor (Kirwan *et al* 2008).

We found a very large flock of Sociable Lapwings at the intersection of four very large fields, 37° 05' N, 40° 02' E, 438 m asl, and observed the birds for 1.25 h just prior to sunset and darkness. They were mainly on the ground and feeding, walking together westwards and keeping at least 3–4 m between individuals. Some small groups, of c20–50 birds, flew from time to time separating from and then merging with the main group. These movements made obtaining an accurate count difficult: there were at least 1810 Sociable Lapwings present.

The fields, on which the birds were present, were for lentil production. On the ground were many seeds, presumably shaken out of the crop during harvesting. The soil surface was even and hard, as it had not yet been ploughed.

We watched the birds getting ready to spend the night. Birds positioned somewhat marginally, congregated gradually by walking individually or flying in small flocks towards the main group. A flock of c30 individuals flew from the aggregation, passed a few metres above us, and returned there, c300 m from the observers, as though they were checking that we posed no threat. Aggregation of the Sociable Lapwings became much more noticeable after sunset. In late dusk, movements increased considerably; both walking and flying individuals came together in a field, on a section quite far away from the roads. This movement took only some five minutes, just before darkness; thereafter all birds kept still.

The day after, we returned to the site about noon, having checked the most eastern part of CSFA for any additional flocks. The birds had moved to an adjacent field to the south. Illumination was much better. After repeated counts from a good viewpoint, we considered there were at least 3200 Sociable Lapwings present. The birds were relatively still, though the dispersal of the very large flock over a large area and heat haze made counting more difficult.

Subsequent to the count, we checked to see if any of the birds wore leg rings by driving the car as close as possible to several parts of the flock. We checked perhaps 800 birds and found four with colour rings, presumably placed on the birds in central Kazakhstan (Robert Sheldon *in litt*), though the satellite-tracked individual was not found.

All the birds were in non-breeding plumage, though some still had rufous feathers on the belly. Juveniles had mainly fresh feathers. Feathers found on plant stems also were newly grown in appearance and generally undamaged. The field's surface was scattered with lambs' faeces and lentil seeds.

For the globally critically-endangered Sociable Lapwing (IUCN 2007), Ceylanpınar SFA apparently plays a crucial role in Turkey especially during autumn migration. Lentil crops need to be dry in order to use a mechanical harvester and such harvesting causes a signif-



Plate 1. Location of the area in the Ceylanpınar State Farm of Agriculture where the autumn flock of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* in 2007 was seen, marked by the solid yellow circle. Note the large field blocks inside CSFA and the smaller private fields outside, mostly in the north.

icantly higher loss of seeds in comparison to harvesting by hand. Traditional agricultural practice outside CSFA leaves far fewer seeds.

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