

The status of European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola* in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Despite much interest amongst taxonomists and amateur birdwatchers in the systematics and field identification of the Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquatus* complex of taxa in recent years, the most recent checklist of Iranian birds (Scott & Adhami 2006) merely records as a footnote that representatives of two forms have been recorded in the country. Following some recent treatments of the complex (eg Wink *et al* 2002), but contra, eg, Collar (2005), we consider *S. torquatus* as a superspecies comprising at least four species-level taxa: *S. rubicola* (European Stonechat), *S. maurus* (Asian Stonechat; a name that we prefer over the more established Siberian Stonechat, because the latter is a misnomer), *S. torquatus* (African Stonechat) and *S. tectes* (Réunion Stonechat). Urquhart (2002) mapped *S. maurus armenicus* as a breeder in north-west Iran south to the head of the Persian Gulf and through the southern Caspian region as far as the eastern province of Khorasan, with some records of *S. m. variegatus* (which breeds in the eastern Caucasus and northern Caspian) either on passage or wintering (eg specimens in The Natural History Museum, Tring, the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, and Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). In addition, Schweizer (2003) reported a sight record of European Stonechat *S. rubicola* in winter (March 2001) from Semnan Province in northern Iran.

Interest in the ornithology of Iran currently appears to be burgeoning, with increasing numbers of both nationals and foreigners working on the country's avifauna, reflected in a great many publications in recent years and a revised checklist of the country's birds (Scott & Adhami 2006). As demonstrated by both Kratochwill & Kirwan (2004) and Kirwan (2007), it therefore is doubly surprising that so little attention is being paid to the considerable resources on the Iranian avifauna available in museum collections. Amongst this material is the outstanding collection from many areas of southern Asia, including Iran, of Walter Norman Koelz, an American naturalist and agriculturist. This latter material was extensively studied by Koelz (1939, 1950, 1954) and Charles Vaurie (numerous publications, eg 1949) for both novelties (including the subspecies *Saxicola maurus excubitor* from Iran, considered a synonym of *S. m. armenicus*; Peters 1964), and data concerning geographical variation in passerines and non-passerines. Koelz's specimens are housed at the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH), in Chicago; the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor (UMMZ); and the American Museum of Natural History, in New York.

We examined 64 Iranian specimens of *Saxicola torquatus sensu lato* from the FMNH. The majority (52) of these relate to the form *S. m. armenicus*, as might be expected, given that this taxon is the widespread breeder in the country. Given only the single previous record of *S. rubicola*, it is somewhat surprising that we found nine females and three males referable to this form from Iran (see Table 1). All were collected, by Koelz, in winter to early spring (between late December and mid March) in the north-western and western provinces of Azarbaijan-e Gharbi, Kermanshahah and Lorestan, and Kerman in the central-south of the country, thus hinting that eastern populations of *rubicola* winter regularly across western, northern and perhaps even southern Iran at this season. Most of Kerman province lies due north and inland of the Strait of Hormuz, whilst Tomogaon (the collection locality in question) is just south-west of Bam, and thus rather further east than other localities (see map on p xvi of Koelz 1983). Identification of *rubicola* specimens was based on mensural data (see Table 1 and comparative data in Urquhart 2002), as well as the amount of white in the rump patch (most had none or virtually none), the amount of dark

spotting in the same region, the extent of the orange on the underparts (which in both sexes is usually far more extensive in *rubicola* than in *armenicus* or other eastern races), tail pattern and, in males, the extent and degree of contrast presented by the white half-collar (generally more extensive and contrasting in *armenicus* and other races of *Saxicola maurus*).

UMMZ holdings include 42 specimens of *S. torquatus sensu lato* from Iran, not including two specimens (181400–401) labelled as being *S. maurus (sensu stricto)* that were not examined, all taken by Koelz. This series was principally taken in September–March, with two from April, four from July and one from August. Of the total, 17 specimens relate to *S. rubicola*, and these were principally taken in late September to late March, and again are indicative of relatively widespread occurrence in western Iran at this season, with records

Table 1. Iranian specimens of *Saxicola rubicola* collected in Iran by Walter N Koelz. FMNH = Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. UMMZ = Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Place name spellings, where possible, follow the Times Atlas of the World (eighth edn, 2000), or are as the relevant specimen labels. Measurements (mm) as follows: wing = flattened chord; bill = to skull.

Specimen no.	Sex	Locality	Province	Date	Wing	Tail	Bill
FMNH 238699	female	Dow Rud	Lorestan	23 January 1941	61	42.5	14.65
FMNH 238706	female	Borujerd	Lorestan	21 January 1941	63	43	14.09
FMNH 238708	male	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	28 December 1940	65	42	13.96
FMNH 238715	male	Tomoagaon	Kerman	4 February 1940	64.5	41	13.98
FMNH 238723	female	Dow Rud	Lorestan	23 January 1941	64	44	15.08
FMNH 238726	female	Dow Rud	Lorestan	15 March 1941	64	45	14.71
FMNH 238727	male	Borujerd	Lorestan	20 January 1941	65	47	14.29
FMNH 238733	female	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	31 December 1940	63	43	13.93
FMNH 238735	female	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	1 January 1941	64	42	14.91
FMNH 238756	female	Miandowab	Azarbayjan-e Gharbi	2 December 1940	65	41	14.84
FMNH 238758	female	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	1 January 1941	64	40.5	14.37
FMNH 238829	female	Dow Rud	Lorestan	9 March 1941	64	45	13.72
UMMZ 181368	male?	Marageh	Azarbayjan-e Gharbi	2 December 1940	68	47	12.38
UMMZ 181369	male	?	Kermanshahah	26 December 1940	68	46	14.61
UMMZ 181370	male	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	28 December 1940	66	44.5	13.09
UMMZ 181371	male	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	30 December 1940	66	45	14.66
UMMZ 181372	female	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	31 December 1940	64	44	broken
UMMZ 181373	male	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	31 December 1940	65	44.5	14.64
UMMZ 181374	female	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	1 January 1941	64	44	12.51
UMMZ 181375	male	Qarishirin	Kermanshahah	2 January 1941	64	45.5	13.02
UMMZ 181376	male	?	Kermanshahah	14 January 1941	66	43.5	13.55
UMMZ 181377	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	23 January 1941	64	42	13.2
UMMZ 181378	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	25 January 1941	67	44	broken
UMMZ 181379	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	25 January 1941	65	44	14.98
UMMZ 181380	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	3 March 1941	65	49	15.08
UMMZ 181381	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	9 March 1941	65	44	14.98
UMMZ 181383	male	Dow Rud	Lorestan	20 March 1941	64	45	14.72
UMMZ 181398	female	Borujerd	Lorestan	27 July 1942	64	46	14.46
UMMZ 135295	female	unknown	unknown	31 October 1945	65	43.5	11.55

from Azarbayjan-e Gharbi, Kermanshahah and Lorestan (see Table 1). A female from Lorestan, taken in July, is also a *rubicola* (UMMZ 181398), thereby suggesting that this form might also breed, albeit presumably very locally and in small numbers, in the country. The remaining 25 are *S. maurus armenicus* or *S. m. variegatus*.

Urquhart (2002) noted the relative lack of knowledge of the wintering ranges and passage routes of stonechats in the Middle East, including Iran, but given that *rubicola* is a regular winter visitor to adjacent parts of Iraq (Urquhart 2002, and references therein) and is also reported to be a summer visitor at low density throughout Armenia, including on the border with Iran (Adamian & Klem 1999), that it should also winter across western Iran is perhaps unsurprising. Further work should also seek to confirm or reject the possibility, first mooted here, that *rubicola* might breed in the country. General references on the migration of European birds reveal that relatively few species' populations are currently known to move in such a predominantly south-eastern direction; examples include Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus* and Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* (eg Moreau 1972, Elphick 2007). Thus, either European Stonechats breed more extensively into western Asia than we currently realise (based on maps in Urquhart 2002), or migration patterns in European Stonechats and possibly other species may include an easterly component to wintering grounds in Iran and Iraq.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support from the Ornithological Society of the Middle East and the Field Museum of Natural History enabled GMK's studies of Middle Eastern and Socotran birds in ornithological collections in North America. We thank Janet Hinshaw, at UMMZ, for expediting the loan of their *Saxicola torquatus* material from Iran, to the Field Museum. Steve Goodman, at FMNH, assisted with some bibliographic material on Koelz. GMK is grateful to staff members at the Natural History Museum, Tring, for permission to examine specimens of *Saxicola* in their care and for access to relevant library facilities: Robert Prys-Jones, Katrina Cook, Alison Harding and Mark Adams. Emily Cline and Barney Coates helped with specimen measurements. Dr Alan Knox and James Siddle made several pertinent comments on the submitted manuscript.

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