

- £1320 for work on Sociable Lapwing breeding ecology in Kazakhstan (funded by Avifauna through OSME)
- £1000 towards a distribution survey of Imperial Eagles in Azerbaijan in July 2008
- £250 towards the setting up of the Palmyra Society Website, which will focus on local wildlife issues

Thank you

In addition to the departures from Council reported above, writing this report has been one of my last duties as OSME's Chairman. I want to thank the many people who have offered guidance and advice during my six

years in the chair. Together we have achieved a lot—increasing our financial contribution to active fieldwork in the region, increasing the size of *Sandgrouse*, and I hope increasing our engagement with active ornithologists and conservationists in the region. I had hoped to welcome Guy Kirwan as my successor, but sadly he has been prevented from taking the role this year due to illness. Geoff Welch has kindly stepped forward to take the chair for a year, and I thank him for that. I came into the role with high hopes for OSME and I leave it with even higher hopes. There is much still to be done and I thank all the members for their continued support.

NEWS & INFORMATION

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

IRAQ

Children's book on the birds of Iraq

With support from the Italian Ministry of Environment, Land and Sea and



Plate 1. Children's Bird Guide of Iraq.



Plate 2. Children's play at launch of *Children's Bird Guide of Iraq*.

the Kurdish Ministry of Environment, Nature Iraq in partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and BirdLife International has released a new book on birds for the children of Iraq. It is written in Iraq's two main languages, Arabic and Kurdish. Released approximately one year after the first field guide on birds, *Birds of Iraq*, was published; this book is based on a version that was developed several years before on the birds of Jordan by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature RSCN in Jordan.

Using illustrations from the original RSCN book, as well as bird images from the Helm Field Guide, *Birds of the Middle East* by RF Porter, S Christensen & P Schiermacker-Hansen, the *Children's Bird Guide of Iraq* (Plate 1) attempts to introduce Iraq's new generation (Plate 2) to the beauty of birds, an important part of the natural world that surrounds them.

KAZAKHSTAN

Pallid Harrier satellite tracking in Kazakhstan

Since 2006, Natural Research (www.natural-research.org) has conducted conservation-focused research on the breeding ecology of Pallid *Circus macrourus* and Montagu's

Harriers *C. pygargus* in Central Asia in cooperation with the Naurzum Nature Reserve (north-central Kazakhstan) and the National Aviary of Pittsburgh (USA).

During the 2007 breeding season, a female was fitted with a satellite-transmitter. Tracking of this single female has so far yielded interesting information on its migration behaviour. At the end of the breeding period (by mid-August), she left the breeding area and moved north-east, settling about 15 days later in an area about 800 km from its nesting area on the border with Russia. She stayed there for one month. In early October (very late in comparison with other harrier species) she started migrating in the opposite direction, passing over her nesting area before continuing south-west. She migrated through Georgia into Turkey, then travelled south into Syria then Iraq. On 10 November she flew through southern Israel near Eilat and headed toward the Sinai. By mid November she had made it to Sudan where she paused for 1.5 months at a site about 150 km east of Khartoum. In late December she moved about 1000 km southwest, into southern Sudan, where she spent the rest of the winter.

After spending three months in southern Sudan, she left her wintering area on 23 March 2008, and quickly travelled 1400 km to the northeast. She reached the Red Sea coast on 29 March where surprisingly she crossed the Red Sea rather than heading north along the coast to the narrower crossing at Suez. By mid April she was SW of the Aral Sea.

Maps of the journey can be viewed here:

http://www.natural-research.org:80/news/paha_KZsat.htm

LEBANON

Sustainable Hunting Project

Society for Protection of Nature in Lebanon SPNL, in partnership with BirdLife International, Association 'Les Amis des Oiseaux' in Tunisia, and African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement, with financial support from the European Union's LIFE Third Countries fund, VBN and UNDP-GEF recently completed a 3-year initiative (2004–2007) to tackle the issue of hunting in the region. The LIFE Third Countries in the southern and

eastern Mediterranean are: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The overall goal of the project was to "strengthen the management of bird hunting in selected North African and Middle Eastern countries of the Mediterranean region to reduce excessive, indiscriminate and illegal hunting of migratory birds, promote more sustainable hunting practices and enhance the compliance of international and regional agreements on the conservation of migratory birds".

Lebanon and Tunisia acted as a focus for projects that can be replicated in other countries in their regions, Arabic Middle East and French-speaking North Africa. The project ran from November 2004 to October 2007. The Project completed the following activities through a series of regional initiatives and 'model' collaborative projects between government, hunting and conservation groups and other stakeholders in Tunisia and Lebanon. Activities included a review of information on hunting of migratory birds, production of guidelines for Sustainable Hunting of Migratory Birds, the promotion of sustainable hunting behaviour to hunters, school children and local government staff, improving public awareness of bird conservation to target audiences and the wider general public and the development and enforcement of hunting legislation. The project also worked to improve communication and understanding between government, conservation and hunting groups through a series of training workshops.

A summary report was produced about the project summarizing the project's achievements and results. All the above reports and publications are available in Arabic and English, and can be downloaded from the project webpage at the following link:

http://www.birdlife.org/action/change/sustainable_hunting/index.html

(Contributed by Bassima Khatib of SPNL).

QATAR

Qatar joins the BirdLife Partnership

Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Hamad Bin Sahim Al-Thani consort to the Heir Apparent of Qatar, has donated \$1 million to

establish a BirdLife fund to conserve birds and biodiversity, and to promote sustainable use of natural resources through site protection and management across the Middle East. Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher announced the donation during her address at the opening ceremony of BirdLife's 31st Global Council Meeting, at the Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar. During the Meeting, Qatar's Friends of Environment Centre joined the BirdLife Partnership as the BirdLife Affiliate in Qatar.

Among other work, the fund will be used to establish hima, a traditional system with its roots in Islamic law, under which communities manage natural areas such as woodlands, grasslands and wetlands, and protect them from over-exploitation, for the benefit of biodiversity, people and livelihoods. BirdLife Partners in the Middle East have pioneered the revival of hima for the conservation of Important Bird Areas.

Assad Serhal—Director General of the Society for Protection of Nature in Lebanon, and the BirdLife Global Council Member for the Middle-East—who revived the hima approach, said: "this is an historical moment for the relaunch of the traditional hima approach, which uses community-based action to conserve sites in the Arab world"

BirdLife is considering establishing a permanent office in Qatar, to support the development of the bird conservation programme of the Friends of the Environment Centre, and to co-ordinate its activities in the Gulf region. Conservation organisations from two further countries in the Gulf region, Nature Iraq and Bahrain Natural History Society, were also welcomed to the Partnership during the Council meeting. (Birdlife International).

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Abu Dhabi organisations sign agreement to keep track of wild birds

The Environment Agency Abu Dhabi EAD and the Emirates Bird Records Committee EBRC have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that will give EAD access to nearly a quarter of a million reports of wild

birds seen in the United Arab Emirates since the late 1960s.

The Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed by EAD Secretary General Majid Al Mansouri, Simon Aspinall, Chairman of the EBRC, and Tommy Pedersen, Secretary of the EBRC, provides the entire EBRC database of records to be integrated into the EAD environmental database, covering both Abu Dhabi and the other Emirates. This will provide EAD with one of the most extensive national databases of wild bird records in the Arabian peninsula. "The Agency has a policy of building effective partnerships with all those bodies that share its vision for the conservation and protection of the UAE's environment and wildlife," said Al Mansouri. "The EBRC and its members and contributors have worked over many years to collect and maintain this important database, which will provide us with valuable information to assess the changing patterns of wild bird populations throughout the country."

Tommy Pedersen, the EBRC Secretary, who also maintains the bird database, welcomed the signing of the MoU. "The Emirates Bird Records Committee, and the many bird-watchers, residents and visitors, who have contributed to its database over the years, share with EAD a passionate commitment to conservation of the UAE's wildlife and environment. Through this MoU, we will now be able to ensure that the status of the UAE's wild bird populations is given the priority that it deserves in the overall planning for environmental conservation in the UAE, and in Abu Dhabi, in particular," said Pedersen. (Contributed by Simon Aspinall).

YEMEN

National bird for Yemen

In conjunction with the Ministry for Water and the Environment, the Ministry for Tourism, and the Yemen Ornithological Society, the Yemeni Leopard Recovery Program initiated a scheme that involved Yemeni citizens in choosing a national bird for Yemen. BirdLife International also supported the initiative.

The final selection of the bird was made by Environment Minister HE Abdul Rahman Al-



Plate 3. Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus*, Socotra—Yemen’s national bird. © RF Porter

Eryani who announced Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus socotranus* (Plate 3) as Yemen’s national bird. Yemen has also chosen the Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* as the national mammal, the Dragon’s Blood Tree *Dracaena cinnabari* (Plate 4, a Socotran endemic) as the national tree and the Aloe *Aloe irafensis* as the national plant. It is hoped these emblems will spear-head a wider conservation education campaign highlighting Yemen’s biodiversity and threats.

Yemen joins the Convention on Wetlands

Yemen became a member of the Convention on Wetlands on 8 February 2008. The 158th Contracting Party to the Convention has designated as its obligatory first Ramsar site the Detwah Lagoon in the northwest of Socotra. No information or boundary delimitations have yet been received for the new Ramsar site, but a site description will be made up when the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) has been received. (Contributed by Richard Porter).



Plate 4. Dragon’s Blood Tree *Dracaena cinnabari*, Socotra—Yemen’s national tree. © RF Porter

Socotra: nominated World Heritage Site facing development threats

Socotra has been nominated for the prestigious accolade of a World Heritage Site. Abdul-Rahman Al-Eryani, Yemen’s Minister of Water and Environment commented, “We are so proud that our wonderful island of Socotra has been nominated as a World Heritage Site because of its unique biodiversity”. The Minister was also excited by Socotra’s Detwah Lagoon becoming Yemen’s first

Ramsar site following the country's recent accession to the Ramsar Convention.

However, sensitive and ecologically important areas of Socotra are currently threatened by uncontrolled development, in particular the proposal to construct a new road system. The scale and construction of many new roads is inappropriate, given the sensitive nature of the Socotran ecosystem. If these roads are built they will seriously impact on the island's wildlife and especially its unique plants and birds. Nineteen bird species of conservation concern could be affected because of the likely destruction of breeding habitat and nest sites. These include Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax*, Island Cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus*, Socotra Warbler *Incana incana*, Socotra Starling *Onychognathus frater*, Socotra Sunbird *Nectarinia balfouri*, Golden-winged Grosbeak *Rhynchostruthus*

socotranus and Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana*.

"It is essential that this proposed road building programme is examined carefully by the Yemen Government before it seriously affects Socotra's fragile and internationally renowned environment", said Richard Porter, one of the authors of a report on the roads recently sent to the President of Yemen by BirdLife International and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

BirdLife is calling on the government of Yemen to build only essential roads that are beneficial for local communities, in a way that is sensitive to the environment. In addition, the cost saving would be enormous, allowing much needed small-scale local development, and there would be far less impact on wildlife and the island's increasingly important ecotourism.

AROUND THE REGION

Dawn Balmer & Keith Betton (compilers)

Records in *Around the Region* are published for interest only; their inclusion does not imply acceptance by the records committee of the relevant country. All records relate to 2008 unless otherwise stated.

Records and photographs for *Sandgrouse* 31(1) should be sent by 15 December to Around the Region, OSME, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK; or atr@osme.org

ARMENIA

A new trip report from Armenia and Georgia is available for download at the Birdquest website: <http://www.birdquest.co.uk/tripreports.cfm?trip=637>. Several **Black Francolins** *Francolinus francolinus* were heard in May in southern Syunik province. At Lake Sevan, around 40 **Greylag Geese** *Anser anser* with juveniles (with some in Shirak province too) were seen in May, and a probable **Lesser White-fronted Goose** *Anser erythropus* was also present in May. During Apr and May around 40 **Eurasian Wigeons** *Anas penelope* were at Lake Sevan. At least 15 **White-headed Ducks** *Oxyura leucocephala* were seen in Ararat province during May and a total of seven **Eurasian Spoonbills** *Platalea leucorodia* were seen in Ararat and Shirak provinces during

the same month. In Shirak province during Apr, an immature **Dalmatian Pelican** *Pelecanus crispus* and two **Cinereous Vultures** *Aegypius monachus* were also recorded. Two breeding pairs of **Common Crane** *Grus grus* were observed throughout Apr and May in Shirak province, two **Eurasian Oystercatchers** *Haematopus ostralegus* were in Ararat province during May, three **Grey Plovers** *Pluvialis squatarola* were seen in May in Ararat province and Lake Sevan and over 600 **Black-tailed Godwits** *Limosa limosa* were counted in the same area during May. At Lake Sevan, a single **Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* was recorded in May and a total of eight **Whimbrels** *Numenius phaeopus* were seen in Apr and May and at least 20 **Marsh Sandpipers** *Tringa stagnatilis* were present in