

Observation of a large flock of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* in southeast Egypt

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The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* is a globally threatened species breeding in the grassland steppes of southern Russia and central Kazakhstan, though formerly more widespread, and wintering in northeast Africa and India (BirdLife International 2008). It is thought that its breeding range and numbers have been drastically reduced as a result of habitat alteration (eg the conversion of steppes to arable lands in early Soviet times) and later the reduction of short grass steppes due to the large scale collapse of collective livestock farming (Watson *et al* 2006).

This species is listed as Critically Endangered since its population has undergone a very rapid reduction in recent decades and this decline was believed to be continuing (Eichhorn & Khrokov 2002, BirdLife International 2008). Recent fieldwork carried out in Kazakhstan, Syria and Turkey has shown that there is a substantially larger population than previously thought (Watson *et al* 2006, Biricik 2009) and the population might have stabilized (R Sheldon pers comm). Recent research has led to a greater understanding of the species' breeding habitat requirements (Kamp *et al* 2009), although there are still big gaps in our knowledge relating to migration routes and wintering grounds.

During an inventory of water birds in Wadi Gamal national park, a flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings was observed at a mangrove reconstruction (plantation) area at Wadi Lahmi on 8 October 2009 (Plates 1 & 2), close to the Red sea shore (24° 13' N, 35° 25' E). The birds were observed feeding and resting in the shallow littoral zone (0.30 m deep). The birds formed a compact group which took flight and landed together on any occasion when disturbed. Other birds present were at least eight Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*, one Curlew *Numenius*



Plate 1. Part of the flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* seen at Wadi Lahmi mangroves, southeast Egypt, on 8 October 2009. © Attila D Sándor

arquata, one Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and two Greater Sand Plovers *C. leschenaultii*. The Sociable Lapwings stayed together and were observed for a period of c30 minutes and were at the same spot c2 hours later. They were still present 11–18 October (P Nash pers comm).

The Wadi Lahmi mangrove area is part of the coastal reserve of the Wadi Gamal national park and has some healthy mangrove patches and areas where tidal fluctuations have created a wetland containing several shallow lagoons interspersed with young and mature Black Mangrove *Avicenna marina* stands. The area is an important breeding and migratory stopover site for several threatened bird species such as Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*, Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, White-eyed Gull *Larus leucophthalmus* and Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus* (PERSGA/GEF 2003).

The Sociable Lapwing is a rare passage visitor in Egypt, with most observations in the Nile delta and valley and on the Red sea coast. A total of 15 records are listed in Goodman & Meininger (1991), and 3 more are published on the Birding in Egypt webpage (www.birdinginegypt.com). Most observations relate to one or two individuals; all larger groups were observed along the Red sea coast, especially in the mangroves of Wadi Gamal national park. The largest group previously observed, of 24 individuals, was c15 km to the north in Hamata mangroves on 13 November 1982 (Goodman & Meininger 1991). The observation of a flock of 37 birds in the same region suggests an important but overlooked staging area of the species in southeast Egypt.



Plate 2. Part of the flock of 37 Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* seen at Wadi Lahmi mangroves, southeast Egypt, on 8 October 2009. © István Moldován

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