# Bird Sites of the OSME Region 6—Birding the Palmyra area, Syria

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The oasis of Palmyra (Figure 1) lies in the centre of the Syrian *Badia*, the northern end of a vast desert that extends continuously through the Arabian peninsula to the Indian ocean. Twice a year, hundreds of millions of migrants pass along the eastern Mediterranean flyway, breeding in eastern Europe and western Asia and wintering in Africa, and these drylands constitute a formidable barrier for them. As a large oasis far into the desert, Palmyra has always attracted migrants, but until recently birders were unable to visit Syria. The situation has now changed and ecotourists are welcome; and even with limited coverage, the desert round Palmyra has emerged as one of the best birding areas in the OSME region.

The recognition of Palmyra is closely linked to the discovery of its most famous bird, the Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita.* After 1989, when the last birds of the colony at Birecik, Turkey, were taken into captivity (van den Berg 1989), Northern Bald Ibis was believed extinct in the eastern Mediterranean; and in 1994 it was placed on the IUCN Critically Endangered list. But in 1999, a famous local hunter, Adib al-Asaad (AA), shot and ate a large black bird that he did not recognise in the hills near Palmyra (it tasted disgusting). A few years later, by then a passionate conservationist, he leafed through an identification guide belonging to Gianluca Serra (GS) and found an illustration that matched the bird he had shot. There had been no Syrian records for 40 years but he

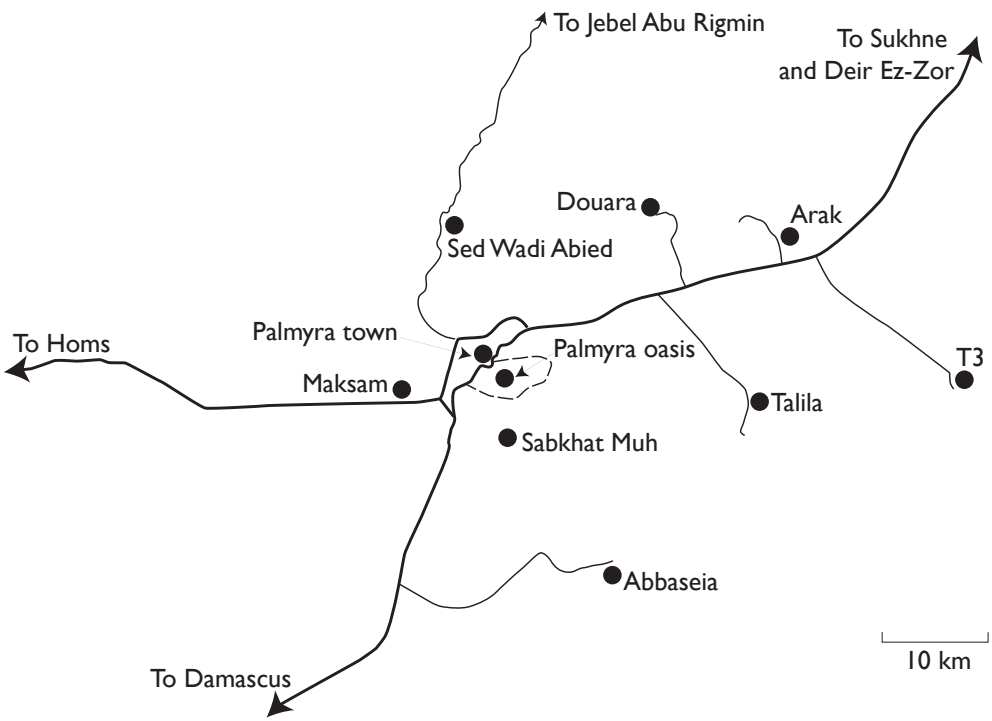


**Figure 1.** The Palmyra area, Syria.

**Table 1.** GPS coordinates of sites asterisked* in the text.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Palmyra** | | |
| Tourist centre | 34° 33' 19.30" N | 38° 16' 34.65" E |
| Palmyra Ruins | 34° 32' 55.35" N | 38° 16' 18.58" E |
| Oweyna | 34° 31' 43.77" N | 38° 14' 32.41" E |
| **Sed Wadi Abied and road north** | | |
| Turning to SWA on Palmyra bypass | 34° 34' 10.67" N | 38° 14' 33.61" E |
| Mazrab plains | 34° 37' 38.98" N | 38° 12' 18.37" E |
| Sed Wadi Abied: W end of dam | 34° 39' 51.67" N | 38° 13' 01.15" E |
| Jebel Abu Rigmin | 34° 52' 14.84" N | 38° 18' 41.53" E |
| Reea al-Hawa | 34° 51' 15.43" N | 38° 26' 19.73" E |
| DesRes | 35° 05' 16.80" N | 38° 13' 23.88" E |
| Isriye | 35° 22' 09.95" N | 37° 46' 32.75" E |
| **Maksam** | | |
| Turning off main road | 34° 31' 05.26" N | 38° 11' 34.27" E |
| The Magic Mulberry | 34° 31' 27.70" N | 38° 11' 26.84" E |
| **Sites along Deir road** | | |
| Turning to Talila | 34° 36' 19.04" N | 38° 26' 34.36" E |
| Talila entrance | 34° 31' 38.43" N | 38° 31' 34.10" E |
| Turning to Douara | 34° 36' 40.18" N | 38° 27' 55.85" E |
| Douara cliffs | 34° 40' 21.92" N | 38° 27' 01.77" E |
| Douara oasis | 34° 40' 02.53" N | 38° 28' 07.02" E |
| Turning to Arak | 34° 37' 42.73" N | 38° 33' 55.56" E |
| Arak dam | 34° 39' 45.37" N | 38° 31' 20.37" E |
| Turning to T3 station | 34° 38' 09.84" N | 38° 36' 07.70" E |
| T3 pumping station | 34° 31' 54.68" N | 38° 44' 22.56" E |
| Feda Wadi Balhan | 34° 42' 01.28" N | 38° 40' 58.65" E |
| Turning to Sukhne dam | 34° 51' 19.43" N | 38° 50' 32.74" E |
| Sukhne dam/house | 34° 51' 33.84" N | 38° 48' 35.69" E |
| Main turning to Sukhne | 34° 51' 48.97" N | 38° 51' 07.71" E |
| Central Sukhne turn | 34° 53' 04.57" N | 38° 52' 11.43" E |
| North Sukhne junction | 34° 53' 23.44" N | 38° 52' 20.53" E |
| Sukhne café | 34° 52' 31.22" N | 38° 54' 03.86" E |
| Deir road sand dunes | 34° 56' 04.21" N | 39° 20' 50.78" E |
| **Routes north of Sukhne** | | |
| Kadim junction | 35° 02' 53.73" N | 38° 24' 35.71" E |
| Junction to Latom and Taybeh | 35° 02' 54.42" N | 38° 54' 44.43" E |
| Zamla junction | 35° 28' 21.53" N | 38° 53' 07.88" E |
| Rasafa fortress | 35° 38' 01.69" N | 38° 45' 20.51" E |
| **Sites along Damascus road** | | |
| Turning to Abbaseia | 34° 22' 02.38" N | 38° 10' 33.02" E |
| Abbaseia | 34° 23' 04.35" N | 38° 23' 18.05" E |

remained convinced that he had shot a Bald Ibis. GS organised the searches that resulted in the discovery in 2002 of the Syrian colony (Serra *et al* 2003). Since then GS has played a central role in its protection and the colony's fortunes have focussed international attention on Palmyra.

## THE PALMYRA AREA: GEOLOGY, CLIMATE AND GENERAL WILDLIFE

Much of the centre of Syria is a low-relief undulating plain roughly 250–500 m asl. As the Arabian tectonic plate thrusts north into the south of Turkey, this has created the Palmyride fold, a geological feature *c*400 km long and up to 100 km wide that extends southwest to northeast across the centre of Syria. The fold appears as a series of whaleback ridges up to 1400 m asl and 400–900 m above the surrounding area, broken up by sheer limestone cliffs and a complex system of wadis. The rocks are sedimentary (limestone, marl and sandstones)

with gravels along the valleys (Serra *et al* 2009a). Syrians call this complex series of ridges the Jebel Amur after the tribe of nomads who live in the mountains, though Government maps refer to it as Jebel Tadmor al Shamaliayeh; the impressive escarpment that runs for *c*50 km just north of the Palmyra–Damascus road is the Jebel Tadmor al Janoubiyeh. Palmyra is immediately south of the mountains at 400 m asl and owes its existence to the many springs that watered the oasis; the most famous, the Eqfa, was close to the Temple of Bel. The climate is continental: summers are dry and hot with daily temperatures of at least 40° C in mid-summer, sometimes reaching 50°. Winters vary greatly in severity but can be bitter; there is often snow on the ridges and heavy snow has fallen on Palmyra within living memory. In January–February 2008, night-time temperatures were well below zero for almost a month; populations of resident species such as larks were probably seriously reduced. Palmyrans welcome the regular evening breeze but it can become very windy at night. Rainfall is relatively high at *c*120 mm per year—thus by some definitions the Badia does not count as desert—but it is unpredictable and can be very localised; most of it falls in winter, often in torrential downpours that wash away any remaining topsoil. There is no running water except after heavy rains; agriculture cannot be sustained without water drawn from wells. Seasonal wetlands include *khabbra*, shallow freshwater lakes sometimes miles long, forming on flats with rock-hard soils and no vegetation, and holding water for months; *sale*, flash floods in dry valleys that can be very dangerous, as there may be no clouds overhead; *sabkhat*, shallow salt-lakes such as Sabkhat Muh; *feda*, smallish pools that form after rains in gullies or along roadsides, often providing excellent birding; and *gahdeer*, natural pools, often up to 2 m deep, narrow with stony sides and bottoms. The Government has dug dozens of freshwater reservoirs, referred to as *sed*, for watering livestock; they are often dry and their steep sides can deter birds but they are always worth checking, particularly if there is vegetation round their edges. Sand storms are common in spring and autumn and increasingly severe; they used not to happen in summer but they were frequent in 2009, presumably a result of drought, overgrazing and erosion. March is the critical month for the desert vegetation and for birders: after heavy rains, annual plants are plentiful and birds disperse throughout the Badia; poor rains (or none) and all is parched; good rains and shallow pools appear at regular sites, excellent for pipits, wagtails, warblers and many other migrants. The last two springs (2008, 2009) have been exceptionally dry with severe consequences for humans and wildlife.

Jebel Amur was once extensively wooded but was completely cleared early in the twentieth century. The present vegetation cover consists in most places of dwarf perennial shrubs with annuals appearing after spring rains; *Artemisia* spp are the principal components of the shrub-steppe of the lowlands with *Salsola* spp in the highlands (Serra *et al* 2009a, b). There is now intense and unsustainable pressure on its fragile ecosystems, particularly from the herds of Bedouin sheep and goats and the Bedu practice of uprooting slow-growing shrubs for firewood. In many areas, the regular traffic of heavy lorries and even bulldozers has further destroyed the desert surface, turning it to powder and worsening erosion. The region once had an interesting faunal community belonging to the Turo-Iranian zoogeographic region but little remains; many species probably disappeared with the woodlands. There is only one surviving species of amphibian, the Eastern Spadefoot Toad *Pelobates syriacus*, but 23 species of reptile, including the increasingly rare monitor lizard *Varanus griseus* and 12 species of snake: the commonest are the Diadem Snake *Sphalerosophis diadema* and Sand Racer *Psammophis schokari*. All snakes are considered dangerous and heavily persecuted, but only two are actually venomous and they rarely attack humans: the False Horned Viper *Pseudocerastes persicus fieldi* and the Black Cobra *Walterinnesia aegyptia*. The Common Chameleon *Chamaeleo chamaeleon* still occurs on Jebel Abu Rigmin but is now very rare. Mammalian herbivores include Libyan Jird *Meriones*

*libycus* and Lesser Jerboa *Jaculus jaculus,* gerbils *Gerbillus* spp, the Long-eared Hedgehog *Hemiechinus auritus*, Cape Hare *Lepus capensis* and perhaps Indian Crested Porcupine *Hystrix indica*. A tiny number of Sand Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa marica* still survive in the remotest areas. The present status of most of the carnivores is unknown. There are two fox species, Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* and Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*, two species of cats, Wildcat *Felis silvestris lybica* and Sand Cat *Felis margarita*, and possibly Marbled Polecat *Vormela peregusna.* Asiatic (Golden) Jackals *Canis aureus* are common scavengers round human habitations; Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena* and the Wolf *Canis lupus* still occur but are heavily persecuted. This is essentially a relict mammal fauna; in the twentieth century alone Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr,* Nubian Ibex *Capra nubiana*, Mountain Gazelle *Gazella gazella* and Asian Wild Ass *Equus hemionus* were hunted to extinction. Elderly Amur men still remember when the hills held flocks of hundreds of Sand Gazelle hunted by Leopard. The mammal that increasingly monopolises every available resource is, of course, *Homo sapiens*.

Birds are hunted for pleasure and for the pot. The avifauna has probably suffered massively but unfortunately there are no studies to provide baseline data. A century ago, the desert was graced by the Asian subspecies of Ostrich *Struthio camelus syriacus*; it is now globally extinct. Eastern Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*, common 70 years ago, has been hunted out and the sandgrouse, vultures and Northern Bald Ibis seem to be following; even Eurasian Stone Curlews *Burhinus oedicnemus* are now rare. Many hunting parties have been reduced to shooting larks. A Presidential decree has outlawed hunting; the ban is generally ignored though the threat of summoning the police is a useful deterrent. A recent development is to use mist nets to catch migrants, particularly in September, which are then sold via refrigerated trucks to up-market restaurants in the major cities, the 'Figbird Trade' (Murdoch 2008). Visiting birders are asked to record, photograph and report this illegal trade to the Desert Commission in Palmyra.

## THE CITY OF PALMYRA AND THE TOWN OF TADMOR

Palmyra is a Roman name meaning 'city of palm trees' but Syrians refer to it by its ancient Semitic name 'Tadmor'. 150 km to the west is the fertile valley of the Ghab, the most northern extension of the Rift Valley, through which runs the river Asir (in Greek times the Orontes); 150 km to the northeast is the Euphrates. Thus Palmyra is halfway across the desert between the Mediterranean basin and Mesopotamia. It has always been a stepping stone for people as well as for birds, with trade its livelihood; the first historical reference is in the 2nd millennium BC. The ancient city reached its zenith in the third century CE when its legendary queen Zenobia challenged Rome for control of the eastern Mediterranean; she was crushed and dragged through Rome in chains of gold. Until 100 years ago, Palmyra had only a tiny population which sought refuge in the Temple of Bel from marauding Bedouin; a visit is said to have required a five days' journey across the desert and an armed escort. With the French mandate, the new town of Tadmor developed to the northeast of the Roman city. Tadmor is expanding very fast; it now has a population of at least 60 000. This has caused huge strain on the fragile desert ecosystem: the water table is falling fast (apparently 15 m in 10 years) and the present farming schemes, which are totally dependent on pumped water, are unlikely to be sustainable. Many farmers are now leaving the land because the cost of running pumps has become prohibitive.

Tourist Palmyra now has hotels to suit all tastes and a variety of restaurants and cafes along the main tourist street* [* see Table 1 for GPS coordinates]. An evening drink on the patio of the Zenobia hotel, on the very edge of the ancient city, is a pleasant way to watch the sun setting on the ruins in splendour; unfortunately, prices are high and the service often lethargic. Prices for rooms vary wildly according to the number of tourists in town

and time of year, with peak seasons roughly coinciding with migration: mid-March to mid-May and mid-September to October. Be prepared to bargain. There are usually many empty beds but do not try to stay during the near-annual Palmyra Desert Festival; the town is booked out. The town is very safe—as is the rest of Syria—though some street kids have become a nuisance.

## VISITING SYRIA—GENERAL

One of the greatest pleasures of a visit to Syria is the genuine friendliness of the people; most Syrians treat visitors as guests rather than as foreigners. Hospitality is a central pillar of Islam; I remember standing freezing by a reservoir counting Coot *Fulica atra* in the cold, and cursing when some farmers approached us—and then appreciating that they had brought us a pot of hot, sugary tea. And we had never even seen them before! If you are in the desert, there is a good chance that Bedouin will ask you and your Syrian guide to stay for tea—and possibly a meal—an invitation not to miss, time permitting; the food will be excellent and the friendship genuine. Just make sure that you behave as your Syrian guide advises; there is a clear code of conduct. It is a good opportunity to show the Bedouin your bird books (especially the larger falcons) and to find out what is around; they know many of the larger species well.

Many foreign birders dismiss the idea of visiting Syria because they think it is too dangerous. It is actually a safe destination, precisely because of extensive security. The police keep a close eye on visitors in many areas, notably the Euphrates valley and the Jazira (the northeast), but if you behave sensibly and explain that you are interested in birds, you are unlikely to have any trouble. As a general rule, I encourage everyone to look through my binoculars—cries of 'Aaah!'—and I show them an identification guide, starting with Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* ('hudhud' in Arabic and specifically protected in the Koran) and bee-eaters (W'rwar), and then moving to the larger falcons (all called Sak'r), which always provoke intense excitement. Understanding is assured, friendships made and invitations to tea often follow.

In the last 30 years, there has been a huge expansion in the road network with good access far into the desert. I rent a car from an international firm and pay by credit card in the UK. It is possible to hire a car in Tadmor though I have never done so; I once hired a 4WD for a day. Petrol is widely available but it is wise to keep your tank at least half full; there are very few stations outside Palmyra, even on the main road. Garages charge a standard rate, which in September 2009 was 40 Syrian Pounds per litre, about 50 pence sterling. The roads are usually excellent, with little traffic outside towns, but beware the many long-distance coaches, driven at high speed with little regard for cars. Minimise driving in Damascus and Aleppo, it is not for those of a weak constitution. Do not drive at night except in well-lit areas; many vehicles do not use their lights. One interesting feature of Syrian roads is that some local people drive the wrong way down the road, usually but not always on dual carriageways—particularly ancient trucks, motor bikes and tractors. Thus it is possible after dark to meet an unlit tractor plodding up your side of the road. This is best avoided. Avoid sleeping in your car at night unless you really have to; local people always seem to notice and may alert the police, who will check to make sure you are not a smuggler or a terrorist. There are many checkpoints along border roads; accept them with resignation.

There is now a bank in Palmyra (but no ATM). ATMs are rare, even in major cities, and then they may not work or accept your card. Do not bother with traveller's cheques; no-one will change them. I happily carry around a wad of cash; there is little crime in Syria, theft is rare and violent crime almost unknown.

**Plate 1.** Palmyra ruins, 23 May 2007. © *David Murdoch*

## PALMYRA RUINS AND OASIS

The fabulous ruins of the ancient city* (Plate 1) cannot be missed, even by the most narrow-minded birder, as the road actually goes through their centre. Rewards include the resident Mourning Wheatears *Oenanthe lugens* (common) and records of wintering Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* and Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis*; migrant raptors often fly over. Sadly, excessive water abstraction has lowered the water table and the spring that was the life source of the ancient city, the Eqfa, dried up 15 years ago; a dusty thicket remains, not worth visiting. The palmerie itself is an atmospheric place, a vast maze of date palms, olive trees, meandering lanes and high, white walls; it is an enjoyable place to wander but difficult birding and usually unrewarding. Eastern Olivaceous Warblers *Iduna pallida* and Laughing Doves *Stigmatopelia senegalensis* are characteristic species. It is very under-watched and there may well be discoveries to make—interesting records include several observations of White-cheeked Bulbuls *Pycnonotus* (*leucogenys*) *leucotis* in the 1970s (Kinzelbach 1986), though there have been no claims for many years; the first breeding records for Syria of Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* in 2007 (Murdoch & Betton 2008); and several sightings of Namaqua Dove from the south of the oasis at Oweyna*. Possible sightings of Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* in late spring deserve to be followed up; there are no recent Syrian records but few birders visit at this time of year and a small breeding population could be overlooked. It looks good habitat for Hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* too. The orchards open out towards the eastern edge and the birding is better, with fields good for pipits and wagtails; but if time is limited it is best spent in smaller oases.

To the southeast of the oasis lies Sabkhat Muh, a seasonally flooded salt-lake up to 20 km long with scattered tamarisk *Tamaricus* sp round its edges (Evans 1994). It is usually dry but can fill overnight after heavy rains; Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* and duck such as Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* and Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* then appear. A

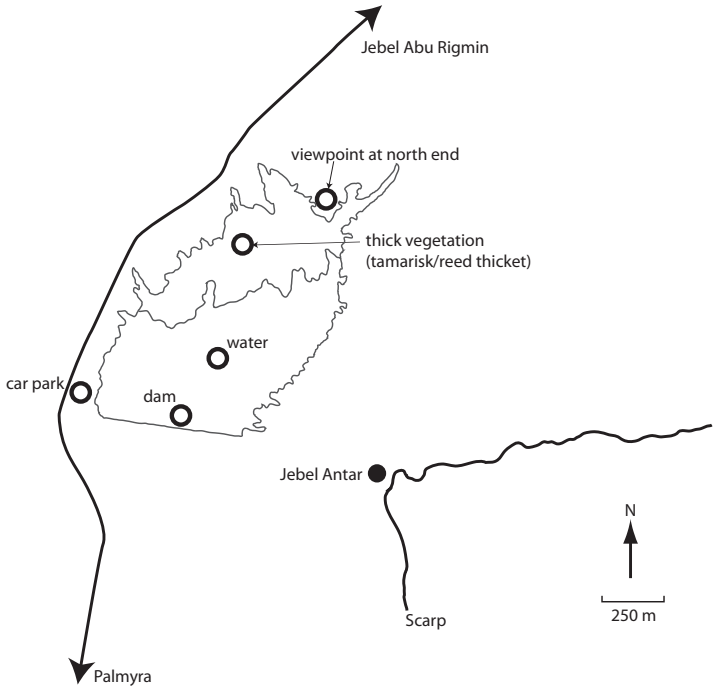


**Figure 2.** Sed Wadi Abied, Palmyra area, Syria.

small flock of Common Cranes *Grus grus* winters in the area. Few foreign birders have visited; driving is tricky and should only be attempted with Syrian guides.

## SED WADI ABIED (FIGURE 2)

About 13 km to the north, but 20 km by road, is Sed Wadi Abied*—literally the 'dam in the white valley'. SWA (Plate 2) is the largest water body for over 100 km in all directions and is exceptional for its range and volume of migrants: huge numbers of passerines in the bushes, waders, storks and herons along the shore, terns over the water, duck on it, and raptors overhead.

The reservoir is *c*1 km long and roughly triangular. The water level varies widely; in some summers (including 2009) it is completely dry. The edge closest to the road is muddy with extensive areas of reeds, fringed by dense tangles of tamarisk bushes often fizzing with migrants. A large area of thickets at the back often holds roosting passage raptors such as Black Kite *Milvus migrans* or harriers; there are large winter roosts of Common Linnets *Carduelis cannabina*, Desert Finches *Rhodospiza obsoleta* and Dead Sea Sparrows *Passer moabiticus*, hunted by Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* and Merlins *Falco columbarius*. Through the thick stuff passes a stony wadi; the muddy area where it enters the reservoir can be outstanding for waders—recent records include Terek *Xenus cinereus* and

**Plate 2.** Sed Wadi Abied and Jebel Antar from the north side, 15 June 2003. © *David Murdoch*

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*. Crakes are regular on passage. Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* nest when the water level is high and Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*, Garganey *Anas querquedula* and Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* have probably bred (there are no confirmed breeding records of the last two species for Syria). Though it is far into the desert, it boasts the first breeding record for Syria of Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* (Tavares *et al* 2000)! A small flock of Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* wintered in 2001/2002 until one was shot.

The best way to work SWA is to park on the small area of tarmac by the west end of the dam* and to work along the near edge towards the back, all the way round if possible to the bluffs on the east side that overlook the north end. The dam itself and the further side are less interesting. It is possible with care to drive right round the back of the thickets onto the bluffs. The valley is lined by impressive cliffs with the majestic crag of Jebel Antar dominating the Sed. Visitors should check the skyline constantly: this is the most regular site in Syria for Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Little Swift *Apus affinis* and Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*. Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* still breed locally and Eurasian Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* sometimes visit; Chukar *Alectoris chukar* are heard but rarely seen; Desert Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* breeds in the ravines nearby. Mid-morning flurries of passage raptors can yield ten species in an hour. During migration, SWA deserves a daily visit, which can easily absorb a morning.

Sadly, disturbance is rapidly increasing. There is still some hunting (though local conservationists are trying bravely to stop it), grazing pressure is intense, the reeds are used for fodder and sometimes burnt, and permanent habitations are now appearing in the valley close by. SWA could be a spectacular centrepiece for educating Palmyrans about wildlife and nature conservation; it deserves full protection and formal designation as a nature reserve.

SWA is easy to reach; from the town centre, take the road on the north side of the castle to a junction on the ring road 3 km to the northwest. The turning* is now well signposted; it is distinguished by a sign in English that states 'White Vally Damp' and another in Arabic and English that proclaims 'Bald Ibis Reserve', 'Birds Breeding Area' and 'No Hunting'—if only! A blind summit 4 km from the turning must be negotiated with care as large trucks thunder over it at high speed. The Mazrab plains*, 2 km short of SWA, are good lark country, with resident Bar-tailed *Ammomanes cinctura* and Temminck's Larks *Eremophila bilopha*, Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* in season, and a farm with trees that attract migrants.

## THE HILLS NORTH OF PALMYRA

An attractive road winds northwest from Palmyra, past SWA, over broken ridges in the direction of Aleppo; this is the only access by asphalt to an intriguing area ripe for exploration. The ridges were once densely wooded with Atlantic Pistachio *Pistacia atlantica* but huge numbers were felled in Ottoman times, it is said to have fed the fires of the Hejaz railway. Today, there are just the bare bones of the hills, overgrazed by hordes of sheep; occasional pistachios survive, but often with branches lopped for firewood. Seedlings have no chance. This is clearly an ecological tragedy needing serious and sustained government action to remedy. The highest ridge, Jebel Abu Rigmin* (Plate 3), is noticeably cooler than the plains, with frosts in winter and scattered trees. It is worth pausing to check the pistachios and gullies for passerine migrants but the area flatters to deceive—it is popular with Bedu and their herds, particularly in the hot season, and any tender vegetation is quickly nibbled away. I have walked the ridges looking for species such as Rufous-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe* (*xanthoprymna*) *xanthoprymna* or Cinereous Bunting *Emberiza cineracea*, which are found in similar habitat in Turkey, but so far without success. Otherwise, there

are few birds except Brown-necked Ravens *Corvus ruficollis* and the occasional Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*.

Off the road, 4WD and an expert guide are essential. Most of the area is *terra incognita* to birders. I spent a day here in May 2006 with AA, striking east through an area known as Reea al-Hawa* ('Place of Fresh Air'), thence through a broad valley with much larger numbers of pistachios, giving a parkland feel that I have never experienced elsewhere round Palmyra, and northeast to the main road at Arak*. Observations included significant numbers of singing Isabelline Wheatears *Oenanthe isabellina* and Pale Rockfinches *Carpospiza brachydactyla*, substantial colonies of Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* and Rock Sparrows *Petronia petronia*, several European Rollers *Coracias garrulus* and, in the pistachios, singing Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*. Sadly, a young plantation had recently been felled, presumably for firewood. The scenery was magnificent and we had a warm welcome and a delicious meal in a Bedouin tent. This is an area that you should explore.

**Plate 3.** Jebel Abu Rigmin, 10 September 2007. Scattered pistachios *Pistacia atlantica* still survive but are not regenerating. © *David Murdoch*

## THE ISRIYE ROAD

The road beyond Jebel Abu Rigmin to Isriye is the wildest and most beautiful road I have yet found in the Badia, but it should not be tackled without a Syrian guide familiar with it and not in the afternoon; there are no people, no signposts and several junctions. Travel with a full tank of petrol, plenty of water (there is none en route), a mobile phone (though there may be no reception) and, if possible, a GPS (which is theoretically illegal in Syria). Do not drive more than 60 km/h if you cannot clearly see the road in front of you as it can hide unpleasant surprises. I have twice come across bridges or culverts washed away by flash floods and the improvised track round was barely passable in daytime; there was no sign that the road was about to end in a 2 m vertical drop, except for small piles of rocks on the road that were easy to ignore. Do not attempt this route in the dark. However, for the adventurous traveller, this is a wonderful road through majestic scenery that cuts straight across the wild lands north of the Jebel Amur.

It first descends a steep, disintegrating stretch of tarmac onto a plateau almost always empty of people—the solitude of this area is one of its greatest attractions. About 20 km beyond Jebel Abu Rigmin and 2 km to the east of the road, a large reservoir is set in stark desert hills, the 'DesRes'*; tracks lead down towards its edge and in dry weather a saloon car driven carefully can reach a few fields often buzzing with migrants. The reservoir is at least 2 km long and excellent for waders; there are usually a few duck and often terns and raptors. Human disturbance has been minimal on the few occasions I have visited. It is easy to spend a couple of hours here. The road continues through Fasadh, a settlement with a police station and some forlorn trees; this is probably the only place to seek help. Beyond, there is a complicated zigzag of roads to negotiate before an excellent stretch reaches a major road junction at Isriye*, a small settlement with an impressive Roman temple and two cafes, but (in September 2009) no garage and no petrol. If you cross the main road and continue north, you eventually pass via the Khanasser valley and the western shores of Sabkhat Jabbul to the dusty town of Sfire* and, finally, Aleppo; this road

is excellent and direct. By road, the distance from Palmyra to Isriye is only *c*150 km, though it feels much longer; from Isriye to Sfire is *c*100 km.

The route is excellent for wheatears and larks, for instance Greater Hoopoe *Alaemon alaudipes*, Temminck's and Lesser Short-toed *Calandrella rufescens*. The few bushes or trees are worth checking for migrants. This is prime habitat for Houbara and sandgrouse but I fear that they have been hunted out. Migrant raptors such as harriers and eagles can appear at any time; Short-toed and Golden Eagles probably breed. The scenery and solitude on this road are overpowering.

## THE NORTHERN BALD IBIS COLONY

For obvious reasons, I cannot disclose the breeding sites used by this iconic bird—the very last wild colony of the migratory eastern population, which is now known to winter in the Ethiopian highlands (Lindsell *et al* 2009). Visitors must take a guide. The range of birds in the area depends very much on the recent rainfall. In 2003, a wet spring, there were large numbers of larks including Dunn's Lark *Eremalauda dunni* (Murdoch *et al* 2005a) probably breeding, Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* and Desert Finch. A Basalt Wheatear (said to be a black morph of Mourning Wheatear) was in the gullies below the nesting cliff in 2007. The springs of 2008 and 2009 were very dry, the sheep grazed any edible vegetation away, there were very few birds and in both years the Ibis failed to raise any young. Attempts may be made to supplement the population with young birds from the semi-feral colony at Birecik in Turkey; this is the last chance to save the colony. If you want to see wild individuals of this charismatic bird in their natural environment, go very soon; it is worth it.

## MAKSAM FARM

The Dowa valley just west of Palmyra supports several farms irrigated by artesian water. The closest, Maksam* (Plate 4), is an excellent site for migrants; it is well watered, with thick, lush vegetation, and it has one remarkable tree. It is off the Palmyra–Homs road, 2 km from the Palmyra bypass and *c*8 km from the centre of Palmyra: good in spring for a visit before breakfast. Turn off at a pile of stones* on the north side of the road, drive north along a poor sandy track for *c*700 m and listen (in spring) for Ménétries' Warbler *Sylvia mystacea*, a male of which seems to sing regularly in the bushes. Entering an area of scattered farm buildings, park discreetly and ask anyone on site for permission to look round—showing a bird guide always helps. You may be offered a cup of tea. Most of the farm is a warren of orchards, olives, dates and pomegranates, hiding warblers such as Barred *Sylvia nisoria* and Olive-tree *Hippolais olivetorum*; its size (10–20 ha) means that birds, once lost, are difficult to find again. The olives thin out down the hill, creating clearings good for flycatchers and pipits. Water flows down open channels, creating wet grassy areas popular with skulking species such as Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* and River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis*. Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes* breeds as, probably, does Namaqua Dove—there have been several reports. Back towards the main road are several tiny fields, well-watered and good for pipits and butterflies. Maksam is a good site for

**Plate 4.** Maksam, 11 May 2006. An excellent site for passerine migrants. © *David Murdoch*

Desert Finch; the distinctive flight call is the best way to pick up this handsome bird. The star spot of all is the 'Magic Mulberry'*, a tree at the far (western) end of the farm buildings by a smelly water pump, that fruits abundantly in May and is an irresistible attraction to hungry migrants (and to me). In the one tree at one time I have had 50 Olivaceous Warblers and 20 Eurasian Blackcaps *Sylvia atricapilla*; up to four Eurasian Golden Orioles *Oriolus oriolus*; Rose-coloured Starlings *Pastor roseus* twice; and the only Syrian records of Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* (in May 2006 and 2007). Sadly, I have had to remove netting from the lower branches; birds are trapped even here. Maksam is drier in autumn and does not hold birds quite as well. Irrigated farms, plantations and cereal fields continue for at least 10 km further towards Homs; the area deserves fuller exploration.

## THE MAIN ROAD FROM DAMASCUS THROUGH PALMYRA TO DEIR EZ-ZOR

This beautiful road is often of outstanding interest for birds. Much of the interest is in diurnal migrants moving through the Badia but a major feature after a wet spring is the damming effect of the asphalt, which produces a series of *feda,* roadside pools that can hold water well into May. These are always worth checking if time allows. From Palmyra towards Damascus, there is a large pool at the junction with the Baghdad road, *c*145 km from Palmyra, and another 19 km short of Palmyra. Northeast from Palmyra, Feda Wadi Balhan* (*c*35 km) is a good spot. The village of Arak*, *c*25 km from Palmyra towards Deir ez-Zor, and the town of Sukhne*, *c*45 km further, have gardens and orchards, worth checking if time allows, and reservoirs. The Arak dam* is in the hills about 8 km from the main road; I have only been there once and was not impressed, it was steep-sided with a few bushes and a lot of disturbance. There is (usually) petrol at two of Sukhne's roadside cafes; it is worth stopping for tea in the café* on the eastern edge of Sukhne as the surrounding trees attract migrants into the small olive grove behind. For those unlucky enough to miss Hoopoe Lark round Palmyra, an area of well-vegetated sand dunes* *c*110–115 km along the Deir road is worth a look. This section of the road appears prone to sand storms. A flat valley at Shola, *c*190 km from Palmyra and just 20 km short of Deir ez-Zor, is outside the strict remit of this article, but when it floods, a shallow splashy wetland up to 1 km wide is formed, a magnet for waders and ducks that can easily absorb an entire morning.

The distance from Damascus to Palmyra is *c*250 km; allow 3 hours as it is easy to take the wrong turning leaving Damascus. From Palmyra to Deir is *c*210 km, an excellent fast road, less scenically stunning than the first section but still wild and exciting; allow 2½ hours. If the birding is good, it can take double the time!

## ROUND SUKHNE

Sukhne is a dusty town on the Deir road *c*70 km from Palmyra (see above). A sewage ditch runs out into the desert on the south side of the road; it stinks but attracts migrant passerines and a few desperate waders. If you have a couple of hours to spare, Sukhne dam can be very good. Coming from Palmyra, the turning* is on the left 1.2 km before the main turn into Sukhne; it is distinguished by about six blue signs including to Katkat and Kadim. The asphalt road is old and full of potholes; this is a good area for Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*. Fork left after *c*1 km, keeping on the old road, which bends up after 3 km to a house* with a small orchard worth checking and the reservoir bed below; it is courteous to greet the family. The reservoir was dry in the autumns of 2008 and 2009 but the dense knee-high plants attracted huge numbers of small migrants—warblers, larks, chats—hunted by predators such as shrikes and harriers. The valley 'upstream' was green and looked good as well. If you bear right at the fork, a new asphalt road of variable

quality heads northwest through glorious desert scenery; on your left (to the south) are the mountains of Jebel Amur and on your right a sheer cliff 10 km long. Desert Wheatears and Hoopoe Larks are common. After *c*55 km, turn left* (west) just after the village of Kadim and a good road takes you straight to Isriye, *c*130 km from Sukhne. I presume that if you continue north at Kadim you will head up to the Euphrates valley—I have not been that way yet. Any greenery can be very productive, but ask permission from the local people as it is usually their garden; I dislodged five reluctant Golden Orioles from a melon patch in September 2009.

A fine desert road runs north from Sukhne to the mid-Euphrates valley via the magnificent late Roman fortress of Rasafa. Enter Sukhne via the main turning* and follow the road, which becomes a dual carriageway, for *c*3 km; 200 m after a sharp bend to the right, turn left* in the town centre and head 500 m north to the junction* on the north side of town. If you get lost, ask a local 'Alla Kawm?' ('What is the way to Kawm?'); few people speak English here. Sukhne is a warren of narrow streets and the only place in Syria that I have felt any hostility. But once you are through town, the road is excellent and newly tarmacked; it passes through miles of empty desert to a junction*, easily missed, 24 km from the main road and signposted straight on (west) to Al Latom and right (north) to At Taybeh. Take the north turn, passing through a string of desolate villages, including Kawm, to a junction* at Zamla, *c*77 km from Sukhne, where you take a left turn for Rasafa. Again, check any greenery; Zamla has two large gardens with trees good for migrants. Rasafa* is *c*100 km from Sukhne, the Euphrates valley at Mansura (on Ba'ath lake) another 27 km. The city of ar-Raqqa, *c*60 km from Rasafa, has good hotels.

## DOUARA

Douara is the Arabic word for 'circle'; the reason is clear on entry to this magnificent amphitheatre of cliffs* (Plate 5). This may be the last colony of Griffon Vultures in Syria, with *c*8–15 nests along several km of precipice; a flock of 17 was seen in autumn 2008 (AA pers comm). Unfortunately, there are no firm data as to whether numbers are stable or decreasing; a formal annual count with documentation of breeding success is much needed. However, the terrain is formidably broken and monitoring the nests would be a real challenge. A survey is important as the Griffons were until recently persecuted by the Bedouin, who accuse them of eating young lambs; one was killed and its body parts sold for medicines in Tadmor in 2008. Further, although Douara is ferociously hot and almost devoid of vegetation, even here there is human disturbance: a prefabricated base for oil workers was erected in spring 2008 directly beneath the breeding cliffs. It has now been removed but a well and a settling tank remain. Two tiny patches of vegetation* close to buildings can be full of migrant passerines and deserve a look if there is time. There are few other birds—Egyptian Vultures, Rock Doves *Columba livia*, Brown-necked Ravens, sometimes Little Swifts and Lesser Kestrels—and an autumn visit may not be very productive. The area has always looked good for Hooded *Oenanthe monacha* and White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, both of which have been reported from the Palmyra area. The turning* to Douara, a yellow sign followed by a white sign to 'Musadira', is off the

**Plate 5.** Douara, 12 April 2006. The cliffs hold Syria's last colony of Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*. © *David Murdoch*

Deir ez-Zor road, *c*20 km from Palmyra and *c*2 km beyond the turning to Talila; Douara is easy to combine with a visit to Talila. The track runs north and is initially grit; I have seen Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Lark here. Good tarmac starts after 5 km, just as you enter the circle; take the left turn at the junction 1 km further on.

Ecotourism is the best hope for the survival of this beleaguered but strategic colony. Birders to Palmyra during the breeding season are asked to visit Douara and to highlight its importance to the relevant authorities. PSPEW members (see below) plan to set up a 'vulture restaurant' on site; they are looking for funding to buy a small truck for transporting animal carcasses to the cliffs. This will be a potential tourist attraction as well as a safe source of food for the breeding birds.

## TALILA

Syria's first formal protected area, Talila was set up in 1992 and covers 220 km² (Serra *et al* 2009a); it was chosen as a representative area of Badia still in relatively good condition. It was fenced in the early 1990s to allow the vegetation to regenerate, since when the plant cover inside the reserve has made a remarkable recovery (Plate 6). It lies on a low ridge with undulating plains forming the main habitat, small sand dunes in the west and many wadis, rich in plants, running across it. With this variety of habitats, it holds the highest diversity of perennial plants in the Palmyra area and a rich annual flora (grasses, legumes and forbs) that act as an important seasonal food supply for herbivores. Herds of Sand Gazelles and Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* have been 'reintroduced' to a fenced inner reserve but they are fed daily by reserve staff. Talila was the site of a co-operative project between the Italian and Syrian governments in 1996–2004; GS was the wildlife officer for the project from 2000–2004 and trained several Palmyrans in nature conservation techniques. With a combination of habitat conservation and good coverage, Talila has many outstanding records. A small flock of 100–200 Common Cranes winters in the general area. It is excellent for larks: Hoopoe Larks and Bar-tailed Larks are common in the sandy areas with Temminck's, Desert and Lesser Short-toed Larks on stonier ground. Isabelline and Desert Wheatears breed and Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii* is common in winter. Small numbers of Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* were seen in 2001–2004, the only recent records from the Palmyra area (Murdoch & Serra 2006). The area is good for shrikes, with records of Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius* (*meridionalis*) *pallidirostris* (Syria's first, in February 2004) and Northern Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*. Most of Syria's records of Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* were made here in February 2004 during the Syrian Wetland Expedition (Murdoch *et al* 2005b); this species is easy to miss and may winter in small numbers in the Badia. There is a recent report of Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* breeding in the Badia close to Talila and an immature Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus* was in the area in October 2008 (GS pers comm).

**Plate 6.** Talila fence, April 2009. This shows clearly the effect of overgrazing. © *Gianluca Serra*

The turning to Talila* on the Deir ez-Zor road *c*18 km from Palmyra centre is well signposted. A 4WD is needed for full access—much of the reserve is very sandy and saloon cars will not take kindly to the tracks. The access road is 12 km long and often excellent birding: it is a good area for Hoopoe Larks, I have seen Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* chicks close

to the road in April and dozens of Cream-coloured Coursers on passage in early May. The tarmac creates *feda*, small pools of water with grassy edges good for pipits and wagtails. The scattered trees by the entrance* are excellent for passage migrants and often hold roosting raptors; I watched a flock of 500 Eurasian Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* here in May 2006. Any water source should be carefully checked; there used to be a leaking pipe with a patch of splashy grass that always held skulking migrants. A site for Desert Eagle Owl close to the entrance is a fine way to end a day's birding.

## THE BADIA SOUTH AND EAST OF PALMYRA

The drylands south and east of Palmyra are rarely visited and a day in the Badia, checking out the tiny settlements and reservoirs scattered through the desert, can be memorable. In particular, the Hamad plateau close to the Iraqi border is remote and exciting. The habitat is mostly flat, stony plains, rock pavements, low hills and shallow wadis; there is little sand and no areas of towering romantic rolling dunes. Where vegetation survives, it consists of dwarf perennial shrubs with tamarisk along wadis; the annuals that appear in wet springs are soon grazed away. Birding during migration can be exceptional: one group found 15 species of warbler in a small oasis on an early October morning with a strong supporting cast including both species of Rock Thrush and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. AA enthuses about al-Waar, a rocky area with deep valleys 40 km from the Iraqi border; I have not yet been there because of potential security problems. He reports that the area holds Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* and *Ammoperdix* partridges, probably See-see Partridge *A. griseogularis*; Spotted Sandgrouse chicks were found here in 2008. A large reservoir, deep and stony, holds water throughout the summer and is excellent for migrants. In the years when Iraq and Syria had very poor relations, the strip of no-man's-land along the border was off limits and the vegetation rapidly recovered, becoming thick and lush. AA saw a Caracal *Caracal caracal* here in the 1980s but relations have improved and the border zone is again heavily grazed. AA also reports a Dark Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates* in the Hamad in the 1990s—and as he correctly identified the 1999 Northern Bald Ibis several years later, I believe him. Coverage in winter has been very poor but the desert may hold substantial numbers of Eurasian Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*; Sociable Lapwing must be a possibility in early spring. It is superb raptor country; all four harriers pass through in season, feeding on exhausted migrants, and small numbers of Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* winter, probably with the occasional Steppe Eagle.

You should not contemplate leaving the asphalt road without a Syrian guide who is highly experienced and knows the area intimately; also take a mobile phone, GPS and plenty of water. Make sure your hotel staff know of your plans in case you get into trouble. However, 4WD is not essential if the ground is dry and your guide is satisfied with a saloon car. But the dangers are much less than they once were as you will rarely be far from humans—often much closer than you might wish: in the last generation, Bedouin encampments have sprung up throughout the Badia, supported physically by tankers carrying water and financially by the high price of Syrian lamb. As a result, areas once free of humans for most of the year now support a semi-permanent presence, particularly after wet springs. The situation is not sustainable; the surface of the desert is cracking up and blowing away. On the positive side, there are several small reservoirs, though they are often dry, and water points at regular intervals, with vegetable gardens and melon beds to succour thirsty migrants and, usually, somewhere, a dripping tap.

Several oases are accessible for those unwilling to travel off the asphalt. T3*, *c*40 km east of Palmyra, is the third pumping station on the oil pipeline from Iraq to the Mediterranean; the turning* is *c*35 km along the Deir road and the access road *c*18 km long. There is a

long-established settlement here but also an army base, so any birding should be done with discretion. Abbaseia* is famous for its sulphur pools and boasts an up-market hotel. The turning* is *c*26 km towards Damascus from Palmyra centre; the approach road winds for *c*23 km through high-quality desert—mainly flat gravel plains and hard earth with scattered bushes—good for Temminck's, Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Larks, migrant wheatears and Tawny Pipits *Anthus campestris*. A water point 9 km along the road is worth a stop. Unfortunately, when I visited the hotel in September 2009, there seemed to be very few migrants in the bushes. When I entered the foyer, the staff were sitting on the floor making snares for falcons. They showed me the corpses of the 'figbirds' they had netted that morning—nearly 100, including several species of warbler, Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*, Thrush Nightingale and Golden Oriole. They sell the birds for consumption as a delicacy in the major cities (Murdoch 2008). The general rules are that smaller oases are easier to work; the more remote the better; always explain to local people what you are doing and show them an identification book; and any source of water will be a magnet.

## BIRDING THE PALMYRA AREA THROUGH THE YEAR

Few birders have visited in mid-winter and information is limited; the temperature and recent rainfall will greatly influence what birds are around. The palmerie holds wintering Black Redstarts *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus collybita* and Common Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs*, Eurasian Blackbirds *Turdus merula* and Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*; many 'chiffchaffs' make odd calls suggesting that they may be of Caucasian origin. Sed Wadi Abied attracts small numbers of duck and much larger flocks of passerines that roost in the thickets at the back; these in turn bring in raptors such as Merlin and Hen Harrier. After heavy rainfall, Sabkhat Muh fills and waterbirds soon appear. Siberian Stonechats *Saxicola maurus* of several forms and Finsch's Wheatears are common in open areas and Bluethroats *Luscinia svecica*, White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* and Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta* feed along water edges. At least three 'forms' of Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus sensu lato* winter in Syria: 'Turkestan Shrike' *L.* (*i.*) *phoenicuroides* is probably commoner than 'Daurian Shrike' *L.* (*i.*) *isabellinus* and 'Chinese Shrike' *L.*(*i.*) *arenarius* has recently been found to winter, notably in the Euphrates valley. Talila is worth searching for 'grey' shrikes and Asian Desert Warblers. A few Pallid Harriers hunt the Badia where flocks of Eurasian Dotterel and a few Eastern Imperial Eagles winter. Great Bustards *Otis tarda* were common into the 1990s in an area of undulating, stony plains north of Palmyra known as Shmal Araq until the Lebanese started hunting them with machine guns; a few still winter but they are still hunted by Bedouin (AA pers comm). More data on wintering birds would be valuable, particularly from the Badia.

Spring migration starts in February with the first diurnal migrants: Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harriers and a few hirundines. Expeditions into the Badia have found huge mixed flocks of Calandra *Melanocorypha calandra* and Bimaculated Larks *Melanocorypha bimaculata*. The Northern Bald Ibises return to their breeding sites in the second half of the month; it is vital not to disturb them while they settle down to breed. Large numbers of migrants are passing through by mid-March. Flocks of wary, long-winged, grey-brown birds the size of sparrows are worth careful inspection: Pale Rockfinches are easy to overlook. Later in the season, when they have set up territory, their weird buzzing song, similar to that of a grasshopper, is an excellent way to locate them. They are probably very under-recorded though their numbers appear to fluctuate from year to year. Visitors to the Badia should watch out for Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* and Sociable Lapwing; there are occasional records of both species but their true status is not yet clear. A bewildering variety of wheatears passes through: there are recent records of ten species including

Cyprus *Oenanthe cypriaca*, which appears to be regular in early spring, Pied *Oenanthe pleschanka* and several recent observations in March of Rufous-tailed Wheatear.

Most birders choose to visit Palmyra in April, and with good reason: the weather is usually pleasantly warm, resident species are breeding and migration is at its best. GS (Serra *et al* 2005a, b) has gathered excellent data on the timing of migration through the Palmyra area. Diurnal migrants such as hirundines, bee-eaters and raptors pass throughout the day and it is important to keep an eye on the sky at all times. Raptor passage in particular is not predictable; concentrations can suddenly appear anywhere including Lesser Spotted *Aquila pomarina*, Steppe, Short-toed, Booted *Aquila pennata* and occasional Eastern Imperial Eagles, Black Kites, Eurasian *Accipiter nisus* and Levant Sparrowhawks *Accipiter brevipes*, and huge numbers of Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus*. The numbers of Pallid Harrier tail off but they are replaced by Montagu's Harriers *Circus pygargus*; Western Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* pass throughout the season. There is a concentrated passage in April of Lesser Kestrels, which breed locally in several small colonies. Nine species of heron have been recorded in spring; they can appear anywhere, often flying over, but the best site is SWA. Western White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* are scarce—most seem to follow the coastal ridge—and Black Storks *Ciconia nigra* very rare. Spotted Crakes *Porzana porzana* and Little Crakes *Porzana parva* skulk along the muddy edges of SWA. Greater Sand Plovers breed in small numbers on dry flats but seem to move away before the summer heat. Dunn's Lark is an elusive species; its status is still unclear but it is probably only irruptive, appearing (and probably breeding) in wet springs. There have been no records for several years.

The mix of migrants is different in May. Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* passage peaks in the first half of the month, the last of all the raptors. May is the best month for Olive-tree, Marsh *Acrocephalus palustris* and probably Barred Warblers; all three were still passing through in the third week of May 2006. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and Masked *Lanius nubicus* and Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* are also notably late migrants. The Maksam mulberry is in fruit.

Almost no birders visit in mid-summer (June to August) so it is possible that species such as Egyptian Nightjar are overlooked. Other species breed in spring but move away as the desert fries and food becomes scarce. Breeding raptors include Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, the occasional Golden and Short-toed Eagle in the mountains, the Griffons at Douara and Egyptian Vulture, which is probably declining but still widespread. Stone Curlews are increasingly scarce, as they are shot for food, but Cream-coloured Coursers are common—they are not good to eat and are not hunted. Little Swifts have been recorded from several sites in the mountains, particularly SWA; the first breeding record for Syria was from a mountain cave in the Jebel Amur in 2009. Please record all observations of these species so that trends in their numbers can be monitored. Eastern Olivaceous Warblers are common in the palmerie and Ménétries's Warblers breed in bushy areas. The Northern Bald Ibises fledge any young in June and the flock temporarily becomes more mobile; they leave in late July. The adults winter in Ethiopia but the movements of the young birds are not yet understood.

There are few data on the timing of autumn passage; the best source of information is again Serra *et al* (2005a, b). Water is scarce, making birding easier. Huge numbers of passerines pass through between mid-August and late October, concentrating in fewer sites, where the quality and quantity of species can be excellent. Shrikes of six species can be found in September. Recent visits have revealed a good passage of Red-breasted Flycatchers *Ficedula parva* in early October. Raptor passage is significantly later and at its best in early October; Montagu's Harriers are the first, starting in late August, followed by Honey Buzzards and Black Kites in late September, then Lesser Spotted Eagles and Steppe

Buzzards. Steppe Eagles, Pallid Harriers and Long-legged Buzzards are late and can move through in early November. However, the bulk of the movement may be along the coastal ridge of western Syria; co-ordinated counts are needed to resolve the issue. September is the month for the larger falcons and the desert fills with hopeful falconers; a female Saker Falcon can sell for millions of Syrian Pounds in Riyadh though Lanners *Falco biarmicus* are worth far less. Trapping has reached unsustainable levels: fewer than ten Sakers are now caught annually in the entire country and Lanner is almost certainly extinct as a Syrian breeding species. There is a detailed discussion in Serra *et al* (2005a). There have been several reports of Lappet-faced Vulture *Aegypius trachielotos*, a healthy population of which breeds in the north of Saudi Arabia (Jennings 1995); the Palmyra area is well within their dispersal range.

## THREATS TO THE ENVIRONMENT ROUND PALMYRA

Several current or potential developments present massive threats to the best wildlife areas round Palmyra. The Government has stated its commitment to environmental protection but it has a difficult balance to strike: Syria has few resources and many hungry people, and it clearly feels that the Badia has to be used to the fullest extent. An Ibis protected area exists on paper but few of the necessary management objectives are yet implemented. This protected area needs to be enlarged to include the Jezel area, which is still in good condition and where the Ibis regularly feed; this is also the best area for the few remaining wild Sand Gazelles. The northeast of Syria has extensive oil deposits and there has been a recent drive to look for oil, with test drills close to several highly sensitive sites, including the cliffs at Douara, and worse still, one of the two Ibis nesting cliffs—in the core of the 'Ibis Protected Area'. Bulldozers have a disastrous impact on the soil of the Badia: their tracks cause massive damage to the vegetation—already severely compromised by overgrazing—and destroy the soil crust, worsening erosion and accelerating desertification.

**Plate 7.** Talila pylons, July 2009. © *Gianluca Serra*

The status of Talila as a protected area has not prevented the construction of a line of pylons across the dunes of the western sector in 2004–2006 (Plate 7). Leaving aside the visual impact, it is well known that pylons cause considerable bird mortality; for instance, three Northern Bald Ibises released from Birecik in 2008 were electrocuted by power lines in Jordan. One wonders how many vulnerable soaring birds these pylons have killed in what is supposedly a protected area. Talila and Sabkhat Muh were recently under grave threat from a proposed road bypassing Palmyra/Tadmor to the south—even though there is already a bypass on the northern side—but after many representations it appears to have been rerouted. A zoo has been proposed at the entrance to Talila, a development that would reinforce the belief of many Syrians that animals are content to exist in cages. Syrians need to be weaned away from this idea; the funding would be much better spent making the reserve more accessible to ordinary Syrians and providing more information on its wildlife. Many Palmyrans are seriously interested in their environment (see below) and show great natural aptitude and enthusiasm. A proper training programme for ecoguides and wardens would benefit local people and the remaining wildlife.

A more insidious threat is the gradual shift in attitudes and beliefs in the local population: each generation perceives as 'normal' the environment it remembers from its youth, not what earlier generations knew. This concept, known as the Shifting Baseline Syndrome (Pauly 1995), predicts a continual lowering of expectations: gradual deterioration over decades is missed and a grossly degraded environment becomes seen as 'natural'. A grim example is the Jebel Amur, heavily wooded a century ago but now almost bare of vegetation; the elderly remember ibex, leopard and flocks of gazelle, but today's children see a barren wilderness, unproductive and empty of wildlife. The result: a highly degraded Badia with little biodiversity is seen as 'normal' and acceptable. The best counter would be the declaration of a national park in the Palmyra area; this would demonstrate that the Syrian government is seriously committed to preserving the natural environment. There is as yet not a single national park in the whole of Syria and nowhere better to choose.

## THE PALMYRA SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND WILDLIFE (PSPEW)

The environment round Palmyra is under serious threat and many people from Tadmor want to do something about it. Syria's first local conservation society, PSPEW, was founded in 2006 by local Palmyrans; it has many plans, notably to protect SWA and to establish a vulture restaurant at Douara, both excellent flagship projects for local conservation. Visiting birders are urged to give it their support. The website (for which OSME provided essential funding) provides valuable information on the birds and wildlife of the area (the words 'palmyra society' in a search engine will be enough). In return, visitors are asked to submit their records and photographs so that PSPEW can develop a comprehensive database on the local wildlife.

## AUTHENTICATING RECORDS

I deliberately describe well-authenticated observations as 'records' and those less fully documented as 'reports'. Describing an observation as a report does not imply rejection: local conservationists have made many important anecdotal observations without taking formal field notes—the 1999 Northern Bald Ibis is a classic example. Assessing these reports poses a serious dilemma for records committees, examined in a lucid *Sandgrouse* editorial by Blair (2005). The same applies to many older reports by visiting birders, often made decades before their potential significance was realised. Nowadays, foreign visitors may not appreciate the rarity in Syria of a species with which they are familiar, for instance, a recent report of Red Knot *Calidris canutus* by highly experienced birders at SWA. These are significant difficulties, nevertheless record-keeping has to be treated rigorously as a scientific discipline with a high standard of documentation. Information on the status of species in the Palmyra area is now available: Serra *et al* (2005a, b) produced a comprehensive annotated list of the birds of the central Syrian desert and an updated Syrian list was published in a *Sandgrouse* supplement in 2008 (Murdoch & Betton 2008). Visitors are requested to take detailed field notes of interesting observations, particularly of Red Data Book species, as per Murdoch & Betton (2008), and to make formal descriptions as needed. A rarities report form can be downloaded from the OSME website (www.osme.org).

## IN SUMMARY

The Palmyra area has been little watched yet its list includes nine species of heron, ten wheatears, 14 larks, 34 raptors and at least 35 species of wader. Much of the area is ornithologically unknown and there are still major discoveries for enterprising birders to

make—but anyone can make valuable observations anywhere in Syria, it is a very under-watched country. Wherever you go, record everything carefully, take copious field notes and let me know!

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