

# A new breeding location of Spectacled Warblers *Sylvia conspicillata* in Turkey

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The Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* is a small warbler which generally breeds in low, dry, coarse vegetation, especially shrubs, characteristic of garrigue, salt flats, or semi-desert habitats in the Mediterranean zone (Cramp 1992).

On 23 April 2010, we were bird watching around Balık lake in eastern Hatay province, southern Turkey, c4 km from the Syrian border. We stopped near a stony hill (Plate 1, 36° 28' N, 36° 30' E) which was covered with Thorny Burnet *Sarcopoterium spinosum*. At the top of the hill we observed a pair of *Sylvia* warblers on the top of a *Sarcopoterium* bush, with another pair c30 m away. We quickly identified the birds as Spectacled Warblers. As both pairs were very agitated and remained in a very small area we didn't approach them too closely but took photographs from c50 m away.

On 1 May we visited the area again and Spectacled Warblers were found at the same location. We concealed ourselves and soon saw a male Spectacled Warbler carrying food. Directly, it went into a bush and quickly appeared again while the female waited on the top. From this behaviour we decided they were breeding. When the birds became aware of us, they quickly moved to nearby bushes and performed distraction displays and gave frequent alarm calls (Plates 2 & 3). These behaviours are classified as confirmed breeding according to breeding evidence codes promoted by the European Bird Census Council (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). This location clearly is a breeding area for the species. We did not want to disturb them more and moved on. An additional two pairs were observed



**Plate 1.** The hill where Spectacled Warblers *Sylvia conspicillata* were observed near Balık lake, Hatay, Turkey, 23 April 2010. © Orhan Gül



**Plate 2.** A male Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* on the top of a rock, performed a distraction display and gave frequent alarm calls, 1 May 2010. © Mehmet Gül



**Plate 3.** A male Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* performed distraction displays and gave frequent alarm calls on the nearby bushes, 1 May 2010. © Orhan Gül

c100 m away and they also performed distraction displays and gave frequent alarm calls. When we moved away from their territories, all returned.

On the two visits combined, c3 km of track were walked and four pairs of Spectacled Warblers were observed. This represents a new breeding location of Spectacled Warbler, only the second known in Turkey.

## DESCRIPTION

Males: like a small Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* with rusty-brown wing panel and an eye ring, but differed in darker greyish head, blackish area from bill to below eye and wings more rufous. The dark alula was very noticeable and contrasted with rusty-brown wing-covert fringes. The underparts were brownish-pink. The throat had a central patch of grey and white on the fore cheek contrasted with pinky-buff underparts.

Females: first impression was of a small Whitethroat, but with plainer wing. They had shorter primary projections and slimmer bills. Head, mantle, wing coverts and tail were distinctly greyish brown, contrasting with bright rufous-brown wings. The dark alula was noticeable and contrasted as that of a male.

## HABITAT

Balık lake is the northeastern part of the old Amik lake, which was drained between the 1940s and 1970s. The lake is surrounded by several hills, the highest rising to c490 m asl. The hill where the Spectacled Warblers were seen rises to c290 m. All of the hills are covered with rocky steppe vegetation and trees are absent. Many areas are dominated by Thorny Burnet.

## DISCUSSION

Spectacled Warbler was first confirmed as a breeding species in Turkey at Karacadağ in Diyarbakir province, in 2002 (Welch & Welch 2004). Balık lake, our location, is c400 km southwest of Karacadağ. Prior to the Welchs' study there were only five records of the species in Turkey: Side (Antalya) 15 April 1969, east of Silifke (Mersin) 19 October 1970, near Iskenderun (Hatay) 4 October 1974, in the Belen area (Hatay) 10 September 1981 and near Burdur lake 16 October 1982 (Kirwan *et al* 2008). Following its discovery breeding on Karacadağ, the species has been confirmed breeding there on three occasions (Kuşbank Database 2010).

In Welch & Welch (2004), Spectacled Warbler was described as breeding in low cushion-formations of *Astragalus* scrub above 1700 m asl. Using GIS/Remote Sensing they identified a small number of sites in the vicinity with the same vegetation reflectance pattern and above 1700 m but, unfortunately, no further Spectacled Warblers were found. At our location the habitat structure was generally similar except that the dominant species was *Sarcopoterium* rather than *Astragalus* and the maximum elevation was only c490 m. Interestingly, there are several hills between Balık lake and the Syrian border that have very similar habitat to the new breeding location so there may be other breeding sites in the area still to be discovered.

There were at least three camps of local people with sheep and goats grazing the area. On Karacadağ, Spectacled Warbler was only observed in areas where grazing pressure was low (Welch & Welch 2004), so grazing may be a threat at Balık lake.

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