

Breeding birds in Iraq: important new discoveries

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Nature Iraq surveys 2005–2010 discovered or confirmed 50 new breeding species for Iraq, bringing the total number of breeding species for the country to 190. This paper summarises the findings for the 50 and puts them into their regional context. Probable breeding species, which number 19, are also listed.

INTRODUCTION

Iraq (Figure 1) is located in the southeastern corner of the Western Palearctic biogeographical region, *sensu* BWP, between 29–38°N and 39–49°E. It covers a land area of 438 320 km², with a Gulf coastline of some 58 km into which flow the major rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates. Much of Iraq experiences a desert climate though it is semi-arid or sub-humid in the north and northeast. Iraqi Kurdistan (Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaimani provinces) contains many upland areas, the highest mountains of which border Iran and Turkey. The southern marshes lie in the flood plain of the lower Tigris and Euphrates in the provinces of Missan, Basrah, Thi Qar, Qadissiya and Wasit and include the Huwaiza, Al-Hammar, Central and Dalmaj marshes

In 2005 the newly created conservation NGO Nature Iraq (NI) commenced a programme of surveys to identify Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) in Iraq. Since then over 220 sites have been visited throughout the country in summer and winter and valuable data has been gathered for site assessments, the aim being to identify priority sites for

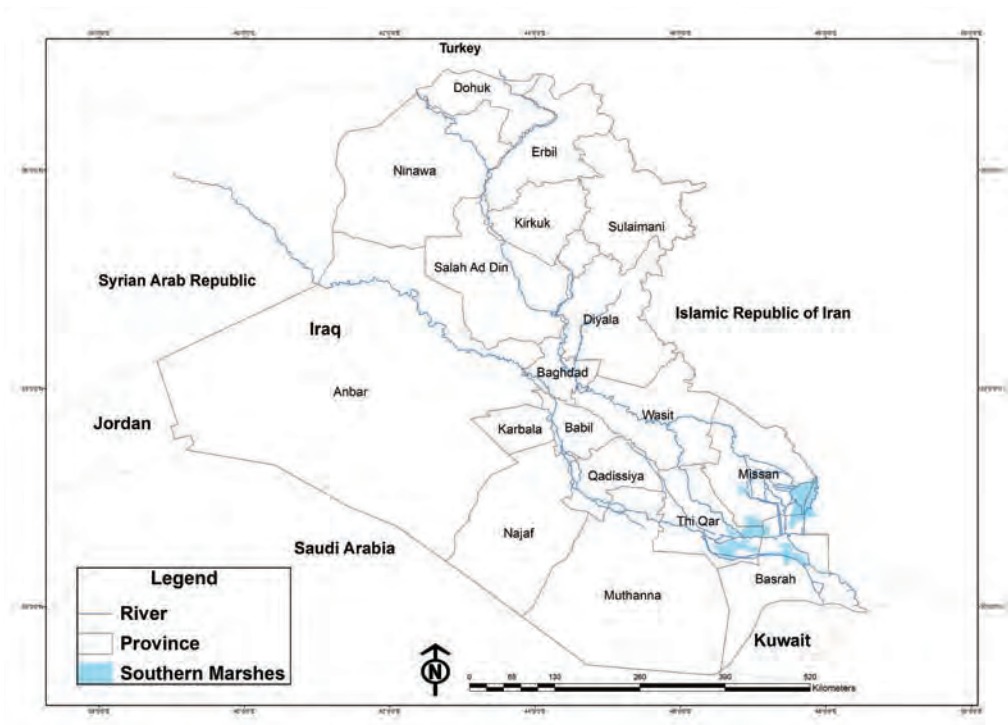


Figure 1. Location of the provinces, rivers and southern marshes of Iraq.



Plate 1. Sakran mountain, Erbil province, Iraq, May 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq



Plate 2. Sargalu in the Peramagroon range, Sulaimani province, Iraq, May 2010—a typical Iraqi Kurdistan habitat. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq



Plate 3. Oak woodland at Parazan, Sulaimani province, Iraq, June 2010. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq



Plate 4. Hazarmerd, Sulaimani province, Iraq, June 2010. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq



Plate 5. Al Tharthar lake, Anbar province, Iraq, October 2009. Surveying sometimes needs army protection. © Mudalal H Al Faidh

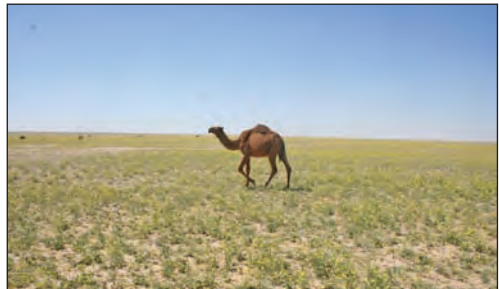


Plate 6. Arid rangeland of Al Haqlaniya, Anbar province, Iraq, April 2010. © Omar Fadhil/Nature Iraq

conservation. During the summer surveys many new breeding species for the country were discovered as well as confirmation of hitherto suspected breeders and a few cases where breeding had simply not been properly documented previously. This paper gives details of these 50 new discoveries and also lists those species for which breeding is now suspected but not yet proven.

The KBA bird surveys were led by KA, OF and MS and comprehensively covered Iraqi Kurdistan, the arid rangelands of western and central Iraq and the southern marshes. Some typical habitats of these regions are shown in Plates 1–12. Assistance in the field was given on various occasions by Laith Ali and RFP (of NI) and Muhammed Fadhil, Ali



Plate 7. Degraded desert, typical landscape of western Iraq, October 2010. © Omar Fadhil/Nature Iraq



Plate 8. Liheis, west Basrah province, June 2010. Typical landscape of the southern Iraqi desert. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq



Plate 9. The Central Marshes, east Thi Qar province, Iraq, May 2005. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq



Plate 10. The Huwaiza marshes, Missan province, Iraq, April 2008. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq



Plate 11. The Huwaiza marshes, Missan province, Iraq, summer 2006. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq



Plate 12. Kermashiya (western part of Al-Hammar marshes, Thi Qar province, Iraq), May 2008. A typical landscape of the southern marshes in summer. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Ne'ma and Mariwan Qadir (Ministry of the Environment). The new checklist of the birds of Iraq (Salim *et al* in prep) lists 396 species that have been reliably recorded in the country. Of these, 190 have now been proven to breed and a further 19 probably breed.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

'PA' in the following accounts refers to Porter & Aspinall (2010). Also: Ap, Anbar province; Dop, Dohuk province; Ep, Erbil province; Mip, Missan province; Nip, Ninawa province;

Qp, Qadissiya province; SDp, Salah ad Din prov; Sup, Sulaimani province; TQp, Thi Qar province (Figure 1).

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Fairly common and widespread in the southern marshes and other wetlands (Ticehurst *et al* 1922, NI winter surveys data); present all year. It was considered to probably breed in the southern marshes (Allouse 1953, 1963, Moore & Boswell 1956) though this was not confirmed until the NI KBA surveys. In 2005, local people and hunters frequently reported an isolated breeding colony in the northern Huwaiza marshes (Mip). The location was inaccessible but the ibises were reported breeding alongside Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*, Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, African Darters *Anhinga rufa*, Sacred Ibises *Threskiornis aethiopicus* and Squacco Herons *Ardeola ralloides*. In May 2010 a colony was reached in the Al-Hammar marshes (TQp) by MS. It was estimated to be 60 pairs and the nests examined contained two young on average (Plate 13). The colony was in dense *Phragmites* and *Typha* in a water depth of c80 cm and there were no other accompanying species. Otherwise, in the Middle East, the Glossy Ibis nests in a few isolated colonies in Turkey, Iran and the Levant (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).



Plate 13. Fledgling Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, Al-Hammar marshes, Thi Qar province, 14 June 2010. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Until the NI KBA summer survey of 2009 proved breeding, the status of this duck was that of a winter visitor (*eg* Allouse 1953), being shown by the NI winter surveys to be especially common in the southern marshes. Whilst the 2005–2010 surveys of these marshes have shown it to be fairly widespread in small numbers in the breeding season, the first proof of nesting was obtained 26 May 2009 by MS when adults with non-flying young aged 5–6 weeks (Plate 14) were observed at two sites at Al-Hammar marshes (TQp), which held 460 and 31 adults respectively. Later, the species was found breeding in Dalmaj marshes (Qp) where a large number of non-flying young with their parents were observed in late May and early June in 2009 and 2010. The breeding habitat in both Al-Hammar and Dalmaj was open-water marsh of c1 m depth with adjacent dense reed-bed where parents can hide nests. This is the southernmost breeding area known in the Middle East (PA).

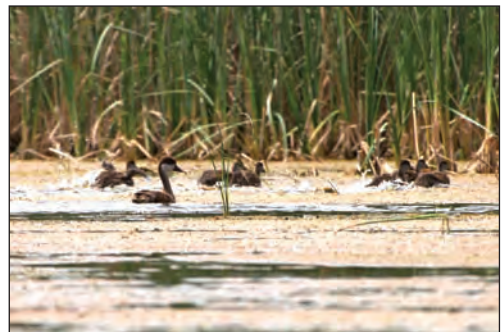


Plate 14. Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* and young, 26 May 2009, Al-Hammar marshes, Thi Qar province. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

According to Allouse (1963) and Salim *et al* (2009) this Near Threatened species (BirdLife International 2010) is an uncommon winter visitor in Iraq. During the NI KBA summer surveys in the southern marshes 2005–2010, Ferruginous Ducks were recorded and breeding was suspected at Al-Hammar marshes (TQp) and Dalmaj marshes (Qp). In 2009,

six parties of young birds and their parents, were observed by MS at these wetlands, totalling 26 birds, and five nests with eggs were found and photographed at Dalmaj marshes 9 May 2010 (Plate 15). The breeding habitat was relatively deep but open water with dense walls of *Phragmites*. The families tended to share a similar habitat to Red-crested Pochards, but showed a preference for deeper water. The mean outer diameter of the nests was 35 cm, and they were lined by the blackish belly-feathers; they were a few centimeters above the water level inside the thickest reed-beds; the mean clutch size was 9 eggs. Ferruginous Duck has a scattered breeding distribution throughout the Middle East (PA).



Plate 15. Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* nest, Dalmaj marshes, Qadissiya province, 9 May 2010. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

This small kite was first recorded in Iraq in 2001 (Salim 2002) but breeding was not proven although one of the birds observed was a juvenile. Full confirmation of breeding came in May 2008 when MS found three nests, two with chicks, in one day c30 km northwest of Diwaniya city (c120 km south of Baghdad). The nests were in date palms at a height of 8–10 m in an area of wheat, barley and rice fields and date orchards. Both parents were taking care of the young at one of the nests closely observed. On 20 February 2009 OF discovered two nearly-fledged juveniles in captivity (Plate 16) that had been taken from a nest at Tarmiya



Plate 16. Two nearly fledged Black-winged Kites *Elanus caeruleus* (with Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*) in captivity, Baghdad, 20 February 2009. © Omar Fadhill Nature Iraq

(c16 km northeast of Baghdad); their age (c30–35 days Peter Castell pers comm) would indicate egg-laying in mid December. On 15 May 2009, OF counted and photographed nine recently fledged juveniles in a market at Al Khalidiya of Ramadi (Ap); they had been taken from nests in Bohriz, Khalis and Attariya areas of Diala province. Furthermore, in the Al Gazaliya area of Baghdad, OF was informed of two young being raised in a nest c20–25 m up in a *Eucalyptus*; they were taken from the nest by locals 21 June 2009. The nearest breeding Black-winged Kites are in Pakistan (Roberts 1991) and southwest Arabia (PA), but in eastern Arabia the species has been recorded more frequently since the early 1980s (Jennings 2010) suggesting an expansion of range.

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

Prior to the NI surveys this eagle was considered to be only a passage migrant in Iraq, especially in autumn. In May and June 2008 several pairs were observed during KBA surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan, apparently holding territory, but it was not until 2009 that breeding was proven. On 20 April a nest was found at Chami Razan (Sup) with an adult sitting tightly. It was situated on a sprawling bush growing on a ledge of a steep cliffside

at 700 m asl; a change-over was witnessed. Also, on 20 May 2009, a female was sitting on a nest at Doli Smaqli (Ep) at 1250 m asl. During these annual surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan at least 24 pairs have been found holding territory and display was observed at 14 sites. In neighbouring Turkey this species is a widespread breeding bird (Kirwan *et al* 2008) as it is in parts of Iran (PA).

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennatus*

Allouse (1953) gave the status of this small eagle as 'probably a winter visitor', but supported this with few records. During the NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2007–2010, pairs or individuals were observed in montane areas with deciduous oak forest at 15 sites (seven in Sulaimani province, five in Erbil and three Dohuk)—all suitable areas for breeding. However, the first actual proof was obtained 7 August 2007 when an adult and two juveniles were watched perched at a nest on a rocky cliff at Qara Dagh (Sup). Three adults were observed at the cliff 19 May 2010. These are the southernmost breeding sites for Booted Eagle in the Middle East (PA).

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

Allouse (1953) was uncertain about the status of Golden Eagle in Iraq, but indicated it was probably a winter visitor, having been observed in that season in the Karun district of Iraqi Kurdistan. However, Moore & Boswell (1956) saw a pair in Ser Amadia (Dop) between 7–9 July and thought they were probably breeding. It was listed in the breeding bird assemblage of the mountains of north and northeast Iraq by Ctyroky (1986) and a pair was observed at Silopi (Ep) in January and a single bird at Koysanjaq (Ep) in February 1994 (MacKenzie *in litt* to MI Evans 2007); on 6 May 1994 MacKenzie (*in litt* to MI Evans 2007) also observed a Golden Eagle at Dukan (Sup). During the NI KBA surveys, 2008–2010, a total of 18 Golden Eagles were observed at six sites. In 2010 adults were observed at three nests, on cliffs in mountains at Barzan (Ep, 5 May, contents unknown), Sakran (Ep, 8 May, contents unknown) and Peramagroon (Sup) where a juvenile was seen on 16 June. The Golden Eagle is a widespread resident in eastern Turkey and western Iran (PA).

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

Considered to be a winter visitor, Allouse (1963) also mentioned the possibility that it breeds on Pishtko mountain (Sup) on the eastern border of Iraqi Kurdistan with Iran. During the NI KBA summer surveys in north Iraq 2007, three adults and two juveniles were seen and photographed soaring above Zraran mountain (Ep) on 22 August—clearly a family party. NI surveys also discovered five Lammergeiers 22 August 2008 in the Barzan area (Ep). On 11 May 2009 an adult was observed on Peramagroon mountain (Sup) and then, on 17 June 2010, the nest was found on a high cliff at c2400 m asl, with an adult and nestling (appeared to be quite young—about the size of a Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* which were nearby). Proof of breeding is not surprising given the nearby resident distribution in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008).

Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*, probably *menetriesi*

[Note: Taxonomy within *Buteo [buteo]* is complex and there is much debate as to the validity of constituent taxa, due largely to clinal variation. Whilst using 'Steppe Buzzard' and '*vulpinus*', we do so to imply that the taxa are of the *vulpinus* group which includes *menetriesi*. There is good evidence to suggest that the birds breeding in Iraqi Kurdistan are *menetriesi* and this is discussed below. The form of the Common Buzzard that breeds in western and southern Europe, *Buteo buteo buteo*, has not been reliably recorded in Iraq.]

Prior to the NI surveys the status of Steppe Buzzard was uncertain. Allouse (1953) listed it as a passage migrant, but because of the difficulty at that time of separation from



Plate 17. Juvenile Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*, probably *menetriesi*, at nest site, Hazarmerd, Sulaimani province, 2 June 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq



Plate 18. Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*, probably *menetriesi*, Hazarmerd, Sulaimani province, 2 June 2010. This was one of the parents of the juvenile in plate 17. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus*, Moore & Boswell (1956) did not record any with certainty. It was not listed among the species in the breeding bird assemblages for northeast and north Iraq by Ctyroky (1986). During the NI winter surveys, 2007–2010, Steppe Buzzards were observed in small numbers in Iraqi Kurdistan. They were not recorded in summer until 2008, but these were considered to be late passage migrants. However, in 2009, birds were observed apparently holding territories and/or displaying at 17 localities in April, May and June (nine in Sulaimani province, three Erbil and five Duhok) and a pair seen copulating at Dukan (Sup) on 13 May.



Plate 19. Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*, probably *menetriesi*, Hazarmerd, Sulaimani province, 2 June 2010. Same bird as in Plate 18, a parent of the juvenile shown in plate 17. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

In 2010 Steppe Buzzards were observed in pairs in suitable breeding habitat and often displaying at 12 sites in Sulaimani province, four sites in Erbil province and three in Duhok. Two pairs were present at Hazarmerd (Sup) on 2 June 2010, one pair with a nest containing one juvenile (Plate 17, age c40 days Peter Castell pers comm); it was on a high cliff at 1035 m asl, rising from an arid plain that was largely given over to agriculture (Plate 4). One of the attendant adults is shown in Plates 18 and 19.

The identity of these birds (*vulpinus* versus *menetriesi*) was discussed by the authors with Dick Forsman who commented as follows, “I was surprised by the apparent large size of the young bird for *vulpinus* (of which I have much experience) as it looked too heavy and the adults showed certain plumage traits similar to Long-legged Buzzard. The moult of the attacking adult in Plate 18 is not the moult of a migrant *vulpinus*, but that of a resident bird. The explanation is that the birds are probably *menetriesi*. This is the taxon that breeds closest to Iraq (eg Glutz von Blotzheim *et al* 1971, Vaurie 1965). The description of the birds, habitat, cliff nesting and behaviour given in Dementev *et al* (1966) are consistent with the birds discovered breeding in Iraq. Also from a personal view when I first saw adult *menetriesi* in nearby southeast Turkey my first reaction was they were Long-legged Buzzards! According to the literature, the uniformly dark rufous form is the most common in *menetriesi*, just like the bird in Plates 18 and 19.” Kirwan *et al* (2008) are

unconvinced of the validity of *menetriesi*, and simply list those breeding in Turkey under Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*. There is clearly much to be learnt about this species and its status in Iraq. Are the birds breeding in Iraq resident for example? A reference database of all birds photographed will be established by NI.

[Note: The Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* is the commonest large raptor breeding in north Iraq and was found in the same areas as Steppe Buzzard. It is resident, or largely so, with similar numbers recorded in summer and winter by NI. During the 2007–2010 KBA summer surveys, Long-legged Buzzards were found at 14 sites in Sulaimani province, ten in Dohuk and seven Erbil. Nests were found at four sites in April and May (Sup).]

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

Listed as a passage migrant (Allouse 1963), it was not until the NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2007–2010 that breeding was suspected and proven. In Dohuk province, birds were found breeding at seven sites: Ser Amadia (four pairs with young in the nest 31 May 2008, and a cliff-nesting colony of over 50 birds in 2009 and 2010), Sararu (three adults in June 2008), Mangesh (two in June 2008), Garagu (one to three pairs 2008–2010), Gali Balinda (one–three pairs 2009 and 2010), Chamanke (nine pairs 14 May 2010 nesting in cliff holes).

Lesser Kestrels were recorded breeding at five sites in Erbil province and ten sites in Sulaimani province. The main colonies of the latter province being at Dukan (11 pairs 2009), Peramagroon (minimum of five pairs with nests on cliffs April 2010, but 75 catching insects there 23 April 2009 may have been from a breeding colony), Ahmed Awa (c8 pairs with three juveniles 24 May 2010), De Lezha (c10 pairs), Homer Qawm (c3 pairs), Chami Razan (c6 pairs) and Qara Dagh (at least ten pairs with nests/fledged young 2008–2010).

In Salah ad Din province, Lesser Kestrels were in suitable habitat in the breeding season at Abu Dalaf (one pair), Jabal Hemreen (one pair), and Jabal Makhool (two pairs nesting in rock crack in a cliff, display observed 13 April 2010). In Anbar province 29 April 2009, two pairs were watched displaying and copulating at Rutba; they appeared to be nesting on a 130 m high isolated rocky hill in semi-desert. In the Middle East, the globally Vulnerable Lesser Kestrel breeds widely in Turkey, Iran and the Levant (PA).

Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*

Al-Dabbagh (1998) recorded this raptor for the first time in Iraq at Al Tharthar lake (Ap, Plate 5) and described it as a passage migrant. The first confirmed breeding came from a video taken by KurdSat TV station and examined by KA and RFP. It showed a pair of Levant Sparrowhawks at a nest at Qara Dagh (Sup) in May 2008. On 12 May 2009 at Parazan (Sup) during the NI KBA surveys of Iraqi Kurdistan, a nest was located in an oak *Quercus aegilops* at a height of c9 m and photographed. The female was sitting and later the male took over, but the nest contents could not be determined (Plate 20). The extensive NI surveys indicate that the Levant Sparrowhawk is a regular and fairly widespread summer visitor to Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2007 several pairs or individuals were seen in suitable breeding habitat in Dohuk province in August. On 20 May 2008 a pair was seen at Peramagroon



Plate 20. Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes* in nesting tree at Parazan, Sulaimani province, 12 May 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

(Sup), on 4 May 2009 an adult was present in woodland at Qara Dagħ (Sup), another on 16 May at Doli Plingian (Sup) and a single at Dure (Dop) on 26 May 2009. In the Middle East this species has a patchy breeding distribution in Turkey and western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

[Note: When Allouse (1953, 1963) published his avifauna and birds of Iraq volumes, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrioides* were listed under Lesser Peregrine Falcon which included *F. peregrinus brookei* and *F. peregrinus babylonicus*. In this and the following account we have adopted the view of keeping *brookei* as a race of Peregrine and placing *babylonicus* as a race of Barbary Falcon *F. pelegrioides*.]

Until the NI KBA surveys the Peregrine was only known as a winter visitor to Iraq (eg Allouse 1963). Then during the NI breeding season surveys birds considered to be *F. peregrinus* were observed at suitable breeding sites in mountains at Qopi Qara Dagħ and Qarasird (Sup). Breeding, however, was not proven until 24 May 2010 during the survey of Ahmed Awa (also Sup), when on high cliffs at 950 m asl a pair was observed and photographed for several minutes whilst displaying, including talon-grappling, and calling. They returned to what was clearly a nesting ledge, before the male flew off and left the female to settle on what were presumably eggs, but possibly chicks. In appearance they conformed to the race *brookei*, which is not unsurprising as it is the taxon breeding widely in Turkey, including the southeast close to the Iraq border (Kirwan *et al* 2008).



Plate 21. Juvenile Barbary Falcons *Falco pelegrioides* in captivity, Erbil province, 28 July 2007. © Omar Fadhil/Nature Iraq



Plate 22a. Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrioides*, Peramagroon, Sulaimani province, June 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq



Plate 22b. Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrioides*, Peramagroon, Sulaimani province, June 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

Breeding was first indicated by Sassi (Allouse 1953) who recorded a juvenile *babylonicus* at Mosel (Nip) on 10 June (date prior to 1912). Al-Dabbagh (1998) listed Barbary Falcon as breeding in the Hemrin hills (SDp) but gave no details. On 28 July 2007 two recently-fledged juveniles of the subspecies *pelegrinoides* were photographed in captivity (Plate 21); they had been trapped by locals near a nest at Bradost mountain (Ep) where a bird was also observed in May 2010. Elsewhere in Iraqi Kurdistan, singles or pairs were observed during NI KBA surveys, April–July, 2008–2010, at six sites in Sulaimani province: Sargalu, Dukan, Homar Qawm, Qara Dag, Peramagroon and Hazarmerd (Plate 4). Two singles were also observed at Zmnako mountain, Darbandikhan (Sup) January 2010. One of a breeding pair at Peramagroon is shown in Plates 22a and b.

Little Crake *Porzana parva*

Allouse (1953, 1963) described this species as a passage migrant and winter visitor and it was regularly observed near Ramadi during the later half of March and throughout April 1954 (Chapman & McGeogh 1956) and during the NI winter KBA surveys of the southern marshes. However, the summer KBA surveys found no evidence of breeding and it was not until 2010 that evidence was forthcoming. On 30 July, a recently fledged youngster was examined and photographed by OF at a local bird market in Baghdad after it was caught at a nearby marsh at Jazerat Baghdad AlSiyahiya (Plate 23). The



Plate 23. Juvenile Little Crake *Porzana parva*, Baghdad, 30 July 2010. © Omar Fadhill/Nature Iraq

age of the bird and date it was caught (too early for a migrant) was considered sufficient proof of local breeding (RFP; Simon Aspinall and Peter Castell pers comm). The breeding status of this highly secretive species is uncertain in the Middle East, with only three breeding localities recorded: Kuwait, north Saudi Arabia and south Turkey (PA).

Common Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Until 2007, Common Black-headed Gull was considered to be only a passage migrant and winter visitor in Iraq (eg Allouse 1953, NI surveys). Breeding was first suspected 4 August 2007 at Dukan lake (Sup) when c50 were present and a juvenile bird was witnessed food-begging to an adult. However, it was not proven until 24 April 2010 when the colony was revisited and copulating birds (Plate 24) and nests with eggs were observed (clutch size three in all nests examined) and later in the season juveniles seen. The nesting site was an island in the middle of the lake and they were breeding alongside Slender-billed Gulls *Chroicocephalus genei*, Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* and Common Terns *Sterna hirundo*. This is the southernmost breeding of Common Black-headed Gull and the nearest known colonies are in western Iran (PA).



Plate 24. Black-headed Gulls *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* copulating, Dukan lake, Sulaimani province, 24 April 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis*

Allouse (1953) noted this small dove as a rare winter visitor; Moore & Boswell (1956) did not record it, nor was it listed by Ctyroky (1986). The first proof of breeding came in 1993 when MacKenzie (*in litt* to MI Evans 2007) saw 'lots' in Sulaimani city (Iraqi Kurdistan) in September and found three chicks aged two weeks (one dead) 26 October. In the early 90s, MS found the species as a common resident breeder in several cities from Mosul in the north to Basrah in the south. In 2006 during the NI KBA surveys of the southern marshes, birds were located at six sites and recently fledged young were observed. In summer 2007, OF recorded fledged young in Baghdad. During the NI KBA summer surveys of Iraqi Kurdistan 2007–2010, Laughing Doves were frequently observed *eg* in 2007 they were recorded at 21 sites and fledged young were seen. Nests were built in trees and on ledges of buildings. In 2009 and 2010 it was considered to be the third commonest breeding bird in Sulaimani city (after House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*). Clearly this species has rapidly colonised Iraq in the last 20 years.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

Until breeding was discovered in 2010, the status of this owl was that of uncommon, possibly irregular, winter visitor (*eg* Allouse 1963, Moore & Boswell 1956). On 10 July 2010 whilst in pine woods at Azmar mountain, near Sulaimani city, Iraqi Kurdistan, MS discovered a pair of Long-eared Owls with two young (Plate 25). They were aged c45–50 days (Peter Castell pers comm), in which case egg-laying would have been in late April. The nearest known breeding Long-eared Owls are in southeast Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008) and it is likely to be a more widespread breeder in north Iraq.



Plate 25. Juvenile Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*, Azmar mountain, Sulaimani province, 10 July 2010. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*

Moore & Boswell (1956) indicated that this species probably breeds in north Iraq, with records from three areas in May including presence at a likely breeding cave. However, it was not until the NI KBA surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2007–2010 that breeding was proven. In Erbil province, 47 were counted around the cliffs of Zozik mountain 18 August 2007 and were probably nesting, four were seen 22 May 2009 near Sakran mountain and ten 30 May 2009 at Ser Amadia; in Dohuk province, 12 were at Gali Balinda 31 May 2009—all in likely breeding habitat. In 2010 in Sulaimani province, birds were present at Peramagroom mountain cliffs in April, a colony of at least 18 was discovered at Assos mountain, whilst a total of 40 were watched repeatedly entering caves in the mountains at Ahmed Awa in late May and early June. In Erbil province, a colony of 30 was watched nesting in cliffs near Bekhal waterfall in June. In the Middle East, Alpine Swift is a widespread breeding species in Turkey, Iran, the Levant and parts of the Arabian peninsula (PA).

Little Swift *Apus affinis*

Historical occurrence in Iraq would suggest a very rare summer visitor or migrant (*eg* Allouse 1953, 1963, Moore & Boswell 1956). The first evidence of breeding was obtained during the NI KBA surveys in 2009 when 20 were counted entering a cave at Chami Razan

(Sup) on 13 May and discovered to be nesting. On 21 April 2010 a total of seven were seen there and later, on 23 May, a full assessment suggested that the colony comprised at least 75 pairs and nests that had fallen from the cave roof were photographed (Plate 26). Also in Sulaimani province, 20 birds were found at Little Zab 25 April 2010 nesting below rocky projections of the cliffs. The northern breeding limit of Little Swift in the Middle East is southeast Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).



Plate 26. Little Swift *Apus affinis* nests that had fallen to the ground from the roof of their nesting cave, Chami Razan, Sulaimani province, 23 May 2010. © Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos minor

The first mention of occurrence in Iraq was by Ctyroky (1986) who listed it as being part of the breeding bird assemblage of north and northeast Iraq but no details were provided. The NI KBA surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2008 and 2009 found the species resident in montane oak forest at Zrara (Ep) at c570 m asl. On 21 May 2008 a single was seen and the following year two pairs were located, one of which was watched entering a hole in an old oak *Quercus aegilops* 5 May. Allouse (1963) mentioned that Moore saw “a small, spotted woodpecker at the woods close to Ser Amadiya [Ep], in August” but was not able to identify it. He added that breeding of this species is possible in the Kurdistan mountains based on it being resident in southeast Turkey and northwest Iran.

Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*

Allouse (1963) mentioned the possibility of this species being resident in the remote oak woodlands of Iraqi Kurdistan. The first indication of occurrence was by Ctyroky (1986) who listed it without details as being part of the breeding bird assemblage of north and northeast Iraq. The NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2009 and 2010 found the species commonly in montane oak forests at Parazan (Sup) where 18 were counted 12 May 2009 and 26 on 26 April 2010, demonstrating abundance there; on 1 June 2010 at least three nest holes were found in old oaks at 4–5 m above the ground; adults were regularly attending and appeared to be feeding young. At Barzan (Ep) a pair was observed on 5 May 2010. Middle Spotted Woodpeckers breed in the neighbouring Zagros ranges in Iran (PA).

Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*

Allouse (1963) gave Yellow-billed Chough as a probable breeder in Iraq and Ctyroky (1986) listed it amongst the breeding assemblages for the mountains of north and northeast Iraq. MacKenzie (*in litt* to MI Evans 2007) observed the species on 22 April 1994 at Korak mountain (Ep). During the NI KBA surveys of 2008–2010 it was proven to breed in high mountains (1600–3000 m asl) in Iraqi Kurdistan. On 21 May 2008 four were observed at Barzan (Ep); on 14 May 2009 a pair was found on a nest on Peramagroon mountain (Sup) at 2000 m asl and another pair 19 April 2010; whilst on 17 June 2010 ten pairs were found there in the subalpine zone, their nests being in crevices and holes in the cliff face. Also in Sulaimani province, a colony of 63 birds was discovered 30 April 2010 nesting in the cliffs of Assos mountain at 2100 m asl. Yellow-billed Chough is resident in neighbouring southeast Turkey and western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

[Note: The Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* is a resident breeding bird in the mountains of northern Iraq (Allouse 1953, NI surveys).]

Sombre Tit *Parus lugubris*

Although recorded regularly in the rocky, wooded hills of Kurdistan and suspected of breeding (Allouse 1953, Vaurie 1959, Moore & Boswell 1956), Sombre Tit was first listed as a breeding species in north and northeast Iraq by Ctyroky (1986) but without supporting details. During the NI KBA surveys 2007–2010, Sombre Tits were found to be widespread in the hills of northeast Iraq with *eg* records from 21 areas May–June 2008. Most were in open oak *Quercus* sp woodlands; the few nests found were in holes in old trees at a height of c3 m above the ground. It is unclear when the first definite proof of breeding was obtained but fledged young were observed in August 2007 at Zraran mountain (Ep) and on 12 April 2009 adults were observed feeding young in a hole nest in a mature oak tree at Homar Qawm (Sup, Plate 27). Globally, the Sombre Tit has a distribution limited to southeast Europe, Turkey, Iran and the Levant (BWP).



Plate 27. Sombre Tit *Parus lugubris* at nest hole, Homar Qawm, Sulaimani province, 13 April 2009. © RF Porter/ Nature Iraq

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Allouse (1953) described the Woodlark as an uncommon winter visitor to northern Iraq. The observations of Moore & Boswell (1956) suggest it is not uncommon in winter and they found the species to be abundant in the Amadia valley (Dop) in late March where a male was observed displaying. Ctyroky (1986) listed it without details in the breeding bird assemblages for the mountains and sub-mountains of north and northeast Iraq. During the NI training course in April 2009, a pair of Woodlarks was found with a recently constructed ground nest, perfectly hidden between low bushes on Qara Dagh mountain (Sup). One of the adults flew up from the nest after it was nearly trodden upon; it quickly returned; later a second nest was found, under construction. In 2010 fledged young were observed at Peramagroon (Sup) on 6 May. The NI KBA summer surveys of 2009 and 2010 recorded Woodlarks at ten sites in Iraqi Kurdistan. Breeding in northern Iraq is not surprising given the Woodlark's distribution in neighbouring areas of Turkey and Iran (PA).

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*

The first recorded sightings of Horned Lark in Iraq were by Boswell and Niller in the Haji Omran area (Ep) at 1800–2700 m asl where they observed adults and collected one specimen in late April 1957 (Allouse 1963). The first proof of breeding was during the NI KBA survey of Kurdistan in 2009. On 23 May, 24 were found at the summit of Halgurd mountain (Ep) at 2600–3000 m asl, pairs were observed displaying and four recently constructed nests were found and one photographed (Plate 28). The nests were built at the base of the endemic *Astragalus helgurdensis* and leaves and stems of *Salvia* sp used as lining. On 24 May an adult was



Plate 28. Nest of Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*, Halgurd mountain, Erbil province, 24 May 2009. © Korsh Ararat/ Nature Iraq

seen at the top of Sari Hassan Bag mountain (Ep) at 2500 m asl. The discovery of breeding in north Iraq is not surprising as the species breeds close to the Iraq border in southeast Turkey and northwest Iran (PA).

Pale Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne (fuligula) obsoleta*

On 24 May 2009, during the NI annual summer KBA survey in Iraqi Kurdistan, two Pale Crag Martins were observed and photographed at Sari Hassan Bag mountain (Ep) at 2500 m asl; they were collecting mud for nest building. In the same area 12 Eurasian Crag Martins *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* were nesting under a bridge. The following year an occupied Pale Crag Martin nest, with an attendant pair, was found 16 June at Peramagroom mountain (Sup). The species is a breeding summer visitor to the neighbouring Zagros mountains of Iran (PA), but has not been recorded in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008).

[Note: Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* is a resident breeding bird over northern Iraq (Allouse 1963, NI surveys).]

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

First recorded by Moore & Boswell (1956) in summer, in the high areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although they saw birds with short tails (probably ‘birds of the year’) in May and foraging parties with young in August, 1944, they summarized their observations as ‘no doubt breeds on some mountains’. Ctyroky (1986) listed it amongst the breeding bird assemblages in north and northeast Iraq but gave no details. The NI KBA survey in Sulaimani province in 2009 provided the first proof of breeding, with a pair nest building at Peramagroom c5 m above the ground in a Walnut tree *Juglans regia*, 20 April (Plate 29). On 6 May 2009, a pair was found incubating eggs or young in a nest at Awesar (Sup), the nest again was built close to the trunk of a Walnut c5 m above the ground. Both of the above nests are relatively high for this species. In Europe 80–90% of nests are usually much lower than these, but there is no detailed information for countries in the Middle East (Peter Castell pers comm). These surveys, 2007–2010, showed Long-tailed Tits to be present at nine sites in north Iraq. This is not surprising given their close breeding distribution in southern Turkey and western Iran (PA).



Plate 29. Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* nest building, Peramagroom, Sulaimani province, April 2009. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Allouse (1953, 1963) indicated this species to be a passage migrant, supported by Al-Dabbagh (1998). It is apparent, however, that some observers (*eg* Moore & Boswell 1956) were reluctant to identify ‘reed’ warblers and thus their historical status is not sufficiently clear. The first proof of breeding was obtained in 2007 during a NI KBA survey of the southern marshes.



Plate 30. Recently fledged Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Zichri marsh, Thi Qar province, 21 July 2007. © Omar Fadhil/Nature Iraq

On 21 July in a mixed habitat of *Phragmites* and *Tamarix* at Zichri marsh (TQp) both Basra Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus griseldis* and Great Reed Warblers *A. arundinaceus* were found breeding. A recently fledged Eurasian Reed Warbler, at first thought to be Basra Reed, in a nearby *Tamarix*, was observed and photographed by OF (Plate 30); it was then joined by its agitated parents. Eurasian Reed Warbler is a summer visitor to the Middle East with a patchy distribution from Turkey and Iran south to central Saudi Arabia (PA). The race that breeds in the Middle East is *fuscus* (eg Kennerley & Pearson 2010).

Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

The first indication of possible breeding in Iraq was obtained by Cumming who thought it bred at Fao, near the Gulf (Cumming 1918, Allouse 1953). In August 2007, juveniles were observed at Wadi Al Ashad, near Erbil city, during NI surveys; however these were more likely to have been migrants from Turkey where the latest that fledged young have been observed is 6 July (Kirwan *et al* 2008). The KBA surveys have now shown Upcher's Warblers to be quite widespread in the breeding season in Iraqi Kurdistan, with many males singing and pairs present in suitable breeding habitat at hill slopes along valley watercourses in Dukan, along the Little Zab, in Qara Dagh, Homer Qawm and Shadala valley (Sup) and Sakran (Ep). It was not until 2010, though, that breeding was actually proven. On 22 May a nest with 4 eggs was found at Kopi Kara Dagh (Sup) at 1203 m asl (Plate 31). It was built in the outer branches of a hawthorn tree *Crataegus* sp 1.75 m above the ground; an adult was sitting (Plate 32). In addition to breeding, the NI surveys have shown Upcher's Warbler to be a regular passage migrant in Iraq. In the Middle East the species breeds in neighbouring southeast Turkey, the Levant and western/southern Iran (PA).

Eastern Orphee Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*

Surprisingly, given the known breeding range in Turkey and Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA), until the NI KBA surveys this species was only known in Iraq from very few records. However, in the summers of 2009 and 2010 during the KBA summer surveys it was found in several areas of Iraqi Kurdistan: Qara Dagh, Homar Qawm,



Plate 31. Upcher's Warbler's *Hippolais languida* nest in hawthorn tree at Kopi Kara Dagh, Sulaimani province, 22 May 2010. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq



Plate 32. Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida* on nest, Kopi Kara Dagh, Sulaimani province, 22 May 2010. © RF Porter/Nature Iraq



Plate 33. Eastern Orphee Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris* nest, Peramagroon, Sulaimani province, 5 June 2010. © Omar Fadhill/Nature Iraq

Shadala valley and Peramagroon in Sulaimani province, and Doli Smaqli in Erbil province, with males singing and pairs present in suitable habitat. On 3 June 2010 breeding was proven during a visit to Homar Qawm (Sup) where a female was observed carrying food to a nest containing four young aged c10 days and nearly ready to leave the nest; the nest was built 70 cm above ground level in an isolated small oak tree *Quercus* sp. Another nest with four 2–3 days old chicks was found at Peramagroon (Sup) on 5 June 2010 in the outer branch of a *Quercus aegilops* c60 cm above the ground (Plate 33).

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

According to Allouse (1963) and Moore & Boswell (1956) Winter Wren is only a winter visitor. However, Ctyroky (1986) listed it amongst the breeding bird assemblage for north and northeast Iraq, but did not offer further details. During the extensive NI summer KBA surveys the species was not observed until 17 June 2010 during a trip by a NI team to the top of Peramagroon (Sup). At c2400 m asl, near a small patch of snow and scattered plants (mostly *Astragalus* sp) in rock crevices, a recently fledged youngster was observed and photographed; at one stage it chased a butterfly but its parents were not seen. This is a rather isolated breeding record in the Middle East from the species' main distribution in northern Turkey, Iran and through the Levant (PA).

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Moore & Boswell (1956) gave its status as 'probably resident' in suitable wooded localities in the hills of northern Iraq. They listed it as being present in at least ten sites and found it to be common at Piris Dagh (Ep). Later it was listed (as the race *S. e. leventina*) without details as part of the breeding bird assemblage for the mountains and sub-mountains of north and northeast Iraq (Ctyroky 1986). The extensive NI breeding season surveys 2007–2010 also showed it to be widespread in the wooded hills of Iraqi Kurdistan with *eg* birds present at 12 sites in 2007 with breeding proven at four. It was found mainly in localities with the following tree species: *Quercus aegilops*, *Q. infectoria*, *Juglans regia* and *Morus alba*. A newly fledged youngster was observed and photographed at Awesar (Sup), 30 July 2007, foraging on tree trunks and outer branches, watched by agitated calling parents. This is the first reported sighting of a recently fledged juvenile in Iraq. The breeding of Eurasian Nuthatch in north Iraq is a continuation of its range in southeast Turkey and the Zagros mountains of Iran (PA).

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

This species was listed (*'Sturnus vulgaris? caucasicus; purpurescens'* sic) by Ctyroky (1986) as being part of the bird community of mountainous and sub-mountainous habitats of north and northeast Iraq, but he provided no further details. The NI surveys observed 27 Common Starlings in Iraqi Kurdistan 22 May 2008. On 29 April 2010, four were seen at Haji Omran (Ep) one of which was visiting a nest site; breeding was proven on 9 May when an adult was seen carrying food and entering the nest hole. Common Starlings were also observed visiting nesting holes in trees at Sitak (Sup) where three recently fledged young with attendant adults were observed and photographed 18 May. They were of the race *purpurescens*, the breeding range of which was suspected by Vaurie (1959) of reaching northern Iraq. In winter the Common Starling is a widespread visitor to Iraq.

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Known to be a winter visitor in small numbers (Moore & Boswell 1956, Allouse 1963) and considered by them to possibly breed. Ctyroky (1986) listed it in the breeding bird assemblages for north and northeast Iraq but without supporting details. The NI KBA summer surveys indicate that this thrush is a thinly distributed breeding species in Iraqi

Kurdistan. A recently fledged juvenile was photographed with an adult in Hawraman area, Awesar (Sup), 1 August 2007; it was in a mountainous area with deciduous oak forest and old Walnut trees. On 12 May 2009, nine Mistle Thrushes were observed including pairs and singing males in an old deciduous oak forest at Parazan (Sup), and then on 22 May 2009 a pair was watched on Sakran mountain (Ep). In 2009 and 2010 pairs were observed in open woodland at Qara Dagħ (Sup) in April and May.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Historically this bird was regarded only as a fairly common winter visitor with two races occurring: the more western *ochruros* and the eastern *phoenicuroides* (Allouse 1953, Moore & Boswell 1956). Ctyroky (1986) listed it in the breeding bird assemblages for the mountains of north and northeast Iraq but without details. The extensive NI KBA summer surveys 2007–2010 found birds present in the breeding season at three sites on Peramagroon (Sup), but only in 2009 and 2010. On 23 April 2009 a pair was seen and considered probably to be of the race *semirufus*. In 2010, a single bird was seen there on 11 May, and four recently fledged young and six adults were seen in the subalpine zone 17 June. These were considered to be of the race *ochruros*, which is the subspecies that breeds in eastern Turkey and western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Historically considered only a passage migrant in Iraq (Allouse 1953, 1963, Moore & Boswell 1956, Al-Dabbagh 1998). However, Ctyroky (1986) recorded the race *samamisticus* in the breeding bird assemblages of the mountains/sub-mountains in north and northeast Iraq (without explicit proof). During the NI KBA surveys in 2007, it was recorded at five sites in Iraqi Kurdistan with a pair of the race *samamisticus* observed and photographed feeding two recently fledged young at Girtik (Ep) in mature oak *Quercus* sp woodland at 1200 m asl in August. NI surveys 2008–2010 discovered birds in suitable habitat for nesting at eight sites in the breeding season in April and May. Breeding, however, was not proven and all appeared to be of the race *phoenicurus*. The Common Redstart breeds in neighbouring southeast Turkey and western Iran (PA). Kirwan *et al* (2008) discussed the occurrence of races *samamisticus* and *phoenicurus* in Turkey and concluded that most breeding birds there are probably intergrades between the two races; this may be the case with most of those apparently breeding in Iraq.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus*

In Iraq, Siberian Stonechats are not uncommon passage migrants and winter visitors (Allouse 1953, NI surveys). However, it was not until comprehensive summer surveys by NI in Iraqi Kurdistan in the summers of 2008–2010 that breeding was proven. All records are from Erbil province: on 22 May 2008 three pairs were observed on a grassy hillside near Haji Omran; on 22 May 2009 seven pairs, including a male visiting a nest with food (Plate 34) and males displaying, were seen at Sakran in an open grassy area at 1900 m asl; on 23 May 2009 five were found in the subalpine zone of Halgurd mountain; on 8 May 2010



Plate 34. Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus* of the race *armenica* carrying food to a nest, Sakran, Erbil province, 22 May 2009. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

three were seen in the Sakran area and the following day 12 were watched at Haji Omran, including pairs, displaying birds and a female visiting a nest with food. In the Middle East, Siberian Stonechats of the race *armenica* breed in eastern Turkey and western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA); this is also the race that has been discovered breeding in Iraq (Plate 34).

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Northern Wheatear has previously been listed as a passage migrant with few records in winter and the suggestion of breeding in north Iraq (Allouse 1953, 1963, Moore & Boswell 1956, Al-Dabbagh 1998). The first indication of breeding was obtained during the NI KBA summer survey of 2007 when a family party including three recently fledged juveniles was observed in Haji Omran (Ep) in August foraging among scattered rocks on a grassy slope. During the 2009 survey two pairs were found at Homar Qawm (Sup), 23 April. A male was watched carrying a caterpillar to the nest, between two rocks, to feed the chicks, which could be heard cheeping. In the Middle East, Northern Wheatears breed throughout Turkey, the eastern Mediterranean coast and west and north Iran (PA).

Kurdistan Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna*

Until a pair was observed on Korak mountain (Ep) 22 April 1994 (MacKenzie *in litt* to MI Evans 2007) the status of this wheatear had been described as a passage migrant (Allouse 1953) and a rare passage migrant (Moore & Boswell 1956). Surprisingly it was not listed by Ctyroky (1986) in the breeding bird assemblages for the hills of north and northeast Iraq. The extensive NI KBA summer surveys 2008–2010 showed that it is an uncommon breeding bird, recorded at four foothill sites in Sulaimani province and two in Erbil. Breeding was first proven 19 April 2010 when a nest with eggs was found in a crevice in a rocky projection on a slope at Peramagroon (Sup) and on 29 May a pair were feeding young at a nearby location. This wheatear only breeds in the Middle East: outside Iraqi Kurdistan its breeding range is restricted to southeast Turkey and through the Zagros mountains of western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

Eastern Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*

Prior to the NI KBA surveys this wheatear had not been recorded in Iraq, though it breeds widely in Iran, where it is a summer visitor, and from Syria south to Saudi Arabia, where mostly resident (PA). In Iraqi Kurdistan a male was seen on a rocky hillside at Peramagroon mountain (Sup) at 1300 m asl 22 April 2009. The following year a pair with two juveniles was observed and photographed 19 April 2010 in the same area (Plate 35); they or another pair were seen and photographed on 30 May and 9 June. At Hemreen lake (SDp), two adults were watched and photographed making a change over at a nest 3 March 2010. The nest was situated between two rocks and much agitated behaviour accompanied by alarm calling was observed from the attendant adults, suggesting the nest contained young, rather than eggs.



Plate 35. Eastern Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens* juveniles, Peramagroon, Sulaimani province, 19 April 2010. © Korsh Ararat/Nature Iraq

Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*

Allouse (1953) described this wheatear as a passage migrant and Moore & Boswell (1957) a winter visitor but with a bird heard singing in August. It was not recorded amongst the breeding bird assemblages in the mountain slopes of north and northeast Iraq by Ctyroky (1986) but was given as resident in central Iraq by Al-Dabbagh (1998) but without supporting evidence. It was the NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2007–2010 that confirmed breeding and showed that Finsch's Wheatears are not uncommon, being recorded in pairs, singing or displaying in the foothills in Sulaimani province (14 sites), Erbil (8 sites) and Dohok (3 sites). Breeding was first proven in 2009 when recently fledged young were seen and photographed at De Lezha (Sup) 16 April (Plate 36) and a nest with 4 young found at Peramagroon (Sup) 23 April in a crevice in a large rock on a grassy slope. In a global distribution largely confined to the Middle East, Finsch's Wheatear breeds widely in eastern Turkey and western and northern Iran (PA).



Plate 36. Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii* juvenile, De Lezha, Sulaimani province, 16 April 2009. © RF Porter/ Nature Iraq

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Spotted Flycatchers were seen on territory by Moore & Boswell (1957) in several areas in north Iraq and concluded it probably breeds (Allouse 1963). It was listed as a breeding bird by Ctyroky (1986) in north and northeast Iraq (but he gave no details). During the summer NI KBA surveys, the species was observed in suitable breeding habitat at 31 sites (four in Erbil province, 14 in Sulaimani and 13 in Dohuk), and on 30 May 2009 the first confirmed breeding evidence was recorded in the montane woodland at Sulav resort (Dop) where a nest was found on the branch of a Walnut c6 m above the ground. A bird was sitting, but the contents could not be seen.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

Allouse (1963) gave its status as a rare winter visitor, whilst MacKenzie (*in litt* to MI Evans 2007) mentioned it as breeding 22 April 1994 at Bekhal (Ep), northeast Iraq, but without details. Since the NI KBA surveys started in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2007, this species has been observed in three areas with fast running water and waterfalls. In Dohuk province up to five birds were seen at Garagu in May and June, 2008–2010; on 12 May 2010 one was watched there visiting a nest built in the roots of a *Platanus orientalis* tree growing in the bank of the stream. At Sakran (Ep) four pairs were seen on 22 May 2009, and one on 8 May 2010. In Sulaimani province, near Ahmed Awa waterfall, two pairs were seen 13 June 2008 and one pair observed 6 May 2009. Breeding in northern Iraq is contiguous with that in the mountains of southeast Turkey and the Zagros of western Iran (PA).

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Moore & Boswell (1956) and Allouse (1953, 1963) gave the status of this sparrow as a common winter visitor to Iraq. This is supported by the NI KBA winter surveys since 2005. The 2007 NI summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan produced the first proof of breeding: on 16 August two recently fledged juveniles, accompanied by an agitated adult male, were observed in dense bushes at Haji Omran (Ep). During the 2008–2010 breeding season surveys, Spanish Sparrows were recorded in Erbil province at Bekhma, Bahrka

and Fishkhaboor—all riparian sites dominated by *Tamarix*; and in Sulaimani province at Darbandikhan, Dukan, Qara Dagh, De Lezha, Homar Qawm and Sargalu, again all sites near water. Breeding in north Iraq is not surprising as this is contiguous with its range in neighbouring Turkey and Iran (PA).

Pale Rockfinch *Carpospiza brachydactyla*

Allouse (1963) recorded this as a passage migrant in Iraq with no suggestion of even possible breeding. However, during the NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan 2008–2010 it was found in four areas where breeding was either proven or suspected—all in Sulaimani province. Three pairs were singing in suitable breeding habitat on hilly ground at Dukan lake 14 May 2008; pairs were also present and singing there 13 May 2009 and 25 April 2010. On 14 June 2008 eleven Pale Rockfinches were found, including adults and juveniles, at Sangaw—the first actual proof of breeding in Iraq. At Qara Dagh, one was found singing 6 May 2009 (13 individuals present 11 May and one 19 April 2010). At De Lezha three were singing 5 May 2009 and 21 May 2010. In the Middle East the breeding range can vary annually, but it nests regularly in neighbouring southeast Turkey and Iran as well as at other scattered localities (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

The first reference to probable breeding was on 14 May 1944 near Harir (Ep) when birds were seen entering mud nests with circular apertures considered to have been constructed by another species (Moore & Boswell 1957). Ctyroky (1986) also listed it amongst the breeding community of the mountains of north and northeast Iraq but provided no details. The NI surveys summer and winter 2007–2010, showed this species to be present and probably resident at seven sites in Iraqi Kurdistan with breeding first proven 11 May 2009 at Peramagroon (Sup) where nests and fledged young were observed. They were also found breeding at Peramagroon in 2010 (Plate 37) and at one site there it was the commonest species, nesting in holes and crevices in



Plate 37. Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* feeding young, Peramagroon, Sulaimani province, 30 May 2010. © Korsh Ararati/Nature Iraq

rocks and trees but also using the old nests of Eastern Rock Nuthatches *Sitta tephronota*. The Rock Sparrow is a widespread resident in Turkey and western Iran (PA)

White-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla nivalis*

Moore & Boswell (1957) provided the first evidence of occurrence in Iraq when they observed a flock of 150 on Ser Amadia mountain (Dop) 18 March 1945, with Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla*, Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* and Rock Sparrows *Petronia petronia*. There are no other records until those of the NI KBA summer surveys in Iraqi Kurdistan when on 23 May 2009 a pair was observed displaying at Halgurd mountain (Ep). On 16 June 2010 on Peramagroon mountain (Sup), near snow patches at c2440 m asl, 43 were found including several juveniles with their parents (see Plates 3 & 4, by KA, in Balmer & Murdoch 2010)—the first breeding evidence of this bird in Iraq. In the Middle East, the

White-winged Snowfinch has a patchy distribution in the mountains of eastern Turkey and western Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Until the time of the NI KBA surveys this species was regarded only as a common winter visitor to Iraq (*eg* Allouse 1953, Moore & Boswell 1957). It was not even included by Ctyroky (1986) amongst the breeding bird assemblages for the hills of northeast and north Iraq. On a visit to Ahmed Awa (Sup) on 1 August 2007 a juvenile was photographed (OF), the first proof of breeding. However, none were seen during the NI KBA summer survey that year. They were, though, observed at a total of 12 sites during the 2008–2010 summer surveys—singing or in pairs in apparently suitable breeding habitat 26 April–1 June. The Common Chaffinch has a local distribution in neighbouring southeast Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 2008).

Red-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus*

Allouse (1963) listed Red-fronted Serin as a winter visitor, but Ctyroky (1986) included it in the breeding bird assemblages for the mountains/sub-mountains of north and northeast Iraq but without substantiation. On 31 May 2008 during the NI KBA survey of Kurdistan, a pair was found on montane rocky slopes in Ser Amadia (Dop). On 19 April 2010 a pair was seen in the subalpine zone of Peramagroon (Sup) at 2440 m asl, the male displaying; on 17 June 2010 on a rocky slope on the same mountain a pair and two juveniles were seen and photographed. This species breeds in southeast Turkey and the Zagros mountains of Iran (PA), so the discovery of breeding in north Iraq is not surprising.

Eastern Cinereous Bunting *Emberiza cineracea semenowi*

Allouse (1953) noted this as a scarce passage migrant. However, Moore & Boswell (1957) described it as “a characteristic but shy bird, present in small numbers on scrub-wooded hills and gorges in Kurdistan”. They recorded it singing or holding territory in April and May 1944–45 at eight sites, though the only evidence of breeding was juveniles on 15 August which at that date may have been early migrants. Ctyroky (1986) listed it, without details, in the breeding bird assemblage for the mountains and sub-mountains in north and northeast Iraq. The NI KBA summer surveys 2007–2010, found this globally Near Threatened species at a total of 12 sites in Sulaimani province, 12 sites in Erbil and 6 sites in Duhok. On 30 May 2010, adults were observed with recently fledged young at Peramagroon (Sup)—the first proof of actual breeding though clearly this is a widespread and not uncommon summer visitor to the hills and mountain slopes of north Iraq. The known breeding range of the race *semenowi* is small, extending from southeast Turkey through to the Zagros mountains of Iran (Kirwan *et al* 2008, PA).

PROBABLE BREEDING SPECIES

The following species probably breed in Iraq, but hitherto this has not been confirmed. All have been recorded during the NI summer KBA surveys with varying degrees of ‘breeding’ evidence including pairs present in suitable nesting habitat and, in several cases, apparently holding territory and/or displaying. Thus they should be regarded as possible or probable breeding birds whose status will be investigated carefully in future surveys.

Caspian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caspius* (based on reports of hunters to NI), Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*, Garganey *A.querquedula*, Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*, Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler *Phylloscopus orientalis*, Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*, Sedge Warbler *A.schoenobaenus*, Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*, Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*, Red-

tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe chrysopygia*, Hume's Wheatear *O. albonigra*, Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*, Radde's Accentor *P. ocellaris*, Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*, Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*, Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* and Grey-necked Bunting *E. buchanani*.

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