

# The mystery of the ‘Syrian’ Serins wintering in northern Iraq is solved

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Somehow the occurrence of Syrian Serins *Serinus syriacus* in Iraq has become embedded in the literature. Porter & Aspinall (2010) even suggested it might prove to be resident there, which was further articulated in the annotated checklist of the birds of Iraq (Salim *et al* 2012). Earlier works, *eg* Hue & Etchecopar (1970), Cramp & Perrins (1994) and del Hoyo *et al* (2010) cite the species as a winter visitor. The records on which these statements were based were of wintering birds in the Dohuk and Mosul areas of Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1920s (Ticehurst *et al* 1926). The latter reported ‘fairly large numbers, feeding on the seeds of reeds’ which was particularly surprising as feeding on reeds is unknown in the Syrian Serin (Khoury 2003, Fares Khoury pers comm) and the observations were over 700 km from the nearest known breeding area of a species with a small restricted range, in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel (Porter & Aspinall 2010) and which is resident with only altitudinal and short-distance migrations (Cramp & Perrins 1994). Ticehurst *et al* (1926) say in the introduction to their paper: “The contents [of this paper] are founded entirely on the records supplied by Sir Percy Cox and Major RE Cheesman and the collector employed by Sir Percy Cox, La Personne, and on specimens brought back by them”. Ticehurst *et al* (1926) then go on to say that it was La Personne who made the trips to Dohuk and Mosul.

The mystery was solved with the discovery of a previously overlooked short paper by Goodwin (1955) who had examined five skins collected by La Personne present in the British Museum of Natural History (now the NHM, Tring) and found they were not Syrian Serins but European Serins *Serinus serinus*. Robert Prys-Jones examined the skins and I have since examined photos of these birds and we can confirm Goodwin’s identification. Two of the birds are shown in Plate 1. A sixth specimen from the same series had been sent to the Bombay Natural History Museum (BNHS 20798) and examination of photographs sent by Asad Rahmani shows this also to be a European Serin.

In with the tray of skins in the NHM is a note by Goodwin in 1955. “There is a possibility that the birds labelled as from Dohuk, in southern Kurdistan, may not have come from there. I have been informed [by Mr Prater, formerly of the Bombay Natural History Museum] that there have been instances of the collector concerned being in error as to his localities.” To this has been appended a further note, dated 18 September 1961, “La Personne is quite sure of his locality, as he has been collecting from Dohuk in the early 1920’s.” The latter note is signed by none other than Bashir E Allouse (author of *Birds of Iraq* 1963) who was a regular visitor to the NHM in the early 1960s (Robert Prys-Jones and Effie Warr pers comm).

So we can now be sure that these birds were collected in Iraqi Kurdistan and that they were, unsurprisingly, European Serins, an uncommon winter visitor to northern Iraq (Salim *et al* 2012). The mystery has been solved and we can remove Syrian Serin from the Iraq list and conservationists need waste no time on potential actions in Iraq for this globally vulnerable species.

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**Plate I.** Three photos each showing a different view of two European Serins *Serinus serinus*, male above and female below, collected in Iraqi Kurdistan December 1922 and incorrectly identified as Syrian Serins *S. syriacus*. © Natural History Museum, Tring

Bombay Natural History Museum. Finally I would like to thank Guy Kirwan for incisive comments which greatly improved this short note.

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