

Breeding of Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* in Iraq

OMAR F AL-SHEIKHLY

In 2005 Nature Iraq started field surveys to establish Iraq's Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). Starting in the southern marshes, the programme extended to Kurdistan in 2007 and then, when the political situation had improved in summer 2009, surveys commenced in the arid rangelands and deserts of central and western Iraq which hitherto had been rather neglected (see *eg* Evans 1994). Further surveys aimed at finding the migratory stop-over sites for the critically-endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* began in these western areas in 2010. These seasonal field surveys, from 2009, in central and western Iraq covered 33 sites in a wide variety of habitats: desert, semi-desert, open grassland, low mountains and rocky hills, as well as marshlands and permanent wetlands.

During the surveys regular visits were also made to the local animal market in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province and c17 km west of Baghdad (Figure 1). Here, on 15 May 2009, an owlet (Plate 1) was found in a cage, waiting to be sold. It was identified as a juvenile Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, later confirmed from my photos and description by Simon Aspinall, Richard Porter and Mohammad Shobrak. It was c40 days old (Peter Castell pers comm). The owlet showed a distinctive facial disc, creamy-sandy plumage and very pale, newly-developed flight-feathers; the breast markings were still developing. The eyes were large with yellow iris and the legs pale with medium length dark claws.

Enquiries revealed that the owlet was one of two chicks (the other had died) that had been collected by a hunter from a nest at Wadi Al Ubaiyadh (33° 04' 34.38" N, 42° 48' 53.47" E, Figure 1, Plate 2), an arid area of rocky hills between Al Rahaliya and Nekheab districts in Anbar province. The hunter indicated to me where to locate the nest site. The nest was in a hole in a cliff of moderate elevation, fecal droppings indicating where the adults had been roosting. I later observed the adults: they had a pale, rusty plumage with the lower breast and belly distinctly barred; the dark-lined facial disc surrounded orange eyes. The following year, on 10 June 2011, two



Plate 1. Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* c40 days old, 15 May 2009, animal market, Ramadi, Anbar province, Iraq. © Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly



Plate 2. Wadi Al Ubaiyadh, between Al Rahaliya and Nekheab districts, Anbar province, Iraq. © Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly

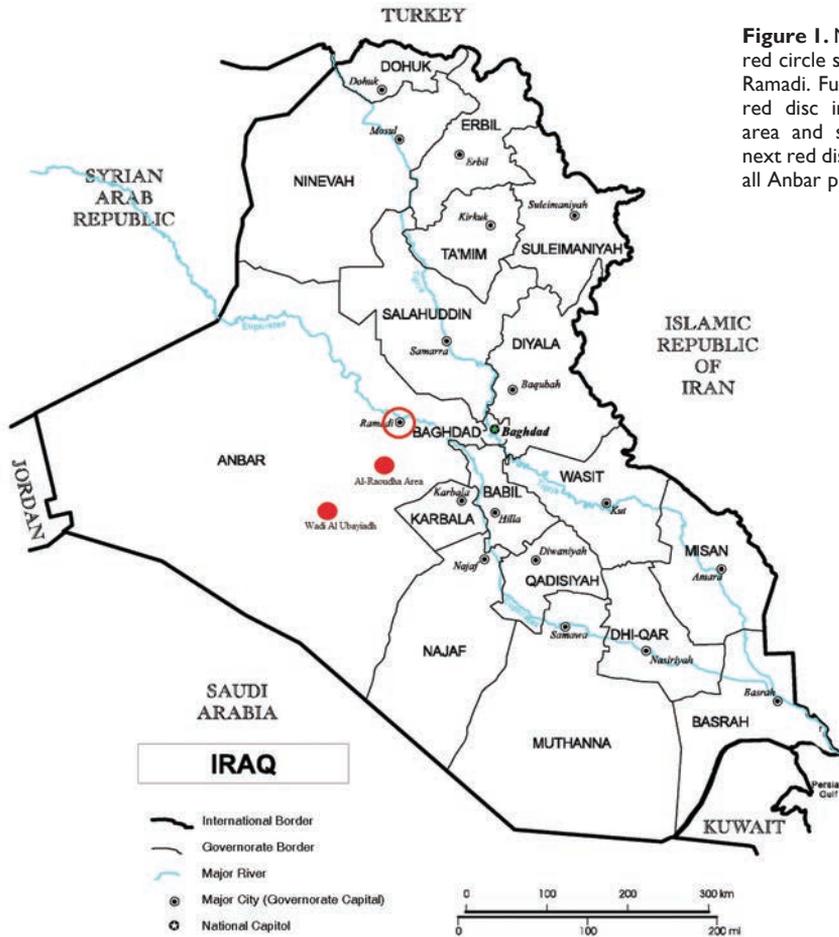


Figure 1. Map of Iraq. The open red circle shows the location of Ramadi. Further southwest, the red disc indicates Al-Raoudha area and southwest again the next red disc Wadi Al Ubayyah, all Anbar province.

full-sized but young Pharaoh Eagle Owls (Plate 3) and an adult (Plate 4) were found in the market. They had been trapped at Al-Raoudha area (32° 59' 12.70" N, 43° 18' 43.65" E, Figure 1) of Anbar province. These two records clearly indicate that the species is breeding in the western deserts of Iraq.

Vaurie (1960) listed a specimen of *Bubo bubo* that he had seen in the Chicago Natural History Museum that was collected in November 1937 at Al-Hadithah on the Euphrates in western Iraq. He noted that its wing measured 364 mm and its colour pattern was typical of *ascalaphus*. Further investigation located this skin at the now Field Museum in Chicago. It was photographed (Plate 5) and measured by the collection assistant, Mary Hennen. The total length was 48 cm; wing 364 mm and tail 195 mm. These are perfect for *ascalaphus*. She confirmed that the collector was R Clawson who, according to the Field Museum database, collected 15–20 birds of different species in Oct–Nov 1937 from Iraq and Syria.

Allouse (1953) indicated that the Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* breeds fairly commonly, mainly in northern Iraq, but with specimens recorded from Baghdad and Babylon. All were ascribed to the race *nikolskii* and he did not mention *ascalaphus*. Eagle Owls were also observed by Al-Dabbagh (1998) in the semi-deserts of central Iraq, but without indicating which taxon. Nature Iraq KBA surveys had hitherto only observed Eurasian Eagle Owls *Bubo bubo*, in the northern woody mountains and eastern hills of Iraq. The Pharaoh Eagle Owl is resident in Arabia with a patchy distribution with the nearest breeding in Kuwait, northern Saudi Arabia and one area in northeast Syria (Porter & Aspinnall 2010).



Plate 3. (left) Two full-sized but young Pharaoh Eagle Owls *Bubo ascalaphus*, 10 June 2011, animal market, Ramadi, Anbar province, Iraq. © Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly

Plate 4. (right) Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, 10 June 2011, animal market, Ramadi, Anbar province, Iraq. © Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly



Plate 5. Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* skin at the Field Museum, Chicago. Specimen collected November 1937 at Al-Hadithah on the Euphrates in western Iraq by R Clawson. © Mary Hennen/ Field Museum Chicago

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my colleagues in Nature Iraq for their continuing support and advice, Dave Willard and Mary Hennen for locating and measuring the specimen in the Field Museum, Chicago, Robert Prys-Jones and Peter Castell for helpful advice and Richard Porter for commenting on my first draft.

REFERENCES

- Al-Dabbagh, KY. 1998. The birds of semi-desert areas of central Iraq. *Sandgrouse* 20: 135–141.
- Allouse, B. 1953. *The Avifauna of Iraq*. Iraq Natural History Museum, Baghdad.
- Evans, M. 1994. *Important Bird Areas in the Middle East*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.
- Porter, R & S Aspinall. 2010. *Birds of the Middle East*. Christopher Helm, London.
- Vaurie, C. 1960. Systematic notes on Palearctic birds. No. 41 Strigidae: the genus *Bubo*. *American Museum Novitates* 2000: 1–31.

Omar Fadhil Al-Sheikhly, *Nature Iraq*. omar.fadhil@natureiraq.org