

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The slaughter of wild birds in Kuwait continues

This year my luck was in. My cousin took a job in Kuwait so, in October, I visited a country that is typically conspicuous in its absence from most Europeans' holiday wish list destinations. I had a great time there, one of the high spots being the Tareq Rajab museum which houses a breathtaking collection of cultural artefacts, mercifully protected from destruction during the Iraqi invasion by someone using their common sense.

Tourists aren't common in Kuwait so everyone I met, both ex-pat and Kuwaiti, was keen to know how I'd been passing my days. When I mentioned that I'd been all round the country birding I was, without exception, met with incredulity.

"Are there any birds in Kuwait?"

"Oh yes. How many species do you think there are?"

"Er...pigeons...sparrows...er, two?"

"Nope, almost 400 have been recorded."

"Whaat? You have *got* to be kidding!"

The birding, courtesy of an ex-pat who took me to most of the key sites, was a real highlight of my visit. As an inexperienced Gulf birder, this was 'listing magic'—nearly 100 species, 22 of them lifers in just a couple of days. I haven't listed at that rate since my first visit to southern Africa a decade ago!

Top of my list was Crab Plover and it turned out to be every inch the strange and elegant bird I'd seen in the field guide. The sight of Steppe Buzzards and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters lined up like so many starlings along the irrigation pivots was a treat, as was the sheer density of waders along the shoreline joined by a thousand Greater Flamingos flying in to feed and finding Cream-coloured Coursers camouflaged against cream and brown desert.

Now, I'm not what you'd call a 'ticker', but there were some birds that I really wanted to see. One of these was the Greater Spotted Eagle. I'd seen the Lesser Spotted in Zambia so this would neatly 'complete the set' (ok then, I am a bit of a ticker). When we reached the appropriate site it didn't take us any time

at all to find it and photograph it close up. That's because it was dead, shot out of the sky and left to rot on the ground. The sickening irony won't have escaped you—a dead lifer.

I already knew that Kuwait 'permits' indiscriminate shooting of birds (and other wildlife). That's why we avoided al-Abraq al-Khabari because it was likely that shooting would be going on there and I couldn't trust myself to be a silent bystander. But, emotion apart, I didn't want to be at a site where bullets were flying around! Nevertheless, there were constant reminders of such shooting with spent cartridges all over the place at some sites.

Now, I'm no expert on the Gulf, but I've birded in Bahrain, and I didn't come across any evidence of shooting there. I also know that Islam calls for respect for the natural world and, from what I could see, Kuwait's observance of the Qu'ran is pretty enthusiastic. So what on earth is going on here? A tiny country with little water boasting nigh on 400 species recorded *and* it's on a major migration route, yet it is allowing people to go out and destroy its wildlife. Why?

That museum I mentioned, Tareq Rajeb, is a jewel in Kuwait city's crown and the reason the collection is still there is because it was protected from those who would have destroyed it. Is it unreasonable to expect the Kuwaiti government to step up and do what any responsible government would do and protect the wildlife that graces its land?

Annie Woodhouse

I am totally appalled by the continued behaviour of the indiscriminate shooting parties throughout Kuwait—it is the worst killing of birdlife that I have seen throughout the entire region. I have vowed never to return with tour parties.

I caused absolute mayhem during my last two visits in 2009 after seeing a Common Cuckoo shot at point-blank range, as well as an adult Barred Warbler, and after seeing both immature Greater Spotted and Eastern Imperial Eagles shot dead, as well as African Purple Gallinules. I remonstrated with

shooters and got all four tyres shot out on my 4 x 4 for my troubles (and was later made to endure the sight of 12 shot European Bee-eaters lined up alongside each other on my car windscreen).

These locals shoot and kill anything feathered that moves in Kuwait, regardless of whether it is in a designated nature reserve or not, and particularly favour the water hole at Tulha oasis and beside the Sulaibikhat reserve. It was criminal seeing Pied Wheatears, Woodchats, Isabelline Shrikes and an array of Stonechats being killed for 'fun', the 'armies' of hunters carefully hunting down their quarry by slowly driving up to the bushes and waiting for the migrant birds to appear. At every location visited in Kuwait, bird killing was rife—absolutely disgusting, heartbreaking, murderous and illegal. This senseless slaughter must be halted before it has a permanent effect on these migrating birds.

Kuwait is not a third-world country—it is one of the richest in the world—and was saved from being taken by Iraq by the American and British armies. Wild birds are fully protected by law in all EEC countries

and this should be extended to the Arabian peninsula and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Lee G R Evans
UK

[Clearly the decades-long slaughter continues—see *eg* Gregory *et al* 2001 *Sandgrouse* 23(1): 34–38. The first writer mentions avoiding al-Abraq al-Khabari in the west of Kuwait. I received an e-mail from a contact in Kuwait which stated, "Last weekend [September 2010] at Al Abraq there were between 15 and 20 cars patrolling the boundary of the farm shooting at anything flying in or out—it truly is depressing, but if



Plate 3. Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Kuwait.



Plate 1. Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana*, Kuwait.



Plate 4. 'I think this was a buzzard of some sort...', Kuwait.



Plate 2. Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, Kuwait.

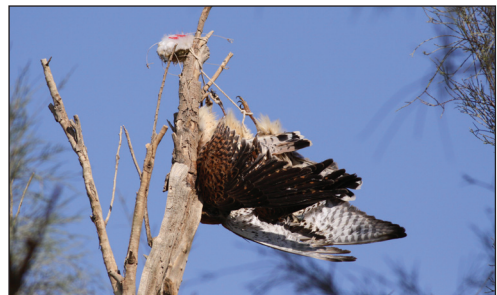


Plate 5. 'This kestrel was either used as bait, or somehow got trapped in the tree with its leggings and died...', Kuwait.

we make too much noise the owners might just withdraw our permission to bird on this critical and important birding site. So, we accept the status quo and have to turn the other cheek even when getting showered in shotgun pellets..." The photographs (Plates 1–5) were taken in Kuwait. The following letter reminds us of another problem in our region—bird markets. *The Editor*]

The wild bird trade in the Kuwait bird market

There have been a number of recent assessments of the trade in wild birds in the Middle East (Bachmann 2010, Stanton 2010) and we carried out an investigation to shed some light on this illegal activity in the Kuwait bird market. The survey (Table 1) provides a snapshot of the range of wild birds sold in this market (Plates 6–9).

The bird market is situated in the Al-Rai area of Kuwait city and is part of what is known as the 'Friday' market. It started near to the old sheep market and developed into a weekend market run by pet owners who sell pigeons, chickens and cage birds. The municipality intervened and made a building to include licensed pet shops and a covered open area used by pet owners who only sell during weekends.

The birds sold include many cage birds imported from Europe, South America and southeast Asia. However, many wild birds caught in nearby countries (eg Iran, Iraq, Syria) are imported into Kuwait for sale in the bird market. These wild birds include raptors, quail, sandgrouse, larks, Hypocoliuses and bulbuls.

Birds used in falconry such as Sakers and Peregrine Falcons are trapped during their autumn migration or smuggled from neighbouring countries and are usually kept in private houses where they are announced to interested parties and sold in an auction where the highest bidder gets the bird. There is a municipality falcon market situated behind the bird market—it is unmonitored and whoever owns a falcon can sell it without any documents. However, this falcon market was not included in our survey.

Weekly visits were made to the bird market on weekends, Friday/Saturday, from 1 January to 30 May 2010. Only one weekend



Plate 6. Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, 24 January 2009, Kuwait bird market. © Ouda Al-Bathali



Plate 7. Eurasian Stone-curlews *Burhinus oedicnemus*, 8 January 2010, Kuwait bird market. © Ouda Al-Bathali



Plate 8. Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, 7 November 2009, Kuwait bird market. © Ouda Al-Bathali

Table 1. Species, total number of birds counted and number of occasions a species was seen during the Kuwait bird market survey, weekends 1 January–30 May 2010. IUCN Red List Categories: NT, Near Threatened; VU, Vulnerable.

Species	# birds	# occasions	remarks
Common Quail <i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	3	1	
Eurasian Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	4	1	
Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	1	1	
Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	3	1	
Pink-backed Pelican <i>Pelecanus rufescens</i>	1	1	probably from Saudi Arabia
Eurasian Griffon Vulture <i>Gyps fulvus</i>	3	2	offered for sale at US\$450
Short-toed Snake Eagle <i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	5	5	
Western Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	25	6	
Pallid Harrier <i>Circus macrourus</i>	25	8	IUCN Status NT
Montagu's Harrier <i>Circus pygargus</i>	11	4	
Dark Chanting Goshawk <i>Melierax metabates</i>	1	1	caught in Qatif, Saudi Arabia
Levant Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter brevipes</i>	1	1	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	14	3	
Northern Goshawk <i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1	1	
Steppe Buzzard <i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	8	4	
Long-legged Buzzard <i>Buteo rufinus</i>	1	1	
Steppe Eagle <i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	2	2	
Eastern Imperial Eagle <i>Aquila heliaca</i>	1	1	IUCN Status VU
Lesser Kestrel <i>Falco naumanni</i>	225	18	IUCN Status VU
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	963	23	
Eurasian Hobby <i>Falco subbuteo</i>	13	5	
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1	1	
Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	62	4	
Eurasian Stone-curlew <i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>	5	2	
Black-winged Stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	3	2	
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>	1	1	IUCN Status NT
Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	1	IUCN Status NT
Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>	8	1	
Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles exustus</i>	6	1	
European Turtle Dove <i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	6	3	
Laughing Dove <i>Stigmatopelia senegalensis</i>	50	1	origin unknown
Namaqua Dove <i>Oena capensis</i>	50	1	origin unknown
Common Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i>	1	1	
Western Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i>	13	6	
Pharaoh Eagle Owl <i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>	1	1	seller claimed it was captured in Saudi Arabia
Lilith Owllet <i>Athene noctua lilith</i>	3	1	
Short-eared Owl <i>Asio flammeus</i>	1	1	
European Roller <i>Coracias garrulus</i>	5	2	IUCN Status NT
White-throated Kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	1	1	
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater <i>Merops persicus</i>	10	1	
Eurasian Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>	2	2	
Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>	6	1	
Lesser Grey Shrike <i>Lanius minor</i>	16	5	
Steppe Grey Shrike <i>Lanius meridionalis pallidirostris</i>	41	7	
Woodchat Shrike <i>Lanius senator</i>	4	1	

Golden Oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	2	1	
House Crow <i>Corvus splendens</i>	40	2	
Rook <i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	1	1	
Brown-necked Raven <i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	17	3	
Hypocolius <i>Hypocolius ampelinus</i>	197	7	
Calandra Lark <i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	36	1	probably imported from Iran
Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>	36	6	
Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark <i>Eremopterix nigriceps</i>	70	3	
White-eared Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus leucogenys leucotis</i>	566	10	all chicks taken from nests
Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	2	1	
Great Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	2	1	
Afghan Babbler <i>Turdoides caudata huttoni</i>	2	2	juvenile offered at KD30
Eurasian Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	200	8	offered at KD5 each
Garden Warbler <i>Sylvia borin</i>	3	2	
Barred Warbler <i>Sylvia nisoria</i>	3	1	
Common Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	12	2	
Bank Myna <i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>	4	1	
Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	17	2	
Eurasian Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	1	1	
Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i>	5	2	
Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin <i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>	27	4	all chicks



Plate 9. European Rollers *Coracias garrulus*, 9 April 2010, Kuwait bird market. © AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan

was missed, in January. Visits were brief, moving through the market from one end to the other though sometimes more time was spent. Thirty-two visits were paid to the bird market. We consider that the actual numbers of wild birds sold in the market may well have been much higher than the numbers we counted. Initially, we submitted the results of two short surveys to local officials but we decided to continue our survey since their response was negative.

We found 66 species of wild birds offered for sale of which six are on the IUCN red list. The species and numbers of birds are presented in Table 1. Both species of kestrel are sold in large numbers, reflecting the high demand for these by young boys.

A detailed copy of our survey was distributed to government bodies to attract their attention into taking appropriate action. It has yielded some fruits as tighter controls and law enforcement have partially stopped some of the illegal trade. Now we think this survey might encourage other individuals in the Middle East to do the same, so the picture would become clearer and tighter controls over the bird trade in the region can become a reality.

References

- Bachmann, A. 2010. Animal trade in Iraq. *Wildlife Middle East* 5(1): 6.
 Stanton DB. 2010. A rough guide to the raptor trade in Yemen. *Falco* 36: 5–7.

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