

REVIEWS

Eden Again: Hope in the Marshes of Iraq

Suzanne Alwash

Tablet House Publishing, 2013. 264 pages.

16 pages of colour photographs.

Hardback. US\$29.95

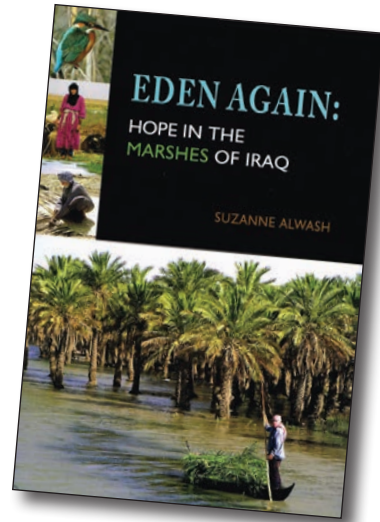
ISBN 978-0-9886514-2-5

The destruction of the vast Mesopotamian marshes in southern Iraq must surely rate as the single most barbaric act against birdlife (and the natural world in general) within the OSME region in living memory. Saddam Hussein ordered the land be drained to punish the people who lived there. At the time it was said that these marshes would be lost forever, but nature is an unstoppable force, and given the right conditions wildlife will often return faster than we might imagine. This book tells the story of that return.

Suzanne Alwash has a fascinating insight to the process of recreating this huge wetland as she is a geologist, and with her husband—Azzam Alwash—she saw the challenge and worked with him to find the solution. It was not just a case of bringing back the water as huge embankments had been created and had to be demolished. It was habitat recreation on a truly massive scale.

The story of how the marshes were reflooded is a moving one because while Azzam and Suzanne came up with the ideas together with money and equipment, the local Marsh Arabs did the majority of the work themselves. The process was not easy as years of internal strife had bred mistrust among communities, and a huge part of the process was simply bringing people together to create a shared ambition. But co-operation was eventually established and despite the work coinciding with several years of drought, more than 50% of the former marshland has now been reflooded. In July 2013 the Iraqi Council of Ministers approved the designation of the Central Marshes of Iraq as the country's first national park.

The book contains many maps showing the areas that have been reflooded, along with photographs of the habitats and some of the



key bird species, such as Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*. There is also information on the species present and a chapter summarises the findings of breeding and wintering surveys undertaken by Nature Iraq.

However, a greater challenge for the future health of the marshes comes not from within Iraq, but further upstream where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers run through Turkey and Syria. The creation of dams along these rivers is not a new idea, but over time the reduction of water flow has been so dramatic that further damming would seriously endanger the Mesopotamian marshes. It would be truly catastrophic if having achieved so much in the last ten years these marshes were again turned to dust through the actions of mankind.

Keith Betton

Oman Bird List, Edition 7

Jens Eriksen & Reginald Victor

Center for Environmental Studies and Research, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. 2013.

Softback. 288 pages, colour photos throughout.

ISBN 978-99969-0-218-5

The sixth edition of the official list of the birds of the Sultanate of Oman, by Jens Eriksen, Dave

Sargeant and Reginald Victor, was published in November 2003. This latest version, the seventh edition, is organised similarly with an introduction and brief sections on the Oman Bird Records Committee, species names and taxonomy (generally follows IOC, OSME ORL and the Porter & Aspinall field guide), status and population trends in Oman, IUCN status, regions of Oman, the histograms, breeding maps and abbreviations, and how to submit bird records to the recorder (Jens Eriksen hjoman@gmail.com). The Oman Bird List starts on page 11 and lists all 513 bird species accepted by the OBRC up to 15 September 2013. Most species accounts are accompanied by at least one photo, universally excellent, of the species taken in Oman by the Hanne & Jens Eriksen photographic 'duo'. A half-degree square map for Oman is presented for each breeding species. Histograms showing temporal distribution by month are included for migratory species. Date/number/place details are presented for vagrants (species with fewer than ten accepted records). As an example, the status statement for Crowned Sandgrouse *Pterocles coronatus* in Oman reads "Fairly common breeding resident of the stony deserts of central and southern Oman. Comes to water early to mid morning, often in large gatherings with max 2,000 at Muntasar (C) 13 Nov 2009. *P. c. atratus* and *P. c. saturatus* are the expected ssp. Population trend [over the last couple of decades]: Stable" where C



refers to the Central Oman region, 19–22°N. On page 252, records of the extinct Syrian Ostrich *Struthio camelus syriacus* are given followed by the start of a section (pages 252–256) on an additional 30 species, all escapes. The book concludes with a gazetteer, three pages of acknowledgements, references and selected bibliography, and an index of bird names, both scientific and English. This is an essential book for those with an interest in the birds of Oman, whether birding tourist, resident birder or academic.

Peter Cowan