

# OSME NEWS

*Rob Sheldon*

In July 2013 I was honoured to be elected as Chairman of OSME. Our members are the lifeblood of this organisation and the support that membership gives, both financially and morally, is key to being able to achieve the aims and objectives of the Society. So, on behalf of Council I would like to thank all of our members for their continued support and encouragement. If you are not a member, or your membership has lapsed, then please consider joining. The bulk of your membership fee goes directly to conservation action within our region through the Conservation and Research Fund (CRF). One of Council's key aims for future years is to grow the amount of money we allocate to conservation and research activities, and we are currently hoping to elect a new Council member who will drive forward our fundraising activities. To help us achieve our key challenges of membership growth and increased fundraising, Council are currently developing a strategy, OSME 2020, which will define how we wish to grow and how we will achieve this. More information on this will be available on the OSME web-site shortly. If you have any questions about the work of OSME, and how you may be able to help, then please don't hesitate to contact me (chairman@osme.org).

## **OSME Summer Meeting and AGM 2014**

The 2014 OSME Summer Meeting and AGM will be held on Saturday 5th July at the BTO Headquarters, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU, UK—see enclosed leaflet. There is ample free parking, and both rail and bus stations are within a 10–20 minute walk. Road access is via the A11 London–Norwich road, connecting with the A14 from the north and Midlands. Trains operate a regular service on the Birmingham–Norwich line, and also to Cambridge and London. Admission is free and all are welcome. As with previous years we are arranging the talks around a common theme, and this year

we are highlighting key discoveries within our region. Johannes Kamp will update us on some recently discovered breeding behaviour of the Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*. As more birders and ornithologists undertake more surveys we are discovering more about the avifauna that occurs within our region. Raffael Aye and Szabolcs Nagy will inform us about the wonderful birds of Tadjikistan and the wetlands of Saudi Arabia respectively. The Summer Meeting promises to be a fantastic day with an excellent group of speakers. OSME Council looks forward to seeing as many members and non-members as possible.

## **OSME Summer Meeting 6 July 2013 (contributed by Geoff Welch & Ian Harrison)**

Last year's Summer Meeting, themed around monitoring bird populations in the OSME region, was again held at the BTO headquarters in Thetford and was attended by 55 members and guests.

Paul Stancliffe from the BTO opened the day by providing a brief update on the ongoing satellite tracking study of Common Cuckoos *Cuculus canorus*. Paul talked at the previous year's meeting and within a matter of days the first ever UK Cuckoo turned up in the OSME region! This ongoing study shows that a small number of UK Common Cuckoos regularly pass through Egypt en route to wintering areas in the Congo. Importantly, the study also shows that many birds follow the same route each year and use the same staging and wintering areas. Using the same developing technologies for the study of globally threatened species provides an invaluable tool for conservationists struggling to protect some of the world's most endangered species.

The second speaker was Marcus Kohler from BirdLife International who gave an overview of the UNDP/BirdLife Migratory Soaring Birds project which focuses on the Rift Valley/Red Sea flyway which runs through the western half of the OSME region. The project, covering 11 countries, focuses on 37

species of soaring bird and is looking to find ways of mainstreaming (integrating) their conservation into five main development sectors—agriculture, energy, hunting, waste management and tourism. The pressures from uncontrolled and unsustainable hunting of birds, not just soaring birds, throughout the flyway is well known and organisations such as SPNL in Lebanon and RSCN in Jordan are devoting a great deal of effort into improving and enforcing legislation, training hunters and raising awareness but there is still a great deal to be done. An increasing problem and one which Marcus talked about in particular is energy production, especially the rapid increase in the number of wind farms being constructed along the flyway. Unfortunately, the ideal locations for wind farms are often also those most favoured by migrating soaring birds so the risk of conflict is very high. Collision with turbines is just one of the risks; others include electrocution, collision with transmission lines and other associated infrastructure, habitat loss, disturbance and barrier effects. The project's approach is to engage actively with the energy companies and, importantly, the major investment and development banks, in order to find practical solutions such as preparing guidance materials for the siting and operation of wind farms. An additional invaluable tool that is still under development is a sensitivity mapping tool which aims to bring together bird, weather and topographical data to identify those areas of greatest potential conflict so that the planning of future developments can be undertaken to minimise conflicts which will benefit both the energy companies and conservationists. More information on the project is available at [www.migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org](http://www.migratorysoaringbirds.undp.birdlife.org).

The final speaker of the morning was Wouter Vansteelant who talked about the ground-breaking monitoring and conservation study of migrating raptors at Batumi in Georgia. Although northeast Turkey was known to be important for migrating raptors following studies in the 1970s, it wasn't until work started at Batumi in 2008 that the scale of the movement and the importance of the eastern Black Sea bottleneck became apparent—800 000 birds were recorded in the first season and over 1 million birds

in 2012! Ten species have been recorded in numbers exceeding 1% of the estimated global population. What sets the Batumi project apart from many other migration studies is that from the start equal emphasis has been given to involving local community members—households, school children, hunters—to build interest and awareness of the importance of the migration and to find ways of delivering tangible benefits from conserving rather than killing birds. Activities have included educational activities for school children, bird guide training courses, promotion of home stays by visiting birders and the launch of the 1st Batumi Bird Festival in 2012 which attracted international media attention and looks set to become an annual event. OSME is proud to have provided support for this excellent project through the Conservation and Research Fund, and will look for further opportunities to collaborate in the future. For further information about the work of the Batumi Raptor Count see [www.batumiraptorcount.org](http://www.batumiraptorcount.org).

The afternoon's talks kicked off with Chris Bowden from the RSPB, and Chair of the International Advisory Group for Northern Bald Ibis, who gave a sobering overview of the fortunes of the eastern Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* population. This population was thought to have become extinct in the wild in 1989/90 when the remaining birds at Birecik in Turkey were taken into captivity but a tiny population of just seven birds was then discovered breeding in Syria in 2002. Despite the declaration of the breeding and feeding areas of these birds as a protected area in 2004 and intensive monitoring and protection work by both Syrian and international conservationists since their rediscovery, the population has gradually declined and this spring only one bird returned from the wintering grounds in Ethiopia. Satellite tracking has identified the migration route and stopover sites for the species and also revealed the many hazards they face, most notably illegal shooting. However, there are two glimmers of hope for conserving this population—four birds were seen on the Ethiopian wintering grounds in 2012/13 so there may still be immature (?) wild birds which may return in 2014; and the Birecik population is doing well

and provides a potential source of birds for reintroduction to Syria. Indeed two Turkish juveniles were released in Syria in late summer 2010 and to many people's surprise successfully migrated as far as southern Saudi Arabia. There are also several projects in Europe aimed at re-establishing the central European population which became extinct several hundred years ago. The Konrad Lorenz Institute has developed a technique for teaching captive bred ibises to migrate between Austria and Tuscany in Italy and a sedentary breeding population has been established in Andalusia, Spain. An International Working Group on the species was established in 2012 and an updated Species Action Plan has been produced. The situation remains dire for the eastern population but the story is far from over.

Rob Sheldon, new OSME Chairman, then gave a talk about the importance of Central Asia for the endangered White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*—the species for which OSME raised over £1400 from last year's raffle and painting auction. White-headed Ducks have four main populations—in Spain, Algeria and Tunisia and Pakistan and Central Asia with the Central Asian population being by far the largest. Significant breeding populations occur in four countries in the OSME region and six OSME region countries are important for passage and wintering birds. The species faces a range of threats including hybridisation with the introduced North American Ruddy Duck *O. jamaicensis* (primarily in western Europe); climate change/drought; and loss of habitat through groundwater abstraction, infrastructure development and increased arable farming. Illegal hunting is also a major problem at some sites. The OSME funds are being used to support research work in central Kazakhstan by the national BirdLife Affiliate, the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan (ACBK). In a pilot area, research is being carried out to determine breeding numbers and distribution, identify important habitat characteristics, study food availability, and sample lead in lake sediments and initial results are expected in November 2013. It is hoped that the work will be expanded next year to include satellite tagging and,

hopefully, also to include important sites in neighbouring Uzbekistan.

The final speaker of the day was Maxim Koshkin from Kazakhstan who presented preliminary results of his PhD research project on numbers and distribution of Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* in the Kyzylkum Desert of Uzbekistan. Maxim is based at the University of East Anglia and his work is supported by the Emirates Breeding Birds Conservation Centre. Macqueen's Bustard is highly revered among Arab falconers but numbers have declined dramatically across the species' range due especially to unsustainable hunting. Through a combination of transect surveys, point counts, habitat sampling and monitoring of land use, Maxim is studying the ecology of the species in the Kyzylkum Desert and investigating links with land use such as sheep grazing. Ultimately it is hoped that it will be possible to develop habitat management recommendations and guidelines for sustainable hunting.

The formal part of the day's proceedings, the 35th Annual General Meeting, saw major changes to OSME Council with the retirement of Mike Blair, Ian Harrison and Geoff Welch. Christine Booth and Chris Lamsdell also stood down as co-opted members of Council. All were thanked for the enormous amount of work they have contributed to the running of OSME. Tristan Reid and Matthew White were elected as new Council members and Rob Sheldon took over from Geoff as the new Chairman of Council. Nabegh Ghazal Asswad, Chairman of the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife (SSCW) was elected as a new Vice-President. Three important announcements were made at the end of the AGM—Khaled Irani, President of RSCN in Jordan and new Chairman of BirdLife International, sent a personal message expressing a wish to work closely with OSME in the future; at the recent BirdLife World Congress in Ottawa, Richard Porter was appointed a Member of Honour in recognition of his work in promoting conservation throughout the Middle East, especially on Socotra and, more recently, in Iraq; and Ahmad Aidek from Syria became the first recipient of the new OSME Certificate

of Recognition as the author of *A Guide to the Biodiversity of Deir ez-Zoor Area*.

### OSME at the Birdfair 2013

The Birdfair at Rutland Water is an important event for the whole of the birding world, and OSME continues to attend (Plate 1). It is a great opportunity to meet members, supporters and friends of the Society, as well as meet new people and encourage birders about the avifauna of our region. We were very fortunate that Martin Woodcock, famed bird artist, donated a painting of a White-headed Duck that we were able to auction by sealed bid to raise funds for the CRF. We are very grateful to Martin for his kind support and generosity and to all the bidders, the funds raised were transferred to ACBK, the BirdLife partner in Kazakhstan, to support their new survey and monitoring programme for the breeding populations in two lake systems, Korgalzhyn-Tengiz and Naurzum. Planning for our attendance at the Birdfair 2014 is well underway and we look forward to seeing as many of you as possible on the 15–17th August.

### Thanks to Mike Jennings, author of the *Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia*.

Mike Jennings, a founding member and long-term supporter of OSME, and Arabian bird expert extraordinaire, recently made a very generous donation of two copies of his ground-breaking Atlas. OSME are extremely grateful for Mike's support and are planning to use both copies to raise money for our Conservation Research Fund, as well as raise the profile of our work. One copy of the Atlas has been donated as an OSME contribution to the 2014 Birdfair auction. Apparently we are the first to commit a prize this year! On hearing OSME's plans, Mike added "The *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* has been a voluntary project involving some 500 observers, national records and others over almost three decades. It has resulted in an atlas that brings together everything known on the distribution, ecology and breeding of more than 270 breeding birds in the Arabian Peninsula. Although for most of that period the project was supported by the Saudi Wildlife Authority, I am very grateful to



Plate 1. OSME stand at Birdfair 2013. © Sal Cooke



OSME for its initial financial support back in the 1980s, for various grants over the years on surveys to little recorded areas, and for its general help, support and encouragement since the project started. I am proud to have been one of the founders of the Society back in the 1970s.”

### OSME Raffle 2013

The annual OSME raffle has been a good source of income for the Society over the last few years. However, with increased costs and a challenging financial environment, Council took the decision that the 2013 Raffle would be the last. The raffle raised £800 to support the work of Nature Iraq on the globally endangered Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our corporate supporters who have provided prizes over the years.

The winners of the 2013 raffle were

- 1st prize Graham Appleton—Opticron SE8x42 Binoculars
- 2nd prize Anne Cotton—Naturetrek voucher for £250
- 3rd prize Paul Stancliffe—Birdguides Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic
- 4th prize Rosa Santilli—Country Innovation Waistcoat
- 5th prize J Hopkins—Helm Books to the value of £50
- 6th prize Nick Moran—Birdguides Guide to British Birds

Congratulations to the winners and thanks to everyone who purchased tickets.

### Donations to OSME

OSME receives over £5000 in donations most years through the generosity of many of its members, some for specific projects but mostly for us to use through our CRF funds. I'd like to take this opportunity of thanking each and every one of them and hope they continue with their generosity. For more details about making donations please contact [treasurer@osme.org](mailto:treasurer@osme.org).

### The Conservation and Research Fund—projects supported in 2013

Last year was an excellent year for the Conservation and Research Fund with £8175 allocated to support 6 outstanding projects. This is the 3rd highest annual allocation from the CRF and we are looking to continue this growth in the coming years. The following projects were awarded grants:

- Breeding ecology of Black Lark—J Kamp (£1000)
- Bonelli's Eagle monitoring—CWE Ltd (£1000)
- White-headed Duck project—ACBK (£1550)
- Batumi Raptor Count—BRC (£2000)
- Basra Reed Warbler research—Nature Iraq (£1600)
- Bonelli's Eagle monitoring follow-up—CWE Ltd (£1000)

Congratulations to all the recipients of CRF awards, the grant is highly competitive and we can only fund a small proportion of those that apply. For further details please check the OSME website.

Applications are reviewed by a small committee which at the moment consists of Richard Porter, Maxim Koshkin and Rob Sheldon. The CRF committee then makes recommendations to Council. We are currently looking for at least two new people to help review CRF applications, and would welcome enquiries, especially those with knowledge of the Caucasus region. For further details please contact Rob Sheldon at [chairman@osme.org](mailto:chairman@osme.org).

### OSME and Social Media

As OSME seeks to grow its membership and supporter base we are looking at improving our presence on social media to complement our existing communications. In 2013 OSME has been tweeting away—as of February 2014 OSME has 963 followers which is an encouraging start. Since October 2013 we have enhanced our presence on Facebook and currently have 250 Likes ([www.facebook.com/OrnithologicalSocietyoftheMiddleEast](http://www.facebook.com/OrnithologicalSocietyoftheMiddleEast)).