

OSME NEWS

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OSME Summer Meeting 2012

The 2012 Summer Meeting and AGM on Saturday 7 July were again held at the BTO headquarters in Thetford and attended by 43 members and guests. The day had the theme of migration and the first speaker, Paul Stancliffe from the BTO, set the scene by giving a comprehensive overview of the increasing use of technology to reveal the secrets of the migrations of several species. The BTO is focussing on a range of species, the majority of which are in serious decline and where it is important to understand where the problems driving the declines are actually taking place, on the breeding grounds, wintering grounds or en route? Only once this is understood will it be possible to develop appropriate conservation actions. The two main techniques being used are geolocators and miniaturised satellite tags. Geolocators can only be used on species which return to the same breeding area year to year as the birds need to be recaptured and the data downloaded for analysis. By contrast, satellite tags can be used on any species and provide information on where individual birds are for as long as the tags transmit. To date geolocators have been used successfully on Common Nightingales *Luscinia megarhynchos*, Common Swifts *Apus apus* and European Nightjars *Caprimulgus europaeus* and satellite tags on Common Cuckoos *Cuculus canorus*. In all cases the results are confirming the importance of western Africa, especially Guinea and Congo, as a wintering area for these species, something we knew or suspected from ringing recoveries. However, what the data is also suggesting is that Liberia may be an important staging ground for many species, especially on their northward migration. Satellite tagging has also highlighted a 'bottleneck' site for Common Cuckoos in northern Italy, and the fact that birds from the same breeding area may use different routes on their southward migration and birds from different breeding areas use different routes to reach the same wintering area. As technology

continues to develop, the weight of satellite tags is decreasing which will make it possible to tag a wider range of species. The other significant element of the BTO's work is that the results from the research, especially the satellite tagging, are being made available via the internet (www.bto.org/science/migration/tracking-studies/cuckoo-tracking). This is proving to be an especially effective means of engaging the general public in bird research and conservation. Whilst the BTO's work is concentrated on species that breed in the UK and winter in Africa, the techniques are clearly applicable to similar studies of species in the OSME region. Satellite tagging has already been used to great effect to understand the migration routes and wintering areas of critically endangered Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* and Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* but the scope for studying other species is enormous. Technology will never replace ringing as the techniques provide different types of information, rather they complement each other and now provide researchers and conservationists with a much greater range of tools for addressing the problems facing so many species throughout the world.

The second speaker of the morning was OSME Council member Helen Demopoulos who gave a fascinating talk about Lebanon where she worked for A Rocha for 15 months in 2007 and 2008. After outlining some of the difficulties of living and working in a country recovering from a long period of unrest, Helen described how the geographical location and topography of Lebanon make the country of outstanding importance for migratory soaring birds. Every year millions of storks, pelicans and raptors pass through in spring and autumn and in several areas birds are concentrated at 'bottleneck' sites which makes them easier to monitor but also renders them susceptible to uncontrolled illegal hunting. A key element of A Rocha's work has been to identify such bottleneck sites and other areas of global importance for

birds. Where the appropriate criteria are met, such sites have been designated Important Bird Areas by BirdLife International. To date 15 IBAs have been identified, 10 of them being bottleneck sites. The other sites are important for globally threatened species such as Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus* and Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii* and for their communities of restricted-range species. During IBA fieldwork, three new species for Lebanon were discovered—Bar-tailed Lark *Ammomanes cinctura*, Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* and Eastern Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*. Additionally the status of several species was re-evaluated, eg Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* is now known to be a common breeding species, Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius* possibly breeds and European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* was found to be a common wintering species. A Rocha has also been instrumental in promoting a renewed interest in the traditional hima system, community-based protection and management of natural resources, to help conserve IBAs. There is clearly still much to be discovered in Lebanon and the country offers many opportunities to visiting birdwatchers though the migration will possibly be the greatest attraction. As Helen said in the title of her talk, rather than just being a country with IBAs, Lebanon is, in fact, an Important Bird Country!

The afternoon session started with a presentation on bird survey and ringing in the Western desert of Egypt, 2010, which was given by Professor Przemyslaw Busse, Krzysztof Stepniowski and Matt White. Prof Busse provided an overview of the development of coordinated networks of ringing sites in Europe, initially focussed along the Baltic, then extending into southwest Europe and finally also taking in southeast Europe and the western fringes of the OSME region. In relation to OSME, initially work was carried out in the Sinai but since 2006 the focus has shifted to the oases of the Western desert, c180 km west of the Nile. Matt White went on to describe the main study areas—lakes Abu Yasser and El Marun. Abu Yasser is a small saline lake surrounded by black desert, low intensity agriculture, mudflats and palm plantations. El Marun lake is surrounded by steep escarpments, tamarisk scrub, irrigated

alfalfa and fruit and palm plantations. Studies at these sites have been a combination of ringing and vantage point counts. To date 83 species have been recorded, 54 at Abu Yasser and 74 at El Marun, with the commonest being Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*, Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* and Western Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis*. Of 30 species of passerine migrant, Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* was the most numerous. Finally, Krzysztof Stepniowski talked about the ringing studies in more detail. A study supported by OSME in 2010 looked especially at habitat preferences of migrants and found that the tamarisk scrub and alfalfa were the most important as these habitats provided plentiful food for migrants as shown by measuring fat scores. Species such as Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* rapidly increased their weight in order to be able to cross the Sahara non-stop while increases were less in Eurasian Reed Warblers *A scirpaceus* as this species feeds en route. Orientation tests showed that most migrants selected headings facing west, northwest or southwest, the latter being in the direction of lake Chad which is known to be an important wintering and staging area for many species. Clearly there is a lot more still to be learned.

The fourth talk of the day was by Stoyan Nikolov, from the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BirdLife in Bulgaria), who is the project manager for a new European Union LIFE+ Nature project *Egyptian Vulture Conservation Challenges along the Eastern Mediterranean Migration Flyway*. In the last 50 years, the global population of Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* has decreased by >50% and the species is now red-listed as endangered. The main threats to the species are electrocution, secondary poisoning, direct persecution, disturbance at the breeding grounds and habitat loss. The species uses two migratory flyways, a western one via Gibraltar to western Africa and an eastern one through the OSME region to Chad. To help understand how best to conserve the species since 2009 a small number of birds breeding in Bulgaria have been fitted with satellite transmitters. Most interesting, but also depressing, one bird travelled 5000 km to Chad but was then killed by local people who saw the transmitter and thought the bird was a 'bad magician'!

Such persecution of tagged birds has been recorded in several parts of Africa and the Middle East which is a great pity as tagging generates a huge amount of vital data but conservationists now have to weigh up the risk of actually endangering the birds they are attempting to study. Whilst much of the LIFE+ project is focussed on conserving the small breeding population of Egyptian Vultures in the Balkans there are clearly things that could be done to help safeguard the species while it is migrating through the OSME region. Future plans include tagging more birds, further expeditions to study birds along the eastern flyway, organising an international conference in 2013 and developing a flyway action plan. There are several opportunities for conservation bodies and active members in the OSME region to assist with some of this work.

The final talk of the day was on migration through Abu Dhabi emirate, UAE, given by OSME Council member, Nick Moran. This demonstrated how regular birding and record keeping by Nick and colleague Oscar Campbell can be analysed to show the phenology of migrants. Between 2007 and 2012, Nick and Oscar covered a range of sites in Abu Dhabi on a regular basis and systematically recorded the species and numbers they observed. The analysis carried out to date shows close parallels to similar studies in Israel and Jordan. Abu Dhabi is already a popular birding location and Nick's presentation provided a taster for prospective first-time visitors. In relation to spring migration, March is the month with the greatest diversity of species and is the peak time for seeing Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*, Menetries's Warbler *Sylvia mystacea* and Daurian Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*. In April the Daurian Shrikes are replaced by Turkestan Shrikes *L. phoenicuroides*, numerous races of Yellow Wagtail, Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, Common Nightingale, Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* and European Roller *Coracias garrulus*. In May, the key species are Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*, European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* and Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*.

Added to these there is a wide range of less numerous migrants and always the chance of rarities! Nick was keen to emphasise that there is a lot more analysis that could be done with his and Oscar's records and plenty of scope for more detailed studies but his talk highlighted the value of keeping systematic records when out birding and, most importantly, making the data available for scientific study rather than having it 'locked away' in a forgotten notebook.

During the 34th Annual General Meeting, the following changes to OSME's Vice Presidents and Council members were announced. Imad Atrash and Dr & Mrs Ramadan-Jaradi retired as Vice-Presidents after completing 10 years in office and Guy Kirwan retired from Council after 5 years in office. All were thanked for the important contributions they have made to promoting and assisting with the running of the Society. The following were elected on to Council – Sal Cooke, Phil Cannings and Chris Hughes.

The meeting had a special end when Effie Warr who, together with her husband John, has made and continues to make an outstanding contribution to the running of OSME, was presented with a specially commissioned painting by Michael Warren of Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriae* (Plate 1). This distinct form of Mourning



Plate 1. Geoff Welch presenting Effie Warr with a specially commissioned painting by Michael Warren of Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriae*. © Helen Demopoulos

Wheatear was recently recognised as a separate subspecies by Hadoram Shirihai and Guy Kirwan and given the name *warriae* in honour of the tremendous contribution Effie has made to ornithological research in the Middle East. The day was rounded off by an excellent meal in The Mulberry in Thetford which allowed OSME Council, members and friends to continue discussions in a relaxed atmosphere, renew old friendships and create new ones. A great end to a great day.

Breckland Bird walk

Members of OSME were treated to great views of some Breckland specialities on the morning of Sunday 8 July, following the Summer Meeting/AGM of the previous day. Chris Mills of Norfolk Birding (www.norfolkbirding.com) kindly led a tour of heathland and plantation sites, and the weather cooperated nicely. The first stop was an anonymous patch of open ground. Despite the predominance of tall grasses, two Stone-curlews *Burhinus oediconemus* obligingly stood out on some turf in the foreground to be viewed and appreciated. From birders in the group familiar with North Africa, we learned that these birds can form large wintering flocks in Morocco; it is also a familiar species over much of the OSME region. Encouraged by this early encounter, the group then moved on to have a look for Woodlarks *Lullula arborea*. This involved a drive, a walk down a forest track and then a good look at an area cleared of trees. The tree stumps from the clearing operation had been collected into parallel lines stretching across the now open area. Each line of piled up stumps had become populated with shrubs and small trees. Early signs were positive: Whitethroats *Sylvia communis* used the perches provided by the tangled tree roots to launch into song flights, a flock of Linnets *Carduelis cannabina* settled in a small holly tree, and a pair of Yellowhammers *Emberiza citrinella* busily ferried food to their unseen nestlings. At the edge of the forest on the far side of the site, a Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* sat in branches silhouetted against the sky. Then a Woodlark appeared on one of the distant lines of tree stumps. Whilst this viewing clearly meant something to those more familiar with the

species, a much better view of two birds a few minutes later allowed a fuller appreciation of some of this species' characteristic features—the white supercilium, relatively short tail and signs of a crest. Unfortunately what some would consider to be the best feature of Woodlarks, their song, was only briefly on offer, though some compensation was provided by a singing Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*. And a Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* added a predatory note to this otherwise peaceful scene, grabbing something tasty on the ground alongside the tree stumps, then spreading its wings around its catch while it disembowelled its breakfast. Round our feet, Brown Silver-line moths were in profusion, and a rather worn Red-necked Footman was identified. All in all, the morning provided a wonderful insight to some of the special wildlife and habitats of the Breckland. Our thanks to Chris Mills from Norfolk Birding for his enthusiastic and expert guiding and to Nick Moran of OSME council for organising the excursion. (Contributed by Daniel Owen)

OSME Summer Meeting and AGM 2013

This will be held on Saturday 6 July at the BTO headquarters, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU—see enclosed leaflet for more details. There is ample free parking. The bus station is 10 minutes walk away and the rail station 15 minutes. 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.

OSME Raffle 2012

The winners of the 2012 raffle in support of research and conservation of White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* in Kazakhstan were:

- 1st prize S Starling—Opticon Imagic BGA SE 8x42 binoculars (value £439)
- 2nd prize E Moran—Naturetrek voucher for £250
- 3rd prize G Conway—BWPi: Birds of the Western Palearctic interactive (value £140)

- 4th prize M Carroll—Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic (Birdguides, value £75)
- 5th prize N Moran—Country Innovations New Venture Waistcoat (value £65)
- 6th prize D Cohen— Helm/Poyser books to the value of £50

Congratulations to the winners and thanks to everyone who purchased tickets. Also many thanks to the sponsors for donating the prizes.

Additional support for White-headed Duck conservation in Kazakhstan

OSME is auctioning an original watercolour painting of White-headed Duck by renowned wildlife artist Martin Woodcock to provide additional funding to ACBK for its research and conservation work in Kazakhstan. Full details of how to submit sealed bids is given on the enclosed flier and on the OSME website.

OSME Raffle 2013

This year's raffle will be raising funds to support work by Nature Iraq on the globally endangered Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*. Basra Reed Warbler is one of the most threatened passerines in the OSME region and the research work intended will be used to develop a species action plan and plan habitat restoration work. Tickets are enclosed—so try your luck and help OSME support more conservation in the region!

Conservation and Research Fund update

A revised application form and guidelines have been produced to standardise the application process and both are available on the Conservation page of the OSME website (www.osme.org). At the end of 2012, Vasil Ananian and Michael Brombacher both resigned from the CRF sub-committee due to pressure of work and on behalf of OSME I would like to take this opportunity to thank both of them for their invaluable input into assessing grant applications during the last few years. News on their replacements will be announced in due course.

Request for new OSME Council members

OSME relies on its volunteer Council members in order to operate efficiently and we are currently seeking new members to join Council at this year's AGM in July. Council members serve for 5 years and Council meets formally three times a year but the majority of OSME business is carried out via email. Whilst knowledge of the birds of the region is desirable, the most important attributes of Council members are having the time and enthusiasm to actively help maintain and promote the Society and good communication skills. If you would like to help maintain OSME as one of the premier regional bird clubs, please contact me (chairman@osme.org).