

# NEWS & INFORMATION

Dawn Balmer (compiler)

## AFGHANISTAN

### Large-billed Reed Warblers discovered breeding

The breeding site of one of the world's least known birds, Large-billed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orinus*, has been discovered in the remote and rugged Wakhan Corridor of the Pamir mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. The first specimen of the species had been discovered in India in 1867, with more than a century elapsing before the second discovery of a single bird in Thailand in 2006 first reported by BirdLife International.

In 2008, Rob Timmins from WCS was conducting a survey of bird communities along the Wakhan and Pamir rivers when he immediately heard a distinctive song coming from a small, olive-brown bird with a long bill. Timmins taped the bird's song. He later heard and observed more birds of the same species. Initially, Timmins assumed these birds to be Blyth's Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, but a visit to the Natural History Museum at Tring in the UK to examine bird skins suggested his birds were another species. In summer 2009, WCS researchers returned to the site of Timmins' first survey, this time with mist nets used to catch birds for examination. The research team broadcast the recording of the song, a technique used to bring curious birds of the same species into view for observation and examination. The recording brought in Large-billed Reed Warblers from all directions, allowing the team to catch almost 20 of them for examination and to collect feathers for DNA analysis. Later laboratory work comparing museum specimens with measurements, field images, and DNA confirmed the exciting finding: the first-known breeding population of Large-billed Reed Warblers. "Almost nothing was known about this species and it was consequently listed as Data deficient by BirdLife on the IUCN Red List, so the discovery of a breeding population marks a major step forward", said Dr Stuart Butchart,

BirdLife's Global Research and Indicators Coordinator.

"This is great news from a little-known species from a remote part of the world and suggests that there may be more discoveries to be made here", said Mike Evans, BirdLife's compiler of the Important Bird Areas of the Middle East. (Source: Birdlife International)

## ARMENIA

### Bird of the Year

Within its 'Bird of the Year' annual campaign, the Armenian Society for the Protection of Birds (ASPB) has announced the Common Crane *Grus grus* to be the Bird of 2010 in Armenia. ASPB had carried out a public opinion poll, and respondents mentioned six bird species, namely Common Crane, Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, Eurasian Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*, Caucasian Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi*, and Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

### Lesser Kestrel breeding success

Research into the breeding success of Lesser Kestrels showed that 28–30 pairs of Lesser Kestrels bred in Gorayk IBA in 2009. Ten pairs occupied nest holes in the new artificial breeding tower mounted for these birds by ASPB. The Lesser Kestrels nesting in the cavities in the roof of a local TV tower in Gorayk are poorly monitored due to their inaccessibility. In the 10 nests placed in the artificial breeding tower, 26 eggs were laid and 23 chicks hatched and later fledged successfully. Additionally, about 11 juvenile birds have been ringed using aluminum rings in order to find out whether they will return to their breeding grounds. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

### Black Vulture movements

In August of 2009 the ASPB and Alexander Gavashelishvili (Ilia Chavchavadze University, Georgia) fitted a three month old Cinereous

Vulture *Aegypius monachus* with patagial wing tags and a PTT satellite unit. This effort follows up on the juvenile vultures tracking programme launched by ASPB in 2006 using wing tags and satellite tagging units. Up to now, a total of four Cinereous Vulture juveniles have been tagged. According to the data received via satellite, the juvenile vulture tagged in August of 2009 stayed within Armenia until November and then began migrating in the second half of the month, when it moved near to the town of Morvarid in Iran. (Source: ASPB Newsletter Number 11)

## **EGYPT**

### **Birding Egypt on Facebook**

Birding Egypt have opened a new forum on Facebook for all those interested in birds, birdwatching and bird conservation in Egypt. (Source: Mindy Baha El Din)

### **Lake Qarun under threat**

Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) warns that the Qarun lake protected area in the Fayoum oasis, one of Egypt's richest and most treasured natural landmarks, is at grave risk of being destroyed. Rather than protecting this natural treasure, NCE asserts that the Egyptian government's policies encourage overdevelopment and other destructive activities.

A wave of tourism development is destroying the shoreline at Qarun lake, animal and bird habitats are being ruined and the water is being severely polluted. Lake Qarun's most prominent recent tourist development is Byoum, a massive complex of more than 120 villas, a five-star hotel and hunting lodge. It is being built by well-known Egyptian developer Samih Sawiris, chairman of Orascom Hotels and Development.

According to Egypt's law protecting nature reserves, it is illegal to destroy, remove or pollute a reserve's natural resources—its wildlife, plants, rocks, even soil. However, this law is subject to a final clause that states "... unless permission is obtained from the relevant authorities." The Egyptian government has given Orascom this permission at Qarun lake.

During a recent meeting with NCE, Orascom chairman Sawiris promised to work with NCE to help protect the environment by forbidding hunting, building a bird sanctuary, restricting water sports and providing fishermen access to the lake. To date, however, none of these promises have been met.

The northern part of Qarun lake, around Gebal Qatrani, contains one of the world's most complete fossil records of terrestrial primates and marshland mammals, critical to understanding of mammalian including human evolution. The lake is also an internationally designated Important Bird Area, providing food, shelter and breeding grounds for a wide variety of resident and migrating birds, including several endangered species. Despite all this, however, Egypt's Tourism Development Authority (TDA) has plans to build on hundreds of acres along the lake's northern shore—even though this area of rolling, untouched desert is protected land.

On the southwestern shore, Orascom's Byoum development will cover around 300 acres of prime lake property. Already a huge cement embankment protrudes into the lake, covering the shoreline and destroying a key bird habitat. Byoum's promotional materials, featuring a silver-engraved, antique, rifle, promote hunting as a major activity, although hunting is illegal in the protectorate. Byoum also denies local fishermen access to the lake. It has been suggested that letters of objection should be sent to the following Egyptian agencies: the Environment Agency ([www.eeaa.gov.eg](http://www.eeaa.gov.eg)) [eeaa@eeaa.gov.eg](mailto:eeaa@eeaa.gov.eg) and the State Information Service [info@etf.org.eg](mailto:info@etf.org.eg)/[etf@etf.org.eg](mailto:etf@etf.org.eg).

## **GEORGIA**

### **Batumi Raptor Count 2010**

Since 2008 the autumn migration of raptors at Batumi on the east side of the Black sea has been monitored by teams of volunteers. Over 830 000 raptors have been counted in eight weeks. More information about the results and the history of the project can be found on its website: [www.batumiraptorcount.org](http://www.batumiraptorcount.org). The 2010 counts will run from 17 August to 16 October and will also include a pilot count in

Kazbegi. To register your interest please visit the website.

## IRAN

### Waterbird monitoring in 2009

In January 2009, a group from Foundation Working Group International Waterbird and Wetland Research (WIWO) and the Iranian Department of Environment (DoE) took part in the International Waterbird Census to count birds in the most important wetlands in Iran. The 2009 census covered eight of the 30 provinces of Iran and produced a wealth of information, and the counters were lucky enough also to find the first Amur Falcon *Falco amurensis* for Iran. The full results have been published by Amini & van Roomen (2009 Tehran/Zeist 520pp) and summarised by Winkel *et al* (2010 *Dutch Birding* 32: 171–188).

Prior to the fieldwork, a workshop covering counting methods and identification issues was held, together with the opportunity for a fieldtrip in the south-central province of Fars. Around Persepolis a wide range of species were seen including Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*, Eastern Imperial Eagle *A. heliaca*, Rock Martin *Ptyonoprogne fuligula pallida*, Radde's Accentor *Prunella ocularis*, Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii*, Hume's Wheatear *O. albonigra*, Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius longirostris*, Eastern Rock Nuthatch *Sitta tephronota dresseri* and Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*. A visit to Dasht-e Konar in the south of Fars produced Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*, Plain Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus*, See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus bogdanovi*, Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus harterti/indicus*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis*, Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes doriae*, Radde's Accentor, Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis* and Levant Grey Shrike *Lanius lahtora aucheri*, Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*, White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* and a juvenile Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* (rare this far south). A search for Pleske's Ground Jay *Podoces pleskei* at Bahram-e Gur in the east of Fars produced just brief views of one.

After the workshop, the group split into nine groups to cover eight provinces (two teams covering Hormuzgan). In Gilan, in the north, 263 350 waterbirds of 71 species were recorded, with Anzali wetland proving to be the most important area. Within Gilan, there were impressive numbers of Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* (1298), Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* (5530), Common Teal *Anas crecca* (67 452), Gadwall *A. strepera* (36 335), Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (620), Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus* (440) and Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* (40). Two Sociable Plovers *Vanellus gregarius* were the first winter observation in northern Iran.

Mazandaran, along the southern coast of the Caspian sea, is the most important province for waterbirds, in terms of both total numbers and species found. An aerial survey was carried out over Miankaleh and Gorgan bay areas and produced large flocks of Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* (778 970), Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus* (52 710), Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (14 755) and Smew *Mergellus albellus* (4880), the latter mainly at sea. Elsewhere, counts of raptors were impressive with 252 White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla* and 573 Western Marsh Harriers. At Fereydon Kemar Damgah there was a sighting of the last wild Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* of the western population, accompanied by a female from the Russian re-introduction programme.

In Golestan, in the northeast of Iran, many of the sites had suffered the effects of drought over the last two years and in January 2009 only 174 000 waterbirds were counted (c230 000 in a typical winter). Eurasian Coot (78 484) and Greater Flamingo (45 461) were the most numerous species. Also of interest, nine White-winged Larks *Melanocorypha leucoptera* and two wintering Chinese Shrikes *Lanius arenarius* were at Bibi Shirvan fish pond (rare this far north). Three White-winged Grosbeaks *Mycerabas carnipes* were found in Golestan national park.

In Sistan Baluchestan, in southeast Iran, 36 549 waterbirds were counted. Numbers are lower due to few suitable habitats. There is a large wintering population of Dalmatian Pelicans (1523) which is about 11% of the estimated world population. There were also important counts of Great Black-headed Gull

*Larus ichthyaetus* (4501), Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* (82) and Great Stone-curlew *Easacus recurvirostris* (54). The first Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* for the province was also found. The best bird was undoubtedly a first-winter Amur Falcon seen on 24 January at Lipar seasonal marsh; the first record for Iran.

Counts in central Hormuzgan, in southern Iran, produced an actual count of 87 000 waterbirds and an estimated count of 154 000 waterbirds (69 species). One of the most important findings was the number of Broad-billed Sandpipers *Limicola falcinellus* (848 counted, 3621 estimated) which confirms the importance of especially Khouran strait as a key wintering site. Also of interest were the numbers of Crab Plover (7222), Lesser Sand Plover *C. mongolus* (3539 counted, 19 407 estimated) and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinerea* (3271 counted, 9480 estimated).

In east Hormuzgan, a total of 72 248 waterbirds of 69 species were counted, plus 22 raptor species. The most numerous were Slender-billed Gulls *Larus genei* (9068), Caspian/Barbara Gull *L. cachinnans/barabensis* (8833), Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (4731), Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini* (4337) and Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (4115). Important numbers of Dalmatian Pelican (2255), Terek Sandpiper (2018), Crab Plover (1262), Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (282) and Broad-billed Sandpiper (121) were also found. Away from counting waterbirds, six Oriental White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* were found (at Khoo-e Azini and Khoo-e Neyzei), 29 juvenile Socotra Cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* at Khoo-e Kuh Mobarak (rare winter visitor), Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica* at Jask and a Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra* c 1km off the coast of Khoo-e Chal (third for Iran).

Bushehr, in southern Iran, yielded 54 000 birds. Most numerous in 2009 were Great Cormorant (13 000), Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (12 000), Common Teal (3700) and Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* (3000). A flock of 26 Macqueen's Bustards were at Mond protected area.

In Khuzestan, just over 100 000 waterbirds were counted, compared with nearly 500 000 in 2007. Only Greater Flamingo had higher numbers than in 2007 (14 236 versus 1986). Other numerous birds were Eurasian Coot

(18 391), Common Teal (12 614) and Common Pochard *Aythya farina* (9634). At Bennynameh, 153 Marbled Ducks were counted. Seven Spur-winged Lapwings *Vanellus spinosus* at three different locations were notable (rare in Iran).

In Fars, only 42 980 waterbirds were counted compared with almost 180 000 in 2007. The reduced counts, as in many areas, were presumably a reflection of the extreme drought. A group of 14 Greater White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons* on a lake behind Sivand dam was a notable record.

## New bulletin for Iran

A new bulletin, *Balaban*, aimed to encourage Iranian birders and ornithologists to publish results of their works in their native language and introduce a place to transfer ornithological papers, notes and news regarding Iranian birds and ornithology has been launched. This will complement *Podoces*. Although most of the texts are in Persian, summaries in English are provided. Small number of paper copies (30 pp, A4 sized) are available. Please contact Mohammad Tohidifar (mohammad\_8463@yahoo.com) or Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh (akhaleghizadeh@gmail.com) for further information.

## KYRGYZSTAN

An excellent article on birding in Kyrgystan by Vincent van der Spek and Machiel Valkenburg was recently published in *Dutch Birding* (32: 10–20 2010).

## SOCOTRA (YEMEN)

### Prize for Socotra Project website

The Socotra Governance & Biodiversity Project website ([www.socotraproject.org](http://www.socotraproject.org)) has been awarded the gold prize in the Yemen Web Awards 2009. The SGBP website received first place within the second largest category of Projects & Government Websites beating the Official Yemen Tourism & Hadhramaut Governorate Website. Winning in Yemen Web Awards means that the SGBP website has qualified for the Middle East finals to be held in Oman in May 2010. OSME encourages them to host conservation stories and news items and provides bird checklists and

relevant *Sandgrouse* papers. (Source: Bohdana Rambouskova, SGBP)

## SYRIA

### Mheimideh under immediate threat

Mheimideh is probably the best birding site along the Syrian Euphrates; all who visit come away astonished that such a rich site can exist in the middle of a village. It has an outstanding list of breeding species, notably three RDB species of duck (White-headed *Oxyura leucocephala*, Ferruginous *Aythya nyroca* and Marbled Ducks *Marmaronetta angustirostris*), White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus* and Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, with good numbers of Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus spinosus* and Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*. But the pressure on it is massive including illegal hunting and every year more good habitat round its edges disappears under houses. An application has again been lodged for the whole site to be drained for agricultural and housing purposes. On this occasion the application is likely to be refused, but at some stage soon it will be accepted unless there is international pressure and a long-term plan for its conservation.

The Ministry of State for Environment Affairs and the Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife are very keen to mount a campaign to save Mheimideh and to develop it as an educational nature reserve, ensuring that there are significant benefits for the local people (in terms of jobs, ecotourist income and prestige). This will require major involvement by the international conservation community and significant funding.

Mheimideh has exceptional potential as a flagship nature reserve that can serve as a major education point for local people. Illegal hunting is widespread along the Syrian Euphrates and directly impacts many species, notably the Critically Endangered Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius*. Thus a conservation presence at Mheimideh is very important. Dr David Murdoch will be contacting potential supporters in the near future to elicit support for the Syrian stakeholders' campaign. (Source: David Murdoch).

## OTHER NEWS

### Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia project reaches a very important stage this year with the publication of the Atlas. The last records were added to the Atlas in April 2010 and it will be published later this year. It will cover 273 proven breeding bird species in Arabia and a further 24 not-quite-proven breeders. For each of the breeding species there is a lengthy text arranged in four paragraph blocks. These cover the species and its taxonomy; status in Arabia generally and in each country, including population estimates; the species' ecological requirements and finally breeding aspects. For each subject great care has been taken to ensure that only Arabian information is provided, thus avoiding the repeat of data from standard works. For each breeding species there is at least one map showing confirmed and probable breeding and presence records against two different time periods (by use of coloured symbols), up to and after 1 January 1984, and a line drawing. The evidence for breeding of the not quite proven species is given but these are not illustrated or mapped. There are lengthy introductory general chapters on bird distribution in Arabia, including several general maps and over 100 colour photos of habitats, conservation issues and about 50 birds. The Atlas will be published as volume 25 of journal of the *Fauna of Arabia*, a hardback A4 format journal published by the Senckenberg Institute in Frankfurt, and it will be approximately 750 pages long.

Reaching this important stage does not mean the end of the ABBA project. The database will continue to be added to and records collected from all sources, including current and past observers, literature sources and museums and archives. It is intended to revamp the database in the coming months to reflect changes in taxonomy and nomenclature and to migrate it to more modern software, to enable the project to be completely re-launched, including a new website. However, in the meantime, observers

are asked to email the project coordinator Mike Jennings (ArabianBirds@dsl.pipex.com) to obtain a set of the project instructions and forms to enable them to complete report sheets for the current breeding season. It cannot be emphasised enough that the project is not just interested in the new and exciting developments regarding breeding/resident birds in Arabia but is also interested in repeat breeding of common birds, population levels, conservation issues, land use and habitat details. All these aspects can be reported. Contributions on all aspects of Arabian birds are also welcomed for publication in *Phoenix* the project newsletter. (Source: Mike Jennings)

### **New satellite-tracking links between Europe and Africa**

New links have been added to the satellite-tracking pages of the West African Ornithological Society website (<http://malimbus.free.fr/trakindx.htm>) for Purple Heron, White Stork, Eurasian Hobby and Eleonora's Falcon. There is also a link to a Wetlands International page that has satellite tracking and colour banding links from all over the world. (Source: Joost Brouwer)

### **WorldWaders**

The second module of the Shorebird Mapping Project of WorldWaders is now available. The first module, for nesting shorebird mapping, was introduced recently and has been well received. Now the Beta version of the Non-breeding Shorebird Mapping Project is online. The module will help identify unidentified key sites for their better protection. Visit [www.worldwaders.org](http://www.worldwaders.org) for more information. (Source: Gyorgy Szimuly)

### **Zoology in the Middle East**

Congratulations to *Zoology in the Middle East* who publish their 50th volume later in 2010. It is one of the largest collections of zoological

papers related to the Middle East ([www.kasperek-verlag.de/ZME-allgem.htm](http://www.kasperek-verlag.de/ZME-allgem.htm)).

## **REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION**

### **Photos for Worldwaders**

Good quality images (for online use only) of wader eggs, nests and chicks are sought. The photos will be used to assist wildlife artist Szabolcs Kokay in painting the identification plates for a new book. The images will be used for reference only and will not be published. More details can be found at <http://shorebirdeggsandchicks.posterous.com>. Images can be sent by email to [post@shorebirdeggsandchicks.posterous.com](mailto:post@shorebirdeggsandchicks.posterous.com) with the image attachment only in the body of the e-mail. The subject of the mail should be the name of the species and the location (eg Red Knot, Alaska). No text is needed with the e-mail. It is requested that images of eggs and chicks of the same species are put into one email. (Source: Gyorgy Szimuly (Szimi)/WorldWaders [www.worldwaders.org](http://www.worldwaders.org))

### **Photos for *Owls of the World***

In 2012, A&C Black will be publishing a definitive photographic guide dedicated to the world's 250 species of owls, and the process of sourcing and selecting photographs is now well underway. *Owls of the World* is being written by Finnish owl expert Heimo Mikkola, and the publishers would like to invite photographers and birders from around the world to submit images (preferably digital) for use in the book, which will be placing particular emphasis on plumage variation and racial separation. Photographs of young birds, island endemic races and adults in flight are particularly welcome. If you think you might be able to help, please send an email in the first instance to Ellen Parnavelas at [eparnavelas@acblack.com](mailto:eparnavelas@acblack.com).