

Syria trip report

23-31 March 2011



View towards Mount Hermon from Bloudan in the anti-Lebanon. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson

This is a summary of my fifth trip to Syria and the second leading a large group (20 participants) from the Swedish tour operator AviFauna. The full report in Swedish (with species name also in Latin) can be seen at www.avifauna.se

This 9-day trip was basically of the same layout as the one last April, arranged by me and AviFauna in cooperation with a local tour operator, based in Damascus. We were 22 Swedish birders and travelled in a large coach with an excellent driver. These two group trips have both followed the general plan and experiences of our recon-trip in April 2009 but was not as high-paced and aimed at both birds and sightseeing.

Syria, since it's "discovery" as a birding destination recently, has attracted some serious attention in Sweden. This trip, as well as the previous, was fully booked even before it was published on the AviFauna website! I have written an 8-page article about Syria, published in the August 2010 edition of *RoadRunner*, the magazine of Swedish Club 300. The first (to my knowledge, at least for many years) independent Swedish birders travelled in Syria in March 2011, very glad to see this!

Itinerary

March 23 evening flight via Istanbul to Damascus with Turkish Airlines, landing in Damascus at 0130am on the 24th.

March 24 late morning drive to Palmyra (250km) and afternoon at Talila Reserve entrance. One night in Palmyra.

March 25 morning at Sabkhat al-Moh, lunch in town, short visit at the ruins and afternoon drive to Deir ez-Zor (210km), stops along the way. Two nights in Deir ez-Zor.

March 26 morning at Mheimideh, lunch in Deir ez-Zor. Afternoon at Mohassan (small wetland 35km south of Deir) and sunset birding from the suspension bridge.

March 27 morning drive north through the Euphrates valley, short visit at Baath Lake, lunch in ar-Raqqa. Afternoon drive to Aleppo, one night there. A total of 330 km this long day.

March 28 morning until afternoon at Sabkhat al-Jabbul, picnic lunch. Afternoon drive to Homs (about 230 km)

March 29 morning and lunch at Krak des Chevaliers, afternoon at Deir Mar Musa. Evening drive to Damascus, one night there.

March 30 morning visit to Bloudan, lunch and afternoon sightseeing in old town Damascus. Late night transfer to the airport.

March 31 04:30am flight via Istanbul to Scandinavia.



swedish birders enjoying tea and a roof top view over the Mheimideh lagoon in the Euphrates Valley.

Arrangements and conservation support

It was a pure pleasure, again, to travel and watch birds in Syria. I can not enough encourage the international birding community to come here, experience great bird watching, hospitality, culture and cooking and to support the tiny nature conservation community.

The **arrangements** with our ground operator, Orient Aroma, was again a blessing. Considering we were a large group of birders, 22 in all, things went smooth and we could access most sites even with our big (33 seat) coach. Of course desert birding and venturing off track was not an option this time, but then this trip was not aimed at birds alone. None of the political unrest in the country during our visit affected neither us nor the program.

One of the local guides in Palmyra, Ahmad Abdallah Jaber, joined us for the day in Palmyra. We also met up with mr Ahmad Aidek in Deir ez-Zor who joined us for both days in the Euphrates Valley. In the Jabbul village we were assisted by Ahmad Mawwas and Abu Khalil who joined us to the wetland and we were glad to see the sign saying "Jabbul Eco tourism Project" on the communal guest house in the village. AviFauna donated an amount of money that will be used for buying the Syrian field guide and hand these out to the local community at the threatened wetland of Mheimideh near Deir ez-Zor. One of our participants, mr Hans Börjeson, also donated a pair of binoculars to Anas al-Khen of the Damascus-based Cham Eco-tourism Society.

We met up with two young Swedish birders, Göran Holm and Svante Martinsson, that travelled through the country and visited mainly Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. Their trip report can be seen at www.club300.se

Birds, site condition and weather

In general, we saw pretty much the expected species for an early Spring trip to Syria. We logged about 170 species which is a little more than last year even though we went earlier and as so missed out on several late-coming migrants. No shrikes, pratincoles, bee eaters, flycatchers et cetera seemed to had arrived yet. The reason for the early Spring visit (mid-April has obviously more migrants and more species-rich birding) was my interest in seeing some of the late winter/ early Spring species that might move through Syria at this time; Sociable Lapwing, Steppe Eagle, Pallid Harrier, Great Black-headed Gull, Cyprus Pied Wheatear to name some of the hoped-for highlights at this time.

This did not turn out as well as I had hoped for. The raptor migration was almost absent with only some small movements at Krak des Chevaliers (despite good weather conditions) and only some single eagles and harriers otherwise. Ahmad Aidek had searched in vain for Sociable Lapwings recently and the road quality on

the steppe did not favour large coaches... There were however some Armenian Gulls heading north along the Euphrates and there were reports of Great Black-headed Gulls also doing so just some days before our visit. We also found some *variegatus* Stonechats and quite many wheatears including three Cyprus Pied during the afternoon visit at Talila, near Palmyra. One of the surprises of the trip was also a splendid male Kurdish Wheatear at Deir Mar Musa.

The drought over the last few years in Syria interior had indeed a negative effect on the bird sites and our visits to them; excellent **Sed Wadi Abied north of Palmyra was completely dry** and lovely Mheimideh had a much lower water level, and fewer birds, than last Spring. Some small wetlands south of Deir ez-Zor, visited with Ahmad Aidek, were also almost dried out. The seasonal steppe lake Sabkhat al-Moh near Palmyra had some water and waders including Greater Sand Plovers. The steppe along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road was not as green nor rich in larks and raptors as previous Spring visits. Sabkhat al-Jabbul was however one of the highlights during the trip with great weather and amazingly rich in birds; hundreds of Flamingoes, 11.000 Shovelers, lots of other waterfowl, Little Crake, Bimaculated Larks, 11 Citrine Wagtails, Iraq Babblers to name a few.

The **weather** during our trip was varied and changed a lot from day to day, even hour to hour, as might be expected at this time of year. The central plains were windy and chilly until the sun stood high at noon. We had the only rain during our first afternoon in Palmyra. The Euphrates Valley had brilliant sunshine but cool northern winds. Nice and pretty warm from Aleppo down to Damascus.



view from the hill Tell Jibbrin with our bus and the northern central parts of Sabkhat al-Jabbul.

Selected species list

This list only deal with the more interesting of the 170 species logged. Omitted ones are those common in the region and during this time of year, for example Little Egret, Steppe Buzzard, Moorhen and Common Crow. For a general idea of the species encountered in Spring I refer to the trip report from last year and other trip reports.

See short video clips from the trip of Little Crake, Blue Rock Thrush, Kurdish Wheatear, Citrine Wagtail, Syrian Serin and more at www.youtube.com/user/Tomas06560656

Shoveler *Anas clypeata* c. 11.000 counted from Tell Jibbrin, Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* , Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* , Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* small numbers (5-15) at Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul



Some of the 11.000 Shovelers at Sabkhat al-Jabbul!

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* c. 150 at Baath Lake

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* 1 at the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor

Great White Egret *Egretta alba* c. 100 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul. Good number.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* c. 700 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* 25 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* a handful recorded

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* 1 at Sed Wadi Abied

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* 2m along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road and 1m at Mohassan

Montagues Harrier *Circus pygarrus* 1f at Sabkhat al-Moh, Palmyra

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* only 1 during the trip, at Sed Wadi Abied

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* 35 migrating at Krak des Chevaliers

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata* three singles recorded on migration

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* some singles and ~75 at the colony north of Halabiyya

Merlin *Falco columbarius* 1 near Aleppo

Little Crake *Porzana parva* five recorded; Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* 6 Mheimideh , 25 Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* 2 at Talila entrance

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* 7 at Sabkhat al-Moh, Palmyra

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus* only 1 at the previous (?) breeding site at Mheimideh

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* a total of some 15 at wetland sites

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* 1 in winter plumage in the lagoon north of Mohassan, Euphrates Valley

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* c. 500 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Armenian Gull *Larus armenicus* c. 50 migrating north along the Euphrates, mainly seen from the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica* some singles at Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* 4 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Desert Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* 1 at daytime perch near the Talila reserve entrance

Little Owl *Athene noctua* two recorded

Alpine Swift *Apus melba* surprisingly only 3 over Deir ez-Zor

Little Swift *Apus affinis* a single over the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* fairly common along the Euphrates and at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* 1 Bloudan

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* 2 at Tell Jibbrin, Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* 2 at Talila and 4 along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road

Temmincks Lark *Eremophila bilopha* 1 at Talila and 2 along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* 11 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul (of which 8 feeding on a grassy area between the salt works and the village)

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis* both along the road north of Deir ez-Zor and near Ziad Hotel in the town, 2-3 each.



White-cheeked Bulbul from the April 2010 trip, then in the gardens of Mheimideh.
Photo Sander Broström

Cyprus Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca* 3 at Talila entrance

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens* none seen around Palmyra but common at Deir Mar Musa

Kurdish Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* 1m at Deir Mar Musa. Migrant or breeder? Similar habitat to Turkish breeding sites.

"Caspian" Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* ssp. *variegatus* Males each at Palmyra, Mheimideh and Mohassan.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* 2 at Talila entrance, 1 at Palmyra and 1m at Deir Mar Musa

Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* 1f at Deir Mar Musa

Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* 2 Deir Mar Musa 12/4

Menetriés Warbler *Sylvia mystacea* 2m each at Talila entrance and at Mohassan

Rueppells Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli* 1m at Talila entrance

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* common at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* several each at the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor, Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* 4 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer* 2 each at Deir Mar Musa and Bloudan

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* 1 at Palmyra. The only shrike during the trip!

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* 4 Sedi Wadi Abied

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus* c. 10 and many nests at the dam north of Mohassan and c.20 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* Deir Mar Musa and Bloudan

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* 14 along the track from Palmyra to Sabkhat al-Moh

Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus* 3 Bloudan

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* fairly common around Aleppo