

Azraq blues: a brief history of a Jordanian oasis drunk dry

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'Azraq' means 'blue' in Arabic and it must have been just such tones of sky and freshwater that caused the bedouin to so name Jordan's largest oasis. It lay invitingly between degraded steppe and basalt-flow desert 110 km east of Amman. I owe my participation in the three Azraq expeditions of the mid 1960s (Plates 1–4) to Guy Mountfort. Serendipitously, he was a business associate of my Dad and we first birded together on Fair Isle, Scotland, in September 1954. Hence in the late 1950s I received frequent news of envy-inducing birds found by Guy's pioneering expeditions to European wildernesses (Mountfort 1958, 1962). In 1962 I had the joy of being enlisted into an illustrious team whose main aim was to give oil-less but bravely independent Jordan conservation practice and ecotourism. As I joined my then close friend James Ferguson-Lees in prior research, I now confess to feeling that I had made at last the rank of purposeful birdwatcher.

In April 1963 we had Phil Hollom as our ornithological guide to Jordan's rift and highlands but the desert east and south of there was virtually terra incognita. So my first task was to go to the British Museum's 'Bird Room' and extract, via Reg Moreau and Derek Goodwin, skins of little known desert species and make painted guides to them. Ornithologically, the most telling early Azraq observations were those of Richard



Plate 1. Ian Wallace (left), Corporal Mahmoud of the Jordanian Army and James Ferguson-Lees at Royal Hunting Lodge above Azraq Shishan, Jordan, 1965. © Eric Hosking Charitable Trust



Plate 2. Group photo at Royal Hunting Lodge above Azraq Shishan, Jordan, 1966. Left to right in front of vehicle: Ian Wallace, Morton Boyd, Fayk Wazani; on top Sana Atallah (left), James Ferguson-Lees (right). © Eric Hosking Charitable Trust

Meinertzhagen. He had spent four days at the oasis during his transect of the ‘Southern Syrian’ desert in October 1922, describing it as “a perfect paradise for birds” noting that it attracted “migrants from miles round [bringing] all varieties to earth” (Meinertzhagen 1924). His diary notes on Azraq’s birds were ‘uncannily precise’ (Wallace 2004)!

Other more august but equally eager members of the first expedition to Jordan were Sir Julian Huxley, Max Nicholson (then head of the UK’s Nature Conservancy), Eric Hosking and George Shannon (ace pre-digital still and motion photographers). After a full day of flights across Europe, we landed at Amman late on 11 April 1963 and after two more days of greetings and provisioning, our convoy straggled east to find the hunting lodge above Azraq Shishan at 15.30 h on the 14th. Below our base camp to the east yawned a long desired vista: a castle, two villages and their fields, the fabled freshwater springs, a huge outfall marsh and an enormous qa (seasonally-flooded silt flat). And everywhere above them battling wearily against a dust-laden northerly wind were hirundines. That night for Sand Martin alone, we entered in our first log of Azraq’s birds at least ‘tens of thousands’. Whatever next?

The other tales and discoveries of four spring and one autumn visits to and around Azraq between 1963 and 1967 are best found in the narrative of Mountfort (1965), in the tardy but almost complete commentaries of Wallace (1982, 1983a) and

in the report of Cameron & Cornwallis (1966). Eventually we concluded that the total spring passage in our time might reach several hundreds of thousands of birds, a scale far exceeding the early sums from observations at Eilat, Israel, and Habbaniya, Iraq (Safriel 1968, Chapman & McGeoch 1956). No similar contemporaneous measures were made of Azraq’s autumn or winter potential to sustain migrants but Nelson (1973) did not doubt that 100 000–250 000 wildfowl occurred in some winters.

In 1968, my attempt to describe all aspects of spring bird migration at Azraq did not attract the immediate support of the editor of *Ibis* and James never found the time for the rewrite. However our measures of the ability of passerine migrants in spring to select the most favourable niches for recuperation merit late mention. Even though they were flying north over a broad front, their landings upon the various grounds below them were markedly concentrated in areas of dense cover, shade, water and hence most food (Table

1). Their spotting of such niches on the wing was clearly very intelligent!

In conservation terms, Guy's and Max's arguments were soon accepted by King Hussein and his government. In April 1967, an International Biological Programme research station with Bryan Nelson at its tiller was based at Azraq Shishan and a provisional system of national parks also got support. Thus our intended bequest did take shape (Nelson 1973) but sadly in spite of Azraq's declaration as a Ramsar Site in 1977, it became a mirage. All European and Jordanian hopes were first clouded by the aftermath of the Six-Day-War and then dashed by the swelling of Jordan's own growing native population by huge serial hordes of refugees. Thus although Qusay Ahmed (a baby boy at Azraq in our time but later Ecotourism Officer of Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature) witnessed Hussein's utter sadness at having to sanction increasing water extraction from the Azraq aquifers, the national imperative had to be the quenching of increasing human thirst...

From 1975 to 1992, greater and particularly deeper water diversion, the Syrians' damming of the main northern wadi (Rajil) and the wholesale digging of illegal private wells (to support new agriculture, not the former main salt pan industry) caused Azraq's ecosystem to first spoil and second collapse. Read Haddad (1998) and Teller (2002: 196–229) for more woeful details. Between 1985 and 1999, Lindon Cornwallis, James, Bryan and Eric's son David revisited the area. Their reports were mainly dismal but did note that from 1993 a series of restoration attempts and new finds began. Of the latter, the discovery that in Paleolithic times the oasis had supported big game including rhinoceros and elephant as well as diverse grazing mammals was the most remarkable. Lo, Azraq had been in prehistory an even richer paradise!



Plate 3. Ian Wallace with Sana Atallah's skins of jerboas and other rodents, Royal Hunting Lodge above Azraq Shishan, Jordan, 1966. © Eric Hosking Charitable Trust

Table 1. Visible incidence of passerine migrants in ten habitats at and around Azraq on 50 spring days in 1963, 1965 and 1966.

habitat		transect and area counts	mean number of birds/km	index of incidence
A waterlogged	A1 isolated, irrigated cultivation with trees in desert	5	117	100
	A2 mixed, usually dense marsh vegetation of oasis	8	82	70
	A3 interfaces of marsh and desert around oasis	3	48	41
B with puddles	Wadis with trees and/or dense scrub in desert	8	32	27
C no surface water	C1 edges of basalt flow desert with perennial plants	8	14	12
	C2 raised <i>Nitraria</i> clumps of oasis dune surrounds	3	13	11
	C3 wadis with shrublets in desert	7	6	5
	C4 short peripheral marsh vegetation between oasis and qa	2	5	4
	C5 edge of saline qa (pluvial lake)	5	1 or less	1 or less
	C6 interior of basalt flow desert	3	1 or less	1 or less

Since 1998, the RSCN and other bodies linked to UNESCO and the Worldwide Fund for Nature have tried hard to mend some of the damage. The main gains have been the restoration of the 1300 year old but still uninhibited frescoes of Qasr Amra (in Wadi Butm), the reintroduction of oryx and ostrich to the Shaumari wildlife reserve and a visitor centre and boardwalk set by reflooded pools at Azraq. The last has provided a few interesting birds and mammals but as yet there is no prospect of paradise regained (Andrews 1995, RSCN 2013).

I never went back to Azraq, preferring to keep my memories of its last truly halcyon time unchanged. However I did respond with mixed success (after a lag of c37 years) to requests for rarity proofs from the Jordan Bird Records Committee and made (particularly at the 2003 OSME summer meeting) other corrections to the 1960s Azraq records (Table 2). Most importantly our one big mistake with the black morph Mourning Wheatears of the basalt desert (Wallace 1983b) had already been so courteously corrected by Lindon when he refound our 1965 birds' descendants in 1985 (Cramp 1988: 858).

In 2005 Nasrat Hamidan (Central Ecologist of the RSCN, in charge of the preservation of Azraq's endemic killifish among other revival projects) came to Britain and made contact with us. In return for his transparent enthusiasm, James, George, David and I assembled copies of our 'historic' literature, films and photographs in order to give the RSCN every aid to reversing the deterioration of the oasis. Sadly, no invitation to a projected seminar in 2006 came. Meanwhile although Azraq's resident human population had by then grown nearly tenfold to 15 000, King Abdullah and his government agreed to further settlement. A sense of another conservation mirage at Azraq caused me to close my files.

I need to salute two local heroes: Sana Atallah and Fayk Wazani, both with Palestinian roots. The former was an exemplary mammologist with expert trapping skills who in 1966 rewrote completely our earlier knowledge of Azraq's delightful rodents and bats. The latter was just 'a driver' according to his Tourism Authority bosses but increasingly to us he acted as local ambassador, problem solver and true chum. How cruelly ironic it was, in



Plate 4. Awaiting dinner in the Royal Hunting Lodge above Azraq Shishan, Jordan, 1965. Left to right, James Ferguson-Lees, Ian Wallace, George Shannon, Eric Hosking. © unknown photographer

June 1969, that Fayk's last recorded act had to be his 'tactful and reluctant' confirmation to Bryan that an Iraqi demand for all non-Arabs to be barred from Azraq had indeed been agreed by the Amman authorities. After just six years our effective presence was over.

Light relief? Given a chance meeting in 2015 with several Jordanians of both sexes at the Royal Military Academy (Sandhurst, UK), I know that they remain a delightful people. Whenever the 'Azraq blues' get to me, I also recall two choice remarks made by Jordanians at the welcoming dinner (for 36!) in Amman on 13 April 1963. One is repeatable in print. About TE Lawrence, the venerable General Ohan noted only "Funny bloke; actually liked riding camels."

To end with innocent birds, let us have some more (unpublished) Sand Martins. After another northerly blow on 27 April 1966, our stalwart ringers, Bob Spencer and John Ash, watched not just tens but possibly hundreds of thousands mass at dusk over the outfall marsh, "blackening the sky like roosting Starlings".

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Table 2. Amendments to the 1960s Jordan records, originally presented at the 19 July 2003 OSME summer meeting.

A). Corrections to Wallace (1982):

p 93. Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* trapped at Azraq Shishan 18 April 1965 re-identified from colour transparency as female Ménétrés Warbler *S. mystacea* (GRM, DIMW).

p 94. Second listing of Semi-collared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata* in error; heading should read "Pied Flycatcher *F. hypoleuca* Scarce"

B). Maintained identifications of Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* in Wallace (1982):

p 92. First year 'vittata' male, Azraq Shishan, 18 April 1965 (field sketch DIMW); adult male and another black-and-white wheatear near it 25 April 1966; same adult male the next day (no sign of buff on underparts, JSA, also IJFL, RS, DIMW—first and last observers with experience of *pleschanka* in East Africa. [*pleschanka* breeds north of and far to the east of Jordan. Four *leucomela* (= *pleschanka*) obtained c360 km northeast of Azraq 1949/50 (Peters 1956).]

C). Species removed from Jordan List/queried by Jordan Bird Records Committee in 2001.

In Wallace (1982):

p 86. Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* Azraq Druz, 4 May 1965 (IJFL, DIMW). Full description prevented by heat shimmer; a probable only.

p 92. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* Azraq Shishan outfall, 3 May 1965 (DIMW). No description written of bird seen close to Moustached and Sedge Warblers; observer's eleventh.

p 94. Plain Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus neglectus* Azraq Shishan trees, 18 April 1963 (IJFL, DIMW). Description incomplete and call atypical; claim withdrawn.

In Wallace (1984):

p 46. Intermediate Egret *Garzetta intermedia* As Safi, 23 April 1963 (IJFL, GRS, DIMW). Committee balked at yellowish-buff tone on hind neck and back and required further information. As observers had matched bird to similar skins in British Museum (NH) including one from Sudan in May 1963, no more research was undertaken. [In last half century, *G. intermedia* has reached Italy, Israel and four Arabian states (Mitchell 2017).]

D). Not in any paper (accepted by JBRC in 2001):

Asian Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos hafizi* (= *golzii*) Shaumari, 24 April 1965 (IJFL, GRS, DIMW). Although sketched and photographed, this bird defeated even Charles Vaurie in 1965 and was not identified until 1998 when DIMW saw identical birds in Kazakhstan.

E). Not in any paper:

Verreaux's Eagle *Aquila verreauxi* Wadi Zarqa, 13 April 1963 (IJFL, PADH, GRS, DIMW). Much debated on the day and 'defaulted' to 'sport' immature Golden Eagle *A. chrysaetos*. In 1982, five marks/colours of its striking pattern found to fit first or second year *verreauxi* (filmed in the Serengeti, East Africa). [Young birds seen in 1961–1964 c70 km west of Wadi Zarqa in northern Israel (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Shirihai 1996).]

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