

First confirmed breeding of two bird species and other interesting records for Lebanon

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Summary: The known status of seven bird species in Lebanon has changed, chiefly during the last two years. Of these, Great Crested Grebe and Goldcrest have bred for the first time in the country and Lesser Crested Tern has reappeared after it was considered extinct in Lebanon for more than a century.

INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is the fourth worst country for illegally killed birds (IKBs) in the Mediterranean region (see the article by Brochet *et al* in this issue). The average number of IKBs in the country was 2.6 million individuals as estimated by one of us (GR-J) on behalf of SPNL (the BirdLife Partner in Lebanon) in 2015 (BirdLife International, 2015). This represents 10.6% of total number of IKBs in 27 Mediterranean countries. Since 2016, GR-J has monitored, on behalf of SPNL, the IKBs at three blackspots of the country. This monitoring activity revealed species that were not seen for over 100 years and enabled us to amend the phenological status and abundance of several species. At the same time, this activity allowed us to report on IKBs to the Internal Security Forces and to train these forces in the identification of the game birds allowed for hunting so that all other avian species can be protected from poachers. Apart from the two species that we have recorded as breeding for the first time in Lebanon, four other illegally killed species represent interesting records for the country.

RESULTS

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Until recently, the Great Crested Grebe was considered as a rare migrant, a scarce but regular winterer and occasional non-breeding summer visitor (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). This species is a breeding resident in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 1999) and Syria (Murdoch & Betton 2008), an occasional breeder in Israel and a passage migrant and winter visitor in Jordan (Shirihai 1999). On 28 April 2019 at Aammîq Swamps, MO saw a pair of Great Crested Grebes with one of them carrying a chick on its back. This is the first breeding record of this species for Lebanon (Plate 1).

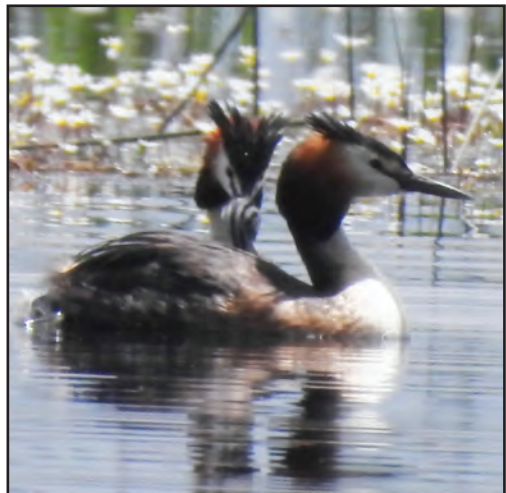


Plate 1: A Great Crested Grebe family, April 2019 at Aammîq, Lebanon. © G. Ramadan-Jaradi

Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

There was one previous record of a male and six females on an islet off Tripoli on 7 March 1998 (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999, Bara 2002). Recently, five individuals were seen at Qleiaat (34°35'15.2" N, 35°59'22.8" E) on 5 November 2018. Of these, three were



Plate 2: Red-breasted Mergansers, among other species, taken at Qleyaat on 5 November 2018. © M. Yakhni

killed by hunters (Plate 2). This is the second record of the Red-breasted Merganser in Lebanon.

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*

This species was recorded as breeding in the Palm Islands off Tripoli in 1895 but without subsequent records and it was considered extinct in Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). The Lesser Crested Tern is a vagrant in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 1999), and Jordan (Shirihai *et al* 1999), is absent from Syria (Murdoch & Betton, 2008) and is a rare summer non-breeding visitor in Israel (Shirihai *et al* 1999). On 3 March 2019,



Plate 3: Lesser Crested Tern, Chekka, Lebanon, 3 March 2019. © B. Abi Jummaa

at Chekka in North Lebanon, Bassel Abi Jumaa observed and photographed (Plate 3) the second record for this species in Lebanon and the first record for over 120 years.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes orientalis orientalis*

Black-bellied Sandgrouse was first recorded in Lebanon on 16 November 1996, when 18 individuals were seen at Cheikh Zennad by Bara (1998). The second record was of c350 individuals on 7 December 2013 (Ramadan-Jaradi & Serhal 2014). More recently, 17 were shot during 8-17 January and 22-25 December 2015. Four more were shot in January 2017 in



Plate 4: Some of the Black bellied Sandgrouse killed at Akkar on 1-5 December 2018. © K Shrayteh

Akkar. Between 1 and 5 December 2018, 25 Black-bellied Sandgrouse were shot by eight different hunters in the north of Lebanon in different areas of Akkar (Plate 4): Andkit, Qubayyat, Kherbit el Rimmen, Kbour el Biid, Sahel Akkar, Wadi Khaled, Aydmoun, and Kherbitshar. With all these records, the species should no longer be regarded as a vagrant to Lebanon but as a regular and not uncommon winter visitor.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

This species is a vagrant to Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi 2008). It is resident in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 1999) and Syria (Murdoch & Betton 2008), but absent from Israel and Jordan (Shirihai *et al* 1999). There are only seven records from Lebanon: several reported in the south of the country in October 1967 and August 1968 (Benson 1970), one in woodland north of Baabda on 15 April 1984 (Khairallah 1986), and one poor flyer (perhaps of captive origin) over the main Beirut-Tripoli road on 4 September 2000 (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 2002). There were two in Aammiq wetlands on 1 April 2015 (FI), and one in Ghalboun on 9 April 2017 (Tamima Itani). On 29 August 2018, an individual was shot during a hunting trip down the river in Fakiha. It was feeding alone on a smaller bird when shot (Plate 5). With these additional records, Eurasian Magpie should no longer be regarded as a vagrant to Lebanon, but as a scarce irregular passage migrant. Some are probably post breeding dispersals from neighbouring countries.



Plate 5: Eurasian Magpie killed on 29 August 2018 at Fakiha (North Beqaa Valley). © M Khalil

European Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

This species is a very rare and irregular winter visitor in November–January in cedar, pine and fir groves at Barouk, Ehden and Qammouha (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999). Also, three were recorded at Barouk cedars on 18 November, one at Ain Zhalta cedars on 8 December 1999 (Beale 2000), and one at Aammiq on 26 November 2000 (Beale & Springer 2001). On 11 August 2018, BAJ observed four individuals in a fir forest at Qammouha, suggesting possible breeding. On 28 August 2018, G R-J, FI and Thierry Bara were led by BAJ to the site of 11 August, where they observed six individuals (Plate 6). On 30 April, GR-J visited the area and watched three individuals but heard no fewer than 10. After two and half hours of observation, he heard nestlings calling with “feed me noises” every time one of the parents moved between the thick leaves of a tree, but they were difficult to see and photograph. This is the first breeding record of this species in Lebanon. Finding chicks of Goldcrest in the nest by late April may indicate that the species is an early summer breeding or more likely a sedentary species.



Plate 6: Goldcrest on 28 August 2018 at Qammouha. © Fouad Itani

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

This species is a vagrant to Lebanon (Shirihai 1996), a comment probably based on an uncertain record by Nevins (1960), who may have seen it in the Litani River Valley on 19 March 1955 (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). This species is resident in Turkey (Kirwan *et al* 1999), a rare winter visitor in Syria (Murdoch & Betton, 2008), a vagrant in Israel and absent from Jordan (Shirihai *et al* 1999). On 3 November 2018, a hunter shot one (Plate 7) of two birds in an open semi-desert at Qa’a Valley. It was reported to FI & GR-J by Chouman Monzer through a mobile photo showing a small sparrow with chestnut crown and black spot on white cheeks. This is the second record for Lebanon and the first for over 65 years.



Plate 7: Eurasian Tree Sparrow shot at Qa’a Valley on 3 November 2018. © C Mounzer

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