

# First documented record of **White-crowned Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucopyga* in Syria and records there of **Desert Lark** *Ammomanes deserti annae* and **Basalt Wheatear** *Oenanthe lugens warriae*, all 2009

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## **WHITE-CROWNED WHEATEAR** *Oenanthe leucopyga*

During a birdwatching trip to Syria in 2009 we explored the black basalt desert east of Jebel Druze in southernmost Syria for a day. While driving through the basalt desert 27 February (Plate 1), DS spotted a 'black and white' wheatear sitting by the road on top of a stone (32° 54' 09.1" N, 37° 19' 05.2" E, As Zalaf, Rif Dimashq, Syria). As the bird was white capped we immediately identified it as White-crowned Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*. The bird was seen for a few minutes before it disappeared, though we found the bird again at the same place two hours and several heavy rainfalls later. All authors observed it and we managed to get several pictures both before and after the rain (Plates 2, 3, both post rain). During the observation we noted: a rather large and narrow-billed black wheatear with white crown and white undertail coverts. White on the belly was restricted to between undertail coverts and legs, tail strikingly white except for black central rectrices. A few rectrices were completely white, whereas others had small inconspicuous black spots at the tips. Clearly an adult White-crowned Wheatear. The bird was actively foraging and moved around for several hundred metres during our observations. It mostly sat on the top of small stones and clay hillocks.

This appears to be the first documented record of White-crowned Wheatear for Syria. There are two earlier reports from near Palmyra: one Douara cliffs 17 November 2001 and



Plate 1. Boulder field in basalt desert, southern Syria, 27 February 2009. © N Martinez



**Plate 2.** Adult White-crowned Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, southern Syria, 27 February 2009. © T Roth



**Plate 3.** Adult White-crowned Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* showing diagnostic tail pattern, southern Syria, 27 February 2009. © N Martinez

one Talila 16 March 2004 (Serra *et al* 2005). As there were no descriptions available, Murdoch & Betton (2008) did not include the species on the Syrian list. The species is a resident breeder in Israel, Palestine and Jordan (Porter *et al* 2004) with a recent northward range extension during which it colonised the Al-Harra basalt desert of Jordan, the extension of the basalt desert of southern Syria (Andrews *et al* 1998, Khoury *et al* 2010). It was frequently found on the Jordanian side of the basalt desert in 2008 (Khoury *et al* 2010) so a record from the Syrian part of the same desert c30 km from the border is not surprising. It is likely that the species occurs in southern Syria as a breeding bird. This hypothesis is supported by the statement of a local shepherd encountered shortly after our observation of the White-crowned Wheatear. Showing him the colour plates in Porter *et al* (2004), he recognised the species by referring to the white cap and told us, that it regularly occurs in the area. Since he also recognised the superficially similar Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriae* in the book, we assume he indeed meant *O. leucopyga*. The White-crowned Wheatear is a vagrant to several countries neighbouring Syria. Cyprus: seven records, first 1970, last 2008 (C Richardson pers comm). Turkey: three records, two Mediterranean coast (1993, 1996) and one central Antalya province 2005 (Kirwan *et al* 2008, E Yoğurtcuoğlu pers comm). Lebanon: not recorded before 2008 (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008) but apparently one new record 14–15 September 2015 (Harrison & Lamsdell 2016). Iraq: one record of immature Sawa lake, central Iraq, 19 February 2010 (Salim 2010).

**DESERT LARK** *Ammomanes deserti annae*,  
**BASALT WHEATEAR** *Oenanthe lugens warriae*

The basalt desert of Jordan and Syria (Plate 1) holds two endemic and distinct dark subspecies. Little is known of the distribution of Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti annae* (Plate 5, see also Plate 4) and Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriae* (Plate 6) in the Syrian part of the basalt desert. *A. d. annae* was seen and photographed by us at several locations between 32° 42' 02.7" N, 36° 54' 10.3" E and 32° 55' 55.29" N, 37° 20' 50.9" E and noted



**Plate 4.** Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti coxi* 25 February 2009, Zenobia, central Syria. © N Martinez



**Plate 5.** Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti annae* 27 February 2009, basalt desert east of As Suwayda, southern Syria. © N Martinez



**Plate 6.** Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriai*, 2 cy male, 27 February 2009, basalt desert east of As Suwayda, southern Syria. © N Martinez



**Plate 7.** Wadi in basalt desert (32° 42' 02.7" N, 36° 54' 10.3" E, southern Syria) where we found a pair of Basalt Wheatears, 27 February 2009. © D Matti

as common. Our observations suggest that the subspecies regularly occurs in the Syrian part of the desert.

Our observations of Basalt Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens warriai* were included in Khoury *et al* (2010). In total we found 5 different Basalt Wheatears: one pair at wadi cliffs (32° 42' 02.7" N, 36° 54' 10.3" E, Plate 7) with the male, a first summer, singing and reacting to a taped song of ssp *lugens*; and three singles close to the road between 32° 42' 02.7" N, 36° 54' 10.3" E and 32° 55' 55.29" N, 37° 20' 50.9" E.

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