

Interesting observations from Tallymerjen IBA, Turkmenistan, 2015 and 2016

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Tallymerjen Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA), Turkmenistan, is a predominately agricultural area consisting of cereal crops and cotton fields, interspersed with fallow land and covers an area of 167 701 ha (BirdLife International 2017a). There is an area of desert/semi-desert in the northeast resembling steppe grassland and for the purposes of this note this area is referred to by the colloquial term 'steppe'. For the distribution of habitats at the site see figure 1 in Donald *et al* (2016). The IBA comprises two parts: one lying 5 km northwest of the railway that passes between the villages of Jeikhun and Tallymerjen and the other 25 km to the southeast of the railway. The landscape and environmental conditions are typical of the submontane plains of the Gaurda-Kugitang (Koytendag) mountain system. The IBA lies on a clayey plain which has been developed for agriculture, mostly arable farming, and there is an extensive network of irrigation canals. The southern border of the site includes the Amu darya river valley (which has oasis-type vegetation). The climate is sharply continental with some subtropical elements. Summers are hot and long while winters are short, with usually only a little snow. A few patches of the original vegetation, communities of *Halochnemum strobilaceum* with various ephemeral plants, remain in a small number of undeveloped areas. There is seasonal pasturing and cattle breeding, especially in the peripheral parts of the IBA. The local population is occupied mostly in the agricultural sector (Rustamov *et al* 2009). The site has been recognised as an IBA since 2009 qualifying under criteria A1 (globally threatened species: Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* and Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*), A4i (supporting 1% or more of biogeographical populations: Greylag Goose *Anser anser*, Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* and Common Crane *Grus grus*) and A4iii (holding concentrations of 20 000 or more waterbirds). The site also supports eight species included in the Red Data Book of Turkmenistan (Rustamov *et al* 2009). The Tallymerjen IBA in Turkmenistan is adjacent to the Talimerzhan Reservoir IBA in Uzbekistan (Kashkarov *et al* 2008) and there is regular interchange of birds between the two sites.

In autumn 2015, Tallymerjen was found to support globally important numbers of the Critically Endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* (Donald *et al* 2016). Globally important numbers of Sociable Lapwings were also recorded in autumn 2016 (Azimov *et al* 2018). Associated with work on Sociable Lapwings, opportunistic observations were made throughout the site 2–13 October 2015 and 30 March–6 April, 8–18 October and 13–16 December 2016, a total of 35 days. During these periods eleven globally threatened species were recorded plus several observations of species of national importance. Given the paucity of bird observations from Turkmenistan, these observations are detailed below. For species such as Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, the observations are best considered as simply indicating the presence of the species within the Tallymerjen IBA.

For each species the IUCN (2017) and Red Data Book of Turkmenistan (2011) status is given as well as our records, plus general comments on status in Turkmenistan based on species' accounts in Rustamov (2015). Red Data Book of Turkmenistan status categories largely correspond to those of the IUCN *ie* I, Critically Endangered; II, Endangered; III, Vulnerable; IV, Rare; V, Data Deficient. Avian species sequence and nomenclature follow OSME (2017).

Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis* (IUCN: VU, Red Data Book: II). An adult on arable land near Dovletli 14 December 2016.

A very scarce passage migrant and irregular winter visitor mainly to southeastern Caspian.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* (IUCN: LC, Red Data Book: not included). Min 8650 observed 13–16 December 2016. These birds were roosting on Talimerzhan reservoir and flying at dawn to the Tallymerjen arable land to feed.

A scarce passage migrant and winter visitor to many wetlands but can be common in some years.

The number of Greater White-fronted Geese using the Tallymerjen/Talimerzhan area has increased significantly in recent years whilst the numbers of Greylag Geese *Anser anser* have declined (ER, R Kaskarov pers comm). The reasons for this change are unknown.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* (IUCN: VU, Red Data Book: III). No direct observations but a satellite tagged adult male was present in the area 23 October 2015–at least 7 January 2016. After this date the tag either failed or was lost. It was tagged in the Polar Urals, Komi republic, Russia, on 26 July 2015. As with the Greater White-fronted Goose, this bird roosted on Talimerzhan reservoir and flew to Tallymerjen to feed.

A very scarce passage migrant and winter visitor to wetlands throughout Turkmenistan.

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* (IUCN: EN, Red Data Book: II). One on steppe 2 October 2015. A pair northeast of Sardoba 2 April and an adult southeast of Dovletli 12 October, both 2016.

Uncommon passage migrant and localised breeding summer visitor. Widespread on migration.

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* (IUCN: NT, Red Data Book: III). Single birds on arable land 2 and 10 October 2015, with two observed 11 October 2015. 2016: max five observed northeast of Sardoba 3 April, max three east of Hojahayran 17 October and min four roosting near Dovletli 14 and 15 December.

Uncommon, threatened and decreasing breeding summer visitor, though some birds are resident. No less than six regularly recorded on migration and wintering at the site (Rustamov *et al* 2009)

Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* (IUCN: VU, Red Data Book: II). 2016: single birds observed 31 March and 2 April with three 3 April all on the steppe to the east and northeast of Tallymerjen village, and max nine observed near Dovletli 8 October.

Very uncommon passage migrant, possibly wintering and even breeding. Occurs widely from the Caspian to the eastern border of Turkmenistan.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* (IUCN: EN, Red Data Book: IV). Max 13 on arable land 2, 11 and 12 October 2015. 2016: three observed 2 April, five 3 April and six 4 April on the steppe east and northeast of Tallymerjen village; regularly recorded migrating and/or roosting throughout the site with at least 45 observed 8 October and min 33 feeding and roosting near Dovletli 15 December.

Widespread passage migrant and winter visitor to southern Turkmenistan. Generally uncommon though can occur in flocks on migration. Following the recent uplisting of this species to globally Endangered (BirdLife International 2017b), it is likely that Tallymerjen supports regionally, if not internationally, important numbers of this species in winter.

Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* (IUCN: VU, Red Data Book: III). An adult on steppe 10 October 2015. 2016: single juveniles observed southeast and northwest of Dovletli 11 October, an adult northeast of Dovletli 14 October and min two roosting alongside the railway to the south of Tallymerjen village 15 December.

Widespread but threatened and decreasing passage migrant and winter visitor, possibly breeding irregularly in riverine forests along major rivers.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* (IUCN: NT, Red Data Book: III). In 2015 recorded almost daily max 10 on the steppe 2 October. 2016: single males observed 1 and 2 April on the steppe to the east and northeast of Tallymerjen village, and max six east-southeast of Sardoba 16 October.

Uncommon, threatened but widespread passage migrant, with some birds wintering.

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* (IUCN: NT, Red Data Book: IV). Sixty-nine on arable land 13 October 2015. 2016: max 55 near Dovletli 14 October and flock of at least 72 on outskirts of Dovletli 15 December.

Uncommon passage migrant, mainly to oases, foothills, river valleys and the coast, and winter visitor to agricultural areas, especially in southern Turkmenistan. The population has been increasing since 2000. Up to 150 recorded wintering previously (Rustamov *et al* 2009).

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (IUCN: NT, Red Data Book: not included). Max 144 on arable land 11 October 2015. At least 50 feeding on arable land near Dovletli, 14 and 16 December 2016.

Uncommon to common passage migrant and irregular summer and winter visitor to inland wetlands, oases and the Caspian shore.

Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (IUCN: EN, Red Data Book: III). Up to two on steppe and 1–2 within arable land 3–5 October 2015. 2016: Regularly recorded on the steppe 8–18 October, max 3 including 2 juveniles 18 October.

Resident, passage migrant and winter visitor, occurring widely in mountains and deserts, also along river valleys during migration. Extremely rare at this site with observations possibly relating to birds wandering from Koytendag IBA c100 km to the southeast.

Barbary Falcon *Falco pelegrinoides* (IUCN: LC [where considered ssp of *F. peregrinus*], Red Data Book: II). One observed arable land northwest of Dovletli 12 October 2016.

Nationally endangered and decreasing breeding summer visitor, passage migrant and scarce winter visitor.

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* (IUCN: LC, Red Data Book: not included). Max 20 observed on steppe 4 October 2015. Several thousand (estimated min 1650+ on 14 December) feeding on arable land and adjoining steppe 13–16 December 2016.

Common to locally numerous resident and nomadic migrant.

Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* (IUCN: LC, Red Data Book: not included). Up to 9000 observed on arable land 7 October 2015. 2016: min 9000 observed flying north over steppe 8 October, and an estimated min 11 200 on arable land 10 October.

Common to locally numerous passage migrant and breeding summer visitor, with some birds present in winter. It would appear that this and the preceding sp occupy the

same niche at Tallymerjen but at different times of year, with *bimaculata* occurring in large numbers on autumn migration and being replaced by *calandra* during the winter.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* (IUCN: NT, Red Data Book: not included). 2016: two southwest of Tallymerjen village 14 December and three near Dovletli 15 December.

Common and widely distributed passage migrant and winter visitor, preferring valleys and oases.

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