

# LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN

## OSME IN 2017

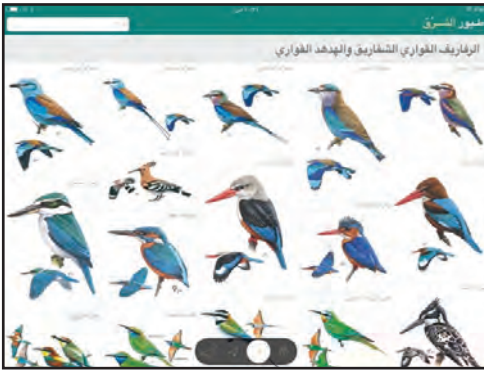
As we start to get to grips with 2018, it is worth reflecting on another good year for OSME and the conservation work across the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus that our members support.

The early part of 2017 was taken up with the final stages of a landmark project for OSME and our partners, BirdLife International and RSPB. After several years of hard work and fundraising we were able to officially launch the Arabic version of the *Birds of the Middle East*. This was a team effort but worthy of special mentions are AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan Alenezi (OSME web manager) who led on the translation of the text, as well as Ibrahim Khader, Sharif Jbour (BirdLife International), Nabegh Ghazal Asswad and Akram Darwish for overseeing the

editing process. Jim Martin and Josephine Blaquie (Bloomsbury Publishing) guided the production process, and OSME co-treasurer, Chris Hughes masterfully kept the project within budget. The launch event was held on 11th March at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai, and included a panel discussion with OSME members Peter Hellyer, Oscar Campbell, and Ahmed Al Ali as well as the field guide's co-author, Richard Porter. You can read more details about the book and the launch events (Plate 1) on the OSME website (see the blog post 11th March 2017). OSME are hopeful that this local language field guide will inspire and engage a new generation of birdwatchers and conservationists across the Arab speaking world.



**Plate 1.** The Arabic version of *Birds of the Middle East* was launched at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai in March 2017 (left to right: Richard Porter, Peter Hellyer, Ahmed Al Ali, Oscar Campbell).



**Plate 2.** A smartphone App version of the *Birds of the Middle East* is progressing well and is expected to be launched during 2018.

Following on from the launch of the printed version OSME and BirdLife International have been working with Nature Guides to develop a smartphone App version of the field guide (Plate 2). Progress has been rapid in the latter half of 2017 and testing is now underway. As I write, this ground-breaking initiative is almost fully funded, but we still require a few thousand pounds to get this project off the ground. The use of smartphones is commonplace in most Middle East countries and we expect that this App version of the book will reach a whole new audience of people who may develop an interest in birds and their conservation. Please email me if you are willing to make a contribution.

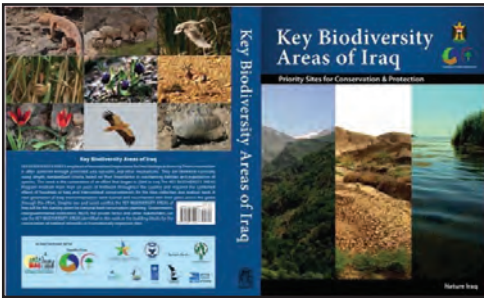
One of the most tangible contributions OSME makes to conservation work across the region is through supporting projects with small grants via our Conservation Fund. In recent years OSME Council have made a conscious decision to increase funding to projects, and 2017 was another record breaking year with 15 792 pounds sterling (unaudited end of year figure) spent on 8 projects, including our first funding to Tadjikistan. This is the third consecutive year we have spent a record amount on the Conservation Fund and this is largely due to an anonymous donor, new support from the Tides Foundation and an increase in donations from OSME members

and supporters. During 2017 the following projects were funded

- White-headed Duck conservation, Turkey: £1500
- Great Bustard breeding grounds, Kazakhstan: £1500
- Bar-tailed Godwit surveys, Kazakhstan: £2250
- Monitoring Sociable Lapwing migration through Kumo-Manych depression, southwest Russia: £1000.
- “Bird camp Besh Barmag initiative”, Azerbaijan: £2000
- Bar-headed Goose in the Pamirs, Tadjikistan: £1542
- Steppe Eagle conservation network in Turkey: £1000
- The “SunChild Eco Club project” follow up, Armenia: £5000

In 2017 we provided our largest single Conservation Fund grant (£5000) to an inspirational project in Armenia. I was fortunate enough to visit the SunChild Eco Club project in July and it was a great privilege to see the next generation of Armenian conservationists being supported by OSME. You can read a full account of the project on the OSME website via a guest blog by Eva Martirosyan posted 12th December. This project also highlights the value of working in partnership as additional funding and support were provided by the US Forest Service and the World Land Trust.

It was pleasing to see a long-running project reach completion during 2017. Back in 2012 OSME provided a small grant as a contribution to an inventory of the Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq. This landmark publication (Plate 3) was released in September of last year and for the first time, some of Iraq’s most important natural areas have been mapped and listed, along with the threats they continue to face. It was the culmination of over a decade’s work from the NGO Nature Iraq, in cooperation with the Iraqi Ministry of Health and Environment. Despite the



**Plate 3.** The Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq, supported by OSME, was published during 2017.

background of conflict, scientists from Nature Iraq, Iraqi ministries and academic institutions have carried out comprehensive surveys throughout Iraq resulting in the identification of 82 Key Biodiversity Areas - the jewels in the crown for Iraq's wildlife.

Working in collaboration with BirdLife International we have made significant progress during the last 12 months in identifying the extent of illegal bird killing across the Arabian peninsula, Iran and Iraq. The results are still being analysed but it is clear that large numbers of birds are being illegally killed across the region and this is a key threat that urgently needs addressing. I hope that we will be able to report during 2018 on the findings of this important piece of work.

The OSME AGM and Summer Meeting were once again held at the BTO Headquarters (the Nunnery), and was a very successful event with a range of excellent speakers. Attendees were treated to a series of six excellent talks, including from four projects that had received support from the OSME Conservation Fund. At the Summer Meeting, AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan Alenezi became the first OSME Honorary Life Fellow (Plate 4) for his tireless work on voluntarily translating the text of the Birds of the Middle East into Arabic. The OSME Summer Meeting is always a highlight in the calendar and we will once again be holding our Summer Meeting and AGM at the Nunnery on 30th June 2018—all are welcome. On behalf of OSME Council I'd like to thank the BTO for their continued



**Plate 4.** AbdulRahman Al-Sirhan (right) was made OSME's first Honorary Life Fellow for his work on translating the Arabic version of the field guide to the Birds of the Middle East. © Dawn Balmer

support in hosting our Summer Meeting and AGM.

For many organisations and individuals involved in birds, whether it be through conservation, tourism or artwork, the Bird Fair held at Rutland Water in England is a must attend event. The Bird Fair is always an inspiring event to attend, and this year we held a reception with BirdLife International to thank those involved in the production of the Arabic Field Guide as well as to show some demonstration pages of the new smartphone App. It was a thoroughly enjoyable reception, and as Chairman of OSME for four years this was probably the highlight of my tenure so far.

In our ever increasingly connected world we are continuing to grow our presence on social media to help spread the message about the importance of birds and bird conservation across the OSME region. Our Twitter followers are almost at 3500, our Facebook page has more than 1600 likes and our website is being visited more than

ever before. We continue to promote Guest Blogs on our website, thanks to the efforts of Richard Porter, which showcase some amazing work across the OSME region. One of the most popular blogs from last year was the fascinating story of the Great Knot known as 'EI' that was ringed in Kamchatka, Russia before being observed by OSME member Oscar Campbell in the United Arab Emirates. A fascinating story that highlights the wonder of bird migration and the need for international co-operation if we are to halt the continued decline in migratory species.

All members receive two issues of *Sandgrouse* each year and Volume 39 (2017) saw the continued publication of our highly regarded journal. Peter Cowan and his team do a fabulous job in producing *Sandgrouse* which is reflected in the numerous positive comments I receive about the journal. Throughout the year we have been planning a special additional 50th Anniversary supplement that we are looking forward to producing in 2018.

OSME are a membership based organisation and we heavily rely on

subscription fees to maintain the level of work that we do across the region. Membership has declined slightly each year for about the last decade although we appear to have seen a stabilisation during 2017 (the 2017 membership figures will be finalised soon). OSME Council is taking steps in early 2018 to see how we can build our membership base to ensure the long-term viability of the Society, and we will report back to the AGM in June. A huge thanks to all OSME members for your continued support of the work we do, it really helps us make a difference.

Finally I'd like to thank all OSME Council members for their input and hard work throughout 2017. We are all volunteers who share a passion for the birds of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. OSME is an incredibly well run society that continues to punch above its weight, and Council members should be proud of what they have contributed to during 2017.

*Dr Rob Sheldon, chairman@osme.org*