

LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN

OSME in 2016

The natural world is under greater pressure than ever before, and biodiversity continues to decline at an unprecedented rate. The Living Planet Report published this year, tracks the state of global biodiversity in a similar way that a stock market index does, and is an important indicator of the planet's ecological condition. The index doesn't make for pretty reading. Between 1970 and 2012 there has been an overall decline of 58% in the vertebrate populations that make up the index. The annual rate of decline is approximately 2% and shows no sign of slowing. In December the IUCN Red-List update of threatened bird species shows that many species around the world continue to slip towards extinction. However, within the OSME region, there continues to be room for optimism. Counts of the Endangered White-headed Duck in Kazakhstan show the population to be doing much better than previously thought. The key threat of hunting is being tackled in countries such as Saudi Arabia, although more needs to be done. Despite unimaginable conditions, countries such as Iraq and Yemen continue to assess their natural heritage and make plans for future conservation action. You can read more about these examples on the BirdLife International website (<http://www.birdlife.org/news/region/middle-east/middle-east>).

The most tangible way that OSME and our members support bird conservation efforts across the region is through our small grants programme. It has been a Council priority in recent years to see this fund grow and support conservationists across the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In 2015 we had a record breaking year providing £10 450 to a range of projects, and I'm delighted that in 2016 we surpassed that figure again, providing £14 000 to 7 projects, including our largest ever award to a single project of £5000. This increase in funds is down to a significant growth in donations (our best year ever) from members and supporters, corporate sponsors and a generous contribution from an anonymous donor. During 2016 the following projects were funded

- EcoClub Project on Yerevan, Armenia: £2150
- Elucidating the patterns in Mid-Winter Waterfowl Surveys by using climate, macrophyte records and lake water level fluctuations, Turkey: £400
- Distribution and abundance of Eurasian steppe birds at the western border of their range, Kazakhstan: £1950
- Monitoring of IBA 'Oygaing Valley' and adjoining territories, Uzbekistan: £2000
- Second year of Monitoring of Illegal Shooting of Raptors in the Batumi Bottleneck, Georgia: £1000
- International youth bird migration project, Azerbaijan: £1500
- SunChild Eco Club project, Armenia: £5000

Two issues of our excellent journal *Sandgrouse* were produced in the year, 240pp in total, and included a wide-range of scientific papers and reports from almost every country in the OSME region. Despite changes in the world of scientific publishing, we continue to be committed to producing printed versions of our journal, but we are making previous issues available online via our website and through the Biodiversity Heritage Library. I often hear lots of positive comments about *Sandgrouse*, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Peter Cowan and his editorial team for producing such a high quality and professional publication.

In accordance with our Memorandum of Understanding signed at the Birdfair in 2015, throughout the last 12 months we have continued to work closely with BirdLife International and partners across our region. Notably, we have worked with colleagues in the Amman office to finalise the publication of an Arabic version of the field guide to the *Birds of the Middle East* (Plate 1). We hope that this landmark publication will help enthuse a new generation of birdwatchers and conservationists across the Middle East. One of the biggest threats to many migratory birds in the OSME region is illegal bird killing, and we have been working closely with BirdLife



Plate 1. Covers mock-up of the Arabic version of the field guide to the *Birds of the Middle East*.

International on an assessment of the number of birds killed across the Arabian Peninsula, Iran and Iraq. These baseline data will provide a valuable source of information to help target conservation efforts in the future.

Engaging new members and supporters has been a high priority in recent years. OSME continues to develop its presence on social media and effectively communicates about conservation issues and highlights from around the region. Our following on Twitter continues to grow steadily with approximately 2800 followers, and our new Facebook page exceeded 1300 likes by the end of 2016. Linking our increasing range of stories and blogs on our website to our social media output has enabled us to engage with more people across the region. Council will continue to develop this area of work in the coming year to promote conservation and connect like-minded people with an interest in ornithology and bird-watching. Alongside the growth in social media, OSME continues with our 'traditional' forms of engagement through our annual summer meeting and our presence at the UK Birdwatching Fair. Both of these events are highlights of the annual OSME calendar where we can showcase some

of the work we do directly with members, and I'd urge you to support both of these events as much as you can. We always welcome as many members and non-members as possible to attend a range of talks at our Summer meeting, which will once again be held at the BTO headquarters in Thetford on the 1st July 2017.

The above are just a few highlights from a really exciting and successful year for OSME. These achievements don't happen by accident and we are fortunate to have committed and talented Council members that manage OSME on a day to day basis. Our financial position is healthy and our governance is strong, which enables us to be confident going forward that we can continue to meet the ambitions set out in our OSME 2020 strategy. All the work of OSME is undertaken on a voluntary basis by a team of dedicated individuals and underpinned by our members and supporters across the region. On behalf of OSME Council, many thanks for all those that have contributed to our work in 2016 and we look forward to your continued support in the future.

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