

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Unsubstantiated claims concerning the breeding biology of the Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis*

We wish to draw attention to a letter that we, together with eleven other ornithologists, have written to the editor of *Zoology in the Middle East* (Porter *et al* 2015a) expressing serious concern about details of the breeding biology of the Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* in Iraq as claimed by Al-Sheikhly *et al* (2013). We feel that this and the subsequent published correspondence (Al-Sheikhly *et al* 2015, Porter *et al* 2015b) should be consulted by anyone with an interest in the study and conservation of this globally endangered species. The editor-in-chief of *ZME*, Dr Max Kasperek, later published a brief introduction to the so-called 'debate' (Kasperek 2015).

Al-Sheikhly *et al* (2013) reported figures and drew conclusions that, in our opinion, are impossible to achieve without undertaking a long-term trapping and colour-ringing programme to allow identification of individual male and female birds. They claim *inter alia* that "971 nests of Basra Reed Warbler were studied", most over the two-year period 2006–2007, and that "males are often polygynous (42.9%, n=317 observed males)." There is however almost no mention in the paper of the methods and resources employed to gather such data. Furthermore, Al-Sheikhly *et al* claimed that "the identification of male and female Basra Reed Warblers was unmistakable in the field," which we contest is impossible, given that the species like all other Western Palearctic *Acrocephalus* cannot be sexed visually, only through in-hand examination and perhaps biometric data, which the authors of the study did not attempt. Neither is there any explanation of

how counts were carried out and extrapolated to population figures given for Iraq's major marshland areas. Following questioning, the authors admit "that the occurrence of polygyny needs to be confirmed by a more comprehensive study." If their precise figures as originally presented lack credibility, then it draws into question any of the paper's other results. We feel that these issues should have been picked up by the editor and referees at the paper's review stage.

REFERENCES

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