Observations of the Critically Endangered Sociable Lapwing Vanellus gregarius during autumn migration in Azerbaijan

PEDRO ROMERO VIDAL & ROBERT SHELDON

The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* is listed as critically endangered by IUCN (BirdLife International 2015). The species is a long distance migrant, breeding in the central steppes of Kazakhstan with small numbers in southern Russia. Two migratory routes have been identified, with the most well-known route through southwest Russia, around the Caspian sea, and into Turkey and then continuing through various other countries in the Middle East, with birds wintering in the Arabian peninsula and northeast Africa. A second route is less well-known (but see Donald *et al* 2016) where birds migrate east and winter in Pakistan and northwest India (Sheldon *et al* 2012).

During autumn and winter 2013, counts of migrating waterbirds were undertaken at Hajigabul lake in Azerbaijan. The lake (39° 58′–40° 01′ N, 48° 54′–48° 56′ E) is located between the cities of Hajigabul and Shirvan in the centre of the country, within the Kura-Araz lowlands, *c*40 km west of the Caspian sea. Hajigabul lake is a shallow salty waterbody that was once connected to the Caspian. The water level is seasonally influenced by rainfall and inundations from the river Kura when it floods. There are no inflows or outflows to the lake and in some periods the lake can dry out. There are also occasional inputs of warm water from the Alibayramly government electric power station. The lake does not freeze in winter. Hajigabul lake and its adjacent land have a dry subtropical climate, with arid plains and hills. Temperatures can be high in summer



Plate I.The lake Hajigabul shore (Azerbaijan), where Sociable Lapwings Vanellus gregarius were observed.

(*c*40°C) and low during winter (between 0°C and 10°C). Precipitation is low throughout the year, varying between 100–300 mm, and is especially low in summer (0–10 mm).

During the waterbird counts, Sociable Lapwings were observed on two separate occasions in single species flocks. The first observation was of a flock of 45 individuals on the shores of the lake, 20 October 2013. Habitat was a muddy substrate interspersed with patches of water (Plate 1). The birds were primarily resting with little movement, although a few individuals were feeding occasionally. Within the flock, four colour-ringed birds were watched. Due to the large distance between observers and flock, the exact colour ring combinations could not be determined. For two of the individuals we could make out that blue and white were part of the combination. For the other two marked birds, only white could be detected with any degree of certainty. Sociable Lapwings have been colour-ringed for more than 10 years in central Kazakhstan as part of a long-term study undertaken by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan. From the partial colour-ring information we are unable to specify which individuals were present in the flock. However, the vast majority of colour-ringed Sociable Lapwings have been marked in a study area 120 km southwest of Astana, near lake Tengiz (50° 59' N, 70° 05' E) and it is highly likely that these birds are from that population. The second observation was of 15 unringed individuals at the same location on 7 November 2013. Initially, only two individuals were observed, at 11.22 h in the morning. However, additional birds arrived and a peak count of 15 was made in the next 2 hours. The birds were observed mainly resting, with the exception of two individuals that were regularly feeding.

Until recently, autumn records of Sociable Lapwing in Azerbaijan were scarce, but there are an increasing number of records being reported and added to a Sociable Lapwing sightings database compiled and maintained by the RSPB (Johannes Kamp pers comm). Through the use of satellite tracking, understanding of the migration routes of the Sociable Lapwing has increased in recent years. The observations presented here suggest that in some years autumn migration may not always follow the route north of the Caspian sea, but Sociable Lapwings might cross the Caspian from western Kazakhstan or northern Turkmenistan. Further surveys of key sites in Azerbaijan are required.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Elchin Sultanov of the Azerbaijan Ornithological Society for his continuous support. Thanks also to Baku State University for the opportunity to carry out the waterbird monitoring project, especially Sevinj Humbatova, Yashar Omarov and Til Dieterich.

REFERENCES

- BirdLife International. 2015. Species Factsheet: Vanellus gregarius. www.birdlife.org. [Downloaded 1 December 2015]
- Donald, PF, N Azimov, E Ball, RE Green, J Kamp, S Karryeva, R Kashkarov, A Kurbanov, E Rustanov, J Saparmuradov, R Sheldon, V Soldatov, A Ten, R Thorpe, M Underhill, R Urazaliyev & A Veyisov. 2016. Discovery of a globally important migration staging site for Sociable Lapwings *Vanellus gregarius* in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. *Sandgrouse* 38: 82–95.
- Sheldon, RD, MA Koshkin, J Kamp, S Dereliev, PF Donald & S Jbour (compilers). 2012. International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Sociable Lapwing Vanellus gregarius. CMS Technical Series 28/ AEWA Technical Series 47. Bonn.

Pedro Romero Vidal, L/Reboredo 30 Ordes (A Coruña), Spain CP 15689. pedro.romero@udc.es Robert Sheldon. vanellus1970@yahoo.co.uk