

# On the migration of the Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*, in Turkey

by Max Kasperek

**Abstract:** The Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) is a scarce but regular passage visitor in Turkey. Spring migration has its peak in April, autumn migration in August/September (medians are April 23th and August 29th). Detailed information on flock size, wintering, main resting sites etc. is given and compared with other Middle East countries.

**Kürzfassung:** Der Regenbrachvogel (*Numenius phaeopus*) ist ein seltener, doch regelmäßiger Durchzügler in der Türkei. Der Heimzug hat seinen Höhepunkt im April, der Wegzug im August/September (Mediane sind der 23. April und 29. August). Es werden detaillierte Angaben zu Trupppgrößen, Überwinterung, wichtigen Rastgebieten etc. gegeben und mit anderen Ländern des Nahen Ostens verglichen.

**Key words:** Charadriiformes – waders – Whimbrel – Turkey – Middle East – migration

## 1. Introduction

The Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) breeds in the northern Palaearctic region between the July isotherms of 6°C and 21°C (VOOUS 1962). The main winter quarters lie on the coasts of the North Atlantic islands and West Africa from Mauritania to the Cape, on the East African coast and Madagascar, on islands in the Indian Ocean, and on the coasts of the Persian Gulf to western India and Sri Lanka (CRAMP 1983, GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM et al. 1977). Whereas the migration route, migration pattern and population size along the East Atlantic flight path is relatively well understood (cf. GLUTZ VON BLOTZHEIM et al. l.c.), little information is available on migration and overwintering in Asia.

Turkey's geographical position does not give any clue as to the winter quarters of Turkish migrants: It is not known whether they cross Africa and winter on the Atlantic coasts (East Mediterranean flight path), or whether they winter in the Middle East and/or continue on to the Indian Ocean. Together with UHLIG's (1990) description of the migration of the Whimbrel in Bulgaria, an analysis of the migration pattern in Turkey may be a further component in the understanding of the migration.

## 2. Material

I found rather few published records of the Whimbrel in Turkey. They have been taken from: BEAMAN (1986), DIJKSEN & KASPAREK (1985), HARBARD, WALSH & FISHER (1976), VAN DER HAVE et al. (1988, 1989), KASPAREK (1985), KRÜPER & HARTLAUB (1875), KUMERLOEVE (1967, 1970), LOUETTE, BECUWE & EYCKERMAN (1977), OST (1969, 1972, 1975, 1978), SMITH (1960), TAYLOR (1872), WARNCKE (1965), WEIGOLD (1913) and VAN WINDEN et al. (1989). Most of the records are from unpublished sources, and the following individuals have provided their observations: M. VAN BEIRS, V. VAN DEN BERK, C. BRÄUNING, R. BRACE, K. BREEK, S. DE BRUIN, P. CARLTON, D. COLIN, L. J. DIJKSEN, G. E. DOBBS, P. J. DUBOIS, G.

EASY, J. EAMES, H. EBENHÖH, H. P. FISCHER, M. GIERTZ, N. GOLAY, D. P. GOSNEY, S. GYSEL, T. HERKENRATH, E. HIRSCHFELD, C. HUSBAND, H. JACOBY, K. JASCHKE, R. KELLNER, A. KILIÇ, N. KOCH, M. KUHN, C. KYRK, S. M. LISTER, A. M. MACFARLANE, S. C. MADGE, A. MÜLLER, H. PIEPER, F. DE RODER, B.-U. RUDOLPH, U. SCHAUMANN, C. STEIOF, A. SVANOLD, R. WEBB and K. WITT. In this way 108 records were obtained. Some were excluded because of inaccurate date and/or inaccurate locality. Records from the same observer with the same number of birds in the same area on subsequent days were counted as one record.

### 3. Results

The Whimbrel is a scarce but regular migrant in Turkey (cf. Fig. 1). It occurs in both migration seasons. Only one record is available for winter (January), and none for June.

Spring migration begins in late March (earliest record at Akyatan Gölü on 28.3.1988, L. VAN BECKHOVEN & L. J. DIJKSEN, unpubl.) and lasts until the end of May (latest record at Murat River near Agra on 25.5.1965, KUMERLOEVE 1967). The median was calculated as April 23th. Autumn migration begins in mid-July, with an early migrant in the Göksu delta as early as 5.7.1986 (R. WEBB, R. BRACE et al., unpubl.). The latest record is from the Yumurtalık lagoons on 28-29.10.1985 (V. VAN DEN BERK et al., unpubl.). The median for autumn migration is August 29th. For the calculation of the migration medians, counts with more than 10 individuals (see below) were not used. Spring passage extends over 2 months, autumn passage over about 4 months.

Usually single individuals were seen: 48% of all observations refer to singletons, whilst in 20% of all cases two individuals were noted (Fig. 2). There are four records with more than 10 individuals: 20 in the Göksu delta on 25.9.1981 (C. KYRK, unpubl.), about 25 in the Büyük Menderes delta on 19.3 and about 30 on 29.3.1911 (WEIGOLD 1913) and 40 there on 7-10.11.1983 (F. DE RODER, unpubl.).

Without these maximum counts, 47 records with a total of 101 birds are from spring migration and 50 records with a total of 116 birds from autumn migration. Flock size is almost identical in spring (2.14 birds/observation) and autumn (2.32 birds/observation). No differences in the pattern of flock size were found.

The Whimbrel was recorded in almost all parts of the country (Fig. 3). There are no records from the south-east and from the upper Euphrates region. 87.5% of all records are from the coast or from areas close to the coast (lagoons, estuaries). A considerable concentration of Whimbrel observations is from the coastal strip between Taşucu and İskenderun in the eastern part of the Turkish Mediterranean coast, where the deltas of the Göksu, Tarsus (Berdan), Seyhan and Ceyhan rivers are situated. 59% of all Turkish records, and 65% of all individuals observed in Turkey, are from this area.

### 4. Discussion

There is only one Turkish winter record of the Whimbrel. Although winter observation activity is extremely low and almost confined to the IWRB midwinter counts (L. J. DIJKSEN et al.) and some organized birdwatching tours (Dr. N. KOCH),

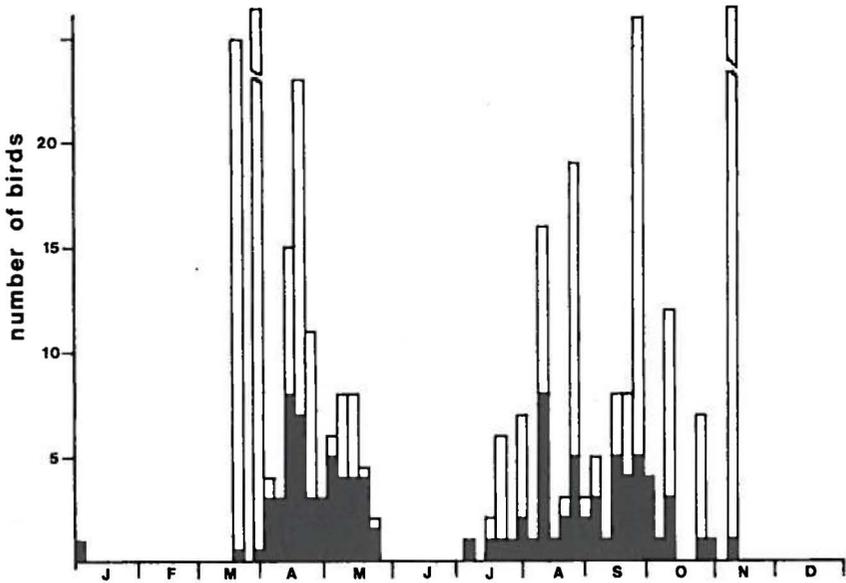


Fig. 1. Seasonal distribution of the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) in Turkey. The white columns show the number of birds, the black columns the number of records.

there should be more records if significant wintering occurred. A similar situation is found in Bulgaria where only a very few winter records are available (UHLIG 1990). The situation in Greece is quite unclear, as all the published winter records are from older sources (reviewed by REISER 1905) and some at least are believed to be confusions with the Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*) (BAUER et al. 1969, see also discussion in UHLIG 1990). There are also only a few winter observations on Cyprus (FLINT & STEWART 1983), and the Whimbrel was described as a rare winter visitor in Israel by HOVEL (1987) and PAZ (1987). A few seem to winter along the Egyptian Red Sea coast, but the only valid Egyptian January record is from Lake Qarun (GOODMAN & MEININGER 1989). For Saudi Arabia, JENNINGS (1981) described the Whimbrel as an uncommon winter visitor in all the coastal areas. On the Saudi Arabian Red Sea coast it is present from September to April according to STAGG (1985). A similar situation prevails in North Yemen (former Yemen Arab Republic), where the Whimbrel winters in small numbers (BROOKS et al. 1987). The Whimbrel is also an uncommon winter visitor on the south-east coast of the Arabian peninsula. GALLAGHER & WOODCOCK (1980) stated that "very few overwinter" in the whole of Oman, and WALKER (1981a) recorded the species in the northern part of the country "in every month" in small numbers. He also described a similar situation for Dhofar, southern Oman (WALKER 1981b). On Masirah Island off the Omani coast, ROGERS (1988) noted flocks up to several hundred on passage and "fewer in January and February". In the Persian Gulf, BUNDY & WARR (1980) observed the Whimbrel in all months in the Arabian Gulf States. RICHARDSON &

CHAPMAN (1988) did not give any winter record from Dubai, but stated that it overwintered in neighbouring areas. NIGHTINGALE & OVERY (1987) recorded the Whimbrel as present in Bahrain from April to December. The Middle East clearly does not play an important role in the overwintering of the Whimbrel. Wintering is irregular and in small numbers. The whole winter population is estimated to be less than 100 individuals.

The median of spring migration in Turkey is April 23th. The migration peak in Bulgaria (UHLIG 1990) and on Cyprus (FLINT & STEWART 1983) is in April, with considerable passage in May. The migration in Israel extends from mid-March to early May (PAZ 1987), suggesting peaks again in April. The migration period in Egypt extends from the end of February to the end of May (GOODMAN & MEININGER 1989). Bearing in mind that there is only one record with an exceptionally high number of birds in February, the migration peak can be located in May. In North Yemen, the migration peak is also in April, but surprisingly there are no May records (BROOKS et al. 1987). For Oman, GALLAGHER & WOODCOCK (1980)

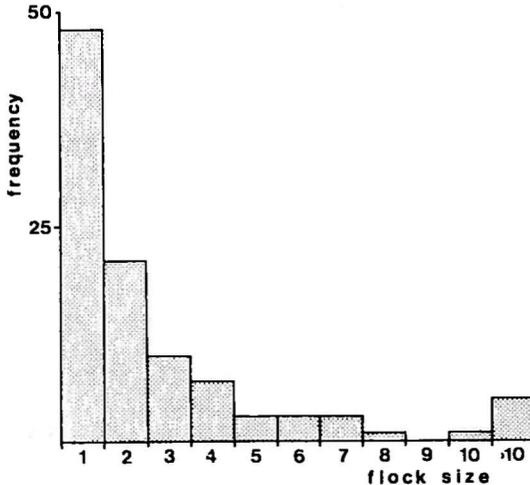


Fig. 2. Flock size of the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) in Turkey.

noted an early return passage from February to April, but ROGERS (1988) defined the period of spring migration on Masirah Island as from March to late April. For the Arabian Gulf States, most Whimbrels on spring migration are seen in April (BUNDY & WARR 1980, RICHARDSON & CHAPMAN 1988). The differences between the countries are thus slight and do not allow any definitive conclusions to be drawn. Although April is the peak migration season in all these countries, there is still considerable passage in the Balkans and the East Mediterranean countries in May, whereas this is not the case on the Arabian peninsula.

The autumn migration in Turkey extends from July to the end of October, with a median on August 29th. The migration peak in Bulgaria is August (UHLIG 1990),

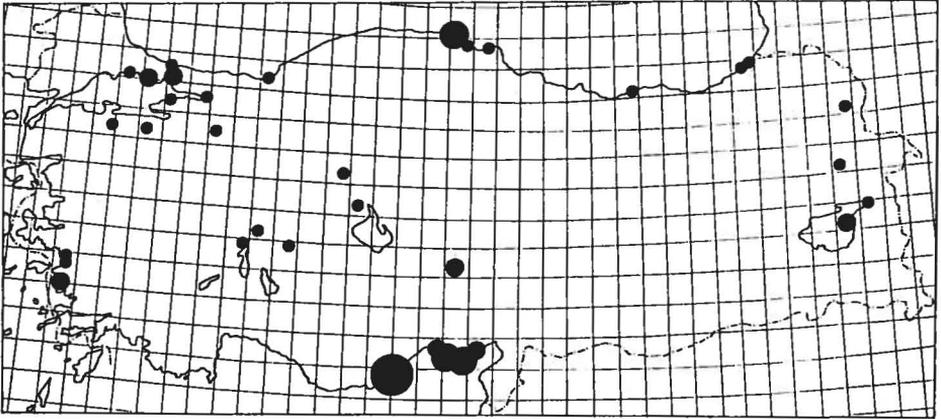


Fig. 3. Distribution of all observations of the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) in Turkey. The size of the dots indicate the number of records: they were grouped into classes of 1, 2-3, 4-10 and >10 records.

but is in September on Cyprus (FLINT & STEWART 1983). PAZ (1987) gave the migration period in Israel from mid-August to late September and GOODMAN & MEININGER (1989) in Egypt from early August to mid-November, but mostly late November. On the south-west coast of the Arabian peninsula, Whimbrels seem to be absent until September (STAGG 1985), and the maximum numbers in North Yemen are reached in October (BROOKS et al. 1987). In Oman, passage is noted from August to November, with large flocks particularly in September (GALLAGHER & WOODCOCK 1986). On Masirah Island, migration extends from mid-July to December according to ROGERS (1988), and migration in the Arabian Gulf States takes place particularly from August to September (BUNDY & WARR 1980). RICHARDSON & CHAPMAN (1988) gave July to November for Dubai. This suggests that birds pass through the Arabian peninsula earlier than through the East Mediterranean countries. However, the data are still too incomplete for final conclusions.

The migration peaks are thus more or less the same for the whole Middle East: April in spring and August/September in autumn. Regional differences may exist, but cannot be clearly demonstrated with the available data. In particular, migration in the Eastern Arabian peninsula seems to be earlier in spring and later in autumn than in the East Mediterranean countries, but there is too little data for any definitive statements.

In Turkey, flocks with more than 10 individuals were seen four times: in March, September and November, i.e. in early spring and late autumn, and not at the migration peak. In Egypt too, the maximum count (27 birds) was not during migration but on February 29th, which is at the very beginning of the return passage (GOODMAN & MEININGER 1989). It is therefore suggested that the Whimbrel forms flocks towards the end of the migration season which remain together in the winter quarters. They break up at the beginning of the spring migration.

KRÜPER & HARTLAUB (1875) described the occurrence in the İzmir area as "only in winter; migrates to the north in April". As there is only one winter record in recent years, it cannot be ruled out that KRÜPER confused the Whimbrel with the Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*) which was common in those days (see discussion in UHLIG 1990).

The spatial distribution of Whimbrel records in Turkey indicates that the country is crossed along a broad front. The Black Sea is crossed as well as the high East Anatolian mountain chains. Coasts seem not to provide guiding-lines (Leitlinie) for migration. Coastal habitats only provide suitable feeding sites and Whimbrels are therefore seen here more often than on the shores of inland lakes.

The number of migrants is low in most Middle Eastern countries: Maximum counts are 12 in Bulgaria, 40 in Turkey, 6 on Cyprus, 12 in Israel and 20 in Bahrain (FLINT & STEWART 1983, NIGHTINGALE & OVERY 1987, PAZ 1987, UHLIG 1990). By contrast, there are maximum counts of 240 in North Yemen (BROOKS et al. 1987) and flocks larger than 600 in Oman (ROGERS 1988). It is not known whether these large flocks indicate the passage of different populations with different migration routes or whether this reflects a different behaviour because they are so close to their winter quarters.

The fact that 65% of all the Whimbrels observed in Turkey were seen mainly in two areas on the south coast is crucial for conservation strategies: The protection of the Göksu delta and the Çukurova, the main feeding sites, must be given the highest priority.

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