

Notes on some summer birds of Syria

by Wolfgang Baumgart and Max Kasperek

Abstract: Ornithological observations in Syria in June 1991 included several interesting breeding records and breeding season records, e.g. of Honey Buzzard, *Pernis apivorus*, Lesser Sand Plover, *Charadrius leschenaultii*, Little Swift, *Apus affinis*, Pied Wheatear, *Oenanthe pleschanka*, Upcher's Warbler, *Hippolais languida*, and Syrian Serin, *Serinus syriacus*. We obtained a record of a possible (extinct?) occurrence of the Lappet-faced Vulture, *Torgos tracheliotus*, in Syria.

Kurzfassung: Ornithologische Beobachtungen in der Brutzeit 1991 erbrachten eine Reihe interessanter Brutnachweise bzw. Brutzeitbeobachtungen, so vom Wespenbussard, *Pernis apivorus*, Wüstenregenpfeifer, *Charadrius leschenaultii*, Haussegler, *Apus affinis*, Nonnensteinschmätzer, *Oenanthe pleschanka*, Dornspötter, *Hippolais languida*, und Zederngärtelz., *Serinus syriacus*. Wir erhielten einen Hinweis auf ein mögliches (erloschene?) Vorkommen des Ohrentreibers, *Torgos tracheliotus*, in Syrien.

Key words: Syria, Middle East, breeding season, distribution.

Introduction

In ornithological respects, Syria is still one of the least known countries of the Middle East. Our knowledge of Syrian birds up to the mid-1960's has been summarized by KUMERLOEVE (1967-69 and 1972). A relatively small number of papers has been published subsequently. The most important ones are by KATTINGER (1970) who reported the results of a trip in 1964, MACFARLANE (1978) who spent three years in Syria and the Lebanon (1974-1977), KINZELBACH (1986a, 1986b) who recorded a few species new to the Syrian avifauna, and finally BAUMGART & STEPHAN (1986-87) who published the observations of one of the present authors (W.B.) who lived in Syria for over 3 years (1980-83).

In June 1991 we carried out a sea turtle survey in Syria on behalf of MEDASSET (Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles). The aim was to identify possible nesting beaches on the Mediterranean coast between the Turkish and Lebanese borders and to make recommendations for their conservation (KASPAREK & BAUMGART 1991, 1992). During this survey numerous ornithological observations were also made, a selection of which is published here.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

The Little Grebe was termed a breeding species by KUMERLOEVE (1967), but actual breeding records seem to be very rare. Apparently only MACFARLANE (1978) produced authentic records: he observed pairs with young at Shumaytiyah on the Euphrates River in 1975 and 1976. Breeding season records are also available from other places on the River Euphrates (MACFARLANE 1978) and from the Ghouta of Damascus (BAUMGART & STEPHAN 1986).

We can add another breeding record: on 23.6.1991, some 20 individuals were

present at a small lake in the mountains south-east of Ras el-Basit. The lake was some 25 ha large, with some reed beds and much submerged vegetation. Some of the Little Grebes were young (first-year birds) and some of them were still being fed by their parents. This shows that the breeding range of the Little Grebe includes north-west Syria.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

MISONNE (1956) included the Little Egret in the list of breeding birds of Tell Abyad on the Turkish-Syrian frontier. However, this was probably done merely on the basis of breeding season records rather than confirmed breeding. Other breeding season records are available from Lake Jabbul near Aleppo (HOLLOW 1959) and from Lake Assad (MACFARLANE 1978), and we can add another one: we observed 5 individuals together on the shores of the Lake of Homs on 26.9.1991. There were only small reedy fringes around the lake, and no evidence of breeding could be found.

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

The Honey Buzzard is known to pass over Syria regularly whilst on migration. We observed a bird in a forest area in the mountains near Kassab on the Turkish frontier on 24.6.1991. It was observed at the same locality over a period of several hours. It may have been an extremely late migrant or a bird which was over-summering, but breeding cannot be ruled out. The settled activity of the bird may point in this direction.

Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*

The Lappet-faced Vulture appears never to have been recorded in Syria. It was not mentioned by KUMERLOEVE (1968) nor by any later publications.

We saw two stuffed birds in the collection of the archaeological museum at Palmyra (Tadmor). The specimens were rather old, and they may even stem from the early days of the museum which was founded during the French colonial period (1920-1942). We could find no reliable information on the origin of these birds, but the museum staff insisted that all the birds were collected in the surroundings of Palmyra. We believe that this is true and take it as strong evidence for the former occurrence of the Lappet-faced Vulture in the Syrian deserts. Another specimen of the Lappet-faced Vulture is exhibited in the collection of the Ministry of Agriculture at Damascus. According to its label, it was collected east of Damascus in 1968 (R. KINZELBACH).

Large, black vultures have previously been reported around Palmyra by local people. BAUMGART & STEPIAN (1986) took these reports to refer to the Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*). However, in the light of these museum specimens, it may be that these observations refer to the Lappet-faced Vulture rather than to the Black Vulture.

The Negev population of the Lappet-faced Vulture belongs to the recently described subspecies *negevensis* Bruun, Mendelsohn & Bull, 1981. This subspecies has virtually no lappets, greyish-brown head with pink nape and brown tights (BRUUN 1981). In fact, it closely resembles the Black Vulture, and this seems to be the reason why the two Palmyra museum birds were not recorded earlier by bird-watchers who visited the museum. As the Negev population was only discovered in 1945 (BRUUN 1981) and the existence of a population of the Lappet-faced Vulture in Saudi Arabia was only recently fully understood (cf. The Phoenix 7, 1990: 9), a survey of the Syrian desert should be a high priority.

Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

KUMERLOEVE (1968) thought that this was a breeding species in northern Syria and BAUMGART & STEPHAN (1986) provided further evidence of this with breeding season records near Ras el-Basit. We again saw an individual in the southern Amanus mountains above Ras el-Basit on 24.6.1991. Being once more well into the breeding season, it gives further indication of a regular occurrence in north-western Syria.

Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonorae*

KUMERLOEVE (1968), MACFARLANE (1978) and others did not list this species. BAUMGART observed several individuals at Ras el-Basit in May and June 1980, 1981 and 1982. We also saw 3 individuals at almost the same locality on 23.6.1991, and two more in the mountains above Ras el-Basit, near Kassab on the Turkish border, on the following day. These observations match well with those on the Turkish Mediterranean coast, where non-breeders are regularly observed, particularly in May and June (KASPAREK & RISTOW 1986).

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

The Greater Sand Plover apparently breeds in Inner Syria, where several records including displaying pairs etc. have been published. (KUMERLOEVE 1967, MACFARLANE 1978). We observed two birds on the sea shore just to the south of Latakia on 22.6.1991. As sandy beaches are not the breeding habitat of this species, we presume that they were migrants.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*

BAUMGART proved that this species was breeding on a small island off Ras el-Basit near the Turkish border (BAUMGART & STEPHAN 1986). This seems to be the only breeding site in Syria. We checked this island on 23.6.1991. The Yellow-legged Gulls were still present, and we counted 32 adults and 6 young on 23.6.1991. The young were full-grown, but some were not yet able to fly.

During our sea turtle survey, we visited all the beaches on the Mediterranean

coast of Syria. Apart from Ras el-Basit, we only once noted a Yellow-legged Gull: one south of Latakia on 22.6.1991. There is no possibility that other still undiscovered breeding colonies exist on the coast.

Little Swift *Apus affinis*

The status of the Little Swift in Syria is still unclear. The number of records is small, mostly from the migration periods and even from winter. BAUMGART recorded the Little Swift only twice during his 3-year stay in Syria (BAUMGART & STEPIAN 1986) and MACFARLANE (1978) suggested that the Little Swift might breed in Syria although he too never observed it during the breeding season.

We observed two birds at Kassab near the Turkish border in north-west Syria on 24.6.1991. There were the concrete shells of several houses, but no construction activity had taken place for a couple of years. We observed Little Swifts repeatedly flying under the roofs of these houses. Although we did not find any nests, they were undoubtedly breeding there.

KUMERLOEVE (1968) recorded a museum specimen which was collected at Kassab on 25.6.1881 by TRISTRAM. This is apparently the only previous breeding season record, at exactly the same location and exactly 100 years ago! This not only confirms TRISTRAM's record, but also contradicts suggestions about range extinctions in Syria and Turkey (cf. MACFARLANE 1978).

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

The status of the Pied Wheatear in Syria is uncertain. Most records are from the spring passage in March and April (KUMERLOEVE 1969, MACFARLANE 1978). We observed a male at the phosphorous mine of Salchit, on the route from Palmyra to Damascus on 26.6.1991, and found another male there as traffic victim. Photographs were taken of the dead individual. The presence of two adult males in possible breeding habitats well into the breeding season strongly suggests that breeding takes place. Breeding in Syria is of particular interest as it forms a link with the Cyprus Pied Wheatear (*Oenanthe cypriaca*), which until recently was regarded as conspecific. The more or less closed breeding ranges of the Pied Wheatear extend into eastern Anatolia, with only a few breeding localities further west (cf. e.g. KUMERLOEVE 1975; the map in HOLLOM et al. 1988 shows a much too small distribution area).

Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*

MEINERTZHAGEN (1935) obtained a specimen with much enlarged testes at Suweida at Jebel al-Arab (Jebel Druze) southeast of Damascus on 25.4.1933, and an egg collector stated that Upcher's Warblers occur in northern Syria (KUMERLOEVE 1969). Unfortunately, no details of the location or season for the latter statement are available. The only modern record is by MACFARLANE (1978). He saw and heard one singing at Abu Zad, Bludan, to the west of Damascus on 26.6.1976.

We can now record the species very close to MACFARLANE's locality: at Halbun

in the mountains west of Damascus on 28.6.1991. It was rather common there and our observations included several family groups. This represents the first breeding record for Syria.

Hippolais Warblers in the gardens above Halbun (1980-83), which were attributed to the Olivaceous Warbler (*Hippolais pallida*) (BAUMGART & STEPHAN 1987), probably also refer to Upcher's Warbler.

TRISTRAM (1864) described the species as new to science from "the dry oak-copse and vineyards of the slopes of Lebanon and Hermon". In a later paper (TRISTRAM 1867), he noted that this species is "very abundant in its restricted localities". In another context (p. 90), he described a locality where he found a nest of Upcher's Warbler. It was 3 miles above Rachaya ("Rasheiya"), and is now situated in the Lebanon. So we cannot exclude the possibility that TRISTRAM never recorded Upcher's Warbler within the borders of modern Syria.

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

MEINERTZHAGEN (1935) found Red-backed Shrikes in Syria in spring, up to the beginning of May (the latest in the Anti-Lebanon on May 3rd), but did not find any evidence of breeding. The recovery of a bird ringed in Siberia to the north of Latakia on 2.5.1935 (KUMERLOEVE 1969) demonstrates that migration actually lasts into May. The May records by MACFARLANE (1978) at Palmyra, Russafa, between Tabqa and Aleppo, at Damascus, Qariyatayn and Wadi el Karu may therefore refer to late migrants.

The observation of a pair on 28.6.1991 at the same place near Halbun (1700 m above sea level) where BAUMGART & STEPHAN (1987) had already found a pair on 24.6.1983 provides strong evidence that it was breeding there. The only other indication of breeding in Syria was of two males defending territories near Kassab on 6.6.1981 (BAUMGART & STEPHAN 1987).

The Red-backed Shrike is known as a rare breeder in Upper Galilee and the Golan, sometimes also on Carmel, but is a fairly common breeder on Hermon up to 1500 m above sea level (HOVEL 1987, PAZ 1987). It thus appears that this population is not isolated from the main breeding area, but that the two are linked by populations in the Anti-Lebanon and the Alawite mountains.

Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus*

Although the Syrian Serin bears the name of the country, its status here has long been unknown and there are still only a few records available. Breeding was discovered by MACFARLANE (1978) in 1976, when he observed several family groups at Qatana and a pair which behaved as if breeding near Jdeideh (Syrian frontier post on the road Damascus - Beirut). BAUMGART & STEPHAN (1987) reported the Syrian Serin from Halbun to the west of Damascus on several occasions in the breeding season 1983. We can now confirm breeding at that site: on 28.6.1991, we observed two individuals several times; they were defending territory; once, they were seen carrying food. Unfortunately, the nest was not found.

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Apart from a few records of the Rock Bunting during winter, there are only two breeding season records near Ras el-Basit and at Slenfe in the Alawite Mountains (BAUMGART & STEPHAN 1987). We can now confirm its occurrence in the region of Ras el-Basit: we observed two individuals on a steep slope in a possible breeding habitat in the mountains near Kassab on 24.6.1991. Although not confirmed, breeding undoubtedly takes place in Syria, and this record forms a link between the populations in Turkey and the Lebanon and Israel (see map e.g. in HOLLOM et al. 1988).

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