

Syria - Birds & Archaeology

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 -21 April 2010



Report compiled by Chris Kehoe

Images of the Roman ruins at Palmyra by kind courtesy of Dave Riley



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Day 1

Saturday 10th April

Outbound to Damascus

Everyone caught a late afternoon flight with BMI from London Heathrow to Damascus. Although we left half an hour late we arrived a little ahead of schedule at 23.00 (local), cleared immigration quickly and soon collected our bags. Adib and Houssan met us in the arrivals area where we changed money before jumping on the bus for the 30 minute drive to the Fardos Tower Hotel. Check-in was swift and we were soon heading to bed in anticipation of an early start.

Day 2

Sunday 11th April

En route to Palmyra; Talila Reserve

Weather: initially sunny and warm but increasingly murky as the day progressed as high cloud and atmospheric dust blotted out the sun, breezy at times

After breakfast at 06.00 we loaded up the bus as Pallid Swifts screamed overhead and set off east out of Damascus at 07.00. It took about an hour to completely clear the city sprawl but 30 minutes later we stopped to have a look for migrants at a roadside oasis where several Chiffchaffs and a few other bits and pieces were in the trees along with a Black-crowned Night Heron as Steppe Buzzards began to ascend on the first thermals. We stopped again soon afterwards to view Temminck's Larks and a couple of Isabelline Wheatears at the roadside before arriving at Baghdad Cafe 66 (not far from the turn off to Baghdad!) where a 30 minute comfort stop allowed time for hot drinks and to view raptors overhead that included several Steppe Buzzards, a Long-legged Buzzard and a Short-toed Eagle. Next stop was at an area of cultivation southwest of Palmyra where a couple of European Rollers were seen and migrant raptors passing through included several Montagu's Harriers.

We ate our picnic lunch in a nearby bedouin tent before moving on and skirting the southern edge of Palmyra en route to Talila Reserve. Very flat desert with scattered tussocky vegetation along the road to Talila provided us with fine views of a couple of Greater Hoopoe Larks while the trees and shrubs at the entrance to the reserve held several migrants including a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, a couple of Common Nightingales and a Pied Flycatcher amongst various commoner warblers and other migrants. We reached our hotel, the Tetracylon, in Palmyra soon after 17.30 and had time to shower and change and complete the day's checklist before walking the short distance to a restaurant where we had a fine meal of salads and kebabs.

Day 3

Monday 12th April

Palmyra area

Weather: dry, sunny and warm after a chilly start, breezy at times, especially in the evening

At 07.00 most of the group set off for a morning's birding nearby, a few deciding instead to have an extended visit to the archaeological sites a short walk from our hotel. By 07.20 we arrived at Palmyra Citadel where a fine male Mourning Wheatear gave good views below the car park. After a little while we began to detect other birds on the stony slope below us with Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Ortolan Buntings and a flighty Pale Rock Sparrow or two the highlights; we also enjoyed panoramic views of the impressively huge archaeological sites we'd be visiting later.

Heading north we arrived at the dam at Sed Wadi Abied after about 20 minutes. A small selection of waders, a White-winged Tern and a few migrating raptors were seen from the dam end before we drove to the north end, via good views of an Egyptian Vulture, where many more birds were congregated on the open mud there; numerous Garganey, Marsh Sandpipers and others were present and periodic appearances by birds of prey, including several Lesser Kestrels and a Golden Eagle, kept us well occupied. The fact that the Bald Ibises were not feeding here, and that the current nest site is not accessible to larger vehicles left us with a bit of a dilemma. A slow drive north took us through some occasional feeding areas but no ibises were present, though we did see families of Temminck's Larks and both Desert and Isabelline Wheatears before reaching our lunch stop amongst the pistachio trees of a small bedouin encampment where a Ruppell's Warbler was watched as our picnic was prepared. A rather speedier journey after lunch took us back to Palmyra where ample time was then available to explore The Temple of Baal and the spectacular Roman ruins. A final quick visit to the citadel produced the hoped-for Trumpeter Finches, despite the blustery conditions, and also a stunning male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush as we returned towards the bus.

Day 4

Tuesday 13th April

Palmyra area; Deir-ez-Zor

Weather: dry, still, sunny and warm/ hot, a little humid at Deir Ez Zor

Having secured the use of two 4x4 vehicles at 07.15 we arrived at the watchpoint below the Bald Ibis breeding site 30 minutes later.. The single incubating bird was located in the scopes and for 20 minutes or more we took turns peering at the tiny image of a blackish shape with a pinkish red head. Not ideal but better than nothing. Shortly before we were about to leave the other two birds flew in and gave rather more satisfying scope views on the cliff before performing an extended fly-past which revealed all their tell-tale features nicely.

A quick look at Sed Wadi Abied revealed a couple of Pied Avocets but nothing else new and by 11.00 we were back at the hotel with an hour to spare for some final packing. Lunch was at a large establishment on the outskirts of town before we made our way eastwards towards Deir- Ez Zor in the Euphrates Valley. Much of the route was marked by rather featureless, arid desert but a leg stretch in a greener area produced an unexpected Bluethroat and good numbers of Steppe Buzzards. We reached Deir Ez Zor by 16.00 and had a little time to settle into the Ziad Hotel before making a 90 minute visit to the river at the famous suspension bridge. This is a place noted for Iraq Babblers but we managed only a couple of distant flight views; however, ample compensation came in the shape of several Little Bitterns, a couple of Red-footed Falcons and, fleetingly, a small group of Dead Sea Sparrows amongst the numerous Spanish Sparrows that gathered to roost in the reeds. Dinner was at a restaurant on the river bank.

Day 5

Wednesday 14th April

Deir-ez-Zor; Mhemideh

Weather: Dry, sunny and eventually rather hot, a little breezy at times

A 30 minute drive took us onto the north bank of the river (historically Mesopotamia) and west to Mhemideh, an area of shallow water and reed beds associated with an oxbow lake. Positioning ourselves on the causeway separating the two major water bodies we were soon inundated with new birds; Ferruginous and Marbled Ducks were found almost immediately, a White-tailed Plover flew past in display flight, a couple of Glossy Ibises dropped in as Purple Swamphens potted about amongst a good selection of waders that included our first Spotted Redshank and Kentish Plovers. More careful scrutiny revealed a slumbering Spoonbill and a couple of furtive, and somewhat distant, White-headed Ducks.

Returning towards the road we spent a few minutes searching along the reed edge and were quickly rewarded with some excellent views of Iraq Babblers. Shallow wetlands near the road gave splendid views of many 'Black-headed' Yellow Wagtails and our first Great Egrets. After a rather warm morning we took a few minutes to freshen up at the hotel before setting off to a nearby eatery. Although initially unprepossessing, the small establishment served up a sumptuous feast. There were no takers for the optional excursion to Dura Europos so the afternoon was either spent exploring Deir Ez Zor or on a return to Mhemideh where we enjoyed good views of a similar cast of birds with Little Bittern and Purple Heron thrown in. Dinner was in a restaurant on the opposite side of the river.

Day 6

Thursday 15th April

en route to Aleppo via Halabbiyah

Weather: dry, sunny and hot, still

At 07.00 we set off on the long journey to Aleppo. First stop was after an hour or so at the ruined riverside fort of Halabbiyah. While some explored the ruins others strolled up an adjacent Wadi where a Ruppell's Fox was a surprise find and showed very well for a short while and a Long-legged Buzzard was briefly overhead. Moving on we arrived at an area of roadside cliffs 20 minutes later and disembarked to enjoy 40 minutes viewing a very obliging Lesser Kestrel colony that was in full swing with courtship feeding, mating and plenty of noise. Also here were a pair of Little Owls and a couple of showy European Rollers.

Continuing our journey we reached the bustling town of Al Raqqa soon after noon and Adib guided us into another eatery that served up another huge and tasty lunch. By 16.00 we were checking in at the Mirage Hotel in Aleppo, in time for some to have a look around the souk before dinner. At Aleppo we became aware via TV of the travel chaos across Europe as a result of a volcanic ash cloud from Iceland closing most of Europe's airspace. All British airports were closed for the foreseeable future...though surely not for a whole week....

Day 7

Friday 16th April

Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Weather: dry, mainly overcast, warm, still, a light shower in Aleppo in the evening

Sabkhat al-Jabbul (Jabbul Lake) has a reputation as the finest wetland area in Syria, if not the Middle East. The journey there took about an hour and we were greeted on arrival at 07.30 by the self-appointed warden who unlocked the gate, where a Eurasian Stone-curlew was on view, and joined us birding along the causeway. Plenty of waders and terns were on display as we arrived but a handful of Dead Sea Sparrows in the reeds held our initial attention. Lots of White-winged Terns and a few Caspians were about with plenty of Slender-billed Gulls and good numbers of Ruff and other waders, an Osprey flew over and White-headed Ducks came and went past openings in the reeds.

Moving on to an area further along the causeway we found several Whiskered Terns and the reeds gave up excellent views of several more Dead Sea Sparrows, Bearded Tits, Great Reed and Savi's Warblers and others as migrant Red-backed Shrikes, Black Redstarts and a few Wheatears flitted about. A group of six Marbled Ducks then showed very well close to the bus before we made our way along the north shore of the lake. Shallow lagoons here held an excellent collection of terns, including many Gull-billed, and waders with particular highlights being two Black-winged Pratincoles and up to 50 of their Collared cousins. We ate our picnic lunch on an area of raised ground which gave a commanding view over the vast wetland before us as a singing Savi's Warbler gave repeated scope views. The afternoon was free to explore Aleppo...or to monitor the ongoing flight ban.

Day 8

Saturday 17th April

Dead Cities; en route to Slenfe

Weather: Dry, sunny, warm/hot

A bit of a lie-in saw us depart from Aleppo at 08.00 and an hour later we arrived at Senjelleh, the first of two 'Dead Cities' visited this morning. As well as the well preserved ruins here were Rock Sparrows, Ortolan Buntings and others during a pleasant 45 minute stop. A short distance away was Al Barra, a 'dead city' of quite different character, being surrounded, and encroached upon, by Olive groves. A splendid White-throated Robin was the highlight here and gave cracking views as it sang from the ruins. After taking an alternative route due to road works we eventually found an eating place in a nearby town and enjoyed another fine lunch. Pressing on, the road soon began to climb into the hills as we headed towards Slenfeh and our base for the next two nights. Short stops along the upslope revealed a brief Rock Bunting and some commoner fare we had not encountered so far such as singing Blackbirds and several Chaffinches. Beyond the town of Slenfeh we reached our hotel overlooking Saladdin's Castle across a small valley at 16.30.

Some casual birding before dinner in a nearby restaurant produced a couple of Spectacled Bulbuls and a large flock of migrating White Storks as Graceful Prinias sang their buzzy song. No change in the fight ban according to TV news.

Day 9

Sunday 18th April

Slenfeh area; Qalaat Saladin

Weather: dry, sunny and warm

Pre-breakfast birding near the hotel was quite productive with a superb Masked Shrike the pick of the bunch. After breakfast we boarded the bus at 08.00 and travelled back towards Slenfeh before taking a quiet side road into an attractive wooded valley. A two hour stroll along the road here produced repeated good views of Ruppell's Warblers, a couple of the many singing Common Nightingales posed for the scope and a couple of Rock Buntings were seen briefly. As the air began to warm up a small group of Lesser Spotted Eagles moved north across the valley. Lunch was at a restaurant perched on the edge of cliff overlooking the vast Homa Valley far below. After an hour to rest at the hotel we boarded two minibuses for the short but winding drive to Qalaat Saladin (Saladdin's Castle). Birding along the road above the castle produced a Golden Oriole and a Wood Warbler amongst others while those who explored the castle all agreed that it far exceeded expectations and even held a couple of good birds in the shape of Western Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush. Back at the hotel a spectacular flight of White Storks held about 1,500 individuals, many of which passed right overhead as we sipped tea and coffee. Europe still closed to air traffic!

Day 10

Monday 19th April

en route to Damascus c300km (via Krak des Chevaliers c100km)

Weather: dry, sunny and warm/hot

Our return journey to Damascus commenced at 08.00. by 08.30 we were close to the Mediterranean coast and sped south along the coastal highway as a small group of White Storks headed the opposite way. Soon after 10.00 we arrived at the imposing crusader castle of Krak des Chevelier where 90 minutes was allotted to a bit of exploring. Lunch was at a roadside eatery near Homs before we continued our journey and arrived back at the Fardos Tower Hotel in central Damascus at 16.00 which gave the opportunity to have a look around before dinner.

Day 11

Tuesday 20th April

Bloudan

Weather: dry, sunny and warm

At 07.00 we set off west towards the Lebanese border and arrived at Olive groves above the town of Bloudan an hour later. A 90 minute search of the area for Syrian Serins proved fruitless but we did manage views of a Syrian Woodpecker, a few Red-backed Shrikes, Red-rumped Swallows and others. Moving on we intended to explore a scrubby valley near the Lebanise border but due to maintenance work at a dam there we were turned away by the authorities.

After a period of rather aimless driving around we eventually found a site for a picnic lunch where Jays of the characteristic local race showed well. Back in Damascus, the afternoon was free for further exploration and word came through later in the evening that the flight ban seemed likely to be lifted, though whether or not there was actually going to be a plane available to take us home was far from clear...

Day 12

Wednesday 21st April

Stuck in Damascus

Weather: dry, sunny and warm

A quick jaunt to the airport confirmed that our flight home had been cancelled due to the lack of an aircraft, it hadn't had a chance to get there from London yet though British airspace was now open. As a consequence we were now part of the backlog of 1000+ BMI customers stuck in Damascus. Re-booking of tickets revealed new departure dates of 2nd, 3rd and 4th May! Of course the situation was fluid and with UK airspace now open the possibility of additional aircraft becoming available in the future was our best hope of reducing the length of our extended stay. Various options were discussed, some explored flights with other carriers while others took advantage of the time and had a further look about the city. Checking the BMI website in the evening showed that two flights had left the UK for Damascus...the game was afoot...

Day 12+1

Thursday 22nd April

Escape from Damascus

While waiting for the BMI office to open word came through from our ground agents, that a second flight had definitely arrived from London and would probably be departing today at 19.00. When they opened at 09.00 the staff in the BMI office were themselves unaware that an evening flight was leaving but after confirming such with the airport, and finding out how many passengers it could carry, the rather busy process of securing seats for the group soon began. By 13.00 we were all finally ticketed to depart. The flight to London carried about 200 of the 1,000 or more trapped passengers on a plane that had only previously plied the Glasgow to London route. After a brief refuelling stop in Vienna we touched down at Heathrow at about 00.30 on 23rd April, and said our goodbyes after a rather interesting couple of days. The cabin crew looked happiest of all to be back home, they had arrived in Damascus for a 10 hour stay but had ended up there for nearly 10 days; we were lucky indeed to be home just 36 hours behind schedule...

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Systematic Lists

BIRDS:

Taxonomy, nomenclature and order follow the International Ornithological Congress's world list v2.4 available on line via <http://www.worldbirdnames.org/names.html>

Subspecies generally follow the Handbook of the Birds of the World (Lynx Edicions) series

n/1 = not seen by tour leader or guides

l/o = only seen by tour leader or guides, these species and any that were heard only or not seen well enough to establish identification beyond doubt are placed in square brackets.

The following codes are used to indicate species of conservation concern according to Birdlife International/IUCN

CR = critically endangered

EN = endangered

VU = vulnerable

NT = near-threatened

GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

Chukar Partridge *Alectoris chukar cypristes / sinaica*

One was at Saladdin's Castle (n\l)

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

A single female was at Sed Wadi Abied

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Up to 50 were at Sed Wadi Abied with smaller numbers at Mhemideh and Jabbul Lake

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

A handful were at Sed Wadi Abied and Jabbul Lake

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

About 80 at Sed Wadi Abied were followed by 10 or so at Mhemideh and Jabbul Lake

Eurasian Teal *Anas c. crecca*

A handful were at Sed Wadi Abied

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* VU

About eight were at Mhemideh with another 10 or so at Jabbul Lake where they gave some excellent views. An odd and unique species, sometimes, along with the next species, considered to be a link between dabbling ducks *Anas* and pochards *Aythya*. Birdlife International estimate that over 50% of the global breeding habitat (shallow seasonal wetlands between Spain and China) of this species was destroyed or degraded during the 20 century.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

A couple at Mhemidehe were followed by about 30 at Jabbul Lake

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

A single male was at Mhemideh

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* NT

At least 20 at Mhemideh were followed by 30 or more at Jabbul Lake

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

A Male was at Mhemideh

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* EN

Two or three rather distant birds were at Mhemideh but about eight at Jabbul Lake gave some rather better views. Habitat requirements are much as for those of Marbled Duck but the population decline this species has been even more marked (though with some signs of recent stabilisation in some areas such as Spain).

PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus r. ruficollis*

After the first at Sed Wadi Abied we came across variable numbers at all wetlands visited but no large concentrations; recorded on four dates

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps c. cristatus*

Common at Jabbul Lake after a couple of earlier birds at Mhemideh where at least one pair were nesting

PHOENICOPTERIFORMES: Phoenicopteridae

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

About 30 birds showed very distantly at Jabbul Lake and a singleton there later on showed reasonably well in the scope during our picnic lunch

CICONIIFORMES: Ciconiidae

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

After a couple of singles earlier in the tour, groups of 2-300 and about 1500 were seen from Saladdin's Castle Hotel during our two evenings there; another flock of 30 or so were seen from the moving bus as we travelled towards Krak des Chevalier

PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae

Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* CR

All three of the remaining individuals from the eastern population were seen at the nest site north of Sed Wadi

Abied; one gave rather poor and distant views as it sat on its nest but the other two, after a brief visit to the cliffs, performed a fly-by just before we left. There is some limited evidence of a genetic divergence from Moroccan birds in the eastern population which further emphasises the need for conservation action; the introduction of birds from the semi-captive population in Turkey would seem to offer the best hope but the situation is currently perilous.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Two at Mhemideh were followed by another at Jabbul Lake

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea l. leucorodia*

A singleton at Mhemideh occasionally woke up to reveal its true character

PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus m. minutus*

Three gave some great views from the suspension bridge at Deir ez Zor with further singles at Mhemideh and Jabbul Lake

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax n. nycticorax*

One was in an oasis between Damascus and Palmyra

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus i. ibis*

One near our picnic stop at Jabbul Lake was the only record

Grey Heron *Ardea c. cinerea*

Small numbers were at various wetland areas in three dates

Purple Heron *Ardea p. purpurea*

A couple at Mhemideh were followed by a few more at Jabbul Lake

Western Great Egret *Ardea a. alba*

At least 50 were at Jabbul Lake after three or four earlier birds at Mhemideh

Little Egret *Egretta g. garzetta*

Small numbers were at most wetlands visited with a few migrants seen moving north over the desert near Palmyra, recorded on five dates

PELECANIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*

Singles were seen near Al Raqqa and at Jabbul Lake

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Singles were seen twice at and near Sed Wadi Abied with others at Der Ez Sor and Jabbul Lake

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae

Black Kite *Milvus m. migrans*

Fairly conspicuous around Palmyra where about 50 were recorded, up to 100 were at Der Ez Zor on the evening of our arrival and several were seen moving up the Euphrates Valley the next day

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron p. percnopterus* EN

Singles were seen on three occasions near Sed Wadi Abied

Griffon Vulture *Gyps f. fulvus*

One, perhaps a migrant, was seen over the viewpoint cafe above Slenfeh; a rather rare bird in Syria

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

One gave some good views at Baghdad Cafe 66 and two more singles were noted near Palmyra

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus a. aeruginosus*

Several migrants were seen moving north near Palmyra and all wetlands held several birds, recorded on six dates with about 40 birds in total

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*

Most of the 15 or so seen were migrants moving north during our first dull day; a number of other small harriers were seen, some of which may have been Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* but none were unequivocally that species

Levant Sparrowhawk *Accipiter brevipes*

A singleton over Palmyra one morning was the only record

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter n. nisus*

Singles were seen on six occasions from Palmyra to the Euphrates Valley

Common Buzzard *Buteo b. buteo* / *vulpinus*

Prominent at and around Palmyra where migrants were seen daily in variable numbers (minimum 10, maximum 100); most, and probably all, were presumably of the much more migratory eastern race *vulpinus* which is colloquially known as Steppe Buzzard

Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo r. rufinus*

A juvenile was over Baghdad Cafe 66 and an adult was above Halabbiyah

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

One at Sed Wadi Abied was rather brief and distant but a dozen or more northbound migrants near Slenfeh gave reasonable views

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis orientalis*

An immature was seen from the bus south of Palmyra but had continued on its way by the time we disembarked

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos homeyeri*

A sub-adult was seen at Sed Wadi Abied

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

Singles were seen on two dates near Palmyra

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* VU

Small numbers were seen around crags at and near Sed Wadi Abied and an active colony near Halabbiyah held about 20 pairs

Common Kestrel *Falco t. tinnunculus*

Ones and twos were seen on seven dates at widespread locations

Red-footed Falcon *Falco vespertinus* NT

Two flew over at Deir Ez Zor

[Merlin *Falco columbarius aesalon*]

A probable was seen at Sed Wadi Abied but didn't linger to allow confirmation

GRUIFORMES: Rallidae

[Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*]

Heard but not seen at Jabbul Lake

Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio caspius / seistanicus*

A pair or two at Mhemideh were followed by a handful at Jabbul Lake

Common Moorhen *Gallinula c. chloropus*

Small numbers were at a few wetlands with emergent vegetation

Eurasian Coot *Fulica a. atra*

Common at Jabbul Lake with smaller numbers at Sed Wadi Abied and Mhemide

CHARADRIIFORMES: Burhinidae

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus sabarae*

One was at the salt pans near the start of the causeway at Jabbul Lake

CHARADRIIFORMES: Recurvirostridae

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

All wetlands of any size held several birds, recorded on four dates

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Three were at Sed wadi Abied and about 20 at Jabbul Lake

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae

Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*

Found in reasonable numbers on four dates at all wetlands visited

White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus*

Probably two pairs were in the Mhemideh area and performed several fly-pasts for us

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius curonicus*

Singles were at Sed Wadi Abied and at Mhemideh

Kentish Plover *Charadrius a. alexandrinus*

Two were at Mhemideh with a couple more at Jabbul Lake

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae

Common Snipe *Gallinago g. gallinago*

A couple were present at Mhemideh

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa l. limosa* NT

Four at Sed Wadi Abied were followed by two at Mhemideh and about 20 at Jabbul Lake

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Three were at Mhemideh

Common Redshank *Tringa t. totanus*

Singles were at Sed Wadi Abied and Mhemideh

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*

A couple were at Sed Wadi Abied and 20 or more at Jabbul Lake

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Small numbers were at all wetland sites, recorded on four dates

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Only seen at Sed Wadi Abied where about eight were noted and at Mhemideh where one was seen

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Ones and twos were at Sed Wadi Abied and Mhemideh

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Small numbers were at various wetlands on five dates

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Only seen at Sed Wadi Abied where about 20 were present

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Up to 10 were at Sed Wadi Abied and Mhemideh but several hundred were at Jabbul Lake

CHARADRIIFORMES: Glareolidae

Collared Pratincole *Glareola p. pratincola*

Up to 50 were at Jabbul Lake

Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni* NT

Two at Jabbul Lake gave some excellent views of their diagnostic wing pattern

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*

Common at Jabbul Lake where hundreds were seen

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

A handful were at Jabbul Lake

[Yellow-legged Gull *Larus m. michabellis*]

About 50 immature large gulls at Lake Jabbul appeared to be at least mostly this species but identification of large gulls in the region, especially immatures, is fraught with difficulties

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus heuglini*

At least one adult was seen in the distance near Al Raqqa

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon n. nilotica*

Up to 100 were at Jabbul Lake after an earlier bird at Sed Wadi Abied

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*

About 20 were at Jabbul Lake

Little Tern *Sternula a. albifrons*

A handful were at Sed Wadi Abied and Mhemideh with over 100 at Jabbul Lake

Common Tern *Sterna h. hirundo*

One at Sed Wadi Abied was followed by up to 100 at Jabbul Lake, the latter apparently breeding there

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias b. hybrida*

Up to six were at Mhemideh with several more at Jabbul Lake

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

After a couple of singles earlier in the tour this species was very common at Jabbul Lake where perhaps as many as 1000 were gathered and formed a spectacular sight

Black Tern *Chlidonias n. niger*

At least two were at Jabbul Lake

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Common Pigeon *Columba livia [palaestinae]*

Urban contexts held small numbers of 'Feral Pigeons'; birds at the Bald Ibis breeding cliff showed a consistent appearance that was consistent with wild birds of the region (subspecies *palaestina*) but as Palmyra is only 10km away the chance of a pure genetic line seems slim

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba p. palumbus*

A handful were seen in the Euphrates Valley after the first at Deir Ez Zor

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia t. turtur*

Seven low past at Mhemideh

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia d. decaocto*

Fairly common throughout though the next species was much commoner in urban contexts

Laughing Dove *Stigmatopelia senegalensis*

Common in urban contexts, especially Damascus and Aleppo with a few elsewhere

CUCULIFORMES: Cuculidae

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus c. canorus / subtelephonus*

One was seen south of Palmyra

STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae

Little Owl *Athene noctua indigena*

A pair showed well at the Lesser Kestrel colony near Halabiyya; both were of a dark and brown rather than pale and sandy appearance so were presumably of the form *indigena* rather than *lilith*; the latter is now sometimes split as Desert Little Owl although some authors also include *indigena* and others in that proposed species on the basis of their similar vocalisations

APODIFORMES: Apodida

Common Swift *Apus a. apus* / *pekinensis*

Common at Deir Ez Zor and Aleppo and when we returned to Damascus

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus brehmorum* / *pallidus*

Common in Damascus, the only other definites seen were two over Palmyra, when first in Damascus all or most of the birds seemed to be Pallid but by the time of our return there about 50% were Common

CORACIIFORMES: Coraciidae

European Roller *Coracias g. garrulus* NT

Two were south of Palmyra with a pair at the Lesser Kestrel colony near Halabbiyah

CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinida

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo a. atthis* / *ispida*

One was seen by some at Mhemideh (n/l)

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle r. rudis*

Ones and twos were seen at Deir ez Zor, Mhemideh and Jabbul Lake with a couple more along the Eurphrates Valley as we travelled

BUCEROTIFORMES: Upupidae

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa e. epops*

Recorded on nine dates with up to four per day noted

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx t. torquilla*

One was seen in Deir Ez Zor (n/l)

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus*

Heard near Slenfeh before one gave some distant scope views at Bloudan

PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius c. collurio*

After the first at Talila Reserve we saw six more on four dates

Masked Shrike *Lanius nubicus*

A stunning male performed well during our first pre-breakfast walk near Saladdin's Castle

PASSERIFORMES: Oriolidae

Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

A male flew across the road near Saladdin's Castle

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius atricapillus*

Small numbers were seen regularly after the first near Slenfeh. Subspecies *atricapillus* is a member of a group of similar and distinct races in SW Asia, the *atricapillus* group, which are characterised by their black crowns and pale faces

Eurasian Magpie *Pica p. pica*

Rather common in the Eurphrates Valley but not noted elsewhere

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax docilis*

Groups of up to 10 were seen rather distantly above Sed Wadi Abied

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula soemmerringii*

A few pairs were at the Lesser Kesterl colony near Halabiyya

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix pallescens*

Fairly common and very widespread, seen daily

Northern Raven *Corvus corax laurencei*

Ones and twos were seen in the desert near Palmyra and below Slenfeh. Birds in the desert are sometimes suspected to be Brown-necked Ravens *C. ruficollis* but those heard calling there were certainly Northern

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Coal Tit *Parus a. ater*

One or two were found near Slenfeh

Great Tit *Parus major terraesanctae*

Fairly common in the western hills after the first at the Dead Cities

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes c. caeruleus-x-satunini*

Small numbers were seen in the western hills

PASSERIFORMES: Panuridae

Bearded Reedling *Panurus b. biarmicus / ruscicus / kosswigi*

Pleasantly common at Jabbul Lake where several eventually gave some excellent views

PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae

Greater Hoopoe-lark *Alaemon a. alaudipes*

Two or three were along to the road to Talila Reserve and put on a brief display of their bizarre display flight

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla hermonensis / woltersi* etc

Singles were seen twice in songflight near Palmyra

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens minor*

Two were seen along the roadside as we returned to Sed Wadi Abied from the Blad Ibis cliffs

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata zion / subtaurica*

Small numbers were seen at widespread sites, often in disturbed habitats such as along roadsides

Temminck's Lark *Eremophila bilopha*

One was watched near the Baghdad turnoff as we approached Palmyra, several more were seen fleetingly near there as we drove along and we stopped to enjoy decent views of a family group north of Sed Wadi Abied, a few more were seen near the Bald Ibis nest site

PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae

[White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis mesopotamia*]

Heard distantly but not seen at Deir Ez Zor

White-spectacled Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos*

Several were seen in the Slenfeh area with a few more in Damascus and the hills west of there

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae

Sand Martin *Riparia r. riparia*

A handful of migrants passed through at Jabbul Lake

Barn Swallow *Hirundo r. rustica*

Small numbers were regularly seen, some were apparently migrants while others were nesting

Common House Martin *Delichon u. urbicum / meridionale*

Very small numbers were seen, mainly in urban areas where they seemed to be nesting

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica rufula*

A small flock moved through at Sed Wadi Abied and a handful were over Bloudan

PASSERIFORMES: Cettidae

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti orientalis*

Several were heard and one or two glimpsed at all wetlands visited and in some drier areas in the hills west of Damascus

PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus tephronotus*

A small group were in the woods below Slenfeh

PASSERIFORMES: Phylloscopidae

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus acredula* etc

Small numbers were at a few migrant traps such as Talila and Sed Wadi Abied

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus c. collybita / abietinus* etc

The commonest warbler seen with up to 10 at some oases and scattered individuals everywhere, several were singing in the hills around Slenfeh

[Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*]

One was seen near Saladinn's Castle (l/o)

PASSERIFORMES: Acrocephalidae

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus s. arundinaceus*

Three or four showed well at Lake Hjabbul after an earlier bird or two at Mhemideh

Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus s. scirpaceus / fuscus*

One at Mhemide was followed by several seen and heard at Jabbul Lake

[Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida elaeica*]

Heard but not seen above Saladdin's Castle

PASSERIFORMES: Megaluridae

Savi's Warbler *Locustella l. luscinioides / sarmatica / fusca*

After several had earlier been heard at Mhemideh two of the many singing at Jabbul Lake gave some reasonable views

PASSERIFORMES: Cisticolidae

Graceful Prinia *Prinia gracilis palaestinae*

Small numbers were seen and especially heard on a regular basis after the first at Mhemide

PASSERIFORMES: Timaliidae

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris*

After a couple of very brief individuals at Deir-ez-Zor a group of six gave some excellent views at Mhemideh; a couple more were seen briefly at Jabbul Lake

PASSERIFORMES: Sylviidae

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia a. atricapilla / dammbolzi*

Ones and twos were at scattered sites throughout

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia c. curruca*

Small numbers were at very widespread sites with some singing in potential breeding areas near Slenfeh

Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia c. crassirostris*

Five birds, evidently a family group, were at Senjelleh

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis volgensis / icterops*

A couple at Talila were followed by a handful more at widespread sites

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala momus*

Fairly common, though more often heard than seen, in the western hills

Rüppell's Warbler *Sylvia rueppelli*

One north of Sed Wadi Abied was followed by eight or more near Slenfeh

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes cypriotes*

Small numbers were heard and a couple seen near Slenfeh

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Western Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer syriaca*

One was seen at Saladdin's Castle

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris tauricus* etc

One was north of Palmyra and a flock of about 40 were east of there

PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula syriacus / aterrimus*

A few were seen and several more heard in the western hills

PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae

Bluethroat *Luscinia s. svecica / volgae / cyanecula*

A female lurked near a small bush in an area of rather barren country between Palmyra and Der Ez Zor

Common Nightingale *Luscinia m. megarhynchos / africana*

A couple of migrants were at Talila Reserve, the wooded valleys below Slenfeh held many singing birds, a couple of which showed well

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis*

A male at Al Barra gave stunning views singing from the walls of the ruins

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros / semirufus*

Two migrants were at Jabbul Lake

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus p. phoenicurus*

About six were seen at Oases and at Talila Reserve on our first day in the field

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

Two were at Palmyra Citadel

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Small numbers were seen in desert areas, mainly around Palmyra

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe o. oenanthe / libanotica*

About eight migrants were seen at Palmyra and Lake Jabbul

Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica melanoleuca*

Up to four per day were seen on seven dates

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe d. deserti*

A single female was noted north of Sed Wadi Abied

Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe l. lugens*

Two or three showed well at Palmyra Citadel

Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*

A female at Talila was followed by some nice males at Palmyra Citadel and Hallabiya

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola s. solitarius / longirostris*

One was at Saladdin's Castle (n/l)

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa s. striata / neumanni*

One was near our hotel above Saladdin's Castle (n/l)

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula b. hypoleuca / sibirica*

A male was at Talila Reserve

[Semicollared Flycatcher *Ficedula semitorquata* NT]

Heard but not seen near Saladdin's Castle

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common in all urban contexts and in the wider countryside including some remote oases

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Common at and around Palmyra and also at Deir Ez Zor but not seen elsewhere

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer m. moabiticus*

After a very brief encounter with seven birds at Deir Ez Zor it was a relief to be enjoy prolonged good views of up to 30 of these subtly beautiful birds at Jabbul Lake

Pale Rockfinch *Carpospiza brachydactyla*

One, perhaps two, gave some rather fleeting views at Palmyra Citadel

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia puteicola*

One was along the road north of Sed Wadi Abied and about six at Senjelleh were evidently breeding there

PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae

Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*

Small numbers of migrants (of indeterminate race) were seen at or over the Palmyra area, several Black-headed race birds (*M.f. feldegg*) were on territory at Mhemideh

White Wagtail *Motacilla a. alba*

One at Mhemideh was the only record

Tree Pipit *Anthus t. trivialis*

A couple were at oases between Damascus and Palmyra, two more were at Talila Reserve and a couple more flew over at Palmyra

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*

A calling bird flew over at Talila

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla c. coelebs / syriaca*

Common in the woodlands of the western hills

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

One was near our hotel overlooking Saladdin's Castle

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris chlorotica*

Small numbers were present in the western hills

Common Linnet *Carduelis c. cannabina / bella*

Ones and twos were seen a on a handful of occasions, mainly in the western hills

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus crassirostris*

A family party were at Palmyra Citadel

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*

A small group seen briefly in flight at Deir Ez Zor were the only ones seen

PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

A couple were at Lake Jabbul

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Ones and twos were seen on several occasions in the hills around Slenfeh

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*

A total of about six were seen at and around Palmyra and a handful more were at Senjelleh

Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala*

Singles were near Sed Wadi Abied and at Senjelleh

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus ssp.*

A couple were seen at Lake Jabbul (n/l)

MAMMALS

Ruppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppellii*

One gave some good but fairly brief views at Hallabiya