

Bird records from Syria

10-24th September 2010

By Tomas Haraldsson (for further info email tomasharaldsson@hotmail.com)

During the autumn of 2010 I had the opportunity to spend a period of internship in Syria and Jordan. This was a part of my Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Stockholm, Sweden. My host and coordinator for the internship was the BirdLife International Middle East office in Amman, Jordan. The period was divided between field visits in Syria with the local partners of BirdLife, such as the Syrian Society for Conservation of Wildlife, and time spent at the office in Amman and various visits in Jordan.

Thus, this was not a bird watching holiday and this document is not to be seen as a trip report but rather a summary of the experiences and bird records from the period in Syria, 10-24th of September. It should be fairly complete but spelling mistakes et cetera might be found.

The bird watching efforts were limited to two days, 10-11th, at the huge wetland of Sabkhat al-Jabbul and to four days at Palmyra, Sed Wadi Abied on the 17th and 20-22nd at the Talila Reserve, in the arid interior of the country.

Logistics

Hotels In Damascus the centrally located and friendly Sultan Hotel (very close to the Hijaz Station) was known to me from previous visits, so I opted for that when passing through the city. Single room could be had at 30 USD including breakfast. Very fast laundry service.

In Palmyra there are plenty of low-mid range hotels and seemingly many more beds than visitors... I stayed some nights at the Tower Hotel, by the main drag near restaurants, the museum and internet cafés. Pretty basic and worn but ok for me, 20 USD per night including breakfast.

Transport Taxi from Aleppo Airport (where few drivers seemed to know the village in question) straight to Jabbul village is some 40 km and was bargained down to about 15 USD.

From Damascus there are buses going from the Harasta Bus Terminal (a 3 USD/20 minute taxi ride from Sultan) to Palmyra. It took three hours with comfortable Kadmous company buses at a cost of 4 USD. From Palmyra back to the capital was much more of a hassle since buses were full and with a very ineffective and messy ticket office.

For shared taxis and buses to Amman and Beirut you head for the Soumarieh Terminal in west Damascus (4 USD/25 min taxi ride) where I was swiftly put in a shared taxi and raced off towards the Jordanian border at Deraa. This was very comfortable and once at the border, a VERY good choice to have a taxi man sorting you through the prolonged and confusing border procedures. Very recommended. Shared taxi cost just over 15 USD from Damascus to Amman. Remember to bring 500 SYP for the departure fee and about 15 USD for the Jordanian tourist visa.



The north-western corner of the freshwater lake, near the village of Jabbul.

Sabkhat al-Jabbul

This is a huge wetland (an estimated 260km² some years ago) and hard to cover, so this visit was merely to get a good pair of days of birding at the northern shoreline of the area, within easy reach from the Jabbul village. I stayed with the family that is in charge of the *mudhafa*, the community guest house, which was of course an unforgettable experience. I joined my host Ahmad Mawwas and the known bird guide Yasin Mujawer, aka Abu Khalil, and was taken by motorcycle to various spots along the dyke/causeway out to Tell Jibbrin and east along the northern shoreline of the freshwater lake.

The sheer number of birds and the variation of species at this wetland are just staggering. The water is not drying out like in some other, but much smaller, wetlands in Syria that are seasonal since water from the Euphrates is lead here. The freshwater lake looked pretty much as during my spring time visits and was teeming with birds. Thousands of Coots with flocks of grebes and ducks among them, thousands of flamingoes and Slender-billed Gulls on the salt lake, all expected herons and waders around the muddy lagoons and reed beds. Highlights included Broad-billed Sandpiper, White-tailed Plover, White-breasted Kingfisher, Citrine Wagtail and Iraq Babbler. At dusk there was a massive stream (10.000? 20.000?) of mainly

Sand Martins and Yellow Wagtails but also hundreds of Crested Larks and Corn Buntings going from the fields out to the reeds for night roost.

The site is easy to visit for a day or two of birding and Ahmad and Yasin make great company. More coverage during the autumn migration time must have a huge potential!



The “White Valley Dam”, as the Arabic name means, was v-e-r-y dry now in September!

Sed Wadi Abied

This is a small dam in the mountainous semi-desert about 15km northeast of Palmyra. It is pretty well signposted “White Valley Damp”, as it says, from the town and the main highway. Taxi drivers seemed to be familiar with it and I had one to take me there for a morning and paid about 20 USD and he waited for as long as I wanted. The dam was dried out as it might be in most years (?), especially now with the tormenting draught the last few years.

In spring time it is extremely rich in migrants and together with the surroundings a very rewarding site. But now it was dry and silent, the local species like Red-billed Chough, Little Swift, Cream-coloured Cursor, Mourning Wheatear and Lesser Short-toed Lark showed after a while but the wide scrubs and reeds had few migrants. A 1cy Montague’s Harrier, an Upcher’s Warbler and a Masked Shrike were noted.



The “Botanical garden” at the Talila entrance with some of the few trees in the background. Even the tiniest scrub contained a warbler, shrike or Spotted Flycatcher.

Talila Reserve

This is a nature reserve on the vast semi-desert steppe south of Palmyra in central Syria. It is one of the most known reserves and an important site for education and awareness of environmental issues. It is run by the General Badia Commission, a government agency, and also supported by various Western development organizations.

At the entrance of the reserve are the administrative buildings, a tiny 30x40m “Botanical Garden”, some groups of trees and scrubs, some small enclosures for Ostrich and gazelles and accommodation for the staff. It is all very sparse and quite isolated out on the open plains, 11 km from the main Palmyra – Deir ez-Zor road and from that junction another 15 km to Palmyra town. I stayed out here for three nights to learn about their work and have some exciting birding.

During migration time this “green spot” around the entrance buildings can be very rewarding to scan through. Being the only trees and scrubs for many kilometers, it attracts exhausted migrating passerines that hide in even the tiniest turf or branch. I spent mornings and evenings of 20-22nd working through the small area and had a really great time!

No huge numbers but the variation was excellent: nine species of warbler including Upcher’s and Barred, four species of shrike, Rock Thrush and Rufous Bush-Chat, Golden Oriole and Scop’s Owl with the surrounding semi-desert containing six species of lark, four species of wheatears as well as Stone Curlew and Cream-coloured Cursor. Three crisply decorated 1cy

birds and a handsome male Pallid Harrier passed by as did Egyptian Vulture, Levant Sparrowhawk and Lesser Spotted Eagle.

List of species for Syria 10-24th September 2010

Ferrugineous Duck / Vitögd dykand	3 at Jabbul 10-11/9
White-headed Duck / Kopparand	30+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Garganey / Årta	150+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Anas sp.	1000+ in flight far out over the lake at Jabbul, most looking like Garganeys. 2 birds flying over the desert near SWA (surprised to find it dry like I was?) 17/9
Northern Pintail / Stjärtand	1 pair at Jabbul 10-11/9
Shoveler / Skedand	a few at Jabbul 10-11/9
Black-necked Grebe / Svarthalsad dopping	75+ at Jabbul among the Coots 10-11/9
Little Grebe / Smådopping	very common (50+) at Jabbul 10-11/9
Great Crested Grebe / Skäggdopping	10+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Greater Flamingo / Större flamingo	numerous (5.000+) at Jabbul 10-11/9
White Pelican / Vit pelikan	a flock of 150 at roost in Jabbul 10-11/9
Greater Cormorant / Storskarv	2-3 at Jabbul 10-11/9
Glossy Ibis / Bronsibis	3 at Jabbul 11/9
Great White Egret / Ägretthäger	20+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Little Egret / Silkeshäger	25+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Grey Heron / Gråhäger	50+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Purple Heron / Purpurhäger	7 at Jabbul 10-11/9
Night Heron / Natthäger	25+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Squacco Heron / Rallhäger	3-4 at Jabbul 10-11/9
Cattle Egret / Kohäger	a flock of 15 at Jabbul 10/9
Little Bittern / Dvärgöröddrom	at least 2 1cy and 1m at Jabbul 10-11/9

Honey Buzzard / Bivråk	14 migr. at Jabbul 11/9
Black Kite / Brun glada	1-2 at Jabbul 10-11/9, 1 at SWA 17/9, 6 over Palmyra 17/9, up to 3 at Talila 20-22/9
Egyptian Vulture / Smutsgam	1 migr. at Palmyra 17/9, 1 subadult at Talila 20/9, 1 at the oryx enclosure, Talila 21/9, 2 at Talila 22/9
Marsh Harrier / Brun kärrhök	common at Jabbul (15+) 10-11/9, 1 1cy at SWA 17/9, 1m at Talila 20/9 and 6 migr. there 21/9
Montague's Harrier / Ängshök	1 1cy at Jabbul 11/9 and 1 1cy at SWA 17/9
Pallid Harrier / Stäpphök	3 1cy migr. at Talila 21/9 and 1 ad m migr. there 22/9



This young Levant Sparrowhawk found one of the pylons as good perching!

Levant Sparrowhawk / Balkanhök	1 1cy at Talila 22/9
Sparrowhawk / Sparvhök	1 at SWA 17/9, 1 migr. at Talila 21/9

”Steppe” Buzzard / ”Stäppvråk” Loose waves passing over Damascus before dusk 12-13/9 (150+), most looked like this species. Migration seen also at Talila/Palmyra 17-22/9 but only singles or maximum ten a day.

Booted Eagle / Dvärgörn 2 pale morph migr. over Palmyra before dusk 17/9



I had hoped for much more raptor migration around Palmyra, but this was the only Lesser Spotted Eagle for the trip.

Lesser Spotted Eagle / Mindre skrikörn 1 1cy migr. at Talila 21/9

Common Kestrel / Tornfalk singles seen at several places

Coot / Sothöna numerous (3.000+) at Jabbul 10-11/9

Moorhen / Rörhöna common at Jabbul 10-11/9

Purple Swamphen / Purpurhöna fairly common (30+) at Jabbul 10-11/9

Water Rail / Vattenrall heard from the reeds in many places at Jabbul 10-11/9

Pied Avocet / Skärfläcka 20+ at Jabbul 10-11/9

Black-winged Stilt / Stytlöpare 15+ at Jabbul 10-11/9

Cream-coloured Cursor / Ökenlöpare 1 at the ruins, Palmyra 16/9, 4 at SWA 17/9, 1 at Talila 21/9

Stone Curlew / Tjockfot	1 at Talila 21/9
Spur-winged Plover / Sporrvipa	common at Jabbul 10-11/9
Northern Lapwing / Tofsvipa	1 at Jabbul 11/9



These unmistakable yellow stilts belong to the White-tailed Plover, here at the northern shore of Sabkhat al-Jabbul

White-tailed Plover / Sumpvipa	1 at Jabbul 11/9
Ringed Plover / Större strandpipare	15+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Little Ringed Plover / Mindre strandpipare	4 at Jabbul 11/9
Collared Pratincole / Rödingad vadarsvala	a flock of 150 and some singles at Jabbul 10-11/9
Dunlin / Kärrsnäppa	15+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Little Stint / Småsnäppa	300+, mostly on the distant mudflats, at Jabbul 10-11/9
Temminck's Stint / Mosnäppa	at least 3 at Jabbul 11/9
Curlew Sandpiper / Spovsnäppa	at least 2 at Jabbul 10-11/9

Broad-billed Sandpiper / Myrsnäppa	a flock of 5 at Jabbul 10/9 and 1 at the same spot 11/9. Possibly only the second Syrian record.
Black-tailed Godwit / Rödspov	2-3 at Jabbul 10-11/9
Ruff / Brushane	fairly common (150+) around Jabbul 10-11/9
Common Snipe / Enkelbeckasin	20+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Spotted Redshank / Svartsnäppa	a few at Jabbul 10-11/9
Redshank / Rödbena	a few at Jabbul 10-11/9
Greenshank / Gluttsnäppa	a few at Jabbul 10-11/9
Wood Sandpiper / Grönbena	10+ at Jabbul 10-11/9
Green Sandpiper / Skogssnäppa	2-3 at Jabbul 11/9
Marsh Sandpiper / Dammsnäppa	at least 5 different at Jabbul 10-11/9
Larus sp. looking at Jabbul 10-11/9	50+ of both <i>armenicus</i> -looking and <i>cachinnans</i> -looking at Jabbul 10-11/9
Slender-billed Gull / Långnäbbad mås	numerous (1.500+) at Jabbul 10-11/9
Sandwich Tern / Kentsk tärna	at least 1 1cy at Jabbul 11/9
Little Tern / Småtärna	common (75+) at Jabbul 10-11/9
Chlidonias Terns	very common (750+) at Jabbul 10-11/9 of which an estimated 60% Whiskered and the rest White-winged Black Terns. A pure flock of the latter, c.150, hawking over the fields were additional birds. No Black Tern positively identified.
Collared Dove / Turkduva cages at Talila 20-22/9	common, for example 75+ feeding at the animal cages at Talila 20-22/9
Laughing Dove / Palmduva	common in towns and cities
Turtle Dove / Turturduva	scarce migrant, some singles and small flocks seen
Common Cuckoo / Gök	1 each at Jabbul 11/9 and Talila 21/9
Wryneck / Göktyta	1 at Talila 20/9
Little Owl / Minervauggla	1-2 at Jabbul 10-11/9 and 2 at the ruins, Palmyra 17-18/9



The rangers at the reserve showed me this Scop's Owl, who had apparently chased a House Sparrow and ended up inside one of the offices!

Scop's Owl / Dvärguv	1 shown in hand at the offices, Talila 20/9. Released and took roost.
----------------------	---

Roller / Blåkråka	1 at Jabbul 11/9 and 1 at Talila 20/9
-------------------	---------------------------------------

Hoopoe / Härfågel	fairly common around Jabbul 10-11/9, 1 at Talila 21/9 and 4 there 22/9
-------------------	--

European Bee-Eater / Biätare	fairly common migrant, several flocks seen each at Jabbul and around Palmyra/Talila, highest count 45 over the ruins 16/9 and 65 at Talila at dusk 21/9
------------------------------	---

Pied Kingfisher / Gråfiskare	common at Jabbul 10-11/9
------------------------------	--------------------------

White-breasted Kingfisher / Smyrnakungsfiskare	1 at Jabbul 11/9
--	------------------

Common Kingfisher / Kungsfiskare	common (10+) around Jabbul 10-11/9
----------------------------------	------------------------------------

Alpine Swift / Alpeglare	2-3 at Jabbul 11/9
--------------------------	--------------------

Little Swift / Stubbstjärtseglare	at least 12 together at SWA 17/9
-----------------------------------	----------------------------------

Crested Lark / Tofslärka dusk 10/9	very common. High numbers (100+) at Jabbul at dusk 10/9
Hoopoe Lark / Ökenlöplärka just north of Talila 22/9	3-4 around Talila/the oryx enclosure 20-22/9 and 2
Temminck's Lark / Ökenberglärka offices, Talila 22/9	2 at the oryx enclosure, Talila 21/9 and 1 at the offices, Talila 22/9
Desert Lark / Stenökenlärka	4-5 at SWA 17/9
Bar-tailed Desert Lark / Sandökenlärka	seemed fairly common (10+) around Talila/the oryx enclosure 20-22/9
Short-toed Lark / Korttålarke	common migrant with many smaller flocks each at Jabbul 10-11/9 and around Palmyra/Talila 17-22/9, highest count 150+ SWA 17/9
Lesser Short-toed Lark / Dvärglärka common (15+) at Talila 21/9	5 at Jabbul 11/9, 3-4 at SWA 17/9 and fairly common (15+) at Talila 21/9
Barn Swallow / Ladusvala	common migrant
House Martin / Hussvala	fairly common migrant, small numbers
Sand Martin / Backsvala (10.000+) gathering at dusk at the Jabbul reeds 10-11/9	common migrant with especially huge numbers (10.000+) gathering at dusk at the Jabbul reeds 10-11/9
Tawny Pipit / Fältpiplärka Talila 20-22/9	3-4 Jabbul 10-11/9 and several each SWA 17/9 and Talila 20-22/9
Tree Pipit / Trädpiplärka	migrant in small numbers, some singles seen/heard
Red-throated Pipit / Rödstrupig pipilärka	heard Jabbul 11/9
White Wagtail / Sädesärle Wagtails	fairly common, small numbers among the Yellow Wagtails
Yellow Wagtail / Gulärle	very common and huge numbers (5.000+) at roost in the reeds. Small numbers around Palmyra/Talila.
Citrine Wagtail / Citronärle	1 in the Yellow Wagtail-stream at Jabbul 10/9 and at least 2 along the northern shoreline 11/9
Grey Wagtail / Forsärle	1 in the museum garden, Palmyra 17/9
Thrush Nightingale / Näktergal the oryx enclosure, Talila 21/9	1 at Talila 21/9 and one in the diminutive garden at the oryx enclosure, Talila 21/9
Rufous Bush-Chat / Trädnäktergal	1 at Talila 22/9
Isabelline Wheatear / Isabellastenskvätta	common, for example 15+ at Talila 20-22/9

Northern Wheatear / Stenskvätta	1 at Talila 22/9
Black-eared Wheatear / Medelhavsstenskvätta	at least 5 around Talila 20-22/9
Desert Wheatear / Ökenstenskvätta	1-2m at Talila 20-22/9 and 2m just north of Talila 22/9
Mourning Wheatear / Sorgstenskvätta	3-4 each at SWA 17/9 and the Palmyra ruins 17-18/9
Whinchat / Buskskvätta	2-3 at Talila 21-22/9



Rock Thrush and Isabelline Wheatear competing for feeding grounds in the tiny “Botanical Garden” at Talila at dawn.

Rock Thrush / Stentrast	1 1cy/f at Talila 21/9
Graceful Warbler / Streckad prinia	common at Jabbul 10-11/9 and SWA 17/9
Reed Warbler / Rörsångare	common at Jabbul 10-11/9 and 3 at Talila 22/9
Upcher’s Warbler / Orientsångare	1 at SWA 17/9 and 1-2 at Talila 21-22/9
Olivaceous Warbler / Eksångare	1 at SWA 17/9
Menetriés Warbler / Östlig sammetshätta	1f at the Palmyra oasis 18/9

Whitethroat / Törnsångare	at least 4-5 at Talila 20-22/9
Lesser Whitethroat / Ärtsångare	at least 3-4 at Talila 20-22/9



This excellent 1cy Barred Warbler was also found in the few but dense scrubs at the "Botanical Garden" at dawn of the 22nd.

Barred Warbler / Höksångare	1 1cy at Talila 22/9
Garden Warbler / Trädgårdssångare	1 at SWA 17/9, 1 at the Palmyra oasis 18/9 and fairly common (7-8+) at Talila 20-22/9
Blackcap / Svarthätta	at least 2 at Talila 20-22/9
Willow Warbler / Lövsångare	fairly common migrant
Chiffchaff / Gransångare	common migrant
Spotted Flycatcher / Grå flugsnappare	common migrant
Bearded Tit / Skäggmes	heard and a few seen in the reeds at Jabbul 10-11/9
Iraq Babbler / Iraskriktrast	common (at least five different parties of 4+ birds) in reeds at Jabbul 10-11/9
Golde Oriole / Sommargylling	1 1cy at Talila 21/9 and 2 1cy there 22/9

Southern Grey Shrike / Ökenvarfågel	1-2 1cy at Talila 20-22/9 and 1 at the oryx enclosure, Talila 20-21/9
Woodchat Shrike / Rödhuvad törnskata	1 adult at Talila 22/9
Masked Shrike / Masktörnskata	1 at SWA 17/9 and at least 2 at Talila 20-22/9
Red-backed Shrike / Törnskata	fairly common migrant, 1m and 6-7 f/1cy around Talila 20-22/9
Hooded Crow / Grå kråka	common
Brown-necked Raven / Ökenkorp	a pair at Talila 20-22/9
Red-billed Chough / Alpkråka	6-7 at SWA 17/9
House Sparrow / Gråsparv	very common
Dead Sea Sparrow / Tamariskspurv	at least 1 at Jabbul 10/9
Ortolan Bunting / Ortolansparv	fairly common migrant with 10+ at SWA 17/9 and fairly common (25+) around Talila 20-22/9
Corn Bunting / Kornspurv	common at Jabbul with many heading for roost at dusk, 150+ on 10/9