

New data on the birds of Syria

Jiří MLÍKOVSKÝ

Institute of Landscape Ecology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Květná 8, CZ–603 65 Brno, Czech Republic
and

Institute of Geology and Paleontology, Charles University, Albertov 6, CZ–128 43 Praha 2, Czech Republic.

Received January 2, 1996; accepted February 29, 1996

Published April 5, 1996

Abstract. Observations on 69 bird species made in Syria in 1995 are presented. Two of the species, *Larus minutus* and *Lanius excubitor*, are new to Syria, raising thus the number of bird species known from Syria to 219.

Distribution, Aves, Syria

INTRODUCTION

The birds of Syria are known only on the basis of anecdotal evidence (Carruthers 1910, Clarke 1924, Meinertzhagen 1935, Hollom 1959, Rappe 1971, Kumerloeve 1972b, Jeffery 1978, MacFarlane 1978, Pyman 1978, Wallace 1984, Baumgart 1991a, b, 1993, Baumgart & Kasperek 1992). Syria (185 000 km²) continues thus to be an ornithological terra incognita (see Baumgart 1993). The available data were summarized by Kumerloeve (1967, 1968, 1969, 1972a), and Baumgart & Stephan (1986, 1987, 1994). More general references include Hüe & Etchécopar (1970) and Hollom et al. (1988).

Below, I present my observations of Syrian birds made during a trip on 28 September – 8 October 1995. Included are also a few observations made in Syria by Petr Benda (PB) between 29 April and 17 May 1995. Unsigned observations are mine (JM).

Sequence and nomenclature of the species follows Voous (1977). Most of the visited localities are listed in Baumgart & Stephan (1986, 1994). Spelling of geographical names is different in different maps. For clarity, I follow spelling used by Baumgart & Stephan (1986, 1994) where possible. Localities not mentioned by Baumgart & Stephan (1986, 1994) are as follows (see Fig. 1):

Afrin: A tall at Afrin Suyn river south of Afrin. Meandering stream surrounded by a narrow swampy belt in dry steppe.

As Sayyal: Blind arms of Euphrates river, with reed stands and open mud flats, near the village of As Sayyal.

Qalaat el-Hosn: I use the Arabian name for this castle, which is called by Baumgart and Stephan (1986, 1987, 1994) Crak des Chévaliers (Kurd-French name).

Qalaat Rabbah: Ruin of an ancient Arab castle, ca. 40 km east of Deir-ez-Zoor.

Qanawat: Dense shrubs sparkled with small fields in Doruz Mountains near the village of Qanawat.

Tadmur: Arabian name for the Ancient Palmyra.

SPECIES LIST

Little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (Pallas): Several individuals were seen on 6.x. on a blind arm of Euphrates river at As Sayyal.

Rosy pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* Linnaeus: A flock of ca. 70 individuals circled above Qalaat el-Hosn on 30.iv. (PB).

Little egret *Egretta garzetta* (Linnaeus): Several individuals were observed on 28.ix. at Afrin Suyn, and on 8.x. at Euphrates dam. Little Egrets were known only from spring migration in

Syria so far (Baumgart & Stephan 1986, 1994). This is thus the first evidence for a fall migration. Also in Jordan, little egrets are much less common in the fall than on spring migration (Andrews 1995).

Great white egret *Egretta alba* (Linnaeus): An individual was seen on 28.ix. at Afrin Suyn. This is the earliest fall observation for Syria.

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* Linnaeus: An individual was seen flying over dry steppe at Apamé on 30.ix.

Black stork *Ciconia nigra* (Linnaeus): An individual flew southwards over Apamé on 30.ix. This is the third and earliest fall observation of this migrant. The previous ones were made on 2.x. 1982 and 29.x. 1980 at Damascus (Baumgart & Stephan 1986, 1994).

White stork *Ciconia ciconia* (Linnaeus): A flock of ca. 100 individuals circled over Maalula on 17.v. (PB).

Northern shoveler *Anas clypeata* Linnaeus: A flock of ca. 10 individuals landed on a small desert dam at Salim on 4.x. This is the earliest fall observation from Syria.

Black kite *Milvus migrans* (Boddaert): Single individuals were seen on 4.x. at Tadmur, and on 6.x. at As Sayyal.

Marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus* (Linnaeus): An individual was seen at blind arms of Euphrates river at As Sayyal on 6.x.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (Linnaeus): Individuals were observed on 1.x. at Maalula, 3.x. at Tall Shebab, and on 5.x. at Tadmur.

Spotted eagle *Aquila clanga* Pallas: An immature individual was seen flying at Afrin Suyn on 28.ix.

Osprey *Pandion haliaeetus* (Linnaeus): An individual was seen fishing in the Euphrates dam on 8.x.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Linnaeus: Observed on 29.ix. in Halab, and on 7.–8.x. at Russafa.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (Linnaeus): Common on blind arms of Euphrates river at As Sayyal (6.x.).

Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* (Linnaeus): A few individuals were seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal, and on 6.–7.x. on a small island in Euphrates river at Zenobia. This is the first evidence for a fall migration of this species through Syria.

Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* Linnaeus: A flock was seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (Linnaeus): A flock was observed on 6.x. at As Sayyal. This is the third observation of this species in Syria. Also the previous two (24.x. 1982 at Ghuzlanie, and 28.x. at Homs Lake) were limited to the period of fall migration (Baumgart & Stephan 1986).

Spotted redshank *Tringa erythropus* (Pallas): Several individuals were seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal. This is the earliest fall observation of this species in Syria (Kumerloewe 1968, Baumgart & Stephan 1986).

Redshank *Tringa totanus* (Linnaeus): Several individuals were recorded on 6.x. at As Sayyal. This is the first fall observation of this species in Syria. So far, redshanks were known from Syria as spring migrants only (Baumgart & Stephan 1986, 1994), although two observations from December and February point toward the possibility, that redshanks overwinter in Syria in small numbers.

Common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (Linnaeus): Several individuals were seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal.

Great black-headed gull *Larus ichthyaetus* Pallas: Several individuals were repeatedly seen on 6.–7.x. at Euphrates river near Zenobia. This is the earliest fall observation of this species in Syria, which is known to rarely overwinter there (Baumgart & Stephan 1986, 1994).

Little gull *Larus minutus* Pallas: Several individuals were observed on 6.x. at blind arms of Euphrates river at As Sayyal. This is the first record of this species for Syria.

Herring gull *Larus argentatus* Pontoppidan: Several individuals were observed on 30.ix. at the sea shore Tartous, and on 8.x. on Euphrates dam. Taxonomy of the *Larus argentatus* complex is not satisfactorily resolved yet. Individuals found at the sea and in regions near to it will probably belong to *Larus (argentatus) cachinnans* Pallas, which is now mostly treated as a separate species. Less evident is the origin of herring gulls wintering inland at Euphrates river. They potentially could belong to the armenian herring gull *Larus (argentatus) armenicus* Buturlin, whose (sub)specific validity has been supported recently (Buzun 1993). Andrews (1995) considers winter occurrence of this form in Jordan probable, and lists a single definite record from 12 April 1992 at Aquaba.

Rock dove *Columba livia* Gmelin: Rock doves or feral domestic doves were seen on 1.–2.v. in Tadmur (PB), on 5.x. in Tadmur (JM), and on 1.–2.x. in Maalula (JM).

Collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (Frivaldszky): Several individuals were seen on 29.–30.ix. in Apamé.

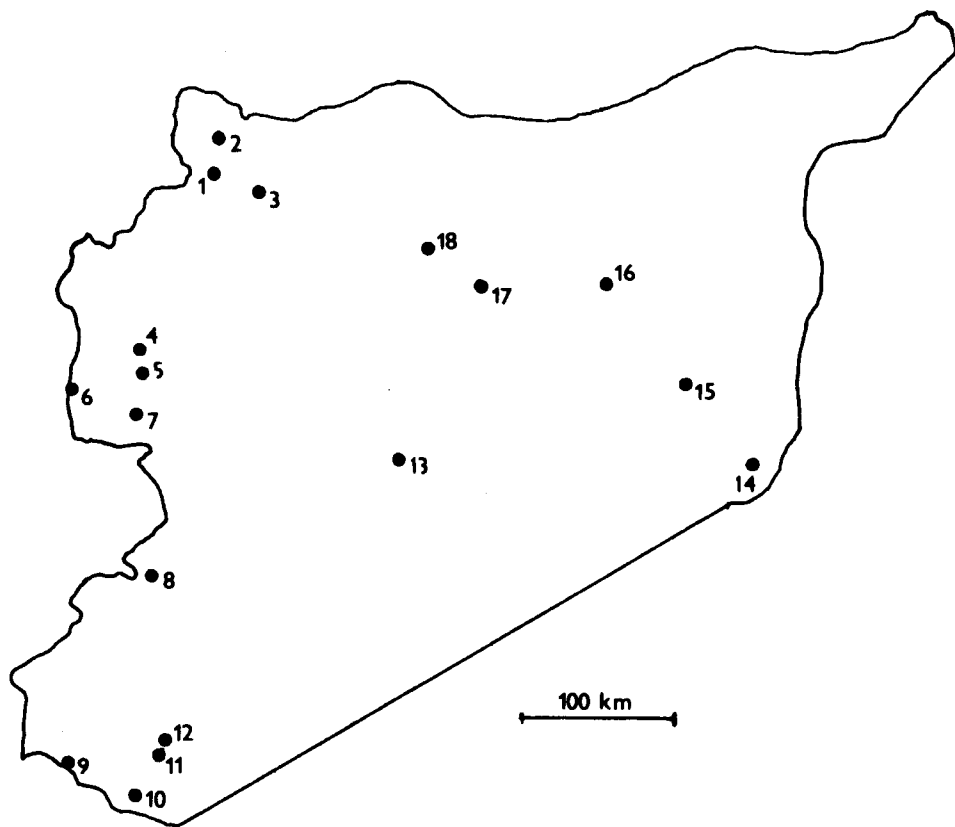


Fig. 1. Map of Syria, showing localities mentioned in the text. 1 – Qalaat Samaan, 2 – Afrin Suyn, 3 – Halab, 4 – Apamé, 5 – Musyaf, 6 – sea shore north of Tartous, 7 – Qalaat al-Hosn, 8 – Maalula, 9 – Tall Shebab, 10 – Bosra, 11 – Qanawat, 12 – Shabha, 13 – Tadmur, 14 – As Sayyal, 15 – Qalaat Rabbah, 16 – Zenobia, 17 – Russafa, 18 – Euphrates dam.

Palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* (Linnaeus): Several individuals were observed on 29.ix. in Halab, and on 4.x. at Shahba.

Barn owl *Tyto alba* (Scopoli): Individuals were seen on 29.x. in Apamé, and on 7.–8.x. at Russafa. Feathers of this owl were found also at Qalaat Rabbah (6.x.). Pellets were collected at Qalaat Rabbah (few) and at Russafa (many). In addition, a large sample of Subrecent prey remains was collected at Russafa. Their analysis will be presented elsewhere.

Little owl *Athene noctua* (Scopoli): Observed on 29.ix. in Apamé, on 6.x. at Zenobia, and on 7.–8.x. at Russafa. Samples of pellets were collected at Zenobia and at Russafa.

Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* Linnaeus: An individual was seen flying in the evening of 4.x. over the desert at Tadmur.

Alpine swift *Apus melba* (Linnaeus): A flock was seen on 1.x. above Qalaat el-Hosn.

White-breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* (Linnaeus): An individual was observed on 6.x. at As Sayyal. This is the second observation of this species from Syria, the first one being from the 6.xi.1983 at Derra (Baumgart & Stephan 1986).

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (Linnaeus): An individual was seen on 8.x. flying above water at the Euphrates dam.

Blue-cheeked bee-eater *Merops superciliosus* Linnaeus: A small flock was observed on 6.x. at As Sayyal.

Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* Linnaeus: Small flock was seen flying on 5.x. over desert at Tadmur.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Linnaeus: Individuals were seen on 3.x. at Tall Shebab, and on 5.x. at Tadmur.

Lesser short-toed lark *Calandrella rufescens* (Vieillot): Several individuals were seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal. This is the first fall record of this species in Syria.

Crested lark *Galerida cristata* (Linnaeus): Individuals were observed on 28.ix. south of Afrin, on 29.–30.ix. at Apamé, on 3.x. at Tall Shebab, and on 6.x. at As Sayyal.

Temminck's horned lark *Eremophila bilopha* (Temminck): Common in a ploughed desert east of Maalula (1.x.).

Crag martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* (Scopoli): Common in Maalula (1.x.).

Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica* Linnaeus: Individuals and small flocks were seen on 29.ix. in Halab, on 3.x. at Tall Shebab, on 5.x. in Tadmur, on 6.x. at As Sayyal, on 7.x. at Zenobia, and on 8.x. at Russafa.

Yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava* Linnaeus: An individual was seen on 4.x. at a small desert dam at Salim.

Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Tunstall: An individual was observed on 3.x. at a gorge creek at Tall Shehab.

White wagtail *Motacilla alba* Linnaeus: Individuals were observed on 7.x. at Zenobia, and on 8.x. at Russafa.

Black-capped bulbul *Pycnonotos xanthopygos* (Ehrenberg): Recorded on 3.x. at Tall Shebab.

White-throated robin *Irania gutturalis* (Guérin-Méneville): Individuals were observed on 3.x. at Tall Shebab, and later on the same day at Qanawat. This is first observation of this species in southern Syria, and in fall. All four previous observations were limited to April (Baumgart & Stephan 1994). In the nearby Jordan, White-throated Robins are scarce spring (iv.) and very scarce fall (vii.–viii.) migrants (Andrews 1995).

Black redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* (Gmelin): An individual was seen on 4.x. at Salim.

White-fronted redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (Linnaeus): An individual was observed on 8.x. at Russafa.

- Northern wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (Linnaeus): Recorded on 3.x. at Tall Shebab.
- Pied wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* (Lepechin): Observed on 1.–2.v. at Tadmur (PB).
- Black-eared wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* (Linnaeus): Observed on 8.x. at Russafa.
- Mourning wheatear *Oenanthe lugens* (Liechtenstein): Common in deserts around Tadmur (5.x.).
- Blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius* (Linnaeus): Several individuals were seen on 1.x. on Qalaat el-Hosn.
- Blackbird *Turdus merula* Linnaeus: An individual was observed on 3.x. in shrubs at Qana-wat. This is the first record of blackbirds for the Doruz Mountains.
- Stripe-backed prinia *Prinia gracilis* (Liechtenstein): Individuals were seen on 29.ix. in Apamé, and on 30.ix. in sparse shore vegetation Tartous.
- Scrub warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* (Cretzschmar): An individual was observed on 6.x. at As Sayyal. Both two previous records of this species from Syria were limited to Anti-Lebanon Mountains (Baumgart & Stephan 1987, 1994).
- Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (Linnaeus): Recorded on 3.x. at Tall Shebab.
- Spotted flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* (Pallas): Recorded on 29.ix. at Halab.
- Great tit *Parus major* Linnaeus: An individual was seen on 28.ix. in a pine growth at Qalaat Samaan, and small flocks were observed on 30.ix. and 1.x. at Qalaat el-Hosn.
- Great grey shrike *Lanius excubitor* Linnaeus: An individual was observed on 3.x. in the gorge at Tall Shebab. This is the first record of this species for Syria. This shrike is a common resident in adjacent parts of Jordan (Andrews 1995).
- Black-billed magpie *Pica pica* (Linnaeus): An individual was seen on 6.x. at As Sayyal.
- Crow *Corvus corone cornix* Linnaeus: Repeatedly seen in western Syria and around Euphrates river, particularly south of Afrin (28.ix.), at Halab (29.ix.), at Maalula (2.x.), at Tall Shebab (3.x.), and at As Sayyal (6.x.).
- Northern raven *Corvus corax* Linnaeus: Recorded in small numbers on 5.x. at Tadmur and along the main road between Tadmur and Deir-ez-Zoor. I have not seen it south of Tadmur along the main road between Damascus and Tadmur on 4.x.
- House sparrow *Passer domesticus* (Linnaeus): Commonly seen south of Afrin (28.ix.), in Halab (29.ix.), Apamé (29.iv. – PB, 29.–30.ix. – JM), Masyaf (30.ix.), Tartous (30.ix.), Qalaat el-Hosn (30.ix.), Maalula (1.–2.x.), Tall Shebab (3.x.), Bosra (3.x.), Shabha (4.x.), Tadmur (4.–5.x.), As Sayyal (6.x.), and Russafa (8.x.).
- Rock sparrow *Petronia petronia* (Linnaeus): Flocks were observed on 1.–2.x. at Maalula.
- Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (Linnaeus): Recorded on 28.ix. south of Afrin (in flocks of *Carduelis carduelis*), and on 30.ix. at Qalaat el-Hosn.
- Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (Linnaeus): Large flocks were observed on 28.ix. south of Afrin.
- Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (Linnaeus): A large flock was seen on 4.x. feeding on weed at a small desert dam near Salim. This is the first record of this species in central Syria. Previously, linnets were known from western Syrian and Jordan mountains only (Baumgart & Stephan 1987, 1994, Andrews 1995).
- Black-headed bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* Scopoli: Two flocks with ca. 30 individuals each were observed on 29.iv. at Apamé (PB). No buntings were present at the same place on 29.–30.ix. (JM).

DISCUSSION

According to Baumgart & Stephan (1994), 217 species of birds were recorded from the territory of Syria so far. During my visit to Syria, two new species could be added to the list: little gull *Larus minutus*, and great grey shrike *Lanius excubitor*. This raises the total of the Syrian avifauna to 219 species. Nevertheless, this is apparently still an underestimate, because avifauna of the nearby Jordan counts 374 species (Andrews 1995).

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