

## Syria trip report 7-14 April 2010



one of the most known birding sites in Syria - Sed Wadi Abied in the central desert. A haven for exhausted migrants and very exciting but in dire need of protection. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

This is a much shortened version in English of the full report in Swedish that can be seen at [www.avifauna.se](http://www.avifauna.se) The 8 day trip was arranged by me and AviFauna in cooperation with a local tour operator, based in Damascus. We were 22 Swedish birders and travelled in a large coach. It followed the general plan of our trip in April 2009 but was not as high-paced and aimed at both birds and sightseeing.

Syria, since it's "discovery" as a birding destination recently, has attracted some serious attention in Sweden. This trip was fully booked even before it was published on the AviFauna website and next years trip, 23-31/3 2011, is almost fully booked already!

### Itinerary

April 7 evening flight via Istanbul to Damascus with Turkish Airlines, landing in Damascus at 2am on the 8th.

April 8 morning drive to Palmyra (250km) and afternoon at Sed Wadi Abied. Evening at the ruins. One night in Palmyra.

April 9 morning at Sed Wadi Abied, lunch in town and afternoon drive to Deir ez-Zor (210km), stops along the way. Evening at the suspension bridge over the Euphrates. One night in Deir ez-Zor.

April 10 morning at Mheimideh, lunch at Halabiyya. Afternoon around Halabiyya and late afternoon/evening drive to Aleppo (some 350km from Deir). One night in Aleppo.

April 11 morning at Sabkhat al-Jabbul, lunch in Aleppo. Afternoon drive south, visit at Aphamea ruins and night in Hama.

April 12 morning and lunch at Krak des Chevaliers, afternoon at Deir Mar Musa. Evening drive to Damascus.

April 13 morning at Bloudan, lunch and afternoon sightseeing in old town Damascus. Late evening transfer to the airport.

April 14 3am flight via Istanbul to Scandinavia.



Raptor migration was wide spread but in small numbers this trip. Some hundred Steppe Buzzards descended at dusk to roost in the Palmyra oasis. Photo Sander Broström

## Arrangements and comments

It was a pure pleasure, again, to travel and watch birds in Syria. I can not enough encourage the international birding community to come here, experience great bird watching, hospitality, culture and cooking and to support the tiny nature conservation community.

The **arrangements** with our ground operator, Orient Aroma, went very fine and we were equipped with excellent driver and local representative. Considering we were a large group of birders, 22 in all, things went smooth and we could access most sites even with our big (33 seat) coach. Of course desert birding and venturing off track was not an option this time, but then this trip was not aimed at birds alone.

I have been in contact with the Palmyra Society since our last visit and now we were accompanied by on of the younger Palmyra guides, mr Ayman Nas. We also met up with mr Ahmad Aidek in Deir ez-Zor who joined us to Mheimideh and explained about his field guide on the Euphrates Valley that hopefully will be published soon. In the Jabbul village we were assisted by mr Abu Khalil who joined us to the wetland and also arranged for a memorable visit at the communal tea house in the village.

The **weather** during our trip was varied and changed from day to day, as could be expected at this time of year. Sunny and pleasant in the central desert and the Euphrates Valley but a prolonged shower over Deir ez-Zor that evening. Cold, rain and quite terrible at Sabkhat al-Jabbul which made our visit brief and with little result. Chilly and windy around Aphamea and at Krak des Chevaliers with totally absent raptor migration as a result. Nice and warm at Deir Mar Musa and in Damascus.

Plenty of rains in February-March had resulted in "**green desert**" around Palmyra so probably the migrants were more spread out than what is usually the case in drier years. So we found few concentrations of birds but it was pretty to see the landscape in such fertile shape. Sed Wadi Abied, Mheimideh and what we saw of Sabkhat al-Jabbul all looked healthy and had pretty much the expected birds.



Migrating passerines is one of the star attractions during a Spring visit to Syria. Any green patch in the desert, tiny garden or stand of olive trees can hold such gems like White-throated Robin or Woodchat Shrike. Photos by Göran Sundholm and Sander Broström

## Selected species list

This list only deal with the more interesting of the 165 species logged. Omitted ones are those common in the region and during this time of year, for example Wigeon, Steppe Buzzard, Moorhen, Whiskered Tern and Turtle Dove for example, no higher numbers were seen either.

For a general idea of the species encountered in mid-April I refer to the trip report from April 2009 and other trip reports.

Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* 20 Mheimideh 10/4, 10 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* 3 Mheimideh 10/4, 10 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Ferrugineus Duck *Aythya nyroca* 2 Sed Wadi Abied 8/4, 4 Sed Wadi Abied 9/4, 30 Mheimideh 10/4, 15 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* 5 Mheimideh 10/4, 7 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* 2 north of Halabiyya

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* a pair Sed Wadi Abied 8/4

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* 2 Deir ez-Zor 9/4, 1 Mheimideh 10/4, 2 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4



a good variety of herons and egrets were seen during the trip. A flock of Purple Herons came in for roost at Sed Wadi Abied in the morning. Photo Sander Broström

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* 3 with likely nesting behaviour at Mheimideh 10/4

Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* seen most days, single birds. 4 Sed Wadi Abied 8-9/4

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* 1f Sed Wadi Abied 8/4, 1m Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road 9/4 and 1m north of Halabiyya 10/4

Montague's Harrier *Circus pygargus* a total of 15 seen, 8 of which on Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road 9/4

Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* 1 Sed Wadi Abied 9/4



The Greater Spotted Eagle at Sed Wadi Abied, initially causing some id problems. Photo Sander Broström

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina* 7 Sed Wadi Abied 9/4, 15 Deir Mar Musa 12/4, 7 Bloudan 13/4

Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata* 3 Deir ez-Zor 9/4, 1 Halabiyya 10/4

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* 1 ad Sed Wadi Abied 8/4

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* 1 2cy Sed Wadi Abied 8/4

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* a flock of some 250 at the Palmyra ruins 8/4, 55 just north of Palmyra 9/4, 60 + 20 at the colony north of Halabiyya 10/4

Merlin *Falco columbarius* 1 Aphamea 12/4

Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* 1 by the suspension bridge, Deir ez-Zor 9/4

Little Crake *Porzana parva* 2 Mheimideh 10/4, 1 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* 10 Mheimideh 10/4, 1 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* 7 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* 1 north of Palmyra 9/4

White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus* only 1 at the previous (?) breeding site at Mheimideh 10/4

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* 3 Sed Wadi Abied 8-9/4, 10 Mheimideh 10/4 and 1 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* 1 ad Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* some 350 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* only 1 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* 15 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Little Owl *Athene noctua* 1 Mheimideh 10/4, a pair at the Lesser Kestrel colony at Halabiyya 10/4 and 1 Aphamea 11/4

Alpine Swift *Apus melba* several each at Sed Wadi Abied, Sabkhat al-Jabbul and Deir Mar Musa

Little Swift *Apus affinis* 10 Sed Wadi Abied 9/4

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* fairly common along the Euphrates and at Sabkhat al-Jabbul

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* 3 Halabiyya 10/4, 7 north of Halabiyya 10/4

Roller *Coracias garrulus* 2 west of Deir ez-Zor 9/4 and a total of 10 along the roads 10/4

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* 1 Sed Wadi Abied 9/4

Syrian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos syriacus* 1 Bloudan 13/4

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* 2m Sed Wadi Abied 8-9/4 and 1 Mheimideh 10/4

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis* 4 Mheimideh 10/4





We did not find them in Deir ez-Zor but in the Mheimideh village gardens! Four White-cheeked Bulbuls made swedish WP listers very happy. Photo Sander Broström

Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* 3 Sedi Wadi Abied 9/4, 1 Deir Mar Musa 12/4

White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis* 1-2m Deir Mar Musa 12/4

Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* 9 Deir Mar Musa 12/4

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* 1 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus orientalis* 1 Sedi Wadi Abied 9/4

Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* several Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* 4 Deir ez-Zor 9/4, 5 Mheimideh 10/4, 2 Sabkhat al-Jabbul 11/4

Rock Nuthatch *Sitta neumayer* 1 Deir Mar Musa 12/4

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* a total of some 15, mainly around Palmyra and the Euphrates 8-10/4

Red-billed Cough *Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax* 4 Sedi Wadi Abied 8-9/4

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* huge gatherings (>1000) at dusk near ar-Raqqa 10/4

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* 5 Bloudan 13/4

Syrian Serin *Serinus syriacus* 5 Bloudan 13/4

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* 1 Talila, Palmyra 9/4 and 4 Deir Mar Musa 12/4

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* fairly common around Aphamea 12/4



sunset over the Euphrates from the suspension bridge in Deir ez-Zor. Birds and culture in the Near East at it's best! Photo Tomas Haraldsson