

Syria

14-22th April 2009



Mheimideh - the jewel of the Euphrates. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Syria started to attract some serious attention by birders with the discoveries of the relict Northern Bald Ibis colony at Palmyra in 2003 and the flocks of Sociable Plovers in 2005. The prospect of exciting and pristine birding, a country opening up to foreigners and a wealth of culture and history makes it an ideal destination for the more adventure-minded birder. A joint operation called the Syrian Wetland Survey as well as some British and Dutch groups have made major discoveries now the last years.

So the time was ripe for the first Swedish (or Scandinavian, for that matter) team to explore the avian wonders of Syria. Enjoy!

Participants

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Iraq Babbler is high on the target list!
Photo Lars Pettersson

Itinerary

April 14th - flights from Stockholm/Copenhagen to Istanbul in the afternoon. Evening and overnight in Istanbul.

April 15th - morning birding around the Bosphorus and flight to Damascus in the afternoon. Driving from Damascus to Palmyra in the evening, about 250 km. Two nights in Palmyra.

April 16th - full day in the semi-desert steppe north of Palmyra with the dam Wadi Abied and the ibis areas.

April 17th - morning and lunch hours around Palmyra (the town, Talila and Arak) and afternoon drive to Deir ez-Zor, 210 km. Evening at the Euphrates by the suspension bridge. Overnight in Deir ez-Zor.

April 18th - morning at Mheimideh, lunch and afternoon around Halabiyya. Evening drive to Aleppo, totally about 400 km during the day. Two nights at private place in Aleppo.

April 19th - full day around Sabkhat al-Jabbul.

April 20th - morning drive to Slenfeh and until the afternoon in the mountains there. Afternoon drive to Homs, dinner, and evening drive to Damascus, totally about 450 km during the day. Overnight in Damascus.

April 21st - morning drive to Deraa, 110 km, and until lunch around the Yarmuk gorge. Afternoon back to Damascus and evening in the city. Midnight transfer to the airport.

April 22nd - homebound flight departure at 03:50 am via Istanbul to Sweden.

Flights and visa

After some shopping around, we opted for Turkish Airlines to take us there. You must (most often) change flights from Sweden to Syria anyway, so why not do it in lovely Istanbul? At about 4.200 SEK return trip it was about the best deal we found. Tickets were booked online at www.thy.com in October (April is high season in this region!) and it worked fine, but be sure to bring the credit card you bought it with to the airport.

The Syrian Embassy in Stockholm provides a visa at 200 SEK and took just a few days to get, details and instructions can be seen at their website. This used to last for two weeks in the country, but now the stay seems extended to three months. Be sure NOT to have Israeli stamps in your passport and that it is valid at least six months on. The relation between the countries is quite frosty so it might be wise not to talk that much about it with Syrians, or mention if you have been there.

Arrangements

In Syria some different tactics are possible for the dealing with the logistics. Do it yourself (rent a car, book hotels, find your way around etc.) or have a local agency to arrange it and pay for their service. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Prices are likely to be higher by using an agency, on the other hand you can focus on the birds and have lodging and driver waiting for you. Car rental are available and the roads are overall good and with little traffic outside towns and cities.

Trans Asia and Orient Aroma are two companies that have worked with birding groups now the last years. I had Trans Asia to arrange the transport and hotels in Deir ez-Zor and Damascus.

Transports

I had arranged with a minibus/van through the local tour operator Trans Asia. The vehicle itself (a Hyundai H-1) turned out to be good for six birders, fairly comfortable and new with driver and guide in the front seat. Luggage space good for six backpacks, scopes and tripods. Although not suited for off road driving, it could still manage at most places f.ex. the ibis sites at Palmyra, around Sabkhat al-Jabbul and other dirt tracks.

One potential obstacle with this arrangement is the driver not being used to birdwatchers and their special “needs”; unexpected stops along the road, early mornings, long driving hours, bad roads and some long waiting if interesting birds appear. Our driver this time made quite some problems on these points and our guide had a hard time trying to make him drive and stop as we wanted. **So if you use a driver make sure he is prepared for this and preferably had dealt with birders before.** This problem is of course avoided by going with an organized bird trip with a tour company.

This part of the arrangements can be costly and some bargaining is called for. Please contact me for info on prices, deals and suggestions.



Right out there in the field! Our van that took us around most of the country in less than a week. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Accomodation

Both budget and some 4-5* hotels are available along the route. Prices seem to have been going up in Syria lately and especially during high season (f.ex. mid-April when also birding is very good...) they can be higher than expected.

* In Palmyra there are a number of options. I had one of the Palmyra bird guides to book a cheap place called New Afqa Hotel. We paid 20 USD/person/night in double rooms. The standard is simple and basic, but after some asking and

complaining, we had at least clean sheets, hot water and some breakfast packages for the morning in the field. But I can only recommend it for birders used to staying at cheap and stained places, not for tour groups, couples etc.

* In Deir ez-Zor we stayed at Ziad Hotel, used by birders several times before and recommended. After a day in field it was wonderful with clean spacious rooms, quiet location and nice and helpful reception. We paid about 26 USD/person/night.

* For Aleppo I don't have any info since we stayed two nights at a private place through friends of mine in Sweden. Quite an experience to live in a local neighbourhood with evening markets, kebab stalls and a vibrant and colourful street life.

* In Damascus there is plenty to choose among. We opted again for a known birders place, the superbly located Sultan Hotel. It is just by the main junction at the Hejaz train station, just a walk down the street to the magnificent Old City. Rooms with good standard and clean showers, the reception has a small lounge and some good info on the city. Price in mid-April at 35 USD/person/night.

Guides

Please make use of and support the bird guides from Palmyra Society! This NGO seems to be genuinely and actively working for the environment and to promote this in Syria. Many sites are in dire need of protection and help and through a group like this, I believe visiting birders can help and contribute. I had been in contact with Ahmed Abdallah, but since he could not be with us, we were very lucky to have Adeeb Assad as our guide for the trip. He is an absolutely outstanding man and does a great job among the villagers at many sites to raise awareness. He is also very good-hearted, hospitable, charming and a perfect company on a trip like this.

The society now are also training young followers of Adeeb and hopefully they can work with future groups. Please cooperate with them and support the fledgling nature conservation movement in Syria. The need our help. Visit www.palmyrasociety.org

A guide that can be used and that will be happy to accompany visiting birders in southernmost Syria is Yousef Ali Alzaoby. He is active in the Suweida and Deraa regions and tries to keep both the deserts in the far south east as well as the border region with Israel (including the scenic Yarmuk gorge) under watch. The lake in the village of Mzerib has Clamorous Reed Warbler and the Yarmuk gorge its Long-billed Pipits, those are the most known species here. Yousef speaks good english and can meet up in f.ex. Deraa and can arrange most things for one or several days. His email is dqrz@hotmail.com

Problems and hassles

Things in general went very well and the country and its people are a wonderful experience. If you are prepared for travelling in the Middle East and have done your homework, you will have a great time. To have a guide is a guarantee to avoid some of the problems that might happen to the independent traveller. Some things to keep in mind:

- cash is king. Bring cash to see you through most of the trip, pay some things from home if you can. We had some trouble getting money from ATM's that were either absent (Palmyra), not working (Deir ez-Zor) or not cooperating with some of our cards (Homs). US dollars were still, after the financial turbulence, accepted with no problems at hotels and for the vehicle rental. Otherwise Syrian pounds (SYP) should be used.

- our passports were asked for by some guard/officer on northwestern shore of Sabkhat al-Jabbul. Adeeb managed to talk him out of it after waving some of our passports in front of him. Otherwise no problems with the authorities, basically no checkpoints and no security matters whatsoever.

- the Syrians are very friendly, helpful, generous, smiling and incredibly hospitable. Our encounters with the locals were among the highlights of the trip, especially on the countryside in the Euphrates Valley. The only place where some hassle and "hey mister wanna buy?" can be expected are, of course, by the touristy (if any place in Syria can be labelled that) areas f.ex. in Damascus Old City.

Trip diary

Tuesday April 14th

Three of us flew in from Copenhagen (living in southern Sweden) and the other three from Stockholm. We all gathered at the airport in Istanbul in the afternoon and arranged for a transfer van to the city centre and a hostel called Sultan Hostel in Sultanahmet. I had stayed there before but this time it was a bit lively and backpacker-dense, but we stayed there for the one night. Me and Lars got the room just above the bar and had to squeeze ear plugs in to get some sleep. Next time another place...

In the evening we went out for a walk in the legendary city and saw Hagia Sofia, the Blue Mosque and soaked up some oriental atmosphere. A local restaurant had the first kebabs for the trip and a cold Efes beer, nice! Afterwards we went to a water pipe café and felt that we had had some really cultural last hours this day.

Wednesday April 15th

We opted for an early rise, this our first morning, and gathered outside the hostel entrance. Now just before sunrise it was overcast and chilly indeed, not much warmer than an April morning in Sweden. We walked the small alleys down to the shoreline where the road runs next to the Sea of Marmara. Not many birds to be seen, *Black-headed* and *Yellow-legged Gulls* and *Great Cormorants* were

patrolling the coast and the *Alpine Swifts* were already on the gloomy sky. But after a while some more interesting stuff started to appear as we walked further in towards the city centre. Dense flocks of *Yelkouan Shearwaters*, looking more like large waders or Teals than seabirds, passed low over the surface out on the straight. Among the cormorants were also some Shags, giving good comparative views.

A local ferry ride across to the Asian side is an experience not to be missed, birder or not. We crammed in with the locals, had a cup of tea and a sesame bread and admired the waters separating the two continents. The flocks of shearwaters were coming nice and close and out there were also some *Mediterranean Gulls*, both adults and some 2cy birds. Exciting was also a pale morph *Arctic Skua* harassing the gulls further out.



Hundreds of Yelkouan Shearwaters are streaming past the ferries on the Bosphorus. Photo Lars Pettersson

Returning to the Eminönü pier, we walked through the charming city back to the hostel, had breakfast and sorted our things out. We had booked a transfer bus to take us to the airport and after some traffic jams we arrived there in good time. Check-in went smooth and spending some time on this fine airport was no problem, considering what we had waiting for us! A neat two-hour flight heading southeast, seeing the Bekaa Valley and snow covered peaks on the approach, and we landed in Damascus at about 4:30 pm. The birds did not let us wait long as a *Chukar* was standing next to the runway!

Passport control took a while, as is customary in this region. But all our luggage was there and the driver was waiting with a fine Hyundai minivan so off we went towards Damascus, yihaa! The weather had been a bit windy and dusty, so not the heat we expected. We sorted out the payment for the vehicle and sped off towards the northeast and the 250km drive to Palmyra. The desert was vast and empty and apart from a pause for tea at “Baghdad Café” (near the turnoff for this infamous city, the Iraqi border was less than 150 km away) the drive was uneventful and we arrived at Palmyra about 9pm. Here we met our guide Adeb Assad at the lobby and planned for the first day in the field tomorrow.

Thursday April 16th

There is usually no problem getting up at first light during a birding trip. The worries about wind and dust was comforted as we met outside the lobby and it was a calm and fine morning. We drove north from the town, towards the hills and the dam (called Sed in Arabic) Wadi Abied which is just a few km's and signposted from Palmyra. As the road winded away through the dry, semi-desert hills birds started to appear along the road. Migrant *Northern* and *Black-eared Wheatears* and together feeding by the road side, both *Trumpeter Finches* and *Bar-tailed Desert Lark*.

The views over the vast and arid plains were really pretty now in the low morning sun and we were happy and in a great mood to finally be birding in Syria. On the last stretch of road before seeing the dam in the distance, we discovered a flock of very handsome *Cream-coloured Coursers*. The flying flock in the morning sun, just amazing. We proceeded up to the reservoir and were happy to see a sign saying “Bald Ibis protected area - no hunting”. At least something to get bird conservation underway. After a short scan here we went on to the other side and based ourselves on a small headland with great views over the dam, the scrubs and the surrounding mountains.

This site now in migration time was so rich in species that we were totally awed. Such a small area but with an incredible variation in birds: a good selection of dabbling ducks and *Black-necked Grebes* on the water, flocks of waders (including *Marsh* and *Curlew Sandpiper*) on the shoreline and 1000+ swallows and swifts swarming over it. We found both *Alpine* and *Little Swifts*, *Crag Martin* and *Red-rumped Swallows* among their more common relatives. Strange calls came from *Red-billed Choughs* passing overhead and both *Little* and *Spotted Crake* were feeding by the muddy scrubs and patches of reed near our view point. The tamarisk stands and scrubs were searched through and one after the other, interesting birds showed up: *Citrine Wagtail*, *Nightingale*, *Great Reed Warbler*, *Wryneck*, *Bluethroat*, *Ortolan Bunting* and *Menetriés Warbler*. *Levant Sparrowhawks* took off from their roost and were later in morning followed by a great stream of raptors, some giving excellent views: several *Montague's* and one *Pallid Harrier*, many *Lesser Spotted Eagles* and both *Short-toed*, *Booted* and *Golden Eagle*, *Long-legged Buzzard* and some 150 *Steppe Buzzards*.



Wadi Abied from the little headland. Excellent habitat for a variety of migrants. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Nearing lunch and with the sun beating down on us, the raptor passage had ceased and we decided to move on towards the Northern Bald Ibis area. Adeeb first wanted to try at the breeding cliffs, so after persuading the driver to negotiate the bumpy tracks with our minivan, we headed out in the semi-desert. *Tawny Pipits* and many *Whinchats* along the road, and after a while we saw the first *Temminck's Larks*, nice and close. Otherwise the density of birds decreased immediately as we left the area around the dam. An area with grass and herbs was searched through, yielding a flock of *Greater Short-toed Larks*, our first *Hoopoe Larks*, *Marsh Harrier* and a *Long-legged Buzzard* in the distance.

We stopped on the plain under the ibis cliffs and scanned the steep rock face for the star attraction, but none was to be seen. Small caves and cracks were carefully checked, as were the empty nests from the last year's breeding. Gusts of wind picked up suddenly and swirling dust was approaching, so we took cover in the car and started to make our way back. A short sandstorm rushed in and was followed by rain, quite unexpected in this dry place. According to Adeeb, the ibises might be feeding at another site, so despite the rain we tried to head out there, with a protesting driver. The crust of the semi-desert had turned in to slippery mud, and we saw our ibis chances diminished quite a lot. On a hill crest some 2 km down the track, we stopped and Adeeb went out in the rain and scanned with his binoculars. Unbelievably and very relieving, he soon called for us; "The ibises are here!". We scrambled out and, using the open trunk of the van as rain cover, managed to find the three *Northern Bald Ibises* in the scope, very distant. Great work Adeeb!



A solemn feeling seeing half the world's wild Northern Bald Ibises outside Morocco. Photo Lars Petterson

The rain soon ceased and the sun broke through, viewing the ibises got better now, but still at least a kilometre away. A flock of waders flew by and landed on the steppe, they turned out to be about 25 *Greater Sandplovers*! They and 10 *Cream-coloured Coursers* and several *Hoopoe Larks* showed brilliantly and we were happy indeed. We then spend the last hour of daylight at Wadi Abied and walked along the tamarisk stands at the shore. *Levant Sparrowhawks*, *Nightingale*, 4 *Egyptian Vultures* and some warblers in the scrubs were seen. Returning to Palmyra we had a "home-cooked" dinner at the hotel with some decent local food (and the compulsory French fries of course) and summed up and magnificent day with over 90 species.

Friday April 17th

We gathered outside by 6am and felt a fairly strong wind over the town. The plan now was to visit some places in and around Palmyra (one of which has had the first Namaqua Doves for Syria recently) before heading for Deir ez-Zor and the Euphrates. We were accompanied from now on by a team of young disciples of Adeeb from the nature conservation group Palmyra Society. Three young men that seemed enthusiastic and interested (but on some occasions of course, they were just...young men) and we had a thoroughly good time with them during the trip.

Our first stop was by the plantations and olive groves on the southern outskirts of the town where the doves have been seen. A good start was a pair of *Desert Finches* feeding by the road side. The chilly wind made bird discoveries tricky, but we searched our way through the area. *Woodchat* and *Red-backed Shrikes*,

several *Menetriés Warblers*, flocks of *Turtle Doves* and *Golden Oriole* put in appearances. We soon decided to move on and drove slowly along a small road just east of the town, near the hills. Here among the few scrubs and turfs were many *Northern* and *Black-eared Wheatears*, many *Whinchats* and quite surprisingly, a male *Barred Warbler* trying to hide in a knee-high bush.

No matter how focused on birds you might be, some things are worth your time even on a trip like this. The graeco-roman temples and settlements were quite impressive and we took a while to wander among the columns and portals in this vast ruin city from the first centuries AD. No birds in particular were seen, others have had Mourning Wheatear and Little Owl here. We had breakfast with our new friends the Syrian part of the team, introducing us to the art of eating beans, mushrooms and *tamiyya* with bread, quite an experience.



The trading city of Palmyra flourished in the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Eager to get on with finding migrating birds, we loaded the van at the hotel and left Palmyra in the late morning. Driving east from the city and turning of at the sign to the Talila bio-reserve, almost colliding with a *Cream-coloured Cursor*, we stopped by the stand of trees and few bushes at the gate to the reserve. The wind tore in the trees and it looked quite empty at first sight, but we soon learned otherwise. Several *Collared Flycatchers*, *Woodchat* and *Masked Shrike* and many *Lesser Whitethroats* were found and a lone *White Stork* passed just overhead. Two of us flushed a male *Namaqua Dove* at the western edge of the trees, by the fence, and others flushed a *Quail*. I had the luck of discovering a roosting *Scops Owl* that could be seen very close in a tree, typically next to the trunk.



The Scops Owl at Talila. Photo Lars Pettersson

We walked on, facing the wind, and searched our way along the trees up to the visitors centre. More *Collared Flycatchers*, a *Desert Finch* flying by and in a tiny “garden” of 10x8 meters, both *Great Reed* and *Olivaceous Warbler* trying to hide. The *Namaqua Dove* was also seen again over here. Amazed at the variety of birds just popping up anywhere in this place, we continued a few km’s east to the village/oasis of Arak, another known place for migrants. Local children acted like we were the highlight of this month and followed us closely during the visit. Happy little kids but just a tiny bit disturbing... Our first *Bee-eaters* passed over head and some warblers, *Redstarts* and more *Collared Flycatchers* were found. Lars called for attention and what he had found was indeed a male *Semi-collared Flycatcher*! Soon a female was also discovered. A *Grey Wagtail* landed by a little ditch and two *Black Storks* tried to head north in the wind. A cup of tea by the van offered by friendly villagers and we saddled up and left. Just outside the

villages Linus shouted for a stop and the bird on the ground less than 50m from the road was a handsome male *Rock Thrush*!

There is a 210km-drive to Deir ez-Zor and the terrain looks exciting at some places with vast areas of short grass on the steppe. Migration time warrants a search here indeed. We did not take our time to stop as we wanted to get to the river and the famous suspension bridge. Many *Marsh* and *Montague*'s (including several males) *Harriers* hawked low over the ground and *Hoopoe Lark* was logged from the van. An interesting wheatear called for a halt and as we looked more closely it turned out to be a fine female *Cyprus Pied Wheatear*! Excellent, and here also our first *Lesser Grey Shrike* on a road sign. Heading on east it started to rain again just before the city, but not stopping us from seeing another *Lesser Grey* and several *Woodchat Shrikes* and a *Booted Eagle* from the van.



The Euphrates south from the suspension bridge. Migrating Booted and Greater Spotted Eagle, Red-footed and Eleonora's Falcon along the river and Iraq Babbler and Little Crake in the reeds. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Deir ez-Zor turned out to be a busy little town, people having their day off and our appearance made heads turn as usual. The rain had ceased as we reached the river and parked just by the western foundation of the suspension bridge. This is a very popular spot for locals to walk, admire the view over the river or just hang around, so birding here was not a quiet and calm business. Nevertheless we enjoyed our time and felt excited to be by this biblical river and pristine birding grounds. One of the first birds to be noted was a bulbul-like call from the trees and as a bird appeared it was a *White-cheeked Bulbul*, just like that. It gave short but good views later on, just by this crowded junction. Target species no.1 safely

in our pocket, we hadn't hardly walked down to the fence overlooking the reed beds and played its call before a group of *Iraq Babblers* appeared and sat chipping and squeaking in the reeds 10 meters away!

Two mega WP species in less than five minutes, one can easily say that the evening sun in our faces on that bridge over the Euphrates was unusually warming. An eagle came drifting north over the river and we saw the right id details of a subadult *Great Spotted Eagle*, very nice. A male *Little Crake* showed in the edge of the reeds and flocks of *Bee-eaters* moved north as well. Perhaps we have the rain in the afternoon to thank for what happened next, it was quite amazing and something I have rarely seen before. Lots of insects here or just birds taking up there migration after the rain? There were also thousands of *Barn Swallows* swarming over the river. An adult *Peregrine* was discovered, hunting up and down along the river. Soon several *Hobbies* joined in and there were other falcons there too. At least one male *Red-footed Falcon* was seen good, sometimes perching in a tree top. A large falcon caused some chaos among us as we realized what it was; a dark morph *Eleonora's Falcon*! All these falcons could be studied for a good while, sometimes in the same airspace with excellent comparison possible. What an amazing end of a great birding day in the Near Orient.



Some birds need more work than others to see well, such as this Little Crake. Photo Lars Pettersson

We drove into the town and found Ziad Hotel as inviting and comfortable as experienced by other birders. A walk along the central streets was fascinating and basically free from Western influence. People were curious and friendly and

showed us a restaurant called Ugarit where we had grilled kebab, salads, hoummos and bread, very tasty. That night we fell asleep quite easily.

Saturday April 18th

Early rise as usual and we met Adeeb and the driver outside the hotel. A load of buses had appeared outside and groups of city-dressed people were walking up towards the Armenian Church next to our hotel. We talked to a young man who said that today was the day of remembering the masses of Armenians that were killed in the early 20th century. They had left Aleppo at night to reach to here for the ceremony.

After this cultural experience we left Deir ez-Zor and headed north in the fertile river valley. Driving east of the river we found ourselves in old Mesopotamia with thoughts drifting to ancient civilizations. After about half an hour we turned off by the village of Sfeira Tathani and in front of us was the wetland named after the other village in the area, Mheimideh. We had expected a good birding place but were not really prepared for the beautiful marshland/lagoon and the rich variety of birds that was played out so close to us.



We hope that growing interest and awareness from the coming generation can help save this amazing place. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

From the elevated causeway cutting through the wetland we had great views and just stood here well over an hour, taking it all in; *Marbled* and *Ferrugineous Ducks*, *Garganeys* and *Pintails* in summer plumages, a male *White-headed Duck*, *Glossy Ibises* and *Purple Herons*, pairs of *Purple Swamphens*, a *Terek Sandpiper* among other waders, *Gull-billed* and *Whiskered Terns* hawking around and *Iraq*

Babblers in the reeds. *Collared Pratincoles* and *Black-winged Stilts* moved about, vocal *Pied Kingfishers* and the whirr of *Savi's Warbler* from the reeds, where in the edges both *Little Bittern* and *Little Crake* gave short glimpses.

The local children were with us and Adeeb had bird books, pens and paper for them. Jonas supported with a cap from his company and we shared our breakfast bread and jam. A look in the scope seemed to be a highlight! Adeeb does invaluable work among the villagers to raise the awareness about the birds and prevent damage to the site. We walked a bit to the western corner of the site with several pairs of *White-tailed Plovers* breeding, close views were given. We could also add to our list of the day a male *Citrine Wagtail* flying over and both *Short-toed* and *Booted Eagle* on the sky.



Breeding White-tailed Lapwings at Mheimideh. Photo Lars Pettersson

The family of some of the kids had invited us to their home for tea, so we went there and chairs were placed on the yard in the little village. Another “dust-and-rain storm” was building up in the south so we took cover in the main house and had tea, bread and yoghurt from our hospitable hosts. One of the kids had taken of with Johan's binoculars so it took some waiting before he returned, with the Swarowski in one piece...

Travelling north in the Euphrates valley, we had some *Gull-billed Terns*, *Montague's Harriers* and *Lesser Grey Shrike* from the van. A dry field was scanned and held small parties of both *Temminck's* and *Short-toed Larks* and *Tawny Pipits*. Great views over the flood plain as we stopped on high ground by the river, the

inundated expanses from the days before the dams upstream could easily be imagined. A simple military bridge was used to cross the river at Halabiyya and here was the famous Roman fortress on the west bank. We drove a few km south of the ruin and parked by a small farmer settlement. The terrain west of here, barren and rocky hillsides and small valleys, looked promising for our target species, the See-see Partridge. Again dust and wind was picking up, but on the other hand it forced down the only *Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters* of the trip as four birds passed overhead.

We spread out and scrambled up the rocky hillsides, watching our step. After a while we flushed to *See-see* 's, disappearing over a crest. It took some search-and-flush, search-and-flush before we had seen them decently, but never on the ground. As the weather threatened to go really bad, we made our way back to the van and had a meal on the ground with the boys, this time tuna and tomato in pita bread. Two *Cuckoo* 's, male and female *Montague* 's *Harrier* and a *Woodchat Shrike* defied the dust and headed north.



Close encounter with a Lesser Kestrel, the 6th of seven species of falcon seen on the trip. Photo Lars Pettersson

The small road hugged closely to the river as we proceeded north up to the cliffs some 10-12 km north of the fortress. This site is known for the colony of *Lesser Kestrels* breeding just by the road. So we parked there and enjoyed the falcons, at least 55 of them, perching, swooping and just gliding around their business. Green fields and afternoon sun, this country again provided very nice settings for

birding. *Booted Eagle*, a flock of *Night Herons* and a pair of *Long-legged Buzzards* entertained as well.

We had some driving to do before reaching Aleppo this night, but the river valley and its charming villages and birding grounds kept us longer than we had planned. A small lake, or more looking like inundated fields, by the village of Mustaha demanded a visit. We walked down along the fields and scanned the area and before long we had the villagers there with cups of tea and smiles all around. Flocks of waders gathered in the evening, well over 500, mainly *Little Stints* and *Ruff*. 20 *Black-tailed Godwits* landed and both *White-tailed Plovers*, *Marsh Sandpiper* and *Collared Pratincole* were present.



Evening tea with great birdlife and friendly locals in the Euphrates valley, an awesome experience. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

The sunset approached as we turned west towards Aleppo, more than 200 km away, it felt a bit heavy right then. It took some 2 1/2 hours of dull driving before we entered the big city and tried to find our way to our lodging for the coming two nights, the parents of a friend of mine living in Sweden. Eventually we arrived in the bustling neighbourhood and our host met us and we walked to their apartment. After leaving our equipment we went back out for some late dinner (it was now nearing 11pm...) and had some burgers and fries at a street stall. Falling asleep after this intense day was not a problem either.

Sunday April 19th

Waking up by the mosque's call to prayer just before dawn was something different than the alarm clock and a part of a trip in the Middle East. We loaded ourselves and some breakfast into the van and rolled out of a sleeping Aleppo towards the east. This day full attention was given to the huge lake and wetland of Sabkhat al-Jabbul, about 30 km southeast of the city. A small road took us down to the little village called Jabbul, we stopped along the green fields and admired the beautiful spring morning with *Little Owl*, calling *Quail* and *Corn Buntings* singing from the wires.

At the northern edge of this huge lake, by the village giving it its name, are salt works and from here a causeway/dyke is running southwest towards a prominent hill called Tell Jibbrin. To the east of this dyke are reed beds, lagoons and shallow shorelines, all teeming with birds. We worked our way slowly out on the dyke and ended up at the hill overlooking what felt like a forgotten dreamland in all directions.

On the surface were thousands of *Coots* with smaller numbers of *Great Crested Grebes*, *Red-crested Pochards*, *Ferrugineous* and *White-headed Ducks* with hundreds of *White-winged*, *Whiskered* and *Little Terns* hawking above them. *Purple Herons* and *Great White Egrets* took off from the reeds as we came and both *Little* and *Great Bitterns* gave short views. The reed beds were alive with a cacophony of *Great Reed* and *Savi's Warblers*, *Water Rails*, several parties of *Bearded* and *Penduline Tits* and *Iraq Babblers*, breeding *Dead Sea Sparrows* and loud *Little Grebes*.



View south from Tell Jibbrin over Sabkhat al-Jabbul. Oversized and underexplored bird haven. So far.
Photo Tomas Haraldsson

As we neared Tell Jibbrin we scrambled up the little hill and had fantastic views over the area. On the salty side, the mud flats were crawling with *Little Stints*, an estimated 4.000. Colonies of *Slender-billed Gulls* and *Greater Flamingos* were seen further out in the haze and the numbers of *Purple Swamphens*, *Squacco Herons* and *Gull-billed Terns* increased steadily. Adeeb wanted to show us another part of the wetland so with the van we went back towards the village and around to the north/north eastern part of the wetland and posted ourselves on a little headland. The sun was now high on the sky and for pretty much the first time of the trip, shorts was the appropriate wear! Careful scanning of the edge of the reeds revealed, at last, our only *Moustached Warbler* of the trip, a pair of *Little Crakes* and some *Kingfishers*. Johan called out as a pretty male *Red-footed Falcon* passed over us.

We were now accompanied by a local birder named Abu Qalil and he invited us to a house in village for tea and a chat. Great to see that the birds of this site have their protectors and we wrote words of appraise in the guest book that he had. In the afternoon we drove thorough villages and farmlands to the north western part of the lake. Everywhere we stopped curious locals came talking and Adeeb did again great work in promoting bird conservation. The consumption of tea on this trip will last me through the coming months, that's for sure... We walked down to the shoreline with the low afternoon sun in our back and had again great views over the muddy shorelines and islets further out. Great numbers of *Black-winged Stilts*, *Spur-winged Plovers*, various *Tringa* waders and *Ruff* gave the opportunity to pick out single *Curlew Sandpipers*, *Temminck's Stints* and a tight flock of nearly 30 *Marsh Sandpipers*. *Collared Pratincoles* roosted and a single *Shelduck* was added to the trip list.



Collared Pratincoles were present at several wetlands during the trip. Photo Lars Pettersson

We summed up an impressive wetland day and headed back to Aleppo. Our gentleman of a host greeted us and insisted that for dinner he would offer us shish kebab, salads and bread brought to his home. We accepted and it tasted excellent, the meat more juicy and spicy than any back home. The possibility of exploring the medieval old town was skipped this time, we opted for catching up on some sleep.

Monday April 20th

This morning the plan was to get up in the mountains along the coast and get some high altitude species. I might have been a bit over-optimistic about driving time and distance since the village we wanted to, Slenfeh, was quite distant. Anyway, that seemed to be the best option and a place Adeeb knew from before, so we started rolling westwards in the morning. Densely inhabited regions, we crossed the fertile lowland know as the Ghat and started the climb up the serpentine roads towards Slenfeh at nearly 1500m above sea level.

After about two hours drive we were high on the mountain slopes with magnificent vistas over the lowlands and exciting scrubs, and flowering meadows to explore. We joked about this day as “Operation Irania”, hinting at the target bird, as we got out from the van at a chance stop a few km’s before Slenfeh. Unbelievably, one of the first birds to be noted among the scrubs and meadows was a displaying male *White-throated Robin* (or Irania)! It took a while before we had all seen it well since it moved around a bit. At least four different birds were

found here in the two hours visit. Several *Orphean Warblers* were singing with *Whitethroats*, *Rock Bunting*, many *Greenfinches* and some male *Black-eared Wheatears* and *Golden Oriole* flying over. We walked along the road upwards and also noted *Rock Nuthatch* and a *Chukar* on the rocky slopes further up.



Habitat just north east of Slenfeh for White-throated Robin. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Happy with the jewel of a bird safely in our pocket, we went on and stopped at a small shack Adeeb knew from before. It was lunch time and from nowhere a lady made some sort of pizza bread in a small oven and we filled our stomachs with feta cheese and thyme *pide*. Adeeb encouraged all visitors and tourists to support this place that was also a nature reserve for the cedar woods still remaining in the area. Four species of tits (but not Sombre) and *Rock Nuthatch* were here and in the distance we saw the Mediterranean Sea. The oak woods that might be interesting were unfortunately given little time, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Olive-tree Warbler have been seen in the area. We used the truck to get up to the cedar reserve and did a short hike, very unproductive apart from pretty *Rock Buntings*, singing *Coal Tits* and our only *Woodlarks* for the trip.



There were shouts of joy and high-fives as the White-throated Robin showed like this. Photo Lars Petterson

Having quite some driving to do, we turned downhill and wended our way to the floor of the Ghat and on to Homs which took quite a while, small roads and several villages. In Homs, in the early evening, we separated from Adeeb and his crew, it was almost sentimental as we had grown quite fond of this amazing and good-hearted man. We managed to withdraw cash for the first time of the trip, removed a huge (at least I thought so) tick from my neck and had falafel at a street stall. A *Merlin* surprised us, passing overhead.

From Homs the highway down to Damascus is an easy drive, so the 160 km went quite well even though it took some two hours. We arrived at Sultan Hotel in heart of the city at 10pm, very close to the old town and good located. With many hours in the van today and about a kilo of falafel in our bellies, it was not more than taking a shower and put your head on the pillow.

Tuesday April 21st

Today we would separate as Johan and Linus would continue into Jordan for four days there. So by birding in the southwest of the country they would be almost there, and it fitted our plans well. I had arranged with Yousef Ali Alzaoby to be with us in the Yarmuk gorge area, a known site for the exclusive Long-billed Pipit. Leaving Damascus just after 6am the fine highway took us to the town of Deraa in just 1 ½ hours time. Red fertile earth with vineyards (!), olive trees and farming

villages was the setting, with a snow covered Mount Hermon (Jebel as-Sheikh in Arabic) in the distance.

Two *Calandra Larks* flew across the road as we entered Deraa and to our surprise, we had to break and look at a male *Namaqua Dove* just by the road side. As far as I know, the only Syrian records are from Palmyra. Yousef tried to take us into the little lake at Mzerib where Clamorous Reed Warbler is found, but the gates were closed. He also showed us a small dam that was pretty much empty, *Yellow-vented Bulbuls* and a *Red-backed Shrike* were noted. Access to the dramatic but military sensitive (we were close to the Israeli border) Yarmuk gorge turned out to be tricky and Yousef had little success convincing the guards. We stopped 200m before the checkpoint, got out and in short time had seen *Blue Rock Thrush*, *Cretzschmar's Buntings* and a loud *White-breasted Kingfisher* by the caldera-like canyon.



Beautiful Yarmuk gorge, this spot had territorial Long-billed Pipit and Cretzschmar's Buntings on the slopes and Black-headed Bunting, White-breasted Kingfisher and Palestine Sunbird by the valley floor. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

But the morning was getting late and the sun obviously stronger here in the south, so we were eager to find a road down in the gorge and some pipit grounds. Finally Yousef, with the help of some villagers, found an access road and we rolled down to the creek at the bottom. Dry hillsides with grass and rocks looked promising and we walked slowly along the road going west near the creek. *Cetti's*

Warblers, *Palestine Sunbirds* flying by and a fine male *Black-headed Bunting* were new encounters, another *White-breasted Kingfisher* showed up and soon we heard a suspicious pipit call from the hillside... Searching hard on protruding rocks and cliffs we soon discovered the source of the call, a *Long-billed Pipit*! At least two birds were present, flying on and off, sometimes chasing each other. In the increasing heat some raptors showed up and headed north, including both a young *Egyptian Vulture* and the only *Steppe Eagle* for the trip, a pretty 2cy bird.

Now nearing the end of our adventures, pretty exhausted and dazed with all experiences, bird encounters and the heat, we retreated to Deraa and had some lunch and soft drinks at a café in the centre. Linus and Johan were eager to head on to Jordan so we tried to sort them out with taxi driver and border crossing procedures. After some hassle and bureaucracy they went off and we later heard that everything went well for them. The rest of us joined Yousef to his home in a nearby village and took some rest before returning to Damascus in the late afternoon.

Our flight back home would depart in an uncomfortable 03:50 am so we had the whole evening to spend in the city. Wandering the streets and souks of the charming old town, doing some shopping and just soak up the last of Syria. I myself visited a *hamam* and had a good bath, a shave the old fashioned way by a barber and a last cup of, you got it, tea. The van took us to the airport by midnight and the check-in went fairly smooth. We were in a zombie-like state in the early hours as we boarded the flight. Three hours change in Istanbul and we landed in Copenhagen or Stockholm respectively just before lunch on the 22nd.



The team on the last day in Syria, from the left Agne Johansson, Tomas Haraldsson, Jonas Starck, Johan Joelsson, our Yarmuk-guide Yousef Ali Alzaoby, Linus Karlsson and Lars Pettersson. Photo Mustafa the Driver

List of species

We noted about 210 species on the trip, a count we are very satisfied with. Not having expected this variety and with little time spend at f.ex. the woodlands in the north west, we believe the count can be even higher during a, say, ten day trip aimed at species.

In bold type are the more tricky/target/surprising species.

Common Shelduck / Gravand

1 flying along the NW shore of Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Wigeon / Bläsand

A male at Wadi Abied on April 16th, a pair at Mheimideh on April 18th and a male at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Mallard / Gräsand

A male at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 4m1f at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Pintail / Stjärtand

c. 5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 20 at Mheimideh on April 18th and c. 10 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Gadwall / Snatterand

A pair at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Shoveler / Skedand

c. 40 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 40 at Mheimideh on April 18th and only a single male at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Garganey / Årta

c. 25 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 25 at Mheimideh on April 18th and 3 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Common Teal / Kricka

c. 5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and c. 20 at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Northern Pochard / Brunand

2 f at Mheimideh on April 18th and 3 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Ferruginous Duck / Vitögd dykand

c. 15 at Mheimideh on April 18th and similar numbers at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Red-crested Pochard / Rödhuvad dykand

c. 30 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Marbled Teal / Marmorand

c. 25 at Mheimideh on April 18th.

White-headed Duck / Kopparand

A male at Mheimideh on April 18th and c. 20 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Surprisingly tricky at Mheimideh, only this one male. We were told that hundreds had been counted at Sabkhat al-Jabbul in March.

Chukar / Berghöna

1 at Damascus airport on April 15th and 1 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Quail / Vaktel

1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th and 2 with territorial call at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



Habitat for See-see Partridge, just south of the Halabiyya Fortress. Search-and-flush, search-and-flush is the method of choice. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

See-see Partridge / Visselhöna

2 pairs at Halabiyya on April 18th.

We drove just south of the castle and walked up in the rugged terrain just above a small farmer settlement. After some searching we flushed the birds several times from the rocky slopes, they were quite vocal also. Impossible to see on the ground!

Alectoris / Ammoperdix sp. / hönsfågel sp.

A short glimpse of two pale sandy-coloured grouses/partridges in the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st. Only seen by one of us and too short to tell, but the location in far south western Syria is interesting. Sand Partridge?

Little Grebe / Smådopping

Common or very common at visited wetlands with at least 25 at Mheimideh on April 18th and many (tens of pairs) at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Great Crested Grebe / Skäggdopping

4 (including active nest) at Mheimideh on April 18th and very common at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Black-necked Grebe / Svarthalsad dopping

A pair each at Wadi Abied on April 16th and Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Great Cormorant / Storskarv

1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



Syrian reed beds are alive with birds and calls like here at Mheimideh, Little Bitterns. Photo Lars Pettersson

Little Bittern / Dvärrördröm

At least 3 at Mheimideh on April 18th and at least 4 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Probably rather common if you work on it, we spend little time on this.

Great Bittern / Rördröm

3 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th. Seen flying over the reeds, none heard.

Night Heron / Natthäger

4 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1 at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th, 8 migr. along the Euphrates on April 18th and at least one breeding pair at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Squacco Heron / Rallhäger

4 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1 at Palmyra on April 17th, several at Mheimideh and at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and at least 10 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Cattle Egret / Kohäger

1 at Palmyra on April 17th and one breeding pair at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Little Egret / Silkeshäger

2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 5 at Mheimideh and 2 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and at least 40 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Great White Egret / Ägretthäger

2 at Mheimideh on April 18th and c. 15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Grey Heron / Gråhäger

2 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, 4 at Mheimideh and 1 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Purple Heron / Purpurhäger

2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 3 + a migr. flock of 22 at Mheimideh and 2 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and 15-20 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Glossy Ibis / Bronsibis

5 at Mheimideh on April 18th and 6 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



Northern Bald Ibis north of Palmyra, one of this years six birds present. Photo Lars Pettersson

Northern Bald Ibis / Eremitibis

3 adult birds at Palmyra on April 16th.

Found during bad weather (dust storm followed by rain) and with some difficulties at the feeding grounds, NOT at the breeding site. All thanks to a hard working and determined Adeeb.

Greater Flamingo / Större flamingo

Some 2.000 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

We were told that some 6-7.000 birds were breeding this year, most of them further out in the lake.

White Stork / Vit stork

1 migr. low in strong wind at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th and 5 near Homs on April 20th.

Black Stork / Svart stork

2 migr. at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Black Kite / Brun glada

c. 25 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 50 at Deir ez-Zor plus a few along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th, c. 10 at Halabiyya on April 18th and c. 20 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Egyptian Vulture / Smutsgam

At least 4 + 1 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 2-3 cy migr. at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Short-toed Eagle / Ormörn

4 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1 at Mheimideh and 1 migr. at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Marsh Harrier / Brun kärrhök

3 + 3 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 10 migr. along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th, several in the Euphrates Valley during April 18th and c. 15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Montague´s Harrier / Ängshök

4 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 5m migr. along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th, at least 5m3f in the Euphrates Valley during April 18th and at least 2m2f at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Our visit must have been close to the migration peak, it felt as if the numbers could have been much higher if time had been focused on this.

Montague´s - Pallid Harrier sp / stäpp-ängshök sp.

c. 15 seen along the roads during April 17-18th, most looked like and should have been Montague´s.



Coming low overhead at Wadi Abied, the only Pallid Harrier for the trip. Nice! Photo Lars Pettersson

Pallid Harrier / Stäpphök

1 2cy (f) migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

As expected, this species migrate earlier than Montague´s and should be scarce here in mid-April.

Sparrowhawk / Sparvhök

1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th and 1 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th.

Levant Sparrowhawk / Balkanhök

4 + 20 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1 at Arak, Palmyra and 2 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th and 1 at Deir ez-Zor on April 18th.

“Steppe Buzzard” / “Stäppvråk”

Common on migration but mainly singles or small groups. C. 150 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th was the only higher count.

Long-legged Buzzard / Örnvråk

3 around Wadi Abied/Palmyra during April 16th, 1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th and a pair at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Lesser Spotted Eagle / Mindre skrikörn

c. 15 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

This was the only occasion for raptor watch, we did not visit f.ex. Krak des Chevaliers and other places where raptor migration is known from.

Greater Spotted Eagle / Större skrikörn

1 2-3cy migr. at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Steppe Eagle / Stäppörn

1 2-3cy migr. at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Golden Eagle / Kungsörn

1 adult at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Booted Eagle / Dvärgörn

3 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1 migr. along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road and 1 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, 1 at Mheimideh and 2 migr. at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Osprey / Fiskgjuse

2 migr. at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Common Kestrel / Tornfalk

Fairly common.



Home visit at the Lesser Kestrels north of Halabiyya. Photo Lars Pettersson

Lesser Kestrel / Rödfalk

A breeding colony just north of Halabiyya with at least 55 birds on April 18th.

Merlin / Stenfalk

1f at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th and 1 flying over Homs city centre on April 20th.

Red-footed Falcon / Aftonfalk

1m at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th and 1m at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Hobby / Lärkfalk

At least 5 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th and 1 at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Eleonora´s Falcon / Eleonorafalk

1 dark morph at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Discovered during the “falcon bonanza” at the suspension bridge over the Euphrates. Rains and showers in the afternoon had ceased and migration picked up along the river in the evening. Thousands of swallows (and probably insects) could be the explanation for the presence of all these falcons, great comparisons and id studies could be done.

Peregrine / Pilgrimsfalk

1 adult at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Water Rail / Vattenrall

1 adult seen at Wadi Abied on April 16th and at least 5 heard at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Spotted Crake / Småfläckig sumphöna

1 adult seen at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Little Crake / Mindre sumphöna

1f at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 1m at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, 1m at Mheimideh on April 18th and a pair + 1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Moorhen / Rörhöna

Common at most visited bodies of water, from small pools to the Euphrates and myriads at Sabkhat al-Jabbul.

Coot / Sothöna

Common and numerous and wetlands and the Euphrates. Huge numbers at the northern, reed-fringed lagoons at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th with numbers easily into their thousands.

Purple Swamphen / Purpurhöna

2 pairs at Mheimideh on April 18th and at least 50 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Crane / Trana

1 migr. at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Black-winged Stilt / Stytlöpare

4-5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th, 2 at Palmyra and 1 at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th, c. 50 each at Mheimideh and the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and very common (500?) at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Avocet / Skärfläcka

2 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 20 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



One of the first bird encounters on the trip, a flock of Cream-coloured Coursers near Wadi Abied in the early morning. Photo Lars Pettersson

Cream-coloured Courser / Ökenlöpare

At least 10 near Wadi Abied during April 16th and 1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th.

Spur-winged Plover / Sporrvipa

1 pair at Wadi Abied on April 16th, c. 20 at Mheimideh on April 18th and many (10+) pairs at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

White-tailed Plover / Sumpvipa

At least 10 (incl. nesting) at Mheimideh and 4 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th.

Northern Lapwing / Tofsvipa

1 at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Collared Pratincole / Rödvingad vadarsvala

15 at Mheimideh and 1 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and 5 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Greater Sandplover / Ökenpipare

A flock of c. 25 near Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Possibly a migrating flock, they came in and landed on the steppe about 1 km south east of Wadi Abied after heavy rains in the afternoon.

Little Ringed Plover / Mindre strandpipare

2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 2 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Ringed Plover / Större strandpipare

1 at Palmyra on April 16th, 3 at Mheimideh and c. 10 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Kentish Plover / Svartbent strandpipare

c. 15 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 25 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Dunlin / Kärrsnäppa

1 each at Mheimideh and the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 30 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Curlew Sandpiper / Spovsnäppa

1 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Little Stint / Småsnäppa

Common at most visited areas with shallow waters, mainly in smaller flocks of up to 20. c. 200 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th. Very numerous on the mudflats near Tell Jibbrin at Sabkhat al-Jabbul with an estimated 4.000 on April 19th.

Temminck's Stint / Mosnäppa

c. 5 at Mheimideh on April 18th and c. 15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Common Snipe / Enkelbeckasin

A few each at most visited wetlands.

Ruff / Brushane

Together with Little Stint the most common wader encountered. The highest counts were at the Mustaha marsh with c. 300 on April 18th and Sabkhat al-Jabbul with c. 250 on April 19th.

Black-tailed Godwit / Rödspov

Singles at the visited wetlands with 20 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th.

Spotted Redshank / Svartsnäppa

2 at Mheimideh and 1 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and 4 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Redshank / Rödbena

2 at the Euphrates near Halabiyya on April 18th and 2 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Marsh Sandpiper / Dammsnäppa

4 at Mheimideh and 1 at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and c. 30 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Greenshank / Gluttsnäppa

c. 5 at both Mheimideh on April 18th and Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Wood Sandpiper / Grönbena

c. 15 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and a few each at the other wetlands.

Green Sandpiper / Skogssnäppa

c. 5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and similar numbers at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Common Sandpiper / Drillsnäppa

Singles at most visited waters, from small ponds to mighty rivers.



This field of view at Mheimideh had surprisingly a Terek Sandpiper (very few records in Syria) with Marsh Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank and other waders. Photo Tomas Haraldsson

Terek Sandpiper / Tereksnäppa

1 adult at Mheimideh on April 18th.

Red-necked Phalarope / Smalnäbbad simsnäppa

3 at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Slender-billed Gull / Långnäbbad mås

High numbers (1000+) and several small colonies (100-200 birds) at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Black-headed Gull / Skrattmås

4 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Lesser Black-backed Gull / Silltrut

3 migr. at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

larus sp.

5+7 migr. along the Euphrates on April 18th.

Gull-billed Tern / Sandtärna

3 at Mheimideh and several in the Euphrates valley during April 18th, c. 50 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th and 5 at Deraa on April 21st.

Caspian Tern / Skröntärna

1 pair at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Sandwich Tern / Kentsk tärna

At least 4 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Common Tern / Fisktärna

c. 5 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Little Tern / Småtärna

5-10 at Mheimideh on April 18th and common (200+) at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Whiskered Tern / Skäggtärna

c. 5 at Mheimideh on April 18th and very common (500+) at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



Hundreds of White-winged Black Terns mingled with other terns at Sabkhat al-Jabbul. Photo Lars Pettersson

White-winged Black Tern / Vitvingad tärna

Common at Sabkhat al-Jabbul with at least 250 on April 19th.

Black Tern / Svarttärna

At least 1 adult at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Stock Dove / Ringduva

1 at Palmyra and 2 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Collared Dove / Turkduva

Common.

Turtle Dove / Turturduva

Common on migration with many smaller flocks seen. An estimated total of c. 300 were around Palmyra and Arak on April 17th.

Laughing Dove / Palmduva

Common in towns and villages.



Just by the road side was this handsome Namaqua Dove. Photo Lars Pettersson

Namaqua Dove / Långstjärtsduva

1m at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th and 1m at Deraa on April 21st.

None found at the site on the outskirts of Palmyra town discovered by Adeeb recently. The bird in Deraa was discovered from the car as we entered the town from the east, feeding by the road side. First record in Syria away from Palmyra?

Common Cuckoo / Gök

2 at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Scops Owl / Dvärguv

1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th.

Day roost close to the trunk in a tree at the entrance to the reserve.

Little Owl / Minervauggla

1 near Ar-Raqqa on April 18th and 1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Alpine Swift / Alpseglare

c. 5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and a few singles recorded during the rest of the trip.

Common Swift / Tornseglare

Rather common with high numbers at some wetlands.

Pallid Swift / Blek tornseglare
c. 10 at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Little Swift / Stubbstjærtseglare
At least 5 at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Kingfisher / Kungsfiskare
1 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 3 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Pied Kingfisher / Gråfiskare
1 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, 5-6 at Mheimideh on April 18th and 5-6 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

White-breasted Kingfisher / Smyrnakungsfiskare
At least 2 at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Hoopoe / Härfågel
Rather common.

European Bee-eater / Biätare
2 migr. at Arak, Palmyra and 20+15 migr. at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, 20 migr. at Mheimideh on April 18th, otherwise a few singles along the road.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater / Grön biätare
4, seemingly on migration, at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Flying over the See-see area, forced low by heavy and dusty winds. Too early for this species to have arrived in numbers?

Wryneck / Göktyta
1 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Bar-tailed Desert Lark / Sandökenlärka
Seen at several places north of Palmyra during April 16th, totally at least 20 birds.
4-5 at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Hoopoe Lark / Härfågellärka
At least 6 north of Palmyra during April 16th, 1 at Talila, Palmyra and 1 along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th.

Greater Short-toed Lark / Korttålaräka
A flock of c.75 and several singing near the ibis cliffs, Palmyra on April 16th and c. 20 in the Euphrates valley on April 18th.

Crested Lark / Tofslärka
Common.

Wood Lark / Trädlärka
2 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Calandra Lark / Kalanderlärka
2 at Deraa on April 21st.



Fairly common north of Palmyra, the strikingly patterned Temminck's Lark. Photo Lars Pettersson

Temminck's Lark / Ökenberglärka

Seen at several places north of Palmyra during April 16th, totally at least 25 birds.
C. 10 in the Euphrates valley on April 18th.

Crag Martin / Klippsvala

At least 2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1 at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Sand Martin / Backsvala

Common on migration and especially numerous at Sabkhat al-Jabbul with thousands at the northern shoreline.

House Martin / Hussvala

Common.

Barn Swallow / Ladusvala

Common on migration with numbers well into their thousands at both Wadi Abied and Deir ez-Zor. The evening of April 17th saw thousands moving north along the Euphrates after the rain.

Red-rumped Swallow / Rostgumpssvala

Rather common but in low numbers together with other swallows and martins. A few at most sites with c. 30 at Wadi Abied on April 16th as the highest count.

Tawny Pipit / Fältpiplärka

2-3 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and c. 10 in the Euphrates valley on April 18th.

Long-billed Pipit / Långnäbbad piplärka

At least 2 (song and territorial behaviour) at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Probably a good stake-out for this exclusive species. See site description earlier in this report.

Tree Pipit / Trädpiplärka

Rather common migrant but in low numbers, a few at each site.

Red-throated Pipit / Rödstrupig piplärka

3-4 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and a few singles at other sites.

White Wagtail / Sädesärta

Common.

Gulärta / Yellow Wagtail

Rather common at wetlands and well vegetated areas. Mainly subspecies *feldegg* and *flava*.

Grey Wagtail / Forsärta

1 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and 1f at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Citrine Wagtail / Citronärta

2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and at least 1m at Mheimideh on April 18th.

White-cheeked Bulbul / Vitkindad bulbyl

At least 2 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th.

Heard directly as we stepped out of the car by the suspension bridge (west of the river) in the town and seen quite well later on. They seemed uncaring about the bustle of the town going underneath their trees.

Yellow-vented Bulbul / Levantbulbyl

3-4 both at Deraa and at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Trush Nightingale / Näktergal

1 at Wadi Abied on April 16th



Easier to see than at their breeding grounds, Common Nightingale in scrubs and oases. Photo Lars Pettersson

Common Nightingale / Sydnäktergal

Migrants seen around Palmyra with 3-4 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and similar numbers at both Talila and Arak on April 17th.

White-throated Robin / Vitstrupig näktergal

At least 4 (only males seen, territorial) at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Probably quite common in the right habitat up here, see site description earlier in this report.

Bluethroat / Blåhake

3 at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

Common Redstart / Rödstart

Rather common in the migrant rich areas around Palmyra on April 16-17th. Few records otherwise.

Whinchat / Buskskvätta

Common with especially a lot of migrants around Palmyra, tens both on April 16th and 17th.

Northern Wheatear / Stenskvätta

Appearance like Whinchat; common around Palmyra (where migrants are more exposed in the sparsely vegetated habitat) on April 16-17th and a few along the road otherwise.

Black-eared Wheatear / Medelhavsstenskvätta

Rather common (25+) around Palmyra on April 16-17th. Some singles along the road also. 2m at Slenfeh on April 20th and several at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Cyprus Pied Wheatear / Cypernstenskvätta

1f along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th.

Rock Thrush / Stentrast

1m at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Blue Rock Thrush / Blåtrast

At least 3 at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Cetti's Warbler / Cettisångare

Rather common and recorded at most sites in the Euphrates valley, Sabkhat al-Jabbul and in the Yarmuk gorge.

Graceful Warbler / Streckad prinia

Rather common and recorded at most sites with rich vegetation.

Savi's Warbler / Vassångare

3-4 in song at Mheimideh and 1 in song at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and several in song at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Moustached Warbler / Kaveldunsångare

1 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Surprisingly tricky, we had to work quite hard to find one and get good views.

Great Reed Warbler / Trastsångare

1 migrant each at Wadi Abied on April 16th and at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th. Recorded in the reeds at Deir ez-Zor and many in song at both Mheimideh and Sabkhat al-Jabbul.

Reed Warbler / Rörsångare

Rather common in reed beds and also some migrants around Palmyra.

Sedge Warbler / Sävsångare

Appearance similar to Reed Warbler but in smaller numbers and at fewer sites.



With local village life going on around it, an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler feeding at Arak. Photo Lars Petterson

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler / Eksångare
1 each at Talila and Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Menetriés Warbler / Östlig sammethätta
2 at Wadi Abied on April 16th and several at Palmyra on April 17th. Also recorded at the Mustaha marsh on April 18th.

Barred Warbler / Höksångare
1m at Palmyra on April 17th.

In small scrubs and turfs just west of the town, incredibly sparse terrain for this species.

Eastern Orphean Warbler / Mästersångare
At least 4 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Garden Warbler / Trädgårdssångare
1 at Palmyra on April 17th.

Blackcap / Svarthätta
Rather common migrant.

Whitethroat / Törnsångare

A few around Palmyra on April 17th and in song at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Lesser Whitethroat / Ärtsångare
Common migrant.

Chiffchaff / Gransångare
Common migrant.

Willow Warbler / Lövsångare
Rather common migrant.

Collared Flycatcher / Halsbandsflugsnappare
Rather common migrant around Palmyra with c.20 during April 17th. Also singles along the road in the Euphrates valley on April 18th.



Possibly a regular migrant in Syria with several recent reports, a male Semi-collared Flycatcher in an oasis near Palmyra. Photo Lars Pettersson

Semi-collared Flycatcher / Balkanflugsnappare
1m1f at Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Spotted Flycatcher / Grå flugsnappare
1 each at Talila and Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Bearded Tit / Skäggmes
Several small parties at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.



Vocal, social and charming little fellows the Iraq Babblers, now found along the Euphrates all the way up to Birecik in Turkey. Photo Lars Pettersson

Iraq Babbler / Irakskriktrast

4 at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th, at least 6 at Mheimideh on April 18th and c. 10 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Quite easy to find since they move around and are fairly vocal. A small party was in the reeds just down from the suspension bridge (western base) and easily attracted by playing its call on Mp3.

Long-tailed Tit / Stjärtmes

3-4 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Coal Tit / Svartmes

Recorded in song at several places around Slenfeh on April 20th.

Blue Tit / Blåmes

Rather common around Slenfeh on April 20th.

Great Tit / Talgoxe

Rather common around Slenfeh on April 20th.

Rock Nuthatch / Klippnötväcka

At least 4 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Penduline Tit / Pungmes

At least 6 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th.

Palestine Sunbird / Palestinasolfågel

4 at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Golden Oriole / Sommargylling

1 at Palmyra on April 17th and 2 at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Red-backed Shrike / Törnskata

Surprisingly few, less than 10 migrants seen along the road, mainly during April 17-18th.

Lesser Grey Shrike / Svartpannad törnskata

2 along the Palmyra - Deir ez-Zor road on April 17th, 1 in the Euphrates valley and 1 near Ar-Raqqa on April 18th.

Masked Shrike / Masktörnskata

1 each at Talila and Arak, Palmyra on April 17th.

Woodchat Shrike / Rödhuvad törnskata

Rather common migrant with 10+ around Palmyra on April 17th and singles along the road at many places.

Magpie / Skata

Rather common outside the desert areas.

Jackdaw / Kaja

c. 20 at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Rook / Råka

Some singles in the Euphrates valley during April 18th.

Carrion Crow / Gråkråka

Common.

Raven / Korp

A pair at Halabiyya on April 18th.

Red-billed Chough / Alpkråka

7-8 at Wadi Abied on April 16th.

House Sparrow / Gråsparv
Common.

Spanish Sparrow / Spansk sparv
Rather common, generally in more agricultural areas than House Sparrow.



Reported from many sites in Syria but we only found Dead Sea Sparrow in the reeds of Sabkhat al-Jabbul. Photo Lars Pettersson

Dead Sea Sparrow / Tamariskparv
c.15 at Sabkhat al-Jabbul (incl. males in song and active nests) on April 19th.

Chaffinch / Bofink
Rather common at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Greenfinch / Grönfink
Rather common at Slenfeh on April 20th.

Goldfinch / Steglits
Several road side records, singles or pairs.

Linnet / Hämpling
c. 75 migr. at Deir ez-Zor on April 17th and rather common in the Euphrates valley, Sabkhat al-Jabbul and Slenfeh, often in pairs.

Desert Finch / Ökenfink

c.10 at Palmyra and 1 at Talila, Palmyra on April 17th.

Trumpeter Finch / Ökentrumpetare
4 near Wadi Abied on April 16th.



A typical bird of the mountain slopes, Rock Bunting at Slenfeh. Photo Lars Pettersson

Rock Bunting / Klippsparv
7-8 around Slenfeh on April 20th.

Ortolan Bunting / Ortolansparv
1m each at Wadi Abied on April 16th, the Mustaha marsh on April 18th and Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Cretzschmar´s Bunting / Rostsparv
1m at Slenfeh on April 20th and rather common (at least 6-7 seen) at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Black-headed Bunting / Svarthuvad sparv
1m in song at the Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.

Corn Bunting / Kornsparv
Common around Sabkhat al-Jabbul on April 19th and around Deraa / Yarmuk gorge on April 21st.



Adeeb and three Swedes scanning the wilderness of Palmyra. We encourage birdwatchers to visit this amazing country and to support and sponsor the tiny community that tries to save the environment. I for one will definitely come back! Photo Tomas Haraldsson