

SYRIA

MIGRANTS AND SPECIALISED BIRDS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Northern Bald Ibis (Al McNee)



Thursday April 1st – Saturday April 10th 2010

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 180-210

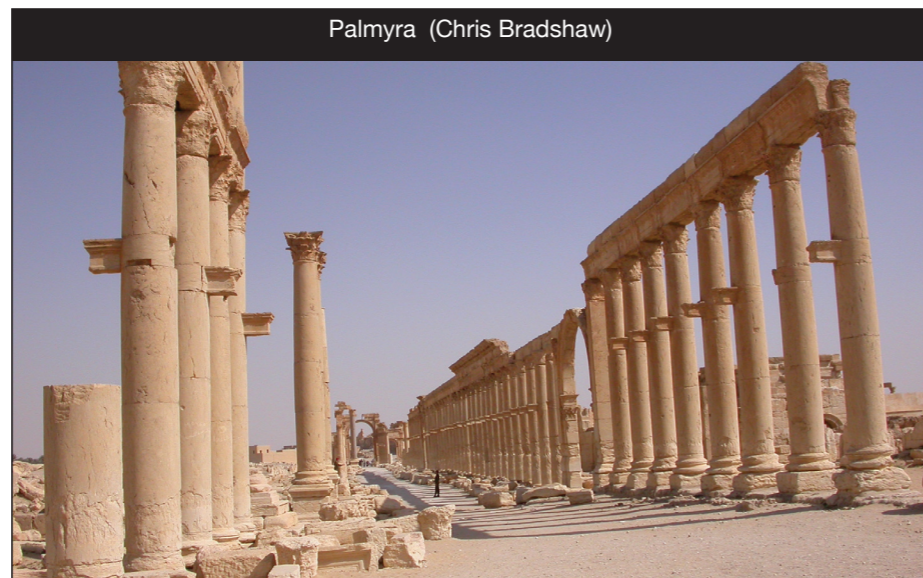
Although recent years have seen an increase in visits by birdwatchers and a number of significant discoveries have recently been made, Syria remains relatively poorly known from an ornithological point of view. It is home to a number of species difficult to see elsewhere in the Western Palaearctic. This tour is timed to coincide with the peak of the spring migration and will hope to find a wide variety of migrants in addition to specialities such as Iraq Babbler which is, in fact, fairly common and White-eared Bulbul which is readily seen around Deir Ezzor. The critically endangered Bald Ibis hangs on by a thread near Palmyra and is also a major attraction. As a result of the lack of ornithological exploration in Syria, participants on this tour may make some interesting discoveries about the country's avifauna and also encounter some of the more difficult to see species on the Western Palaearctic list.

We don't ignore the cultural side of the country and there will be an opportunity to spend some time at the famous Roman ruins in Palmyra. The standard of accommodation on this tour is generally good and the Syrian people are very friendly.

Day 1: An afternoon flight from London to Damascus. On arrival we transfer to Bloudan, about an hour away from the capital.

Day 2: Bloudan is situated in the mountains bordering Lebanon and we spend the morning exploring the orchards and mountain slopes that surround the town. The main attraction for us here is Syrian Serin, a bird with a very restricted world range and which can usually be found in orchards around Bloudan. Syrian Woodpecker also occurs here, whilst the weedy edges of fields are frequented by flocks of finches and Yellowhammers. At higher elevations, we search among patches of snow for Horned Lark, Northern and Black-eared Wheatears and perhaps Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. Lower down, we visit a small rocky valley with scattered bushes - home to Sombre Tit and migrants including Cretzschmar's Bunting. In the afternoon we travel north to Aleppo, arriving in the early evening for a two-night stay.

Day 3: We spend today birding around Sabkhat al Jabbul, a huge wetland that attracts good numbers of water birds. Greater Flamingo occurs in large numbers,



Palmyra (Chris Bradshaw)

whilst among a wide variety of wintering wildfowl Ruddy Shelduck, White-headed Duck and Red-crested Pochard should be present. Shorebirds include passage waders - Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Ruff and Kentish Plover. Large flocks of Slender-billed Gulls are easily seen here, along with Whiskered and White-winged Terns. Marsh Harriers quarter the reedbeds which are home to Purple Heron, Bittern, Purple Gallinule and

European Penduline Tit. Migrant harriers may include Pallid and Montagu's, whilst the fields host migrant pipits and wagtails and breeding Calandra Larks.

Day 4: This morning we travel eastwards towards Deir Ezzor making birding stops en route. In the afternoon, we reach Halabiyah where cliffs are home to a colony of Lesser Kestrels. Nearby, we spend the late afternoon in a rocky valley

Syrian Serin (Martin Scott)



where we search for See-see Partridge. Desert and Bar-tailed Desert Larks are also often present here. The nearby Euphrates attracts wildfowl, waders and gulls, the latter perhaps including Great Black-headed. Overnight in Deir Ezzor.

Day 5: We begin the day by looking for White-cheeked Bulbul, a species that is usually to be found close to our hotel. We then visit Mheimedah, a wetland with extensive areas of reeds. This is a very bird-rich site that hosts many interesting species. Ducks are prominent and should include White-headed and Ferruginous, Garganey and Marbled Teal. It is a reliable location for Purple Gallinule, whilst Spur-winged and White-tailed Lapwings and Pied Kingfisher are usually present. At this time of the year there is a good chance that Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters will have arrived, and we also have an excellent chance of encountering Iraq Babbler. Savi's Warbler, Citrine Wagtail, Purple and Black-crowned Night Herons are also possible. In the afternoon, we travel to Palmyra. We make a stop at the oasis at Arak, an area attractive to migrants with Thrush Nightingale, White-throated Robin and Semi-collared Flycatcher on previous visits. Transfer to Palmyra for two nights.

Days 6-7: We spend these two days exploring a variety of sites in the Palmyra area. A small lake is attractive to a variety of ducks and waders, and also migrant flocks of terns including White-winged. Emergent vegetation attracts Moustached Warblers, Dead Sea Sparrow, and Bluethroat and, with luck, perhaps a Spotted or Little Crake. We also visit the Northern Bald Ibis colony, hoping that this critically endangered species lingers on at this last outpost of its formerly more widespread Syrian range. As one would expect in the desert, larks are a feature of our birding and should include Temminck's Horned, Desert, Lesser Short-toed and Hoopoe. Dunn's Larks have been seen in this area in the past but we will need to be lucky to encounter this rather erratic species. Other birds include Cream-coloured Courser, Tawny Pipit, Brown-necked Raven, Red-billed Cough, Desert and Trumpeter Finches. Mourning Wheatear can usually be found around the citadel in Palmyra. A late afternoon visit to the reserve at Talila is usually productive for spring migrants, which on our previous visits have included Eastern Orphean Warbler, White-throated Robin, Semi-collared Flycatcher, Woodchat Shrike and Common Quail. Around dusk we will search for Pharaoh's Eagle Owl, a

species regularly found in this area.

Day 8: After some final birding around Palmyra, we head westwards towards Damascus making stops for interesting birds along the way. Once in Damascus we head south to Deraa where we have an overnight stay.

Day 9: We begin the day with a visit to a small reedy pool at Al Mzeirib village that has hosted breeding Clamorous Reed Warbler in the past. Nearby weedy fields and olive groves are attractive to migrants which on our previous visits have included Eastern Bonelli's and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Masked Shrike and Ortolan Bunting. However, most of the day is spent in the Yarmuk area, a river that forms part of the border with Jordan and which flows through a landscape of impressive gorges. We explore this dramatic area in search of a number of species including White-breasted Kingfisher, Long-billed Pipit, Blackstart, Palestine Sunbird and Cretzschmar's Bunting. Later in the day, we return to Damascus for our final night in Syria.

Day 10: Morning departure for our flight back to the UK.

Tour Price London/London: £2195

Tour Price Damascus/Damascus: £1775

Single room: £220

Deposit: £250

This holiday is fully inclusive of flights, accommodation and meals, transport, permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature and a visa to enter Syria. Please note your passport should not contain any Israeli stamps

Comfortable accommodation throughout with en-suite facilities. Packed lunches included. Evening meals based on Syrian cuisine which is largely meat based. Participants should note that alcoholic drinks are not available in all areas.

Transport by minibus. Short to medium walks over undulating terrain and in desert habitats. Stout footwear recommended.