

The status of Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* in Syria

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INTRODUCTION

Sociable Lapwing (Plover) *Vanellus gregarius* [*Chettusia gregaria*] is a bird of semi-arid Steppes, breeding in southeastern Russia and Kazakhstan and wintering in southwest Asia and northeast Africa (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al* 1975, Cramp & Simmons 1983, Kasperek 1992). Its movements on outward migration are slow and protracted (Snow & Perrins 1998). It disperses widely through much of southern Asia, including Syria. BirdLife International [BLI] (2005) gives the key wintering sites as being in Israel, Eritrea, Sudan and northwest India; typical wintering habitats are dry plains, sandy wastes and areas of short grass, often adjacent to water.

There has been a major range contraction since the 1850s, the species having disappeared from former breeding areas in the Crimea and southeast Ukraine (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al* 1975, Kasperek 1992). Sociable Lapwing entered the IUCN Red List in 1988. In 1998, it was classified as Vulnerable, having an estimated world population of fewer than 10 000 individuals (Stattersfield & Capper 2000). More recently the decline has accelerated – in April 2002 breeding numbers were estimated as being between 200 and 600 pairs (600 to 1800 individuals, Tomkovich & Lebedeva 2002). Its IUCN Red List status changed in 2004 to Critically Endangered ‘because its small population has undergone an extremely rapid reduction for poorly understood reasons, and this decline is projected to continue in the future’ (BLI 2005).

This catastrophic decline has been attributed to a range of causes, primarily thought to occur in breeding areas. Sociable Lapwing is a conspicuous ground-nesting species vulnerable to predators and human disturbance. Large-scale cultivation attempts, failed and successful, across the Russian steppes since the 1930s almost certainly have had a major long-term effect. However, ‘known factors cannot explain the magnitude of recent declines, but key threats probably affect birds at wintering and passage sites’ (Stattersfield & Capper 2000). Conservation measures proposed have included surveys of key wintering and passage sites (BLI 2005). This report reviews recent records from Syria and neighbouring countries to assist the conservation of a species under serious threat of extinction.

RECENT ASSESSMENTS OF THE STATUS OF SOCIABLE LAPWING IN COUNTRIES NEIGHBOURING SYRIA

Kasperek (1992) made a detailed assessment of Sociable Lapwing’s status in the Middle East, concluding that it was an uncommon migrant with large wintering flocks only in the Negev of Israel and Eritrea; most records from Turkey were in late April and September – October. During a BLI project on Great Bustard *Otis tarda*, Soner Bekir (*in litt* & pers comm) estimated 125 on the Bulanik Plain near the city of Mus in East Anatolia in Oct 03 and counted flocks of 12 and 8 near Erzerum airport on 19 October 2005 (Plates 1–4), supporting its Turkish status as a passage migrant. Kasperek (1992) reviewed previous records from Mesopotamia, concluding that it had never been an important wintering area for the species. There are few recent ornitho-

logical data from Iraq but a 'large flock' was reported from the Tigris south of Mosul, during a helicopter flight on 5 November 2004 (Trouern-Trend 2005). There are two Lebanese records, both in October, from 1958 and 2004 (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2005). Andrews (1995) treats it as a winter vagrant in Jordan, the most recent published record being of 7 in the northeast in February 1969. He noted that Canon Tristram had found Sociable Lapwing plentiful in February 1872. Andrews suggested that small flocks might winter around Jordan's desert fringe. Shirihai (1996) described it as a 'rare to fairly rare passage migrant' to Israel, passing through from mid-February to mid-May and from mid-September to late November, and a 'locally scarce winter visitor', arriving in November – December and departing in the second half of February and in March. It still winters in the Negev but numbers have declined to perhaps 20 – 40 in recent years (Yoav Perlman, pers com).

Green (1984) made field observations from February 1983 to January 1984 in the al Jawf area of northwestern Saudi Arabia, immediately south of the Jordanian border, an area ecologically similar to much of eastern Syria. He described Sociable Lapwing as an uncommon migrant in February – May and August – September but did not cite individual records. Recently (20 Nov 05) Anders Blomdahl's Swedish Ornithological Society expedition to Oman reported 13 and 6 at two locations near Salalah, Oman (Ian Harrison *in litt* to editor) (**Plate 5**). BLI (2005) summarises the status of Sociable Lapwing in the Middle East as 'non-breeding' (equivalent to wintering status) in Iraq and Israel, a passage migrant in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and a vagrant to Lebanon and Jordan.

RECENT RECORDS FROM SYRIA

The Syrian avifauna is very poorly known (Evans 1994). In his overview, Kasperek (1992) made little reference to Sociable Lapwing in Syria. He tabulated 8 records, all between September and November, noting that at that time there were no Syrian records between December and February. Neither Pyman (in Syria January – September 1943) nor Jeffery (in the Palmyran desert April 1948 – April 1950) recorded the species in Syria; McFarlane noted it once between 1974 and 1977, a flock of 40 birds at Dibsi Faraj on Lake Assad on 12 September 1974 (Macfarlane 1978). The overview by Baumgart *et al* (1995) concluded that Sociable Lapwing was a passage migrant in March and from September to November in small numbers (maximum 30), with most records from the northeast.

In the last decade there has been increasing interest in Syria's birds. Visits by individual birders have yielded only one Sociable Lapwing record (**Table 1**). However, there were three observations totalling 23 birds in 2001 – 2003, all in February – March, in or near the *al Talila* Reserve southeast of Palmyra (Serra *et al* 2005). Three records totalling 8 birds came from the Syrian Wetland Expedition in January – March 2004 (Murdoch *et al* 2004): one on a flooded field with 2000 Lapwings at Lake of Homs, western Syria; three in a meadow north-east of the Euphrates valley, again with Lapwings; and 4 in the *al Talila* Reserve.

ASSESSMENT OF STATUS IN SYRIA

Syria is a country through which, for geographical reasons, a significant part of the Sociable Lapwing population is likely to pass, either on migration to Israel and north-east Africa or possibly to winter. The tabulated records from early February to mid-March (**Table 1**) are consistent with Baumgart's assessment that the species is a migrant rather than a wintering species to Syria. However, on detailed examination, it becomes clear that this interpretation could be due to observer bias; observations at *al Talila* reserve were much less frequent in December – January than in February –

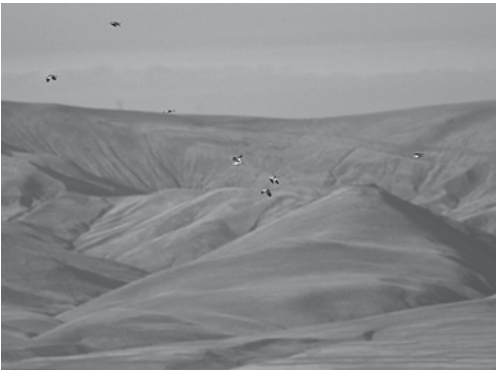


Plate 4. Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* flock, Erzerum, Turkey, 2005. © Soner Bekir.



Plate 5. Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, Sun Farms, Sohar, Oman, 30 Jan 06. © Adrian Jordi.

Table 1. Recent records of Sociable Lapwing <i>Vanellus gregarius</i> in Syria					
Date	Bird nos	Site	Source	Habitat	Notes
24/2/98	7	Deir ez-Zor – Ashhola, Euphrates valley	Wester (unpub)	'Marsh'	No other information is available.
14/2/01	5	<i>al Talila</i> reserve	Serra <i>et al</i> 2005	Undulating steppe with shrubs	Possibly 10–15 present
7/3/01	17	Near <i>al Talila</i> reserve	Serra <i>et al</i> 2005	Flat steppe with scattered shrubs	Two flocks of 4 and 13
7–8/3/03	1 shot	Near <i>al Talila</i> reserve	Serra <i>et al</i> 2005	Flat steppe with scattered shrubs	Shooter reported a small flock to G Serra
9/2/04	1	Lake of Homs, W Syria	Murdoch <i>et al</i> 2004	Lake shore / inundated field	In flock of 2000 Lapwings
21/2/04	3	Between Tal Brak & al-Hasakah, NE Syria	Murdoch <i>et al</i> 2004	Meadows	In flock of 44 Lapwings
22/2/04	4	<i>al Talila</i> reserve	Murdoch <i>et al</i> 2004	Flat steppe with shrubs	In flight

March and small numbers of birds could have overwintered without detection. Most sites were only visited once during the Syrian Wetland Expedition. Thus it is still unclear whether Sociable Lapwing is a scarce wintering bird or only a passage migrant to Syria. A further possibility is that Syria is an important wintering area in February – March with the early part of the winter spent elsewhere.

The most direct danger to Sociable Lapwings in Syria is from hunting, which is illegal but widespread (Evans 1994; Murdoch *et al* 2004, Serra *et al* 2005). One of the few recent records relates to a shot bird (Serra *et al* 2005); another comes from Lake of Homs, where hunting is often intensive (Murdoch *et al* 2004). A more insidious threat comes from degradation of the species' favoured habitat, mainly from overgrazing, which has intensified in the last generation. There is a complex cocktail of causes for overgrazing, including the disruption of traditional patterns of pasture exploitation, rapid technological progress, a very high rate of population growth and a general lack of conservation awareness at all levels (Serra & Chatty, in prep).

The Italian Government sponsored the creation of the *al Talila* reserve, a FAO/Ministry of Agriculture project for the re-introduction of large mammals. As a result of strict protection over the past 10 years, *al Talila's* steppes are in excellent condition with good shrub coverage, a unique circumstance in the Syrian steppe (Serra *et al* 2005). A small number of Common Cranes *Grus grus* winters in the reserve every year with larger numbers stopping over in mid-March, and the reserve has attracted species such as

Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana* (Murdoch *et al* 2004). Four of the seven records of Sociable Plover in Syria in the last ten years have come from *al Talila*, the observations becoming almost regular during the FAO project from 2001 to 2004. Observer bias has probably played a part but we suggest that the high-quality habitat encourages Sociable Lapwings to make a prolonged stopover in late winter or during migration.

A Sociable Lapwing monitoring scheme was included in *al Talila* reserve's 2004–2006 management plan but unfortunately it was not implemented after the FAO project ended. The pattern of observations indicates that *al Talila* is still a regular site for Sociable Lapwing. We therefore recommend strongly that the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds Agreement (AEWA) and BLI become actively involved procedurally in making resources and experience available so that the staff of *al Talila* can undertake regular surveys for the species throughout the winter. We also ask that other organisations, such as OSME, retain an active interest in Syria, specifically in the Sociable Lapwing.

It is clear that the threats to Sociable Lapwing, its ecology, migration patterns and even its wintering range are very poorly understood. Because it is Critically Endangered, urgent action is needed. We therefore recommend that the staff of *al Talila*, as employees of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, should undertake national surveys of appropriate habitat to determine the present status of Sociable Lapwing in Syria. If significant overwintering or passage populations are discovered, it is essential to identify and preserve key habitats.

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