

An East African ringer in Lebanon . . .

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March to May are the main months when Palaearctic migrants are moving north out of Africa and back to their breeding grounds in Asia and Europe. As those moving up the eastern side of Africa reach the northern coastline, many move eastwards to pass north through the Middle East in order to avoid crossing the Mediterranean Sea. This is particularly true for the larger birds such as raptors, storks and pelicans, but large numbers of passerines and smaller non-passerines also pass along this route following the northern-most stretch of the Great Rift Valley which extends from Mozambique all the way to Lebanon and Syria acting as a funnel for migrants moving into Asia.

A particularly attractive feature of this section of the Rift for them is that unlike the surrounding areas of the Middle East, it is green, well-vegetated and relatively well-watered – especially in the spring. Having said this, it is far less well-watered than it once was even a mere 30 years ago. The main area of freshwater marsh in Lebanon, centred around Aammiq, used to stretch some 20 km north to south and fill right across the valley floor for some 10 km.

Today drainage for agriculture along with removal of water for irrigation has reduced the marsh in the spring (when it is almost at it's fullest) to a mere 1 km north to south and 3–4 kms east-west along the main water

channel. In summer the marsh is reduced to only two deep pools which just manage to retain water through to when the rains return in the winter. As a result, this relatively tiny wetland is critical for large numbers of birds which rely on it for a stop-over site on migration, a non-breeding/wintering site, or as a breeding site.

It is here that the A Rocha* Lebanon project is based and where I was invited to go for a fortnight of ringing to help re-launch the Lebanese Ringing Scheme after a gap of about 25 years.

The marsh itself consists of areas of open, deeper water, large swathes of *Phragmites* reedbed, and shallower, swampy areas of old flooded fields on either side. The reedbed formed the focus of our mist-netting with a few single panels erected on the fields for larks, pipits and the chance of an odd wader.

On most days 100 m of full height net was put up in the reeds although on the first and last days we doubled this when we had all ringers working together. On the slopes of the mountains just to the west overlooking the marsh, we operated a second ringing site in some stunted oak woodland and thicket to try for a variety of species not found in the marsh. Here 156 m of full height was erected but the numbers of birds was surprisingly low and given the difficulty of working the sites (we shifted to a second site in the second

* A Rocha is an international Christian conservation organisation involved in practical conservation in response to the biblical call to care for all creation. It currently operates in eight different countries (Portugal – the first centre and where the name 'A Rocha' originates, meaning 'The Rock' in Portuguese – France, Lebanon, Kenya, Britain, Czech Republic, Canada and the USA) with possible new projects developing including in South Africa. Activities are focused around research, monitoring and environmental education and training. For further information, write to A Rocha, Connansknowe, Kirkton, Dumfries, DG1 1SX, UK, or visit the web site www.arocha.org.

week hoping for more birds) on a steep slope. We were rewarded with just 5–6 birds all morning and on the last day this was abandoned and we concentrated on a major ‘bash’ on the marsh.

Several times during the week we had tried to trap swallows coming in to roost and had varied success, from just one bird on a very windy night, to 148 on a calmer evening.

Altogether we were eight ringers – Colin Beale and Andy Sprenger from the A Rocha Lebanon team, five volunteer ringers from Britain, and myself from Kenya.

The main aim of the fortnight was to kick-start the Ringing Scheme with a bit of a ‘bang’ by catching a good number of birds. It was also to help Colin and Andy as they tried out different netting sites to gain an understanding as to the numbers of birds one might expect to catch during the spring migration – how many nets are feasible to use, the best net rides, and what species might be expected. As such, it was an excellent fortnight: on 2 May the first bird ringed was a Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* with the ring number ‘LIBAN B000001’ – the first of a total of 1034 birds ringed of 33 species.

Over the next fortnight, Eurasian Reed Warbler was by far the most common of the 33 species caught, making up a good 34% of the catch. Other common species were, as one would expect, other typical reedbed species with Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus* the next most common (other than the Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*), followed by another very similar species, Moustached Warbler *A. melanopogon*, but which has the clearly black or dark legs and a more rounded wing formula. That first day we also caught four Great Reed Warblers *A. arundinaceus* which apparently were a little earlier than the expected date – though in the event we caught some almost every day.

For me, the Moustached Warbler was one that we had searched for in vain when I worked and trained as a ringer for three years at the A Rocha bird observatory in Portugal . . . as was Savi’s Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* of which we caught 14 of both races

– mostly the nominate but also *fusca*. Certain species that were very familiar to me from my Portuguese ringing days were caught in smaller numbers – Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, a single female Sardinian Warbler *S. melanocephala*, and the resident Cetti’s Warblers *Cettia cetti* (ringed on the first day or two and later retrapped two or three times).

Others were species I’d seen maybe once in the hand such as Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana*, Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, Blackeared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*, Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, and Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, and one or two others were totally new to me including Little Crake *Porzana parva* and several Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler *Phylloscopus orientalis*. The crakes we caught in a crake trap design that we had used very effectively in Portugal and I’ve used in Kenya to trap African Crake *Crex egregia* and Greater Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* (it also works very nicely for Sharpe’s Long-claw *Macronyx sharpei* in windswept montane grassland habitats) and were amazing to handle.

One of the best moments, however, was as we were nearing the end of clearing the nets of swallows at the second swallow roost. We’d put up a couple of nets in the evening in the reeds and played Barn Swallow song underneath it and caught a total of 148 birds including half a dozen or so Sand Martins *Riparia riparia*. It was dark by the time we were extracting the last 20 or so birds and it was then I noticed a bird in the middle of the top panel – i.e. not in the pocket but ‘stuck’ to the flat wall of netting a few inches below the top shelf string. ‘Probably caught by a ring’ I said to Mark next to me half-jokingly, so reached for it next as it was fluttering around held only by the left foot . . . but sure enough there was a ring snagged on the netting and in the torchlight we made out ‘BUDAPEST T103689’ – YES! Our first control and a mega exciting moment! The joys of modern communication and e-mail meant that we were able to discover the ring-

ing details before the end of the fortnight: Izsák, Hungary in mid-August 1999 as a first year swallow and therefore on its second return journey from Africa.

That wasn't all . . . and the other controls (note the plural!) were almost more extraordinary in that we had no more until the very last morning, and even then the very last two hours of ringing! The first was a Eurasian Reed Warbler from the single panels with a ring that read 'Tel Aviv . . .' and that same round from a line of nets in the reeds a Moustached Warbler with another 'Tel Aviv' ring . . . followed an hour later from the same net ride by *another* Moustached Warbler with yet *again* a 'Tel Aviv' ring!! This had been the predicted origin of most of the controls we expected to catch, but even so . . . THREE in two hours of ringing and 172 ringed birds that day was just ridiculous!

When it was quiet around the nets, being in the middle of the Bekaa Valley meant that we were perfectly positioned to see any larger migrants passing overhead, and sure enough on some days we had some awesome spectacles of visible migration. White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* were the most numerous but there were two or three flocks of 40–60 Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* and a single huge flock of c. 900 White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* in V-formation that cruised past overhead making an incredible sound through the air with their wings. Several flocks of Common Cranes *Grus grus* were also seen and there was an almost constant movement of raptors with sometimes 20–30 Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina* in the air together with several Longlegged Buzzards *Buteo rufinus*, Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo* or Black Kites *Milvus migrans* amongst them. Longleggeds were in fact permanently around the fields and marsh the whole two weeks in ones and twos and we also had all four species of harrier – Eurasian Marsh *Circus aeruginosus*, Hen *C. cyaneus*, Pallid *C. macrourus*, and Montagu's *C. pygargus* – including beautifully plumaged males. Other ornithological highlights were Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* at night

in the marsh as we drove back from a swallow roost, a Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Collared Flycatcher *Muscicapa albicollis* – the latter two being birds I have been looking for for a long time (the flycatcher was caught and ringed on the mountain site, but on one of the days when I was working the marsh so I dipped on that one in the hand!).

There is unlimited potential for some really fascinating studies on migrants passing through the northern stretches of the Rift Valley and the little-known resident species in Lebanon, something that the A Rocha Lebanon project is planning to carry out including regular constant effort ringing on the Aammiq Marsh and in the oak woodlands on the mountain side. The ringing there is truly superb – conditions can seem a bit extreme for a tropical ringer used to warm water (one of the net rides involved 'swimming' – i.e. wading up to your armpits in freeceezing water! Though we managed to reduce it to just waist high, but still . . .!) and NOT used to frost on the ground (I don't recommend open sandals at dawn . . .), but the quality of the ringing easily makes up for that! Imagine it: down on the marsh at dawn with the sun rising over crystal clear hills and with Mt Hermon iced with snow as a backdrop, a Little Crake in the hand and 30+ migrant *Acrocephalus* warblers and the odd Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* in bags waiting to be ringed, Longlegged Buzzards and flocks of 500–800 White Storks overhead . . . with back-up support of tea and freshly-baked scones with strawberry jam and thick layer of cream as mid-ringing morning snack . . . what more could a ringer ask for?!

Furthermore, it was a really fascinating country to visit and the Lebanese people we met were very friendly – and the food . . . well, it was incredible! At present, the A Rocha Lebanon team don't plan to run further ringing weeks for visiting ringers due to staff changes, but there will be some regular ringing being carried out on constant effort sites – so DO keep a look out for any birds that turn up in your nets wearing a bangle labelled 'LIBAN ****'!