Title

Take a look at these photos. You might be forgiven for not knowing they were taken in Iraq, a country where the news headlines are rarely happy ones.

These are Iraqi kids, from five schools around the mountain of Peremagroon, in Kurdistan, who this spring have made and erected over 40 nestboxes as part of a conservation education programme funded by the UK Government's Darwin Initiative.

A year ago Nature Iraq, in partnership with BirdLife International and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, embarked upon a multi-faceted, three-year conservation programme – the first of its kind in the Middle East. An online course in conservation has started at Sulaimani University and over 40 students and others have enrolled. Plans are also taking shape for developing an app to help identify birds, together with other animals and plants that children, students and Iraqi visitors to the region might expect to see around Peremagroon – one of the most important areas for biodiversity in Kurdistan.

Kani Shok Primary School with their nest boxes. (Nature Iraq)

The most exciting venture has been the nestbox project. Holes for hole-nesting birds seem to be at a premium in Kurdistan, possibly because of the destruction of woodland in the past, and the fact that many trees have not been allowed to mature. It came as a surprise to see Great Tits nesting in holes in the ground!

Hopefully this Nature Iraq project will provide nesting sites for birds such as the Great Tit and Sombre Tit – a species with a specialised habitat and globally restricted range.

This area of Iraqi Kurdistan has one of the highest densities of Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches in the Middle East – it would be exciting if they could also be attracted to nesting in boxes.

Zewe Primary School student putting up a nest box. (Nature Iraq)

A future step will be for NI to put video cameras in some of the boxes so that Iraqi children can enjoy watching the daily lives of these enchanting birds.

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