

Walking with Nature Iraq by Richard Porter

Title

Wednesday 2 June and the fifth day of Nature Iraq's (BirdLife Partner) bird conservation programme for Iraqi biologists. Hot with a noon temperature of 38 degrees. We're clambering on rocky slopes leading up to magnificent cliffs that look down on the ancient city of Sulimaniyah some 10 kms to the west. Walking the wooded mountain slopes, high crags and river valleys in Kurdistan in spring is an uplifting experience. Even more rewarding is being a part of Nature Iraq's team surveying Important Bird Areas and, this week, training new recruits to the world of wildlife conservation. So we are ten men and one woman shouldering binoculars, telescopes and cameras. In a country like Iraq you would think this would make us highly suspicious yet in my two visits I've always felt totally safe and welcome. Middle East hospitality is second to none. We've just completed a transect count of the breeding passerines and are now scanning the cliffs for breeding raptors – two pairs of Egyptian Vultures and Steppe Buzzards and one pair of Long-legged Buzzards and Barbary Falcons. In Kurdistan you could almost describe the globally threatened Egyptian Vulture as common (we've found 22 pairs at eight sites in three weeks), Lesser Kestrels are breeding widely and the near-threatened Cinereous Bunting sings from many an oak tree. A typical mix of breeding birds would be Black-headed Buntings, Menetries's, Upcher's and Olivaceous Warblers, Woodchat and Masked Shrikes, Black-eared and Finsch's Wheatears, Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, Syrian Woodpeckers, Rufous Bush Robins and Sombre Tits. Whist it is rare to be out of sight of any large raptor, including Short-toed and Booted Eagles or Griffon Vultures. By late May and early June much of the migration is over but Lesser Grey Shrikes and Rollers are still passing through, and were those Sedge Warblers in Phragmites and Typha reeds along a tributary of the Tigris migrants or a new breeding species for Iraq? A Willow Warbler singing at night in the neon lights of a fashionable Sulimaniyah Restaurant was unexpected. With me are Iraq's leading ornithologists: Korsh Ararat, Omar Fadhil and Mudhafar Salim. Since 2005, when the Nature Iraq's programme started, they have surveyed over 220 sites (many qualifying as Important Bird Areas) and are now preparing a provisional list of Protected Areas for the Ministry of the Environment. Oh yes – and added six bird species to Iraq's list! Richard Porter BirdLife International