

Title Since the invasion of 2003, many people have been struggling to survive in the chaos and bloodshed in Iraq . Even now the country's far from safe. However, over the past two years, Omar Fadil has set out to doggedly survey the bird population for Nature Iraq (BirdLife Partner), taking him to some of the most dangerous spots in search of species like the elusive and Critically Endangered Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*. On the phone from Baghdad, he told BirdLife about his latest survey in what is still one of Iraq 's security hotspots. *My team is based in Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam, and we are looking for the Sociable Lapwing. It's a Critically Endangered bird and we received fresh sightings and GPS co-ordinates which indicated a bird was sitting in an area near Haditha which is an extremely dangerous place. It took me about 6 hours to drive from my base in Tikrit to where the bird was sitting. My problem was how can I make the Iraqi army or police understand that I am coming to this area to look for a bird? For them it doesn't not make any sense because of what the area has witnessed before. I was impressed that the Iraqi army understood, and supplied me with three patrols with five armed soldiers in each of them. All of us are looking for the Sociable Lapwing, which was an amazing experience for me. The soldiers were surprised. They asked: "what are you looking for? It is a precious bird or golden bird" or something like this. And it was difficult for me to make all the troops who came along to understand the importance of this bird. But actually I can say that all the eyes of the group - of the policemen, the Iraqi army, and my team - were looking for the bird. At the end of the day, which was about 4pm , they offered for me to stay in the field for the next day, so they could start looking for the bird the next day as well. However, we didn't have the time to do that, but they were very keen to help me definitely. Unfortunately we could not find the bird. But now we have a better understanding of the habitat, the feeding resource and the migratory places that the birds are looking for in the western desserts of Iraq . It's dangerous birdwatching in Iraq . For example, from Haditha to the site, where the bird was sat, there was some rocky houses by the river banks - very familiar places for Al-Qaeda. Policemen sometime hesitate to go past these rocky houses, because there have been a lot of innocent Iraqi people killed. I feel very sad when I pass by these rocky houses. When we're passing through local cities or villages, the people are surprised about what we are doing because we are looking like combat troops. But when they understand our situation, and that the troops are for protecting us, they come to offer help and indicate to us when and where we can see the birds. They call me in Iraq a 'bird guy'. Some people think I'm mad, but I say that's ok - I'm feeling good!* Read more stories from [The BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme](#).