



Friends of A Rocha Lebanon Newsletter
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A ROCHA

Together, caring for God's creation

arocha@cyberia.net.lb

Dear Friends,

It seems hardly any time since our last newsletter, but we are speeding to the close of the year and Christmas is almost upon us. As we were setting out the shepherds, wise men, Mary and Joseph of our nativity set last week I was reminded of how, when my children were younger we would have many additions to the traditional scene; toy space men, model dinosaurs and polar bears.....Although not historically or bio geographically accurate it always struck me as completely appropriate that all of creation, as represented by the kids toy chest, should come and join in the welcoming of the Christ child. Today larks, stonechats, blue throats, lapwings and starlings are just some of the winter visitors to Lebanon that join the resident birds in their aerial adoration of God.



Special species of this issue Coming fresh from the wetland

The common Stonechat



European Stonechat, spring 2005

At this time of year the number of small birds in the marshes at Aammiq is lower than in the breeding seasons, but our winter visitors are actually more colourful than the nesting species, we see Robins, Bluethroats and Penduline Tits with their "Mask of Zorro" appearance. They are all a little shy though and hard to see well. But the Stonechat is a proud little bird that likes to perch up on thistles, tall weeds and rocks, making it a welcome and visible Christmas bird in Lebanon, almost posing for photographs at times! They can be found all over the country at this time, up in the desert areas near Hermel and Baalbek, on any patch of habitat on the coast such as at Chekka, and all around the field and vineyard edges of the Bekaa. A little smaller than a sparrow, they are often in pairs throughout the winter, staying until April when they return to breed in Europe or Siberia. Their colouring varies according to the age, sex and breeding grounds, the European Stonechat is generally darker than the Siberian, but adult males of both types in spring are a beautiful black headed, orange fronted bird with a white collar. They have white

flashes on the wing, so should not be confused with Robin, which is an all brown bird apart from an orange chest.

Like a lot of birds, the name in English describes something about it, if you pick up two stones or pebbles and bang them together, you will make the sound that the Stonechat makes, "chack chack".

The 14 different species are spread around Europe, Asia and Africa and all have the Latin first name "Saxicola", meaning "living on rocks", so the Latin name also tells you something about it as well.

So, if you get the opportunity, pick up those binoculars, put on that coat, and go out and look for that splash of colour on a dark winter's day, the Stonechat!



Siberian Stonechat, autumn

Since we last wrote the team has been very busy traveling round the country with the Important Bird Area programme and monitoring plants, birds and animals and showing schools and other groups around Ammiq wetland. Lets hear from some of the students and learn about one of the sites the team has been studying.....

By students from Grade Four- Lebanese Evangelical School Ain Zhalta.

One day we went on a school trip to Ameeq Marsh...



At the classroom, we learned about the marsh and some of the animals that are there.

We went to the marsh which was exiting. There was lots of water. We took some things with us and did some pond dipping. We collected some of the water to see what was there. We found some insects and some reptiles, some amphibians and some snails. We put them back into the water because they would die if we didn't.

Then we went and used binoculars to see the birds in the air. We saw lots of the birds, some in the air and some on top of the water. We tried to work out what each of the birds were. We saw some ducks, and some buzzards.

Lake Qaraaoun, a great year round bird watching location

One of the privileges of searching for Important Bird Areas (IBAs) this year has been spending time in outstandingly scenic places with (sometimes!) a wide selection of birds to watch. Lake Qaraaoun is one of those places, it is the largest lake in Lebanon and, lying in a narrow part of the Bekaa valley, it sees thousands of migrating storks, cranes and birds of prey passing low overhead twice a year on their epic journeys between Africa and Europe/Siberia.



However, unlike some other “migration hotspots” such as mountain passes or coastal headlands, the lake has interesting bird activity at all times of year. In winter, waterfowl (ducks, grebes and coots) are present in their hundreds on the water, Lapwings and larks feed on the shoreline and surrounding fields, and on the rocky hillsides Stonechats, Black Redstarts and the rarer Finsch’s Wheatear can be spotted. The noisy Rock

Nuthatch can always be heard trilling away and the majestic Long-legged Buzzard soars overhead. In spring, as well as the obvious large migrants mentioned above, there are a multitude of warblers, wheatears, pipits, buntings and swallows that use the lake area as a resting place as they journey north, the variety is great, and a severe test of a birdwatcher’s identification skills! The summer is quieter, but there are always some handsome egrets and herons around, and often a few storks decide to stay (presumably immature birds that don’t need to migrate all the way to the breeding grounds). Sadly this year, there were also two pelicans stranded on the lake through summer, one unable to fly due to a wing damaged by gunshot, its mate faithfully staying to keep it company. The jaunty White Wagtail nests near the restaurants on the west shore and the Upcher’s Warbler and Woodchat Shrike can be found on the eastern side. If you are lucky, the tortoise and chameleon can both be found at this time.

By late July the southbound migrants begin to appear and once again the spectacle that is the miracle of migration can be admired all over again. There are few more moving sights than a group of pelicans taking off from the lake, the browner young ones following the white and black adults all the way from the Danube and continuing south out of Lebanon – no need for air traffic control, passports, and no border controls for these free spirits!

As the lake is not a nature reserve it has a few problems with un-controlled hunting and pollution entering it from the Litani river, but we hope and pray that an increased awareness of the need to protect nature, and an improvement in the water quality in the Litani will together make Qaraaoun an even better place for birds.



A female woodchat shrike, Lake Qaraaoun

Lebanon A Rocha news available in 3 languages!!!

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