

A Rocha Lebanon Newsletter September 2002

A few spots of rain falling on Aana village this morning - the first for 4 months - signal the beginning of a new season in the Bekaa Valley. It's an appropriate time to reflect on the events and changes that have occurred in the last 12 months for A Rocha Lebanon. It has been a busy and productive year for us. With 2 new couples, Cheryl & Brian and the Bernhards, joining Andy & Laurel in October 2001, and Richard Storey joining in February 2002, the team is at its biggest ever, and the work of A Rocha Lebanon has diversified greatly with this new range of skills.



Migrating White Storks

Our core programs - the weekly bird count and bird ringing at the marsh, and the educational field trips for school groups - have continued, with the new team members going through some rapid on-the-job training! The bird count, now spearheaded by Andy and assisted by Brian, has provided the baseline data for 250 species that led to our first publication, *Birds of Aammiq* (this book is now being illustrated by Cheryl, Laurel and the Bernhards). The bird count continues weekly, along with the ringing, in order to provide the data we need for monitoring increases or decreases in the bird populations around Aammiq. Andy's enthusiasm for birds has also opened our eyes to the wonders of stork and raptor migrations, which bring flocks of several thousand birds each spring and autumn. A truly awesome sight!

The translation skills of the Bernhards have allowed us to reach out in a number of ways to the local communities around the Aammiq Marsh. "Celebrating Creation" was the first new program. Headed by Cheryl, herself a professional artist and teacher, it introduces the environmental message to local women as they are taught a series of craft designs reflecting the beauty of nature over an 8-week period. Beginning in our village of Aana, Cheryl has now taken the program to 4 different villages in our area and has taught nearly 200 people through this program.

"Nature Friends" was the second new outreach program this year. Headed by Richard, it was a science club designed to introduce 8-12 year olds to the variety of beautiful habitats and organisms around them in the Bekaa. The idea was that as kids begin to recognize the amazing diversity of animals and plants around them, and appreciate the remarkable lives they lead, they will understand the need to protect them. Nature Friends ran for a month during the summer holidays, and provided a welcome alternative to holiday boredom for 20+ village kids!



Damselfly, Lestes sp.

Another branch of A Rocha Lebanon's work that has received a strong boost this year is our range of merchandise. Between the Bernhards' skill with a camera, Laurel's expertise with a paint brush and Cheryl's experience with presentation, the team has produced a variety of attractive greeting cards and framed photos that celebrate the beauty of the Bekaa in its different seasons. These have been popular items with school groups and other visitors, and have been an effective way to give our visitors a "take home" reminder of their experience with A Rocha, hopefully reminding them also of the need to protect natural habitats.

Brian arrived with a strong desire to see practical conservation work promoted at Aammiq, and one result has been the creation of a tree nursery. Deforestation on the hillsides behind Aammiq may potentially cause serious soil erosion and more "flashy" runoff after rain, so Brian's initiative is a first step towards countering this, as well as increasing habitat for birds. Although his much-loved trees will not be ready for planting for some time, the tree nursery is already a valuable demonstration of conservation-in-action for visiting school groups.

Meanwhile, from their new home in Beirut, Chris and Susanna Naylor, directors of A Rocha Lebanon, have continued to direct the project. Their discussions with funders, local landowners, Ministry of Environment officials, etc., all determine the ultimate success or failure of our efforts to protect Aammiq. Thanks to these negotiations, the marsh is now 20% larger than it was 3 years ago, and the hunting ban within the marsh has been enforced, leading to a significant drop in bird mortalities. Reduction in grazing within the reserve area has allowed large fields of wildflowers to re-grow, with a diversity of plant and insect life that must have significant conservation value in addition to the value of the marsh.



Aammiq Marsh at sunrise

Another development, the sudden loss in profitability of sugar beet farming in the Bekaa, has resulted in the conversion of many fields around Aammiq to winter wheat. This change has caused a major (perhaps 30%) reduction in the amount of groundwater abstracted for irrigation, and this has greatly improved water levels in the marsh. This, combined with the heavy rains this spring, has meant that the marsh has stayed wet longer this year than in recent memory. The marsh is in a healthy state!

Of course life in an A Rocha project is not all work, and we have been enjoying deeply the community aspect of our life here. For A Rocha Lebanon, community takes on a slightly different flavour than for other

A Rocha projects. Our team lives in 4 separate houses scattered throughout Aana, a small village of 2000 people perched on the slopes of the Barouk mountains, overlooking the Bekaa. Being spread throughout our community, we have daily contact with our neighbours, landlords, shopkeepers and many of the other people who welcome us into their homes. Middle Eastern hospitality more than lives up to its reputation, and on a single walk through the village you're likely to hear "Tfaddal" ("come in!") several times. Visiting is an important and regular part of life here, and is always accompanied by cups of strong Arabic coffee as well as a plate of whatever fruit is in season. There is no such thing as a quick visit! The language barrier is still frustrating for some of us, despite our best efforts to overcome it, but never seems to dampen the warmth of the welcome we receive.

Community for us also means drawing aside from work and other pressures, and spending time together as a team. This we do two evenings a week, once to study the Bible together, and once to share a meal. These are precious times for finding again the direction and inspiration we need to meet our purpose here, and for enjoying each other's company. The life and work of A Rocha Lebanon never stays the same for very long. The departure of Cheryl and Brian in Oct. 2002 will leave a big hole, and our work will no doubt shift in focus as a result. We also have new ideas for the future, in particular beginning a members' program so that people across the country can be involved in A Rocha. Our experience this year has shown that a remarkable range of skills can be adapted to further A Rocha's work in Lebanon, and we look forward to the people and the opportunities that God will bring our way.

By Richard Storey