

Lesser White-fronted Goose expedition to Eastern Syria, February 2007

Anssi Kullberg

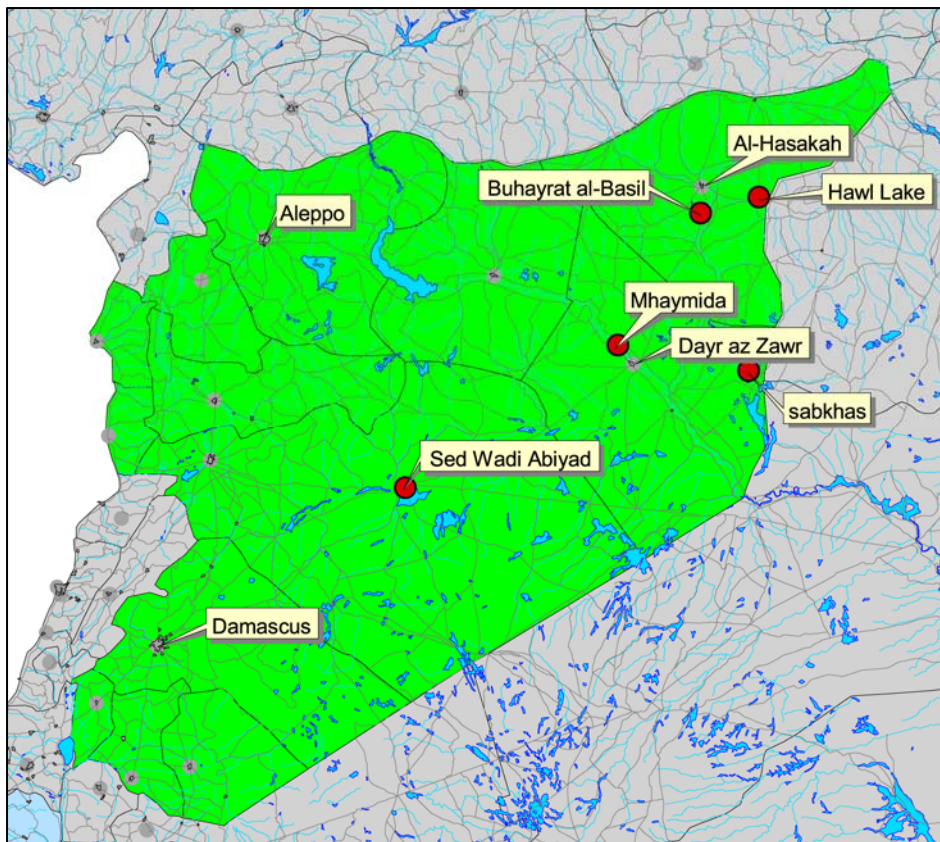
Introduction

The expedition was carried out on 9-11 February 2007, as planned in earlier correspondence with the team working on the protection of Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* as well as Syrian and regional ornithologists. Participants included Anssi Kullberg currently working for the Finnish Embassy in Damascus and Beirut, Ahmed Abdallah from Palmyra who is a guide specialized in nature and birds, and Perttu Kantonen who is the trainee of the Finnish Embassy in Damascus and volunteered to be the photographer of the expedition.

The main purpose of the expedition was visiting and researching three poorly known sites in Eastern Syria, very close to the Iraqi border, based on the recent discovery of a Russian Lesser White-fronted Goose individual wintering in Eastern Syria. The bird unfortunately left to Iraq early the same week before we could start the expedition. However, many of our findings were still significant, highlighted in the discovery of at least 8, probably many more, Lesser White-fronted Geese, and a number of other interesting species, including for example 7 Red-wattled Plovers *Hoplopterus indicus*, 15 Smews *Mergellus albellus*, very significant numbers of Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* and Greylag Goose *Anser anser*.

A couple of remarks on the occurrence of wintering geese in Syria: two species of goose are relatively numerous winterers in various large water bodies in Syria: White-fronted Goose and Greylag Goose, which both winter in thousands for example in Sabkhat al-Jabbul and the Asad and Baath reservoirs. Greylag Goose

probably also breeds in Syria. Lesser White-fronted Goose is until this winter only known from "vagrant" records, mainly of birds shot by hunters, but I heard from May Abido that an expedition including her and international experts discovered Lesser White-fronted Geese at Baath lake this winter before our expedition.



Map of Syria showing the main cities and localities where the survey was undertaken.

Results by sites

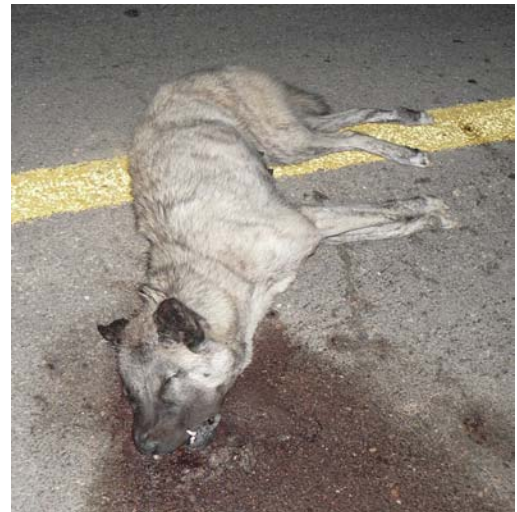
Sed Wadi Abiyad and its surroundings

On our way from Damascus through Palmyra to Dayr az-Zawr our first birding stop was at Sed Wadi Abiyad, located near Palmyra and the famous last breeding colony of Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* where one of the young individuals had already returned, while the four satellite-tagged ones left Ethiopia and headed towards Syria the next week (information from Ahmed Abdallah and Gianluca Serra).

Teal *Anas crecca* 12
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* 5
Shoveller *Anas clypeata* 4
Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* 1
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* 2
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* 1
Coot *Fulica atra* dozens
Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* 1
Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* numerous
Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* 1

Temminck's Lark *Eremophila bilopha* several
Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* 2
Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* over 20
Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens* 3
Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* 2
Robin *Erithacus rubecula* 1
Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis* numerous
Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* 20

On the way from Palmyra to Dayr az-Zawr, a dead Striped Hyena was discovered and photographed by the road. Another dead individual was later discovered on the road from Palmyra to Damascus.



Sabkhat ar-Rawda and Sabkhat al-Burghuth

On 10 February 2007 the expedition set off from Dayr az-Zawr, towards a group of large sabkhas (seasonal salt lakes) located east of the Euphrates Valley very close to the Iraqi border. We didn't have very good maps to compare with the satellite-tracked wintering spot of the Russian goose, but we assumed that these sabkhas were the area where the bird spent several weeks this winter. Due to the vicinity to Iraq the area has not been visited by birdwatchers.

Both the larger water bodies, Sabkhat ar-Rawda and Sabkhat al-Burghuth, were completely dry when we arrived to the area. A third water body, partly located in Iraq, was still full of water and it was told to us that this one was supported by springs. We could not reach the shore of this lake because of lack of tracks, but the Syrian authorities had no problem allowing us to approach the western side of this lake. In addition, there was plenty of evidence indicating that the whole area had still very recently been covered by lots of water.

The area consists of extremely wide open grassy steppes. Due to the vicinity of the border zone there are no real villages in the area, but only scattered presence of military and sheep-herders. West from here, there is quite a lot of oil-drilling activity which has provided good asphalt-covered road to reach close enough to the sabkhas. Access, therefore, is not restricted except to the nearest zones to the border.

The steppe is a major wintering area for Common Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, which, with numbers well in hundreds of thousands, was the overwhelmingly most abundant bird in the area. It's mainly a wintering species in most of Syria, but breeds commonly in the north and north-east, grassy areas along Turkish border and in the Kurdish areas. Smaller numbers of many other lark species - Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*, Crested Lark, Temminck's Lark and Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* were found throughout the area. Other major winter flocks included Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*.

In many places there were still wet and muddy earth recently vacated from water cover, and many waterbirds could be found sticking to the last tiny remnants of water. It was for example strange to find 4 Armenian Gulls *Larus armenicus* and 7 Teal *Anas crecca* walking in seemingly desert landscape, until closer look into the ground revealed that it had been covered by water very recently. Here species recorded around the northernmost sabkha (dry):

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| Teal <i>Anas crecca</i> , 7 | Hoopoe Lark <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i> common |
| Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> 2 | Temminck's Lark <i>Eremophila bilopha</i> common |
| Black Kite <i>Milvus migrans</i> 4 | White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i> 3 |
| Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> 3 | Magpie <i>Pica pica</i> 1 |
| Armenian Gull <i>Larus armenicus</i> 4 | Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix</i> 2 |
| Lesser Short-toed Lark <i>Calandrella rufescens</i> 1 | Isabelline Wheatear <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i> 1 |
| Common Skylark <i>Alauda arvensis</i> extremely abundant | Mourning Wheatear <i>Oenanthe lugens</i> 1 |
| Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata</i> abundant | Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> 1 |
| Calandra Lark <i>Melanocorypha calandra</i> scarce | Linnet <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> abundant |

At the watered lake, the following birds were observed:

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|--|---|
| Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> 1 | Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i> 1 |
| Goose sp. <i>Anser</i> sp. 1 | Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> 2 |
| Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i> dozens | Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> 1 |
| Coot <i>Fulica atra</i> hundreds | Armenian Gull <i>Larus armenicus</i> 2 |
| Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i> 2 | Yellow-legged Gull <i>Larus cachinnans</i> 11 |

When returning from this lake, we discovered an area with lots of evidence of a large water body covering this area only recently. There were huge flocks of skylarks and starlings, and we made a walk into the slightly muddy steppe after flushing two flocks of teal and some pintails. This led to the discovery of approximately 700 Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, probably many more, grazing together with 9 White-fronted Geese *Anser albifrons* and 4 Greylag Geese *Anser anser*. Other species found here included Northern Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* and Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*.



View of the empty sabkha

Our assumption is that until recently the area was widely covered by shallow water and therefore formed an ideal wintering area with relatively undisturbed grazing opportunities for thousands of geese. When the area dried up and shepherds moved their sheep herds into the lands, most of the geese and ducks moved out, either to northern areas of Syria or to Iraq, leaving behind some scattered flocks and individuals. Ruddy Shelduck, however, is less bound to water, and so they did not yet feel urged to leave. However, one day later we observed hundreds of Ruddy Shelduck flying north at Buhayrat al-Basil, which is north from this area.



Grazing areas for geese and ducks

At dusk of 10 February we also visited Mhaymida, a beautiful little wetland north of Dayr az-Zawr, which is ironically protected by the heavy presence of people on all its sides, because being surrounded by villages from all sides makes hunting here very difficult (i.e. you risk shooting people and stock). As usual, Mhaymida was absolutely fully packed with birds, although there was not yet any green among the reed beds. Here is a quick count:

Little Grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> 8	Purple Gallinule <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i> 4
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> 9	Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> 15
Little Egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i> 3	Coot <i>Fulica atra</i> over 400
Great Egret <i>Egretta alba</i> 1	Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> 1
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i> 2	Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i> 1
Teal <i>Anas crecca</i> 50	Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i> 2
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> 6	Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> 7
Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> 3	Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i> 20
Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i> 50	Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i> 2
Ferruginous Duck <i>Aythya nyroca</i> 2	White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i> 2
Marsh Harrier <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> 2	Magpie <i>Pica pica</i> 7
Hen Harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i> 1	Hooded Crow <i>Corvus cornix</i> 2
Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i> 3	Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i> 1
Black Francolin <i>Francolinus francolinus</i> 1	Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> 4

From Hasaka to Hawl Lake

The next day, 11 February 2007, the expedition set off from Hasaka to the east, al-Hawl, where there is an IBA classified beautiful freshwater lake with reedbeds and surrounding fields and bushland. It is spring-supported and supposedly the largest such lake in Syria. It appeared that the Hawl Lake was specially favored by diving waterbirds, the overwhelmingly most abundant species at the lake being Coot *Fulica atra* with at least 4000 birds, probably more. Other abundant species were Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* (more than 500) and Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* (more than 300). In addition there were smaller numbers of various half-diving ducks and shorebirds.



The lake is surrounded by villages from two sides and quite interesting fields and bushland from one direction. The last-mentioned area had for example 7 Red-wattled Plovers *Hoplopterus indicus*, and thousands of wintering Common Skylark *Alauda arvensis* and Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* as well as pipits and other passerines on migration. Red-wattled Plover is still mentioned as a "vagrant" in the literature, but I strongly believe this is only resulted by the lack of research in eastern-most Syria. I discovered this species with good numbers in the extreme north-east of Syria last year, finding it often in villages and on crop fields in the areas of Fish Khabur and Qahtaniya, east from Qamishli.

Anssi at Hawl Lake

The mayor of the nearest village visited us and offered a beautiful breakfast. He also provided us with some information concerning the Hawl Lake. According to the mayor, the First Lady is interested in the lake and has started an initiative to protect it. Pumping water into fields is now prohibited and hunting restricted. On the other hand, the same man also told us, when enquired about Lesser White-fronted Goose, that "once 30 geese landed here and a local man shot them all, since they are so tame". Moreover, he told that "local guys often shoot geese ringed in Europe, especially Austria". We advised them to send the rings of killed birds to relevant research institutions since the information is very valuable.

Here is quite a thorough count from the Hawl Lake and its immediate surroundings:

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* 2
Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* 4
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* 16
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* 28
White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* 12 flying
Wigeon *Anas penelope* over 40
Teal *Anas crecca* 50
Shoveler *Anas clypeata* 2
Pintail *Anas acuta* 4
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* 8
Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* over 500
Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* over 300

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* 4
Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* 4
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* 1
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* 2
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* 1
Coot *Fulica atra* over 4000
Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* 1
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* 2
Red-wattled Plover *Hoplopterus indicus* 7
White-tailed Plover *Chettusia leucura* 1
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans* 3
Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* 12

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* common
 Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* 4
 Palm Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* common
 Little Owl *Athene noctua* 4 (markedly common)
 Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* 6



Little Owl

Common Skylark *Alauda arvensis* abundant
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* abundant
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* 20
 Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* 3
 Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* more than 20
 Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* 4
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* 3
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* common
 Blackbird *Turdus merula* 1
 Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* 1
 Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* 15
 Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* 6
 Graceful Warbler *Prinia gracilis* abundant
 Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* 1
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* abundant
 Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* abundant
 Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* abundant
 Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* 20
 Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* common (30+)
 Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* abundant (thousands)

Buhayrat al-Basil and finally some lesser white-fronted geese

On afternoon 11 February 2007 we visited the last of our targets, Buhayrat al-Basil, which is a new reservoir at Khabur River, south of Hasaka, near the municipalities of Ajaja and Shaddadi. This lake doesn't yet have vegetation on its own, so breeding populations are probably very limited. However, as it turned out, this shallow lake had thousands of waterbirds, probably on migration, and also large amounts of shorebirds. Hunting was obvious and there is no protection whatsoever at this lake. This is a worrisome piece of news, since it was here that we discovered thousands of geese, including the Lesser White-fronted Goose. Unfortunately it seemed that majority of the geese had just left or were leaving the lake (flying over us) when we arrived.

When approaching the lake, large flocks consisting of hundreds of Ruddy Shelduck and geese passed over us. We counted several hundreds of Ruddy Shelduck and White-fronted Goose respectively. Probably there were also Lesser White-fronted Geese and Greylag Geese leaving the lake among these large flocks. I would put the probable number of Lesser White-fronted Goose close to 30-40 but more than 8 could not be surely identified among the remaining geese on the lake due to distance and the movements of the flocks. It is remarkable that the composition of waterbirds here was very different from the Hawl Lake. While Hawl was favored by diving waterbirds, Basil Lake was obviously a favorite destination for many arctic species and half-divers that favor more shallow water.

Here is a modest count of the waterbirds that were close enough to the shores to be identified and counted. (There were hundreds of more in great distance.)

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* more than 50
 Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* more than 50
 Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* 10
 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* 10
 Great Egret *Egretta alba* 50 (significant number)
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* more than 50
 Greylag Goose *Anser anser* 15
 White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* 173 (plus hundreds or thousands that left)

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* 8. The original count produced 18 of them, but recounts reduced the number of the surely identified individuals into 8. Possibly 10 more left the lake with some flocks of WG flying off.
 Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* 6
 Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* 20 (plus hundreds that left)
 Wigeon *Anas penelope* 40

Teal *Anas crecca* over 4000: the most abundant waterbird here!

Garganey *Anas querquedula* 2

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* more than 1000

Pintail *Anas acuta* over 200

Shoveler *Anas clypeata* over 300

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* 6

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* over 300

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* 1

Smew *Mergellus albellus* 15 (significant: this species is formerly considered as vagrant)

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* 2

Coot *Fulica atra* 300-400

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* 1

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* 2

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* over 30

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* 6

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* 4

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* 12

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* 1

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* 4

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* 2

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* 100

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* 2

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* 1

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus* 3

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* 20

Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* over 20

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* abundant

Skylark *Alauda arvensis* abundant

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* common



Buhayrat al-Basil – Basil Lake

Lastly, I would like to remark that there was nothing dangerous or obstacles on the access to these three sites. They can easily be visited by foreign birdwatchers, too. It is however strongly recommended to involve a Syrian guide, who can explain to the Syrian security authorities the harmless motives of birdwatchers visiting these areas.