

# IRAQ OPERATIONAL DEPLOYMENT – “EXTREME BIRDING”

Oct 2004 – Feb 2005

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## INTRODUCTION

I was deployed to Iraq in late 2004. During my time in the country on duty, I was able to do a little birding. Having travelled widely in most of the Middle East, I was familiar with the species that occur there and consequently the chances of a lifer were slim.

Unfortunately it was the wrong time of year for Grey Hypocolius, which has become a bit of a bogey bird for me. My time in the country was spent at Basrah Palace (BP) which sits on the Shatt Al Arab, Basrah Air Station (BAS), Shaiba Logistics Base (SLB) and fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, six weeks with the Black Watch in Forward Operating Base Dogwood (FOBD), supporting the US assault on Fallujah.

## Basrah Palace

Just after arrival at the Palace, numerous Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were seen that had obviously bred in the area. The Palace had a very large Night Heron roost numbering in excess of 500 birds. Pied Kingfishers were common and occasionally a Smyrna Kingfisher put in an appearance. Several Egret species were noted and a passage of Marsh Terns took place for a few days.

After the deployment to FOB Dogwood, several Indian Pond Herons or Squacco Heron were seen, but were too distant for a positive ID. A pair of Great Spotted Eagles wintered on the opposite bank from the Palace and Marsh Harriers were a regular site. A Honey Buzzard was seen on one occasion presumably on migration.

## **Species List**

Cormorant
Night Heron

Squacco/Indian Pond Heron
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Honey Buzzard
Marsh Harrier
Greater Spotted Eagle
Red-wattled Plover
Common Sandpiper
Caspian Gull
Black-headed Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Whiskered Tern
White-winged Black Tern
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Palm Dove
Smyrna Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
Indian Roller
Barn Swallow
Water Pipit
House Crow
Chiffchaff
House Sparrow

### **Basrah Air Station**

My first day in theatre and as I was waiting for a chopper ride to Basrah Palace a very light Nightjar flew around in the lights, a most surprising lifer; an Egyptian Nightjar – a great start to the tour.

The remainder of the BAS is open desert ground interspersed with buildings however there are also two small seasonal ponds. The ponds are situated outside the Headquarters building and one by the incinerator. Birds encountered included Marsh Sandpiper, Kentish Plover, Red-wattled Plover and Black-winged Stilt.

These small ponds produced some good birds and were always worth a look when you had a spare moment.

### **Species List**

Black-winged Stilt
Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Red-wattled Plover
Little Stint

Redshank
Green Sandpiper
Palm Dove
Egyptian Nightjar
Pallid Swift
Crested Lark
Water Pipit
White Wagtail
House Sparrow

### **Shaiba Log Base**

During infrequent visits the only birds of note were a Southern Grey Shrike and an Isabelline Wheatear near the helipad.

### **Species List**

Isabelline Wheatear
Southern Grey Shrike

### **FOB Dogwood**

Red-wattled Plovers were regularly heard, Yellow-legged Gulls were frequently seen and towards the end of the six week a pair of dark Desert Larks was seen.

Red-wattled Plover
Caspian Gull
Crested Lark
Desert Lark
Black Redstart

### **The Journey from Dogwood to Basrah**

This was the highlight of the trip and gave clear indications how productive birding in Iraq could be given freedom of movement.

On approaching Najaf and around the town, Pied Kingfishers were common. Two White-tailed Plovers were seen in the town and on driving south between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers Marsh Harriers and a Booted Eagle were seen. In the desert areas bordering the road Desert Wheatears were seen with their usual companion Desert Warbler.

Camp Cedar 2, a US camp along route Tampa on route to Basrah was a fuel stop. However outside of the camp there are some large ponds which harboured Temmick's Stint, Marsh Sandpiper and White-tailed Plover. In the distance large numbers of wildfowl were flying many of which were Shovellers and several White Storks were noted.

## **Species List**

Little Egret
White Stork
Shoveller
Montague's Harrier
Buzzard
Booted Eagle
Kestrel
Black-winged Stilt
Kentish Plover
Pacific Golden Plover
Red-wattled Plover
White-tailed Plover
Little Stint
Temminck's Stint
Redshank
Marsh Sandpiper
Caspian Gull
Black Headed Gull
Smyrna Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher
Desert Lark
Water Pipit
Desert Wheatear
Desert Warbler
Rook

## **SUMMARY**

If Iraq ever becomes visitable, it is a fantastic place to bird watch with endless possibilities and very differing habitats. For those deployed to the area with an interest in avi fauna, don't forget your bins and field guide. It passes the time and brings some sense of normality to proceedings.