

Birding in a conflict zone: a 50-year perspective

Stepping off the Orient Express in Istanbul in April 1966, I wasn't aware of what the next 50 years would open my eyes to in the world of Islam. The haunting voice of the Muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from the Blue Mosque rang over the city and, as I look back, may have been saying: 'Young man, the Middle East is now your ornithological playground.'

While 1966 was a life-changing year for me, it was a peaceful year: surveying the western Turkish lakes and counting migrating raptors over the Bosphorus with my birdwatching chums. I returned to the country for several months in 1967 and, while searching for Brown Fish Owls *Bubo zeylonensis* along the Aksu River in June (yes, we were sure we would find them), I was aware of fighter-plane activity: preparation for an escalation of the Six Day War? It was my first taste of conflict in the region.

Half a century ago there were still few years when there wasn't some form of war or conflict to unsettle travel plans in the Middle East; while Turkey was safe, venturing farther afield was, with one or two exceptions, mostly out of the question. Iran, however, was safe until the Shah was overthrown, and two trips in the 1970s, my first in the region outside Turkey and with some of Britain's birding luminaries, made me realise that a field guide for the region was needed. That project dominated my plans over the coming decades, before more conservation-oriented visits took over. Checking on the identification of, say, Asian Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguineus* or White-throated Robin *Irania gutturalis* in Vaurie was a pain.

If this tale seems rather self-centred, then I apologise, but I wanted it to reflect, albeit briefly, my own thoughts and experiences. Many trips were against the recommendations of the Foreign Office but the chance to explore Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes or of finding a new bird for Socotra trumped the official advice.

Outside Turkey, Yemen became an irresistible lure for me. Little-known ornithologically, it was becoming safe by 1979 and for my first visit I spent a month that year among the country's endemics in overwhelmingly dramatic landscapes, and among beguiling cultures and kind people. Since then, Yemen's fortunes have fluctuated, as we know from daily news bulletins. Civil war in 1994 and a humanitarian crisis since 2011 have had a catastrophic human toll. But windows of opportunity and spells of stability made it possible for me to explore much of the country and for the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME) to take two long expeditions, enabling comprehensive surveys and the identification of Important Bird Areas. These extended to the magical and poorly known island of



Ian Willis

82. Richard Porter (seated), in Turkey in 1966.

Socotra, to census and map the breeding species, including the ten endemics.

Among the good times were frightening moments. When the 1994 civil war started I had just arrived in Sana'a for a month of surveys and to help plan Yemen's first conservation conference. I was staying near the president's palace when the first Scud missiles landed and tracer bullets filled the night-time sky. We had to take shelter for several days, during which my birding was restricted to studying the garden ecology of Yemen Serins *Crithagra menachensis*. A week later, along with resident expats, I was airlifted out during a 'guaranteed' cease-fire window.

Similarly, in 2011, at the start of an uprising that would soon escalate, a rapid retreat seemed prudent. At this time, I was studying Socotra's Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus* (over 1,900 individuals – perhaps the highest density in the world?) and also helping my Yemeni colleagues with a project in the Highlands of Ibb. Financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, it was designed to encourage a greater understanding among the villagers and local decision-makers of the importance of the wildlife of this outstanding IBA that holds nine of the southwest Arabian endemics, the Arabian Accentor *Prunella fagani* among them.



Richard Porter

83. Ahmed Saeed Suleiman (centre) teaching the local people about birds on Socotra, March 2001.



Burr Heneman

84. Oiled beaches in Kuwait, April 1991.



Richard Porter

85. Training in Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes, April 2013.

Richard Porter



86. Sharif Jbour (left) shows Iraq's first field guide to a student, in Syria, November 2006.

The political situation worsened, however, and an e-mail arrived from a colleague (reproduced below as written):

We are so sorry for dis contacting you due to the crazy war which killed everything in Yemen including human, birds, butterfly and flowers. Besides, our Yemen never deserves that. We wish, they could stop this useless war in order to live in peace.

AbdulRahman, lbb, June

Despite this, the team went on to complete their work. And on Socotra my friends are preparing to celebrate Vulture Awareness Day this September.

Before the demise of Saddam, the 1990/91 Gulf War was, for many, the first headline-catching Middle East conflict. It was also an environmental disaster. Oil, from deliberately

sabotaged pipes, poured into the Arabian Gulf and Kuwait's deserts, killing thousands of birds. Supported by RSPB, BirdLife International organised a task force to assess the damage and prepare a recovery plan, which I helped to coordinate from my desk in Sandy. The horror scenes from the Kuwait and Saudi Arabia coasts speak for themselves.

Syria and Iraq have few birdwatchers, but I have had the privilege of joining them many times. After the removal of Saddam, in 2003, a conservation movement blossomed, spear-headed by Nature Iraq, an NGO that would not have been allowed under the previous regime. Their first project was a six-year survey to identify the country's important wildlife sites and I was chosen to train their young biologists on behalf of BirdLife International. It wasn't deemed safe to be in Iraq so Syria was to be the training ground, with its large wetlands and deserts that would simulate two of Iraq's major habitats. For five years we gathered annually in Syria until, once again, conflict intervened.

So, for the next six years, training courses and survey reviews were held in Iraq, although not before three of my Iraqi colleagues were kidnapped and held to ransom in the Marshes. On my last visit, in spring 2013, when tensions persisted, it was unsettling to know that rifles were at the ready for the unexpected while we were censusing White-tailed Lapwings *Vanellus leucurus*. Yet despite everything, Nature Iraq has produced a field guide in Arabic; recently published its endeavours in the monumental *Key Biodiversity Areas of Iraq*; and celebrated the re-flooding of the Mesopotamian Marshes

Richard Porter



87. The Euphrates women's boat race, April 2013.

with a festival on the Euphrates that ended with a boat race!

Back in Syria the situation worsened, with ISIS strengthening its grip. Palmyra was under siege and being bombed daily. In 2015, a young birdwatcher posted a poignant image on Facebook of a field guide in the rubble (see *Brit. Birds* 108: 448), writing: 'What is very precious to us is totally worthless to others.' It was shortly after this that I heard that one of my Syrian birdwatching friends had been killed.

Experiences in Lebanon were different. Watching streams of Lesser Spotted Eagles *Clanga pomarina* heading south over the Akkar Mountains in 2013, I looked down on Syria's Lake Homs, one of the sites for our Iraqi training, the town of Homs now in ruins. Yet Syria has an Arab-language field guide and the Syrian Society for the Conservation of Wildlife is shortly to hold a workshop on the illegal hunting of wildlife. A few years earlier, soon after the Israel–Hezbollah War, I visited southern Lebanon to help train a village community in the protection of their HIMA (an area for conservation) and while counting Great Black-headed Gulls *Ichthyaetus ichthyaeus* along the shore it was sobering to know that my host, the mayor, was now living in his third house, the previous two having been destroyed by bombs. There is something unnerving about sleeping in a house riddled with recent bullet holes.

My favourite Middle East country? I always reply: 'My heart is in Yemen, but my soul is in Turkey.' With so many memories over the years, Turkey is indelibly etched on my soul. But for the 'heart' I return to Yemen and the brave bird-watchers and conservationists, whose fun and friendship are second to none. So, I finish with a Christmas message from a good friend of 25 years. We have carried out many surveys and found new birds together since he first joined the OSME Yemen Expedition of 1993

as a complete novice. Now he is a leading Yemeni authority on both birds and conservation.

Despite everything my work with UNDP continues, less targeted on birds, but benefiting them. New projects include phasing out organic pollutants, community programmes on renewable energy for domestic lighting, harvesting rain water (I am digging biggest tanks in my home now), turtle protection on Socotra where we are supporting women's capacity building for a better livelihood. Using binoculars is illegal, but this year I have noticed very many African Grey Hornbills [Lophoceros nasutus] around my home for the first time. Climate change? Days and years are passing so fast without even noticing. There is no difference whether we are in a good time or misery as we are now. In this occasion I had to rewind the film to remember the olden good days we had together all over Yemen and Socotra. Wishing it will come again very soon. Alternatively, if situation continue I have to come over so that I can work as a house-keeper in your lodge with part-time birdwatching.

Maybe it will be some time before I can visit Yemen, Syria or even Iraq again, but I can still hold dear the resilience, determination and friendship of my Middle East colleagues and the knowledge that, even in these difficult times, they are dedicated to making a better world for wildlife – and people. I wish them well. Inshallah!

Richard Porter



88. Richard Porter (right) with colleagues from Nature Iraq at the Mesopotamian Marshes, April 2013.

Laith Ali Al-Obeidi