



Al Asad au Natural



Volume I, Issue 17

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"Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life."

- John Muir

Farewell to Al Asad

My time here grows short, and this publication is headed into hiatus. I hope everyone has enjoyed reading about the incredible diversity of plants and animals here as much as I have enjoyed discovering it! If anything can be taken from these pages, I hope that it might include a greater appreciation for the natural world around us, wherever we may be; an understanding of how easy it is to see only the browns and grays of the world as we rush through it (may you all find time to occasionally look in slow motion!); and an inspiration to see the world not as what is outside our home, but what is in fact our home. I am very grateful for the opportunity

to be here, both in support of our mission and to see an interesting part of the world. I was fortunate to start correspondence with a number of people here and abroad who are working to study and preserve wildlife and natural areas in Iraq – and am grateful that I was able to help in some small way. I have many people to thank – everyone who has been supportive or contributed to this newsletter (not the least of whom has been my chain of command!), the Ohio Ornithological Society, Columbus Audubon, Nature Iraq, the 3rd ESC Public Affairs Office, the Vector Control and veterinary staff, and many, many others. I especially want to wish Nature Iraq

success in their efforts to survey and protect Iraq's wildlife. I do not think my journey here is quite over – I will be continuing to process the data I have collected here into usable products over the summer, and plan to keep the partnership between the birding communities of Iraq and Ohio alive. I have no doubt that someday in the not too distant future I will return to Iraq as part of a tourist group. I look forward to this day and meeting my Iraqi friends, enjoying a wider slice of Iraq's awesome wildlife and deep history, and seeing even more of it's birds and animals! Until then, ***may the peace (and good birding) be upon you!***



Creature Feature

Spiny-tailed Agama

Known in the Middle East as the Dhub-Dhub or Dhab lizard, this prehistoric looking lizard is common in Kuwait and southern Iraq, but only recently did I find this species here at Al Asad. Despite their large and prehistoric appearance, the Dhub is a vegetarian that will not purposefully hurt a human. They do have sharp spines on their powerful tails and sharp claws for digging, so picking one up is not a good idea! Dhubs typically feed at night, spending the day sunning near the den hole. These dens often start out as wide as 30 cm, but quickly taper

The biggest threat to the Dhub-Dhub is the illegal pet trade.

to half that, and twist as deep as 2.25 meters underground, with a tunnel length of over 5 meters! Staying near the den provides refuge from hawks and owls, it's natural predators, but not much help against its other main predator,

the Desert black snake, which will chase it right down the hole. Dhubs are late-risers, usually not coming out to sun until after 8 am (now that's my kind of lizard!). They breed in March and April with much wrestling and biting, laying eggs in the burrow which will hatch in August and September. They can go long periods without food, and get most of their water from plants or dew condensed around the opening of the den.

Left: Dhub-Dhub spotted by his den at Al Asad

Right: Two Dhubs at another post—check out the thick tail in the cage!



Who's Living Under My CHU?

Camel spider

Not a spider, and not a scorpion, but a "wind scorpion", this much maligned creature is only 1-3" long, does not jump to attack camel bellies, does not run at 25mph screaming across the desert, is not poisonous, does not have a numbing bite,

and will not bite unless you pick it up. It does have powerful jaws that will hurt if you do pick it up and get bitten! They are mostly nocturnal, and eat termites, beetles, and grasshoppers.



My Garden

A. Capers—just starting to bloom into a large white flower. In mid summer 1-2" fruits that look like mini watermelons form, which then turn inside out as they ripen, exposing the seeds and red flesh.

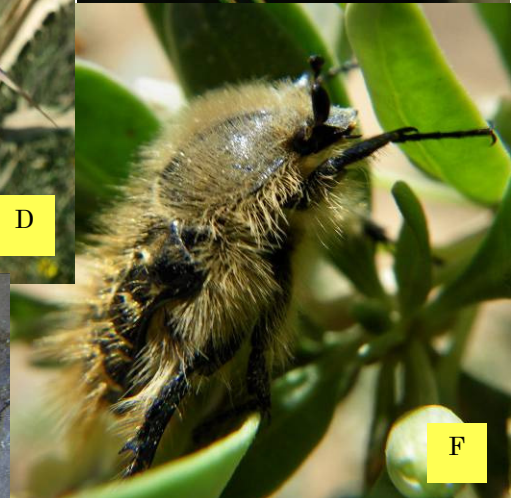
B. unknown

C. Romeria (Asian poppy)

D. A large thistle—I watched for 3 weeks for this to bloom!

E. A moth

F. Flower chafer (a type of scarab beetle) on Nightshade



Questions from the Field...your questions answered!

How Can I Get the Cool Stuff I Find at Al Asad Identified After the Un-Official Unit Naturalist Redeploys?

Email!

I would like to hear updates on the plants and animals found at Al Asad, and will be happy to continue to answer "questions from the field"!



Useful Field Guides

A Field Guide to Jordan

Birds of the Middle East

Birds of Israel & the Middle East

Birds of Iraq (in Arabic)

Pic of the Week!>

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stolen from other sources and greatly appreciated!



Always Right, Sustain the Fight!

371st SB

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Birders' Corner

What to say but "WOW!" I would have never thought that here at Al Asad I would have opportunity to see over a quarter of the bird species on the official list for Iraq! Some highlights that come to mind include the critically endangered Sociable plover, Iraq's first accepted Goshawk record, the stunning Blue-cheeked bee-eater, the charismatic Hoopoe's and Wrynecks, the diversity of shrike species, and the endemic Iraq babbler. Also, finding numerous species of ducks and wading birds here at the edge of the desert was an unexpected bonus. Other endemics like the Iraqi Little grebe, Hooded crow, and Gray hypocolius were also memorable. In my opinion, Al Asad warrants recognition as an Important Bird Area for Iraq, and I hope that as the base grows the stewardship of it's natural habitat is always a high priority.

Species identified on Al
Asad to date:

115



A final thought: "The wildlife and its habitat cannot speak for itself. So we must and we will." - Theodore Roosevelt

Special Hoopoe Insert!

"It was in China, late one moonless night,

The Simorgh first appeared to human sight -

He let a feather float down through the air,

And rumours of it's fame spread everywhere."

- Farid ud-Din Attar from his 1177 allegorical poem "The Conference of the Birds"

The Hoopoe, named for it's "oop-oop-oop" call, has been one of my favorite birds on Al Asad. Wide-spread across most of Europe, Africa, and a lot of Asia, the Hoopoe is a distinctive bird that has influenced many cultures. In Persia, the Hoopoe was featured in "The Conference of the Birds", a philosophical poem where the Hoopoe leads birds seeking the mythical Simorgh, (Phoenix). In the end, 30 birds find their true king after seeing their collective reflection in a pond. The Hoopoe is also the national bird of

both Italy and Israel. It is ironic that Israel recently chose a bird described in the Bible as non-kosher for it's symbol, but it's choice shows that the people of Israel were willing to put their love of this charismatic bird above politics and symbolism. In much of Europe, the Hoopoe is considered a thief or stupid, and in Scandinavia it is seen as a harbinger of war, but for Ethiopian Jews, it is called the "Moses bird" and thought to be a guide to Zion. Hoopoes can be found on temple walls in ancient Egypt, where they were sacred. In ancient Greece the Hoopoe was a symbol of murder and death, but in Rabbinic tradition and the Koran, King Solomon awards the Hoopoe it's unique crown for wisdom and service in delivering an invitation to the Queen of Sheba. Legend calls this bird "mountain chiseler" or "two beaks",



and claims that it can chisel thru rock, and even if the beak is removed it will chisel with it's crest! The beak does have uniquely strong muscle support that allows it to open even when stuck deep in the ground in search of insects. It will defend itself with this strong beak, and also by excreting a foul smelling substance. They are monogamous, but only for 1 season at a time!



Above: a Hoopoe injured during migration at Al Asad

Left: "The Concourse of the Birds" by Habib Allah, circa 1600. Note the Hoopoe center right instructing the other birds on the Sufi path, where the birds find religious truth by looking within themselves after many trials.