

NATURE IRAQ HOSTED FIELD ORNITHOLOGY AND BOTANY COURSE WITH BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL AND THE ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS EDINBURGH IN IRAQI KURDISTAN.

Omar Fadhel¹ & Anna Bachmann²

¹Biological Researcher at University of Baghdad & Nature Iraq Bird Team, omarbiology78@yahoo.com

²Project Manager, Key Biodiversity Areas Project, Nature Iraq, anna@natureiraq.org

A 10 day training course, hosted by the Iraqi Environmental group, Nature Iraq, was conducted from the 14th to 23rd of April in Iraqi Kurdistan for over 20 bird and botany field biologists. This double course focused on bird and botany identification in the field, survey methodology and assessment of conservation issues. Trainees from various facilities and institutes all over Iraq attended this course, which included extensive field visits to areas in the Kurdistan governorate of Sulaimani.

Instruction for the ornithology portion of the course was provided by Richard Porter, an expert on the birds of the Middle East with BirdLife International and an advisor to the Nature Iraq Biodiversity Program. This was the first time that Richard had visited Iraq and it was a very exciting experience for Iraqi bird experts and enthusiasts. This was their first chance to have a “face to face” and exchange valuable information on bird identification and conservation with one of the top bird specialists in the world. The presence of Richard had special importance because it showcased Nature Iraq’s role in protecting and conserving Iraq’s environment - especially those areas and habitats that are important for birds. It may also be an indication of a future when opportunities increase for outside birdwatchers to visit Iraq and see its unique bird populations and ecosystems.

For the botany portion of the course, the instructors were Tony Miller and Sophie Neale from the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, Scotland. This was their first visit to Iraq. Their presence and training was significant because Nature Iraq has initiated with other Iraqi government and university stakeholders, a project to complete a modern Flora of Iraq. This will be a massive, multi-year project that will involve extensive surveying of Iraq’s botanical resources and new methodologies are needed to complete this work. Their course focused on innovative field collection techniques, taxonomy and habitat conservation assessments. They provided a lot of advice that will be reflected in changes to the up-coming Key Biodiversity Areas survey that Nature Iraq conducts twice a year throughout the country.

During the course a number of diverse mountain, wadi and riverine habitats were visited including Homer Qawm, Zewe and Peramagroon, Kobi Qara Dag, Chami Rezan, Darbendikhan Lake, De Lezha, Chamchamal, Ahmed Awa, Waraz, and Mawat. The information collected will be included in Nature Iraq’s extensive database on Iraq’s flora and fauna.

In terms of bird observations the training team found a wide spectrum of breeding birds in these areas that are listed as globally threatened or near threatened species by the International Union of Conservation on Nature (IUCN) or are species of conservation concern. These included: Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) – Breeding population of over 30 pairs; Asian Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) – on migration; Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) - several breeding pairs and flocks of up to 75 on migration; Cinereous Bunting (*Emberiza cineracea*) – on territory at three sites; Pygmy Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pygmaeus*) – on migration; Semi-collared Flycatcher (*Ficedula semitorquata*) – 10 pairs located and probably breeding, and European Roller (*Coracias garrulus*) – possibly breeding. As a result the known breeding range was extended for over 30 species.



Fig1. Tony Miller with students (A. Bachmann)



Fig2. Training in Kurdistan (R F Porter)

From a botanical point of view the areas visited during the course were lush and green (Iraq has been facing a drought over the past two years but recent rains had covered the Kurdish mountain in grasses and herbs). Tony Miller of the RBGE stated, “When we got down to looking at the vegetation in detail we found it to be rich in species, on a par I would say, with some of the richest areas I have visited in the Middle East. In particular, I was impressed by the changes in species composition across fairly small distances as we changed altitude or moved, for instance, from limestone to serpentine soils.”

Though the course was short and scheduled at the best time for botany work, the overwhelming impression was that Iraq would have many novelties and new plants to be found. Although there are signs in many areas of deforestation (usually attributed to Saddam’s policies) there were also signs of woodland management practices, such as the extensive coppicing of oak woodlands.

As a result of the course, many additional trainees have been identified with a solid baseline of skills in field ornithology and botany and Nature Iraq intends to tap into these new recruits for its up-coming Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) summer survey. In addition, with many Iraqi and international partners, Nature Iraq is involved in a new effort to complete a modern Flora of Iraq and many of the methodologies presented in the course will be implemented during this effort. It is also hoped that such trainings in Iraq will become a permanent fixture of the spring Nature Iraq training program and we hope to repeat these and other field courses in the spring of 2010.



Fig3. THomer Qawm (A. Bachmann)