

The First Confirmed Records of Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* and Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* for Iraq

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Abstract

During the intensive field surveys in different locations of various habitats in Iraq arranged by the Iraqi Organization for Conservation of Nature (IOCN), some considerable observations on the biodiversity in various locations were gained. This included adding new species to the Avifaunal of Iraq in addition to new observations of confirmed breeding of some bird species that were not recorded as breeding species. Two new bird species have been added to the Iraqi bird checklist after they were clearly observed and documented during two different surveys in two different locations. Pied Stonechat (or Pied Bushchat) *Saxicola caprata* has been found in the southern desert southwestern of Muthanna Province; and Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* was observed in Abu-Ghara, north of Maissan Province. These two observations were documented and the habitats were described as well. The current paper documents the first record of these two bird species for the bird-list of Iraq.

Keywords: Bushchat, Hooded Wheatear, Iraq, *Oenanthe monacha*, Pied Stonechat, Salman, *Saxicola caprata*, Teeb

1. Introduction

The Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* is also called Pied Bushchat is a resident breeder from the Middle East to Indonesia in tropical southern Asia through the Indian subcontinent eastward and classified as a least concern (IUCN, 2016) [3]. It can be found in open areas such as scrub, grassland and agriculture (Bird Life International 2012) [3].

Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* range includes central Asia and as west as eastern Iran eastward to Baluchistan, Turkistan, and northern Afghanistan (Yosef and Martin, 2002) [18]. The species winters in southern Iran and southern Afghanistan, and northwestern India (Snow and Perrins, 1998; Scott and Adhami, 2006). Within the Middle East, Pied Stonechat is vagrant with few records in Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Porter & Aspinal, 2010; Shirihai, 1996) [10, 16]. Its vagrancy might reach as west as east Mediterranean, Cyprus, and Egypt (Kai and Völlm, 2008).

The hooded wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* is a small insectivorous passerine which was previously known as a member of the Turdidae thrush family (Bird Life International 2012) [4].

The distribution of Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* ranges over the area of Egypt, Israel, Arabian Peninsula and Pakistan. Within the Middle East, it breeds locally in different locations within Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, eastern and southern Iran, and winters at the western grounds of the Arabian Gulf (Porter & Aspinal, 2010; Cornwallis, 1975) [10, 5]. This species has been found in Kuwait and as west as Cyprus (Porter & Aspinal, 2010; FARES and FÖRSCHLER, 2008) [10, 6].

Various field visits that targeted different areas within Iraq were arranged by the Iraqi Organization for Conservation of Nature (IOCN) in order to discover the status of the different habitats in Iraq recently. These surveys have

resulted into considerable discoveries of new species and better describing the current status of the species and the different habitats in Iraq. The two new records subject of the current paper are part of the results of the surveys conducted by the IOCN experts. As for the two first observations subject of the current paper, the first observation was during targeting the area of Ali Al-Gharbi, Chlaat, and the northern parts of Teeb areas (that include Abu-Ghraab), in Missan Province at early February 2017; and the second survey was during surveying the desert areas around Salman sub-district, Muthanna Province at early March 2019 (Figure 1).

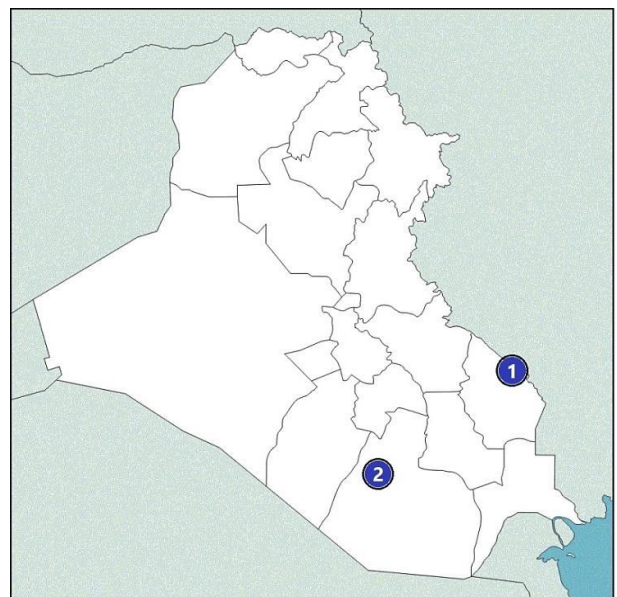


Fig 1: Map of Iraq shows the locations where the two new observations were made as the first records for Iraq: 1- Hooded Wheatear in Abu-Ghraab, and 2- Pied Stonechat northeast of Salman.

The observation of the 1st Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* in Iraq

At the 3rd of March 2019, during large-scale survey that extended from Mamlaha (southwest of Samawa city) to the western areas of Salman sub-district, and while birding in large natural depression in the middle of desert area called Suweilha, 45km northeast of Salman sub-district, the team has spread around the campsite to better cover the depression. Surveying the scattered bushes and the rocky edges, the team was able to spot a blackish individual bird that was perching on the top of a *Ziziphus* shrub. The bird has flown to other distant shrub before the observer got closer to it. Due to being the area open with no or scattered hides of shrubs, it kept flying from bush to another while the team was able to watch it carefully by binoculars then to identify and document it (Figure 2). After keeping following the bird, it disappeared, heading southeast to the depth of the depression where we weren't able to spot it again despite that its destination was checked carefully.

The observed individual was an adult male. The head, breast, back, below the breast and flanks, and tail are black. The lower belly, vent and under and upper-tail coverts are whitish. The shoulder-patch is narrow of whitish colour. Bill and legs are black.



Fig 2: Left – Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* observed in Suweilha depression, northeast of Salman sub-district. Right – landscape habitat where the Pied Stonechat was first observed in Suweilha, northeastern of Salman sub-district. ©IOCN.

The observation of the 1st Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* in Iraq

At the 4th of February 2017 in Abu-Ghraab area close to the Iraq-Iranian border, 70km to the northeast of Amara city, single male was observed perching at prominent area of land close to the edge of relatively deep valley. Once the team was trying to photo the bird, it flew down to the valley. Being close to the eastern borders, the area used to be as battles ground, and it is well-known of its intensive mine-fields, the matter that restricted to large extent the movement of the team members. Nevertheless, the team was able to get as closer as possible to where the bird was perching at the cliff of the valley-side to get closer observation of the bird for better documentation (Figure 3).

The observed bird was an adult male of Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha*, the crown, forehead, and nape are whitish. The lures, checks, hind-neck, throat, and upper breast are black. The wings, wing coverts, and the upper parts of the back are black. Rump and tail are white with black central feathers. The bird was very shy and swiftly flies away from the observers.

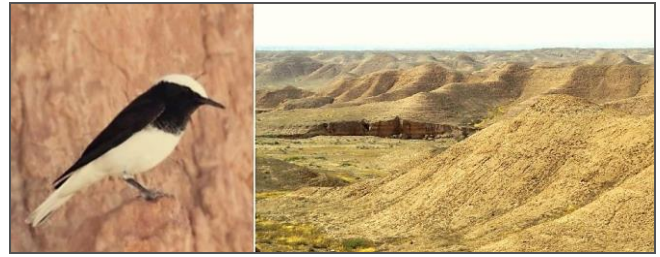


Fig 3: Left - Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* was perching on the side of the cliff facing deep valley in Abu-Ghraab area. Right – landscape habitat where the Hooded Wheatear was found in Abu-Ghraab, northern Missan Province. ©IOCN.

Allouse 1962 and Salim 2006 have referred to Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* and to the possibility of its occurrence in the region as vagrant (Allouse, 1962; Salim, *et al.*, 2006), but after more check and revision by thorough work made by a specialized team, this species was among the excluded bird species for given reasons. Subsequently, neither Porter 2010, nor Salim 2012 have mentioned Pied Stonechat *Saxicola caprata* among the birds' checklists of Iraq (Porter *et al.*, 2010; Salim, *et al.* 2012) [10, 13]; therefore, this observation represents the first confirmed record of this species for Iraq.

As for Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha*, this species was not mentioned by either old or new literature on the avifauna of Iraq (Allouse, 1953, Allouse, 1962; Salim, *et al.*, 2006, Porter *et al.*, 2010; Salim, *et al.* 2012) [1, 2, 13, 10]; thus, the observation of this species that clearly described in the current paper represents the first documentation for the occurrence of Hooded Wheatear *Oenanthe monacha* in Iraq.

Recommendations

During IOCN's field surveys in Iraq, the team has found that the two above-mentioned areas to the north of Missan Province and to the northeast of Salman depression are relatively very rich with biodiversity (especially Avifauna) where considerable, accumulative bird-lists were obtained from these two areas during some surveys. Some of these observations were either new to the Iraqi list or of very ecological and scientific importance, of which the two species subject of the current paper (Hooded Wheatear and Pied Stonechat) are some of them. It is highly recommended that these two areas to be considered for effective protection to conserve their unique wildlife. The Iraqi Ministry of Environment has nominated Teeb (including Abu-Ghraab hills) as protected area as a first essential step towards protection of the biodiversity in these areas. More dedicated scientific work and awareness campaigns are needed to highlight the rich biodiversity of these areas.

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