



Al-Asad au Natural



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Creature Feature

Special Points of Interest:

- Which Christmas tradition is new to Al Asad this year? See page 2!
- Brighten your AO! Page 3.
- An action shot thru The Dusty Lens on Page 4.
- **Next Issue:** A bearish start to the New Year!

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"To him that watches,
everything is revealed."

- Italian proverb

Green Toad

One of only 6 amphibians in Iraq, the Green toad is found on Al Asad. they mostly live on land, but move to water in spring to mate. Green toads live

in humid burrows and crevices, and are mostly nocturnal. Toads secrete toxins when threatened, making them unpalatable to predators. For this reason, it is a good idea to wash your hands after

picking one up! In winter, the Green toad hibernates. Toads and other amphibians are important indicator species for healthy wetlands, as they are especially susceptible to effects from pollution.



Green toad found by Marines at the ASP

Who's Living Under My CHU?

Darkling Beetle. There are probably over 100 species of darkling beetles in Iraq, and 18,000 members of this family worldwide. Some have chemical defenses, making them taste bad to predators, and some are flightless. Darkling beetles eat both fresh and decaying vegetation and will also scavenge dead animals.



A Christmas Tradition Coming to Al Asad

Once Americans participated in a Christmas tradition known as the “side hunt”. After the Christmas meal (served at lunch time), family and friends would divide into “sides” and take to the woods to shoot birds (and other animals). The side with the biggest body count won the day. Through the late 1800s and early 1900s this tradition and other unsustainable practices began to take a severe toll on birds and other wildlife. Senseless slaughter, uncontrolled commercial harvests, rapid habitat destruction, and the mass killing of birds for trivial uses such as decorating fashionable hats, drove some species to extinction and many oth-

ers to the brink of extinction. By Christmas of 1900 once numerous species such as the Passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and Snowy egret were on the brink of extinction. That year ornithologist Frank Chapman changed the rules. Instead of killing birds, he organized 27 friends across the country and in Canada to conduct 25 Christmas Bird Counts (CBC). On that day these enthusiasts counted nearly 18,500 individual birds representing 90 species. A new tradition was born. By the 101st annual count in 2001, 52,471 people in 1,823 places participated in a CBC. These surveys are organized by a team leader who recruits birders to cover a 15

mile diameter circle, counting every bird seen or heard that day. The results are compiled and sent to the Audubon Society. While a count of this nature is not precise, over time it is an excellent tool to identify patterns in bird numbers. One of the challenges facing ornithologists in Iraq is that so much of the country has not been surveyed over the last 30 years that we do not have an accurate picture of everything that lives here and what condition those populations are in. With this in mind, I will be conducting a CBC right here on Al Asad. My results will be little more than anecdotal evidence of the birdlife here, but



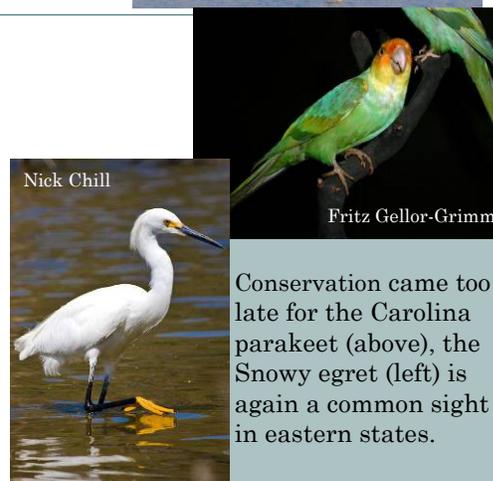
Black redstart (left) and Red-wattled plover (right) are two of the species seen recently on Al Asad that will hopefully be found on the Christmas bird count.



hopefully it will provide a rough idea of which birds live on Al Asad in winter and provide a basis which future surveys can be measured against. I will report my results to Nature Iraq and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East. In America, changes in attitudes towards wildlife occurred too late for the Passenger pigeon (extinct in 1914) and the Carolina parakeet (1918), but others like the

“Citizen-science” is the name given scientific studies when large numbers of people are asked to volunteer their observations.

Snowy egret have recovered, although some are still threatened. Many birds are also threatened in the Middle East. Iraq has a great opportunity to take action now and protect its natural heritage for future generations, and groups like Nature Iraq are working hard to do just this. They will start their annual bird surveys in January and February. Let’s all wish them, “Good Birding!”



Nick Chill

Fritz Gellor-Grimm

Conservation came too late for the Carolina parakeet (above), the Snowy egret (left) is again a common sight in eastern states.

Questions from the Field...your questions answered!

What Flowers Would Do Well in a Planter on Al Asad?

Try Some Native Wildflowers!

These native flowers would be good choices. Some of these are available as seeds or in ornamental varieties, others can be transplanted from around our buildings. All will require regular water but some can be over-watered. Some may require shade during the heat of summer, all will do better if you rinse the leaves after dust storms. Try to emulate the amount of light available where you see the plant growing naturally. Potting soil will result in more growth and more blooms. I'll "inspect" your garden if it includes blackberries!



(clockwise from top)

Harmal (*Peganum harmala*)

© Kurt Stueber

Dwarf chicory (*Cichorium pumilum*)

© Sara Gold

Sage (*Salvia napolfila*)

Pimpernel (*Anagallis arvensis*)

Oriental poppy (*Papaver orientalis*)

© David Beaulieu

Blackberry (*Rubus sanguineus*) — both

fruit and flower pictured, © Eitan f

Bindweed or Morning Glory (*Convolvulus*);

Mustard (*Brassica* or *Sinapsis*)



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and is greatly appreciated!



Always Right, Sustain the Fight!

371st SB

PIC of the WEEK



Randy Mendenhall photographed this Grey heron at Al Asad.

Birders' Corner

Species identified
on Al Asad to date:

85

In this edition of Birder's Corner I wanted to showcase another of the most frequently asked about species in Kuwait and Iraq, the **Crested lark**. Most people notice this bird because it is very widespread, readily cohabitates with humans, and the crest on top of its head is distinctive, reminding many Americans of the cardinals we see at home. There are other larks common here—I have seen **Short-toed** and **Desert larks** here at Al Asad, and the large **Hoopoe lark** in Kuwait, but the Crested variety is the one I see the most. One type of lark is common in Ohio—the Horned lark can be found in plowed fields, especially during the cold months. Other birds seen this week in-

clude a **Red-wattled plover**, **Isabelline shrike**, **Great Gray shrike**, **Isabelline wheatear**, and a small flock of **ducks** that were too far away for a good identification. Also, the hawk that has been buzzing our bird bath in recent weeks is a **Common kestrel**, a small type of falcon.

Kestrels are unique among hawks—they nest in natural cavities or man-made structures rather than building nests in trees like most hawks.



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