

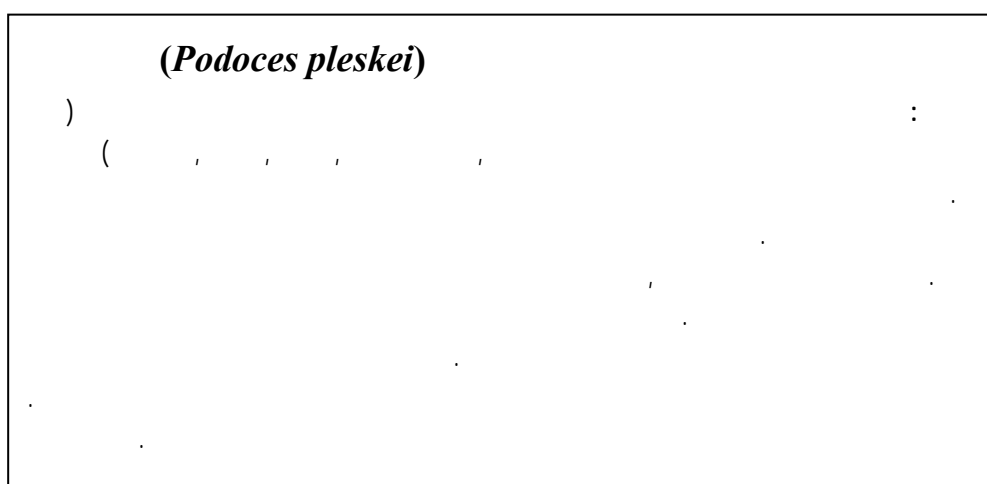
Short Communication

A Preliminary Survey of the Distribution of Pleske's Ground Jay *Podoces pleskei* in Iran, with Some Information on Numbers

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Pleske's Ground Jay *Podoces pleskei* Zarudny 1896 (family Corvidae) is a bird of desert habitats in Iran's central plateau, occurring from the northern edge of the Dasht-e Kavir in Semnan and Khorasan Razavi south through eastern Esfahan, Yazd and South Khorasan to extreme eastern Fars, Kerman and Seistan & Baluchestan. It is the only bird species that is known with certainty only from Iran, although it probably also occurs in bordering areas of eastern Afghanistan and extreme western Pakistan (Rasmussen & Alderton 2005). In June 1973, D.A. Scott (pers. obs.) observed the species within a few km of the Afghanistan border in the Namakazar Basin between Niyaz Abad and Kalateh Kabudeh in eastern Khorasan. Previous studies of the species have provided data on its distribution, diet, morphometry and nesting behaviour (Baloutch

1977; Dayani & Baloutch 1985; Hamedanian 1990, 1997, 2000). Londei (2001a, b) has reported an unusual plumage. There have been a number of reports of ground jays by personnel of the Iran Department of the Environment and by Iranian and visiting birdwatchers, and a study of the biology of the species is currently being conducted (H. Radnejad, pers. comm.).

In the autumn of 2002, a preliminary field survey was carried out over much of Iran (excluding the provinces of West Azarbaijan, East Azarbaijan, Ardabil, Gilan and Kurdistan in the north-west of the country) to determine the distribution of the species and obtain some information on numbers, habitat, behaviour, and threats to the population. A total of 213 Pleske's Ground Jays were observed during the survey, in Tehran, Semnan, Khorasan, Esfahan, Yazd, Kerman and Fars provinces (Table 1).

Table 1. Counts of Pleske's Ground Jays in Iran in autumn 2002.

Province	District	Location	No. of birds
Kerman	Shahr Babak	Rig Sefid & Robat plain	6
Kerman	Shahr Babak	6 km south of Dahaj village to Keder village	1
Kerman	Shahr Babak	Pir Ghouchan plain	1
Kerman	Sirjan	Goud-e Ghoul Non-hunting Area-Chah (Mazra plain, Gerdab, Chah Gaz, Pouzeh Hezar Chil)	5
Kerman	Bardsir	Kabutar Khan hillsides	1
Fars	Neyriz	Bahram-e Gour (Tolombeh Tabakh, Kaffeh Chah Badam, Kaffeh Chah Ashoor & Bashneh, Bagh Choubi)	14
Yazd	Mehriz	Kalmard Protected Area (Chah mill plains, Ghalandari, Chah Shir, Noorzadeh farm, Tall sarban)	20
Yazd	Ardestan	Me'raji area (around Siah Kuh Protected Area)	1
Yazd	Ardestan	Aqda plain (Badoura spring to Kariyon area)	3
Yazd	Khatam	Tall Sabz plain	3
Yazd	Khatam	Cheshmeh Shour	9
Yazd	Khatam	Cheshmeh Anjir	3
Yazd	Khatam	Yazd-Harat road, plains around Abulfazl Mosque	6
Yazd	Khatam	Harat-Shahr Babak road, plains around Abulfazl Mosque	11
Yazd	Tabas	Chah Rig Gondeh	2
Yazd	Tabas	Chah Shour	1
Yazd	Tabas	Near Deq Naybandiha	1
Yazd	Tabas	Deq Mashhi (around Ali-Abad)	1
Yazd	Tabas	Dihouk	2
Yazd	Tabas	Mian Takab plain (50 km N of Eshq-Abad)	4
Yazd	Tabas	Cheshmeh Qanbar (Haji Abad)	2
Yazd	Naybandan	Qadir plain (Darei)	2
Yazd	Abar Kouh	Abar Kouh plain (Chah Bolagh, Posht Kouh Eisa, Kaffeh Taffan, Chashm Zolf Parishan)	7
Esfahan	Naein	Plains around Abbas Abad mountain (Hizom Chah Naein, Chaft, Dasht Tang Gol, Zavar & Ashin, Anarak)	18
Tehran	Varamin	Kavir NP: Shokr Abad plain (Siah Kouh to Sefid Ab)	2
Tehran	Varamin	Kavir PA: Baba Hemmat plain	1
Semnan	Shahrud	Touran Biosphere Reserve, Abbas Abad (Naz Kouh, Doshakh, Dastjerd and Sharieh plains), Delbar (Mehrano, Jerd Takal Harb, Haft Tashi, Sineh Narm Chal and Kal Marazh) and Dast Hizomi	65
Semnan	Semnan	Chah Shirin (SE of Semnan)	2
Semnan	Damghan	Yazdan Abad (55 km south of Damghan on the road to Esfahan)	3
Khorasan Razavi	Sabzevar	North of Chah Barzan and Riza plains	7
South Khorasan	Qaen	Karizan plain	9

The highest densities were observed in Touran Biosphere Reserve (Table 1) where 65 individuals were recorded. The species was not recorded in Bushehr, Lorestan, Qazvin, Central (Markazi), Chahar-Mahal & Bakhtiari, Hamedan, Kohkiluyeh & Buyer-Ahmad, and Khuzestan provinces.

All of the Pleske's Ground Jays found during the present survey were in steppe and sandy deserts with scattered shrubs of *Zygophyllum* sp., *Haloxylon* sp. and *Ephedra* sp. at between 800 and 1900 m above sea level. The birds build their nests in these shrubs. Other common plants in the habitat of the ground jays included *Amygdalus* sp., *Pistacia* sp., *Tamarix* sp., *Calligonum* sp., *Alhagi* sp., *Atraphaxis* sp., *Salsola* sp. and *Artemisia* sp. Some of the principal factors affecting the population of ground jays are habitat loss due to conversion to agriculture, the cutting of shrubs for fuelwood, and overgrazing by domestic livestock (sheep, goats and camels). The collection of specimens for museums and universities may also be a problem locally. For example, Dayani & Baloutch (1985) collected 40 specimens for their study, while Hamedanian (1990, 1997, 2000) collected ten.

There is clearly a need for more detailed studies on the ecology, biology and especially conservation of this poorly known species. The development of eco-tourism in areas with ground jays could help to promote the conservation of the species, but care would have to be taken as eco-tourism can have negative as well as positive effects.

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