

Short Communication

The Status of Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* in Iran - with First Evidence of Breeding

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خروس کولی سینه‌سیاه دارای پاهای بلند، روتنه قهوه‌ای شنی، سرسیاه و زیر تنه سیاه و سفید است. دو طرف چانه و پهلوی گردن سفید، سطح روی شاهپرهای بال سیاه، دم سفید با حاشیه پهن سیاه‌رنگ در انتها و پوشی‌های زیر بال سفید است. در این مقاله وضعیت خروس کولی سینه‌سیاه در ایران و مشاهدات موثق این گونه از مناطق جنوب غرب و شمال غرب کشور در سال‌های اخیر ارائه شده است.

The Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* is primarily an Afrotropical species, occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa from Senegal to Ethiopia and south to Kenya and Uganda, but it also occurs in the Nile Valley north to the Nile Delta in Egypt and locally in southeast Europe and the Middle East (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, Syria, Jordan and Iraq) where it is mainly a summer visitor (Wiersma 1996, Snow & Perrins 1998). The relatively small population in southeastern Europe, the Middle East and Egypt is thought to be in the range 25,000–100,000 individuals (Wetlands International 2006). The population has increased considerably in Egypt and Israel since the 1960s. However, in Greece numbers had decreased to 25–30% of the 1970 totals by 1993. The species inhabits a great variety of habitats, including cultivated fields and grassland near water, mudflats, sandflats, sodaflds, rice fields, flooded fields, beaches and dunes (Wiersma 1996).

The Spur-winged Lapwing was listed by Zarudny (1911) as a rare winter visitor to the Mesopotamian lowlands of Iran (Khuzestan and a very rare winter visitor to the Zagros. Vaurie (1965) and Hüe & Etchépar (1970) listed the species for southwestern Iran on the strength of Zarudny's old records, and there were no further records of the species in Iran until January 2000, when three were seen at a refuse dump near Ahvaz (Keijl *et al.* 2001). Since

then, there have been several records mainly in Khuzestan which warrant revisiting the status of the species in Iran. We have therefore collected all available published information about the species in Iran and present a summary here.

Initially, it seemed that the Spur-winged Lapwing occurred in Iran only as a winter visitor as the first records in recent years were obtained during the midwinter waterbird counts. Following on from the record in January 2000, two birds were seen at exactly the same spot in January 2004 (de Boer *et al.* 2004, van Diek *et al.* 2004, M. Hornman *in litt.*), while a total of 19 birds were seen at two locations in Khuzestan in January 2007 (F. Willems unpubl. data).

However, in early May 2004, 14 Spur-winged Lapwings were observed by L. Frutig and RA in the southern part of Shadegan Marshes, Khuzestan. The birds were identified by their black cap, narrow black stripe from the chin to the breast, black breast and belly (except rear part), and white cheeks extending towards the sides of the breast in a point. The behaviour of the birds clearly indicated breeding, with some birds standing for long periods of time on exposed perches, intermittently giving warning calls and flying above the area or chasing away Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybrida*, while other birds were sitting on the ground between the *Salicornia* shrubs, most likely on their nests.

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The area consists of a brackish wetland dominated by *Salicornia* sp. On 28 April 2006, four birds were seen around a seasonal pool near Rofa'ye, Susangerd district, Khuzestan (W. Müller & RA pers. obs.). The birds were very agitated, flying around giving their alarm calls and diving down towards the observers, indicating that they were likely breeding

nearby. In April 2007, seven Spur-winged Lapwings were found in the same area near Rofa'ye, and a further three were seen near Bandar-e Emam Khomeini in southern Khuzestan (RA pers. obs.). Table 1 clearly shows that observations of Spur-winged Lapwings in Iran have been concentrated in Khuzestan.

Table 1. Observations of Spur-winged Lapwing in Iran.

| Date | No of birds | Location | Remarks | Source |
|-------------|-------------|--|----------------------|------------------------------|
| c. 1900 | x | Mesopotamian marshes | no details published | Zarudnyi 1911 |
| c. 1900 | x | Zagros | no details published | Zarudnyi 1911 |
| 14/01/00 | 3 | Ahvaz rubbish dump, Khuzestan | | Keijl <i>et al.</i> 2001 |
| 10/01/04 | 2 | Ahvaz rubbish dump, Khuzestan | | van Diek <i>et al.</i> 2004 |
| 02-03/05/04 | 14 | Shadegan marshes, Khuzestan | breeding very likely | RA pers. obs. |
| 09/03/06 | 2 | Kani Borazan, W Azerbaijan province | | RA pers. obs. |
| 28/04/06 | 4 | Rofa'ye, Susangerd district, Khuzestan | breeding likely | RA pers. obs. |
| 19/01/07 | 15 | Hoveyzeh, Khuzestan | | Willems <i>et al.</i> unpubl |
| 22/01/07 | 4 | Hoor Al Azim complex, Khuzestan | | Willems <i>et al.</i> unpubl |
| 20/04/07 | 3 | Bandar-e Emam Khomeini, Khuzestan | | RA pers. obs. |
| 21/04/07 | 7 | Rofa'ye, Susangerd district, Khuzestan | | RA pers. obs. |



Figure 1. Spur-winged Lapwing at Kani-Borazan, 9 March 2006.

So far the only record away from the southwest of the country is of two Spur-winged Lapwings observed by Mr Naser Nasiri and RS at Kani-Borazan wetland, West Azarbaijan province, on 9 March 2006 (Fig. 1). The birds were brown above, with black head, breast and primaries, contrasting white cheeks and sides of the neck, white vent and underwing coverts, white tail with black tail-band, dark grey bill and legs, and dark red eyes. The birds were feeding quietly and were not showing any signs of breeding behaviour. This would appear to be the first confirmed record of the Spur-winged Lapwing in northwestern Iran.

Kani-Borazan wetland is a permanent freshwater marsh of 927 ha located about 40 km northwest of Mahabad at 36°59'N, 45°46'E, near the villages of Befrovan, Gharadagh, Khorkhore and Ghale Hasan. The main aquatic plants include *Tamarix* sp., *Phragmites australis*, *Salicornia herbacea*, *Kochia scaporia*, *Suaeda maritima*, *Limpnium* sp., *Typha* sp. and *Carex* sp. Since 2004, the wetland has been protected by the Department of the Environment as a Non-Hunting Area.

The observations listed above clearly show that the Spur-winged Lapwing is now a regular wintering species and also a breeding bird in Khuzestan. The apparently regular wintering of the species in Iran is particularly noteworthy as in other parts of the Middle East it is considered mainly a summer visitor. That it is breeding can safely be assumed from the regularity with which indications of breeding have been found despite definite proof still lacking. The species has recently colonised the area – such a conspicuous and boldly marked bird would hardly have been overlooked for decades. Conceivably, the colonisation of Khuzestan province by the species is a consequence of population growth in the Middle East as observed in Israel and Egypt. As an alternative explanation, like with the Basra Reed Warbler recently discovered in Khuzestan (Ayé 2006), habitat destruction in nearby Iraq might have forced the Spur-winged Lapwings into Iran.

The recent record from northwestern Iran – although just a single event – might be an indication of an ongoing range expansion beyond Khuzestan. Birdwatchers and professionals alike should watch out for Spur-winged Lapwings when visiting any suitable wetland in Iran, especially in the west of the country.

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