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Sistan (Afghan) Scrub Sparrow *Passer (moabiticus) yatii*: Notes on Common Name, Status and Threats

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Abstract
We searched for the Sistan Scrub Sparrow *Passer (moabiticus) yatii* in the wetlands on the Iranian side of the Sistan basin during a visit to Iran in December 2010. At least 300 Sistan Scrub Sparrows were found in the dry basin of the Hamoun-e Saberi lake. No Sistan Scrub Sparrows were found at the Chah Nimeh water reservoir, along the River Hirmand on the Afghan border and at an irrigated site near Zahak. The habitat changes caused by extreme droughts in the range of the Sistan Scrub Sparrow in recent decades are discussed. Given the small range of the species, local changes in its habitat could have devastating effects. In addition, the common name of the species is discussed. We suggest that the species be called Sistan Scrub Sparrow instead of the previous names Afghan Scrub Sparrow or Yate's Sparrow.

1. Introduction

The Afghan Scrub Sparrow or hereafter Sistan Scrub Sparrow *Passer (moabiticus) yatii* is a form endemic to the Sistan basin and closely related to, and perhaps conspecific with, the Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus*. Recently, the substantial differences in morphology and seasonality of moult between Sistan Scrub and Dead Sea Sparrows have been pointed out by Kirwan (2004). The same author pointed out that the two taxa could well be good species. This treatment was tentatively adopted by Porter & Aspinall (2010) and by Ayé *et al.* (2012), but not by the BirdLife Taxonomic Working Group (BirdLife International 2012). The status and threats of Sistan Scrub Sparrow remain largely unknown. The Sistan Scrub Sparrow is largely confined to the wetlands of the Sistan basin on the Iranian-Afghan border and thus has a highly restricted range. Here we present some notes on the status and threats of Sistan Scrub Sparrow in the wetlands of Sistan obtained during a visit in December 2010.

2. Study Areas and Methods

We searched four areas in three wetlands or former wetlands on the Iranian side of the Sistan (also called Seistan) basin in the surroundings of Zabol on 14 and 15 December 2010 (Fig. 1). Four local people who were interviewed stated that three other basins of the Chah Nimeh reservoir did not show any major wetland vegetation either, and these basins were therefore not visited in the limited time available. During the whole time, we were accompanied by police or other security forces. We took notes of the habitat and the behaviour

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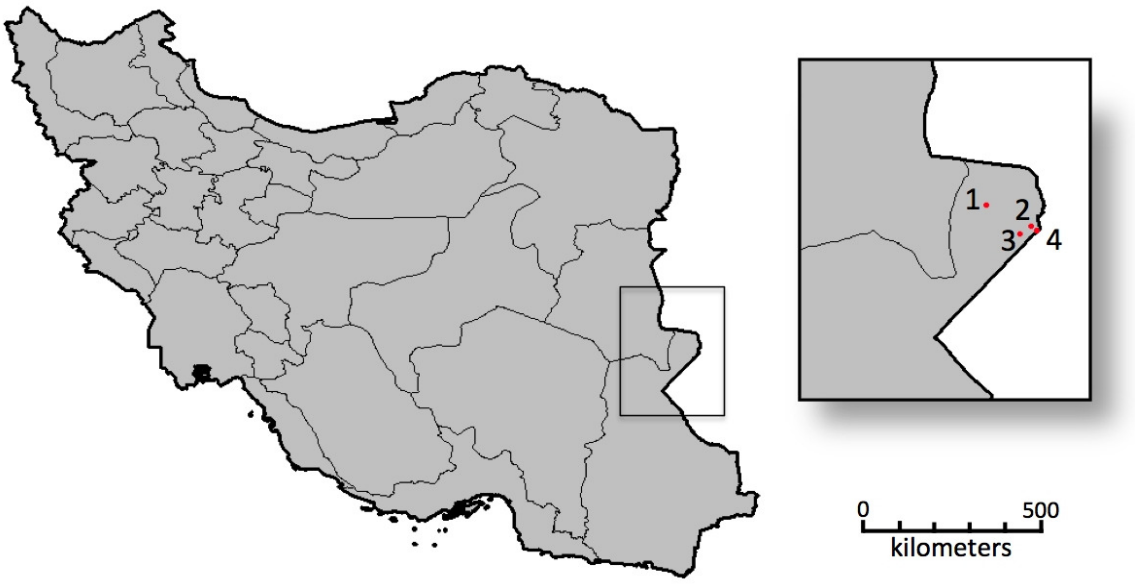

Fig. 1. Map of Iran with the Sistan area (inset) and the sites visited during the present study. 1 = Hamoun-e Saberi, 2 = Outskirts of Zahak, 3 = Chah Nimeh reservoir near Dahan-e Gholaman, 4 = Hirmand River.

of the taxon and interviewed local people on the history of the habitat. Satellite images available in Google Earth (accessed 27 October 2010 and 5 August 2012) do not show areas of wetland vegetation large enough to be visible. The basin 4 of the Chah Nimeh reservoir showed hardly any vegetation along its shoreline. In addition to the survey in the field, we conducted a literature survey on the species with a special focus on its status as a migrant or resident bird.

3. Results

At least 300 Sistan Scrub Sparrows were found in the dry basin of the Saberi lake in the morning of 15 December 2010 (Figs. 2–3). Due to security concerns, the authors were not allowed to walk further than about 1.5 km into the basin of the lake. The site of the observation was 31°02'40"N, 61°19'26"E, i.e. about 1.2 km into the basin of the lake. The species was found in a dry reed-bed with tamarisk bushes (about 5% coverage for tamarisk estimated). Reed *Phragmites* was still present with high coverage, but completely dry (Fig. 4). All but a few reed stems were broken at heights of mostly 0.3 to 1.0 m above the ground. At the time of the visit, the reed-bed was being grazed by sheep and goats. The birds were feeding on some parts (the seeds?) of the tamarisk bushes (*Tamarix gallica*) and apparently also on dung on the ground and on seeds of reed.

Fig. 2. A male Sistan Scrub Sparrow in fresh plumage, Saberi lake, December 2010, R. Ayé.

Fig. 3. The yellowish colouration of the underparts of *yatii* is also visible in many females under favourable conditions, Saberi lake, December 2010, R. Ayé.

Table 1. Sites searched for Sistan Scrub Sparrows in December 2010.

Site name	Coordinates	No. of Sistan Scrub Sparrows	Remarks
Hamoun-e Saberi	31°02'40"N, 61°19'26"E	≥ 300	
Outskirts of Zahak	30°51'15"N, 61°43'29"E	0	C. 300 unidentified sparrows flying in at sunset.
Reservoir nr Dahan-e Gholaman	30°47'18"N, 61°37'31"E	0	No suitable habitat because of lack of vegetation.
Hirmand River	30°48'42"N, 61°46'11"E	0	

No Sistan Scrub Sparrows were found on the shore of basin 4 of the Chah Nimeh water reservoir near Dahan-e Gholaman or along the River Hirmand on the Afghan border (Table 1). At an irrigated site with tamarisk bushes near Zahak, however, around 300 unidentified sparrows were seen at dusk, suggesting that there might have been a roost in the area.

4. Discussion

4.1. Common name

In the past, the taxon *Passer (moabiticus) yatii* was named Yate's Sparrow (Paludan 1959) or Afghan Scrub Sparrow (Sharpe 1888, Roberts 1992, Kirwan 2004). The name Yate's Sparrow has rarely been used. It has been suggested that naming species after foreign collectors could offend local populations, and this has led to some debate (King 1997, Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001, Kirwan *et al.* 2009). We are not attempting to find nor even suggesting that there should be a universal solution to this problem. However, in the case of military personnel with a rather casual interest in natural history (cf. Paludan 1959), there is no strong case for reactivating an old, rather poorly known name. The alternative name 'Afghan Scrub Sparrow' is a misnomer. The taxon only occurs in a very small part of Afghanistan, and Afghanistan comprises probably less than half the taxon's range. When 'Afghan' is used referring to the Pashtu people, the overlap of the taxon's range with areas inhabited by Pashtu people is equally limited. 'Sistan Scrub Sparrow' would be a much more appropriate name for the taxon. Generally, the authors encourage more reflection before naming species after geographical areas or even countries. The success of conservation activities may strongly depend on the pride that a local population takes in a species. The name of a species could in turn be a very important factor influencing the population's attitude towards a species. Therefore we suggest that the taxon be called Sistan Scrub Sparrow.

4.2. Status

During the past 150 years, the number of records of *P. m. yatii* has shown a very dramatic decline from 61 records in the 1860s–1960s (mostly in 1900 and 1901) to only three in the 1970s and none in recent decades (Khaleghizadeh *et al.* 2011). Against this background, it is very positive that the taxon could still be found in hundreds in its previously known breeding area in December 2010. Our observations constitute the first definite records for this form since the 1970s. However, SIS has observed what he considered to be Dead Sea Sparrows in the Hamoun-e Saberi many times in recent years without paying attention to the exact taxon or subspecies concerned. All these observations very likely refer to Sistan Scrub Sparrow, because the closest areas where Dead Sea Sparrow in the strict sense is known to breed regularly are in Bushehr Province, where the Dead Sea Sparrow occurs in winter and in spring at least until 19 April (Dubois *et al.* 2000, Sacher 2000, own obs.) and has been shown to breed (Jamadi & Darvishi 2008). This area is about 1,000 km away from the Sistan basin.

Fig. 4. A view of the habitat of Sistan Scrub Sparrow in the dry basin of Saberi lake. December 2010, R. Ayé.

While it is not excluded that the observed birds left the area later in the year or in January, we do not consider this likely and our observations rather suggest that at least part of the population is sedentary. Christison (1941) and later Summers-Smith (1988), Clement *et al.* (1993) and Kirwan (2004) suggested that the taxon was migratory, wintering in the Chagai desert of Pakistan. Apparently the only evidence for the occurrence of the taxon in Pakistan is the report by Christison (1941), who called it "a common winter visitor to Central Chagai". This author, however, does not give any further information on how often the taxon was observed during the three years that he spent in the region, and we are not aware of any skins or further details of his records. Further information on the status of the taxon in Chagai is urgently needed. The assessment of Sistan Scrub Sparrow as a winter visitor to Pakistan and thus as a migratory taxon is based on Christison's (1941) reports alone. However, our observations suggest that Sistan Scrub Sparrow is at least partly sedentary. This is further supported by an observation of 12 birds on 17 January 1976 in gardens in Zabol (D.A. Scott, *in litt.*). Breeding of this taxon in the Chagai is hypothetical. Therefore it seems likely that the Sistan Scrub Sparrow depends year-round on the habitats of the Sistan depression, which has implications for the assessment of potential threats to this taxon.

4.3. Threats

Given the small range of the taxon, local changes in its habitat could have devastating effects. The wetlands of the Sistan basin have experienced very dramatic habitat changes over recent decades. Our observations after such a long period of drought or at least relatively dry conditions suggest that the taxon is to a certain degree resilient to such conditions. However, the birds were seen in one of the few areas with a large amount of reed and were feeding on tamarisks. Summers-Smith (1988) and Clement *et al.* (1993) report that the species feeds on seeds of grasses and tamarisks among others. Given the scarcity of observations of *yatii*, this information probably refers to the food of *moabiticus*. Our limited observations do not show any difference for *yatii.* Tamarisks and reed will survive for a certain amount of time during conditions of drought, but degradation will continue. Indeed, analysis of satellite data shows a continuous decline of vegetation coverage since 1985 (UNEP 2006).

While the information on the state of the wetlands may vary somewhat with the information source, the overall picture is similar. The wetlands dried out at the beginning of the 1970s and then again in 1982. Since 1997, they were mostly dry according to Behrouzi-Rad (2009). The extreme drought was interrupted by a medium-level flood in the beginning of 2005, which resulted in partial recovery of the vegetation (UNEP 2006). According to the accounts of local people, the habitat – or the Saberi lake for that matter – has been dry for about 6 years. According to Najafi & Vatanfada (2011), the main reason for the drying up of the Sistan hamouns is regulation of the flow in the Hirmand River, which feeds the Sistan lakes. Two large water reservoirs were constructed on the Afghan side of the Sistan catchment area in the 1950s. Najafi & Vatanfada (2011) stated that the flow of the Hirmand River was reduced because of these two reservoirs. On the other hand, data on water use in the catchment area of the Sistan wetlands is very sparse and satellite images do not show an increase in the surface area of irrigated land

in Afghanistan (UNEP 2006). Moreover, the large Chah Nimeh reservoir south of Zabol is also supplied by the Hirmand River and thus also uses water that previously flowed into the Sistan wetlands. One of the objectives that the Ministry of Energy of Iran states for Chah Nimeh reservoir, besides providing a reservoir for drinking water, is to allow continued survival of animal and plant species (Najafi & Vatanfada 2011). However, our observations and interviews showed that the basins have bare shores and are therefore not a suitable habitat for the Sistan Scrub Sparrow and other key species of the Sistan wetlands listed by Scott (1994). If the Ministry of Energy wants to achieve its objective, steps have to be taken to allow suitable vegetation to grow both along the edge and also submerged in the water or, alternatively, the water should be directed towards more suitable areas for such vegetation.

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