



THE CERULEAN

Fall - 2008, Vol. 5, No. 3

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Quarterly Newsletter of the **Ohio Ornithological Society**: *Ohio's Birding Network*

THE WILDS WINTER RAPTOR EXTRAVAGANZA SATURDAY, JANUARY 17TH, 2009

from the EDITOR

In this issue of *The Cerulean*, Major Randel Rogers, a Galloway hometown hero and member of the OOS, is our featured Birder's Bio. No matter what your politics are, I hope you will be inspired by this Ohio soldier's tale and his "official newsletter of the unofficial unit naturalist". While proudly serving in Iraq with the Ohio Army National Guard, Randy is inspiring an entire military contingent and their families to appreciate nature in the Middle East and back home in Ohio. But Randy is a birder with *another* mission: protecting birds and "building bridges between Iraqi and US birders".

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Just like the Birders' Exchange Program which funds and supplies Central and South American scientists, educators, and conservationists with books and optics, Randy is spearheading a similar effort in Iraq.

Won't you please join the friends of Randy Rogers and help him "build bridges between Iraqi and US birders"? Send your contribution, designated for **OOS: Randy Rogers' Iraq Project**, to The Ohio Ornithological Society, P.O. Box 14051, Columbus, Ohio 43214.

We've raised nearly \$1870 so far. OOS members and Randy's friends generously donated \$870, and the OOS board unanimously voted to donate an additional \$1000. One-hundred percent of donations will help his noble effort. FYI, Randy donated to the OOS collection for the Latin American Birders' Exchange program before he was deployed overseas!

Ann Oliver
-Cincinnati

Mark your calendars and pull out your fleece! The OOS and the Wilds are hosting our fourth consecutive mid-winter foray to the fabulous winter birding mecca in Muskingum County. This year's Winter Raptor Extravaganza will feature views of *new* raptor perches. This past spring, OOS partnered with the Wilds and AEP to place American Kestrel nest boxes and raptor perches on the Wilds and on AEP ReCreation Lands in Muskingum, Noble, and surrounding counties.

At the Wilds, more than 10,000 acres of grassland provides abundant forage for those furry sausages with legs known as Meadow Voles. Raptors converge at the Wilds in great numbers to take advantage of the mammalian bounty. We expect Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Short-eared Owls, along with a number of other species of meat-eating predatorial birds. Kings of the sky are Golden Eagles. Last year, every participant got to see one. Several Golden Eagles have overwintered at the Wilds for at least nine years. Also possible is Northern Shrike, and this is the locale where a Prairie Falcon spent two winters.

Arctic-like temperatures and icy blasts of air don't deter the birds, and in years past the weather hasn't deterred the birders. Last year, about 130 people showed up and a good time was had by all. Even though this trip costs exactly nothing, we need to know who will be coming.

To reserve your spot, watch for a posting on the Ohio Birds listserv:
<http://www.birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/OHIO.html>
or check the OOS website homepage:
<http://www.ohiobirds.org/> and send an email to wilds@ohiobirds.org.

Jim McCormac
-Columbus

MIDNIGHT AT THE IRAQI OASIS: OOS MEMBER GUARDS BIRDS WITH OHIO NATIONAL GUARD

Last December, when I learned my Ohio National Guard unit was deploying to Iraq, I asked soldiers returning home from active duty if they had seen any birds. The answer was almost universally “No, I didn’t see *any* birds”. How could this be possible? Iraq is situated along major migration corridors, the base is adjacent to an oasis only a few miles from the Euphrates River, and wildlife concentrates at water sources. There must be birds!

An old adage says the military is just a reflection of society on a smaller scale. I decided soldiers, like most people, were just not *noticing* birds. So I went to Al Anbar Province with high hopes and immediately found birds. I average a life bird about every 1.5 days. Still, I was amazed people could cohabitate with Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters or European Rollers and never notice. I resolved to start a newsletter for my unit. Thus was born “Al Asad au Natural” which I publish “every two weeks... more or less”!

I encourage interest in nature and the environment by highlighting plants and animals found here. A regular feature called “Who’s Living Under My CHU?” spotlights creatures dwelling beneath our container housing units including Mediterranean House Geckos, Sand Vipers, and Golden Skinks. Another column, “Creature Feature”, ranges from Crested Porcupines, to Patas Monkeys, to Eurasian Collared-Doves. Whatever the topic, I try to relate it to something similar back home, especially birds. For example, as we watched young Eurasian Collared-Doves hatch around the base, I wrote about that species appearing in Florida in 1982, being sighted in Ohio in 2001, and breeding by 2007 in the Buckeye State. Lake Erie is mentioned when talking about migration. The 1914 death of the last Passenger Pigeon in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo was used as an example of extinction. The icon bird of the OOS, the Cerulean Warbler, was accented to discuss habitat preservation.

My efforts have reached further than planned: in addition to expanding my distribution throughout our brigade of 3000 people, my articles are being picked up by other military papers across Iraq. I’ve also been interviewed by



Little Crake. Photo courtesy Randy Rogers.

The New York Times regarding the link between nature observation and stress reduction among troops.

Even more rewarding, our family support group has been getting each issue. Many family members say reading “Al Asad au Natural” makes them feel more connected to their deployed soldier. Children have taken copies to school, I hope not as their homework assignment! I’m trying to obtain field guides on mammals, trees, flowers and birds of the Middle East for our MWR (Moral, Welfare, Recreation) Office. Lots of personnel have questions about our natural surroundings but I have limited resources for answers.

I’ve been making inroads in conservation, too. I’ve been in contact with Nature Iraq and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East. Nature Iraq is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) trained by Birdlife International and charged with restoring the southern marshes in Iraq. You may recall, Saddam Hussein drained and cultivated 90% of these wetlands in an attempt to destroy the culture of the opposing Iraqi people who lived there. Endemic birds like the Basra Reed Warbler were gravely threatened by this destruction of habitat. Many feared salinization resulting from drainage and agriculture might make the marsh destruction irreversible. Thankfully, through much hard work, a significant portion of these globally important wetlands are recovering.

With that in mind, I have taken on two additional causes. The first is to do what I can to assist Nature Iraq. I’m working to channel support to them in the form of Arabic language field guides and possibly new or used field equipment. Secondly, there are several Important Bird Areas (IBA) in Iraq. The lead ornithologist with Nature Iraq has invited me to assist in surveying northern Iraqi IBA’s this winter. The main equipment need for Nature Iraq is ‘live traps’ of various sizes from rodent to small mammal for IBA field studies across Northern Iraq.



Randy birding in Iraq.

Meanwhile, I’m giving as much time as possible to survey the nearby oasis, palm grove, and wadi of Al Asad in order to assemble a local IBA application packet.



Randy's newsletter Al-Asad au Natural

A wadi is a ditch or valley eroded into the ground by running water from heavy seasonal rains. Wadis are important seasonal wetlands providing habitat for a variety of birds and animals. This area has some protection stemming from the belief that biblical Abraham visited the oasis. But as our base expands it encroaches on the wadi to the edge of the oasis. Four of the 52 species I have recorded here merit possible protection (Pallid Harrier, European Roller, Desert Lark, Iraq Babbler) as does the unique habitat which forms a migrant trap in spring and summer. Additionally, the near-threatened or possibly endangered Striped Hyena has been observed.

I have found Iraq to be a country with unique natural and historic attributes, many of which are understudied and not protected by the former regime. Iraqi's have a cultural appreciation for their history and natural heritage. A great opportunity for success is possible if groups like Nature Iraq can become influential as a new government and new economy continue to grow.

Major Randal Rogers, Logistics Officer
-Al Anbar Province, Iraq

Al Asad Oasis.
Photo courtesy Randy Rogers.



Editor's Note: MAJ Rogers is a Logistics Officer with the 371st Sustainment Brigade. His unit monitors and coordinates all logistics in the Al Anbar Province, roughly an area the size of Texas. He lives in Galloway, Ohio and has been a member of OOS since its inception. At home, he works full-time for the Ohio Army National Guard and volunteers with the Franklin County MetroParks.

Although serving in a brigade of three thousand, Randy Rogers is a *birding* army of one. With your help, the OOS is raising funds to supply Randy's brigade with *Birds of the Middle East* field guides: he also needs books on mammals, trees, and flowers of the region. Meanwhile, Randy hopes to assemble a 'care package' of used binoculars, digital cameras, live animal traps, and field guides for Iraqi birders.

Best of all, the new field guide *Birds of Iraq*, in Arabic, is now available through The Ornithological Society of the Middle East: <http://www.osme.org/osme/sales.html>. Randy hopes to purchase several copies for Iraqi birders. For information on current IBA's in the Middle East: http://www.birdlife.org/action/science/sites/mideast_ibas/index.html.

Sign up for Randy's newsletter:
randel_rogers@hotmail.com.