Aammiq Marsh breeding bird survey: 5th and 9th May 2000

A basic survey of breeding birds was done in about one quarter of the reedbed and associated wet habitats at the western end of Aammiq Marsh. The area covered was approximately 50 ha, but this figure includes meadows lying within the survey area. Preliminary mid-morning visits were made on 3rd and 4th May to assess the area and plan the survey route. The southern side was surveyed on 5th May, and the northern side on 9th May, from 6am to about 8am on both days.

An enlarged copy of a locally produced habitat map was used, but as this was inadequate for mapping individual birds, the survey area was divided into nine sections based as much as possible on landscape features. The size of individual sections ranged from 0.2ha (section F, an isolated strip of unburnt reeds) to 20ha (section G, an inaccessible wet area) (see map). For each section, an assessment of the proportion of new growth (new reed) and older reed surviving after burning the previous autumn (old reed) was made. Some of the 'old reed' is likely to consist of more than the growth from last year alone (eg in sections G and I). Birds which were exhibiting behaviour indicative of breeding (eg singing, aggression, food collecting, mate guarding) were recorded in each section.

Section	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Total
%old/new reed	50/50	1/99	1/99	1/99	10/90	90/10	20/80	1/99	99/1	pairs
Cetti's warbler									1	1
Savi's warbler						2	1		5	8
Moustached warbler		1	1	3	3	1	7	2	3	21
European reed warbler	1	2	2	1	6	4	14	6	7	43
Great reed warbler	6	7	3	5	6	2	14	4	3	50

Although the two visits on 5th and 9th May were made at the same time of day, there appeared to be a lot more birds singing on 5th than were singing on 9th. This may be due to the low temperature on 9th, after a frost the previous night. It is thought that most of the Cetti's, Savi's and great reed warblers were recorded, but some European reed warblers were collecting food (for nestlings), and most of the moustached warblers were foraging in pairs (mate guarding?); probably a large proportion of the males of these two species had stopped singing by early May. Other probable breeding species recorded were little grebe (several), little bittern (1), little crake (2), moorhen (several), coot (several) and spur-winged plover (2 pairs). At least two great snipes, a Near-threatened Species which passes through Lebanon on migration, were also seen.

Some species were clearly associated with a particular habitat. The single Cetti's warbler was in an area of dense old reed in deep water, and all of the Savi's warblers were in clumps of old reed. The other species' preferences were less clear. Moustached warblers were the only species recorded singing in short new reed and new *Typha* (c1m tall), although European reed warblers were observed foraging in these habitats. European reed warblers sang in old reed, although sometimes from only very small clumps within short new reed or isolated from the main reedbed. Great reed warblers were the most obvious species, being large, clumsy, and singing high up in most areas of old reed and often in areas of tall new reed (c2-3m).

Recommendations.

1. A prerequisite for any survey work is an accurate map. Clearly the lack of any detailed maps of the area is an impediment (it is an offence in Lebanon for any unauthorised person to be in possession of maps). For territory mapping of breeding birds in the reedbed, 1:2,500 scale would be acceptable given the amount of burning which occurs in the autumn, but a larger scale may be necessary if large blocks of old reed survive. If the present map continues to be used, it could be improved by updating the positions of the ditches which join the northern and southern edges of the reedbed, and the position of the bridge to the east of section I.

2. The provision of landmarks within the reedbed would help observers to accurately assess their own locations, and the locations of the birds. For example, a post on the small mound which lies on the boundary between sections D and E would be seen easily from the northern edge of the reedbed. In the longer term, if the reedbed is to be divided into sections for repeated survey work, section boundaries and intersections should be marked with posts. Numbers or letters can be displayed on top of posts to aid identification (as at Minsmere Reserve, UK, for example).

3. Aammiq Marsh holds a large proportion of the Lebanese breeding populations of several species of water birds, including the four most numerous warblers mentioned above (Savi's, moustached, European reed and great reed warblers). The sizes of these populations should be assessed, to provide further information in support of the site's designation as an Important Bird Area.

4. About 80% of the area of the reedbed appeared to have been burnt during autumn 1999. Such extreme modification of the habitat obviously has a profound effect on the populations of some species (eg Savi's warbler on the basis of the present observations). Controlled burning is a useful method of managing reedbeds, and it would be useful to make some sort of assessment of the effects of burning while it is occurring on such a large scale in order to aid management decisions should burning become less indiscriminate in the future. Some moustached warblers hold territories in short new reed; this may be because they prefer this habitat, or because they compete less well with the other warblers and are pushed out of the mature stands of reed when this is scarce.

5. Breeding bird survey work should be done at the appropriate time, ie when males are singing and setting up territories. Timing will vary with the different species, and of course there is the usual problem of separating birds holding territory from birds singing whilst passing through on migration. For example, there were obviously far more European reed warblers in the reedbed in the latter half of April than there were during the survey visits in early May, and I suspect that the breeders were establishing their territories at the same time as the bulk of the migrants were passing through. Of course, individual migrants will only be recorded on one or two of a series of survey visits, and will not produce the clusters of registrations which result from a 'resident' bird being present during a series of visits. There is still the problem of recording species such as some of the Acrocephalus warblers which seem to sing for a short period only prior to breeding.