

Rediscovery of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse in Egypt in March 2012

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While working in the Egyptian Nile valley in March 2012, a team of Austrian and German ornithologists rediscovered Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus*, a species considered to be extinct in Egypt since the 1980s. After a puzzling fly-by observation of four sandgrouse near Al Bahnasa on 18 March, the observers concluded that the only species fitting was Chestnut-bellied. They searched the area thoroughly during the following days and several flocks were found; the identification was verified when good views were obtained of individuals in flight and on the ground. On 22 March, an impressive maximum of c 100 individuals were seen near the original site. As a result of the still unstable political situation in Egypt, the camera equipment of Leander Khil, including telelenses, had been seized when enter-

ing the country through Cairo airport (but returned on departure), which forced him to take the first record shots with a digital compact camera, at a maximum focal length of 105 mm. The photographs of expectably low quality still showed some of the key features, such as the white trailing edge to the primaries, dark underwing and dark belly. Luckily, Jonas Geburzi was able to take better photographs of flocks and single males and females a few days later. The birds preferred arid and sandy plains with loose vegetation, as well as fields (abandoned and in use) and were flying around a lot, especially in the evening.

After the team left the country in late March and had been replaced by another team, more observations followed until the end of May; all observations are listed in table 1. On 17 May, sound-re-

292 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoenders *Pterocles exustus*, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 22 March 2012 (Jonas Geburzi)



TABLE 1 Observations of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* at Al Bahnasa, Egypt, in March-May 2012

18 March, four (J Geburzi, L Khil, M Trobitz, C Weinrich)
21 March, several (M Boetzel, L Khil, M Trobitz)
22 March, c 100 (J Geburzi, M Trobitz, M Werner, C Weinrich, T Zegula)
30 March, 11 (M Boetzel, N Böhm, L Gaedicke, M Gebauer, S Schweineberg, E Stich)
2 April, 40-50 (E Stich)
5 May, c 20 (P Franke, M Held, P Krech, M Senft, T Zegula)
17 May, c 80 (P Franke, T Zegula)

cordings were obtained (figure 1-2). In late May, details on the location were published online on www.birdguides.com and www.khil.net/blog/?p=1487. The area where the birds were found is situated in Minya province, off the main road from Giza to Luxor, where a road leads to Sandafa to the east (at 28°31'30.07"N 30°35'55.10"E). The birds were seen on several occasions along the first 3 km, on the southern side of the road. The habitat becomes much greener and less suitable towards the towns of Al Bahnasa and Sandafa.

Description

GENERAL IMPRESSION In flight, birds appearing as brownish, small to medium-sized sandgrouse with elongated and pointed tail, flying with fast wing-beats. On the ground, appearing very short legged, with small head and stretched, long neck when wary. Central rectrices prominently elongated and pointed.

HEAD Sandy-brown, with strong orange tone on upper throat and face in males.

UPPERPARTS Sandy to greyish-brown, with large pale brown spots in both sexes.

UNDERPARTS Belly dark-brown, colour fading to paler brown towards undertail and head. Sharply demarcated black line across pale upperbreast in males. Strongly brown and white mottled throat and upperbreast in females.

WING Upperwing sandy to greyish-brown with strongly contrasting black primaries and secondaries; primaries with clean white trailing edge. Upperwing with prominent rows of pale spots in females. Underwing and axillaries dark brown without obvious contrast.

BARE PARTS Eye dark. Bill pale grey. Leg colour hard to see in field or on photographs.

SOUND In flight, many individuals uttering short, guttural calls: *kwritt-kwritt-kwritt*.

BEHAVIOUR In late afternoon, when most observations were made, birds frequently observed flying in small groups between fields and plains, gathering at some preferred spots. Appearing to prefer sandy plains with loose, dry vegetation. Sometimes, birds seen on agricultural fields in as well as out of use.

Identification

All other species of sandgrouse occurring in the Western Palearctic (WP) could be safely excluded mostly by the combination of tail-length and colour of belly and underwings. Black-bellied Sandgrouse *P orientalis* shows a sharp contrast between the white axillaries and underwing and black belly. Also, this species is considerably heavier in flight and shows no elongated tail-feathers. Pintailed Sandgrouse *P alchata* and Spotted Sandgrouse *P senegallus* have an elongated, pointed tail, similar to Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse but show a whitish belly and white underwing-coverts in all plumages. Crowned Sandgrouse *P coronatus*, which was seen in the same area, has a short tail and buffish belly and underwing-coverts. Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse *P lichtensteinii* is excluded by its short-tailed appearance and different coloration (cf Madge & McGowan 2002, van Duivendijk 2011).

Male and female Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse can be distinguished quite easily by the colour of the plumage. Males are more uniform on head and breast and show a sharply demarcated black line across the upperbreast. Face and throat are yellowish, contrasting little with a more greyish crown, neck and breast. Females have a heavily mottled breast and neck and lack the black line across the breast. The upperparts are less vividly colored and more mottled in females than in males. The subspecies *P e floweri*, which might be expected in the region, differs from other subspecies slightly in colour (Meintertzhagen 1930, Madge & McGowan 2002; Nicoll in British Ornithologists' Club 1921). Based on distribution

293 Habitat where Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles exustus* were observed, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 21 March 2012 (Leander Khil)





294 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoen *Pterocles exustus*, male, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 30 March 2012 (*Elias Stich*) **295** Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoen *Pterocles exustus*, male, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 2 April 2012 (*Elias Stich*) **296** Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoen *Pterocles exustus*, male, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 22 March 2012 (*Jonas Geburzi*) **297** Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoen *Pterocles exustus*, female, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 22 March 2012 (*Jonas Geburzi*)

and the overall greyish tones visible in plate 294-297, we strongly suspect the birds to belong to this subspecies. However, the verification should be left open for upcoming studies and will require studies of birds in the hand. If the identification of *floweri* is confirmed, our records refute the presumed extinction of this taxon.

Distribution and habitat

Stretching from West Africa to India in a narrow but almost coherent band, Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse boasts a large distribution, mostly in the Afrotropic and Indomalayan ecozones. The species is found from Senegal and Mauritania east to Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. The range continues across the southern and eastern parts of the

Arabian Peninsula, southern Iran and Pakistan to India, covering most of the subcontinent; six subspecies are recognized (Madge & McGowan 2002, BirdLife International 2012). The six subspecies vary in overall plumage coloration and relative intensity of the barring on the underparts. *P e floweri* is darker and greyer on the head, mantle and breast and less yellowish on the upperwing-coverts and scapulars than nominate *P e exustus* (Mauritania and Senegambia east to Sudan). The other subspecies, *P e ellioti* (East Africa), *P e erlangeri* (Arabia) and *P e hindustan* (Iran to India), differ from nominate *exustus* mainly in being paler and greyer. *P e olivascens* from south-eastern Africa has distinctly greyer olive upperparts and wings and females are more heavi-



298 Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoenders *Pterocles exustus*, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 22 March 2012 (Jonas Geburzi)

ly barred and streaked on the underparts than nominate *exustus*.

The sites where birds were found in Egypt in March 2012 perfectly fit the description of the preferred habitat from older observations in the region. Also, the location on the border between the cultivated Nile valley and the desert matches the older descriptions (cf Meinertzhagen 1930).

Status in Egypt

The isolated population within the WP was once distributed across large parts of the Nile valley in northern and central Egypt. The population was first reported from Egypt in the mid-19th century, when it was 'abundant in the Nile Valley and in bordering desert' (cf Goodman & Meininger 1989). The population was later described as a separate (and thus endemic) subspecies, *P e floweri* (Nicoll in British Ornithologists' Club 1921). It was considered to be the most abundant sandgrouse species in Egypt in the late 19th century (Shelley 1872) but it was found to be 'certainly scarce' already by 1929 (Meinertzhagen 1930). At that time, the species was still found in several scattered locations in the Nile valley, between the eastern fringe of the delta in the north to Luxor in the south. The last and only recent

record is from 4 March 1979, when c 10 were found between Isna and Idfu, south of Luxor (Short & Horne 1981). For a detailed account on the former distribution in Egypt, see Goodman & Meininger (1989). The observation in 1979 was considered to have been the last observation of the subspecies *floweri*. The reasons for the presumed disappearance of this subspecies are unclear (Hume & Walters 2012).

Other WP records

Besides the Egyptian population, there are only four records from the WP ('sensu BWP'). In August 1863, an adult female was shot in a flock of Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus* near Szany, Hungary, during one of the famous influxes of the latter species into Europe (Glutz von Blotzheim et al 1977, Gorman 1996, Magyar et al 1998). The other WP records are from Kuwait, with the following three records accepted by the Kuwait Ornithological Rarities Committee (KORC; Al-Sirhan 2012): February 1999, Ratqa (three individuals wounded and captured alive from a flock of c 30; Gregory 2005); 4 March 2005, Sabah Al-Salem (female, photographed); and 5 January 2007, Sabah Al-Salem (female, photographed). An observation from 2012 has not (yet) been reported

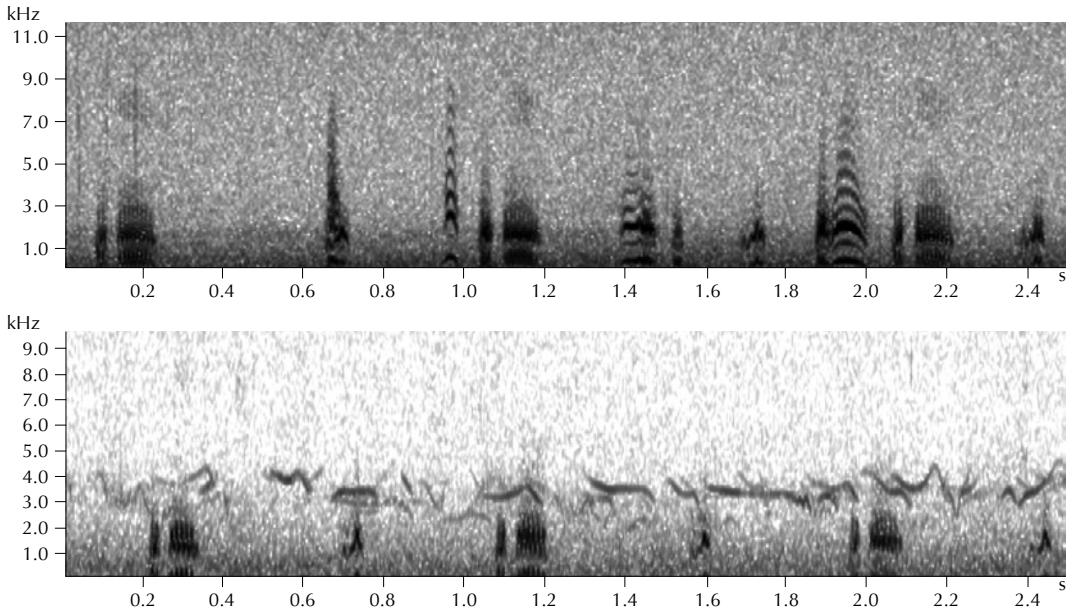


FIGURE 1-2 Flight calls of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse / Roodbuikzandhoen *Pterocles exustus*, Al Bahnasa, Minya, Egypt, 17 May 2012 (Patrick Franke)

to the KORC (Abdulrahman Al-Sirhan in litt). The series of records from Kuwait are remarkable and the origins are not fully understood. There is the possibility of a northward expansion, or even a not-yet discovered population in the north-east of the Arabian Peninsula. It is also possible that birds have been transferred by strong winds from distant regions, such as Saudi Arabia or the UAE. On 8 January 2010, six live birds ('most probably caught in Kuwait or neighbouring countries') were photographed in a cage on the Kuwait bird market. Later, up to 30 individuals were seen caged there (Al-Sirhan & Al-Bathali 2010; Abdulrahman Al-Sirhan in litt). Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse is, as other sandgrouse species, a sought-after game bird in Arabian countries. Birds are apparently held in captivity frequently and are allegedly also reproducing in captivity (Abdulrahman Al-Sirhan in litt). Jennings (2010) also states that the species has been introduced in Kuwait for hunting purposes. So, a captive origin of extralimital records in Arabia should also be considered.

Future

Obviously, given the very recent rediscovery, not much is known yet about population size, phenology and use of habitat of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse in Egypt. It is also not clear whether the

fields where the birds were found also serve as breeding habitat. Hopefully, this will soon change with future trips by birders and researchers. Given the rarity of the species in the WP and the fact that the rediscovered population currently offers the only opportunity to find the species with any regularity, we anticipate that many birders will visit the area in the future. The future of the species in Egypt depends on the goodwill of local people. Therefore, we ask birders to keep the interest of local people in mind, not to walk over their crops, show them the greatest respect and try to communicate about the importance of these birds.

Samenvatting

ROOBUKZANDHOEN HERONTDEKT IN EGYPTE IN MAART 2012 In maart 2012 ontdekte een team van Duitse en Oostenrijkse vogelaars een populatie van Roodbuikzandhoenders *Pterocles exustus* nabij Al Bahnasa en Sandafa in de provincie Minya, Egypte, in het overgangsgebied van de gecultiveerde Nijlvallei en de woestijn. Het hoogste aantal exemplaren was c 100. In tabel 1 worden alle waarnemingen in maart-mei 2012 weergegeven. De determinatie was eenvoudig, bijvoorbeeld door de combinatie van puntige verlengde middelste staartveren, donkere buik en ondervleugel en (bij mannetjes) smalle zwarte lijn over de borst. De vogel werden gefotografeerd en er werden geluidsopnames gemaakt. Vermoedelijk betreft het de ondersoort *P e flo-weri* (endemisch voor Egypte) waarvan de laatste waar-

neming uit 1979 stamde en die als (vermoedelijk) uitgestorven werd beschouwd. De determinatie op ondersoort is in het veld niet vast te stellen aan de hand van het verenkleed en vraagt om bevestiging door onderzoek aan vogels in de hand. Roodbuikzandhoen is buiten Egypte slechts enkele malen in de WP vastgesteld; er is één geval uit Hongarije (1863, verzameld) en er zijn enkele recente gevallen uit Koeweit, waarbij de wilde herkomst niet geheel onomstreden is.

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