Egyptian Nightjar at Chorokhi delta, Georgia, in August 2017 and status in Europe

The Chorokhi delta (41°35'55''N, 41°34'26''E) is an estuary situated in the south-western corner of Georgia. The landscape is dominated by marshes, bushland and open fields. Abandoned Soviet military infrastructure is dotted all over the place with the Georgian army still being present in the area. Due to the fluctuating water levels of the Chorokhi river, there is quite some natural dynamic in certain parts of the estuary. The Chorokhi delta has gained an international reputation since the Batumi Raptor Count (BRC) was initiated in 2008. Birders started to visit this small delta on a regular basis, and it proved to be a very attractive spot for migrants, concentrating important numbers of passerines and a good diversity of waders and raptors. Wetlands of the delta are also a good stopover place for gulls and terns, and noticeable active migration can be witnessed at sea. Ducks, jaegers, gulls and terns can be expected during seawatching sessions and Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* is a regular sight. The Chorokhi delta turned out to be a good spot for rarities as well, as quite a few have been found over the years, including several firsts for the country. The delta's rare migrants list already contains some good species, such as Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus*, White-tailed Lapwing *V leucurus*, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*, Daurian Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*, Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* and Siberian Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens japonicus*. Sociable Lapwing *V gregarius* is almost annual with up to 20 individuals seen together in 2009 (https://tinyurl.com/y7lcucbq).

On 26 August 2017, a BRC team composed of Jaime Escobar, Jonas Schärer and Xu Shi visited the delta. It was a good day for birding, the weather was pleasant with temperatures of c 25°C and low hanging cloud coverage. Several species of shorebirds, gulls and terns were observed, as well as 100s of Red-backed Shrikes *L collurio* and 10s of Lesser Grey Shrikes *L minor*. The three observers approached the beach at the end of a long straight road south of the delta at c 10:30. With them came a herd of cows, which was accompanied by a dog. On the stony beach, the dog was roaming around, flushing a roosting nightjar *Caprimulgus*. The bird had been roosting among the pebbles on the beach close to the edge of the vegetation. It landed c 20 m away from where it had taken off. The nightjar, first spotted by JS, was also instantly seen by the two others and did not seem to be scared by them as it passed them by closely. The bird's main focus seemed to be to find a new roosting site for the day as quickly as possible. Initially, it was thought to be a female Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, based on plumage colour and shape, but, after a few moments, it was clear that the bird was a nightjar. It is interesting that Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* flying around possibly also mistook it for a falcon and mobbed it constantly when it was flying. The three observers had good views of the bird by binoculars and naked eye. When the nightjar relanded on the rocky beach, it was perfectly camouflaged. Fortunately, it could be found by scope and a few photographs were taken with a mobile phone through the scope. The bird was then flushed two more times intentionally for identification purposes by the observers and once by the dog, before flying away some distance and going down on the beach further south. It was striking to the observers that this nightjar was extremely pale with no white markings. The only distinct feature seemed to be the sandy colour and the darker wing-tips. XS proposed that according to the Collins birdguide (Svensson et al 2015) it could only be an Egyptian Nightjar *C aegyptius*. However, all observers agreed that they did not

42-43 Egyptian Nightjar / Egyptische Nachtzwaluw *Caprimulgus aegyptius*, Chorokhi delta, Batumi, Georgia, 27 August 2017 *(Simon Cavaillès)*

TABLE 1 Records of Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* in Europe (Hedgren 1973, Boertmann et al 1986, Walbridge 1999, Palmer 2000, Nyberg 2003, Ramos 2008, Dierschke et al 2011, Gil-Velasco et al 2017; Andrea Corso in litt, Raymond Galea in litt; this paper)

Britain (2)
23 June 1883, Rainworth, Nottinghamshire, collected
10 June 1984, Portland, Dorset

Canary Islands (1)
29 March 2007, La Lajita, Fuerteventura, male, ringed and released the next day

Denmark (1)
29 May to 18 June 1983, Christiansø, Bornholm, female, ringed on 29 May

Georgia (1)
26-27 August 2017, Chorokhi delta, Batumi

Germany (1)
22 June 1875, Helgoland, Schleswig-Holstein, collected

Italy (8)
pre 1874, Agrigento, Sicily, collected
December 1879, Modica, Ragusa, Sicily, collected
2 April 1899, Palermo, Sicily, female, collected
May 1955, Mazara del Vallo, Sicily, male, collected
10 April 1965, Zannone island, Ponziane, Lazio, female, collected
15 October 1970, Campomarino, Campobasso, Molise, female, collected
30 March 1977, Lentini, Siracusa, Sicily, collected
23 March 1991, Burano lake, Grosseto, Toscana

Malta (10/15 individuals)
spring 1876, locality unknown, three, collected
spring 1911, locality unknown, two, collected
13 March 1916, Zurrieq, collected
31 March 1916, locality unknown, collected
28 March 1922, Valletta, two, found for sale at market
1 April 1935, Wied id-Dis, two, collected
2 May 1972, Zabbar, collected
28 March 1973, locality unknown, collected
11 May 1976, Marnisi, collected
11 April 1978, locality unknown, collected

Sweden (1)
21-22 May 1972, Stora Karlsö, Gotland

have the expertise to identify this bird, so they decided to show the pictures to the rest of the BRC team. Later the same day, the photographs were shown to Simon Cavaillès and John Wright, who confirmed the identification. Next day (27 August), the nightjar was successfully relocated by a group of four observers. During this sighting, good quality photographs could be taken by SC (plate 42-43). The bird was not found again after this day.

Description

The flight appearance of the bird was initially reminiscent of a female Common Kestrel, because of its long tail, pointed wings and overall pale sandy coloration with dark wing-tips on the upperwing. On the ground, the bird appeared uniformly sandy coloured from a distance, and was very well camouflaged despite sitting in an unusual habitat.

SIZE & STRUCTURE Comparable with that of European Nightjar *C europaeus*, with rather elongated body, long wing and tail.
HEAD Variegated brownish to buffish plumage, lighter chin, large dark eye and small dark bill.
UPPERPARTS Plumage predominantly pale brownish, richly variegated. Close inspection revealing finely decorated feathers with irregular dark thin lines, buffish spots mostly on wing-coverts and sparse large dark chevrons.
UNDERPARTS Breast and flank washed brownish with dark brown bars, vent and undertail-coverts off-white.
WING Pale grey-brownish upperwing, contrasting dark primaries and primary coverts, barred secondaries. No white spot at wing-tip. Coverts pattern like upperparts. Underwing paler.
TAIL Grey-brownish, darker towards basis, distinctly barred.

Identification

Of the nightjars regularly recorded in the Western Palearctic, Egyptian Nightjar is the only one showing a plumage combining sandy-brown upperparts contrasting with a dark hand, as well as the absence of white spots on wing-tip and tail corners. European Nightjar *C e meridionalis* was the only nightjar species previously known to occur in Georgia: it is a breeding bird species commonly seen during migration along the Black Sea coast. Even though it has a similar shape to Egyptian and females/first autumn males do not show white spots on wings and tail either, it could be ruled out because of its darker plumage and more uniform upperwing. Paler subspecies of European, *C e unwini* and *C e plumipes*, occur from the Middle East to Central Asia. Both show a sandier brown plumage but still display a set of characteristics similar to nominate *C e europaeus* and excluding Egyptian, eg, 'dark centre to crown, long submoustachial-stripe extending to rear-side

of ear-coverts, dark carpal bar (marginal coverts and lesser coverts) and contrasting broad white wing-bar over lesser coverts' (van Duivendijk 2011). Nubian Nightjar *C nubicus*, also a desert species, would be smaller with broader and blunter wings. It would also show a greyish plumage and white wing spots (Cleere & Nurney 1998).

The overall pale plumage together with white-tipped fresh remiges of a single generation, forming a narrow white line along the trailing edge of the wing, point towards a juvenile bird. Note that the outer primaries of both wings show signs of wear, possibly caused by the harsh conditions of the species' habitat.

Distribution and taxonomy

Egyptian Nightjar is a species inhabiting deserts and semi-deserts. It is found on arid plains of sand or clay with scattered scrub and tamarisks, sometimes close to water. In the wintering range, its habitat is similar but it can also be present in and near rice fields and other agricultural areas. There are two subspecies: *C a saharae* (hereafter *saharae*) and *C a aegyptius* (hereafter *aegyptius*). *Saharae* can be found in central and southern Morocco, northern Algeria, central Tunisia, probably north-western Libya and possibly northern Egypt. This subspecies winters in western Sahel. *Aegyptius* can be found in north-eastern Egypt, the northern Arabian Peninsula, the southern Levant and in Iraq, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, eastern Kazakhstan, western Tajikistan, extreme western Pakistan and south-eastern Iran (Cleere 2018). It winters in eastern Sahel. Both subspecies are migratory, although *aegyptius* is partially sedentary in Egypt (Cleere 2018). The breeding grounds are left by September and migration occurs on a broad front (Cleere 2018). The observed bird could not be identified to subspecies level, because size and plumage differences between *aegyptius* and *saharae* are too subtle. However, it seems more likely that it came from the *aegyptius* population south of the Caspian Sea, and might have been an early migrating bird off route. Closest suitable habitats for Egyptian Nightjar extend over southern Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and north-western Iran, where the species is not known to occur. Its presence in these poorly monitored places and habitats is a possibility that should be investigated, as this well-camouflaged and nocturnal species can pass relatively unnoticed. Singing males should be looked for at night in May-June in sandy areas and areas with low shrubs that may be cultivated (Amir Ben Dov pers comm).

European records

This was the first record for Georgia. There have been 25 records of Egyptian Nightjar in Europe over the last 150 years, but only three during the last 30 years (table 1). Unsurprisingly, most of these records come from Malta and southern Italy, because these areas lie relatively close to the breeding ranges in Tunisia. One record comes from Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, which is located at quite a distance from breeding areas in Morocco (Ramos 2008, Gil-Velasco et al 2017). Quite astounding are records from Britain, Denmark, Germany and Sweden (Hedgren 1973, Boertmann et al 1986, Walbridge 1999, Palmer 2000, Nyberg 2003, Dierschke et al 2011), which show that vagrant Egyptian can be found far away from their breeding range. Most of these records are probably related to overshooting spring migrants as they date from 13 March to 23 June. It is interesting to note that extralimital spring records from southern Europe are predominantly from March and April, while records from northern Europe are from late May to June. Only two records are from autumn (apart from this one in Georgia also one on 15 October 1970 in Italy), and one is from winter (December 1879 in Italy). On 17 September 2018, one was reported (but not photographed) on the beach near Batumi; if accepted, this may be the second for Georgia (cf Dutch Birding 40: 330, 2018).

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