

A New Record of Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* (Linnaeus, 1766) (Columbidae) in Syria (First Record in the Syrian Coast)

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□ ABSTRACT □

There are about 400 bird species in Syria from different families such as columbidae. Seven bird species belong to this family; one of them is Namaqua dove (locally is called Humhuma) *Oena capensis*. There are no confirmed records of *Oena capensis* in Syria before the year 2000, and the first confirmed sightings in Syria was recorded in 2003 (Palmyra in the Syrian desert). It is resident and common in most sub-Saharan Africa, and less common in the middle east. Its geographical range has been expanded to the middle east since 1980s, and it was recorded from many middle east countries. In this study, this species was recorded from the Syrian coast (part from Mediterranean coast) (Latakia- Syria) in 2023-2024. Field trips were carried out in rate of twice a month and birds were observed in early morning. Four individuals (two females and two males) were recorded from two position of Latakia governorate: Burj Islam and Shabatliyah. This refers to the continuous expansion of the original geographical range of *O. capensis* towards the north.

Key words: Namaqua dove, geographical range, Syrian coast, columbidae.

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تسجيل جديد لليمام طويل الذنب (*Oena capensis* (Linnaeus, 1766) (Columbidae) في سورية (أول تسجيل في الساحل السوري)

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□ ملخص □

يوجد في سورية حوالي 400 نوعاً من الطيور تتبع فصائل مختلفة ومنها فصيلة الحماميات Columbidae التي تضم سبعة أنواع في سورية. أحدها اليمام طويل الذنب (*Oena capensis*) الذي سجل لأول مرة في سورية عام 2003 في منطقة تدمر ضمن البادية السورية. وهو نوع مقيم شائع بكثرة في معظم أنحاء أفريقيا جنوب الصحراء الكبرى، وأقل شيوعاً في الشرق الأوسط. وقد توسع مجاله الجغرافي باتجاه منطقة الشرق الأوسط منذ ثمانينيات القرن العشرين ليسجل في عدد كبير من بلدان المنطقة. لم يسجل وجوده بشكل موثق في سورية قبل عام 2000، وفي هذه الدراسة سجل وجوده خلال عامي 2023-2024 في محافظة اللاذقية لأول مرة الساحل السوري (سورية التي تقع على ساحل البحر المتوسط). أجريت الجولات الحقلية بمعدل جولتين في الشهر حيث تم مراقبة الطيور في الصباح الباكر. سُجل وجود أربعة أفراد (2 ذكور + 2 إناث) في موقعين هما برج إسلام والشبيلية ويشير هذا التسجيل إلى استمرار توسع المجال الجغرافي لهذا النوع شمال مجاله الجغرافي. توصي الدراسة بإجراء المزيد من الأبحاث حول تأثير التغيرات المناخية على حياة الطيور في سورية من مختلف جوانبها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: يمام طويل الذنب-المجال الجغرافي-الساحل السوري -فصيلة الحماميات.

حقوق النشر  : مجلة جامعة اللاذقية (تشرين سابقاً) - سورية، يحتفظ المؤلفون بحقوق النشر بموجب الترخيص CC BY-NC-SA 04

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Introduction

Syria is located on the Eastern Mediterranean basin. The Syrian coast extends for 193 km from Turkey in the north till Lebanon in the south. Latakia governorate located in the northern part of the Syrian coast, and it is considered a very important aerial corridor in bird spring and autumn migration way [1].

Syria has a distinct variety in topography and climate that led to a great biodiversity of its fauna and flora. It is one of Mediterranean countries that has big richness in bio-communities [2]. There are around 400 bird species in Syria; some of them are resident, others are migrant, crossing, or visitors in addition to vagrant birds of some species which may shelter to Syria due to climate change [3].

The family [Columbidae: Columbiformes] includes five sub-families and 42 genera and about 320 species around the world [4]. In Syria, there are seven columbid species belong to three genera in the wild [5] (table 1). The species Long-tail dove or Namaqua dove (locally is called Humhuma) *Oena capensis* is a rare summer visitor to Syria especially to Al Badiyah area, and it may reproduce and gradually increase number of its individuals there. Usually, this species lives in grass meadows and semi- deserts that contain spiny bushes [5].

Oena capensis (figure 1) is indigenous species to Africa as it is abundant and common resident in sub-Saharan Africa and less common in the Middle East. Some populations of this species are resident, but others have seasonal movements or regular migrations in some areas [4,6]. However, it could be considered as an invasive species

Table 1: Columbidae species in Syria

Common name	Scientific name
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>

as it has high ability to spread and adopt with new habitats [7]. This species has expanded its geographical range through the middle east since 1980s, and many studies outweigh that this expansion is toward the north due to developments in irrigation in desert area of Arab peninsula [8].

This expansion is normal due to human activities. Expansion of irrigated agriculture contributed to expansion of geographical range of *O. capensis* as in trying to find new suitable habitats which can provide suitable food and shelter: this was followed by successful reproduction trying [9]. This species does have two recognized subspecies: *Oena capensis capensis* which is found in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Socotra, and *Oena capensis aliena* which is found on Madagascar [10].

The studies have documented invasion of this species into many new areas of Arab peninsula, it was recorded in 21st century in northern of Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan [9]. Its populations settled in areas located to the north of its previous main geographical range from the beginning of 21st century. The settlement of this species has been continued as it was recorded in many countries located to the north of its original geographical range in Africa, west Asia, north of Morocco, Cyprus, and Turkey, and central and south of Asia [11, 12, 13, 14].

O. capensis recorded in Jordan for the first time in 1980s and has become a settled species [15]. The first record to this species in Lebanon was in 1999, and was recorded repeatedly until 2015 [16, 17,18]. In Turkey, it was recorded for the first time in 2005 [19], and it was recorded many times after [20, 21] to become one of the breeding species in Turkey in 2023 [14]. vagrant individuals of this species were documented in Greek and Georgia, and there is increasing in its population size along the Mediterranean coast. It is expected to expand towards south Europe in near future [22].

Therefore, the phenomenon of distribution of this species northwards in the Middle East deserves more attention and furtherer studies. There are no confirmed records of *O. capensis* in Syria before the year 2000, and the first confirmed sightings in Syria was recorded in 2003 in the Syrian desert, Palmyra oasis near Wadi Al Abiad Dam, although it was observed around Palmyra since 2001 [2]. It was a very rare summer visitor and migrates to Syria in spring and leaves it after breeding season toward Africa [2]. It was repeatedly recorded from 2007 to 2008 including six males and one female in May 2008. This refers to possibility of being a rare resident to Palmyra area, but its breeding has not been confirmed yet [23, 24]. There were no data updating for Syria since 2011. However, it was a non-breeding species according Birdlife International until 2024 [25].

Taxonomy

Kingdom: Animalia

Pylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: columbiformes

Family: columbidae

Genus: *Oeana*

Species: *Oena capensis*(Linnaeus, 1766)

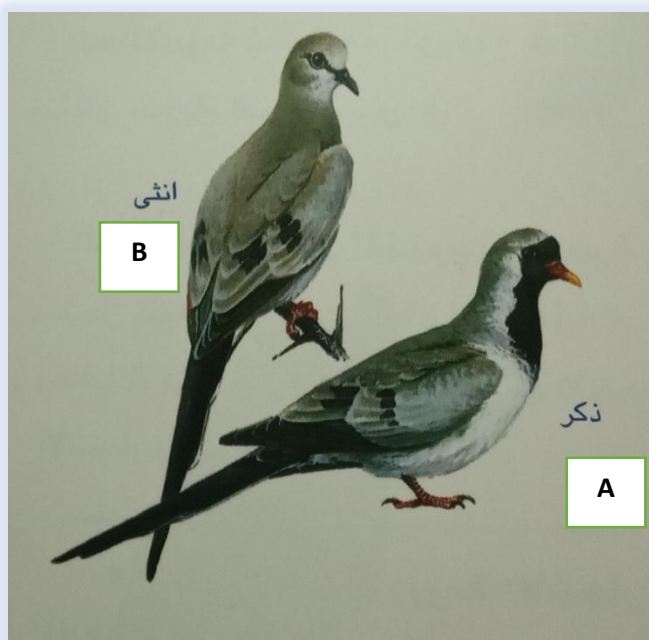


Figure 1: general shape of *Oena capensis* (A: male, B: female)

Description

It is a very small dove with a total body length of 28 cm [4] including tail length (9cm). The body colour is bluish-gray or brownish-gray. The feathers in the middle of the tail are black. A large brownish-red spot is visible on the black primaries during flying, and coverts of wings are brownish-grey with isolated dark spots. Namaqua dove is easily distinguished from general shape of pigeons and its small size. The male has a distinctive black mask and colourful bill [26] while the female has a plain head and dark bill. It flies swiftly and straight, but it spends most of its time on the ground.

This species is mainly granivorous, but its dietary is insufficiently known [27, 28]. It is mostly seen feeding cautiously on the ground in farms near animals, and it consumes a variety of cultivated seeds and grains. It may be observed associated with species of *Streptopelia* sp. [9].

Importance of the research and aims:

This is the first study to focus only on pigeons and doves present in the Syrian coast. It aims to document species found in this coast and to estimate some ecological factors that may affect their presence.

Materials and Methods:

The study was carried out from April 2023 to April 2024 using binoculars to observe bird species in the study area. Field trips were carried out in rate of twice a month and birds were observed from 6 am – 9 am.

The area of the study included two different positions in Latakia Governorate:

- 1- Burj Islam position (35° 41' 00" N, 35° 48' 00" E): it locates on a rocky coast of Mediterranean Sea. It has vermiculate plain lands descend toward west north and it has many caves. It is about 1 km from Mediterranean Sea coast.
- 2- Al-Shabatliyah position (35° 41' 9" N, 35° 49' 39" E): Al Shabtliyah town is in the Latakia countryside. It is about 1 km from the sea, and about 18 km to the It is surrounded by forests, olive and orange fields from all directions. Lands of the villages exposed to fires in 2020 and after that led to the north of Latakia city with around 100 m elevation from the sea level. It is surrounded with forests, olive and orange fields from all directions. Lands of the villages exposed to fires about 2020 and after which led to heavy lost in crops and vegetation there.

Results and Discussion:

Four adult individuals were recorded (two females and males) for the first time in Latakia governorate in two positions of Burj Islam and Shabatliyah in 2023 (figures 3 & 4). It was verified that these individuals are scattered (wild) and they did escape from the cage by checking feather safety and detecting individuals of this species repeatedly according to bird hunters in the region. It was detected from the beginning of summer 2023 associated with populations of *Streptopelia turtur*. This may be a new evidence that the geographical range of *O. capensis* is expanding continually. There are no documented records for this species in Syria before 2000, and it was documented for the first time in this country in 2003 [2]. After that, it was repeatedly recorded from 2007 to 2008 including six males and one female in May 2008. This refers to possibility of being a rare resident to Palmyra area, but its breeding has not been confirmed yet [23, 24].

There is no documented record for this species after 2008 at any area of Syria before carrying out this study. May be climate change and global warming make the coast area is more convenient to this species to settle there. However, more studies are needed to emphasize whether this species is resident in the Syrian coast or not or whether these individuals were found by accident.

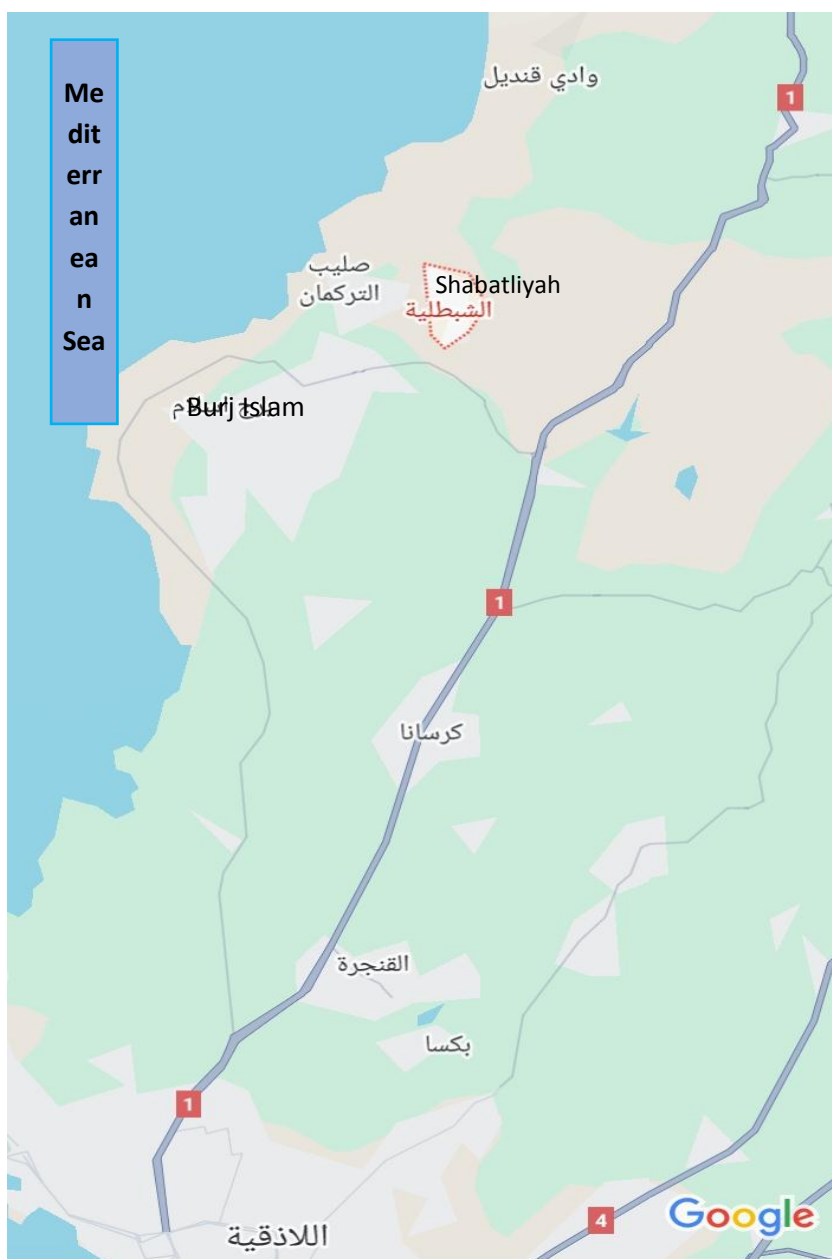


Figure2: area of the study on map



Figure3: A female of *O. Capensis* was captured and re-freed later in the study area

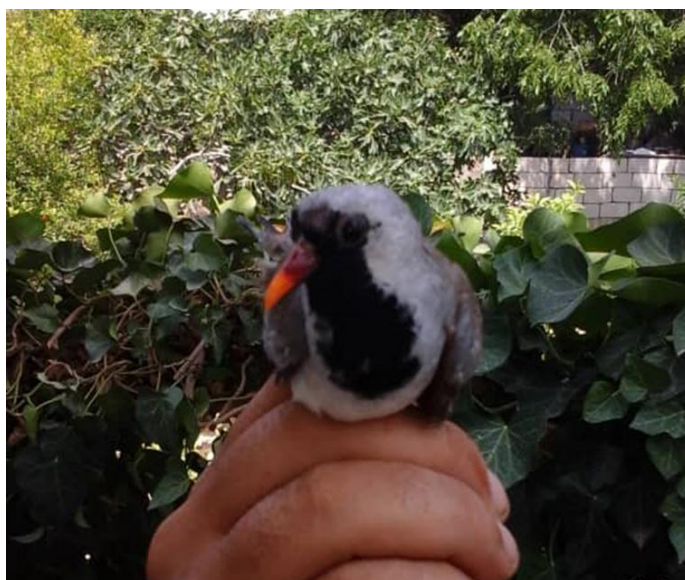


Figure 4: A male of *O. Capensis* was captured and re-freed later in the study area

Suggestions and Recommendation

It is not clear whether *O. capensis* is resident or it is visitor to the Syrian coast. More studies are needed to emphasize this this species is a permanent resident in Lattakia governorate or Tartous governorate or is it resident in the Syrian coast in general.

It is recommended that new studies on avifauna of Syria should focus more on climate change impacts on range shifts of birds (especially columbidae species), and how climate change could affect their behaviors of feeding and breeding.

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