

# Survey of wintering sites of Lesser White-fronted Goose in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2011

Sami Timonen & Toni Eskelin

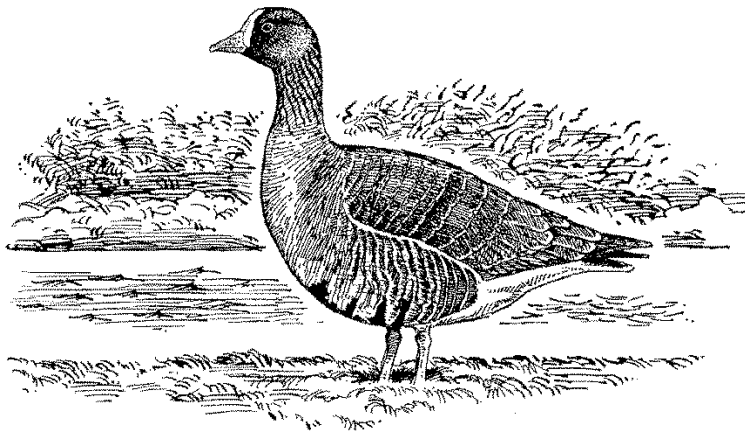
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# Survey of wintering sites for the Lesser White-fronted Goose in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2011

Sami Timonen & Toni Eskelin



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## SUMMARY

The second survey to search for Lesser White-fronted Geese in the Syrian Arab Republic was carried out in February 2011 by a team of Finnish and Syrian ornithologists. The main sites visited during the survey were the same as in 2010 including Lake Jabbul, Lake Tishreen, Lake Assad, Lake Basil and Lake Rawda. In addition, Lake Tishreen was surveyed for the first time in 2011. One site, Lake Rawda, was completely dried out. The prevailing habitat conditions for geese were different compared to the situation in 2010, as the feeding fields were either completely or partly dry due to the drought in winter 2010/2011. As a result of this, the total numbers of geese (mixed Greater and Lesser White-fronted) recorded in February 2011 was only about a fifth of the numbers recorded in 2010, with a total only 549 individuals observed.

The proportion of individual geese identified to species-level was high in 2011. Lake Jabbul hosted about a third of the number of geese compared to that counted in 2010. At Lake Tishreen a flock of 191 Greater White-fronted Geese was seen. Lake Tishreen was a new addition to the sites visited in 2010. The site is situated c. 100 km north of Lake Assad (Al Thawra Reserve). As in 2010, no geese were recorded at Lake Assad in 2011. Goose numbers at Lake Basil in February 2011 were less than one fifth of that recorded there in 2010.

The only Lesser White-fronted Geese identified (four individuals) were observed on 2 February on the western part of Lake Jabbul. A total of 232 Greater White-fronted Geese were also seen at Lake Jabbul on the same date. The number of geese present at Lake Jabbul in 2011 was much lower compared to 2010, when 72 Lesser White-fronted Geese were identified together with 700 Greater White-fronts. The count of 72 individuals in 2010 is currently the highest number of Lesser White-fronted Geese recorded in Syria.

The results of the survey show that there is large annual variation in the number of geese wintering in Syria. In some years there may be tens of thousands of geese, whereas in other years numbers may be as low as a few hundred or perhaps only a few thousand geese.

Illegal hunting was extensive at Lake Jabbul, Lake Tishreen and Lake Basil.

The survey team donated two telescopes, two digital cameras and several local bird field guides for the purpose of wetland bird monitoring in general, and in particular for Lesser White-fronted Goose monitoring, to the General Commission for Badia Management and Development (GCB). The survey team also had several meetings and appointments with individuals and the officials of GCB. The main aims of international Lesser White-fronted Goose conservation work and recommendations for national conservation work for the species in Syria were presented and discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first survey of possible wintering areas for the globally endangered Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* (subsequently referred to as LWfG) in the Syrian Arab Republic was undertaken in February 2010, which aimed to reveal the status (abundance and distribution) of the species in the country (Eskelin & Timonen 2010). In February 2011 a second survey was carried out to identify the annual variation of the occurrence of LWfG and to shed light on the temporal dynamics of the species. The aim in 2011 was, as in 2010, to cover the main wetland areas most suitable for wintering geese. In addition, promotion of the conservation and observation work on wetlands was a primary part of the expedition. Optical equipment and identification books were donated for monitoring and conservation work on LWfG in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The survey was carried out in the period 1-11 February 2011. The survey was organised by NOF-BirdLife Norway and funded mainly by the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management. Fieldwork was carried out in close co-operation with the General Commission for Badia Management and Development (subsequently referred to as GCB) and the BirdLife International Middle East secretariat. The survey was conducted as part of the implementation of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) International Single Species Action Plan for the LWfG (Jones *et. al.* 2008).

The participants of the expedition were Mr. Toni Eskelin and Mr. Sami Timonen (LWfG Working Group of WWF Finland), Mr. Ahmed Abdullah (GCB), Mr. Mahmoud S. Abdallah (GCB) and Mr. Saifeden Hamoud (GCB).

A full list of wetland bird species and the numbers seen during the survey is presented in Table 1.

## ITINERARY AND METHODS

### Itinerary

- 1.2. Timonen and Eskelin arrived in Damascus, where they met the other members of the team. Overnight stay at a private house near Damascus.
- 2.2. 07.00 – 21.00 hrs. Travel to Lake Jabbul via Aleppo. In the afternoon observations along the western shore of the lake and in the evening a visit to fields where geese were seen in 2010, and to the southwestern part of the lake. Meeting in Khanaser village with the local director of Badia Regional Office. Overnight stay at the GCB's Guesthouse in Khanaser.
- 3.2. 05.40 – 20.00 hrs. The morning was spent near the goose fields at the southwestern part of Lake Jabbul. In the afternoon observations near the Fishermen's Cottage and Bridge and a visit to a nearby salt lake in the south. Observations along the western shore of the lake en route to Aleppo. Overnight stay in Aleppo.
- 4.2. 07.00 – 19.00 hrs. Observations in morning in the northern part of Lake Jabbul. In the afternoon a visit to the Fishermen's Cottage and the Bridge. Overnight stay in a hotel in Aleppo.
- 5.2. 08.00 – 19.00 hrs. Travel to Lake Tishreen in the morning, with observations in the western part of the lake. In the afternoon consultations with a local ranger and drive to the northern side of the lake. Overnight stay in the same hotel in Aleppo.
- 6.2. 06.00 – 19.00 hrs. Travel via Lake Jabbul (SE part) to Lake Assad (Al Thawra Reserve). Overnight stay in GCB's Guesthouse in Al Raqqa.

- 7.2. 06.30 – 19.00 hrs. Visit to Jabar forest near Lake Assad in morning. Meeting with local administratives of GCB Regional Office. Then a drive to Khabur Dam via Al Farraj Reserve. In the afternoon observations at Lake Basil. Overnight stay in Al Hasakan.
- 8.2. 05.00 – 19.00 hrs. Observations in the northern part of Lake Basil. In the afternoon a drive to Deir-ez-Zor. In the evening a visit to Mheimideh. Overnight stay in GCB Guesthouse in Deir-ez-Zor.
- 9.2. 06.00 – 20.00 hrs. A visit to Lake Rawda. Overnight stay in Deir-ez-Zor.
- 10.2. 08.00. – 20.00 hrs. Morning excursion in the surroundings of Palmyra and a visit to Talila Nature Reserve with the personnel of the GCB. The work and future plans to promote nature conservation and ecotourism and raising public awareness of the nature in the area were presented and discussed. Drove to Damascus in evening where we stayed overnight.
- 11.2. Departure from Damascus.

### **Main sites visited**

The main sites visited during the survey were mostly the same as in 2010, namely Lake Jabbul (Sabkhat al Jabbul), Lake Assad, Lake Basil (Buhayrat al Basil, Lower Khabur reservoir) and Lake Rawda (Sabkhat al Rawda). In addition, Lake Tishreen was visited for the first time in 2011. The sites are described in more detail in the 2010 survey report (Eskelin & Timonen 2010, see also BirdLife International 2013a, 2013b).



Lake Jabbul (Sabkhat al-Jabbul), Syria. Photo: Toni Eskelin.



Lake Rawda (Sabkhat al-Rawda), Syria. Photo: Toni Eskelin.



Lake Tishreen, Syria. Photo: Toni Eskelin.



## RESULTS

All daily goose observations made by the survey team are presented below:

### **Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons***

Lake Jabbul

- 2.2: Observation point 35°51.336'N, 37°38.846'E: 250 individuals on a field together with four LWfG. The flock took off towards the west.
- 3.2: Observation point 35°52.251'N, 37°39.610'E: Between 06.15–07.25 hrs. 68 individuals in 5 flocks took off mainly in a south-southwesterly direction. At 08.30 hrs. 78 individuals flew from the fields back to the lake, where 232 individuals were counted at 12.00 hrs. See also Greater White-fronted/Lesser White-fronted Goose.
- 6.2: Observation point 35°50.556'N, 37°38.413'E: At 8.30 hrs 52 ind. flew off from a field, whilst 95 ind. were present on the lake (age sample: 27 adults, 19 juveniles).

Lake Tishreen

- 5.2: Observation point 36°42.891'N, 38°13.768'E: At 16.30 hrs 191 individuals came from the northeast and landed on the nearby fields. At 17.00 hrs. birds took off in two separate flocks and flew to the southeast.

Lake Basil

- 7.2: Observation point 36°16.541'N, 40°46.518'E: Altogether 100 individuals on a nearby field and five ind. on the lake.
- 8.2: Observation point 36°16.541'N, 40°46.518'E: A total of 110 individuals between 09.45 – 10.45 hrs. 51+48 ind. to the lake and 5 ind. already on the lake. Between 11.00 – 11.30hrs 105 ind. flew to the fields, and five ind. remained on the lake.

### **Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus***

Lake Jabbul

- 2.2: Observation point 35°51.336'N, 37°38.846'E: Four individuals on a field in a flock of 250 Greater White-fronted Geese. Birds took off and flew to the west. A few minutes later two individuals were seen flying to the southeast, which were possibly from the same group.

### **Greater White-fronted- /Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons/erythropus***

Lake Jabbul

- 3.2: Observation point 35°52.251'N, 37°39.610'E: Between 06.15 – 07.25 hrs: 159 individuals in 4 flocks took off to the southwest. Later in the day these birds were seen again at the lake, and identified as Greater White-fronted Geese. See also White-fronted Goose.

### **Grey goose species *Anser sp.***

Lake Jabbul

- 3.2: 36°00.287'N, 37°31.526'E: One possible Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* was seen on the western shore of the lake. Unfortunately, the distance was too great for positive identification.

Lake Tishreen

- 5.2: Observation point 36°44.706'N, 38°01.072'E: One single individual in flight.

## DISCUSSION

### Results and evaluation of the field work

The same sites that were surveyed in 2010 were also visited during 2011, with the addition of Lake Tishreen. Information that Lake Rawda had dried out was received before the visit to the area, but nevertheless the visit was made because of the potential importance of the area. In addition to geese, all other waterbirds were counted and/or estimated.

The weather during the survey was fairly good, daily temperatures varied between +5-+15 °C, and winds were weak or moderate, except on 4 February at Lake Jabbul when there was a strong wind and it was quite chilly.

The prevailing habitat conditions for geese were different in 2011 compared to the situation in 2010. The feeding fields were completely or partly dry due to the drought in winter 2010/2011. As a result, the number of geese was only about a fifth of the numbers recorded in 2010, with a total of only 551 individuals observed (in 2010 the corresponding number was 2391 individuals).

The proportion of individual geese identified to species-level was high. Lake Jabbul hosted about a third of the goose numbers counted in 2010 (254 ind. vs. 1178 individuals). At Lake Tishreen, a flock of 191 geese was seen. Lake Tishreen was a new addition to the sites visited in 2010. The site is situated c. 100 km north of Lake Assad (Al Thawra Reserve). As in 2010, no geese were recorded at Lake Assad in 2011. Goose numbers at Lake Basil in February 2011 were less than one fifth of that recorded in 2010.

The only LWfG identified (four individuals) were observed on 2 February on the western part of Lake Jabbul. A total of 250 Greater White-fronted Geese were also seen at Lake Jabbul. The number of LWfG present was much lower than in 2010, when 72 individuals out of a flock of 769 geese (8.5 %) were identified as being LWfG. This number is still the highest number of LWfG ever counted in Syria (for other records, see Murdoch & Betton 2008 and Eskelin & Timonen 2010).

Amongst interesting bird observations were a high number of White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala* (2680 individuals) on Lake Jabbul. This figure is 410 individuals higher than that counted in 2010, and is about 26% of the estimated world population in the winter period (BirdLife International 2013c). At Lake Tishreen, high numbers of waterfowl were estimated with about c. 250 000 individuals, most of which were Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, but also included 6000 Red-crested Pochards *Netta rufina* and 800 Pygmy Cormorants *Phalacrocorax pygmeus*. These numbers highlight the importance of Syrian wetlands for wintering waterbirds.

The results of this survey show that there is large annual variation in the number of geese wintering in Syria. In some years there can be tens of thousands (Murdoch et al. 2005, Hofland & Keijl 2008), whereas in other years numbers may be as low as a few hundred or perhaps only a few thousand geese.

It is difficult to know or to estimate the distribution of geese in Syria during the whole winter period 2010/2011. The general prevailing drought is the most likely explanation for the scarcity of geese at the time of the survey in February 2011. The fields surrounding the lakes were not as green as in 2010, and Lake Rawda was completely dry, something which is known to happen there at regular intervals (Eskelin & Timonen 2010). However, it is uncertain if geese had arrived in the country earlier in the winter to check the conditions, and then returned to sites in the north (Turkey) or to the east (Iraq, Iran) where feeding conditions may have been better.

A local hunting guide, Ahmed Sulaiman, stated that the numbers of geese at Lake Tishreen vary from year to year, but have declined markedly in recent years. In the past, geese were seen in “thousands”, and only a few years ago c. 3000 were seen. The geese usually arrive around mid-December and leave around 10 February, with all geese having left the area by 20 February. One possible reason for the decline may be changes in water management and building of huge water reservoirs in Turkey (see also Kirwan et al. 2008).

Illegal hunting was extensive at Lake Jabbul, Lake Tishreen and Lake Basil. For example, at Lake Tishreen five motorboats were seen chasing flocks of waterfowl. Several birds were seen to be shot. At Lake Jabbul shots were heard every day and shooting hides were found. Direct hunting by solitary hunters was witnessed several times, including hunting from cars. On one occasion, a hunter hid beside the goose fields whilst another hunter chased a flock of geese to within range. At Lake Basil hunting was witnessed both from shore and from boat.



An illegal hunter at Lake Jabbul, Syria. Photo: Toni Eskelin.

The survey team donated two telescopes to GCB (Opticron ES 80 GA ED 20-60x) with tripods, and two digital cameras (Sony Cybershot DSC HX1 20X-zoom) for the purpose of monitoring of wetland birds in general and LWfG in particular. In addition, several local bird field guides were presented from the BirdLife Middle East office to GCB.

Reprints of the Alula magazine article on the identification of LWfG were circulated to many interested people in the field.

The survey team had several meetings and appointments with individuals and with officials of the GCB. The main aims of international LWfG conservation work and national recommendations for LWfG conservation work in Syria were presented and discussed (for details of the recommendations, see Eskelin & Timonen 2010).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the local expertise of our expedition: Mr. Ahmed Abdullah (GCB), Mr. Mahmoud S. Abdallah (GCB) and Mr. Saifeden Hamoud (GCB).

We also warmly thank Mr. Yaseen Mujawer, Mr. Ahmed Sulaiman and Mr. Mouhamed Mawass for their co-operation at Jabbul village.

The preparation of the trip was facilitated by Mr. Tomas Aarvak (NOF-BirdLife Norway), and Ms. Nina Mikander (UNEP/AEWA Secretariat). We also acknowledge the help of General Ali Hamoud, the Director General of the Head of Body’s Board of Directors at GCB.

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Birding with schoolchildren at Lake Jabbul. Environmental education and training are necessary for effective conservation work. Photo: Toni Eskelin.

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## Appendix

**Table 1.** Numbers of wetland birds at the most important areas studied. x = 1-10 individuals, xx = 10-100 individuals, xxx=100-1000 individuals, xxxx=1000-10000 individuals.

Species	Scientific name	2.2. Lake Jabbul W- and SE-part	3.2. Lake Jabbul SE-part	4.2. Lake Jabbul N-part	5.2. Lake Tishreen W-part	5.2. Lake Tishreen E-part	6.2. Lake Jabbul S-part	6.2. Lake Jabbul Bridge	6.2. Lake Assad, Al Thawra Reserve	7.2. Khabur Dam	7.2. Lake Basil
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>A. albifrons</i>	250	232			191	147				100
Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>A. erythropus</i>	4									
unidentified "grey" geese	<i>Anser sp.</i>				1						
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>T. ferruginea</i>										56
Common Shelduck	<i>T. tadoma</i>	1700	20				90				
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>A. penelope</i>			20	200						
Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>			10	200						
Eurasian Teal	<i>A. crecca</i>			1000	100						2000
Mallard	<i>A. platyrhynchos</i>			50	50						700
Northern Pintail	<i>A. acuta</i>			20							
Northern Shoveler	<i>A. clypeata</i>			300							
Dabbling Duck species	<i>Anas sp.</i>	2800	170						200		
Red-crested Pochard	<i>N. rufina</i>			150	6000		118		20		20
Common Pochard	<i>A. ferina</i>		500	4500	20000				1000	900	100
Ferruginous Duck	<i>A. nyroca</i>		2	250			110				20
Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>				300				400		4
Smew	<i>M. albellus</i>										46
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>M. serrator</i>						2				
White-headed Duck	<i>O. leucocephala</i>			2670			13				
unspecified waterfowl		1000	10000				xxxx	200			
Little Grebe	<i>T. ruficollis</i>	5	20	20	20		40		10	20	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>P. cristatus</i>	200	600	200	100		1500		200		140
Black-necked Grebe	<i>P. nigricollis</i>		x						780		
Great Cormorant	<i>P. carbo</i>	600		600	40		400				30
Pygmy Cormorant	<i>P. pygmeus</i>				750						
Eurasian Bittern	<i>B. stellaris</i>		1								
Little Egret	<i>E. garzetta</i>	4		40	3			7			3
Great Egret	<i>E. alba</i>	20		130	3			8		1	330
Grey Heron	<i>A. cinerea</i>			30	2			8		2	110
Greater Flamingo	<i>P. roseus</i>	1100		940			60				
Common Moorhen	<i>G. chloropus</i>		5	15	30						
Water Rail	<i>R. aquaticus</i>	2	5	x							
Purple Swamphen	<i>P. porphyrio</i>		1								
Eurasian Coot	<i>F. atra</i>	8300	7000	5000	225 000		xxx		10000	3000	2000
Black-winged Stilt	<i>H. himantopus</i>	300									
Pied Avocet	<i>R. avocetta</i>		43	10				26			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>C. hiaticula</i>		4				16	4			
Kentish Plover	<i>C. alexandrinus</i>							3			
White-tailed Lapwing	<i>V. leucurus</i>			1							
Northern Lapwing	<i>V. vanellus</i>	1	x	3	4	6					

Little Stint	<i>C. minuta</i>		x	70				150			
Dunlin	<i>C. alpina</i>		x					50			
Ruff	<i>P. pugnax</i>	80	x	15							
Jack Snipe	<i>L. minimus</i>							1			
Common Snipe	<i>G. gallinago</i>		1					1			
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>S. rusticola</i>		1								
Eurasian Curlew	<i>N. arquata</i>		3				3				
Green Sandpiper	<i>T. ochropus</i>			1							
Spotted Redshank	<i>T. erythropus</i>		x	6	4			5			
Common Greenshank	<i>T. nebularia</i>		x					1			
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>T. stagnatilis</i>							1			
Common Redshank	<i>T. tolanus</i>	1	x	x	2			10			
unid.middle-sized wader		700			5			120			
unid.small-sized wader					4			350			
Pallas's Gull	<i>L. ichthyaetus</i>				6				3		
Black-headed Gull	<i>L. ridibundus</i>		50	1100							80
Slender-billed Gull	<i>L. genei</i>			80							
Black-headed / Slender-billed Gull	<i>L. ridibundus/genei</i>	4800			200						1800
Mew Gull	<i>L. canus</i>				12						600
Caspian Gull	<i>L. cachinnans</i>				11						
Armenian Gull	<i>L. armenicus</i>	5	15	25	6		16		2700		
Whiskered Tern	<i>C. hybrida</i>	10	2500	250	80						10
Black Tern	<i>C. niger</i>			1	1						
White-winged Tern	<i>C. leucopterus</i>		10	30							
Common Kingfisher	<i>A. althis</i>			8			2		4		
Pied Kingfisher	<i>C. rudis</i>		12	4	1				1		