

**Haditha Wetlands & Baghdadi (IQ050)****Anbar - 33.905833N 42.532778E**KBA Criteria: **V and Ia**IBA Criteria: **A1, A2 and A3**IPA Criteria: **A4 and B1**Area: **48274 ha** - Altitude: **65-187 m**Ecoregion: **Mesopotamian Shrub Desert (PA1320)**Status: **Unprotected**

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**Site Description:** The site encompasses both banks of the Euphrates River in Baghdadi town and contains one of the most biologically important river valleys in Western Iraq, due to its unique habitat hosting important fish spawning areas during the spring months. The habitats surveyed in this area included desert shrublands and sparsely vegetated herbaceous vegetation in sparsely vegetated lands as well as riparian vegetation, reedbed and reedmace beds, and rooted submerged vegetation. The geology of the area is Euphrates limestone, shelly, dolomitized limestone.

The area is characterized by dense date palm orchards on either side of the river, in addition to citrus and other fruit trees. The shores of the Euphrates are grassy and muddy as the river flows towards Ramadi, with occasional rocks rising out of the river in the middle. These are considered an elevated extension of the river matrix, and one of the nesting sites for resident and migrant water birds. There is also occasionally submerged vegetation along the riverbank and some dense reed beds and marsh habitats.

Alongside the main highway there are desert and semi-arid habitats, sandy and open areas with rocky cliffs and scattered vegetation. Al-Haqhaniya is situated to the north of the site c. 10 km from the city of Haditha. Date farms and fruit orchards cover large areas along the east bank of the Euphrates but in dramatic contrast to the flat deserts beyond.

One of the oldest parts of Haditha is the shrine of Sheikh Hadid where a sinkhole is located. It is situated on the western bank of Euphrates and represents an important heritage landmark of the site. West of the site is Camp Al-Asad, one of the largest Iraqi military bases in Anbar Governorate, which regularly deploys troops and military vehicles for roadblocks and checkpoints in the surrounding area. An oasis is located on the base that is locally known as Abraham's Well. During 2010, a U.S. military official stationed at the base provided information on the biodiversity of the area but attempts by the KBA Team to visit the base were impossible.

Key Biodiversity Area Criteria	Notes	
<b>V. Vulnerability Criteria: Presence of Critically Endangered and Endangered species – presence of a single individual or Vulnerable species – 30 individuals or 10 pairs.</b>		
<i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>	Euphrates Softshell Turtle has been trapped by fisherman near Baghdadi.	
<i>Typhlogarra widdowsoni</i>	25 individuals found at the sinkhole at Sheikh Hadid Shrine in the spring of 2012	
<i>Caecocypris basimi</i>	Known historically at the Sheikh Hadid Shrine sinkhole but not observed in 2012	
<b>Ia. Irreplaceability Sub-criterion: Restricted-range species based on global range</b>		
<i>Rafetus euphraticus</i>	See above	
<b>Important Bird Area Criteria</b>	<b>Observations made 2010-2012</b>	
<b>A1. Globally Threatened Species</b>	<b>Breeding</b>	<b>Wintering/ Passage</b>
Sociable Lapwing <i>Vanellus gregarius</i> Passage Migrant		One bird reported to Nature Iraq at Al-Asad camp near Baghdadi.

## KEY BIODIVERSITY AREAS OF IRAQ

A2. Range-restricted species	Breeding	Wintering/ Passage
Iraq Babbler <i>Turdoides altirostris</i> (Resident)	9 pairs (2011-2012)	7 (2010)
A3. Biome-restricted species		
Sahara-Sindian Desert biome	Breeding	Wintering / Passage
Cream-coloured Courser <i>Cursorius cursor</i> (Resident)	1 pair (2010)	
Spotted Sandgrouse <i>Pterocles senegallus</i> (Resident)	13 pairs (2010)	
Brown-necked Raven <i>Corvus ruficollis</i> (Resident)	2 pairs (2011)	
Hypocolius <i>Hypocolius ampelinus</i> (Summer visitor)	3 pairs (2010)	
Greater Hoopoe Lark <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i> (Resident)	1 pair (2012)	
Desert Lark <i>Ammomanes deserti</i> (Resident)	2 pairs (2012)	
Temminck's Horned Lark <i>Eremophila bilopha</i> (Resident)	2 pairs (2012)	
White-eared Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus leucotis</i> (Resident)	11 pairs	6 (2010)
Iraq Babbler <i>Turdoides altirostris</i> (Resident)	9 pairs (2011-2012)	7 (2010)
Dead Sea Sparrow <i>Passer moabiticus</i> (Resident)	10 pairs (2011)	38 (2010)
Important Plant Area Criteria		
A4. Site contains national endemic, near endemic, regional endemic and/or regional range-restricted species or infraspecific taxa		
One endemic <i>Onopordum canum</i> (seen on the KBA Survey) and one near endemic <i>Allium vinicolor</i> (historically recorded) were found at this site.		
B1. The site is a particularly species-rich example of a defined habitat type		
Desert-desert shrubs habitat type; Herbaceous vegetation-sparsely vegetated land and Marsh vegetation- Helophytic vegetation- reed-beds and reedmace beds habitat type		

**Additional Important Bird Observations:** A total of 84 species was recorded. In addition to those listed in the table the following were observed on passage or in winter at levels that did not meet IBA criteria: in winter Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* (Vulnerable), Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* (Near Threatened), Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca* (Vulnerable) and Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* (Near Threatened).

**Other Important Fauna:** A local hunter reported on the rare hunting via electrocution of Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* near Haqlaniya. Golden Jackal, *Canis aureus* have been observed. The veterinary control center of the Coalition forces that were formerly stationed at Al-Asad military base have reported the trapping of adult male Striped Hyena *Hyaena hyaena* near the base perimeter as well as Rueppell's fox *Vulpes rueppelli* and Jungle cat *Felis chaus* in 2010. One amphibian species was observed at the site: Variable Toad *Bufo variabilis*.

**Fish:** While the Euphrates River was not surveyed for fish, the site is important because the sinkhole at Sheikh Hadid Shrine contains two endemic cave-dwelling, blind fish species: *Typhlogarra widdowsoni* and *Caecocypris basimi* (both Critically Endangered). These two species were described in Iraq more than 50 and 32 years ago respectively by Trewavas (1955) & Banister and Bunni (1980). Also the site is reported to be an important spawning ground for important species such as *Luciobarbus esocinus* and *L. xanthopterus*, both Vulnerable species.

**Conservation Issues:** Baghdadi's habitat is uniquely representative of Western Iraq, and is a strong candidate for a nature reserve. Although the Ministry of Environment and

Ministry of Agriculture have taken steps towards nominating the site for protected area status and including it in regular ministry visits and surveys, several fundamental issues must be resolved. Hunting and fishing is one of the highest impacts affecting the biodiversity. Waterfowl and game birds such as Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* and Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* are the main bird species targeted by local hunters. The site was once an important area for Arabian Sand Gazelle that were previously reported to congregate in large groups drinking from the eastern side of Euphrates, but because of heavy hunting pressure are now rarely seen or reported (Al-Sheikhly, 2012). Electro-fishing was observed at many locations along the Euphrates River and local fishermen indicated that this technique had been imported from southern Iraq where it is widely practiced.

Agriculture is mainly represented by the extensive orchards along the river and by nomadic grazing and was considered a moderate threat; there were many new urbanization projects and tourism activities that are restricted to neighboring towns and villages of Anbar that influence the Euphrates River of Khan Al-Baghdadi; there are also a few new roads and only moderate activities of aircraft and helicopters heading toward Al-Asad Base; pollutants were mainly from urban wastewater, agricultural effluents, garbage, and noise.

**Recommendations:** This site should be declared a national protected area and requires additional, in-depth surveys (including botanical and fish surveys) to fully characterize its biological diversity. Protecting the annual fish spawning grounds especially the economically valuable species such as *Luciobarbus esocinus* and *L. xanthopterus* is a primary conservation issue. An examination of water quality is also

needed. Priority actions include increasing awareness and enforcement of the current Iraqi hunting laws to reduce hunting pressure on threatened species. Pollution also

deserves attention to improve sewage and solid waste handling and management to reduce agricultural pollutants. The strong military presence near the site warrants cooperation and communication with civilian and military authorities to ensure impacts on the remaining natural habitats, some of which are contained within the Al-Asad Military base, are minimized and access to important survey areas is allowed.

