In October 2007, I was deployed to Tallil, a military base in southern Iraq. Needless to say, when I was assigned to Iraq as an army physician, I thought I would have to put my bird photography hobby on hold. Much to my surprise, then, I found a bird photographer’s paradise in the middle of a war-torn desert. During my nine-month tour, I was able to photograph 110 species of birds at the base—often from just several meters away.

Of special interest were several small drainage ponds on the base. The setting wasn’t especially “natural,” and I photographed numerous birds perched on barbed wire and military equipment. Nonetheless, the beauty of the birds there was a stark and welcome contrast to the war. I was unable to bring my long lenses and tripod, but a Nikon 200-400 lens and a teleconverter were adequate due to the tameness of the birds.

When I arrived in Iraq in October, I was greeted by relatively cool 106-degree weather. I was not surprised to see Crested Larks with raised head tufts running all over post. On one of my visits to the little pond where we get our bathing water from the Euphrates River, I noted a medium-sized black-and-white bird hovering over the water. In my frequent subsequent visits, I realized that they were apparently a family group of five Pied Kingfishers. These delightful birds are gratifyingly approachable and are decidedly large for kingfishers. Their hunting behavior—hovering over the water and plunging in to get small fish—provided me with hours of entertaining and challenging photography. On several occasions, three or four kingfishers tried to land on the same “No Swimming” sign; several short squabbles ensued. On one occasion in the spring of 2008, a beautiful White-throated Kingfisher (p. 42) was sitting on the post usually occupied by the male Pied Kingfisher. This was the only time I saw this azure-winged brown beauty.

More generally, that spring of 2008 brought an incredible variety of migrating birds. I was able to get superb close-up views of many aquatic species that migrate through Europe. In all my tens of thousands of miles of driving around Europe, I never got so close to the birds as I did in Iraq. I am not sure why the Iraqi birds are so tame, but I suspect that part of the reason is that in the war zone they have a safe haven from all the hunters. One evening, I was watching hundreds of acrobatic Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters (pp. 42–43) chasing insects directly over my head. As I watched, two very large birds flew overhead and
One of the chief appeals of the hobby of birding is that it can be practiced anywhere. Some of the most improbable of places—huge cities, austere deserts, and arctic tundra—constantly surprise us with their bounteous birdlife. In this article and photo essay, a U.S. Army physician stationed at Tallil Airbase tells of his surprise at discovering the remarkable diversity of birds to be found in the midst of the Iraq War. These Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) were part of a flock of six that visited the airbase for several days, creating a fair bit of excitement for the soldiers stationed there. 14 March 2008.

All photos were taken October 2007—June 2008 at Tallil Airbase, a military installation in southern Iraq.

All photos by © Thomas Dove.

The Greater Flamingos (this page). The birds stayed for several days before moving on. A month later, six more flamingos allowed very close views. I played tour guide to quite a few soldiers in my unit, as no one would believe that flamingos were actually on a military base in the middle of Iraq.

Another favorite photo subject was the shrikes (pp. 44–45). In Europe, these birds are very shy around me, and I have not gotten many good views despite multiple attempts. In Iraq, though, I was able to photograph five species of shrikes within a 400-meter radius. In fact, all five had been in one particular tree at one time or another. The birds frequently allowed me to get within three or four meters. I hardly even bothered to point my camera at the posing Red-backed Shrikes. During an earlier stint in Germany, I was privileged to see Red-backed Shrikes on a few occasions. I frequently traveled more than an hour to an orchard where I knew they were located. Unfortunately, they flew away long before I had a chance for a photo. In Iraq, they were propped up in perfect poses, allowing me dozens of close-range images. They were one of my favorite birds until I watched one viciously taking apart a young bird. I will find a new favorite.

The Spur-winged Plover (p. 43) is a large brown-and-white plover that is usually shy. Two of them, however, let me approach quite closely. It was then that I observed three eggs in a shallow depression in the clay. The eggs soon hatched, and the chicks were already searching on their own for insects 6–12 hours after hatching. Although two of the chicks did not survive, one did just fine. It was interesting to watch the parents stay a considerable distance away.
distance from the young chicks—so as not to attract predators. The adults eventually became accustomed to my presence, and they eventually stopped calling every time I would approach.

Other shorebirds that breed on the base include Black-winged Stilt (p. 43) and Kentish (Snowy) Plover. The chicks soon yearn for independence and stop responding to the admonishing chirps of the adults. Only in their first few days do they hide under the breast feathers of the adults. Quite unafraid, they provided excellent photo ops, although I always maintained sufficient distance for the birds to go about their business without having to keep an eye on me.

Not many soldiers came to my little birding oasis, but there must be enough human activity that the birds are well habituated. Dozens of Little Grebes swam in the water, but they tended to be quite shy. It was fascinating to watch three or four young grebe chicks jump onto their mother’s back.

Many bird species occurred regularly in good numbers, but others, like this White-throated Kingfisher (Halcyon smyrnensis), were one-day wonders. 30 March 2008.

Flocks of hundreds of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters (Merops persicus) enlivened the airbase, and they frequently engaged in interesting behaviors. Here, one adult coughs up a bug ball, while the other seems to avert its glance. 16 March 2008.
when they sensed danger. During the winter months, there were hundreds of ducks, including Northern Shoveler and Common (Green-winged) Teal.

An abundance of warblers occupied the extensive reed beds bordering several of the ponds. However, the Old World warblers are unlike the extremely colorful American species. Most of the European and Middle Eastern species seem to be variations of brown and gray with some white over the eye. With the help of several of my birding colleagues in the United States and Europe, I have identified at least eight species of warblers from among my photos from the Tallil Airbase. Some, like the Lesser Whitethroat (p. 46) in the genus Sylvia, were merely difficult to identify. Others, like the Upcher’s Warbler (p. 46) in the genus Hippolais, were epically difficult to identify, with bird identification experts from around the world engaged in online discussion about my photos! The warblers tend-

Several species of shorebirds bred right on Tallil Airbase and provided great opportunities for close-up study of their breeding biology.


BIRDING IN IRAQ

Birds tend to congregate in a group of scrubby pine trees with clouds of insects serving as food. They seemed oblivious to my presence and allowed me to click away to my heart’s content. What I was really hoping for was a photo of the endangered Basra Reed-Warbler, and—who knows?—maybe I’ll even find that there’s a photo of one lurking somewhere in my photographic archives.

Not all passerines are as difficult to identify to species as the Old World warblers. There were Yellow Wagtails (p. 47) around the base, for example, and they were unmistakable. Especially stunning were the males of the distinctive subspecies *feldegg*—easily the most beautiful of the dozen or more races of the Yellow Wagtail.

Another species I grew quite fond of...
is the Ruff (p. 47). I first started to notice this species in late February. In Europe, I traveled to Hungary to photograph them hundreds of yards away. In Iraq, they allowed me to get within six meters, and I got to observe the males molt into their extraordinary breeding plumage. The whites, browns, and blacks of their summer coats are remarkable. Unfortunately, I was not lucky enough to see any of them displaying on their communal breeding grounds, called leks. I will have to travel to northern Europe to see this spectacle.

Perhaps the most amazing sight from my time in Iraq was that of a large flock of White-winged Terns (p. 49) skimming over the water to feed. This amazing show happened eight meters from where I was poised with
my trusty Nikon. Their flight style was languid yet effortless, and they seemed to be in constant pursuit of large flying insects.

Daily during the spring migration, a Common Snipe (p. 48) sat contentedly in almost the same spot, confident I couldn’t see it. Occasionally the bird flew. Once, the snipe decided to parade around, oblivious to my presence. The bird then opened its beak and demonstrated an amazing flexibility at the tip of the beak. I had seen this beak-flexing only once before—on a Long-billed Dowitcher that I photographed in Hawaii.

Even the usually shy Little Bittern let me walk around the tree in which it was perched. It was as if the bird wanted to present me with the best angle for a photo. Finally, I left the bird peacefully in the tree where it was trying to look like a branch.

The robins finally came around the

Numerous species of Old World warblers passed through the airbase on spring migration. Many of them presented substantial identification challenges for the author!

For more photos of difficult warblers from Tallil Airbase, please see the WebExtra <aba.org/birding/v40n6p46w1.pdf> that accompanies this article. You will have an opportunity to join in an online discussion of the identification of challenging Hippolais and Acrocephalus warblers from southern Iraq.
end of May. They are not the big, orange-breasted “robins” I grew up with, but rather are Rufous Bush-Robins. They are drab and grayish tan overall, but the tail is bright reddish-brown and constantly flicked upward. The Rufous Bush-Robins allowed close approach, and they were enjoyable to watch. By the end of May, most of the warblers were gone, along with the Ruffs and other sandpipers and raptors.

I saw a few raptors. Most were passing through on migration. A Long-legged Buzzard frequently spooked the gulls in the afternoons. This is a large bird, and it is one of the few species that didn’t allow me to get especially close.

Sandgrouse reside in Iraq, and they came to the ponds to drink. I admired

The Yellow Wagtail (Motacilla flava) exhibits extensive geographic variation throughout its Nearctic breeding range. The feldegg subspecies, which occurs at Tallil Airbase, is especially stunning. 19 April 2008.

Like so many birds at Tallil Airbase, this Ruff (Philomachus pugnax) allowed extremely close approach. Ironically, this active military installation provided essential refuge to many bird species in southern Iraq, a region in which heavy hunting pressure persists to this day. 28 February 2008.
the Spotted Sandgrouse, but the colors and contrasts on the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were remarkable. I didn’t find a good way to sneak up on them, and they remained very wary. On several occasions, though, I was able to photograph them in flight. A special moment came when I saw a small flock of endangered Marbled Teal accompanied by a lone Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (p. 50). They flew straight over, and I managed to capture this rare conjunction on film.

My tour in Iraq has ended, and I am back in Germany searching for Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers in the lush, green forests of that country. I have mixed feelings about having left Iraq. It was good to leave, on the one hand, be-
cause I have a wonderful wife whom I missed very much, and I needed to resume my practice of cardiology. On the other hand, I worked with a great group of soldiers and friends in Iraq. It was also a privilege to collaborate with a group of resident doctors at a local hospital. They proved to be a wonderfully warm, bright, dedicated team of young physicians. We became close friends, and I do miss them. They do an amazing job despite very challenging conditions. The obstacles they have overcome to obtain a medical education in Iraq over the past five years are remarkable. I salute them, and I believe the future of Iraqi medical care is in good hands.

I also left behind the best birding spot I have ever visited. I have always been struck by the capacity of birds to surprise us—in my case,
If there is a lesson to be learned from birding on an active airbase in the middle of a war, it is, “Always expect the unexpected.” On that note, this unexpected tandem of a Marbled Teal (Marmaronetta angustirostris) and a Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (Pterocles alchata) created an unusual photo op. 1 June 2008.

in the forests of Germany, the mountains of Hawaii, the suburbs of Long Island, and elsewhere. More than anywhere else, though, that lesson was driven home at the Tallil Airbase. Despite the anxiety of being at war, there were moments of calm, solitude, and loveliness at this most unexpected of birding hotspots.

Acknowledgments
I very much appreciate the patience of Mike Ord and Frank Gröhl. These two experienced birders and friends of mine have mentored me in the field and were kind enough to help identify the birds in my photos.