Kuwait's Jahra Pool Reserve under threat

The Jahra Pool Reserve, a listed site in *Important Bird Areas of the Middle East* (M I Evans, 1994) is Kuwait's only freshwater wetland, and owes its existence to waste-water outflow from the nearby town. In a country entirely lacking in rivers and natural, standing fresh water it is not surprising that the site is ornithologically important, a claim supported by the fact that over 70% of the 300+ species on the Kuwait List have been recorded there. The Reserve comprises 250 hectares of coastal subkha lying between the town of Jahra and the sea. About 70 hectares are fenced in to offer protection to the main pool (some four or five hectares of open, shallow water) and dense reed beds, which extend out across a small delta to the sea.

Since Kuwait's liberation from Iraqi occupation early in 1991 the reserve has received a fair degree of protection, initially and unintentionally from military security patrols, which discouraged anyone from venturing into the area, and subsequently by the Environment Protection Council's employment of guards on the site. The great reduction in the amount of shooting and disturbance resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of water birds wintering at the Pool and two new breeding records for Kuwait. Little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficolis* and black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* bred in the summers of 1993 and 1994. Moreover, up to five purple gallinules *Porphyrio porphyrio* have been present since first seen by Thomas Spencer and Bryon Wright on 9 September 1992. I suspect that its occurrence on the Reserve may well be the result of the massive destruction of the marshes in southern Iraq. Satellite assessments indicate that close to half the marshlands have now been drained by the Iraqi army.

In 1992 the Kuwait Oil Company inflicted serious and persisting damage on the reserve, when it bulldozed away the east and west gates to widen and consolidate a road across the site. Since then hunters and others have had a route across the marshes, which is both sound and free from the hazards of unexploded ordinance, into the heart of the Reserve. Apparently the Oil Company ignored the protected status of the site and made no attempt to consult with the Environment Protection Council (EPC) at any time.

Since the winter of 1991-92 a more serious and potentially fatal threat to the existence of the Jahra Pool Reserve has arisen. During that winter and the one following, unusually heavy rains caused flooding of the subkha and adjacent parts of Jahra town, which resulted in subsidence damage to buildings and roads. Understandably, this prompted the decision by engineers of the relevant ministries to construct an extensive system of enormous drains to take storm-water away directly into the sea. The new drains cross the reserve and have been under construction since the early part of this year. Unfortunately, all of the engineering plant (stores hangars, cement/gravel hoppers, workshops etc) and portakabins for site offices and accommodation have been located within the fenced area. Whilst it is to be hoped that the damage caused thereby will be temporary and reversible, the fate of a large portion of the subkha is uncertain. The spoil from the main ditch, estimated to exceed 20,000 m³, has been spread and compacted onto the adjacent subkha, obliterating its vegetation and raising the surface level by 0.3-0.5 metres.

However, most damaging of all has been the decision to divert into one of the main drains the very outflow that gives rise to the Pool itself. An alarming and depressing aspect of the scheme was that once again the protected status of the reserve was ignored, with the EPC learning of the threat only after the drainage project has been approved.

To ensure the continued existence of the Jahra Pool the EPC has therefore been forced to seek an undertaking from the ministry to provide an alternative supply of fresh water. It is understood that such an undertaking has been provisionally agreed and water could be piped from a preliminary treatment plant more than a kilometre away. How readily financial approval will be forthcoming for this rather costly solution is questionable and a cause for serious concern, given the Government's current need to severely restrict public spending. Newspapers regularly report on the gloom in Kuwait's civil engineering industry resulting from Government cut-backs, so it is difficult to envisage any priority being given to the Reserve issue. That the problem need never have arisen if the EPC had been consulted at the outset is now beside the point: the Council will need all the encouragement and support that it can muster to preserve this listed important bird area.

Prof C W T Pilcher, Faculty of Medicine, PO Box 24923, Safat, Kuwait.

ABBA and Phoenix notes and notices:

Donations received

Very welcome donations to the ABBA project have been received during 1994 from the Riyadh Natural History Society (£85) and Derek Harvey, Yemen (£25).

Keep sending in the records

Bound into the middle pages of this issue will be found a reduced sized copy of the instructions to contributors, to the project, the standard report form and an example of a completed form. Contributors and potential contributors who do not have a current set of these forms should carefully remove the forms and use them to submit records. Please make enough copies of the report form for your likely use. If you have the facilities please enlarge back to A4 size. Unfortunately space does not permit the reproduction of the current list of Arabian breeding birds, (the Form 2 mentioned in the instructions) which contains the species code. Please write in if you would like a copy of this list of breeding birds and their codes or indeed if you need a supply of A4 sized report forms. The species number is obviously important for the record to get onto the database but do not let not having the number stop you from sending in reports, leave the species code space on the form blank, a number can be added to the form at the office before the