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THE FIRST OBSERVATION OF THE BANK MYNA *ACRIDOTHERES GINGINIANUS* (LATHAM, 1790) (FAMILY: STURNIDAE, CLASS: AVES) IN THE WILD IN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT:

The Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* (Latham, 1790) is a member of the *Acridotheres* Genus of the Family Sturnidae (Passeriformes). This species spreads within the northern parts of South Asia around or close to the human settlements with recent expanding towards southern India. It can be distinguished from its analogous Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* of the same Genus, which has been observed for the first time in Iraq at 1997, mainly by the orange skin patch around the eye with some other key morphological features. Since it was observed for the first time in Iraq in the bird-markets at 2001, some individuals of Bank Myna have been occasionally found in the cages in five districts. The first records for this species in the wild in Iraq were represented by unconfirmed observations in the wild at 2005 and 2008 due to the lack of documentation. This paper documents the first confirmed observation of the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* for Iraq.

KEYWORDS: *Bank Myna, Acridotheres ginginianus, Common Myna, tristis, Iraq, Alien Species*

1. Introduction

Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* belongs to Phylum: Chordata, Class: Aves, Order: Passeriformes, Family: Sturnidae, Genus: *Acridotheres*, Species: *ginginianus* (Ali and Ripley, 1983). Generally Bank Myna measures look like the Common Myna, become fully housebroken.

This species occurs in the Indian subcontinent from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal through India west to Pakistan and there is an ancient record of the species in southeastern Afghanistan (ORL, 2017). It is known to do some nomadic or local migrations (Ali, 2002).

Within the Middle East, the species is not a native and it is not a local species in the Middle East, the breeding populations in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are believed to have originated from escaped cage-birds (Porter & Aspinall, 2010). This species has also been mentioned from Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Iran (ORL, 2017; ABRAHAM et al., 2018)

Everywhere in its native territory it can be seen searching for insects and left-over food (Jior et al., 1995). In its natural range, Bank Myna is usually found together with Common Myna, but have slightly smaller and softer voice than that of Common Myna. The later species has already been recorded in Iraq (Salim, 1998).

As part of the similar case with other Myna species, Bank Myna is considered alien species in many countries including Iraq just like the case with Common Myna and Pied Myna (Abed and Salim, 2019). The introduction of alien species is one of the main reasons for extinction of

many of the local species all over the world (Primack, 1993; Hunter, 1996; Foin et al., 1998). Starlings and mynas of the family Sturnidae are birds of enormous dispersion because of human insertion. Some species because they imitate human speech were submitted as pets, while others were to fight insects or for other reasons (Long, 1984; Lever, 1987).

2. Methodologies

Firstly, the IOCN (Iraqi Organization for Conservation of Nature) team has adopted a programme of recording the birds found in the cages that has started at 2000 by counting and checking the wild birds in captivity. This method was not only dedicated to investigate the status of the Bank Myna, yet it included all of the wild birds kept in the cages by the bird-keepers in the different bird markets. This method has covered various bird markets in Iraq in different Districts (Baghdad, Sulaimaniya, Erbil, Najaf, Qadissiya, Wassit, Muthanna, Thi-Qar, Missan, and Basra).

The rhythm of the visits to the markets was not regular as it might be conducted once a year, biannual, seasonally, or sometimes monthly. Each visit, IOCN team was recording the number of the wild bird species in the cages and the number of each species found during the visit, and collect as much reliable info as possible. The records of the visits are kept in the IOCN records and are available for any request for information for research or conservation purposes.

The second methodology was by the direct observation during conducting the field surveys by the IOCN team. Similar to the previous methodology, this methodology was not only dedicated to search for the Bank Myna. Both researchers took part in the field surveys that were conducted in various areas in Iraq aiming at knowing more the status of the birds in different

areas and habitats in Iraq. The surveys where the Bank Myna has been found (*subject of the current paper*) were part of these country-level surveys.

3. Results and Discussion

The Early and Current Observations of Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in captivity in Iraq

Bank Myna has been found more than one time in the captivity in the bird markets in different districts in Iraq. The first individual that has been found in captivity was an individual in a cage in a bird market in Baghdad at 2001. The source where the bird has been brought from was not up to a reliable level of certainty. The keeper claimed that this individual has been hunted in one of Ba'quba orchards in Dyala, central-east Iraq, and no more info were given.

The second observation of Bank Myna in captivity was five years later, at 2006 in Baghdad. This might not be due to the absence of the Bank Mynah in the captivity, but due to the lack of the intensive surveys in the bird markets in Iraq. As regards 2006 observation, it has been claimed by the keeper that the bird was brought from outside the country, and this claim was not supported by any clue.

The third observation for the Bank mynah in captivity was for two individuals that were in a cage found in Sulaimaniya bird market at 2014. The birds were mixed with some Common Myna individuals in the same cage. The keeper of the birds claimed that he brought the birds (*of both species*) from Baghdad bird market. The keeper has also reported that it was not the first time to bring the Bank Myna birds and sell them in Sulaimaniya.

At 2016, two Bank Myna individuals were found in a cage in a bird market in Basra. Same as above, the keeper did not mention the source of these birds. At the same year, 2016, the team has found an individual in a cage in the bird market in Najaf. The keeper has reported that this bird has been collected from the nearby orchards in Bahr Al-Najaf date palms area. This claim supports the fact of the presence of the Bank Myna in this specific area where the team was able to find an individual in these gardens (*see the observations in the wild below*).

At 2017, the team has found an individual in captivity in Basra bird market. This individual was not in good condition where the keeper has claimed that it was netted in the dense date palm orchards of Abu Al-Khaseeb area south of Basra city. This area was the habitat where the first Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* was found in Iraq more than couple of decade ago where it has established their breeding grounds and became one of the common cage birds in Iraq (Salim, 1998; Salim and Abed, 2017).

The First Confirmed Observations of the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in the Wild

The first records of the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in the wild in Iraq were consist of only ~~three~~ observations. During fieldwork in Bahr Al-Najaf area at April 2005, within the intensive area of the date-palm

orchards to the west and southwest of Najaf city (Fig.1) an individual Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* was observed by M.S. perching on a date palm leaf that was thought to be the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, but after close check, it became clear that this bird was the Bank Myna, but the observer was not able to take a photo of it before it disappear inside the fenced farms.



Figure.1: shows the Date-palm orchards in Bahr Al-Najaf where the 1st Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* was found in the field in Iraq

The second observation for the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in the wild was at spring 2008 where an individual found by IOCN team in Shamiya sub-district orchards where it was observed perching on an electricity cable at an agricultural area with rural houses. The bird left its place heading to the depth of the fields once the team has reversed to take a picture of it. It was easily identified by the key features of the Bank Myna, mainly by the orange patch and the coloration of the body that's different from the Common Myna that might be found (*and breed*) at the same area (IOCN, Pers. Comm.).

As for the third observation, the key subject of the current paper, during the 2nd ringing camp held in an orchards close to Diwaniya city area that aimed at studying the migrant Passerines and other important species within Southern Iraq area, and while preparing to finish the working day at the 18th of May, 2017, S.A. was walking around watching the birds around the camping site, then he has found a greyish bird of Starling-size foraging on the ground within agricultural area at the coordinates (31 57 55 N, 44 56 05 E). He recognized that the bird was not a Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, because it is unusual to find the Starling this time of the year, however, IOCN has acquired already some summer observations of the Starling in Dalmaj area, which is rarely happened record within southern Iraq (IOCN, 2017, Unpublished internal report). After careful check through binoculars, it appeared the observed bird was a Myna, where it was thought to be Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* that gets in expansion and has established breeding grounds since it was recorded for the first time at 1998 (Salim, 1998). After checking the photo, it became clear that the observed bird was Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus*, and this observation was the first confirmed record of this species for Iraq.

After conducting thorough discussion among the IOCN team members, it has been agreed that observing the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in the wild was not unexpected based on the number of the observations in the bird markets, and based on the observations of the species around Iraq. The Bank

Myna Acridotheres ginginianus has been observed in Iran, Kuwait (and the rest of the Gulf States), and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (ORL. 2017), where most, if not all of the birds found in the wild were considered as escaped birds from the cages (Porter & Aspinall 2010; Ruey, 2001).



Figure 2: the location where the first confirmed Bank Myna was observed in the wild in Iraq.



Figure 3: Bank Myna foraging in the field.

Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* was not listed by Allouse 53 and 62, and Salim *et. al.* 2006 and 2012 as an Iraqi birds. Also, the current biodiversity surveys that were conducted intensively since 2005 until recently by different institutions and teams did not mention any record for the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* in the wild in Iraq; so, based on the given information and references, the current paper confirmed the first record of the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* for the Iraqi bird checklist.

It can be concluded that the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* occurs in Iraq in the wild, and it prefers the orchards landscape (mainly the date-palm orchards). All of the Bank Mynas found in the wild in Iraq were not far from the rural houses and the rural community settlements; however, no birds were found at dry or arid areas, and this might illustrates the preferred habitat for this species in Iraq. Like the case with the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* that was recorded from Abu Al-Khaseeb area in Basra for the first time for Iraq at 1998, the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus* might start in establishing their breeding grounds in Iraq due to the availability of the suitable habitats; however, we don't predict that it will be as the numbers of the expanding Common Myna in Iraq recently (Salim, 2006). The case and even the expected numbers might be similar with the recently-recorded Pied Myna *Gracupica contra*; however, the later might have less chances in spreading and breeding like the case with the Common Myna (Salim and Abed, 2019).

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