necessary and complementary: the conservation of species, sites, and ecosystems. The IBA book is designed as an aid to the second approach, site conservation. For many countries in the Middle East, a large amount of information has accumulated regarding which birds occur at which sites, but this is distributed within many different books, journals, note-books and other even more arcane sources, often unpublished or only available with difficulty. The aim of the IBA project was to sort through this huge and unmanageable mass of information, so as to come up with a clear and up to date picture of the priorities for site conservation in the Middle East, to provide guidance to all people and agencies planning to take actions to conserve birds and other wildlife in the region. The project aimed to answer questions such as: which are the most important sites, why are they important, where are they, which ones are safe for the moment and which are immediately threatened, and so on.

But how does one choose which are the most “important” sites for birds, or decide that a site is “not important”, in a way that can be accepted by all parties? This is partly a question of scale, and BirdLife International decided that its role was to identify and list only those sites which were important on a regional (Middle Eastern) or global level, excluding those sites which were important at a local or national level.

After consultations in the region, sites were considered “important” if they supported species threatened with global extinction (Red Data Book species) or with extinction in the Middle East, or if they supported particularly large numbers of a species (usually waterfowl or seabirds, since these show the greatest tendency to congregate at sites), or if they supported particularly good numbers of Middle Eastern ‘endemic’ birds, i.e. those species whose world populations are restricted to the Middle East and for which the Middle Eastern countries therefore have most responsibility for preserving, in any contribution to maintaining global biodiversity.

BirdLife International wanted this to be more than a mere desk study - by putting responsibility for the data collection into the hands of conservationists living and working in-country, wherever possible, it was intended that these people, at the sharp end of conservation action in the region, would be more likely to feel that the book was ‘theirs’ and to actually use it in taking action to conserve the most vulnerable sites in the region. In the event, more than 65 people in the Middle East contributed details on 391 Important Bird Areas, ranging from staff of wildlife reserves to government scientists, and from amateur bird watchers to...
Legal protection of, and threats against, Important Bird Areas of different habitats (from Important Bird Areas in the Middle East).

Some of the sites stick particularly in my memory, even though I haven’t visited them. The ice-age refuge of Shallal ad-Dahna, high in the Asir mountains of Saudi Arabia, with its juniper woodland, permanent streams and relict populations of northern, temperate zone animals such as the magpie. Or the rocky, monsoon lashed coast of southern Oman with its unique cold water up welling offshore, which supports kelp beds, abalones and possibly even breeding humpback whales - sounding more like northern California than Arabia.

Publication of Important Bird Areas in the Middle East should add further emphasis to the efforts already underway throughout the region to conserve the natural heritage of the Middle East.