

Birding Tunisia—off the beaten track

Mark Cocker

Observer les oiseaux en Tunisie—en dehors des sentiers battus. La plupart des sites mentionnés dans les rapports de visites ornithologiques privées en Tunisie se situent dans la région touristique du nord-est, autour des villes de Hammamet et de Sousse. Les données concernant ces sites étant facilement accessibles, l'auteur préfère attirer l'attention sur des sites intéressants du point de vue ornithologique qui sont peu visités et qui pourraient mériter des investigations complémentaires. Une dizaine de sites, situés dans le nord et le sud du pays, sont ainsi présentés.

The main purposes of this article are, first, to act as a brief reminder of the high-quality birding in this diverse, readily accessible and fascinating country, and, second, to highlight a number of less-visited locations which may well deserve further investigation. I should also point out that the article is written from the perspective of a non-resident (mainly based on a few personal visits) and is aimed largely at visiting ABC members. I trust native Tunisian members will forgive an intrusion on their 'territory', and at least enjoy the piece as a restatement of something they already well appreciate—Tunisia is a great place to watch birds.

Tunisia as a birding destination—a brief overview

Tunisia is a fraction over 160,000 km² (a little larger than England and Wales combined) and contains a high diversity of landscapes and habitats in a relatively short distance. It has a long coastline on the southern shore of the Mediterranean and a long narrowing 'wedge' of territory reaching into the Sahara desert almost to 30°N. Squeezed between two large and presently little-visited Islamic republics—Algeria to the west and Libya to the east—Tunisia also has long traditions of political stability and cultural tolerance. An important tourist industry has thrived for decades and the Tunisian people's universal courtesy to foreigners is extraordinary. Although frequent police road checkpoints are a minor irritation, tourists are not a high priority and the police will only occasionally stop and ask for identification and car-hire documents.

As a birding destination, the country has perhaps been overshadowed by Morocco, which is almost three times the size, has a far larger

altitudinal range (owing to the presence of the Atlas Mountains) and, as a consequence, a more varied avifauna, as well as reliable sites for some charismatic or rare North African birds, but Tunisia has several compensatory merits. It is remarkably compact (for example, pristine desert habitats can be reached in just half a day's drive from the main airport); it is well served by an excellent road network; English and French are widely spoken and there is a broad range of hotels, restaurants and other amenities even in some of the most remote spots; hire cars are widely available and apparently decreasing in cost. Finally, the bias shown by birders towards Morocco means that visitors to Tunisia have an opportunity to make valuable contributions to its national ornithology. There is a flourishing and highly active society, Association 'Les Amis des Oiseaux', the BirdLife International partner organisation, and anyone visiting Tunisia is encouraged to contact them and submit their ornithological records (Ariana Center—Bureau C 209, Avenue 18 Janvier 1952, 2080 Ariana, Tunisia, tel./fax: +216 71 717 860, e-mail: aao.bird@planet.tn).

Northern Tunisia

'Tourist' Tunisia largely lies on the north-east coast and is centred on the cities of Hammamet and Sousse. As a consequence, many of the bird sites listed in the informal body of privately printed reports (available from Foreign Birdwatching Reports and Information Service; see *Bull. ABC* 10: 36) are in this area. The aim here is not to repeat these readily accessible site details, but to highlight localities that are less well known or that have possibly been overlooked altogether.

Sidi Jedidi

There is a small relatively new and bird-rich barrage immediately west of the village of Sidi Jedidi. Although not marked on Michelin map no. 956 for the country, it is easily found on a minor road that leaves Hammamet and heads almost due west towards the larger town of Zaghuan. It can be reached in *c.*20-minutes drive from Hammamet. The roughly 'L' shaped waterbody is readily viewable from the road that runs along its southern edge or from a raised dam on its east side.

It has been known for at least ten years as a wintering site for two globally threatened wildfowl, **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca* and **White-headed Duck** *Oxyura leucocephala* (Fig. 5), and detailed counts in October 2003 indicated that the barrage is increasing in importance for wetland birds. There were at least 1,700 individuals of seven species, including **Ferruginous Duck** (235), **White-headed Duck** (71), **Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (71), **Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope* (70), **Northern Shoveler** *A. clypeata* (98), **Common Pochard** *A. ferina* (406), and **Common Coot** *Fulica atra* (864). Counts at the same site on 23 January 2003 by a Slender-billed Curlew survey team produced a total for the same seven species of just 125 birds (Azafzaf & Feltrup-Azafzaf 2003), which suggests that wildfowl populations may well be highly seasonal. Nevertheless, the October counts for Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks are amongst the highest for any Tunisian wetland and underscore the site's potential importance. White-headed Ducks were also seen there in May 2004, which may indicate that there is a small breeding population.

Other noteworthy sightings in the wetland habitats include migrant **Squacco** *Ardeola ralloides* and **Purple Herons** *Ardea purpurea*, **Marbled Duck** *Marmaronetta angustirostris*, breeding **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* and a single record of **Purple Swamphen** *Porphyrio porphyrio* (February 2001). There is a high steep ridge of exposed rock that runs alongside the lake and almost through the village of Sidi Jedidi. In parts it is covered in open, goat-grazed pinewoods and amongst these and on the more exposed rocky outcrops are breeding **Thekla Larks** *Galerida theklae*, **Black**

Wheatears *Oenanthe leucura*, as well as the beautiful North African endemic **Moussier's Redstart** *Phoenicurus moussieri*, and **Blue Rock Thrushes** *Monticola solitarius*. Both **Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus* and **Lanner Falcon** *Falco biarmicus* are regular above and around the lake.

Barrage Oued R'mel

This larger and highly promising wetland (Figs. 1–2) lies *c.*15 km west of Sidi Jedidi along the Zaghuan road and is about a 40-minute drive from Hammamet. It is reached by driving *c.*2 km along a small south-running tarmac road that leaves the main route in the village of Ain Saboune. Where the track reaches the water's edge an old bridge offers a good vantage over the lake and its wet margins. The lake holds significant numbers of wintering wildfowl and both **Ferruginous** and **White-headed Duck** remain in spring, suggesting that these species may breed. In addition, it attracts a range of migrant waterbirds like **Great Egret** *Egretta alba*, **Purple and Squacco Herons**, **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus*, **Gull-billed Tern** *Gelochelidon nilotica* (also a possible breeder) and **Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger*.

Thuburbo Maius Marsh

This wetland, whose real name I have been unable to locate, lies near the ancient Roman ruins of Thuburbo Maius, on either side of the C28 road between the towns of El Fahs and Mejez El Bab, 58 km south-west of Tunis. The most productive part of the marsh is *c.*10 km north-west of Thuburbo Maius on the north side of the C28 and consists of a large shallow weed-fringed freshwater lagoon. Approximately 3 km further west (and south of the C28) is a very large saline pan. This huge expanse can be approached from a badly rutted tarmac road that runs south off the C28 from a crossroads where the sign indicates 32 km to Mejez el Baba and 14 km to El Fahs. The saltpan is rather inaccessible and in three visits I observed only flocks of several hundred **Greater Flamingos** *Phoenicopterus ruber*. However, given that in October 2003 there were *c.*7,000 birds in total in the area, the pan may well be an important feeding area, whilst the entire site may be of national importance for the species.

The most productive part of the complex is the freshwater pool north of the road, which is easily viewed from beside the C28. It appears to be an important stopover for spring and autumn migrant waders and other wetland birds including **Marbled Duck** (in May 2004), **Common Crane** *Grus grus*, **Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus*, **Pied Avocet** *Avocetta recurvirostris*, **Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*, **Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea*, **Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus*, **Black, White-winged** *C. leucopterus* and **Whiskered Terns** *C. hybrida*. **Red-footed Falcon** *F. vespertinus* and **Lanner** were also seen there in May 2004, and a notable sighting in February 2001 was a flock of 25 wintering **Eurasian Dotterel** *Charadrius morinellus*.

El Feidja National Park

Tunisia has very little true montane habitat (Djebel Chambi, near the town of Kasserine in central Tunisia, is the tallest peak at just 1,544 m), but some of the best forest, dominated by *Quercus suber* and *Q. canariensis* (Amari & Azafzaf 2001) can be found in a range of hills, which reach just 1,130 m at their summit, north of the small town of Ghardimaou, close to the Tunisian–Algerian border.

The site (Figs. 3–4) is reached by a minor road, signposted to Ain Soltane (clearly marked on Michelin map 956), which runs north-west off the main P6 route through Ghardimaou towards the Algerian frontier. The site's border location and El Feidja's status as a national park mean that access is only with permission from the park headquarters. At Feidja the local police were summoned to investigate our presence and the park authorities are largely unfamiliar with non-Tunisian birdwatchers 'armed' with suspicious-looking optical equipment. However, once permission was granted the staff was highly welcoming. Thus, with appropriate (preferably advance) permission, no birder should have any difficulty visiting this wonderful site (Le Conservateur du Parc National d'El Feidja, 816 Ghardimaou, Tunisie. Tel.: [97] 675844 and [98] 468267).

El Feidja is exceptional not only for its wider, rather bizarre atmosphere of a 'northern European' oak woodland located in Africa, but also for its suite of North African endemic bird

taxa. This includes three woodpeckers, which are all very tame, conspicuous and present at relatively high densities: **Levaillant's Woodpecker** *Picus vaillantii*, the distinctive red-chested *numidus* race of **Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major* and the isolated *leudoci* race of **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** *D. minor*. Other very common birds of the oak forest include the *mauretanicus* form of **Short-toed Treecreeper** *Certhia brachydactyla*, the distinctive *leudoci* race of **Coal Tit** *Parus ater*, which has khaki brown upperparts, lemon underparts and bright yellow cheeks, and the strikingly beautiful North African **Blue Tit** *P. caeruleus ultramarinus* (which, with other members of the North African/Canarian group of taxa within this complex, has recently been found to differ significantly in its DNA profile: Salzburger *et al.* 2002). **Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* and **Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapilla* are highly localised species in North Africa, but both are common at Feidja. We also saw the white-faced, black-crowned race of **Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius cervicalis* and found several singing **Atlas Flycatchers** *Ficedula speculigera*, which has recently been proposed as a separate species (Sætre *et al.* 2001). The woods hold high densities of Wild Boar *Sus scrofula* and their signs can be found everywhere, whilst an important project in the national park is the protection of the endemic form of the Red Deer *Cervus elaphus barbarus*. A captive-bred population is currently being developed at the park headquarters.

Beni M'tir

For visitors to El Feidja there are apparently small hotels in Ghardimaou and there are several in the larger town of Jendouba, which is only c.35 km to the east on the P6 road. However, the same suite of forest birds can be found at greater convenience near to the more northern resort town of Ain Drahem. The whole area around the latter has remnant patches of oak woodland. Some of these woods are extensive and of high quality, holding all of the birds listed for El Feidja, if not in such densities nor in so pristine and scenic a context. One such area was c.2 km along the C65 road towards the village of Beni M'tir. The turning for this road is

c.7 km south of Ain Draham off the main Ain Draham–Jendouba road (P17).

Hammam Bourguiba Valley

Another area with the complete suite of woodland birds is situated in the valley towards the small settlement of Hammam Bourguiba, c.5 km north of Ain Draham, where the valley road runs south-west off the P17 in Babouch. We explored the first 2–3 km and **Levaillant's Woodpecker** was particularly common.

Southern Tunisia

Central southern Tunisia is dominated by the Chott el Jerid, a large flat salt basin that covers 4,600 km². The peripheral oases with their natural springs, associated groves of cultivated date palm and open brackish-water pools on the edge of the desert have long been a major draw for migrant birds and birders alike. The small town of Douz is one of the main destinations and there is a suite of sites around the town productive for both desert specialities and concentrations of wetland migrants. Once again, however, I wish to draw attention to less-visited areas rather than the well-known localities.

Douz–Redjim Maatoug

The small settlement of El Hsai, c.5 km south of Douz, was formerly one of the few places in the Western Palearctic accessible by tarmac road where **Desert Sparrow** *Passer simplex* could be found (Figs. 7–8). The species has not apparently been seen for a number of years at the site and exploration of the area further south, which now comprises the Jbil National Park (Amari & Azafzaf 2001), is only possible with four-wheel-drive vehicles.

However, a good tarmac road (not always shown on maps of Tunisia) now continues along the southern edge of the Chott el Jerid to the small remote settlement of Redjim Maatoug, which is c.110 km south-west of Douz. Unlike El Hsai, which had no *Passer* concentrations, Redjim Maatoug had an extremely large House Sparrow *P. domesticus* colony involving hundreds, if not thousands of birds. It also had good stands of a desert grass, tentatively identified as awn grass *Aristida* sp., which is considered an important component of Desert Sparrow habitat (Summers-Smith 1988, Densley 1990). Given the erratic and nomadic distribution pattern of

this little-known species, the desert village may repay further investigation.

The route to Redjim Maatoug passes through a wide variety of desert landscapes, from open vegetation-free flats to bushy scrub. Most of the region's speciality birds can be seen from this road, like the beautiful and distinctive *elegans* form of **Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* (we saw a recently fledged family party feeding on a migrant **Common Redstart** *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* in Redjim Maatoug), **Desert Wheatear** *Oenanthe deserti* and **Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor*, which seems to show a marked attraction for feeding on the tarmac itself (Cocker in prep.). In May 2004 we also found **Bar-tailed Lark** *Ammomanes cinctura* and **Desert Warbler** *Sylvia nana*, both of which were nest building. **Greater Hoopoe Lark** *Alaemon alaudipes* could be heard singing and seen performing its extraordinary display flight virtually every time we stopped.

The best policy is probably to make a number of sorties off the road, wherever a notable change of landform occurs. The stretch between kilometre posts 21 to 9 km from Redjim Maatoug was particularly rewarding. We also observed a number of interesting European migrants including **Booted Eagle** *Hieraetus pennatus*, **Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus*, **Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix* and a large passage of **European Turtle Doves** *Streptopelia turtur*.

Given the highly isolated nature of the Redjim Maatoug road, visitors should ensure the car has a full tank of petrol (none is available except at Douz) and is well supplied with water. They should not drive off the tarmac unless with a properly equipped four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Chebika–Moulares

North of the large oasis palmery at Tozeur is a second smaller salt basin, the Chott el Gharsa. This is crossed by the P16 road and is well used by 'desert safari' convoys of tourists wishing to see the picturesque abandoned Berber villages of Chebika, Mides and Tameghza (also spelt Tamerza). The P16 runs north-west for c.50 km to Chebika, then turns sharply to follow the Oued Sendess to the north-east through a steep rocky valley until it reaches Tameghza, where it

is flanked to the west by barren crags. These impressive formations mark the Algerian–Tunisian border. After Tameghza the road (which becomes the C201) crosses a level plain with large areas of semi-natural grassland interspersed with cereal cultivation. The mixture of extensive arable crops and grassland continues on both sides of the road for the 18 km beyond a settlement called Redeyef and before one reaches the mining town of Moulares. This whole area is worth exploring and holds a number of North African specialities.

Chebika and environs

The gravel flats in the few kilometres both before and after the (north) turning for the Chebika palmery hold **Cream-coloured Courser**, **Red-rumped Oenanthe** *Oenanthe moesta* and **Desert Wheatears**. We also found a dead **Egyptian Nightjar** *Caprimulgus aegyptius* (Fig. 6) on the road, c.7 km before Chebika, which suggests that the area would be well worth visiting at dusk (Tozeur has many hotels and there are at least two in nearby Tameghza). There were also **Desert Ammomanes** *deserti* and **Bar-tailed Larks** in the area, as well as **House Buntings** *Emberiza striolata* and **Trumpeter Finches** *Bucanetes githagineus*. Where the road winds through a steep-sided valley we saw several **White-crowned Oenanthe** *leucopyga* and **Mourning Wheatears** *O. lugens* on the rocky slopes. The sheer gorge on the west side of the oasis also holds breeding **Alpine Tachymartitis** *melba* and **Little Swifts** *Apus affinis*. The presence of the latter is noteworthy, given its mysteriously fragmented distribution in Tunisia.

Tameghza

In Tameghza itself a side street turns south off the P16 towards the river and the so-called 'Falls'. This steep-sided valley, with its permanent water flow, associated orchards and lush vegetation, is a magnet for migrants in both spring and autumn, including **Common Cuckoo** *Cuculus canorus*, **Red-breasted Flycatcher** *Ficedula parva* and **Wood Warbler** *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*.

Redeyef–Moulares

The 18-km stretch of C201 road between these two towns is flanked by interesting higher altitude grassland, which has been widely convert-

ed for cereal production. Nevertheless c.9 km before Moulares is an area of semi-natural habitat with an interesting suite of species including **Stone-curlew** *Burhinus oedicnemus*, very high densities of breeding **Lesser Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella rufescens* with much smaller numbers of **Greater Short-toed Lark** *C. brachydactyla* and **Tawny Pipit** *Anthus campestris*. Another common breeder is **Spectacled Warbler** *Sylvia conspicillata*. **European Roller** *Coracias garrulus* may well breed here, whilst **European Turtle Dove** and **Montagu's Harrier** were both migrating through the area in spring 2004.

In October 2003 a **Dupont's Lark** *Chersophilus duponti* was seen at this site, although there was no evidence of a breeding population in May 2004. Nevertheless there are large flats covered in *Artemisia*-like scrub in the area, notably north of the C201 between Tameghza and Redeyef and off the C201 to the south-east of Moulares (i.e. en route to the other mining town of Metlaoui). The species may well breed in the area, which thus warrants much more careful exploration.

Hichem Azafzaf is one of the country's leading birders and has participated in many national census projects as well as co-authored the Tunisian chapter of *Important Bird Areas in Africa* (Amari & Azafzaf 2001). He is pleased to hear from anyone visiting the country and receive trip reports (Groupe Tunisien d'Ornithologie, 11 Rue Abou el alla el maari, Cité El Houda, 2080 Ariana, Tunisia. Tel./Fax: +216-71-701664. Mobile: +216-98-207238. E-mail: azafzaf@gnet.tn)

Captions to plate on opposite page

- Figures 1–2** Barrage Oued R'mal (Hichem Azafzaf)
Figures 3–4 El Feidja National Park / Parc National de Feidja (Hichem Azafzaf)
Figure 5 Male White-headed Duck / Erismature à tête blanche *Oxyura leucocephala* (Hichem Azafzaf)
Figure 6 Egyptian Nightjar / Engoulevent du désert *Caprimulgus aegyptius* (Hichem Azafzaf)
Figure 7 Female Desert Sparrow / Moineau blanc, femelle, *Passer simplex* (Hichem Azafzaf)
Figure 8 Male Desert Sparrow / Moineau blanc, mâle, *Passer simplex* (Hichem Azafzaf)



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8

References

- Amari, M. & Azafzaf, H. 2001. Tunisia. In Fishpool, L. D. C. & Evans, M. I. (eds.) *Important Bird Areas in Africa and Associated Islands: Priority Sites for Conservation*. Newbury: Pisces Publications & Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.
- Azafzaf, H. & Feltrup-Azafzaf, C. 2003. Slender-billed Curlew survey: preliminary report. Association 'Les Amis des Oiseaux', Groupe Tunisien d'Ornithologie.
- Cocker, M. (in prep.) Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* showing feeding attachment to desert roads. *Br. Birds*.
- Densley, M. 1990. Desert Sparrows in Morocco. *Br. Birds* 83: 195–201.
- Sætre, G.-P., Borge, T. & Moum, T. 2001. A new bird species? The taxonomic status of 'the Atlas Flycatcher' assessed from DNA sequence analysis *Ibis* 143: 494–497.
- Salzburger, W., Martens, J. & Sturmbauer, C. 2002. Paraphyly of the Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*) suggested from cytochrome *b* sequences. *Mol. Phylo. Evol.* 24: 19–25.
- Summers-Smith, D. 1988. *The Sparrows*. Calton: T. & A. D. Poyser.

The Hollies, The Street, Claxton, Norwich NR14 7AA, UK.

Masuku Lodge Choma · Zambia

On the Nkanga River Conservation Area near Choma

Six twin-bedded rondavels near the central lodge in the beautiful unspoilt bush of the NRCA, one of Zambia's important bird areas. The lodge, overlooks a dam, and is surrounded by miombo, dambo and thicket. The wide range of habitats supports a high diversity of animal and bird life. Our most recent bird count numbered 439 species.

NRCA is also an excellent place to see Zambia's only endemic bird, Chaplin's Barbet

For further details, view
www.masukulodgezambia.com or
contact 03 220225, 097 760756, or
e-mail 760756@zm.celtelplus.com