

ESSAOUIRA

9 – 20 October 2011.

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I spent a week and a half in Essaouira in mid-October 2011, the latest of a series of visits from which I have compiled a list of the birds recorded in and around the town since 2007 (see Greig-Smith 2011; Go-South Bulletin 8, 104-112). This trip was a bit different, for several reasons.

First, I had not previously been in the area during the main period of autumn migration, and therefore I hoped to see some species that I have not yet recorded in Essaouira. I travelled from London, via Marrakech, on 9 October, and returned late on 20 October, and I was able to make some bird observations on each one of 11 consecutive days, chiefly during the mornings. A total of 99 species was recorded (more than usual in my experience for a 10-day period), of which 16 are migrants new to my own Essaouira list. Of these, 13 species are also new additions to the full list of birds seen in Essaouira since 2007.

I saw several new species among the groups of waders that congregate on the Ksob river estuary, the 'Town Ponds' (on the eastern, inland side of the town), and the two Water Treatment Plants, one outside the town to the north (the 'NWTP'), and one to the south, on the bank of the estuary (the 'SWTP'). There were 5 Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) on the Town Ponds, up to 3 Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) in several locations, and a single Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) seen on two days among a group of 10-15 Redshank (*Tringa totanus*).

A Squacco Heron (*Glareola ralloides*) was first seen on the Town Ponds on 13 October, and then spent several days on the estuary. Other notable records on the river included a Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) on 15 October, two Pintail (*Anas acuta*) on 17 & 18 Oct and a male Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) on 19 & 20 Oct.

A Black-Winged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) was present on the Golf Course on 14 October. The remaining new records are of migratory passerines: Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*) were seen singly or in pairs in many places, Pied Flycatchers (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) similarly occurred singly or in pairs, mainly on the Golf Course, where Tree Pipits (*Anthus trivialis*) were seen regularly on each day I visited, and Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) occurred on several occasions. There were single records of Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*), Orphean Warbler (*Sylvia hortensis*) and Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*). I also saw a Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*) in coastal scrub on 16 October – only recorded once before in Essaouira.

The second difference to my previous visits was that I was able to spend a considerable amount of time on the Golf Course to the south of the town, at Diabat. Thanks to kind permission from the management of Golf du Mogador, I started on a programme of bird surveys on the Course and its surroundings (previously not accessible). I will continue this at different seasons during the next year or so, the aim being to assess the implications of the major changes brought about through the construction of the Golf Course, hotels and villas, and the substantial habitat change accompanying it. On one hand, this investment has created large areas of denser vegetation than naturally occurs in the forest and scrub that surrounds the area, and much of it is regularly irrigated. On the other hand, there is disturbance due to the building work, and much higher activity by people and vehicles, both for the management of the Course and visits by golfers. It is not self-evident what this means for birds. My results so far, based on standard counts on the Golf Course, and an equivalent effort in the surrounding forest, suggests that in October there was a substantially greater diversity of species

on the Course, and many types of birds were encountered with greater frequency there. Most of the migrant landbirds mentioned above were seen exclusively, or most frequently, on the Golf Course.

Finally, the weather leading up to October had been very dry, and consequently many of the shallow ponds to the east and north of the town - normally good places for waders and other waterbirds - were dried out. Even the 'North Lake', which I have previously regarded as a permanent area of open water, was completely dry. This meant that the large numbers of ducks usually seen there were concentrated on the ponds of the nearby water treatment plant, as well as appearing in small numbers on the river and the largest of the Town Ponds. The amount of rain that falls in the forthcoming winter will determine when, and how much the North Lake regains its previous status as a good site for waterbirds.

In an effort to avoid the catastrophic flooding that affected the river and estuary at the end of November last winter, major engineering work is now underway beside the bridge to Diabat, creating high protective banks and a managed river channel. This work is close to the habitual location of Essaouira's famous Western Reef Heron beside the bridge, but fortunately the bird remained there every day, and seemed quite unconcerned !

Species List

(* marks species not previously recorded in Essaouira – see Greig-Smith 2011).

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – always present on freshwater ponds

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – single birds occasionally seen on the river estuary; larger numbers on rocky shore by the harbour

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) – regularly seen in forest and scrub, beside freshwater and on the golf course, in small groups (1 – 5 birds)

***Squacco Heron** (*Ardeola ralloides*) - single bird on the Town Ponds on 13 Oct; then on the estuary on 16 and 19 Oct

Western Reef Heron (*Egretta gularis*) – single bird present on the estuary on all visits

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) – seen daily in all habitats, singly or in groups up to 25 birds

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) – single birds up to group of 5 on the river and at the NWTP

Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) – one bird on the (non-tidal) river on 15 Oct

Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) – up to 3 birds together on the estuary on all visits

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – 2 birds on the Town Ponds on 10 and 18 Oct, and up to 3 at the SWTP on 14 and 19 Oct

***Wigeon** (*Anas penelope*) – single male on the estuary on 19 and 20 Oct

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – large gathering (up to 100) on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) – 2 birds on Town Ponds on 18 Oct; also common among other ducks on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

***Pintail** (*Anas acuta*) – 1-2 birds on the estuary on 16 and 17 Oct; also present on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) – up to 100 on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

Teal (*Anas crecca*) – 1 bird on the Town Ponds on 10 Oct; also present on NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

White-Headed Duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*) – 4 birds on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

Marbled Duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*) – several dozen on the NWTP ponds on 18 Oct

***Black-Shouldered Kite** (*Elanus caeruleus*) – one bird on the Golf Course on 14 Oct, mobbed by Common Bulbuls and other small birds

Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) – single birds in forest areas on 15 and 18 Oct

Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) – 1-2 birds seen frequently, in forest, on buildings at the edge of the town, and on the Golf Course

Eleanora's Falcon (*Falco eleonora*) – seen every day, flying over all areas; congregated at a part of the river by Diabat; counts suggested that they were less frequent over the Golf Course than the forest

Barbary Partridge (*Alectoris barbara*) – groups up to 10 birds frequently flushed from cover in forest and on the Golf Course

Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) – always present on freshwater ponds; also occasionally seen on the river bank and on the tidal estuary

Coot (*Fulica atra*) – large numbers (up to many dozen) on all freshwater ponds

Black-Winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) – always present on freshwater ponds, and at both North and South Water Treatment Plants

Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – single birds sometimes present among groups of Little Ringed Plovers, on the Town Ponds and the SWTP

Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*) – very common on the estuary, river, Town Ponds and both Water Treatment Plants

Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – 3 birds on the estuary on 10 Oct, 6 on 19 Oct, 2 on 20 Oct

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) – single birds at the SWTP on 10 Oct, estuary on 16 Oct, and NWTP on 18 Oct; larger numbers on the rocky shore by the harbour

Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) – 3 birds among other waders on the Town Ponds on 10 Oct, and on the estuary on 14 Oct

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) – the commonest small wader, at NWTP and SWTP, the estuary and the Town Ponds, in groups up to 40 birds

Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) – at SWTP on 10 Oct

Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) – up to 5 birds on Town Ponds, on 10, 13 and 18 Oct; 2 on the river on 20 Oct

Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) – single birds by the harbour on 16 Oct and at the NWTP on 18 Oct

Black-Tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) – 4 birds on the Town Ponds on 10 Oct

Redshank (*Tringa totanus*) – common on the estuary, Town Ponds, SWTP and NWTP, in groups up to c. 15

***Spotted Redshank** (*Tringa erythropus*) – a single bird among a group of Redshank at the SWTP on 14 and 19 Oct

Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) – up to 6 birds regularly present on the river, estuary, and SWTP

***Wood Sandpiper** (*Tringa glareola*) – 1-3 birds on the Town Ponds and the SWTP on most visits

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – single birds on the estuary, SWTP and Town Ponds

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) – groups up to 7 birds on the river, on most visits

Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) – single birds flushed regularly at the SWTP and the Town Ponds

Black-Headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) – small groups on the estuary, from 14 -20 Oct (max 12 birds); many identified definitely as *L. ridibundus*, some immatures showed possible features of Mediterranean Gull *L. melanocephalus*, but not certainly identified

Yellow-Legged Gull (*Larus cachinnans*) – very common (many 100) on the beach, estuary, river and (in early morning only) on the Golf Course

Lesser Black-Backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) – small numbers identified within flocks of Yellow-legged Gulls

Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*) – 1-2 foraging close to the beach, on 11, 13 and 16 Oct

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) – 2 birds foraging at the harbour, 11 Oct

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*) – regularly flying over the forest and golf course, in groups up to 15

Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) – occasional sightings of single birds or small groups flying over the forest; also large flocks of Feral Pigeons within the town

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – common in all habitats

Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) – regularly seen in forest/scrub, and occasionally on the golf course, in groups up to 12 birds

Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) – single bird on the river on 15, 19 and 20 Oct, including foraging in the tidal estuary close to the beach

Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) – single birds in several parts of the Golf Course, on 12, 14, 16 and 17 Oct

Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*) – one bird in coastal scrub on 16 Oct

Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*) – regular in most open dry habitats, 1-3 birds together

Brown-Throated Sand Martin (*Riparia paludicola*) – seen daily, up to 10 birds foraging over open water; active nests discovered in river sandbanks

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – up to 20 foraging with Brown-Throated Sand Martins over Town Ponds, and smaller groups on the Golf Course

Rock Pipit (*Anthus petrosus*) – single bird at the SWTP on 12 Oct and 20 Oct

***Tree Pipit** (*Anthus trivialis*) – widely distributed around the Golf Course, usually 1 or 2 birds

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) – common in all habitats other than forest; flocks up to c. 25 birds at the SWTP, mixed with Yellow Wagtails

Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) – single bird on the river on 15 Oct; occasional birds at the SWTP among Yellow and White Wagtail flocks

Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) – common on the Golf Course and at the SWTP, flocks up to c. 25 birds

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) – single birds seen regularly on the Golf Course, and in forest

***Nightingale** (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) – a single record, in bushes on the Golf Course, on 16 Oct

Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – single birds seen on the river bank on 19 Oct, and at the edge of town on 20 Oct

Moussier's Redstart (*Phoenicurus moussieri*) – widespread throughout the forest and scrub, and on the Golf Course, generally single or paired

***Whinchat** (*Saxicola rubetra*) – single birds in scrub on 10 and 15 Oct, and 1-3 together in several parts of the Golf Course on 14, 16 and 17 Oct

Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) – regular in scrub habitats and on the Golf Course, on all days

Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – 1-3 birds recorded on most days, on the Golf Course, and in many open dry habitats, including a single bird that alighted on our roof terrace in the town!

Blackbird (*Turdus merula*) – common in all forest, scrub and Golf Course habitats

Fan-Tailed Warbler (*Cisticola juncidis*) – single birds recorded regularly, in scrub

***Reed Warbler** (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – seen in several places on the Golf Course on 14 Oct

Olivaceous Warbler (*Hippolais opaca*) – recorded occasionally in bushes at the edge of the Golf Course and in riverine scrub

Spectacled Warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – in low bushes beside the riverbank, on 16 and 20 Oct

***Whitethroat** (*Sylvia communis*) – a single record, on the Golf Course, on 14 Oct

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – seen singly or in pairs, in many places, from 14 – 20 Oct

Sardinian Warbler (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – very common in all habitats

***Orphean Warbler** (*Sylvia hortensis*) – a single record, in dry inland scrub on 15 Oct

Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – several firm sightings in low scrub; many *Phylloscopus* warblers were not observed closely enough to identify certainly

Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – seen regularly in scrub and forest, and on the Golf Course; much more abundant than Willow Warbler

***Pied Flycatcher** (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – single or pairs on many parts of the Golf Course, on 12, 14, 16 and 17 Oct; only seen once in other areas

Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) – occasional in forest and Golf Course, usually seen singly

African Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus ultramarinus*) – common in forest and on the Golf Course

Great Tit (*Parus major*) – more common than Blue Tit, seen in all forest, scrub and Golf Course habitats

Common Bulbul (*Pycnonotus barbatus*) – very common and conspicuous in all habitats

Black-Crowned Tchagra (*Tchagra senegala*) – regularly heard in forest and Golf Course; more frequently than in previous seasons

Southern Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis*) – regular in all scrub, forest and Golf Course habitats

Spotless Starling (*Sturnus unicolor*) – flocks around the town, including large roosts in trees in the town squares; also seen on the Golf Course (up to 200 birds foraging on the fairway grass)

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) – 2 birds flying over Golf Course on 14 Oct

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) – common everywhere, sometimes in flocks of several dozen

Spanish Sparrow (*Passer hispaniolensis*) – noisy flocks in scrub near the town and the riverbank

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) – common everywhere

Serin (*Serinus serinus*) – common in all wooded habitats

Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) – regularly in small flocks in scrub and forest

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) – less frequent than other finches, but locally regular in groups up to c. 12 birds in some areas of coastal scrub

Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) – regular in scrub and on the Golf Course

Cirl Bunting (*Emberiza cirlus*) – seen occasionally, usually single, in scrub and on the Golf Course

House Bunting (*Emberiza sahari*) – common within the town, and twice seen in wooded scrub around the Town Ponds