

Report of some rare birds observed in north-western Morocco between 26th & 28th May 2006

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Disponible en ligne (Available online) : 28 juin 2006

This report is based on a four-day ornithological expedition in north-western Morocco, from the 26th to the 28th May 2006. During this period, we observed some birds that are rarely recorded in the study area. This report highlights these records and, where relevant, includes descriptions of birds observed. Species that are not rarities, but that were observed outside of typical passage periods or are of conservation concern have also been included.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*

Two birds, a male and a female, were frequently seen within the same patch of bulrush *Typha spp.* in the marshes of the lower Loukkos, at a location that is directly adjacent to the town of Larache. The two birds were observed on multiple occasions during the 26th and 27th May, which is well within the species' main breeding season (Cramp 1977). Both birds were very active, frequently observed flying back and forth over the bulrushes. It is suspected that these two birds constituted a breeding pair. The species is not known to have bred in the Lower Loukkos since at least the 1970s (Thévenot *et al.* 2003).

Great White Egret *Egretta alba**

Two individuals were seen at the Ain Chouk marsh opposite the barrage de garde along the lower Loukkos on the 26th May. Five individuals were seen at the same place on the 28th May (two together and three together, all visible at once). One individual was in full breeding plumage, showing a

black bill with a yellow base and long white plumes on the back.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*

A single male was observed at the Ain Chouk marsh along the lower Loukkos on the 26th May.

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

Small numbers were present at the Ain Chouk marsh along the lower Loukkos throughout the length of our visit.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

At least six birds were present at the Boucharane marsh along the lower Loukkos throughout the length of our visit.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

One adult was seen at the mouth of Merja Zerga on the morning of the 28th May. It was sitting on the outskirts of a mixed flock of Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii*.

Description: The bird was observed for ten minutes at a distance of about 50-60m, through 10x binoculars. Legs were greenish-yellow, bill was yellow with no markings, wingtips included white windows, iris was dark, and the bird was markedly smaller than the Audouin's Gulls. Three of the observers have had plenty of experience with the species in the UK.

Marsh Owl *Asio capensis*

One bird was seen at the marshes of the lower Loukkos on the evening of the 27th May (GPS coordinates: N35°08.967' W006°17.494'). A single bird was seen at Merja Zerga during afternoon of the 28th of May. Two birds were seen at same site at the Lower Loukkos marshes on the evening of the 28th May. One bird was observed resting and hunting for about half an hour; the second bird flew out with the first bird once it flew away from the site. Both birds seemed to fight as they flew.

cf. Plain Swift *Apus cf. unicolor**

At least three birds were seen drinking at the marsh of the Lower Loukkos on the evening of the 27th May, together with a large flock of Common Swifts *Apus apus* and some Little Swifts *Apus affinis*. This allowed very close and useful comparison to the Common Swift, with both species seen at extremely close quarters. The sighting followed a day of gale force easterly winds, when the birds may have been blown into the area.

Description: Birds were between Common Swift and Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* in colouration. They were not as dark as the Common Swift, but less pale than the Pallid Swift. The mantle and primaries were uniform in colour, with none of the contrast that can be observed in the Pallid Swift. Some darker scaling could be observed in the underparts, particularly the flanks. The birds were of almost uniform, dark grey/brown colour. No white could be observed on the throat or forehead, excluding the possibility of Common and Pallid Swift. The throat was slightly paler grey in colour in all individuals. The birds seemed to be no different in size from the Common Swifts that accompanied them, and distinctly larger than the Little Swifts in the same flock. All of the individuals observed were watched for over half an hour, through 10x binoculars. The birds passed by us at extremely close quarters, often being seen at a distance of less than 10m. On two or three occasions, they passed by us so close that our binoculars were unable to focus on them. The observers have a lot of experience in the identification of Common Swifts and Pallid Swifts.

Additional observations: Although our birds clearly showed many of the distinguishing features of *Apus unicolor*, two particular discrepancies were observed between our birds and the description of the species given by the identification guides referred to (Beaman & Madge 1998; Cramp 1985; Mullarney *et al.* 1999). It is stated in the cited publications that *Apus unicolor* is slightly smaller than *Apus apus*, but that this is only visible when birds are seen in close proximity to *Apus apus*. Our birds were seen extremely well, and in very close

proximity to *Apus apus*, and no discernible difference in size was apparent. Also, the tail of *Apus unicolor* is supposed to be more forked than in *Apus apus*. Again, this was not apparent in the birds that we observed, although this feature did not receive as much attention from the observers as the birds' colouration.

It is interesting to note that Thévenot *et al.* (2003) mention that specimens are required to verify the status of the Plain Swift in Morocco, indicating that the taxon observed in Morocco may or may not necessarily be the same as is found in the Canary Islands and Madeira, where the species was until recently thought to be endemic (Mullarney *et al.* 1999). Our observations seem to emphasise a need for close examination of specimens. It would certainly be interesting to survey the area of marsh where these birds were seen drinking on a regular basis, in order to observe whether the birds drink there frequently. If so, then mist netting some individuals is a realistic possibility.

This species has so far only been observed in coastal areas of Morocco, where it seems that they are breeding (Thévenot *et al.* 2003). On early evening of the following day (*i.e.*, the 28th May) we surveyed the sea cliffs to the south of Larache, where some *Apus spp.* had been observed the previous day. On this now calm day, not a single swift was observed around or above the cliffs, or anywhere close to the coast. We had thought that these swifts might be breeding on this coast, but it seems that perhaps we were wrong. One interesting fact is that the birds were observed after extremely strong, gale force easterly winds. If this wind displaced these birds towards the Larache area, then these individuals must have been further inland. It is therefore possible that some of the mountains inland, perhaps the Rif or the Middle Atlas, may harbour a population of these birds. *Apus unicolor* is known to breed at higher altitudes than its congeners in the Canaries (Cramp 1985). Close inspection of *Apus spp.* observed all over Morocco, and not just along the coast, would prove useful in ascertaining the full extent of this taxon's range in Morocco.

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina**

One bird was observed at the same site as the cf. Plain Swifts on the 27th May. A Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* had been seen moments earlier at the same site, and this offered useful comparisons. The bird was seen during a morning following gale force easterly winds, which may have blown the bird off course. On the 14th May, four birds were ringed at Gibraltar and a fifth bird observed (GONHS records). The bird observed at Larache may have been part of this same influx.

Description: A *Hippolais* with a yellowish-brown back and yellow belly. The yellow on the belly was slightly paler, more lemon-coloured than on Melodious Warbler, and there were some small traces of white on the lower belly. The bird was visibly larger and more robust-looking than a Melodious Warbler. The pale yellow panels on the secondaries that are characteristic of this species were clearly visible on this individual. The head was more rounded than in Melodious warbler, with the head peaking above the eyes rather than behind the eyes as in Melodious warbler, which has a more Acrocephalus-like shape to the head. The primary projection, much longer than in Melodious Warbler, was quite striking. The bird was observed for about 6-8 minutes, at a distance of about ten metres, through 10x binoculars. The bird was seen very clearly, often exposing itself well on the edge of the vegetation.

Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Three birds observed at the marshes of Lower Loukkos on the 27th May, together with House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. The smaller size, brown crown and black cheek-mark were clearly observable in all individuals, which were seen at close range. Two of the birds followed a flock of House Sparrows into an unfinished building that held a colony of House Sparrows, indicating that they could be breeding within the House Sparrow colony.

House Bunting *Emberiza striolata ssp. sahari*

Common in the Medina at Tangier on the 26th May, from where the species is not reported by Thévenot *et al.* (2003), who state that the species is expanding its range north. About 20 birds were observed, including a flock of 12 individuals.

References

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Note de la Rédaction :

à la date de publication de cette note, ces observations sont en cours d'analyse par la Commission d'Homologation Marocaine.