Trip report from Lebanon
Birds & culture
12-18th May 2006
by Tomas Axén Haraldsson

During my time in Egypt I had the possibility to visit a fascinating and exciting country, Lebanon. There were several reasons for my visit. To experience some great historical sites like the excavations and temples of Baalbek and Byblos, to indulge in the famous Lebanese cooking and to have some exciting birding in this bird-wise little known country. I was hoping for species like Moustached Warbler, Upchers Warbler, Syrian Serin and Pale Rock Sparrow.

The following text is a summary of the full trip report written in Swedish that can be found on the Club 300 web.

Itinerary

May 12th    flight from Cairo to Beirut in the evening. I stayed the first four nights at hotel Mayflower in the Hamra area.

May 13th    full day guided tour to the temples of Baalbek and the ruins at Aanjar. Very impressive and fascinating, can be thoroughly recommended.

May 14th    day trip with a hiking society to the Chouf Mountains east of Beirut. Great day and some nice birds as well. An enormous traditional mezze meal in the afternoon. Checking out the nightlife of Beirut in the evening.

May 15th    visit to the excavations at Byblos/Jbeil north of Beirut. Dinner at the famous restaurant Pepe`s Fishing Club. Another excellent day.
Pretty fishing port of Jbeil with the ancient ruins of Byblos

May 16th  
birding at the IBA of Kfar Zabad and the wetland of Aamiq in the Bekaa Valley. I stayed two nights at the A Rocha project house in Aana.

May 17th  
full day out birding with Richard Prior around Aamiq and other sites in the area.

May 18th  
I returned to Beirut and spent the day checking out the city. Flight back to Cairo in the evening.

Pale Rock Sparrow, Little Bittern and Syrian Serin, inhabitants of the Bekaa Valley.

Acknowledgements

The itinerary of this trip and general planning was done via email correspondence with Nabil Khairallah from the SPNL who met with me upon arrival. I am very grateful for all his help and assistance.

The two days in Aana and the great birding in the Bekaa Valley was made an unforgettable experience by Richard Prior and his wife Veronique at the A Rocha project. My sincere gratitude goes to them for their hospitality, friendliness and company in the field.

My thanks also to Assad Serhal, the representative of BirdLife in Lebanon, for the interesting visit to Kfar Zabad.
Bird areas visited

Chouf Mountains Cedar Reserve

Beautiful hiking area about one hours drive east of Beirut. Not the famous cedars of Bcharre in the north, but still a wonderful forest covering the hillsides of the Chouf range. We hiked from the parking in the flowering scrub lands with patches of trees along a trail leading all the way up to the summit at nearly 2000 m above sea level.

Species like Wren, Chaffinch, Coal Tit and Blackcap inhabited the dense cedar forest (replanted). On the sunny hillsides with meadows and scattered trees and bushes were Woodchat and Masked Shrikes, Rock Bunting and many Whitethroats. The air space was surprisingly empty, one Short-toed Eagle was seen. Further uphill, on the sparsely vegetated slopes close to the summit, were displaying Tawny Pipit, Rock Sparrows and Shore Lark. A Rock Nuthatch and some Black-eared Wheatears were also noted.

From the summit there is a great vista over the Bekaa Valley and the distant snow-capped mountains near the Israeli border.

Kfar Zabad

A very small wetland, dominated by reed beds, close to the village of Kfar Zabad in the eastern Bekaa Valley, just by the foothills of the anti-Lebanon mountain range. A project is underway to protect the area and create facilities for visitors. During my visit a small visitors centre was being built. Fields, meadows and small farms lie next to the area. Wetlands being a rarity in this country, it is of great importance.

The reeds were alive with Great Reed Warblers, Moustached and Savi’s Warblers. Little Bittern was flushed from the edges. Black-headed Bunting, Cettis Warbler and Calandra Larks were territorial. Next to a dirt track running through the fields were three Pale Rock Sparrows and two Rose-coloured Starlings passed overhead. Black and White Storks as well as two Long-legged Buzzards appeared in the sky. By the parking lot I was surprised to see a Namaqua Dove fly past me towards the village. Obviously this was the first record for Lebanon and a report is sent to the national committee.

Aamiq

A small wetland, though larger than Kfar Zabad, near the village of Aana in the south central Bekaa Valley. The area is under ongoing survey from the A Rocha project based in Aana. Very important for both breeding, migrating and wintering birds since it is one of very few wetlands left in the intensely cultivated Bekaa Valley. Smaller water surfaces, reed beds and surrounding fields and meadows provides a truly exciting birding area, located along a major migration route from Asia to Africa.
Night Herons, Little Bitterns, Little Grebes and a multitude of the previously mentioned warblers were in the wetland. We managed to flush a Great Snipe that Richard had seen some days before. Red-rumped Swallow, Woodchat Shrike and a lone Turtle Dove flew by. In the surrounding land both Calandra Larks and Corn and Black-headed Buntings were common.

Other sites near Aamiq

**Tell el-Akhdar**  Some km’s north of Aamiq in the agricultural land, some fields and patches of wood near a stream and a semi-dried out pond. A Spur-winged Plover held territory and seven Rose-coloured Starlings landed in a tree nearby. A bit surprisingly an elegant pale morph Eleonora's Falcon flew by us at close range, apparently on migration.

**Hillside track from Aamiq to Aana**  A 3 km trek over the dry hillsides with scattered scrubs, thorns, crags and goat-grazed grass areas. Nice experience with the characteristic birds of this habitat: Woodchat and Masked Shrikes, Orphean Warbler, Black-eared Wheatears, Rock Nuthatch and many singing Pale Rock Sparrows.

**Kfariya vineyard**  Good spot for Syrian Serin with at least ten birds, several singing.

**Litani River southeast of Aana**  A short drive south along the main road and then turn off to the east and back north along the small river. At a known spot Richard showed me at least two singing Upchers Warblers and the song from Pale Rock Sparrows were everywhere. Isabelline Wheatears, Long-legged Buzzard and a single Squacco Heron were also seen.

**Species list**

*Only about 70 species were recorded during this trip. Of course a trip more focused on birds will result in more species, but I am still satisfied and very tempted to return to this fascinating country.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Location/Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teal</td>
<td>a pair at Aamiq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garganey</td>
<td>1 male at Aamiq</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mallard</td>
<td>5 at Aamiq</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little Grebe</td>
<td>common at Aamiq</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little Bittern</td>
<td>4-5 at Kfar Zabad and several at Aamiq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Egret</td>
<td>1 at Aamiq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squacco Heron</td>
<td>1 heading north along the Litani River</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Night Heron 25 at Aamiq
Grey Heron 1 at Aamiq
Black Stork 1-2 at Kfar Zabad and 20 heading north over Aana
White Stork 4-5 at Kfar Zabad and 8 at Aamiq

Short-toed Eagle 1 in the Chouf and 1 in the Bekaa
Marsh Harrier 1 in the Bekaa and a pair around Aamiq
Common Buzzard 1 in the Chouf
Long-legged Buzzard several seen in the Bekaa

Eleonoras Falcon 1 pale morph passing Tell el-Akhdar

Quail 1 heard at Kfar Zabad
Chukar 2 along the road high in the Chouf above Aana
Moorhen heard at Kfar Zabad
Spur-winged Plover 1 at Tell el-Akhdar
Great Snipe 1 flushed at Aamiq

Namaqua Dove 1 male at Kfar Zabad. Obviously the first record for Lebanon!

Turtle Dove 1 at Aamiq
Collared Dove fairly common in the Bekaa
Laughing Dove common in Beirut
Calandra Lark common in the Bekaa
Crested Lark common
Wood Lark seemed common in the Chouf
Shore Lark singing at high altitude in the Chouf
Red-rumped Swallow 2 at Aamiq
Tawny Pipit 1 singing at high altitude in the Chouf

Isabelline Wheatear several around Aana and the Litani River
Black-eared Wheatear fairly common in the right habitat
Northern Wheatear fairly common on high altitude in the Chouf
Redstart 1 female between Aamiq and Aana
Wren common in the Chouf
Yellow-vented Bulbul seemed common around settlements, like in the outskirts of Beirut

Cetti’s Warbler common in the Bekaa
Zitting Cisticola common in the Bekaa
Graceful Prinia common
Savi’s Warbler several singing at Kfar Zabad and Aamiq
Reed Warbler common in reed beds in the Bekaa
Great Reed Warbler common in reed beds in the Bekaa
Moustached Warbler fairly common both at Kfar Zabad and Aamiq

Upchers Warbler several males in song along the Litani river near Aana
Orphean Warbler 2 between Aamiq and Aana
Sardinian Warbler several seen
Blackcap common
Lesser Whitethroat seemed common in the bushlands in the Chouf
Whitethroat common
Chiffchaff singing in the cedar forest at Chouf
Spotted Flycatcher several just north of Aamiq

Great Tit several in the cedar forest at Chouf
Coaltit several in the cedar forest at Chouf
Rock Nuthatch 1 in the Chouf Mountains and 2-3 between Aamiq and Aana
Red-backed Shrike one pair in the Chouf above Aamiq
Woodchat Shrike seemed common in the right habitat
Masked Shrike seemed common in the right habitat
Jay 1 in the Chouf Mountains
*Rose-coloured Starling* 2 at Kfar Zabad and 7 at Tell el-Akhdar
Spanish Sparrow one flock just north of Aamiq
Rock Sparrow Baalbek (among the temple ruins!) and at Chouf Montains
Pale Rock Sparrow 3 at Kfar Zabad and fairly common around Aana/Aamiq
Goldfinch 16-17/5
Linnet seen
Syrian Serin 10-12 at Kfariya vineyard
Black-headed Bunting common in the Bekaa
Corn Bunting common in the Bekaa

Me in the chilly morning on 1.900m a.s.l. in the Shouf.