

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Lebanon: a form of bird hunting that is little more than slaughter

In October 2011, I made a short bird watching trip to Lebanon. Timed to take advantage of the autumn migration, I still had happy memories of birding at the Bosphorus and was looking forward to reacquainting myself with the eastern Mediterranean avifauna. My Lebanese friend tried to warn me, but having watched birds over the last 30 years in over 60 different countries I thought I'd 'seen it all'. I have to admit now that I was confronted by an unexpected scenario, a real shock.

If one starts from the principal that hunting involves respecting certain laws, common-sense rules and limits, including a concern for the quality of the environment, then the current situation in Lebanon rarely fits this description, but resembles instead a kind of poaching on a huge scale, carried out in full view, and with the knowledge of all. Field observations made during the ten-day visit in October 2011 confirmed the catastrophic scale of the problem, tolerated by a good-natured attitude of indifference that is virtually endemic in Lebanon.

Lebanon is not lacking in assets as far as its natural heritage is concerned, with its extensive coastline and two mountain ranges running along a northeast/southwest axis—the mount Lebanon range in the west which peaks at over 3000 m, and the Anti-Lebanon range to the east. They are separated by the fertile Bekaa valley. This magnificent little country (one third the size of Belgium) benefits from a rich biodiversity and unique combination and variety of habitats.

Birds in their millions

Lebanon is situated on one of the main migration routes of Palearctic birds en route to, or returning from, their winter quarters in Africa. Probably hundreds of millions pass through these 'killing fields' each year—200 million each autumn through Israel is a recent estimate—and the prospect of sometimes exceptional sightings prompts scores of birders from around the world to scour the birding hotspots of Israel and the gulf of Aqaba. The

numerous trip reports on line (135 presently to be found on www.travellingbirder.com) are proof enough. By contrast, the same on-line databases are virtually devoid of similar reports for Lebanon. Furthermore, the Israel checklist stands at 535 species (www.israbirding.com/checklist), while Lebanon's, just next door, is only 395 (Ramadan-Jaradi *et al* 2008). The handful of trip reports that are available on the net certainly whet the appetite. The ornithological discoveries made in recent years in the northern semi-desert zone alone are sufficient to provoke interest (Prior & Conroy 2009).

The scale of bird-hunting in Lebanon (Plate 1) is probably one of the main reasons for this. Officially hunting has been banned in Lebanon since 1 January 1995, when a law promoted by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, www.spnl.org), the Environment Ministry and several international bodies, was passed. Applied for a term of 5 years as part of an international agreement involving the European Union and the UN, and linked to substantial financial aid, this radical measure was designed to allow the state to make use of new means to properly manage hunting. At the time, the new law not surprisingly provoked lively reaction, to the extent that the process of reflection on hunting was completely paralysed, producing four renewals of the so-called ban. So it was not until February 2004 that Lebanon finally managed to ratify law 580, officially fixing rules for the activity.

Since then, in order to hunt, a gun licence, an annual hunting permit and a valid insurance certificate are all supposedly necessary. The law also specifies that hunting is forbidden at certain times of the year, as is shooting in towns and villages, public parks, near places of worship and between houses. Moreover, it is officially illegal to make use of any kind of traps or lures to attract targeted prey. Many migratory species are equally exempt from the right to be subject to 'reasonable hunting'. Result: Lebanon officially has only 20 000 legally declared hunters. But we know that between



Plate I. Whinchat and swallows killed just a few minutes earlier, Lebanon October 2011. © Sonam Depris

20 and 25 million cartridges are sold in the country each year. Spot the discrepancy.

In fact, the law right from the outset has not lacked its shortcomings, the authorities having neither the resources nor the motivation to enforce it. Many local police officers are keen hunters themselves, and helped by a pervasive corruption, any eventual 'problems' are most often resolved by a simple bribe or 'baksheesh'. In reality, the majority of hunters (at least 74% according to an SPNL study) practice their hobby without adhering to any form of regimentation, and, given the discrepancy between the estimates by hunting organisations (60 000) and SPNL (more than 600 000), no-one has any real idea of just how many hunters there really are in Lebanon nowadays. One thing is for sure—in October in most regions of the country, the smallest piece of land is under permanent surveillance and bushes searched as if with a fine toothcomb. A real problem for the birdwatcher or walker alike, hunters are literally everywhere. When asked about it,

many of them affect to be unaware of any laws concerning hunting. The minister of the environment is himself reputed to be a keen hunter. In any case, the majority of hunters don't appear to follow any kind of rules, including those for personal security, judging by the number of people admitted to hospital with shotgun wounds each year.

From Pelican... to Wren

But which species can generate such a craze? Looking from Europe, one imagines the classic species: pigeons, thrushes, woodcock. In reality, in Lebanon, everything is shot at. Illuminating 'bag lists' confirm this—see photos on the Facebook page of the 'Hunting in Lebanon' group (www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100002637363741&ref=ts#!/group.php?gid=4574453566&v=info). Internet forums are also well worth consulting. Thus one can read *eg* "Usually thrushes are hunted between 10 October and 25 March. But we also hunt finches, warblers [Blackcap, Garden, Orphean and Barred] which become fat in

autumn, plus quail, larks, bee-eaters, pipits, flycatchers, redstarts and robins. And we hunt all year round (it's our tradition). Some shoot swallows and bats (when night falls). A lot of people also shoot raptors". One can equally see that many hunters don't really know which species they're killing. For example, a study carried out by SPNL in 2004 showed that only 18% of hunters could differentiate between migratory and resident species. The majority of hunters don't know, or pretend not to know, what impact their unbridled hunting has on the avifauna. Take Abdo, 48 years old, a hunter since he was 9. Sceptical as regards the increasing rarity of species, he believes that killing birds in huge numbers is easily justifiable "because there are thousands of them". Like the hunters we encountered in autumn 2011 in the Ras Baalbek area that were proud to confirm that they hunt the Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* as soon as it appears in late May—a rare species in Lebanon whose breeding in the country was only recently confirmed (Prior & Conroy 2009). Some hunt extensively in spring, in the breeding season. Others affirm that they concentrate on hunting migratory species, believing that in this way their activity has no effect on the local environment. However, there is evidence that resident sedentary species are just as impacted. Thus, according to research carried out by SPNL between 2002 and 2007, in the space of five years the number of birds in Lebanon diminished by 18%. A similar study carried out in the 1990s showed a reduction of 9%. SPNL also believe that 16 threatened species are actually in the process of becoming extinct in Lebanon.

As regards the place of guns in Lebanese society, internet forums tend to confirm that firearms are everyday objects: "every household has at least one hunting rifle" says one correspondent. In addition, cartridges are easily bought everywhere—at around 5 Euros for 25 (12 caliber no.9)—including in mini-markets and superettes. Automatic weapons are also widely available; certain hunters don't hesitate to use them, given the chance *eg* to shoot at flocks of storks and pelicans. During our field observations in October 2011 we attempted, on several occasions, to count the number of shots per minute but without success as the crackling of firearms

was so intense. The true environmental impact of tons of lead shot falling on the land each year—between 640 and 800 tons is the estimate—is as yet largely unquantified. If the average hunter is not overmuch worried about this, Birdlife International for its part considers that, as do many scientists, the severe lead contamination of certain areas of Lebanese land represents an unexploded health time bomb.

A neighbourhood activity

In Lebanon, hunting is often a neighbourhood activity. It is done in the garden or nearby orchards. The hunter often makes himself comfortable beforehand. Alone, or with friends, one just waits...usually not for long, the flow of birds being virtually continuous. Such is the case with Youssef, past his sixties, who we met in autumn not far from the little village of Aana. As usual, he had parked his car in the shade of the avenue of trees leading from the village. Sat in his plastic garden chair next to his old Toyota, he had organised the open boot/trunk to make for an agreeable day's hunting: on the left, thermos of hot coffee, arak, fig jam, radio and mobile phone; on the right, his 'bag', already an impressive tally considering it was only 10am: twenty-odd Blackcaps, male and females neatly laid out side by side, a dozen or so Redstarts, some Garden Warblers, two House Martins, a Spotted Flycatcher, a Tree Pipit.... "Not long till the finch season" reflected Youssef, for whom hunting is evidently a year-round activity linked to the ebb and flow of various species. Like a lot of hunters, Youssef uses a tape machine with powerful speakers, balanced on top of a pole, to attract the birds. Many hunters use them 24 hours a day. This was particularly noticeable during our visit around Barouk village, and not far from there, below the car park at the entrance to the Chouf nature reserve. Loop tapes, particularly of quail (especially prized), played loudly all night, are then followed by the traditional explosions of gunshot at dawn. The more impatient even hunt with flashlights at night, others make use of various traps and nets regularly checked. In certain strategically rewarding hunting locations, such as the pretty hill in the Qubayat area (in Akkar region, towards the northern frontier

with Syria), with its small fields bordered by hedgerows ideally oriented in a north/south axis, the amount of used cartridges and cartridge boxes per square metre of ground is so dense one cannot discern the true colour of the soil.

Safety seems to be a matter of subjective choice, and no code of conduct seems to be in practice in Lebanon. So, people shoot around houses, and don't hesitate to stop suddenly by the side of the road to try and shoot down a bird of prey spotted from the vehicle just beforehand. Moreover, it seems that there's no age limit for starting to hunt. So, sons are often given their first rifle at around ten years old, the caliber and power varying according to the age of the debutant hunter. All this is considered quite normal. Some even consider that hunting is a component of the rites of passage between childhood and adult life. The son goes hunting with his father. He's proud to carry a gun and to shoot skillfully. Hunting is also a factor in social recognition. And the pride in carrying a shotgun is all the more increased by the size of the bag achieved, photographed and posted on-line or stuck to the window of one's car.

Blackcaps... on skewers

As regards what the hunters do with the masses of birds killed, although many of them are dumped in waste bins or simply left on the ground where they fall, the tradition in autumn is to cook fricassees and kebabs of passerines. As detailed by one hunter in an on-line forum, mid-October is particularly favoured: "The birds arrive in their thousands and every hunter gets hundreds of delicious birds...Bee-eaters and warblers carry significant amounts of fat; they're not bad at all!" Respected sources testify to a related business, including across borders. In normal times, certain sought after species are in fact killed in Syria—where hunting is also supposedly illegal—and re-sold in Lebanon where they are destined for restaurants (on the menu 'fried birds' or 'on skewers': 'miqliyyeh' or 'Asafeer mishwiyyeh'), see Murdoch (2008). Some observers have suggested that the 'troubles' in Syria probably increased the hunting pressure in Lebanon in autumn 2011.

To face up to the hunting lobbies, Birdlife International launched an awareness

campaign to promote 'sustainable' hunting of birds (see www.birdlife.org/action/change/sustainable_hunting/PDFs/EC_LIFE_SHP_0108.pdf). Other concrete initiatives have been developed by local, regional and national organisations. Foremost among these, SPNL promotes various projects, supported by some local bodies. Thus, three 'himas' that serve as migratory 'stop-off' points have been established, thanks to campaigns and international donations: Qoleileh (south of the coastal town of Tyre), Kfar Zabad and Ebel el Saki (Bekaa valley). In these places, it's officially the local authorities and local population that prevent hunters from killing birds and protect nature as they thus gain a benefit through tourism. SPNL organise an annual festival, including various activities aimed at making young people aware of the need to protect birds. In addition, field research and observations have enabled 15 IBAs to be established (www.spnl.org).

Unfortunately, even though some initiatives have been successful, eg the courageous actions of the charity A Rocha Lebanon (www.arocha.org/lb-en/index.html), the small number of sites concerned are more often "little islands of nature targeted by hunters" explained Nizar Hani, scientific coordinator of Shouf Cedars nature reserve (southeast of Beirut). If need be, as we witnessed ourselves at the small wetland of Chamsine/Kfar Zabad (near Aanjar) financed by USAID, people don't hesitate to cut through fences and padlocks into officially protected areas in order to get at their targeted prey.

Setting quotas and rules for the activity

Without a stable government, an honest police force or a greater awareness by the people, the enforcement of the laws is for many observers just a pipedream. Resolutely constructive despite the scale of the task, national and international experts alike call for an eventual effective control of the activity in Lebanon. "Hunting has always existed and it would be counter-productive to ban it" says Dr Ghassan Ramadan-Jaradi, professor of ecology and taxonomy. Driven by the same pragmatic realism, Bassima al Khatib of SPNL suggests "Huntible species must be specified, quotas established, licences awarded and rangers trained".

For the moment, the least that can be said is that such results are still some way off. Some Lebanese demonstrate that they *are* aware of the scale of Lebanon's ecological problems...in order to better justify the continued practising of their favourite sport: "In Lebanon, there are more hunters than birds now because green spaces are disappearing, the forests are being burned, quarries are eating away the mountain sides, and concrete invades the fields and meadows. Environmentalists should speak up against this destruction of our environment...instead of trying to stop us hunting". Naturalists even forwarded the idea a few years ago that the fear of 'bird flu' perhaps offered an opportunity to better protect birds and reduce hunting in Lebanon. Having seen the 'hunting bags' resulting from last autumn's activity in Lebanon, it appears that this kind of fear has little chance of affecting Lebanese attitudes in this area.

This is precisely why I have written this letter. Without naivety, I take this step with the aim of bringing to light this important information, which I hope all will understand

requires tackling urgently. Perhaps this simple gesture will help NGOs and funders of nature conservation bodies and projects to become more aware of the gravity of this unacceptable situation? That is the 'big question'. For my part, I cannot in all conscience just 'sit on my hands'.

References

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Translated from the original French
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[See *Sandgrouse* 33: 61–63 for two letters concerning the slaughter of wild birds in Kuwait. *The Editor*]