

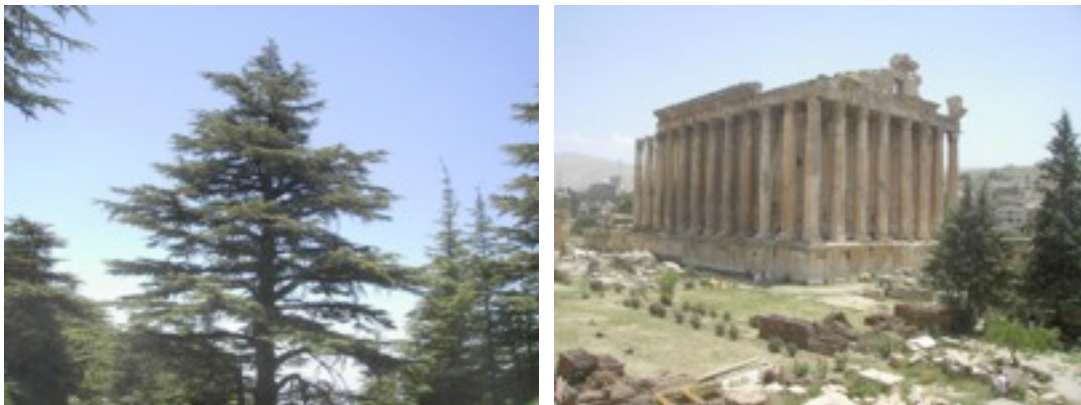
Trip report from Lebanon

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.



cedars and the temples of Baalbek - icons of Lebanon

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.

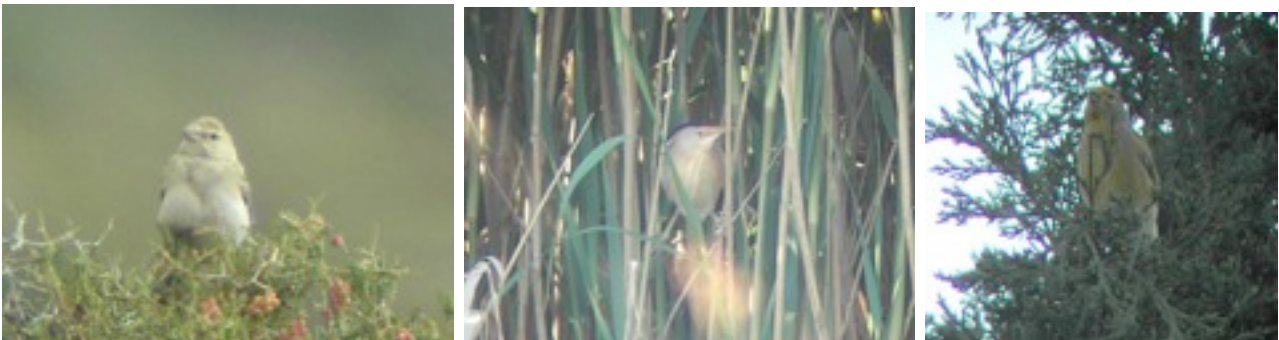


Pretty fishing port of Jbeil with the ancient ruins of Byblos

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.



Black Storks and Black-headed Bunting. Photos by Richard Prior.

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.



Aamiq from the hills to the west, May 2006.

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.

Teal	a pair at Aamiq
Garganey	1 male at Aamiq
Mallard	5 at Aamiq
Little Grebe	common at Aamiq
Little Bittern	4-5 at Kfar Zabad and several at Aamiq
Little Egret	1 at Aamiq
Squacco Heron	1 heading north along the Litani River

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
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Pale Rock Sparrow

Goldfinch
Linnet
Syrian Serin
Black-headed Bunting
Corn Bunting

2 at Kfar Zabad and 7 at Tell el-Akhdar
one flock just north of Aamiq
Baalbek (among the temple ruins!) and at Chouf Montains
3 at Kfar Zabad and fairly common around Aana/Aamiq
16-17/5
seen
seen
10-12 at Kfariya vineyard
common in the Bekaa
common in the Bekaa



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