

Trip report Lebanon 1-4 October 2018

Bird observations during Bird Camp Lebanon

Bird Camp Lebanon 2018 was arranged a few days in October in the mountain village of Ras al-Matn in the central Mount Lebanon range above Beirut. The place was chosen both for being on the main bird migration flyway, with tens of thousands of raptors passing in the autumn, as well as being one of the more progressive and ambitious nature conservation spots in the country.

This was a cooperation between Society for Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, the BirdLife partner in Lebanon), BirdLife Sweden and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, Caucasus & Central Asia (OSME).

Learn more about the Bird Camp Lebanon initiative in guest blogs and other media at www.spnl.org and www.osme.org and learn about Bird Camp Besh Barmag in Azerbaijan at www.birdingaze.blogspot.com and on respective Facebook pages.



Itinerary

Evening/midnight Monday 1 October – arrival of Swedish group (three participants and the initiative holder) in the village of Ras al-Matn, 30km northeast of Beirut in the Mount Lebanon. Three nights in private housing for Swedish group.

2 October - morning at the observation point above the Beirut River Valley. Bird ringing trial with two nets. Present are local key persons from the community, SPNL members and our hosts. Visit to public school, presentation and mingle. Lunch with vice-Mayor of the municipality and one of the responsible hunters in the area. Afternoon birding visit to Mount Lebanon ridge at 1500m near Falugha. Social dinner.

3 October – morning at the observation point, field visits by 25 students from the public school to see nets and birds in hand as well as raptor migration and mingle. Visit to private school, presentation.

Lunch with local key persons. Massive eagle migration from the lunch table (2.750 Lesser Spotted Eagles in 30min!!), very striking and exemplary. Afternoon visit to Mayors office of neighboring municipality Kfar Salwyn. Late afternoon birding up on the ridge above Kfar Salwyn. Social dinner.

4 October – Swedish group birding along the road towards Beirut, at the airport by 12 noon and departure for Sweden in the afternoon. In Sweden by 10pm.

More from the trip!

Enjoy this short video compilation by Harald Ris from the event:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVT8w07sxpU>

Article on the SPNL web, including photos and video, about the Bird Camp and the wider initiative:

<http://www.spnl.org/unifying-our-voices-for-bird-conservation-birdlife-sweden-and-spnl-celebrating-wmbd-in-hima-ras-el-maten/>



Morning view over the Beirut River Valley. Chattering White-spectacled Bulbuls and Graceful Prinias, the first Short-toed Eagles drifting overhead and tea brewing on the log fire. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson.

Budget & logistics

All arranged through the Bird Camp project and local transports, restaurants, visits and permits arranged through SPNL and local partner MESD in Ras al-Matn village.

Birdwatching sites

All birdwatching visits within 30min drive from our base in the village Ras al-Matn, situated at 800m in the Mount Lebanon, 30km northeast of Beirut.

Observation point, Beirut River Valley We spent the mornings at a local observation point in the hillsides with dry bushes and olive groves outside Ras al-Matn. Views to the south across the scenic Beirut River Valley which is in the bird migration flyway. In the bushes were local species like Graceful Prinia, White-spectacled Bulbul, Sardinian Warbler and a Blue Rock Thrush but also migrants including Red-backed Shrike, Garden Warbler, Wryneck and Tree Pipit. Raptor migration in the late morning dominated by Lesser Spotted Eagles and Steppe Buzzards but also Steppe, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black Kites, Levant Sparrowhawks, Marsh Harrier and Black Storks.



Raptor migration, dominated by Lesser Spotted Eagles, picking up in mid-morning over the Beirut River Valley as seen from the observation point at Ras al-Matn. Photo Harald Ris.

Picnic site, Ras al-Matn Our lunch on October 3rd was arranged at a picnic area in the village with nice views to the north/west. Here heavy raptor migration began at 2:45PM and during the following 30 minutes at least 2.750 Lesser Spotted Eagles passed by. Also two Greater Spotted Eagles, a majestic Griffon Vulture and other raptors. We had to leave at 3:15PM but migration continued even from the neighboring village.

Falugha, Mount Lebanon Above the tree line up on the ridge at some 1500m, barren with dry grass and rocky hillsides. Resting migrants like Northern Wheatear, Whinchats, Tawny Pipits, Redstart, Short-toed Larks and Barn Swallows. Locals included Rock Sparrows and Crested Larks. At 5pm a sudden burst of 350 Lesser Spotted Eagles, Short-toed Eagles, a 1cy Northern Goshawk, an Egyptian Vulture heading south on low altitude.



Sad sights on virtually every Lebanese lookout point we visited in the mountains where bird migration comes at close range. Constructive work though is in progress in Ras al-Matn and dialogue with responsible hunters goes on. Photo Tomas Axén Haraldsson.

Kfar Salwyn, Mount Lebanon Neighboring municipality of Ras al-Matn to the east, we drove up to the ridge at some 1500m at a small radar station. Great vistas over the Bekaa Valley with the Anti-Lebanon range and the Syrian border to the east and the Beirut skyline in the haze in the west. Exciting passage of raptors in the late afternoon at 5-6pm with hundreds of eagles, buzzards, several Hobbies, a male Red-footed Falcon, an adult male Peregrine and a dashing male Pallid Harrier at close range.

The illegal hunting situation at the places we visited was of a lesser extent than what was feared. We heard a total of some 100 gunshots (mainly distant and with no hits seen) during the 2.5 days which is very little compared to other sites in the north and in the Bekaa. However, our visit was in weekdays and we were told the hunting is worse in weekends. We saw several hunters in action and our police escort had stern talks with some of them.

We had company of one of the responsible hunters involved in the village initiatives and he claimed only a few percent of the hunters active were actually licensed and legal.



Handsome 1cy Honey Buzzards passing overhead on the Mount Lebanon ridge. Not shot at. Photo Harald Ris.

Species list 2-4 October 2018 around Ras al-Matn

Black Stork (<i>Ciconia nigra</i>)	4 migrating at Beirut River Valley
Great Cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>)	7 migrating at Mount Lebanon
Western Osprey (<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>)	1 migrating Aabadiyeh
European Honey Buzzard (<i>Pernis apivorus</i>)	A total of 10 migrating at different sites
Griffon Vulture (<i>Gyps fulvus</i>)	1 migrating in Ras al-Matn



A majestic Griffon Vulture among Lesser Spotted Eagles, seen from the lunch tables in Ras al-Matn. Photo Zsombor Karolyi.

Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*)

1 subadult migrating over Mount Lebanon

Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*)

A total of 50+ migrating



One of many beautiful Short-toed Eagles seen at close range during our brief visit. Photo Harald Ris.

Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Clanga pomarina*)

A total of 4.843 counted on migration

Greater Spotted Eagle (*Clanga clanga*)

2 migrating (1cy and 2cy+) in the burst of LSE at 3pm on October 3rd, Ras al-Matn



Greater Spotted Eagle ahead of a Lesser Spotted Eagle. Note the larger size, chunky shape, clear "fingers", darker colors and single white carpal patch of the Greater Spotted Eagle. Photo Harald Ris.

Booted Eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*)

A total of 8 migrating

Steppe Eagle (*Aquila nipalensis*)

A total of 5 migrating

Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

1cy bird migrating at Mount Lebanon

Levant Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter brevipes*)

A total of 95 migrating



Levant Sparrowhawk passing by in singles or smaller groups. Photo Zsombor Karolyi

Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*)

A total of some 20 migrating

Western Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*)

A total of 10 migrating

Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*)

1 stunning 2cy+ male migrating at Mount Lebanon in the sunset of October 3rd



A few seconds of euphoria and shouts as this piece passed us at close range in the evening sun. Male Pallid Harrier above Kfar Salwyn. Photo Zsombor Karolyi.

Black Kite (<i>Milvus migrans</i>)	A total of 15 migrating
"Steppe" Buzzard (<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>)	A total of some 100 migrating
Common Kestrel (<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>)	Seen daily, residents
Red-footed Falcon (<i>Falco vespertinus</i>)	1 male migrating at Mount Lebanon
Eurasian Hobby (<i>Falco subbuteo</i>)	A total of 5 migrating



Hobby powering by our hilltop lookout in the Beirut River Valley. Photo Harald Ris.

Peregrine Falcon (<i>Falco peregrinus</i>)	1 adult male migrating at Mount Lebanon
Rock Dove (<i>Columbia livia var. domestica</i>)	Daily, scattered observations
Eurasian Collared Dove (<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>)	1 in Beirut
Laughing Dove (<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>)	10-15 in Beirut
European Bee-eater (<i>Merops apiaster</i>)	3 migrating at Kfar Salwyn, 25 migrating at Ras al-Matn
Eurasian Wryneck (<i>Jynx torquilla</i>)	1 in the Beirut River Valley
Crested Lark (<i>Galerida cristata</i>)	5+ at Mount Lebanon
Greater Short-toed Lark (<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>)	10+ at Mount Lebanon
Barn Swallow (<i>Hirundo rustica</i>)	200+ migrating
Tawny Pipit (<i>Anthus campestris</i>)	4 at Mount Lebanon

Tree Pipit (<i>Anthus trivialis</i>)	Several migrants heard overhead
Western Yellow Wagtail (<i>Motacilla flava</i>)	4 migrating Ras al-Matn
Northern Wheatear (<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>)	2 at Mount Lebanon
Whinchat (<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>)	4 at Mount Lebanon
Common Redstart (<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>)	1 Mount Lebanon, 1 Beirut River Valley
Eurasian Wren (<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>)	A few (2-5) around Ras al-Matn
Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (<i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>)	1 in Beirut River Valley
Unidentified nightingale (<i>Luscinia sp.</i>)	1 heard, probably Common Nightingale
Common Blackbird (<i>Turdus merula</i>)	A few (2-5) around Ras al-Matn
Blue Rock Thrush (<i>Monticola solitarius</i>)	1 in Beirut River Valley
Graceful prinia (<i>Prinia gracilis</i>)	Seemingly common in bushes and hillside scrub.
Lesser Whitethroat (<i>Sylvia curruca</i>)	2 in Ras al-Matn
Common Whitethroat (<i>Sylvia communis</i>)	1 in Beirut River Valley
Sardinian Warbler (<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>)	Seemingly common in bushes and hillside scrub. Several caught with nets.



Male Sardinian Warbler partaking in the Bird Camp educative demonstrations. Photo Zsombor Karolyi

Garden Warbler (<i>Sylvia borin</i>)	2 caught with nets at Beirut River Valley
Eurasian Blackcap (<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>)	Fairly common, 2 caught with nets
Cetti's Warbler (<i>Cettia cetti</i>)	1 heard in the Beirut River Valley

Willow Warbler (<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>)	5-10 observed around Ras al-Matn
Common Chiffchaff (<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>)	2 in the Beirut River Valley
Spotted Flycatcher (<i>Muscicapa striata</i>)	5 in the Beirut River Valley
Pied/Collared/Semicollared Flycatcher (<i>Ficedula sp.</i>)	1 giving brief views in Ras al-Matn
Great Tit (<i>Parus major</i>)	Common around Ras al-Matn
Red-backed Shrike (<i>Lanius collurio</i>)	2-3 seen at several sites
White-spectacled Bulbul (<i>Pycnonotus xanthopygos</i>)	Common around Ras al-Matn
Hooded Crow (<i>Corvus cornix</i>)	20 in the Beirut River Valley
Northern Raven (<i>Corvus corax</i>)	2 in the Beirut River Valley
Common Myna (<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>)	2 in Beirut
Eurasian Oriole (<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>)	1 1cy/female in Ras el-Matn
House Sparrow (<i>Passer domesticus</i>)	Common around Ras al-Matn
Rock Sparrow (<i>Petronia petronia</i>)	4 at Mount Lebanon
Common Chaffinch (<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>)	2 in Beirut River Valley
Common Linnet (<i>Linaria cannabina</i>)	A flock of 25-30 at Mount Lebanon
European Goldfinch (<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>)	2-3 in Ras al-Matn
European Greenfinch (<i>Chloris chloris</i>)	Observed daily in the area
Corn Bunting (<i>Emberiza calandra</i>)	2 at Mount Lebanon, 1 at Kfar Salwyn
Rock Bunting (<i>Embeiza cia</i>)	4 in Beirut River Valley

Herptiles observed (5):

Variable Toad (<i>Bufo variabilis</i>)	1 in Ras al-Matn
Roughtail Rock Agama (<i>Stellagama stellio</i>)	Common in rocky habitats
Snake-eyed Lizard (<i>Ophisops elegans</i>)	1 in Beirut River Valley
Lebanon Lizard (<i>Phoenicolacerta laevis</i>)	2 in Ras al-Matn
Common Chameleon (<i>Chamaeleo chamaeleon</i>)	1 crossing the road in front of our car in the bottom of Beirut River Valley, giving its characteristic swaying-like-a-leaf walk!

Mammals observed (2):

Golden Jackal (<i>Canis aureus</i>)	1 seen, several heard during the night
Rock Hyrax (<i>Procavia capensis</i>)	Family group in the Beirut River Valley, seen from the observation point



Rock Hyrax family below the observation point at Ras al-Matn, as seen through the scope. Photo Zsombor Karolyi

Butterflies observed (10):

Small White (*Pieris rapae*)

Large Salmon Arab (*Colotis fausta*)

Southern White Amiral (*Limenitis reducta*)

Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)

Freyer's Grayling (*Hipparchia fatua*)

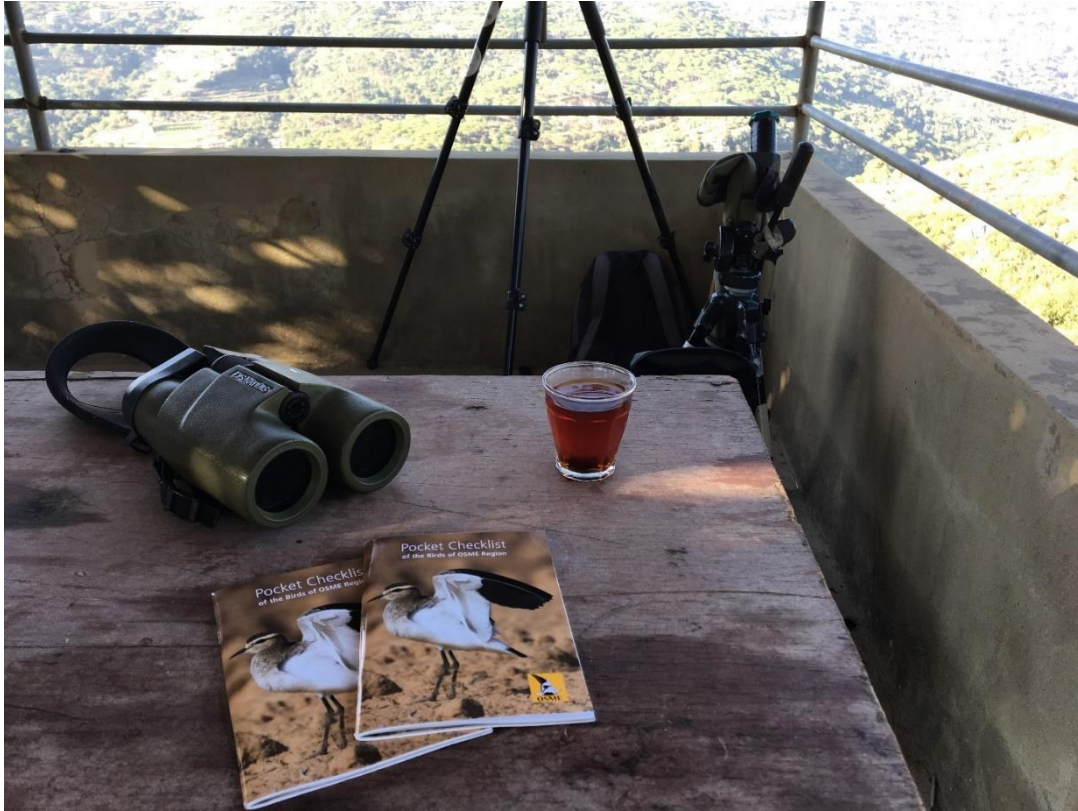
Maniola sp.

African Ringlet (*Ypthima asterope*)

Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*)

Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*)

Carcharodus sp.



The Ornithological Society of the Middle East, Caucasus & Central Asia (OSME) encourages and promotes bird conservation and awareness in Lebanon and across the region. Join us! www.osme.org



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