



Lebanon: Amazing raptor migration and good birding

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This autumn I spent two weeks (09.09. – 22.09.2019) volunteering in Lebanon in support of the project RaptorCountLebanon2019. Watching from our viewing platform overlooking Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea was a great experience! I also birded some other good areas in Lebanon. Lebanon is a great place to bird and in this trip report I will give some hints where, including a species list at the end.



Introduction

Lebanon's location in the middle of the "bird highway", the bottleneck between the Mediterranean Sea in the West and the desert in the East, makes it a hotspot for bird migration. Besides millions of passerines, there is also a huge migration of raptors and other soaring birds such as pelicans and storks. This is one of the great spectacles of nature and I was very happy to experience it in the skies of Lebanon!

The hospitality in Lebanon is amazing, food is great and birds are, in the right area, plentiful. It is not particularly cheap, but a great meal in a restaurant is not necessarily expensive.

I would imagine that self-driving could be quite a challenge if you are not used to more "fluent" types of traffic. It is quite expensive to get a local SIM-card and data, I think it was about 40 Dollars for a few GB. Calls are usually extra, but everyone uses WhatsApp.

Safety is a concern in Lebanon. Although the situation during my visit was much better than often portrayed in the Western media, the situation can change quickly. Ask locals or even better, go birding with locals, as well as inform yourself on government sites about areas that are currently not safe to go. Probably best to not get involved when observing illegal hunting. Illegal hunting is a big problem in Lebanon and ecotourism and initiatives like the raptor count is one way to do something about it. Change, coming from inside of Lebanon, is happening, but it will be a long way.



Places

Ras El Matn

During the project for the Raptor Count we stayed in two places: Ras El-Matn and Hammana. Ras El-Matn can have some great bird migration, as probably all the area in the Beirut hills. Birding can also be good, but hunting pressure is high. For example, the White-spectacled Bulbul is quite common, but very shy and more often heard than seen. I had some bats flying over the accommodation in the Northern part of Ras El-Matn and saw Rock Hyrax at the cliffs South (approximately here 33.853313, 35.636628) with resident Rock Nuthatch and Chukar. In the evening the howling of the Golden Jackals gives goose bumps, wandering around at night I found a Levantine Viper, as well as a Middle East Black Tarantula *Chaetopelma olivaceum*.



Hima Hammana Migration Count Spot

Hammana is a pretty little town with a town center with little restaurants. Our count spot (33.805436, 35.739267) was above the town. The community of Hammana mad a shelter that should also provide weather protection in the coming years, and there is a little kiosk nearby with some drinks and snacks (33.806496, 35.742992). This is also the spot where you can park your car, along the Beirut-Damascus highway. The count spot is within the Hima of Hammana. This name is an Arabic term for an area officially set aside for the conservation of natural resources, notably fields, wildlife and forests. In the Hima Hammana hunting was banned. Therefore there were always a few interesting migrants resting in safety, including my highlight Cream-coloured Courser on top of the hill. During migration anything can show up at a place like this! Resident birds included Rock Nuthatch and Blue Rock Thrush. Non-feathered inhabitants observed were Red Fox, as well as the omnipresent, but difficult to view Social Vole *Microtus socialis*. The voles sit at the entrance of their burrow and whistle when one is approaching. Probably best to try to see them in the evening.



But the main attraction of the place is the raptor watching. Depending on the weather we were counting all day during the two weeks I was there. Highlights I experienced included the 5th and 7th Crested Honey Buzzard for Lebanon, 17 species of raptors and a Lesser Spotted Eagle successfully catching a dove. Depending on the wind and weather, migration can be slow or distant, and then it can be better to move to the nearby Bekaa Valley.



Aammiq Wetland

Aammiq wetland (33.731021, 35.783063) is one of the only freshwater areas in Lebanon and the only significant one currently protected for migrating birds. I visited twice, once a morning, once an afternoon/evening. Morning is better to visit to find migrating passerines, the trees were filled with Eastern Olivecous Warblers and Willow Warblers the time I visited. When the wind picked up at midday, it became more difficult to find the passerines. The advantage of the afternoon visit is to observe the birds coming in to roost in the evening, mostly herons and Marsh Harriers. We also saw some distant Golden Jackals and there is a chance to see Swamp Cat, as well as Social Vole.

On both visits, we saw two bird species that are rare in a Western Palearctic context: White-throated Kingfisher and Spur-winged lapwing. They both seem to be reliable at the location. Other nice birds included Great Crested Grebe (this year first breeding record for Lebanon as far as I know), Graceful Prinia and migrants like Woodchat Shrike. The area is also good for reptiles with two species of turtles (*Testudo graeca* and *Mauremys rivulata*), as well as Large Whip snake (*Dolichophis jugularis*) observed. If you want to visit, contact Abdallah Hanna, the manager of the Skaff Estate (+961 3 601 740, WhatsApp works)



Tourist day

Forest of the Cedars of God: In the Cedar Forest we saw Blue Tit and Coal Tit, both fairly rare birds in Lebanon. There were quite a few tourists and not the hoped for Syrian Serin.

Col des Cedres: Between the Baalbek temple and Cedars of god we stopped at the top of the mountain pass (34.211415, 36.059719) and had a quick birding stop. We saw some Northern Wheatears as well as Horned Lark. A bit further down the road there also seems to be a good area for birding (with Syrian Serin and Crimson-winged Finch reports around 34.234369, 36.067130).

Baalbeck Temple: More a tourist site, but only spot where I saw Laughing Dove. Impressive ruins complete with Roughtail Rock Agama!

Anjar

Anjar is home to the most special bird species of the region: Syrian Serin. Currently probably the best place in the whole region to see the bird, they are breeding and also hang around a bit after the breeding season within the ruins of Anjar (Anjar Citadel). Their preferred spot is two Mulberry trees (33.730907, 35.933095) at the Southern end of the ruins, opposite of the entrance. They can also be found in the surroundings of the ruins. As the ruins are a touristic attraction, it is safe to go and binoculars and cameras are not a problem. While visiting, we saw an Egyptian Vulture flying over. This is Lebanon! Expect everything everywhere ;)



Final words

With its attractive residents and amazing migration spectacle, Lebanon has the potential to be an amazing birding destination. The people of Lebanon have incredible hospitality and wonderful food! The combination of all these experiences made this time unforgettable and I am very happy I had the chance to experience #raptorcountlebanon2019!

I would like to thank the communities of Hammana and Ras El-Matn for their hospitality, as well as BirdLife Switzerland, BirdLife Sweden, SPNL and OSME for organizing and supporting the project.

If you plan to visit Lebanon, you can contact me at [valentin\(at\)hotmail.com](mailto:valentin(at)hotmail.com) and I might be able to give you some contacts and tips.

Species lists

Birds

Species	Hima Hammana	Ras El-Matn	Ammiq Wetland	Anjar	Enroute / Comment
Mallard			1		
Northern Shoveler			1		
Garganey			1		
Common Quail	1	1			
Chukar		1			
Little Grebe			1		
Great Crested Grebe	1		1		First breeding record for Lebanon observed
Black Stork	1				
Great Cormorant	1				
Great White Pelican				1	
Gray Heron			1		
Purple Heron			1		
Great Egret			1		
Little Egret			1		
Cattle Egret			1		
Squacco Heron			1		
Black-crowned Night-Heron			1		
Glossy Ibis			1		
Osprey	1				
Black-shouldered Kite					1, still very rare, but spreading in Region
Egyptian Vulture				1	
European Honey-buzzard	1	1	1	1	
Oriental Honey-buzzard	1				5th and 7th for Lebanon
Short-toed Snake-Eagle	1				
Lesser Spotted Eagle	1	1			
Booted Eagle	1	1			
Eurasian Marsh-Harrier	1	1	1		
Pallid Harrier	1				
Montagu's Harrier	1				
Levant Sparrowhawk	1	1			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1			
Northern Goshawk	1				
Black Kite	1	1	1		
Common Buzzard	1				
Long-legged Buzzard	1				
Little Crake			1		
Eurasian Moorhen			1		
Eurasian Coot			1		
Eurasian Thick-knee			1		
Spur-winged Lapwing			1		

Wood Sandpiper			1		
Common Snipe	1				
Cream-colored Courser	1				
Rock Pigeon	1				
European Turtle-Dove	1				
Eurasian Collared-Dove	1				
Laughing Dove					1
Common Cuckoo	1				
Tawny Owl		1			
Alpine Swift	1				
Pallid Swift					1
Eurasian Hoopoe	1				
White-throated Kingfisher			1		
European Bee-eater	1	1	1	1	
European Roller	1		1		
Eurasian Wryneck		1			
Lesser Kestrel	1				
Eurasian Kestrel	1				
Red-footed Falcon	1				
Eleonora's Falcon	1				
Eurasian Hobby	1				
Red-backed Shrike	1				
Masked Shrike	1	1	1		
Woodchat Shrike			1		
Eurasian Jay	1				
Hooded Crow	1				
Common Raven	1				
Lesser Short-toed Lark	1				
Crested Lark	1		1		
Horned Lark					1
Bank Swallow	1		1		
Barn Swallow	1		1		
Red-rumped Swallow	1				
Common House-Martin	1		1		
Coal Tit					1
Eurasian Blue Tit					1
Great Tit	1				
Rock Nuthatch	1	1			
Eurasian Wren	1				
White-spectacled Bulbul	1	1			
Cetti's Warbler			1		
Willow Warbler	1	1	1		
Wood Warbler	1				
Moustached Warbler			1		
Graceful Prinia		1	1		
Lesser Whitethroat	1	1			
Sardinian Warbler	1	1	1	1	

Greater Whitethroat	1			1	
Spotted Flycatcher			1		
Thrush Nightingale			1		
Black Redstart	1	1			
Blue Rock-Thrush	1				
Whinchat	1				
Northern Wheatear	1				1
Isabelline Wheatear	1		1		
Eurasian Blackbird	1				
Palestine Sunbird	1				
Western Yellow Wagtail	1				
Tree Pipit	1				
Rock Bunting	1				
Ortolan Bunting	1				
Cretzschmar's Bunting	1				
Common Chaffinch	1				1
European Greenfinch	1			1	
Eurasian Siskin		1			
European Goldfinch	1		1	1	
Eurasian Linnet				1	
European Serin	1	1			
Syrian Serin				1	
House Sparrow	1	1		1	

Mammals

Species	Hima Hammana	Ras El-Matn	Ammiq Wetland	Anjar	enroute
Rock Hyrax		1			
Social Vole	1		1		1
Golden Jackal		1	1		
Red Fox		1			