

Is House Bunting about to colonise Europe?

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House Bunting *Emberiza striolata*, Tangier, Morocco, May 2006 (Keith Bensusan). Feeding on seed provided for them in the Tangier Medina. The only European record so far is of a male at Algeciras, southernmost Spain, in June 1987.

House Bunting *Emberiza striolata* breeds across North Africa and the Middle East to northwest India. In North Africa, the form *sahari* occurs from Mauritania to Egypt, often in close proximity to man, in cultivation and around villages and towns. In Morocco, it was found mainly in the south of the country until the 1950s, with breeding occurring north of the High Atlas at only a few localities (Thévenot *et al.* 2003), but since the 1960s, it has been expanding northwards. Thévenot *et al.* (2003) reported that it had reached as far north as Rabat, Fes, Meknes and Kenitra, but the species was not cited as a colonist of Tangier, where it was recorded only as a vagrant.

On 7th May 2006, one of the authors visited the Medina at Tangier, in northernmost Morocco, where he was surprised to find a healthy population of House Buntings, including dozens of singing males. On the 26th May, the authors all visited the Tangier Medina in search of the species, and they again found them, in similar numbers. Searches for the species were also carried out in Tetouan and Larache (also in northern Morocco), but these proved unsuccessful.

Although individuals and pairs were most commonly observed, the House Buntings at

Tangier were sometimes found in flocks of up to a dozen, particularly where food was available. The flock in the accompanying photograph was taken outside a barber shop in the Tangier Medina, where the barber feeds them on seed three times a day. The barber is very keen to show visitors his companions and takes great pride in caring for 'his' buntings.

In Tangier, House Buntings are best searched for around the old walls, ledges and rooftops of the Medina. It seems that the birds favour these rocky-type habitats and avoid the wires and television aerials that the House Sparrows frequent. The characteristic song of the male is an instant giveaway to its presence.

Tangier lies in northernmost Morocco, of course, only about 30km from southern Spain. The species has already occurred as a vagrant in Spain, but could it be about to colonise?

Reference

Thévenot, M., Vernon, R. & Bergier, P. 2003. *The Birds of Morocco, Ting.*

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