

Birding Algeria

21st -26th March 2019

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Introduction

Initially we started planning this trip in November 2018 with a view to visit both the north and south of the country. It was already established that visiting the **Algerian Nuthatch** site in the north was relatively straightforward. The posting in December 2018 by Kristina Klug of photographs of both **African Silverbill** and **Red-billed Firefinch** in the garden of Hotel Bois Petrifie in Tamanrasset in southern Algeria was confirmation that a combined trip was not only desirable but also possible!

We decided it would be best to fly into Algiers and link up with a guide there then use Air Algeria for an internal flight to Tamanrasset.

This report gives details of our six day trip to both north and south Algeria in March 2019.

Resources

There are very few recent trip reports to Algeria, with six present at the time of writing on the excellent www.cloudbirders.com/.

<http://www.magornitho.org> – excellent website detailing latest sightings and research papers in the Maghreb, including a [section on Algeria](#).

As ever we checked sightings beforehand on eBird.

Contacts and guides

Menad Beddek (menad.beddek@hotmail.com) was our guide for the north, as well as birds he is an expert in the reptiles and amphibians of Algeria. We paid a flat daily fee in euros which included the vehicle he drove, fuel, food and accommodation. He also supplied two sets of optics. We stayed in a bed and breakfast in Setif for our two nights, this worked well as a base. Menad knew a young local birder named Ishak Soukkou who took us into the BouAfroun forest and almost instantly without binoculars found us a pair of Algerian Nuthatch.

Mourad Harzallah. Menad arranged for us to meet up with Mourad and his colleague Aimene Boulaouad who took us to sites for Atlas Crossbill and White-headed Duck on the way back to Algiers. Mourad is a talented naturalist and also does trips for mammals and birds to the Djanet region.

Assikel Art et Tourisme, Tamanrasset. This company <https://www.assikel.com> (info@assikel.com) is run by Moulay and his brother Bachir. They provided a complete service from booking

accommodation in the Hotel Bois Petrifié, to sorting out the paperwork and arranging police escorts. They speak English and French. They were excellent and looked after us really well being very adaptable as obviously our itinerary was completely different to that undertaken by the usual tourists that they deal with.

Tips

A visa is required for Algeria. If visiting from the UK this currently cost £85. You need to send or personally hand in your passport and the numerous required documents and completed application form to the Algerian Consulate. It is important to start the visa process as early as possible. A key document that you require for a visa is a Certificate of Accommodation. Menad provided this for us. Note – take a printout of this document with you. One of our original participants was refused a visa as he had an Israeli stamp in his passport.

At the time of writing the exchange rate was 157 Algerian Dinar to the £ and 134 Algerian Dinar to the €. Both guides accepted euros in cash for payment.

Binoculars are officially forbidden in Algeria, as are telescopes, so you will need to develop the unusual skill of birding without optics! Large DSLR cameras and lenses are officially allowed but prepare for questions at the numerous scans in the airport. BS took a small 8x30 monocular he had bought on eBay and this got through all security checks without question.

The Nuthatch sites in the north are up in the mountains so it is best to have a couple of days there just in case you have bad weather, particularly if you are visiting in March or early April. It is useful to have the song of Algerian Nuthatch, as some birds are responsive and will sing back and come towards the call. Most stayed high in the canopy so for photos it is best to have a speaker at the bottom of a slope, with you and the camera at the top level with the bird.

In the south, tourists are required to have a police escort, including to and from the airport. It is free and presumably included in the price you pay to the agency. We did not have any problem with this, however it does restrict your birding time to between 9am and 5pm, so no dawn or dusk birding in the wadis. Our police escort put no restrictions on us wandering wherever we wanted.

All bird records for Algeria are very valuable. Most Algerian ornithologists use iNaturalist where they have created a common project "Oiseaux d'Algérie" which can be accessed via this link <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/oiseaux-d-algerie>. Records can be submitted along with a photograph. Otherwise for lists, visiting birders can use eBird which is reviewed by Karrim Haddad. Whatever method you use please send your records in!

When birding in the wadis in the south please be aware that these are very susceptible to flash floods. If it is raining or you can see heavy rain close by, it is best to get out of the bed of the wadi asap and on to the safer higher ground surrounding them.

Itinerary

20th March. Travel to London Gatwick, overnight at London Gatwick.

21st March. Early flight to Algiers, birding in Jardin D'Essai du Hamma in Algiers, then drive to Setif and overnight there.

22nd March. Early morning drive to BouAfron forest, birding in the wood then drive back to Setif.

23rd March. Early morning departure from Setif, birding at sites between Setif and Algiers.

24th March. Arrive very early morning into Tamanrasset Airport. Early morning birding in Hotel Bois Petrifie, then birding Oued Tamanrasset.

25th March. Early morning birding in Hotel Bois Petrifie, then birding in Oued Tit, an oued north of Tit, and Outoul.

26th March. Very early morning flight from Tamanrasset to Algiers, then onwards flight to London Gatwick.

Key sites

Jardin D'Essai du Hamma. A historic garden complex from French colonial times, which is accessed off the main road running along the coast between the airport and the centre of Algiers. It is a reliable site for Rose-ringed Parakeet (ssp. *krameri*). Park at the entrance (35.7512088, 3.0754188), best area seemed to be at 36.7468525, 3.0736124, although in theory they should be easy throughout the park.

BouAfroun Forest. This is a mature deciduous wood, and is one of the strongholds of Algerian Nuthatch. Levaillant's Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker (ssp. *numidus*), Black-capped Jay (ssp. *cervicalis*), Coal Tit (ssp. *ledouci*) and Short-toed Treecreeper (ssp. *mauritanica*) are also present.

Atlas Crossbill site (36.068708, 4.499243). A vegetated gully by the N5 road 10km west of El Achir. We quickly found a family of Atlas Crossbill feeding in the *Pinus nigra* trees. Also present at this site was Tristram's Warbler, with at least four singing males having freshly arrived from their wintering areas.

Barrage Medjana (36.104210, 4.685373) A large reservoir NE of El Achir, which holds a variety of waterfowl, including White-headed Duck.

Hotel Bois Petrifie (22.803524, 5.512413 note this location is accurate, the one on Google maps is not!). One of the main hotels in Tamanrasset, the garden is accessed through the hotel and consists of a few small trees and open areas. Red-billed Firefinch were recorded in the trees, as well as seen feeding on the grass seeds on the ground.

Assikel, Art et Tourisme (22.788247, 5.523742). This is the office of the company with their hotel next door. The garden is accessed through the office and consists of a small cultivated area and several large trees. Red-billed Firefinch were recorded in small numbers in the trees during an evening visit, the owner told us a lot more were present early morning usually.

Oued Tamanrasset. (22.721909, 5.468034) This is the oued that runs through the town before heading southwest through the rocky desert. Unfortunately it is now also the main outfall of the town's semi-treated sewage water. It is the main site for African Silverbill.

Oued Tit. This oued is crossed by the main road north of Tamanrasset. We drove west up the wadi and parked at 22.963220, 5.190081. At the time of our visit water was flowing in the oued to the west of here, so we followed the water down for approximately 1km. We also birded the oued next to the road, birding both sides of the road.

Key species

Algerian Nuthatch. There are five known sites for Algerian Nuthatch, these are detailed in articles on MaghrebOrnitho:

- <http://www.magornitho.org/2017/11/algerian-nuthatch-guerrouch-forest/>
- <http://www.magornitho.org/2018/10/new-breeding-site-algerian-nuthatch/>
- <http://www.magornitho.org/2018/10/trip-new-algerian-nuthatch-site/>

We visited BouAfroun forest, where the nuthatches were widespread inside the mature deciduous oak wood.

Atlas Flycatcher. We visited too early for this species which hadn't returned from wintering grounds. The wood of BouAfroun which we visited for the nuthatch also holds this species between mid-April and early September.

Red-billed Firefinch. This species is widespread in Tamanrasset, we saw it in the gardens of the Hotel Bois Petrifié and the garden of Assikel Art et Tourisme. As with all the desert species, activity is greatest early morning or in the evening. We also found this species at Outoul.

African Silverbill. This species has been reported from Tamanrasset city before, but we did not see it here at all. However it was widespread and was the commonest species in Oued Tamanrasset and Oued Tit; we also recorded small numbers at Outoul.

Rose-ringed Parakeet. This is the African subspecies (ssp. *krameri*) which was introduced into the Jardin D'Essai du Hamma and escaped and is now widespread throughout the Algiers area, see Fellous, A. Moulai, R. & Jacob, JP. (2005). Introduction et nidification de la Perruche à collier (*Psittacula krameri*) en Algérie. Aves 42: 272-277.

Daily Log

21st March. Arrived in Algiers at 1235, but got stopped by police at passport control. There was a problem as although we had sent all the required documentation to the Algerian Consulate to get the visa we had not brought a printed Certificate of Accommodation with us. I sent a text to Menad, who was waiting in the airport for us and he managed to get in to where we were being 'held' and tried to explain where we were staying. Luckily Sam found an image of the certificate on his phone so eventually our passports were returned to us and we were allowed to proceed. Our bags were then scanned and they found the cameras, so there was much negotiation before we got them through.

Eventually got out of the terminal to find it was windy, cloudy and a bit wet! Decided to head towards the centre of Algiers to Jardin D'Essai du Hamma, a botanic garden for our first bit of birding. The gardens held a good number of birds – **Woodpigeon, Laughing Dove, Blackbird, African Blue Tit, Great Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper** (ssp. *mauritanica*), **Blackcap, Common Bulbul** and **Rose-ringed Parakeets**. The parakeets in Algiers are of the African sub-species *krameri*, which is a potential split, hence our interest in seeing these birds. After getting a snack of crepes (with chocolate sauce and banana!) we began our journey east to Setif.

Being a Thursday evening and the start of the spring holiday the road was very busy so the journey took us just over six hours, rather than the three and a half hours it should have taken. We arrived in Setif at 2315 and had a nice meal before bed.

22nd March. After a good breakfast headed northeast out of Setif. We passed through an open agricultural area seeing roadside **Crested Larks**, a **Calandra Lark**, and **Corn Buntings**. As we climbed up into the hills we came across **European Stonechat** and a couple of nice male **Moussier's Redstarts**. The cloud base appeared to be lifting which was good news.

Our first stop was at 36.556346N, 5.830208E just west of Djimla in the Babor Mountains. Walked up through some scrub, seeing **Barbary Partridge**, **Song Thrush**, **Robin** and **Cirl Bunting** before getting into the oak forest. Here we had good views of three very showy **Levaillant's Woodpecker** and **Coal Tit** of the distinctive local race *ledouci*. We also accidentally flushed an **African Long-legged Buzzard** (now regarded as just a [race of Common Buzzard](#)) off its nest in a large oak. We heard a nuthatch but could not locate it.

Meanwhile Menad had contacted local birder Ishak Soukkou so we decided to head towards Djimla to meet up with him. We followed Ishak to his house just below the BouAfroun Forest at 36.568481N, 5.899562E and walked up the slope and into the forest. Almost immediately Ishak located a pair of **Algerian Nuthatch** on the limb of an oak tree (36.56669N, 5.89536E). The male gave us long prolonged views as it worked on excavating a nesting hole. As we walked through this superb forest we saw at least another four birds. The forest held good numbers of **African Blue Tit**, **Great Tit**, *ledouci* **Coal Tit**, *mauritanica* **Short-toed Treecreeper** and *africana* **Chaffinch**. Other birds seen included **Mistle Thrush**, more **Levaillant's Woodpeckers**, the local race *numidus* of **Great Spotted Woodpecker** with its very distinctive red breast band and several **Eurasian Jays** of the equally distinctive local race *cervicalis*. Above the forest we had flyover **Common Kestrel**, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Common Raven**.

As we walked back down through an open scrubby area towards Ishak's house we saw **Woodlark**, several **Wrens** and a **Wryneck**. The cloud had broken a bit giving us good views of the hills before it closed in again. It was then time to begin the return journey to Setif. About 60km northeast of the town in an area of hills the cloud broke up initiating a bit of raptor activity with **Marsh Harrier**, **Black Kite**, a **Red Kite** and a **Booted Eagle** all soaring above us. Got back into Setif at 1900 and after another nice meal took a walk down into the old colonial part of this rapidly expanding town.

23rd March. After another good breakfast said goodbye to our very welcoming hosts and began the journey back west. Sam had a list of target species he was keen to see and Menad had contacted some local birders for some up to date gen. We headed to El Achir where we met up with Mourad Harzallah and Aimene Boulaouad. They took us to a gully at 36.070358N, 4.502355E on the N5 10km west of the town. In an area of low pines on the west slope of the gully we soon located a family party of **Atlas Crossbill** (*ssp poliogyna*), quite distinctive with their massive bills. In the scrub below the pines we found at least four singing **Tristram's Warblers**, also **Sardinian Warbler**, many **Serins** and **Cirl Bunting**. Walked back up to the road where we got close views of a pair of **Golden Eagle** (an adult and a sub-adult) sitting together on a low power line pylon.

Returned to El Achir and went to a local restaurant for a very nice traditional Algerian meal. Then drove north to Barrage Medjana (36.103732N, 4.684868E). Parked north of the lake and walked down a track through an agricultural area seeing **Hoopoe**, **Great Grey Shrike** (*ssp algeriensis*), **Skylark** and **Corn Bunting**. The track crossed a rocky outcrop and here we had a **Thekla Lark**. At the north end of the northern inlet of the lake there was an outflow creating a wet area which held **Grey Heron** and a **Green Sandpiper**. In amongst the reeds and grasses there were several *iberiae* **Yellow Wagtails**, **Meadow Pipits**, a **Chiffchaff**, a **Song Thrush** plus a few **Spanish Sparrows** amongst the **House Sparrows**. In a compound near the lake we flushed a pair of **Barbary Partridge** and found a small flock of **Linnet**.

Out on the lake a variety of wildfowl comprised c20 **Black-necked Grebes**, 6 **Common Shelduck**, many **Mallard**, 12 **Garganey**, 4 **Shoveler**, 9 **Ferruginous Ducks**, 18 **White-headed Ducks** and many **Common Coot**. Over the lake was a large flock of swifts, mostly **Pallid Swifts**, but with some **Common Swifts** and two **Alpine Swifts**. There were also lots of *hirundines*, mainly **Barn Swallows**, with some **House Martins** and a couple of **Sand Martins**. A **Marsh Harrier** flushed several **Green Sandpipers** as it hunted along the lake edge.

Returned to El Achir and went for refreshments in a local café before saying goodbye to Mourad and Aimene who had been excellent companions. Menad drove us back to Algiers airport where we had a long wait for our 2300 flight to Tamanrasset. Menad had been an excellent guide and had looked after us extremely well.

24th March. We arrived at Tamanrasset at 0310 and were met by Moulay of the Assikel Art et Tourisme Agency. There was a bit of a delay before our police escort was available to accompany us to Hotel Bois Petrifie on the edge of town. We grabbed a few hours sleep before getting up at 0700 to check the hotel garden. Almost immediately we found **Red-billed Firefinches**, there were probably c25 in the garden. We got superb close views. Birds were courtship feeding, copulating and nest building. Also present in the garden were **Laughing Doves**, **Rock Martins**, **White-crowned Black Wheatears**, **Saharan Eastern Olivaceous Warblers** (in full song) and **House Buntings**.

Got picked up by our driver at 0830 after breakfast and were driven to the Tourism Office in order to get our police escort. The earliest you can get this is 0900. Whilst we waited an adult **Egyptian Vulture** drifted over. After much discussion it was decided that as we were just 'staying' in Tamanrasset we would not need a police escort. We drove south through the town, passing the livestock market to a small wadi at 22.754225N, 5.501377E. There was a small pool with a **Moorhen** and a **Grey Heron**, so we got out to check what else was about. We immediately found a flock of about 15 **African Silverbill** coming in to drink which gave superb close views. Walked up the wadi for a few hundred metres finding a **Desert Lark** and some **Brown-necked Ravens**.

Continued south and took a track that cut across the rocky desert to 22.737674N, 5.462720E where we were dropped off in Oued Tamanrasset along with a young local who was to accompany us. We began to walk down the wadi and quickly realised that **African Silverbills** were probably the commonest species (200+ seen) – we even saw a few nests in the tamarisks. Also present in good numbers were **Laughing Doves**, **Fulvous Babblers**, **White-crowned Black Wheatears** (moula moula in the local Tuareg language), **Saharan Eastern Olivaceous Warblers**, **House Buntings** and a few **Rufous-tailed Bush Robins**. There is a lot of water in this wadi, mainly waste water from the town. The pools held some **Moorhen** and on the edges **Yellow Wagtails**. In a small reed bed there were four singing **African Reed Warblers**. There were surprisingly few migrants – some **Turtle Doves**, two **Hoopoe**, a **Subalpine Warbler**, a few **Barn Swallow**, a **Sand Martin**, with **Booted Eagle** and **Black Kite** overhead. We eventually arrived at a ford at 22.721807N, 5.468599E where we met up again with the vehicle.

Continued down the wadi to a village at 22.675445N, 5.436097E where we parked under some large trees and had our lunch. Migrants in the trees comprised a **Common Redstart** and a **Western Orphean Warbler**. There were also a few **Great Grey Shrikes** of the race *elegans*, one chasing a silverbill, and a **Woodchat Shrike**. Along the river were lots of **Yellow Wagtails**, mostly *flava*, but also 2 *feldegg* and a *thunbergi*. Checked the village and surrounding area but did not find much new to add to the list. Despite this remote location we felt perfectly safe, everyone appeared to be very friendly and we were not hassled at all.

Returned to Tamanrasset. Failed in our attempt to access the water treatment works. Eventually got back to hotel at 1700. It had been a super day. It had been surprisingly cloudy so the heat

had not been overbearing. In the evening we were taken to Bachir's house where we had a lovely meal of couscous and camel meat.

25th March. Up early to recheck the hotel garden and get more gripping photographs of the firefinches. At 0830 we returned to the Tourism Office. After a while our escort – two jeeps containing armed gendarmes arrived. We headed north up to Oued Tit and drove up the wadi to a site at 22.963220N, 5.190081E. The escorts were quite happy to let us wander further up the wadi. Once again **African Silverbills** were abundant in the scrubby areas along with **Fulvous Babblers, Sahara Eastern Olivaceous Warblers, Laughing Doves** and some **Eurasian Collared Doves**. Migrants were again surprisingly scarce with only a **Sedge Warbler**, a **Sub-alpine Warbler**, a **Sardinian Warbler** and four **Bluethroats**, though along the river there was a scattering of **Yellow Wagtails**. Birds were coming in to drink including a **Booted Eagle, Desert Lark**, many **House Buntings**, but best of all five **Spotted Sandgrouse** and a single **Crowned Sandgrouse** that dropped in very close to Sam. Along the rocky edge of the wadi were many Rock Hyrax and the ubiquitous **White-crowned Black Wheatears**.

We drove back down to the main road and checked the area east of the road. In the scrub **Turtle Doves, Great Grey Shrikes**, another **Woodchat Shrike**, more **African Silverbills, Fulvous Babblers** and a few **Rufous-tailed Bush Robins**. Overhead we had **Barn Swallows, 4 Red-rumped Swallows**, a **House Martin** and a **Sand Martin**. It was now very hot and sunny. Stopped in the shade to cool down and get some lunch.

After lunch drove further north to a wadi at 23.063586N, 5.193458E which had looked good on Google Earth. Unfortunately the vegetation comprised tamarisks rather than acacias so it was fairly birdless, though we did flush a small group of five **Little Egrets**. Thankfully the cloud was building up and it was getting a bit cooler.

We decided to head back south and stop by some gardens/fields at Outoul, where our driver and escorts arranged access for us. In the irrigated garden we had c25 **Red-billed Firefinches** (these were the only ones we found outside Tamanrasset). The fields contained a **Marsh Harrier**, a few **Hoopoe**, a **Northern Wheatear**, the usual **Fulvous Babblers, Great Grey Shrikes** and **Rufous-tailed Bush Robins**, as well as several **African Silverbills**. An **Egyptian Vulture** flew over.

Our escorts informed us we had to return to Tamanrasset and once there we went straight to Bachir's house for a welcome cup of tea, then a shower. Later Bachir took us into the town centre where we visited the first permanent building established in Tamanrasset built by a French missionary/spy in 1908. We then witnessed some traditional singing and dancing complete with guns blasting in celebration of three weddings that were taking place later that evening. Returned to Bachir's for yet another delicious traditional Tuareg meal.

26th March. Just after midnight Moulay arrived to take us to the police station to get our police escort back to the airport. There was then a long wait for our 0325 Air Algeria flight back to Algiers, where we arrived at 0555. A long wait followed, prior to our BA flight to London Gatwick. I took a wander around outside the terminal building, mostly a very busy car park but I did manage to see two **Greenfinch** which was a new species for the trip list. Our flight eventually left on time at 1335.

The trip was a great success with excellent views of all the key target species. Our guides were excellent and it was great meeting up with some local Algerian birders. In all we saw 97 different species.