

Algeria

Constantine and Djimla Forest

7 October 2018



Algeria Nuthatch, *Sitta ledanti*, relatively common at Djimla Forest

Inspired by the flood of recent reports from birders visiting Algeria for its one endemic, the **Algerian Nuthatch**, *Sitta ledanti*, I contacted the resident expert, Karim Haddad, and hopped on a plane with the hope of joining the growing number of fellow enthusiasts to see this enigmatic little bird.

Although brief, the combination of easy birding, good company and excellent logistics made my first visit to Algeria an exceedingly pleasant one. I would highly recommend the trip to Constantine, even if for a quick weekend tour.

I especially thank Lonnie Bregman for his report of 1-3 June 2018 and whom I contacted prior to travel by email for details of the guiding services provided by Karim (contact details at end of this report).

Saturday, 6 October

I took an evening flight to Constantine from Algiers on Air Algérie (Euro 40 return – one hour). Easy and on-time: there are five domestic flights per day. I had made arrangements with Karim prior to arrival in Algeria for a one-day all-inclusive birding tour. Other birders have noted the restrictions in Algeria on foreigners bringing binoculars into the country. I therefore (very) reluctantly left my trust Zeiss at home in Bissau on the proviso that Karim would provide me with bins for the tour (which he did).

On my arrival at 19:00, Karim was waiting for me and whisked me off for a delicious Maghrebian meal with his family at his home in Constantine. By 22:00, I was installed at the downtown Ibis Hotel for the night.

Sunday, 7 October

Karim collected me at 04:00am for our drive to the Djimla Forest for the Nuthatch. He was bang on time and we stopped *en route* for coffee and croissants at a local pâtisserie.

As we climbed into higher country (up to 2000m asl), we halted at a roadside pile of boulders at what was Karim's reliable site for **Moussier's Redstart**, *Phoenicurus moussieri*, a life bird for me:



There appeared to be small family of Redstarts, at least two males and three females hopping onto and around the broken debris of rocks removed for road construction.

Further up the road, and close to our destination, I spotted perched on a power line, **Long-legged Buzzard**, *Buteo rufinus* of the North African subspecies *cirtensis* (with characteristic rufous belly and trousers):

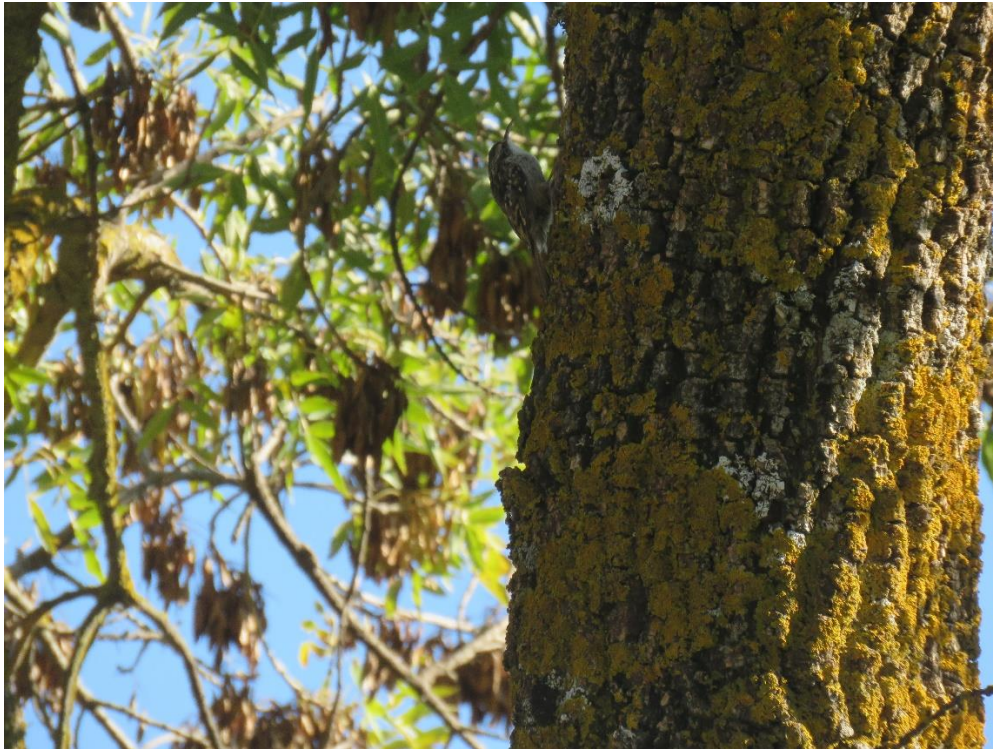


Interestingly, the moniker *cirtensis*, refers to the original name of Constantine, the Roman city of *Cirta* (later re-named in honour of the first Christian Emperor, Constantine).

At 10:00am on the dot, we arrived at the bottom parking area of Djimla Forest. From there, it is a 15 minute steepish hike up the slope and into the forest. We were blessed with cool, sunny weather:



It was not long before we heard the characteristic chirrrr of nuthatches; although my first birds were a false alarm they being, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, *Certhia brachydactyla* of the subspecies *mauritana*:



But it was not long before we were on to a small party of perhaps 5-6 nuthatches feeding furtively in the grooves of the native species of Cork Oak:



By the end of the morning, Karim estimated we had seen up to twenty Nuthatches (the only resident *Sitella* in Algeria):



The main target easily nailed, we settled into some relaxed birding in the sublimely beautiful reserve:



During our walk along the trails we encountered three species of Tit all of North African subspecies:

. **Great Tit**, *Parus major excelsus*

. **Coal Tit**, *Periparus ater ledouci*

. **African Blue Tit**, *Cyanistes teneriffae ultramarinus*

We also heard three species of woodpecker: Lesser Spotted & Levillant's, but only got views of the distinctive *numidus* subspecies of **Greater Spotted Woodpecker**, *Dendrocopos major*:



A very vocal **Woodlark**, *Lullula arborea*, caught our attention, wondering if it had got the seasons wrong:





Eurasian Jays, of the dark-crowned subspecies of northern Algeria and Tunisia, *cervicalis*, were common (and garrulous!), but kept to thick cover and we only managed fleeting flight views. We also managed to connect with **Atlas Flycatcher**, *Ficedula speculigera*, but only one female bird; it seemed that all males had fully migrated south by October. Other more common birds seen were: **Mistle Thrush**, *Turdus viscivorus*; **Common Blackbird**, *Turdus merula*; **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, *Accipiter nisus*; **Common Raven**, *Corvus corax*; and **Whinchat**, *Saxicola rubicola*.

In order to preserve time to visit other areas (and to have lunch), we abandoned the forest at 11:30am and headed back north to Constantine. On our way back to the car, we could hear several Sardinian Warblers calling in more open wooded areas:



Next stop was the botanic garden just outside Constantine:



Here we hoped to get views of **Levaillant's Green Woodpecker**, *Picus vaillantii*, and we were not disappointed with one obliging and handsome male seen inside the park:





The park was also home to many **Chaffinch**, *Fringilla coelebs*, of the striking subspecies, *africana*:



African Chaffinch, male (at left) and female

Other more common birds seen in the park were: **Mallard**, *Anas platyrhynchos*; **Coot**, *Fulica atra*; **Little Grebe**, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*; **Common Moorhen**, *Gallinula chloropus*; **Cattle Egret**, *Bubulcus ibis*; **Kestrel**, *Falco tinnuculus*; **Wood Pigeon**, *Columba palumbus*; **Eurasian Collared Dove**, *Streptopelia decaocto*; **Eurasian Wren**, *troglodytes troglodytes*; **Firecrest**, *Regulus ignicapilla*; **Sardinian Warbler**, *Sylvia melanocephala*; **Common Blackbird**, *Turdus merula*; **Robin**, *Erithacus rubecula*; **Spotted Flycatcher**, *Muscicapa striata*; **Spectacled Warbler**, *Sylvia conspicillata*; and **Common Bulbul**, *Pycononotus barbatus barbatus*:



Common Bulbul

With the sun setting, Karim responsibly called a halt to our expedition and drove me to the airport for my evening return flight to Algiers. It had been a great day.

Contact: I can highly recommend Karim as an amiable and knowledgeable bird guide. In addition to other duties, he acts as the reviewer for Ebird Algeria. His contacts:

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Karim and his family have plans to set-up accommodations in the upper storey of their home, which would enable birders to get early and more comfortable starts to the Nuthatch sites. He also proudly displays a small private museum of natural curiosities for the visiting birder and is an avid numismatist (bring along some coins and banknotes from unusual places and he will be much appreciative).



Karim in studied avian observation mode



A view of the rugged mountains surrounding the Djimla Nuthatch site

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