

A report of a birding trip to Tunisia that I did not intend to write

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Introduction

This is actually a report of a combined family / birding trip to Tunisia that I did not necessarily want to write. However, for a birder, I experienced a great disappointment so I had to do so.

After having visited Carthago (near Tunis) in April 2009 for one day during a Mediterranean trip we decided to visit Tunisia for a longer time. We thus visited Sousse during the autumn break in October 2022 through Enfidha-Hammamet International Airport. October is of course a great month to witness bird migration so I had high hopes to make some interesting observations. However, the holiday started off rather disappointingly as, upon arrival in Sousse, I learned that not one but two new bird species had been reported that day that would have been to my Dutch list. One of these proved twitchable but was gone when I returned home a week later: a Yellow-browed Bunting. However, that was not my biggest disappointment.

Custom laws

Birders should be aware of some peculiar custom rules. One of these is that Tunisian currency cannot be imported nor exported. This is quite strongly enforced. Furthermore, and as noted on many websites, drones cannot be brought to Tunisia: these will be confiscated and returned on your day of departure.

Most importantly though for a birder, it is apparently forbidden to bring 'professional' binoculars into the country. I use the word apparently because this is not noted on any websites but assume it is the truth. As you will guess by now, my binoculars were judged to be professional which meant they were confiscated! I was told that they would be returned on my day of departure (which indeed proved to be the case). I was furthermore told that happened about once a week at Enfidha-Hammamet International Airport. Thus, Tunisia has the same set of rules as neighbouring country Algeria. The only difference is that birders warn each other for this rule in the case of Algeria but that this rule is apparently unknown in the case of Tunisia. After returning home, where I did a thorough search on internet, I found only one other case: in 2014 a tourist mentioned that his binoculars were confiscated at Djerba airport. I thus think that I was unlucky considering that not every birder is affected. Is this difference due to the fact that many birders seem to arrive through Tunis airport? All this leads me to wonder if these differences are due to the airport of arrival. In any case, I would not recommend to arrive through Enfidha-Hammamet International Airport.

Itinerary

Fri 21 October: arrival at Enfidha-Hammamet International Airport in Tunisia with my binoculars confiscated. Not a nice start. Signed a paper stating it would be returned on my day of departure. Transfer to Hotel Mahaba Beach in Sousse. Without binoculars, not willing to identify birds.

Sat 22 October: whole day around the hotel. Identified some birds that were the most tame. Tour operator staff promised to do utmost best to get me a replacement pair of binoculars.

Sun 23 October: walked along the beach but remained at the hotel for the other part of the day. Booked a trip with a pirate ship to see dolphins in the hope that this would be good value.

Mon 24 October: Tour operator brought me a pair of binoculars! Obviously not a professional pair as the lens in the right tube was not working which made viewing a bit awkward. In time also for the boat ride for which we left by bus at 9:00 that took us to the naval harbour at Monastir (I note with some irony). I observed some birds in the salt pans we passed. The pirate boat left at 10:00 but

was a big disappointment: imagine a crowded housemusic boat searching for dolphins... We succeeded seeing two Bottlenose Dolphins *Tursiops truncatus* that are present around some fish farms off shore. Tried in the afternoon to set up a trip to the southern desert for Pharaoh Eagle Owl, one of the few Western Palearctic species I still have not seen. I talked to Tunisian bird guide Mohammed-Ali Dakhli (ma.dakhli at planet.tn) through email and phone. He could unfortunately not join me but gave me some good info on the owl near Chenini.

Tue 25 October: arranged a rental car via the hotel: 35 EUR per 24 hours. Left Sousse at around noon. Drive was longer than anticipated as the highway was closed from Gabes onwards which meant I had to travel on secondary roads to Medenine and from there onwards to Tataouine. Arrival in the dark but scanned the area of Chenini for the site. After that, pizza for 11.000 dinar and check-in at Hotel Mabrouk at Tataouine (opposite Tataouine's Earth Memory Museum) for 60.000 dinar a night.

Wed 26 October: at site in early morning. No sign of the eagle owl unfortunately but still some nice birds. Highlights were a family of Fulvous Babbler and a Greater Hoopoe-lark. From 08:30, I had breakfast at the Mabrouk hotel where a House Bunting kept me company. After that, it was already time to drive north towards Sousse, via Guermasa (via the back road starting at circa 5 km from Chenini), Ghomrassen, Kasr Hadar and Beni Khedache. Lost my way to Kasr Hallouf a bit but found it in the end. From there to Tichine and Matmata. From Matmata back to Sousse.



Scenery in southern Tunisia. Left: Guermasa, right: Chenini. 26 October 2022

Thu 27 October: in the morning I visited the salt marsh and open water of Sebkhah el-Menzel between Sousse and Hergla. Most birds to be seen in the ponds of Aquaculture Tunisienne east of the road (viewable from the shoulder). Not very many birds so decided to bird the premises of the international golf course of El Kantaoui because I was still missing the local blue tit and the African chaffinch (although I had seen both in April 2009; see appendix). However, also here, binoculars were “interdit”, even my non-professional pair, and no luck with both.

Fri 28 October: I handed in my non-professional binoculars to the tour operator and my own was returned at the airport. We left for the Netherlands at around noon.



The in-house House Bunting (left) of Hotel Mabrouk in Tataouine (right). 26 October 2022

Birding list

As stated above, this was not primarily a birding trip. Also, I missed several target species like the blue tit and chaffinch. Finally, I did not write down most of the heard-only birds. The following list is thus rather an at random list.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*
Common during the whole trip.

Laughing Dove *Spilopelia senegalensis phoenicophila*
Common but not seen in the desert.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus chloropus*
24 October: two during the bus ride between Sousse and Monastir.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra atra*
24 October: circa 20 during the bus ride between Sousse and Monastir.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*
24 October: two during the bus ride between Sousse and Monastir.
27 October: circa 300 at Sebkhahalk el-Menzel.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
24 October: circa 10 during the bus ride between Sousse and Monastir.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola squatarola*
27 October: one at Sebkhahalk el-Menzel.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula ssp.*

27 October: two at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*

27 October: two at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

22 October: heard from the hotel garden at Sousse. A fly-by over sea.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

27 October: one at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

24 October: circa 10 in Monastir harbour.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis michahellis*

Regularly observed along the coast of Sousse and Monastir.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo hirundo*

24 October: two during boat ride from Monastir harbour.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*

24 October: five at Monastir harbour and a flight of 30 during the boat ride.

27 October: circa 20 at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea cinerea*

24 October: one in Monastir harbour.

27 October: circa 20 at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Great Egret *Ardea alba alba*

27 October: circa 10 at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel.

Little Owl *Athene noctua saharae*

26 October: the first bird I saw that day in front of the hotel.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*

Our hotel in Sousse had its own breeding pair that I saw almost daily.

Desert Grey Shrike *Lanius elegans ssp.*

26 October: six along the roads in the desert, including in several villages. Ssp. *elegans*.

27 October: three in northern Sousse and at Sebkha Halk el-Menzel. Suddenly, one also at the hotel.

Ssp. *algeriensis*.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax tingitanus*

26 October: three along the highway near Sfax.

Greater Hoopoe-Lark *Alaemon alaudipes alaudipes*

26 October: one briefly seen and heard at the Chenini owl-site.

Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti algeriensis*

26 October: one just east of Chenini.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata arenicola*

I saw many *Galerida*-lariks on both dates but I did not identify Thekla's Lark *G. theklae*.

26 October: at least 10 identified during the day.

27 October: two at Sebkhahalk el-Menzel.

Fulvous Babbler *Argya fulva fulva*

26 October: a family group of three at the Chenini owl-site.

Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*

Common. A night roost was situated in the front of our hotel.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula mauritanicus*

Up to 10 near our hotel at Sousse. A night roost was situated in the front of our hotel.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula ssp.*

27 October: one at the El Kantaoui-golf course and one at the hotel.

Moussier's Redstart *Phoenicurus moussieri*

26 October: two males between Guermasa and Tichine.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius solitarius*

26 October: two during the drive in the desert.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola ssp.*

26 October: a male between Kasr Hallouf and Tichine.

27 October: a male at Sebkhahalk el-Menzel.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti homochroa*

26 October: a female between Chenini and Guermasa.

Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura riggenbachi*

26 October: the commonest bird during the drive in the desert.

White-crowned Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga leucopyga*

26 October: circa five around Chenini including the owl-site.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia barbara*

26 October: one between Kasr Hallouf and Tichine.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis hispaniolensis*

The commonest species. A loud night roost was situated in the front of our hotel.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea ssp.*

22 October: one seen at the hotel at Sousse.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba ssp.*

22 October: one heard at the hotel at Sousse.

26 October: one just east of Chenini and three at the gas stop along the highway at El Jem.

27 October: one heard at Sebkhahalk el-Menzel.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris voousi*

27 October: eight flying by to their night roost at our hotel.

House Bunting *Emberiza sahari sahari*

26 October: one inside the hotel breakfast room at Tataouine.

Mammal list

Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*

24 October: two during boat ride from Monastir harbour.

Appendix

Bird species seen during April 2009 in Carthago and Tunis (see separate trip report on my Mediterranean cruises).

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*, Eurasian Collared Dove, Laughing Dove, Yellow-legged Gull, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*, Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*, Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, African Blue Tit *Cyanistes teneriffae*, Common Bulbul *Pycnonotus barbatus*, Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*, Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, Spotless Starling, Common Blackbird, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Spanish Sparrow, African Chaffinch *Fringilla africana spodiogenys*, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* and European Serin *Serinus serinus*.