

News & Letters — Nouvelles & Lettres

Bird atlas of Mauritania: request for information

A new annotated checklist of the birds of Mauritania has been published but without distribution maps. Bruno Walther and I aim to fill the gap with an atlas and kindly request ornithologists and birders to send records to me at the email address below.

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Reviews — Revues

Oiseaux de Mauritanie — Birds of Mauritania, by P. Isenmann, M. Benmergui, P. Browne, A.D. Ba, C.H. Diagana, Y. Diawara & Z.E.A.ould Sidaty (2010). 408 pp. Société d'Etudes Ornithologiques de France, Paris. ISBN 2-916802-02-9 (paperback), €38.

Although covered mostly by desert, Mauritania is very interesting for ornithologists. It is a region where the Afrotropical and Palaearctic meet, as shown for example by the sympatric breeding of species like the African Grey Woodpecker *Dendropicos goertae* and the Palaearctic Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* near the oasis of Ouadâne. Furthermore Mauritania is of utmost importance for Palaearctic migrants. The Parc National du Banc d'Arguin stands out as a stopover and wintering site for waders along the East Atlantic Flyway, as does the Parc National du Diawling in the valley of the Senegal River with the only known breeding site of Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconais minor* in West Africa. Both regions are also important as breeding sites for herons, gulls and terns. The Banc d'Arguin is unique in Africa by hosting a combined number of 25,000 to 50,000 breeding pairs of 16 species including an endemic subspecies of the Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia balsaci* and an endemic heron *Ardea monicae*. The southern fringe of the desert and oases within it are important refuelling areas for migrating birds especially in spring before crossing the desert. However, previous species lists of the birds of Mauritania were either out of date, of a preliminary character or were difficult to obtain, and a comprehensive work dealing with the avifauna of the entire country was wanting. This has changed with the publication of this new book by Paul Isenmann and his co-workers.

The informative introduction covers the geography and climate of the country, the history of ornithology and the biogeographical affinities of breeding birds, followed by an account on Palaearctic-Afrotropical migration in Mauritania. In these chapters the readers are informed that some 155 species have been found breeding in the country, that the great majority of passerine migrants across the Sahara stops during the day and migrates during the night whereas in larger non-passerines the migration strategy varies according to species, and that the Banc d'Arguin alone hosts 50 % of all the waders wintering in Africa. Conservation problems are also mentioned. General problems include habitat degradation by wood-cutting and the invasion of cattail following the permanent flooding of large areas of the Senegal delta. Specific examples in the species accounts include the probable extinction of the Ostrich *Struthio camelus* and the decline in numbers of several bustard species due to hunting.

As usual for this kind of book, the introduction is followed by the annotated checklist, where all 506 bird species that have been convincingly recorded in the country are described. It is a great advantage that all texts in the book are in both French and English. The species accounts are informative and vary in length according to the knowledge that exists about each species. The authors exhaustively compiled all available information about birds in the country; an immense effort that is reflected in the bibliography at the end of the book, which is itself a valuable resource. More extensive accounts are divided by subheadings such as "breeding" and "nesting data", or "wintering" and "origin" (for migrants). There are no distribution maps, but these should not be expected for such a large country in which only a few regions have been visited by ornithologists regularly and vast areas not at all. The book is made more attractive by numbers of colour plates that intersperse the text, with photographs taken mainly by Maurice Benmergui.

The main species list is followed by a list of 86 species that have been previously reported for the country but which were excluded from the main list due to insufficient documentation. This is warranted for the majority of the mentioned species and increases the reliability of the information of the book. However, some of these species, such as Little Crake *Porzana parva* and Red-chested Swallow *Hirundo lucida*, will probably be recorded for Mauritania in the future as they are observed more or less regularly in the Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj in Senegal (pers. obs.), just south of the Senegal River, the border between the two countries. It is however not clear why some of these species are not listed under the following list of species that occur nearby in Senegal.

In conclusion, this is a book that all ornithologists interested in the avifauna of West Africa have long been waiting for. It fulfils the first of its tasks mentioned in the introduction, to reflect adequately the present state of knowledge of the birds in Mauritania. Let us hope that it will also fulfil its second task, to promote the study and protection of birds in the country.