

Brown-throated Martins breeding at lower Loukkos, north-western Morocco, in winter of 2007/08

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Brown-throated Martin (or Plain Martin) *Riparia paludicola* breeds across Africa south of the Sahara and southern Asia, with an isolated population in Morocco. Seven subspecies differing in size and plumage tones are recognised (Turner & Rose 1989), although the southern Asian subspecies is elevated to full-species status in some recent treatments, as Grey-throated Martin *R chinensis* (eg, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). The subspecies *R p mauritanica* is endemic to Morocco (Turner & Rose 1989) and comprises the sole population in

the Western Palaearctic (Cramp 1988).

In Morocco, the species was found primarily around rivers as Oued Oum Er-Rbia (north of El-Jadida) and Oued Tensift (south of Safi) and, up to 1960, south in the Souss region (Thévenot et al 2003). Then, the species started to expand its breeding range inland along valleys to as far as Marrakech and in the Souss valley to Taroudant and Aoulouz. It also bred in the lower Massa valley and to the north it reached the Sebou valley in the 1960s. During the 1970s, it spread along the Sebou valley and its tributaries to reach as far as Khémisset, Sidi Slimane, Fes el-Bali, Taza and Khenichet (Thévenot et al 2003). The latter locality constitutes the most north-westerly part of the species' known range in Morocco (Thévenot et al 2003).

Observations at lower Loukkos

On 2 November 2007, Mohamed Amezian, Abdelhak Elbanak and Ian Thompson visited the complex of wetlands known as the lower Loukkos (35°01' N, 6°01' W), a few kilometers north-east of Larache in north-western Morocco. While scanning some larger than usual flocks of sparrows *Passer* for Spanish Sparrow *P hispaniolensis*, IT's attention was drawn to a bird that flew low across his view. It looked unusual because it had no tail. Despite this, his first impression was a Sand Martin *R riparia*, which he thought to be a late migrant. Upon further inspection, however, he could see that although it had the characteristics of a Sand Martin, it had no chest band. His thoughts then turned to Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*. Because of the absence of a tail he could not check for tail spots but this bird was smaller and had a white body and undertail-coverts. Fortunately, it was joined by a second bird. We watched them for 30 min in excellent light conditions as they flew around and directly above us and we identified both as Brown-throated Martin, based on the following characters (cf Turner & Rose 1989): **1** the birds appeared more 'compact' than Sand Martin with a more jaunty flight; **2** the back, wing and uppertail were plain brown; **3** the throat was dusky, grading into the white belly and white undertail-coverts, contrasting with the dark tail; and **4** the underwing was rather plain grey-brown with very little contrast in the underwing-coverts. The juveniles showed conspicuous pale fringes on the inner webs of the flight feathers (cf Turner & Rose 1989).

A maximum of four birds were seen together at

396 Brown-throated Martin / Vale Oeverzwaluw *Riparia paludicola*, recently fledged juvenile, lower Loukkos, Larache, Morocco, 17 February 2008 (Ian Thompson). Note whitish fringe on inner web of flight-feathers.



one time. The birds continued to feed around us until one flew down and disappeared into a large man-made excavation. As we approached, we saw the bird emerge from a nest hole. This reinforced our original identification. We continued to watch for another hour and IT tried to take photographs but this proved impossible because of the attention we drew from the local children. Also, the presence of roaming animals and some local villagers collecting soil nearby the nest appeared to disturb the birds. Despite this, IT took some very quick shots of the nest hole. MA, AE and IT returned at 16:30, when they found the birds in the same location. They located a second nest hole after watching a bird flying into a small ravine c 100 m away from the first nest hole. From the birds' behaviour, ie, paired birds in the air and feeding for all the time that they were observed, we assumed that they were either constructing nest holes or feeding young, although neither activity was confirmed. No other hirundines were seen that day.

On 2 February 2008, five birds were located at the same site by IT, MA, AE, Keith Bensusan, Rhian Guillem, Albert Yome and Stephen Warr (Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society) while surveying wintering birds in wetlands in north-western Morocco. On 17 February 2008, MA and IT again returned to the same location and a minimum of two adults were seen feeding six young. Good photographs were taken through a telescope. Two birds were observed at the site by John Cortes on 28 March 2008.

The recent cessation of sand extraction at the lower Loukkos site is one possible explanation as

397 Brown-throated Martins / Vale Oeverzwaluwen *Riparia paludicola*, recently fledged juveniles, lower Loukkos, Larache, Morocco, 17 February 2008 (Ian Thompson)



to Brown-throated Martins' attempted colonisation. With the site now being abandoned, leaving the martins with suitable breeding habitat and much reduced disturbance, it is possible that wandering birds have found it to their liking.

Northward expansion

The observations at lower Loukkos concern the first breeding records of Plain Martin this far north-west in Morocco and constitute a further range extension of almost 100 km from Khenichet, the closest previously known breeding site. Furthermore, the species is now breeding only c 100 km away from the European continent.

A northward range expansion of 'southern' species has been noted in many species in Morocco. An example is House Bunting *Emberiza sahari* which has spread north of the Atlas mountains during the last decades of the 20th century (Thévenot et al 2003) and has reached as far north as Tangier, where it has recently been recorded breeding in the old medina (Amezian et al 2006). Another example is Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* which has spread northward and eastward (Thévenot et al 2003). Furthermore, Little Swift *Apus affinis* has recently colonised southern Spain from Morocco, after colonising north-western Morocco in the early 1950s (eg, Pineau & Giraud-Audine 1979, Garcia 2003).

The recent shift in the distribution ranges of many species is hard to attribute to any particular cause and is probably the result of many factors such as population growth in the core population, habitat quality improvement (eg, Qninba et al 2008, Amezian et al in press), conservation practices (as in Western Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* in the Iberian Peninsula; Sánchez-Lafuente 2001) and climate change. The latter two potential causes are hard to assess in Morocco.

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