





Birds of Jabal Moussa (based on surveys carried out in 2008)

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Soaring and breeding birds

In 2008, at the request of the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa, staff and volunteers of A Rocha Lebanon carried out bird surveys of several different types in order to gauge the importance of the Jabal Moussa area for birds at different times of year. These surveys included point-counts for soaring birds on migration, breeding bird surveys, bird-ringing and walkover surveys to different parts of the mountain in each season of the year.



Honey Buzzards (© A Rocha)

We found that Jabal Moussa is extremely important as a bottle-neck site for large soaring birds, such as Eagles, Buzzards and Storks, on migration. The fall migration, when birds are flying south through Lebanon on their return journeys to wintering grounds in Africa, is particularly important for birds of prey. On 24 visits in the autumn 13,982 raptors of 20 species were seen passing over the mountain, including nearly 10,000 European Honey Buzzards *Pernis apivorus* and over 2000 Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina*.

The breeding bird surveys, as well as observations made during other surveys, showed that there are 28 bird species confirmed as breeding here, plus another 8 which may breed. The most numerous breeding species are Chiff-chaff, Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*), Great Tit (*Parus major*), Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), Wren Troglodytes (*troglodytes*), Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*) and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (*Hippolais pallida*). Most of these species are common and widespread in Lebanon, except for Blue Tit which has hitherto been thought of as a scarce breeder or winter visitor. Short-toed Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*), Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) and Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) are also suspected to breed in the area although breeding has not been proven.

An Important Bird Area

Bird-ringing operations were carried out on 7 occasions in the Spring. This is where birds are caught in fine nets, fitted with a numbered metal ring on one leg, and released after being identified weighed and measured. This technique has been used all over the world for many decades to study the behaviour, migration, breeding and longevity of birds. At Jabal Moussa it proved a very useful tool in assessing the migration of passerines (songbirds) through the area. Several passage migrants were recorded this way that were not seen, or only rarely seen, on any of our other surveys. These included

Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*), Thrush Nightingale (*Luscinia luscinia*) and Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*). These birds do not breed in Lebanon but sites such as Jabal Moussa are very important for them on their long migration journeys as they can rest and feed without disturbance or danger from hunting.

Our more casual 'walk-over surveys' were particularly useful in the winter as we were able to show that several species, such as European Robin, Woodpigeon and various species of finches, were abundant at this time of year, despite being less common or absent in other seasons.

As a result of our surveys, and in particular because of the scale of the soaring-bird migration in the fall, Jabal Moussa was declared as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International.

As well as being scientifically useful, this year spent on the Jabal was also tremendous fun and holds many happy memories for all of us who were involved. One amusing memory is of the first time we climbed up to the big cross near Yahchouch. Colin reached the top first and lay down exhausted on the ground. Helen arrived a few minutes later just in time to see a Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), the first we had seen at Jabal Moussa, flying low overhead, looking as if it was interested in the 'body' lying below. Thankfully it soon lost interest when the body moved.



Tree Pipit © A Rocha