

**United Nations Environment Programme  
Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas**



# **Summary report on an Ornithological Survey in Libya from 19 to 31 January 2006**



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- 1. Introduction:** A first ever comprehensive winter ornithological survey of coastal wetlands in Libya had been carried out in January 2005. The present survey aimed to complement and extend the results of the previous survey.
- 2. International Framework:** The survey was once again carried out under the auspices of the Environment General Authority of Libya (EGA), which had called for the survey as an implementation of the RAC/SPA Action Plan for Mediterranean marine birds, and the Afro-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement. It was timed to coincide with the international midwinter waterbird census, organized by Wetlands International (WI).
- 3. Objectives:** The objectives were similar to those of the 2005 survey, i.e. to search for wintering Slender-billed Curlews, to make a comprehensive survey of waterbirds on Libyan coastal wetlands (with more detailed attention given to those identified in 2005 as being of major importance), to collect further data on wetland sites and their functioning (for incorporation in RAC/SPA Standard Data Sheets); this year greater attention was paid to training Libyan ornithologists.
- 4. Participants:** The same participants took part as in 2005 (three experts from Libya, two from Tunisia, one from Italy, one from France, one from UK), with in addition three trainees from EGA and Al Fateh University.
- 5. Programme:** Most of the main coastal wetlands were visited, from Ras Ajdir on the frontier with Tunisia in the west, to the Gulf of Bumba between Derna and Tobruk in the east. A visit was also paid to Houn, in the Jofra inland oasis complex. On returning to Tripoli, the participants presented the results to the Head of EGA and a seminar was organized at EGA headquarters to present the 2005 and 2006 findings to EGA staff and invited representatives from Al Fateh University, the National Authority for Rural and Agricultural Development, the Marine Biology Research Centre (MBRC), the Environment protection offices of Tripoli and Jafara, and other local stakeholders. The seminar was featured Libyan television's main evening news on Libyan television on 31 January. National press covered the event on 1 February. The survey was the cover-page item in EGA's February 2006 news bulletin.
- 6. Results:** The 2006 survey, like the one in 2005, did not succeed in finding any of the critically endangered Slender-billed Curlews. It censused over 50,000 waterbirds (as against 30,000 in 2005), with striking increases in some species, notably Slender-billed Gull and Greater Flamingo, mainly due to improved knowledge of the largest wetlands and higher water levels at the westernmost sites. The survey confirmed the importance of Libyan wetlands for a variety of wintering waterbirds, notably the endangered Mediterranean endemic Audouin's Gull, several other gull species, and for Eurasian Crane, considerable numbers of which were observed, even well into the desert. Overall, the international importance of Libyan wetlands was confirmed for waterbird communities of Mediterranean lagoon ecosystems including Greater Flamingo, Kentish Plover and Slender-billed Gull. A number of species rarely recorded before the 2005 survey were

observed once again, and some new species noted, in particular Pied Kingfisher. Several species previously considered to winter exclusively south of the Sahara, (e.g. Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Little Bittern and above all Reed Warbler) were again observed, the latter in considerable numbers, to such an extent that a revision of its international status will be required. A remarkable roost of harriers seen at Taourgha. The number of colour ringed birds observed was larger than in 2005, illustrating that waterbird movement towards Libya may originate from eastern, northern and western Eurasia.

In terms of habitat, the 2006 survey confirmed the findings of the 2005 survey on the size and near-natural functioning of many coastal wetlands in Libya, which undoubtedly constitute some of the most untouched, near-natural sites anywhere in the Mediterranean. Those especially worthy of mention include: Sebkhet Boukamash; Farwa Island and Lagoon; the huge Taourgha complex, which is perhaps the largest coastal wetland in the Mediterranean (comprising the sebkhet at Qasr Ahmed, Taourgha, Al Hisha and Om Al Adham, and the springs at Taourgha and Hisha); Sebkhet Sultan; Sebkhet Karkoura; Sebkhet Al Kuz; the Temimi wetlands; and Ain Al Ghazala. The complex of wetlands around Benghazi was better surveyed, and the connections between sites in this complex better understood.

Training in field techniques was carried out and the seminar at the end provided feed-back to officials on the importance of Libyan wetlands.

- 7. Suggested follow up activities:** The results confirmed many of the principal suggestions made by the 2005 survey:
- Ramsar Listing of additional Libyan wetlands: Many of the wetlands visited clearly merit designation as wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. Farwa Island and Lagoon are a priority for habitat conservation measures, for which there is strong local support, and international expressions of support would be most welcome to the Libyan authorities. Sebkhet Al Kuz could perhaps represent the next candidate.
  - National protection measures: Sites designated under international conventions and also sites protected under national legislation (in particular those specified under paragraph six above, all of which are in near-natural condition) deserve more intensive protection measures. Measures to prevent further degradation of the wetland complex adjacent to the city of Benghazi are also recommended: the sites are of high value, for heritage and public awareness, as well as biodiversity reasons.
  - Special Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance (SPAMIs): Many of the sites visited merit designation as SPAMIs.
  - Hunting in Libya: Again, it appeared that waterbird hunting activities were quite extensive in the eastern part of the country, notably around Sebkhet Al Kuz, Temimi wetlands, and Ain Al Ghazala. Investigation of the extent of hunting (which formally is illegal) should be carried out, and appropriate measures taken.
  - Publication of the results: It is planned to publish a summary of the results of the two winter waterbird surveys in an international ornithological journal, and to attempt a more general update of the status of Libyan birds.
  - Further ornithological surveys: It is suggested that winter surveys should continue in future years, with greater attention paid to inland wetland sites. A survey during the breeding season, and particularly a visit to the Lesser Crested Tern nesting colonies (of which Libya holds more than 99% of the Mediterranean population), should be carried out in late August 2006. Greater attention should be paid to surveys of the rich birdlife of the Benghazi wetland complex.

- Training: Further training of Libyan field ornithologists is a very high priority, both through fieldwork in Libya and visits to ornithological stations abroad. Academic studies for a small number of specialists are also urgently needed.
- Ornithological structures: For continued recording of Libyan avifauna, a formal recording system should be established, either through the university system or through a specialized ornithological organization, which could develop links with international ornithological bodies.

These conclusions were presented in outline to the Head of EGA, who expressed strong support for them, in particular as regards further winter surveys (especially around the inland oasis sites), summer surveys of breeding Lesser Crested Terns, site conservation (notably at Farwa), and further training.

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**9. Final report:** A more detailed report with Appendices will be produced in due course, along the lines of the one produced in 2005.







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