

## Republic of Djibouti –**Report 2010**

### A. An introduction to the country

The Republic of Djibouti, independent since June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1977, covers a total land area of ~ 23.200 sq. km. The country shares boundaries with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Northern Somalia. The population is consisting of two main ethnic groups, the “Issa” in the South and the “Afar” in the North. It is estimated about 750.000 inhabitants (Ministry of Health, 2010). About 75 % of the people live in Djibouti city and other smaller cities. Still, a minority group sticks to a traditional nomadic lifestyle.

Biogeographically, Djibouti is located in the Great Rift Valley and belongs to the Horn of Africa which is home to a number of endemic and globally threatened species of fauna and flora. It is separated from the Arabian Peninsula by 28 km only. Highest altitudes such as Mount Moussa Ali reach up to about 2.020 m and are an impressive contrast to depressions like Lake Assal, which goes down 153 m below sea level.

The coastline has a total length of ~370 km with scattered extensive mangroves bordered by large inter-tidal mudflats exposed at low tide in several areas. The main natural resources consist of livestock and marine fisheries exploited traditionally to feed the urban areas. Very low and irregular rainfall is part of the semi-desert, monsoon driven climate. Areas with more humidity result in acacia bush land or even patches of *Juniperus/Buxus* forest. Grass and herb savanna, marshes, palm aggregations or mangroves represent other important biotopes.

### B. Background on Djibouti bird status

Djibouti’s ornithological issue is still little studied and the available birds list is based on the result of several visits done by Geoff and Hilary Welch from 1987 to 2009 and observations by Houssein Rayaleh/BirdLife Species Guardian (Houssein Rayaleh, pers.com). Further, existing records have been made by renowned birder Nik Borrow (Birdquest, Djibouti & Somaliland trip report, Sept 2010).

Despite the limited ornithological observation coverage and the smallness of the country's area, effectively 364 bird species have been recorded until now (Geoff et al. 2009, Houssein Rayaleh, pers.com). And this impressive species size is related to Djibouti’s geographical location at the narrowest point (Bab El Mandeb Straits) in the eastern entrance of the Red Sea, which is one of the most significant entry/exit points for bird migration in the Palearctic-African system between Africa and Asia/Europe that is regularly used by millions and millions of migratory birds.

### C. Key ornithological interest of site by site in Djibouti

#### I. South –eastern strip –Doraleh/Djibouti city/Haramous Islands to Loyada (Potential IBA and Designated Ramsar Site)

The area consists of two main wet habitats but for simplicity is designated as one site and part of it, was declared as the first and only Ramsar site of the country when Djibouti ratified Wetlands Convention in 2003. The site supports large inter-tidal mudflats with mangroves patches in several areas. The eastern coastal terrestrial part of the site is formed low sandy plain intersected by well vegetated wadis and covered with sparse acacia and shrubs.

The area supports large populations of passage and wintering shorebirds some of them are estimated as more than 1% of global population i.e. Crab Plover, Terek Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Sandpipers as well as more than ten species of herons, Sacred ibis, Yellow-billed and Abdim’s Storks and Greater and Lesser Flamingos. In addition, individual of Arabian bustard

and Arabian Golden Sparrow variable flocks, Greater or Lesser Hoopoe lark are can be observed in the area (Houssein Rayaleh pers om).

## II. Ali-Sabieh/Assamo (IBA n° about 120 km far from the capital city of Djibouti)

An area is bordering with Ethiopia and Somalia and it constitutes low hills and medium altitudes mountains intersected by wadis and with large zones of sparse acacia, mixed shrubs and some small gardens developed in the broader wadis where ground water accessibility is easy.

By its geographical location in the border with Ethiopia and Somalia, diversity of bird species of this site shows a mix of species which differs from other IBAs b in Djibouti. The wadis with acacia shrubs support northern crombec, Arabian warbler, black bush robin, grey-headed batis, yellow-breasted and black throated barbets, yellow-necked spurfowl, and rosy-patched shrike.

Wadis with Tamarix patches support nightjar species (possibly European and Nubian nightjars). The gardens host large numbers of Somali bulbul and Rüppell's weaver, Blue napped mousebird, individual grey headed kingfisher, red-billed oxpecker, crimson-rumped waxbill, green-winged pytilia, shining and variable sunbirds, and wattled starling. Ali-Sabieh/Assamo is the only area in Djibouti where the Abyssinian scimitarbill, eastern violet backed sunbird and pale chanting goshawk have been observed.

Additionally, the area hosts two globally threatened mammal species such as Endangered Leopard *Panthera pardus pardus* and Vulnerable Beira antelope *Dorcatragus megalotis*.

## III. Musha and Mskali Islands (potential Ramsar Site) about 15 km far from Djibouti City in the Tadjoura Gulf bay).

Two ancient coral reef islands and several satellites islets, located at around 15 km in the North of Djibouti city in the Gulf of Tadjoura. The larger Island, Musha, supports an extensive stands of mangroves and *sueda* sp.

The islands and particularly its satellite islets is known as one of the breeding areas which used by red-billed tropicbird, white-eyed gull, bridled tern, Eurasian spoon bill, osprey, Goliath, striated and western reef herons, chestnut –bellied sandgrouse and possibly some mangrove warblers i.e. clamorous reed warbler.

The site is colonized by Indian House Crow and its presence has significant negative impacts on the breeding success of all species (Houssein Rayaleh, pers.com).

## IV. Goba'ad Plain in the southwest of the country (border with Ethiopia)

The site is consisted vast alluvial depression with mixture of extensive low acacia scrub, many shallow wadis, and large sandflats and scattered by plateaus.

By its geographical location between two other significant IBAs (Lake Abhé and Hanlé plain) and closer to the border with Ethiopia, its avifauna shows elements reflecting a mixture of bird species provided the neighborhood location with Ethiopia. Goba'ad with two other sites in Djibouti is the only site which hosts ostrich with breeding population potentiality. In addition, typical semi-desert species presence include Black –crown sparrow lark, spotted thick-knee, Arabian bustard, Lichtenstein, chestnut-bellied and spotted sandgrouses, whilst wadis which are more vegetated hold yellow-necked spurfowl, yellow\_breasted barbet, blue-

napped mousebird, grey-headed batis, crombec, rufous bush robin and African swallow-tailed kite.

And with Ali-Sabieh/Assamo region, Goba'ad is the second site where lesser masked weavers have been recorded.

#### V. Lake Abhé in the west of the country (IBA code DJ005)

The site is a salt lake situated in the embouchure of the Awash River forming a chain of six interconnected lakes positioned in the centre of the Afar Depression including Afambo, Bario, Gargori, Gummare and Laitali. Lake Abhé constitutes the largest permanent inland wetland ecosystem in Djibouti and is well-known for its landscapes with a plethora of thermal springs, only found the Djibouti side of the lake formed by “bizarre” chimneys lined up as human made structures “towering mineral deposits dating from the period when the was deeply flooded” which confer to this site an unconventional beauty rewarded to make more popular by the fiction movies “Planet of Apes” filmed entirely inside.

Furthermore, the lake is more renowned for its thousand and thousand of greater and lesser flamingos that flock to the site year around with at least 50 migrant species of water birds, White pelican and possibly cormorant may breed on the Ethiopian side. The site is relevant also other threatened wildlife such as spotted hyenas, Somali and Eritrean warthogs and Dorcas gazelles. It highly contributes the livelihoods of the nomadic Afar people who reside all surrounding arid areas in and over the border.

#### VI. Hanlé and Galafi plains

The site has similar biotope which constitutes large alluvial depression with extensive low mix acacia scrub, shallow wadis, and vast sand mats scattered low hills bordered by steep-sided mountains. In several small places, the area support permanent freshwater that hold denser vegetation such as palm trees and patches of marsh.

Hanlé and Galafi plains hold ostrich breeding small population and the freshwater areas support small numbers of breeding water birds such as spur-winged plover, three banded plover, black crane and Egyptian goose. And the area is known the only Djibouti record of long-tailed cormorant, malachite kingfisher and white-browed coucal (Welch and Welch 1998).

#### VII. Goda massif “Forêt du Day Ecosystem” (IBA code DJ001)

The Forêt Du Day ecosystem is dry tropical Afromontane mixed woodland in the Goda Massif mountain ranges in the North of Djibouti with an altitudinal range between c. 1200 m to c. 1750 m and is an Important Bird Area (BirdLife International, 2000). It consists also one of the few forested areas still remaining in the country where, historically, the dominant forest tree was African pencil cedar *Juniperus procera*, which formed a closed canopy forest until a dramatic decline in the last 20-30 years which left a large proportion of the junipers dead or dying, and the canopy open (Bealey et al., 2006).

At higher altitudes, the under storey consists principally *Buxus hildebrandtii*, whilst in peripheral and lower areas the main species are *Acacia seyal*, *Acacia etbaica* and *Acacia mellifera*. Scattered large *Ficus* sp. occurs throughout. Beyond the forested plateaus at high altitude are extensive basalt plains with scattered shrubs including many *Euphorbia* sp. There are valleys with permanent open water in many areas, favoured habitat of the regionally vulnerable endemic Bankoualé palm *Livistona carinensis*.

is the home to 70% of the land based biological diversity. Ecology of this landform is considered an isolated outlier of the Ethiopian Montane forest hotspot & Ecozone, as important island of forest in a semi desert.

In terms of ecosystem of global and national significance, the Forêt Du Day is the home to 70% of the land based biological diversity and hosts a variety of rare, extremely arid-adapted globally threatened as Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin, Leopard, Dragon and Livistona trees. Further it has survived for many centuries as biological diversity genetically reservoir and important natural resources to feed and contribute the community livelihood in a highly desert landscape in areas of the Djiboutian dry highlands.

The Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus* which is the main species targeted is listed as Critically Endangered in the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2010) and broadly speaking this indicates that there is a very high probability that the species will become extinct in the wild in a short time. There is no higher category of threat on this species which has been listed as Critically Endangered since 1994, the first time that this threat categorisation system was applied to birds.

The Francolin is only found in two tiny ecosystems in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and the most well known and, on presence evidence, the largest population is centred on the Forêt du Day in the Goda Massif. Further east is a second population in the Mabla Mountains about which is little known, although it is likely to be much smaller (Hillary and Geoff Welch and H. Rayaleh, 2009).

The Bankoualé Palm *Livistona carinensis* is a relict near endemic palm species classed as Vulnerable in the IUCN/WCMC world list of Threatened Trees (1998), only known to occur with tiny populations in Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen. The Djibouti population is fewer than 400 adults in 12 sub-populations in its main distribution ranges at Goda Massif. The adults are over mature, and juveniles and seedlings are only found in areas protected from grazing in areas where animals cannot eat them.

The palm species shares part of its geographical range with the very rare and Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin and due to its restricted distribution in the country and the region, the palm species is facing a high risk of extinction in the wild in the medium-term future and based on the recent data collected on the palm. It may be more appropriate to move the species status from the IUCN category of Vulnerable to Endangered (Houssein Rayaleh, pers. comm. 2008).

Further, at Forêt du Day, the juniper woodland, which is a rest of ancient forest, is in poor condition with a high proportion of trees dead or dying. Other concerns include firewood collection on lower slopes, hunting and human disturbance. Part of Forêt du Day was declared a National Park in 1939 and more recently protected area, but the designation is no longer valid before than at present time (Government 2004). In addition to its biodiversity importance, Forêt du Day Ecosystem provides natural resources (fire wood, grazing pasture) and environmental services (water supply, erosion control) which are vital to local livelihoods. The deteriorating natural environment is therefore of concern to local people.

#### VIII. Mabla massif (IBA code DJ002)

Mabla is the second largest area of relict montane forest and it was described as contiguous areas to Forêt du Day with junipers forest in Djibouti but today there are no longer alive juniper trees in the area and the dominant tree species are *Acacia seyal*, *Buxus hildebrandtii* with locally abundant *Acacia etbaica* and common *Acacia mellifera*.

The area is confirmed currently with the Goda massif “Forêt du Day” to support a viable population of the Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin (Welch et al. 2009).

First, the “Yellow-tailed pytilia” was discovered here, before the species is regularly recorded in Goda massif (Welch et al. 2009).

With exception of olive pigeon, brown woodland warbler, African paradise flycatcher and African scops owl, Mabila holds all of the other “typical” species found in the “Forêt du Day”. Further, the area supports breeding Verreaux’s and Bonelli’s eagles and breeding colony of Rüppell’s vultures.

#### IX. North-east coastal plain (IBA code DJ003)

The area is consisting of a broad coastal plain lying between Djibouti/Eritrea border with the low hill offshore island of Doumera to the north, and the hill of Ras Siyyan to the south with extension to Godoriya (the southern side of the Bab el Manded Straits).

The plain is sparsely vegetated and extends inland for 30 kilometers to range of low hills “Kadda Gueini hills and Godoriya tablets). A large coastal lagoon bordered by mangroves located at Ras Siyyan with extension of larger stands of mangroves at Khor Angar and Godoriya.

In autumn, the area has international importance as one of the most significant entry/exit points for bird of prey migrating between Africa and Asia/Europe in the Palaearctic-African system. At total of 26 species of raptor using the crossing have been recorded (Welch and Welch 1988) and the principal species were steppe buzzard (98000+) and steppe eagle (76000+) but as an indication and in 38 days of systematic counts made in October/November 1987 246000+ raptors have been recorded.

In addition to the raptors, the area is used storks, ibises, pelicans, bee-eaters, rollers, swifts, swallows, martins, passerines, and waders.

Furthermore, the site supports breeding populations of osprey and sooty falcon on the coastal cliffs and islands, Eurasian spoonbill, clamorous reed warbler in the mangroves and typical arid bird species on the coastal plain such as hoopoe lark, black crowned sparrow lark and desert wheatear. It supports too seabirds such as slender-billed gull and significant populations of crab plover (5600+, in 1987, Welch and Welch, 1988).

#### X. Sept Frères islands (IBA code DJ004)

The site is a group of six offshore volcanic islands next to the North-east coastal plain in the Bab el Mandeb straits, largely empty of vegetation, which together Ras Siyyan, forms the Sept Frères.

The islands support important breeding Seabird species such as white-eyed and sooty gulls, swift and lesser crested, white-checked, bridled terns and red-billed tropicbird. Osprey and sooty falcon also breed in the islands.

In addition and in certain weather conditions (wind directions), the islands play an important role in assisting migrating raptors complete their crossing of the Bab el Mandeb straits.

#### XI. North-west Djibouti-Alol to Madgoul «Doda» (IBA code DJ007)

A complex of sites grouped by commodity –Alol, Doda, Andaba and Magdoul –consisting of mixture of large alluvial plains subject to periodic inundation, salt flats, mineral hot springs, marsh, dense Acacia scrub, mature stands of Acacia nilotica woodland, large stands of doum palm Hyphaene, grassland and rugged basalt hills.

The site is one of the third known sites for ostrich breeding population. When inundated, the site supports an important breeding and passage wintering waders, i.e. breeding of black winged stilt, Kittlitz's plover, little grebe and Egyptian goose has been confirmed.

286+ avocets and 1300+ of marsh sandpipers have been recorded at Doda (both highest Djibouti counts, the latter a significant count for East Africa).

The area held large numbers of short-toed larks, tawny pipits, yellow wagtail, isabelline wheatear and shrikes including first Djibouti record of woodchat shrike, many wintering warblers such as Ménétries and Arabian warblers, Hemprich hornbill, Somali starling, rosy-patches shrikes, Black scrub robin chat, hoopoe larks, Arabian bustards, white and black storks.

Further, this large and complex site is also important for raptors including vultures “Rüppell, Griffon, Lappet-faced vultures”, Bataleur, Verreaux's eagle, Dark chanting goshawk, with breeding confirmation for all aforementioned eagles.

Finally, the basalt cliffs, rocky plateaus and plains of the area support Trumpeter finch, a species restricted to only 4 sites in Djibouti and found nowhere else in East Africa.

## 1. Status of Conservation Projects

In Djibouti, there are no African Bird Club ongoing projects but in 2009, ABC co-funded a project to support the Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin conservation efforts in Djibouti to carry out to survey Mabla Mountain which is the second distribution range of this species. And mid this year, Djibouti Nature which is BirdLife Affiliate in Djibouti received a small grant from The Mohamed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund for Djibouti Francolin conservation.

Further, the BirdLife GEF UNDP Soaring Bird project was supposed to begin later this year and Djibouti is one of the five African countries concerned by the project which includes in total eleven countries from Africa and Middle East. As part of Djibouti Nature's regular water birds census, survey to locate wintering Slender-billed Curlews was conducted in Djibouti this winter, unfortunately no curlews were found. But all along the coastal wetlands were surveyed and counts of wintering water birds and terrestrial bird species were recoded.

Currently Djibouti Nature implements, the above mentioned project supported financially by “The Mohamed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund” to contribute the establishment of a foundation for the effective conservation of the Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin, the Vulnerable Bankoualé palm “*Livistona carinensis*” and their core range and thereby secure their long term survival in Djibouti by Carrying out awareness-raising campaign to gain community and other stakeholders interest in conservation as an important value which could be a potential source to generate incomes for communities

## 2. Conservation Concerns

The major conservation concern in Djibouti is the fast expansion of two invasive species “*Prosopis juliflora* and *Corvus splendens*” which caused increasingly damages on biological diversity. Further, the status of many migratory raptors particularly scavenger species such as “*Gyps fulvus*, *Gyps rueppellii*, *Percnopterus aegyptiaca*” may be an important concern because of unevaluated growing decline in their whole distribution ranges in the country is observed.

In addition, many species globally threatened have never or little surveyed to evaluate their status at national level such as Atlantic petrel, Greater spotted eagle, Imperial eagle, Lesser kestrel and Egyptian vulture (all species are listed Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List) etc..., and is shown in the currently available data base, indicators to support any decline or stability in numbers of these above mentioned species in Djibouti.

However Egyptian vultures that Djibouti hosted before in big population have clearly declined in both numbers and distribution range in recent years. The reason of this decline is not known but as a survey has been conducted recently in Ethiopia (early December 2010) by volunteers logistically supported by our sister organisation in Ethiopia (EWNHS/BirdLife in Ethiopia) and results are expected soon.

Furthermore, there is growing concern in Djibouti's natural habitats and natural resources (fauna and flora), which are under increasing threat. There is continued degradation of important ecosystems such as temporary wetlands, coastal wetlands and the very few forested areas which constitute the country biological diversity genetic reservoir (IBAs, Ramsar Site and potential IBAs), sometimes because of the above mentioned reasons.

Currently, the major available data on the status of Djibouti's natural habitats, fauna and flora is lacking, limited and/or never updated within the last two decades, particularly about the status of globally threatened species, except the only endemic bird species of Djibouti, the Critically Endangered Djibouti Francolin. Djibouti's confirmed IBAs are of urgent need to be reviewed, revised and mapped. In Djibouti, the level of environmental awareness and appreciation of nature remains very low but an upcoming node of enthusiastic young groups are under establishment. Djibouti continues to have limited national capacity in the field of ornithology (one person) and there are no local birders at all, limiting our capacity to carry out significant studies in the issue, implement environmental management programs and/or develop nature based tourism programs, etc....

### 3. Significant Bird Sightings / Discoveries

There are many recent reports from high qualified birders who recorded new species for Djibouti with some species of international significances:

In 2010 significant bird sightings done separately by Nik Borrow (Birdquest) and team composed by Callan Cohen, Michael Mills (Birding Africa) and others birders include a record of species always considered endemic to Ethiopia and Eritrea, the White-throated Seedeater "*Serenus xanthopygius*".

March 2009, important bird sightings include a record of *Yellow-tailed Pytilia*

The Yellow-tailed Pytilia *Pytilia (melba) flavicaudata*, a species whose taxonomic status is still undetermined, is currently only known from the Forêt du Day and Mabla, though birds bearing a striking resemblance have been recorded near Kimberley in South Africa (Hand,1998).

More records made in March 2009 include also as 3 new species for Djibouti such as Cinereous Bunting *Emberiza cineracea*, Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*, Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*:

Despite these few significant species records above mentioned, Djibouti hosts several species restricted only to Djibouti in the region, namely Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*, Arabian golden sparrow *Passer ochlorus*.

In addition, many dry plains offer to observe desert birds such sandgrouse, larks, bustards, coursers and even ostrich. Lake Abhé which is the only inland wetlands on the country supports thousands and thousands of flamingos both species and innumerable water bird species collared Pratincole *Glareola prtincola*, Kittlitz's Plover *Charadrius pecuarius*, Cream-coloured Couser *cursorius cursor*, may be Somali Courser *Cursorius somaliensis*, etc...

#### 4. New Contacts with other Bird Clubs

Currently, there are no bird clubs in Djibouti but DjiboutiNature/BirdLife Affiliate in Djibouti is bird-related NGOs in the country. And works are on route to may establish the first Bird Club in Djibouti within the University of Djibouti soon.

#### 6. Other Concerns or Issues

The development of Djibouti Port with its new petroleum terminal at Doraleh in the western side of the capital city which hosts one of the mangroves pockets around the city may affect wintering migrant shorebird population using the mudflats around the capital city.

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