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Ornithological study of the aquatic avifauna of limnic ecosystems in the Upper Sebou, Morocco

Abstract :

Continental wetlands constitute key ecosystems for the conservation of waterbirds, whose composition and phenology represent excellent indicators of the ecological quality of these environments. However, over recent decades, the marked regression of natural wetlands has raised major concerns regarding its effects on the diversity and abundance of avifauna in Morocco. In this context, the wetlands of the Middle Atlas, the Pre-Rif and the Saïss Plain were subjected to an exhaustive avifaunal survey over four consecutive years from 2021 to 2024. This monitoring aimed, on the one hand, to analyse phenology and, on the other hand, to study the population dynamics of birds across eleven wetlands, both natural and artificial. In addition, the impact of anthropogenic pressure and climatic conditions on species diversity and the abundance of bird communities was examined. The methodology adopted for the phenological study consisted of periodic surveys based on visual counts conducted by two observers using binoculars and high-magnification photographic equipment. For the breeding of the Cattle Egret at the Ain Chkef heronry, morphometric measurements of eggs (length, width and volume), nest dimensions and their heights relative to the water level and the vegetation support, the number of clutches, the duration of the breeding season, the number of hatchlings and the number of fledglings were recorded. Census results across the eleven sites showed the numerical dominance of Enjil and Idriss I dams, with 4,174 and 3,999 individuals respectively, whereas Allal El Fassi dam recorded the lowest number, with only 25 individuals. Species diversity ranked Idriss I dam first with 78 species, followed by Oued Fez with 67 species and Sidi Chahed dam with 62 species, while the lowest diversity was recorded at Aguelmam Sidi Ali, with 12 species. These results highlight the predominance of dams in terms of both abundance and species richness. Across all the sites studied, 21 families were represented, the most important being Scolopacidae with 18 species, followed by Anatidae with 12 species, Ardeidae with 8 species and Rallidae with 5 species. Principal component analysis identified five phenological groups comprising 24 resident species, 33 passage migrants, 11 wintering species, 11 summer visitors and, finally, one accidental species. Indeed, most sites exhibit high ornithological value due to the presence of species of national and international importance. These wetlands host twelve bird species listed on the IUCN Red List: the White-headed Duck and the Egyptian Vulture are classified as Endangered (EN); the Common Pochard and the Curlew Sandpiper are classified as Vulnerable (VU); the remaining species; Ferruginous Duck, Red Knot, Marbled Teal, Bar-tailed Godwit, Black-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Ruddy Turnstone and Northern Lapwing; are classified as Near Threatened (NT). The study of the impact of hydraulic developments along Oued Fès showed that these works led to a significant degradation of the habitat and affected both migratory and resident waterbird communities. Furthermore, analysis of the breeding ecology of *Bubulcus ibis* revealed remarkable flexibility in the choice of nesting sites and reproductive strategies. The species demonstrates the ability to produce multiple clutches within the same season and, in some cases, even winter breeding events.

Keywords: Wetlands, avifauna, phenology, reproduction, heronry, hydraulic developments, Middle Atlas, Pre-Rif, Saïss Plain, Morocco.