



Dear friends,

The A Rocha team have been busy over the winter with all the usual work; scientific monitoring, escorting eco tourist and educational groups around the wetland, writing up reports, the development of a new web based environmental education resource (more later) and, details below, finishing off the Important Bird Area project, with our partners SPNL, in community trainings, the latest at the American University of Beirut. This newsletter looks back to the winter rains and forward to the warmth of spring. Talking of which – why not book a trip to the wetland (schools and groups welcome) and enjoy the wonders of bird migration, spring flowers and the beauty of the West Bekaa. For full details go to: <http://www.arocha.org/leban/work/education.html>



Aammiq Marshes, Spring 2009

Climate Change and the Aammiq wetland

We have all been talking about the weather even more than usual this winter. First, because there was so little rain and snow, and then because the storms that did arrive, in late February, were so spectacular! The late rain, following as it did, three successive poor winters meant that the wetland remained dry well into February, the latest in living memory. This fits in with regional trends as climate change models predict major water stress for the region with implications for biodiversity as well as the human population. Indeed as Karam http://www.fao.org/sd/climagrimed/pdf/ws01_24.pdf writes “people have observed detrimental changes in hydrology over recent decades. Ground water levels have fallen, springs and wetland areas have dried up, and rivers mainly Litani no longer flow in dry seasons.” The good news is that the wetland also filled faster than it has ever done, as the storms brought the much needed rain and snow raising water levels by 2m in 10 days! It seems the wetland is warning us – climate change is beginning to bite. We are developing projects to try to help mitigate against longer dry spells – e.g. by digging of deeper refuge pools around the wetland.



Special Species – Spotted Eagles

Eagles travel through Lebanon in large numbers during the spring and fall migration periods. April and May are the best months to see these majestic birds in spring, as they spiral to gain height over the mountains on their epic journeys. Great places to watch out for them are around Beirut River Valley; Beit Mary, Broumana, Ras el Metn, Deir el Harf being good examples. They may be traveling with other smaller birds of prey but the Eagles are unmistakable with their huge almost rectangular wings. The two spotted species are dark brown and difficult to tell apart in flight. The majority that pass through Lebanon are of the slightly smaller Lesser Spotted variety. At this time of year they are on their way back to their Eastern forest breeding areas far to the north. Their rarer, larger relative; the Greater Spotted Eagle is a bird of forests near wetlands, and unsurprisingly in Lebanon is most often seen roosting at the Aammiq wetland, taking a well earned break on its mammoth journey.



A juvenile Greater Spotted Eagle, perched at Aammiq

Lebanon's IBAs go from 4 to 15! (before and after the A Rocha / SPNL IBA project)



The morning of April 2nd 2009 at the Ministry of Environment saw the closing ceremony of the Identification and Conservation of New "Important Bird Areas" in Lebanon project. A Rocha and SPNL staff presented the project and its results to assembled guests from the Lebanese Ministries, the press, conservation NGOs and the scientific community. And what results they were! Here are the highlights:

- 9 new Global IBAs declared
- 2 new Regional IBAs declared
- Over 30 national sites assessed with a total of 320 site visits, over 3000 hours of field monitoring.
- A huge new national data base for birds.

- Site Management committees formed at each new designated IBAs.
- Over 70 local participants trained in bird identification and site monitoring.

This and so much has been recorded in the IBA leaflet and map – paper copies available from A Rocha, also available free to download by going to the page <http://www.arocha.org/lb-en/work/IBAs.html> on our website. The full story of the project is on the leaflet together with a complete list of the new IBAs and a map showing you where each is located.



Land Tortoise Smuggling!

If you visit pet shops you may well find land tortoises (*Testudo graeca*) for sale. Many of them are, relatively speaking, very cheap, far too inexpensive to be captive bred. Michel, a member of the A Rocha Lebanon board realized this and decided to investigate, as he knew that many tortoises were being taken from the wild, sold here and exported to Japan, USA, and Europe for very high prices. You can find out more about this terrible trade, where many of the animals die in transit by going on line at www.chelonia.org.

Michel teamed up with IndyACT, who are investigating wildlife crime in Lebanon, and found that unscrupulous dealers are obtaining export permits based on their possession of a virtual "farm for tortoises." With the required, but fraudulent C.I.T.E.S. certification more than 10'000 tortoises were exported in one year!

To cut a long story short, IndyACT, using the documents and evidence Michel had assembled, took photos of the "so called farm", contacted the highest officials, gave reports to the media (where full pages in more than 5 local newspapers wrote about the smuggling of tortoises from Lebanon), and finally were able to stop the export of a major consignment of animals from the airport, but for how long?



The Count Down has started!!
New A Rocha Lebanon and Bible Society Project...
For more information... wait for our next newsletter.

Thanks for reading to the end. Don't forget to visit our website: www.arocha.org

Best wishes, The A Rocha Lebanon Team lebanon@arocha.org

A Rocha Lebanon newsletters are available in 2 languages!!!

If you are reading this newsletter in English but would prefer to have it in Arabic, email us and we will send you your preferred version.



A ROCHA

Together, caring for God's creation