

Little known West Palearctic birds: Algerian Nuthatch

Simon Harrap

The discovery in 1975 of the Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti* was sensational. Of course, new species of birds are still being found every year, most frequently in Africa and South America, but no new birds had been found in the Palearctic since 1937, when Theresa's Snowfinch *Montifringilla theresae* was described from Afghanistan. (Vaurie's Nightjar *Caprimulgus centralasicus* was described in 1960, but based on a specimen collected in Chinese Turkestan in 1929.) Thus, to find a new bird in the West Palearctic was remarkable. How could it have remained hidden for so long?

The first Algerian Nuthatches were found on the summit of Djebel Babor, a mountain in northeast Algeria, and the species was initially thought to be confined to this isolated massif. The climate there is cool and humid, with precipitation largely falling in the winter, when snow up to 4m deep may be present from November to May. The nuthatches are found above 1,450m, with the highest densities in the summit forest.

There followed a relatively vast outpouring of scientific literature on the species, mostly concerned with discussions of why it existed at all. The forest on Djebel Babor has survived

grazing, fire and war and indeed, the mountain has its own endemic species of tree, the Algerian Fir *Abies numidica*. This 'lost world' was thought to have been a time-capsule which had carried the Algerian Nuthatch, a relict of a once widespread species of small nuthatch, into the modern world.

There was, of course, immediate concern for the survival of the species. The forest on Djebel Babor covers c.1,300ha, but optimum habitat extends for less than 250ha in the summit area, and initially there were thought to be just 12 pairs of nuthatches, although more extensive surveys in 1982 resulted in an estimate of about 80 pairs.

Concensus on the origin and ecology of Algerian Nuthatch seemed to have been reached when more sensational discoveries were made. In June 1989, a population of Algerian Nuthatches was found in Guerrouch Forest in the Taza National Park and, in June and July 1990, the species was discovered in Tamentout Forest and Djimla Forest. All three new sites are in the Petite Kabylie region of Algeria and within 30km of each other and of Djebel Babor, although separated by tracts of unsuitable habitat.

Plate 1: Adult male Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti*, Djebel Babor, Algeria, July 1987 (Alain Fossé)



Plate 2: Adult male Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti*, Djebel Babor, Algeria, July 1987 (Alain Fossé)

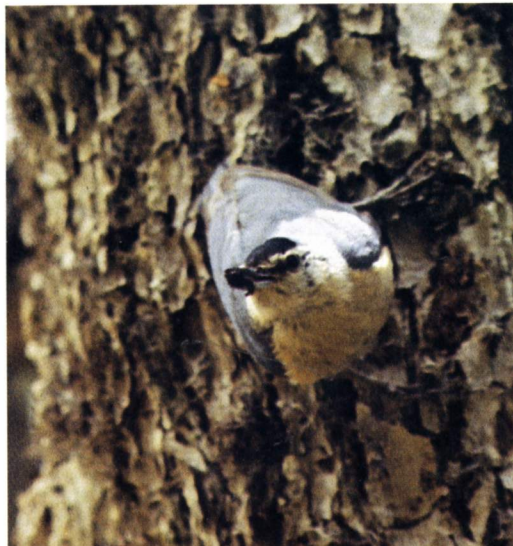




Plate 3: Adult female Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti* at nest, Djebel Babor, Algeria, July 1987 (Alain Fossé)

The Guerrouch Forest has a rather warmer and drier climate than Djebel Babor, rarely experiencing frosts, and the forest is dominated by oaks rather than firs. Here, nuthatches have been found from 350m to the summit at 1,121m, with densities apparently increasing with altitude. Both Tamentout Forest and Djimla Forest are similar to Guerrouch, but nuthatches are apparently found largely above 1,000m, again in oaks.

These new discoveries have thrown a spanner in the works of the earlier theorizing, and the range of habitats utilised by the Algerian Nuthatch suggests that its distribution is restricted simply by the availability of forest rather than by a very specific ecological niche.

On the basis of size, plumage and vocalizations, the Algerian Nuthatch clearly belongs to a species group which includes Krüper's, Corsican, Chinese *S. villosa*, Yunnan *S. yunnanensis* and Red-breasted Nuthatches. But, rather than being a relict, trapped on the ecological island of Djebel Babor, the discovery of new sites and a much broader range of habitat preferences suggests a rather wider

distribution in the recent past. Deforestation, which has occurred in historical times rather than over geological time-periods, has probably reduced the range, which was widespread until very recently, to the current tiny fragments.

The new discoveries have boosted hope for the species' survival. In summer 1989, surveys in Taza National Park suggested a population of 364 individuals in the park, and nuthatches were also found to the southwest of the park boundary.

There is no information on the populations in Tamentout and Djimla Forests, but with a total area of 10,500ha, they may hold around 1,200 individuals if the population density is similar to that of Guerrouch.

Before the new areas were discovered, the Algerian Nuthatch was listed in the ICBP's world checklist of threatened birds (Collar & Andrew 1988), but with the discovery of three new populations, in over 20,000ha of forest, the situation has changed somewhat, although the designation as 'rare' is unlikely to be altered, and grazing, wood-cutting and fires continue to be threats, even within the national parks.



Plate 4: Juvenile Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti*, Djebel Babor, Algeria, July 1982 (Arnoud B. van den Berg)

Appearance

The Algerian Nuthatch is a medium-sized nuthatch with a short, slender and sharply-pointed bill, which often appears to be up-tilted due to the rather straight culmen and distinct gonydeal angle. The upperparts are bluish-grey with a prominent whitish supercilium, and the underparts are creamy-pink to orange-buff. The male has a well-demarcated black cap on the forecrown, a whitish supercilium and a variable black eyestripe – a head pattern which is most crisply-defined in the spring and summer. In fresh autumn plumage, the female has most of the crown and eye-stripe bluish-grey, concolourous with the upperparts and with blackish confined to a diffuse spot on the forehead. When worn, however, the female shows a variable black cap, although it is generally paler, rather less extensive and less well-defined than in the male.

Juveniles have the cap and eye-stripe concolourous with the upperparts, as in the female, but the supercilium is very poorly-marked, the upperparts are paler and less blue, and the underparts are also paler. Vielliard (1978) described black-capped juveniles, but this has not been supported by subsequent observations, although there is still a faint possibility that juveniles are sexually dimorphic, reflecting the adult plumage, as in Corsican and Red-breasted Nuthatches.

First-winter females are thought to resemble adult females, though with broader bluish-grey fringes to the feathers of the cap and eye-stripe totally concealing the black feather bases in fresh plumage. Also their supercilium is mottled grey although, unlike the juvenile's, it is still broad and prominent.



Plate 5: Adult male Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti*, Djebel Babor, Algeria, July 1982 (Arnoud B. van den Berg)

Algerian Nuthatches have a complex vocabulary. They give a quiet, soft, nasal "kna" recalling Red-breasted Nuthatch whilst foraging and in flight, and in excitement or territorial defence, a harsh, rasping "vschrr, vschrr" or "schrr, schrr-schrr", rather like a Jay, and sometimes, when more agitated, a louder, even 'cawing', "chwa-chwa-chwa". The song is a repetition of 7-12 phrases, sometimes nasal, sometimes fluty, lasting 2-4 seconds: "quair-di, quair-di, quair-di...." or "verdi-verdi-verdi....", sometimes slightly rising in pitch. It may be slightly faster, "du-wid-du-wid-du-wid....", and at the fastest, each phrase is almost monosyllabic and slightly higher-pitched, "vid-vid-vid-vid....". At all times, however, the song is quite distinct from the mellow, tremulous trill of Corsican Nuthatch.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Arnoud van den Berg for supplying copies of his excellent recordings of Algerian Nuthatch, and Peter Harrap for his assistance in the translation of several references.

References

- Bellatreche, M. 1991. Deux nouvelles localisations de la Sittelle kabyle *Sitta ledanti* en Algérie. *L'Oiseau* 61: 269-272.
 Bellatreche, M. & Chalabi, B. 1990. Données nouvelles sur l'aire de distribution de la Sittelle Kabyle *Sitta ledanti*. *Alauda* 58: 95-97.
 Collar, N.J. & Andrew, P. 1988. *Birds to Watch*. The ICBP World Check-list of Threatened Birds. Cambridge.
 Collar, N.J. & Stuart, S.N. 1985. *Threatened Birds of Africa and its Related Islands*. Cambridge.
 Jacobs, P., Mahler, F. & Ochando, B. 1978. A propos de la couleur de la calotte chez la Sittelle Kabyle. *Aves* 15: 149-153.
 Ledant, J.-P. & Jacobs, P. 1977. La Sittelle Kabyle (*Sitta ledanti*): Données nouvelles sur la biologie. *Aves* 14: 233-242.
 van den Berg, A. 1985. Photospot: Algerian Nuthatch. *Brit. Birds* 78: 265-268.
 Vielliard, J. 1978. Le Djebel Babor et sa sittelle *Sitta ledanti*. *Alauda* 46: 1-42.

Simon Harrap, El Coqui, 3 Beresford Road, Holt, Norfolk NR25 6EW