

green & gold

Birds of the oases and desert in Chad

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ELSA BUSSIÈRE**



In September 2019 the NGO African Parks sent an expedition into the Sahel-Saharan region of north-eastern Chad to conduct the first ornithological census of the Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve. A 10-day, 1150-kilometre adventure into the heart of a long-forgotten sandstone citadel in the middle of the desert, the survey would result in the first bird list for this Eden: 189 species. With a mere 13 per cent of the area studied, the exploration of the Ennedi Massif is only just beginning...

From the sandy vastness of the Sahara Desert in Chad rises the Ennedi Massif, a mineral masterpiece that covers 40 000 square kilometres and is a

natural open-air museum with hundreds of rock paintings as exhibits. Classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the massif is critical for groups of semi-nomads in search of water and pasture. To others, though, it has revealed only a tiny part of its magic. Barely a handful of scholars have ventured there in recent decades, but that seems likely to change – in 2018 the Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve was created and is now managed jointly by African Parks and the government of the Republic of Chad.

Inevitably, the Sahara conjures images of immense, sterile, burning expanses, vast sand fields that are hostile



KEN BEHRENS

to all forms of life. However Fada, the starting point for our expedition, is a green oasis, reminding us that below the desert's surface lies a large reserve of fresh water. Colourfully dressed women sell handfuls of dates in the market and Rose-ringed Parakeets chatter as they cross the small central square, where blacksmiths keep their coal braziers alive with bellows sewn out of goatskin. As the muezzin calls locals to prayer, Adoum Ali, the expedition's driver, pulls tight the last ropes securing the tarpaulin that covers our stores and luggage. On top of a small arch, binoculars in hand, Carles Durà from the Catalan Institute of Ornithology and Robert Thomson from the FitzPatrick Institute at the University of Cape Town observe the first Trumpeter Finches of our journey. It's time for Adoum Ali to start the engine and head out onto the dust-blown track.

The well-known Guelta d'Archeï is our first destination. Water flows all year into these small mountain pools that, protected by 80-metre-high cliffs, host a relict population of West African crocodiles – a throwback to the time, only 6000 years ago, when the Sahara



was green. As we enter the guelta, House Buntings flush and fly up over the high mountain slopes. Speckled Pigeons flee hunting Lanner Falcons, the flapping of their wings echoing around the rock faces and breaking the sacred silence. Sunlight seeps through the canyon, gliding over the cliffs and casting sparkles across the water.

Suddenly the guelta starts to sing, coming to life as dozens of camels make their way to the pools to drink. Their protectors, the herders, walk with them, crooning about the miracle of >

above *The Ennedi Massif abounds with House Buntings, which favour the rocky outcrops.*

top *In its non-breeding season, the threatened Marbled Duck finds a haven on Ennedi's lakes.*

opposite *A landmark of the massif is the Guelta d'Archeï, where a relict population of West African crocodiles survives and hundreds of camels come to drink daily.*

previous spread *Each year in August, Ennedi undergoes a transformation from barren golden desert to green savanna.*

Grand-Duc Ascalaphe
(Bubo ascalaphus)
PHARAOKH
EAGLE-OWL



Rollin d'Abyssinie
(Coracias abyssinicus)
ABYSSINIAN ROLLER



VALENTINE PLESSY

water in the desert. It's a spectacle the White Wagtail, Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco Heron and Green-backed Heron have observed many times.

A few kilometres away, on the grassy, savanna-like plain where Denham's Bustards and Bronze-winged Coursers forage, two lakes shine in the landscape.

For only a few weeks are they full, offering Knob-billed Ducks, Glossy Ibises, Ferruginous Ducks and Wood Sandpipers a welcome stopover after their great desert crossing. Dozens of Grasshopper Buzzards from Cameroon also congregate in their pursuit of insects moving north. Two telescopes we've positioned on elevated points reveal

unexpected species such as Gull-billed and Whiskered terns.

Here, at this moment, the desert has disappeared. Animals are grazing, children's laughter resounds across the distant landscape and the sky is filled with swallows – all, once again, reminiscent of the green Sahara.

The first glimmer of dawn gilds blades of grass on the Aloba Plain. Flocks of Red-necked Ostriches populated this landscape in the last century, along with herds of addax and scimitar-horned oryx. Now these two magnificent Saharan antelopes have become symbols of the catastrophic wave of extinction that still engulfs the Sahara and its Sahelian fringe.

Camels and swarms of migratory birds share these rolling expanses that each rainy season are transformed into a land of plenty. Their calls mingle with the voices of humans well adapted to the environment. As we cross the green landscape, it seems unthinkable that the water could one day run out. African Grey Hornbills undulate from acacia tree to desert date palm, short glides alternating with heavy wing beats. Their melancholy whistles contrast with the trills of White-throated Bee-eaters assembling on a branch to begin a frenzied recital. In just two months,

though, the sand will reclaim its domain and the battle against drought will begin again.

In this ever-changing environment the Aloba Arch stands tall, impervious to howling winds and sandstorms. More than 120 metres high, it's like a gate marking the passage from plain to mountains. A Pharaoh Eagle-Owl guards the opening, its reddish fawn plumage camouflaging it among the crevices of the same-hued rocky cliffs.

Driving north-westward, we pass across terrain where trees become scarce and sparse grassland eventually disappears, leaving only a world of minerals; every grain of quartz sparkles in the sun. Feeling dehydrated in the dry air, we lose our sense of time and place. Everything seems infinite: time is suspended and the horizon looks unreachable.

A movement at the base of a dune catches our attention. A small form the >

above *The isolated oasis of Anoa provides welcome relief for migrants, including Garden and Eurasian Reed warblers. In fact, you never know what may turn up.*

opposite *A surprising find for us was Sooty Falcons. We suspect they may be breeding at various sites in the massif.*

following spread *Even at the peak of the rainy season, Ennedi remains essentially in the world of minerals rather than plants.*



MIKE BUCKHAM





colour of the buff sand moves quickly – a Cream-coloured Courser alone in an empty world. But it knows where to find insects in this furnace. Or perhaps not alone. In the distance is a characteristic silhouette, small and fine, similar to a lark but with a long, curved beak. Unmistakably, it's a Greater Hoopoe-Lark. We also spot a Namaqua Dove sheltering in the shade of a lone acacia tree and four dorcas gazelles. But it's midday, the sun is burning and the temperature is close to 46 degrees Celsius – time to move on, away from the massif and to explore the Sahara's dunes.

Sand accumulates in vast undulations as barkhans – mobile, crescent-like dunes shaped by the wind – that follow one another endlessly. Nothing seems to change and only the GPS confirms our progress towards the Ouide and Anoa lakes, which promise a shady stop for



Garden and Eurasian Reed warblers and Marbled Ducks. Here they discover a lifeline in the heart of the desert. Anoa, especially, is a jewel in the Sahara, surrounded by silence and bathed in stillness and in ochre, yellow and blue where the sky and sand mingle and merge.

A characteristic whistle breaks the silence, the sound of air passing through feathers. There can be no doubt: falcons are hunting in the twilight. Our torch beams sweep across the starry sky. The falcons appear, their blackish primaries and tail feathers contrasting with the bluish grey of their streamlined bodies. The lemon-yellow eye ring, cere and legs confirm our tentative identification – Sooty Falcons!

Early the next morning the happy laughter of ornithologists who have fulfilled their mission mingles with the chink of spoons in coffee cups. Adoum Ali tightens the ropes, everything is secure and we begin the drive back to Fada. Not far along, we meet about 50 camels on the track as they head towards the oasis of Anoa. Quietly, imperturbably, they surround the vehicle, leaving only the sky as our opening to



the world. Two large white wings glide gracefully across the smooth blue space – an Egyptian Vulture migrating south. The exploration of Ennedi's birds has begun, but only just. Ten days and 1150 kilometres in the Sahara is no more than a quick glance; we hope for longer looks in the years ahead.

Elsa Bussière is African Parks' conservation manager at Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve.

above *Cream-coloured Coursers* are usually found on the largely barren, hard rocky plateaus – known as hamadas – of the Ennedi Massif.

opposite, above For a few months, Lake Nohi provides water for wildlife. But then it dries and the struggle against drought begins again.

opposite, below *The Greater Hoopoe-Lark* is a distinctive and conspicuous species, unlike other members of the lark family.