

# A NEW LOCALITY OF DUPONT'S LARK *CHERSOPHILUS DUPONTI* IN ALGERIA

Walid Dahmani<sup>a</sup>, Abdelwahab Chedad<sup>b\*</sup>, Mohamed Ait Hammou<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department and Faculty of Nature and Life Sciences, Laboratory of Agro Biotechnology and Nutrition in Semi-Arid Areas, Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, 14000 Tiaret, Algeria; [herpetowalid5@gmail.com](mailto:herpetowalid5@gmail.com), [mohamedait Hammou@gmail.com](mailto:mohamedait Hammou@gmail.com); <sup>b</sup>Department of Biological Sciences, Laboratory of Saharan Bio-Resources: Preservation and Valorization, University of Ouargla, 30000 Ouargla, Algeria, Directorate of Forest Conservation of Ghardaïa, 47000 Ghardaïa, Algeria. [agrochedad@yahoo.fr](mailto:agrochedad@yahoo.fr)

\*Corresponding author. Email: [agrochedad@yahoo.fr](mailto:agrochedad@yahoo.fr)

 Abdelwahab Chedad: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8098-1803>

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**Abstract.** Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti* (Vieillot, 1824), is one of Algeria's most discreet and rare birds. During the monitoring campaign, which was run between 2015 and 2022 using the point count method, a pair of Dupont's Larks was spotted in Aïn Dheb (South of Tiaret, Western Algeria) on July 27, 2016, with another dubious sighting of a single individual being recorded in the same locality in the second week of May 2022. This newly documented locality is important because it likely expands the currently known range of this rare species in Algeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Dupont's Lark is a resident passerine bird whose distribution range is limited to Spain and North Africa (Suárez 2010; BirdLife International 2020). Globally, this species is classified as vulnerable (Vu) according to the IUCN Red list, with a small population consisting of approximately 19500–27300 individuals (BirdLife International 2020). In Algeria, it is protected nationally by the executive Fiat 12–235 of 24 May 2012, which establishes the list of protected non-domestic animal species. This species is protected because its distribution range is restricted and threatened by several factors, including overgrazing, desertification and climate change. The genus *Chersophilus* contains only one species, with two subspecies: *C. d. duponti* (Vieillot, 1824) occurring in southern Spain and north of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia and *C. d. margaritae* (Koenig, AF, 1888), whose distribution area ranges from western Algeria to eastern Egypt (Shirihai and Svensson 2018; Gill et al. 2022). In Algeria, Dupont's Lark inhabits sagebrush and alfa steppes on consistent or stony soils (excluding sands) of the Hauts Plateaux and the northwestern edge of the Sahara (Aflou and El Bayadh), but three isolated winter sightings were recorded outside the range in Hassi Messoud, Ghardaïa and El Eulma/Sétif (Isenmann and Moali 2000).

In recent decades, many bird species have experienced range expansions throughout Algeria from north to south and vice versa. For instance, the Eurasian Col-

lared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* has spread from the north to the extreme south of Tamanrasset (Moali and Isenmann 2007), as well as several Fringillidae species and some *Oenanthe* species (Chedad 2021; Chedad et al. 2020a, 2021a) in Ghardaïa. Likewise, the distribution range of the House Bunting *Emberiza sahari* has undergone expansion in both directions (Moulaï 2019; Chedad 2021; Chedad et al. 2021b; El Bouhissi et al. 2021), and that of the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* has expanded towards the extreme south-west in Tindouf (Haddad et al. 2021), and the Maghreb Magpie *Pica mauritanica* and Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* have spread from the north to the Algerian Sahara (Chedad et al. 2022; Bouletif et al. 2022). This note documents the presence of Dupont's Lark in Algeria in a new locality (Tiaret region, western Algeria), indicating the possible range expansion of this species as well.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area

The Chott Chergui basin, located in the Hauts Plateaux of Western Algeria and classified as a Ramsar site in 2001 (Ramsar 2020), covers an area of 49704 km<sup>2</sup> stretching over seven provinces: Tlemcen, Naâma, Sidi Bel-Abbès, Saïda, Laghouat, El Bayadh, and Tiaret (Benabadji and Bouazza 2000). This vast region is a large closed depression containing permanent and sea-

sonal lakes and ponds, fresh, brackish and salt water, as well as thermal springs. This region is of great ecological importance due to the biodiversity that it hosts. Specifically, it harbors several species of migratory waterbirds, which makes it an important nesting and wintering area for avifauna (Adi et al. 2016).

### Data collection

Bird surveys were conducted during the 2015–2022 period along the southern part of Tiaret. The inventories were conducted by direct observation using a pair of binoculars equipped with a Nikon P900 camera ( $\times 83$ ). Surveys were performed on a regular basis, with periodic outings averaging around two per season (at the beginning and at the end). Additional surveys were carried out during the main postnuptial (September and October) and prenuptial (March and April) migration seasons of other land birds (Chedad et al. 2021c, d).

Since the study area is an open steppe, we used the point count method with unlimited distance, where the observer records only the presence and absence of the species, at dawn, during a 5–6 hour-long transect. (Blondel 1975, Blondel et al. 1981). This method has already been used multiple times before (Blondel et al. 1970; Blondel 1975; Bani et al. 2006; Chedad et al. 2021b; Mansouri et al. 2021; Nakhla et al. 2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During this study, a total of 66 bird species belonging to 15 orders and 30 families were inventoried across the Tiaret South. The most dominant bird families are Muscipidae with 11 species and Alaudidae with 10 species. Among this avifauna, a pair of Dupont's Larks was observed on July 27, 2016 on a dune cord in the Aïn Dheb region, South of Tiaret ( $1^{\circ}44' 46.68''\text{E}$ ;  $34^{\circ}34' 6.97''\text{N}$ ; 1031 m a.s.l.) (Figures 1, 2). This region falls into the arid climate zone, and is characterized by a low vegetation cover, composed mainly of *Peganum*

*harmala*, *Atriplex halimus*, *Stipa tenacissima*, *Legeum sparthum*, among other species (Figure 2). This habitat hosts a significant abundance of invertebrates and reptiles, which constitute the diet of many bird species, including those belonging to the family Alaudidae. Dupont's Lark shares the same biotope with many species of the families Alaudidae, Muscipidae and others such as: *Alaudala rufescens*, *Eremophila bilopha*, *Melanocorypha calandra*, *Galerida macrorhyncha*, *Oenanthe moesta*, *Oenanthe deserti*, etc.

As to the phenological status of this species, it is probably an accidental visitor in the Tiaret South, because, despite our repeated surveys in the same area after the first sighting, the species was encountered only once. Moreover, it was a dubious observation of a single individual in the second week of May 2022. The absence of more observations supports the hypothesis that it could be considered as a form of occasional summer dispersal.

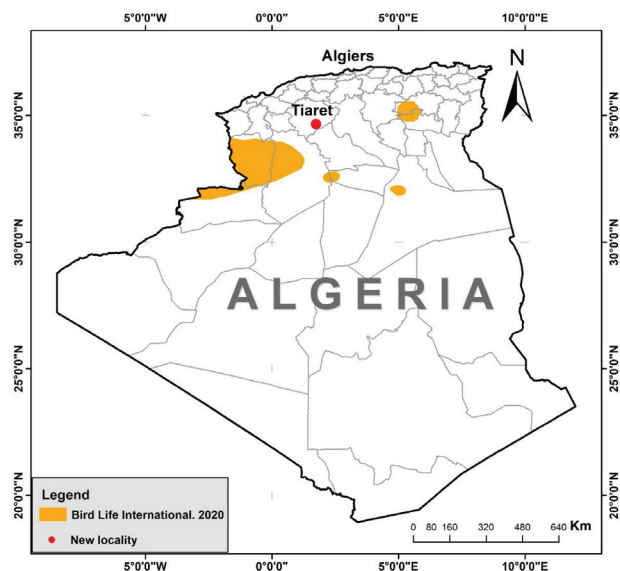


Figure 1. Observation site of the Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti* in Tiaret, Algeria, on 27 July, 2016 (Walid Dahmani, red dot). The previously known range of the species (orange color) was established following BirdLife International (2020).



Figure 2. Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti* in Aïn Dheb (Tiaret, Algeria) (left). General view of the biotope at Aïn Dheb (Tiaret, Algeria).

In the Tiaret region and the areas adjacent to Sidi Bel-Abbès and Saïda, the expansion of another lark species' range was documented (Greater Hoopoe-lark *Alaemon alaudipes*), which is probably linked to the advance of the desert due to climate change (Dahmani et al. 2023). Dupont's Lark has not been recently documented in Algeria (last ten years or more), perhaps because of its declining number, and its ability to merge and hide in its environment. Moreover, Shirihai and Svensson (2018) mentioned that this species is confined to arid plains with grasses and low scrub, and is a contender for the title of "Europe's most elusive bird". Dupont's Lark individuals usually dive silently to the ground and then disappear in the grass.

## CONCLUSION

This study documents the presence of Dupont's Lark for the first time in the North-west of Algeria (south of Tiaret), in a semi-arid climate zone, characterized by a weak but diversified vegetation cover and a desert biotope. Following our observations, we conclude that the occurrence of Dupont's Lark in this area is probably accidental. It is necessary to thoroughly study the reproduction and distribution of this poorly known species in Algeria.

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### Conflicts of interest

The co-authors report no conflicts of interest.

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### Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

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