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THE FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD OF THE PINK-BACKED PELICAN (*PELECANUS RUFESCENS* GMELIN, 1789) IN ALGERIA

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Abstract. On 4 February 2025, a single individual of the Pink-backed Pelican (*Pelecanus rufescens*) was observed at the Hammam Grouz dam, Milla region, located in eastern Algeria. This marks the first confirmed sighting of this species in the country. The presence of this species in Algeria is noteworthy, as it is typically found in sub-Saharan Africa. This observation may indicate a case of vagrancy, possibly influenced by environmental factors.

Birds exhibit a wide range of movement behaviours, from regular long-distance migrations to rare and unpredictable vagrancy events. Migration is a well-studied phenomenon driven by seasonal needs and environmental cues, but it is increasingly affected by global climate change (Arizaga et al. 2006). Vagrancy, in contrast, occurs when individuals stray beyond their typical range, often due to disorientation, unsuitable breeding conditions, or environmental disruptions (Gilroy and Lees 2003). Although uncommon, such records can provide valuable insights into ecological flexibility and potential range shifts.

The Pink-backed Pelican (*Pelecanus rufescens*), a species primarily distributed in sub-Saharan Africa, had never previously been recorded in Algeria (Isenmann and Moali 2000). On 4 February 2025, during a routine avifaunal survey at the Hammam Grouz dam (36°13'35"N 6°16'46"E) (altitude 720 m), a single individual was observed and photographed (Figure 1). This sighting marks the first confirmed record of the species in the country. With an initial capacity of 45 million m³ and a height of 49.5 metres, the Hammam Grouz dam was constructed between 1981 and 1987 on the Oued Rhumel (Toumi and Rémini 2006).

A previous unverified report from February 2018 mentioned the presence of six individuals at the Beni Haroun dam, also in eastern Algeria. However, no photographic evidence or detailed descriptions were available at the time, leaving the record inconclusive (Lemkoureb 2025, pers. comm.). The recent 2025 sighting provides the first definitive proof of the species' presence in Algeria.

According to Heim De Balsac and Mayaud (1962) and Isenmann and Moali (2000), two pelican species had previously been observed in Algeria. The Great White Pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) was sighted in the 19th century and on 9 October 1912 in Algiers, and the Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) reported as accidental in the 19th century.

The Pink-backed Pelican has white, pale grey, and pink plumage, with dark grey wingtips and a black rump. Its breast and abdomen are pink, with a pinkish hue on its back. The facial skin develops a large black patch with a smaller pink patch above it. Its bill is pinkish, with a pouch ranging from pink to deep yellow, marked with vertical dark stripes. It has a small crest, giving the head a peaked appearance, and during the breeding season, the adult displays long, ragged feather plumes (Allen 2019).

Figure 1. Pink-backed Pelican observed at Hammam Grouz, Mila, Algeria (4 February 2025).

Figure 2. Ringed Pink-backed Pelican (A39) at Hammam Grouz, Mila, Algeria (4 February 2025).

The Pink-backed Pelican is widely distributed across Africa and parts of the Arabian Peninsula, occupying freshwater and coastal wetlands, including lakes, rivers, and estuaries. It is primarily a resident species, although some populations undertake seasonal movements in response to water availability and food resources. Breeding occurs in scattered colonies, often on secluded islands or in dense vegetation, where they nest in trees or on the ground. Despite its broad distribution, the species is highly dependent on wetland ecosystems, making it vulnerable to habitat degradation and climatic changes (BirdLife International 2024).

Three species of pelican occur annually and naturally in the Western Palaearctic (Del Hoyo et al. 1992). The Great White Pelican and the Dalmatian Pelican breed in Europe, with large numbers in Romania (Danube Delta), but colonies also exist in other countries such as Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine (Del Hoyo et al. 1992). In north Africa, the Pink-backed Pelican is an annual spring and summer visitor to southern Egypt at Abu Simbel on Lake Nasser, close to the Sudanese border, sometimes in large numbers (over 90 in 1990 and 1994). It also breeds just outside the Western Palaearctic in Saudi Arabia (over 300 pairs; Newton and Symens 1996).

In Morocco, Bergier et al. (1996) mentioned a non-validated observation of at least six Pink-backed Pelican adults at Merzouga on 24 May 1994. However, in a later publication, Bergier et al. (1998–99) considered this species as accidental, for which one or more records had been cited but were not considered entirely satisfactory. The Pink-backed Pelican was removed from the list of birds of Morocco due to obvious confusion or insufficient descriptions of previous sightings (Bergier et al. 2000, 2017). The species had not previously been documented in Tunisia. This sighting of the Pink-backed Pelican at the Hammam Grouz dam in Algeria constitutes the first confirmed record for Maghreb countries.

The Pink-backed Pelican observed at the Hammam Grouz dam was ringed with a red band marked "A39" in white (Figure 2) and had been previously recorded in Sardinia (Marcello Grussu, pers. comm.). This individual was originally ringed at the Sigean African Reserve in southern France, where pelicans have been marked annually since 2002, while earlier individuals remained unmarked. Escaped pelicans, whether ringed or not, are known to disperse across Europe (Jiguet et al. 2008). While Jiguet et al. (2008) confirmed the natural occurrence of all three pelican species in northern and western Europe, identifying the precise origin of an individual remains difficult unless it was ringed in a wild population.

The occurrence of *Pelecanus rufescens* in Algeria is most likely linked to captive escape events in France, where the species was housed in zoological parks. The dispersal of these individuals into Europe has been previously documented, and this record suggests that some may have travelled further south. The presence of this individual in Algeria highlights the potential for introduced populations to expand their range. Further monitoring is necessary to determine whether such occurrences remain isolated cases or indicate a broader dispersal trend.

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Conflict of interests
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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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