

## First record of African Dunn's Lark (*Eremalauda dunnii dunnii*) for the Tafilalt, Morocco

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Dunn's Lark (*Eremalauda dunnii*) is native to the Saharan desert and the Middle East and Arabia. It inhabits flat, arid areas with light vegetation such as grass and scattered bushes. There are two recognised subspecies: African Dunn's Lark (*E. d. dunnii*) in the Sahara and Arabian Dunn's Lark (*E. d. eremodites*) in the Middle East and Arabia. The African subspecies has a scattered range from Mauritania through Mali, Niger and Chad to Sudan. The Arabian subspecies breeds east of the Gulf of Suez, mainly in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Oman. It has also bred occasionally in Jordan, Israel and the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. Vagrants have been recorded from Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Birdlife Cyprus, Jennings 2010, Porter & Aspinall 2010, Nation & Hooper 1997, Richardson & Aspinall 1998, Serra 2005, Shirihai 1996, Sinclair & Ryan 2003).

In 2006 this species was recorded for the first time in Morocco near Aswerd (Oued Ad-Deheb), a remote desert village in the southernmost part of Western Sahara (Thévenot *et al.* 2003, Lees & Moores 2006). In 2007 during a survey for Dark Chanting Goshawk (*Metabates melierax theresae*) the first breeding African Dunn's Lark for Western Sahara were incidentally found along an 87 km transect close to the road between Dakhla and Aswerd (Copete *et al.* 2008). Since then annual sightings were reported from this area.

In spring 2010, during a birding trip to Morocco, Ernst Albegger and Sandra Götsch together with Helmut Kräuter and Josef Ringert, all Austrian birders, spent some days in the Tafilalt. In search of African Desert Warbler (*Sylvia deserti*) we visited one of the classic sites named by Dave Gosney at GPS point 31.2415 N, 4.0834 W, situated about 9.5 km west of Auberge Yasmina on 14th April. At noon we parked the car about 600 m to the East of this spot (some 200 m to the North of

the signpost 'Auberge Yasmina at 9 km'). In this area the stony desert is sparsely vegetated with small grassy bushes and desert plants looking very similar to the countryside in Western Sahara, where African Dunn's Lark occurs. Soon after leaving the car, we heard a scratchy warbling song with short whistling phrases. Within seconds we located a medium-sized, singing lark on the ground at close range. The bird was stocky with a large head and had pale sandy-brown upperparts. The underparts were whitish with some dark streaks on the breast. The bird showed a pale supercilium and a pale eye ring. Furthermore it had dark moustachial and malar stripes and a dark mark under the eye. These facial markings were not very obvious and sometimes difficult to see. This feature is described to be typical for African Dunn's Lark (Copete *et al.* 2008). The bill was large, heavy and pale pinkish coloured. As the bird didn't fly, we couldn't see any tail pattern. We were totally surprised to identify it as African Dunn's Lark this far north, some 1400 km linear distance from its only known breeding grounds in Western Sahara.

After a few minutes we found a second bird, which was feeding close to the other one on the stony ground. We considered this to be a female as it differed in behaviour and bill size. While the first bird was singing regularly, this one was occupied only with feeding and kept close to the first bird, which was moving in front. The bill of the second bird seemed to be slightly weaker. The firstly discovered male continued feeding and singing on the ground. Both birds were very tame allowing us to observe and photograph them from a distance of about 8 m. We watched the confiding birds for about an hour before we moved on. In order to spread this exiting information quickly, we sent an SMS to Patrick Bergier of Go South, who confirmed our presumption, that this was the first record for Morocco excluding the remote parts of Western Sahara.

After this information was published on [www.go-south.org](http://www.go-south.org), Patrick Bergier received additional data: already on 10th April a single African Dunn's Lark was photographed by Raúl Aymí and Eladi Ribes, who worked at the ringing station at Auberge Yasmina in spring. The following day J. W. Hermans *et al.* photographed probably the same bird at this site.

On 3rd May, eight individuals and a nest were found at three sites in the described area in a section of 2-3 km along the untarred road to Auberge Yasmina. The nest was situated at the base of a large clump of grass and an adult bird was observed feeding a juvenile (Martin Barry, Benoît Maire, Alain Mathurin).

On 18th May the last reported observation was made by Anthony Faure, who found an adult bird feeding a young at the same location, where we had discovered the birds first.

Although the Tafilalt is one of the most extensively explored areas in Morocco, this record proves that the region can still hold a few surprises for ornithologists especially away from the well-trodden paths.



**Figure 1.** The known breeding area of African Dunn's Lark near Aswerd in Western Sahara is situated about 1400 km southwest of the Tafilalt

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*African Dunn's Lark in the Tafilalt*



**Photo 1.** African Dunn's Lark in the Tafilalt, 10th April 2010 (Eladi Ribes)



**Photo 2.** Desolate plains with sparse vegetation held eight birds of African Dunn's Lark in spring 2010 (Ernst Albegger)

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**Photos 3 to 6.** Male African Dunn's Lark feeding and singing on the ground, 14 April 2010 (Ernst Albegger)



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**Photo 7.** Female African Dunn's Lark, 14 April 2010 (Ernst Albegger)