

Breeding of the Marsh Owl (*Asio capensis tingitanus*) in a strictly forest area of Morocco: a chance or a choice?

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The Marsh Owl is an African bird. Its range mainly extends south of the Sahara and more particularly in the southern hemisphere below the equator. However, some isolated populations live in West Africa, Nigeria, Senegal and Mauritania as well as in northwestern Morocco. Three subspecies are officially recognized: *Asio capensis capensis* in South Africa and in the south of the Sahara; *Asio capensis hova* in Madagascar and *Asio capensis tingitanus* confined to Morocco.

This last subspecies has undergone a large decline since the end of the 19th century due to the increase in human population and the resulting modification, disturbance and destruction of wetlands (Bergier & Thévenot 1991, Thévenot *et al.* 2003). To date, the available knowledge on nesting Marsh Owls shows the almost exclusive use of marsh vegetation on littoral wetlands (Thévenot *et al.* 2003); nesting was recorded at Larache (Heim de Balsac 1952), Merja Zerga (Thévenot *et al.* 1983), Sidi Boughaba (Naurois 1961, Cherkaoui 2003), at the Bouregreg river near Rabat (Heim de Balsac 1952) and at Sidi Moussa Oualidia (Naurois 1961).

As part of its research programs in the Ma'amora forest [Didactic Lot of the Royal Moroccan Federation of Hunting (DLRMFH): 34°00'80"N-6°28'25"W], one of us (SH) found a Marsh Owl's nest on 8th April 2014. It was located into an herbaceous formation composed mainly by *Chamaerops humilis*, *Teline linifolia*, *Cistus salviifolius* and *Lavandula stoechas* and contained three eggs and (Photo 1 & 2). In order to situate this finding at the full scale of the Ma'amora forest, the collaboration with I. Cherkaoui proved to be necessary.

To our knowledge, this is the first record of a Marsh Owl breeding in the Ma'amora forest. Indeed, the most recent studies undertaken in this forest have not reported neither the presence of the species nor its breeding (Cherkaoui *et al.* 2007 & 2008). This is also the first nesting record in a strictly Cork oak *Quercus suber* wooded area. This remarkable presence could be due to the protection of this part of the forest and to the absence of human disturbance, particularly grazing activity. This last factor is known to affect negatively the vegetation structure (Papachristou & Platis 2011; Hanane 2014). Taking advantage of the quality of this habitat and its suitability (high shrub cover), this pair of Marsh Owl has bred successfully (two chicks on 22nd April 2014, with one in poor condition; one chick the next day - Photo 3).

At this point, we cannot respond to the title question because, so far, we have only found one nest. That is why research should be continued to determine if this species will be able to breed over the coming years in the same area and even in others. If so, we can at this time confirm the existence of a new breeding habitat for this highly vulnerable species.

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Photo 1. The nest is concealed in a herbaceous formation composed mainly by *Chamaerops humilis*, *Teline linifolia*, *Cistus salviifolius* and *Lavandula stoechas*

Marsh Owl in the Ma'amora forest



Photo 2. Three eggs on 8th April 2014



Photo 3. One chick on 23rd April 2014

Marsh Owl in the Ma'amora forest



Photo 4 and 5. Marsh Owl, Ma'amora forest, April 2014