

## Project Update: December 2019

The Maghreb magpie is recently considered as a new species. Only one population of Maghreb magpie *Pica mauritanica* occurs in Tunisia and few ones in Algeria and Morocco. This species is highly threatened in North Africa with no clear conservation status. Also, it is poorly known, and no data are available. This critical situation makes conservative intervention indispensable more than ever.

This briefing summarises major activities carried out to accomplish the first part of the project that target the distribution of the species' populations in the study areas. These objectives were to:

- 1) locate the current populations of Maghreb magpie,
- 2) map the actual occurrence of the species and highlight changes in its distribution over time,
- 3) identify probable nesting areas,
- 4) determine the nesting habitats requirements of the species. Work was carried out through three missions in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia respectively.





Population of Maghreb magpies (juveniles) in Morocco

### **First Mission: Morocco**

Between 16<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> August 2019, the two Tunisian ornithologists, Dr. Aymen Nefla and Mr. Ridha Ouni, started on Moroccan territory the first of scheduled inventories of Maghreb magpie populations in North Africa. This mission was part of the project "*Distribution and Vulnerability Assessment of the Maghreb Magpie Pica Mauritanica*" developed and supervised by Dr. Aymen Nefla (project leader) and Mr. Ridha Ouni, administered by EXPLORALIS (NGO) and funded by The Rufford Foundation.

A technical meeting bringing together all ornithologists involved in the census missions was carried out on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2019, the arrival day of mission's supervisors, Dr. Aymen Nefla and Mr. Ridha Ouni, in Morocco. During which the sharing teams and tasks as well as logistics and planning check were discussed.

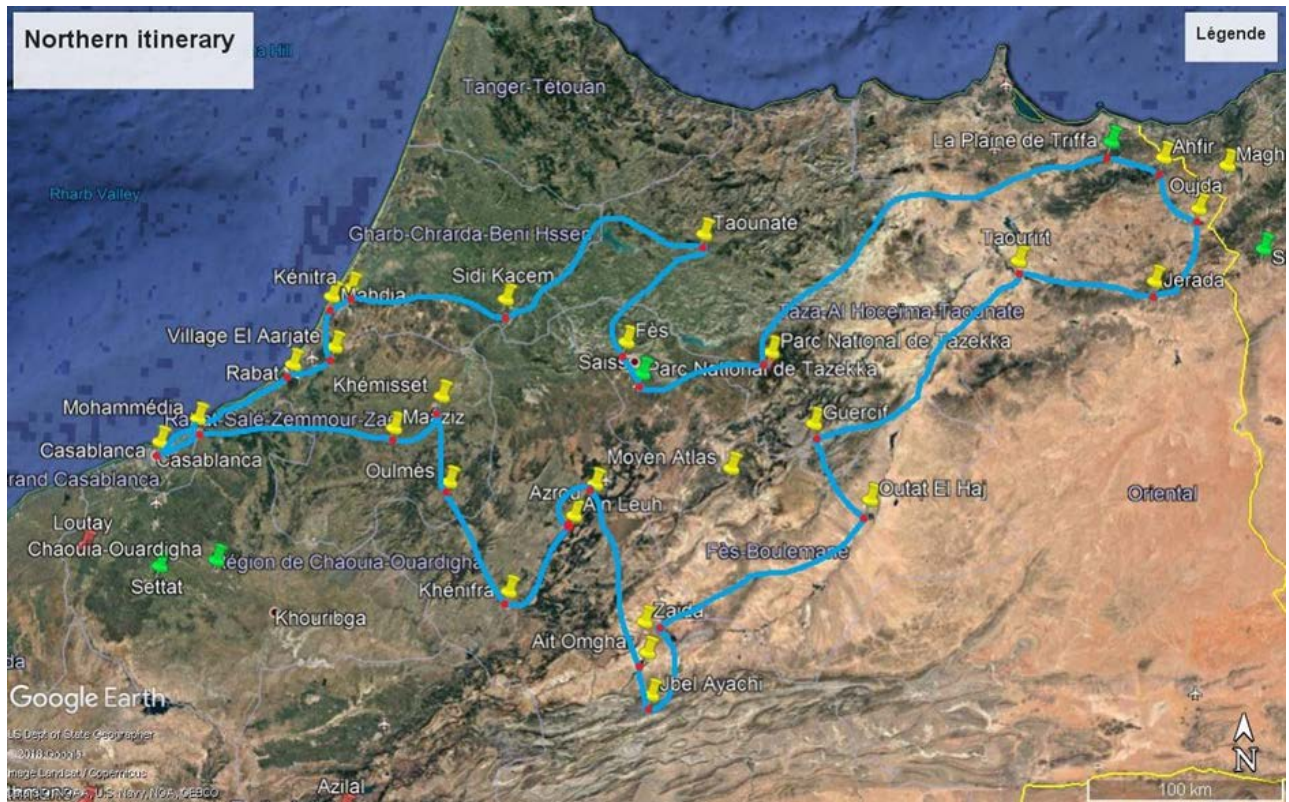


### **Technical meeting**

Subsequently, for an optimal prospection of predefined areas based on the literature, the involved members were divided into two teams in order to cover simultaneously the two itineraries, north and south, prepared beforehand. Each workgroup, equipped with a 4 × 4 vehicle, has prepared to set the stage for a new adventure!

### **Northern itinerary**

**The first team** was formed by Dr. Aymen Nefla, Pr. Abdesslam Rihane, Mohamed Hilmi (PhD student), Ismail Mansouri (PhD student) and Wafa Squalli (PhD student). They crossed the entire northern itinerary covering 2606 km in 9 days. They left Casablanca to cross a predefined route searching the Maghreb magpies. They passed respectively by Mohamedia, Maiziz, Khmisset, Oulmes and Khnifra. Subsequently, they left for Ain Leuh, Azrou, Ait Omghar, Jbel Ayachi and Zaida-Midelt respectively. Then they crossed Outat El Hadj, Taourirt, Jerada, Oujda, Ahfir and Triffa. After visiting the Taza-Tazekka National Park, they prospected respectively Fes, Taounet, Sidi Kacem, Kenitra, Mahdia, Boughaba, Aarjate village and then Rabat to finally return to Casablanca on 25<sup>th</sup> August.



Follow-up itinerary for the Maghreb magpie prospection in northern Morocco





Team working in northern Morocco







Team working in southern Morocco

### **Second Mission: Algeria**

After the Moroccan mission censuses efforts of the Maghreb magpie in North Africa continued in the Algerian territory. This country was characterised by a great avian and biotopes diversity. Like in Morocco, the field work was carried out by two research teams. The involved members were divided into two teams in order to cover simultaneously the two itineraries, east and west, prepared beforehand. The first and the second workgroup were equipped with one and two vehicles respectively.

### **Eastern itinerary**

**The first Team** was formed by Dr. Aymen Nefla, Mr. Ridha Ouni and Laalmi Hakim Ben Mokhtar. They crossed the entire eastern itinerary covering 3140 km in 7 days. They left Tunis to Tabarka where they crossed the land border and accessed the Algerian territory. They passed respectively by Annaba, Constantine, Batna, Bou Sâada, Djelfa, Hassi Rmal, Laghouat and Tiaret respectively. After visiting the Theniet El Had National Park, they prospected respectively Ksar El Bokhari, Barika, Batna and finally return to Tunis via Souk Ahrass on 24<sup>th</sup> August.





Follow-up itinerary for the Maghreb magpie prospection in eastern Algeria





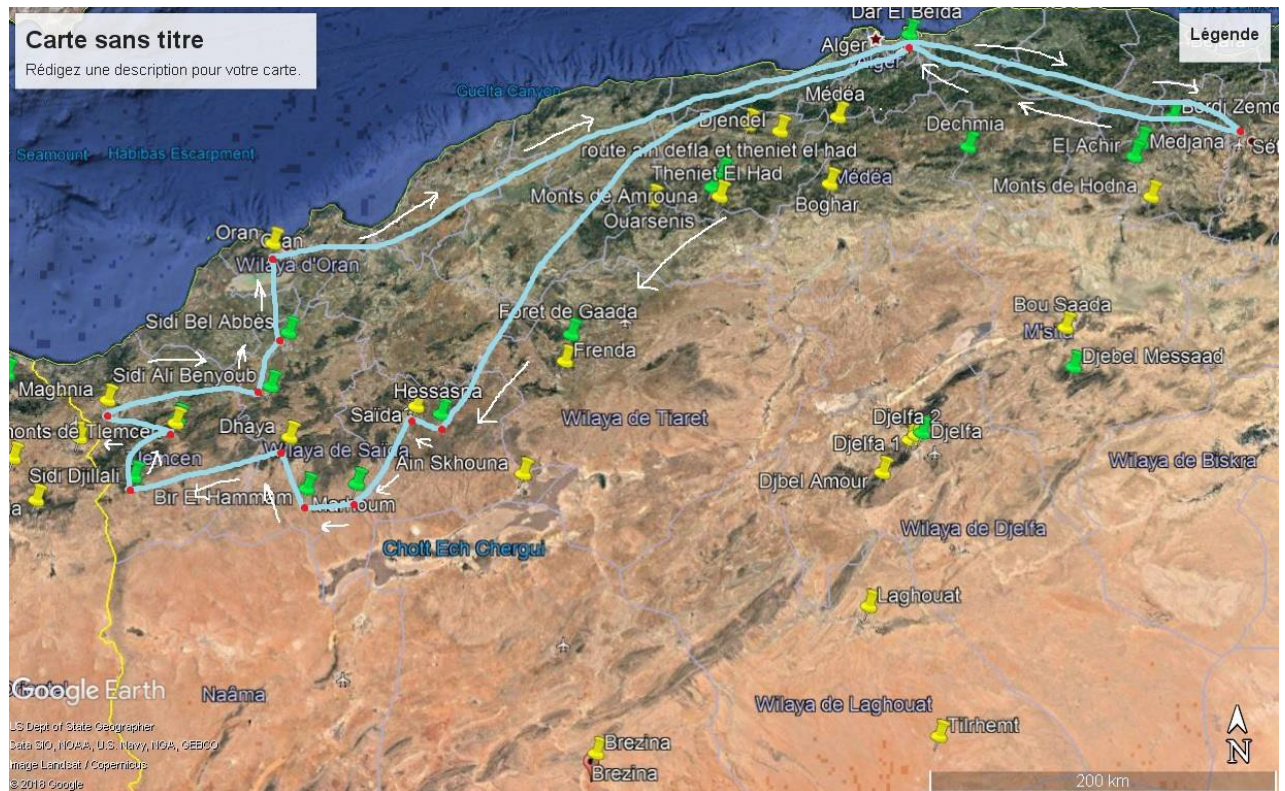
Team working in eastern Algeria



During this adventure, we went through the Theniet El Had National Park. This unique park covers approximately 3424 ha including 1000 ha of the Atlas cedar *Cedrus atlantica* being the only one in the North African region with such density.

### Western itinerary

**The second Team** The second team of Pr. Salah Telailia and his company began his tour on 23<sup>rd</sup> September. In fact, they crossed the entire western itinerary covering 2360 km in 9 days. They left Batna to Borj Bouaridj crossing Dar El Beida at Alger. Then they passed respectively by Saïda (Hassasna), Marhoum, Bir El Hmam, Dhaya, Sidi Djillali, Tlemcen, Maghnia - Sidi Ali Ben Ayoub, Sidi Bel Abbas, Oran and finally return to Batna via Borj Bouaridj in 1<sup>st</sup> October.



Follow-up itinerary for the Maghreb magpie prospection in western Algeria



Team working in western Algeria

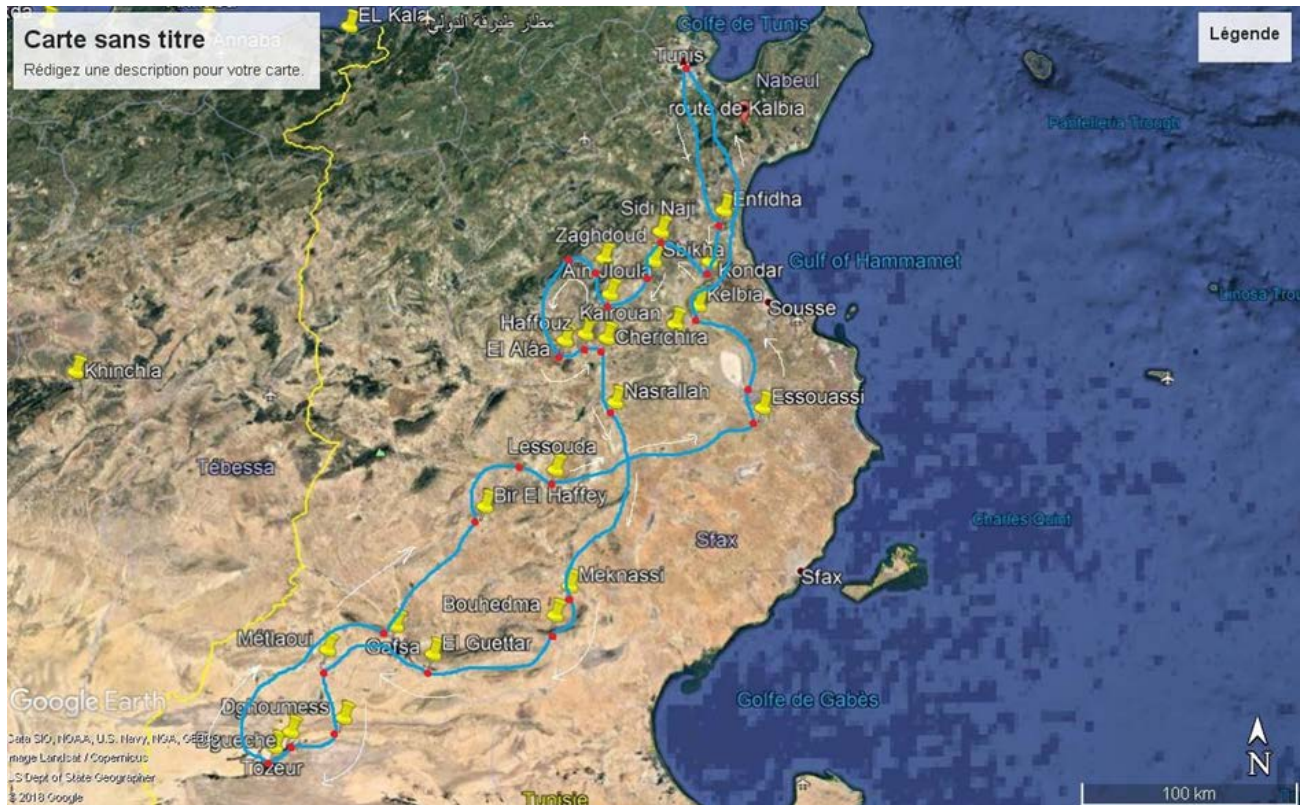




Maghreb magpies in Algeria

### Third Mission: Tunisia

The fieldwork began in 17<sup>th</sup> October. The Team was formed by Dr. Aymen Nefla, Mr. Ridha Ouni, Mr. Mohamed Hilmi, Mr. Wael Ben Abâa and Mr. Slim Alilech. They crossed the entire predefined itinerary covering 1833 km in 6 days. They left Tunis to Enfidha, Kondar, Sidi Neji, Sbikha and Kairouan respectively. Then they crossed Cherichira, Zaghdoud, Ain Jouloua, Haffouz, El Ala and Nasrallah. Subsequently, they left for Meknassy, Bouhedma National Park, El Guettar, Metlaoui and Tozeur respectively. After visiting the Dghroumess National Park, they prospected respectively Gafsa, BirLahfey, Sidi Bouzid, Lassouda, Essouassi, Sidi El Heni and then El Kalbia to finally return to Tunis on 22<sup>nd</sup> October.



Follow-up itinerary for the prospection of the Maghreb magpie in Tunisia



Team working in western Algeria



Nests of the Maghreb magpies in Tunisia



During all adventures the investigation for the Maghreb magpie occurrence was based on some presence indices. All directly observed individuals were enumerated and classified according to the corresponding age categories (young or mature). Our surveys mainly targeted nests which represent a relevant index of the presence of the species in the area. Nests are useful for determining the local population size. All these data collected in the field, make it possible to map the sites of presence and reproduction of the species. Also, this is essential for the eventual advancement of project work. Sometimes other clues such as skeletons or feathers have been used. The species at this time of the year is erratic; its movements usually extend over a radius of up to 20 kilometers. As a result, a feather found leads us to explore the entire surrounding area to look for a possible presence of individuals.

All missions carried out in three countries allowed us to obtain relevant and precise results about the spatial distribution of the Maghreb magpie. This fieldwork provided for us ample answers to the initial questions and hypothesis. It clarified the evolution of the spatial distribution of the species over time (old vs current distribution), their current distribution limits and the orientation of declining gradients of Maghreb magpie's populations. In addition, we managed to identify the nesting habitats requirements to which the species is highly linked as well as to estimate abundances of the existing populations, their nesting areas and their affinity towards anthropisation (all details will be provided in the final reports).