

Sighting of a Common Crane farinland at Es-Semara (Moroccan Atlantic Sahara)

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Introduction

In Western Europe, Common Cranes (*Grus grus*) undertake a biennial north–south migration of approximately 4000 km through the Great Plains of France and Spain (Alonso & Alonso 1996, del Hoyo 2020), available information on their migration routes is based on counts at staging and wintering areas (Alonso & Alonso 1996, Salvi 1996).

After the breeding season, the species moves to floodland, shallow sheltered bays, and swampy meadows. During the flightless period, there is a need for shallow waters or high reed cover for concealment. After the migration period, the birds winter in open country, often on cultivated lands, and sometimes in savanna-like areas such as Extremadura in the Iberian Peninsula where the bulk of the Western population winters (Cramp and Simmons 1980).

The short- and long-term changes in numbers of cranes wintering at various sites (Sánchez Guzmán *et al.* 1998) suggest that at least part of the Iberian wintering population is highly mobile and may shift from year to year between alternative wintering areas. A small proportion of this population, which is derived from birds breeding in the south Baltic countries, continues south to winter in Morocco (Cramp & Simmons 1980).

Birds that breed in Finland and Russia take a more direct southerly migration route, with some entering Tunisia (Isenmann *et al.* 2005) and others wintering farther east in Turkey, Iraq and parts of Iran. However, the majority winter in the river valleys of Sudan (south at least to Malakal), and in Ethiopia (del Hoyo 2020) (Fig. 1).

In Morocco, Thévenot *et al.* (2003) consider the Common Crane as an uncommon winter visitor whose wintering numbers were believed to be larger in the early 20th century than nowadays. The population wintering in Morocco typically occurs in two main areas. The first and most important area is located in the Northwest between Tangier and Barrage Idriss I where a few thousand birds winter (almost) annually. The second area is Massa river in the Souss region where a few dozens of birds regularly winter. The latter is considered as the southernmost limit of the species wintering range in the Maghreb region.

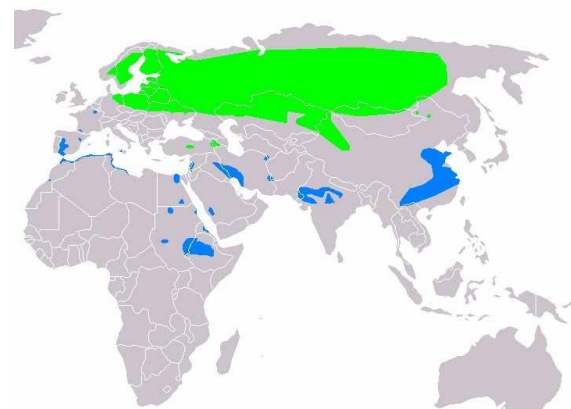


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of the Common Crane (*Grus grus*) © Viktor Kravtchenko.

Further south, the Common Crane is an accidental visitor to the Moroccan Atlantic Sahara (Bergier *et al.* 2017) and Mauritania. Up until now, only four observations are known south of the Souss region: three between Laâyoune and Mjijik near Dakhla and one in Nouadhibou, Mauritania. All these four observations were recorded not far from the coast between the end of December and early February.

On March 4th, 2021, two members of the local NGO “Association Bir Lehlou pour l’Environnement et le Développement durable et la Protection (ABLEDD) de la Nature à ES-Semara” accompanied by a reporter from the Laâyoune TV station visited a small wetland called Oued Win Salwan to make a short reportage on wetlands and waterbirds. The site is located 180 km from the Atlantic coast. There, they have observed and filmed an adult Common Crane which was present amongst a number of waterbirds (Photo 1). This is the fourth record for the Moroccan Atlantic Sahara, and to our knowledge, the most continental observation ever recorded in this arid region.

Oued Win Salwan occurs at nearly 5km north of Es-Semara (26°46′2.507 N, 11°42′15.317W). It is a permanent pond formed by the discharge of treated wastewater. It also receives water from temporary streams. The wetland is surrounded by lush vegetation composed of a mixture of reedbeds and other emergent vegetation, scrubland with *Tamarix sp.*, and *Acacia raddiana* trees (Photo 2).



Photos 1. Adult Common Crane (*Grus grus*) flying over the Win Salwan Wetland (Screenshot from the TV reportage).



Photo 2. Landscape of Oued Win Salwan Wetland near Es-Semara.

At the time of the visit, other waterbirds species were sighted including the vulnerable Marbled Teal (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*), Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*), Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Common Coot (*Fulica atra*), Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), Common Redshank (*Tringa totanus*), Wood Greenshank (*Tringa ochropus*), White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) and Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) (Photos 3 and 4).

According to Bergier *et al.* (2017), some of these waterbirds have not been recorded before in the region of Es-Semara.

Due to its remoteness, this region is rarely visited and its small wetlands are thus under-monitored, some of them maybe not even listed in regional and national wetland

inventories. To address this, monitoring and cataloging these small Saharan wetlands is highly recommended. This could provide useful information about their potential importance not only to migratory Palearctic birds, but also to the small breeding communities that nest locally.



Photos 3 & 4. Marbled Teals and White Storks at Oued Win Salwan wetland.

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