

# The bird they no longer expected - the Algerian Nuthatch

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**Algeria's colonial history has resulted in birds like the Algerian Nuthatch remaining largely unnoticed by Western ecologists for a significant period.**



*Sitta ledanti*. [Wiki Commons](#)

In the summer of 1976—the same year in which two Viking spacecraft landed on Mars—the French newspaper *Le Monde* announced the discovery of a bird previously unknown to science.

The bird was named sittelle kabylie: sittelle means “nuthatch” and kabylie refers to Kabylia, a French colonial name for a mountainous portion of northern Algeria, part of the former Berber kingdom of Numidia.

The Algerian nuthatch, as it is called in English, arrived in the European imagination at a time when the chances for any so-called ‘discoveries’ in a familiar part of the globe—Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East—were felt to be long past.

## Silhouettes

In fact, no new species of birds had been described in this region since the 1880s. A follow-up to the original announcement in *Le Monde* was headlined, “L’oiseau que l’on n’attendait plus,” or “The bird we no longer expected.”

Walking through an open forest on a sunny morning in March, my wife, Sarah, and I are feeling both expectant and hopeful.

Our guide, Karim Haddad, a robust, 57-year-old ecologist, has been studying the nuthatch for years. He knows where they live, what they eat, and how they communicate.

To help us locate the birds, Karim occasionally plays a recording of male nuthatch on his phone, but he can do a remarkable imitation with his voice as well.

As we proceed uphill, the spreading silhouettes of cork oaks give way to a species with taller, straighter trunks—the Algerian oak.

## **Departure**

We spy several other striking birds: African blue tit, short-toed treecreeper, Atlas chaffinch, and great spotted woodpecker, with a distinctive red patch under the tail.

But the nuthatch remains elusive. For a moment, I wonder if this excursion—which required a domestic flight from Algiers to Constantine, a 4:30-a.m. wakeup call, and a three-hour drive—could be classified as a wild-goose chase.

And then I remind myself that neither Sarah nor I are serious birders. We don't keep life lists, and there are no birding apps on our phones.

We are here mostly because of Sarah's job, as the interim head of the American International School in Algiers.

There are only a few months left before our departure from Algeria, and I thought it would be fun to see a bird that can be found only here, particularly if that bird is a nuthatch.

## **Susceptible**

The name goes back to the Old English "nuthack," derived from the bird's habit of wedging a nut or seed into the bark of a tree, then hacking away with its beak until the seed opens.

The nuthatches I knew and loved in North America were plump, inquisitive visitors to backyard feeders, with an endearing propensity for walking down a tree trunk headfirst.

At the time of their discovery, these Algerian cousins were thought to be Ice Age relicts, with a population numbered in the dozens. But scientists now suspect that there might be as many as a thousand nesting pairs spread over six different sites, with the sixth identified—by Karim himself—as recently as 2018.

This sounds like good news until you consider that the six sites, though reasonably close to each other, are separated by miles of treeless habitat.

Algerian nuthatches prefer old forests, Karim says, where they can prospect for insects and build their nests in woodpecker holes. And such places are particularly susceptible to damage by logging, woodcutting, livestock grazing, road-building, and fire.

## **Resilient**

In fact, Karim has just pointed out two tell-tale signs of habitat degradation. The first is an unusual scarcity of the green undergrowth that would be typical of a healthy forest, despite recent rains.

And the second is a lack of shed branches, combined with a dearth of low-growing branches in general. These, it turns out, have all been harvested—either for firewood or animal feed.

But the Algerian nuthatch is a resilient bird. Over the past five years, Karim does not feel that their numbers have plummeted.

True, they are classified as endangered and rank relatively high on the global scale of birding difficulty, but once you enter their home forests, they are reliable entertainers.

Sure enough, there's one now—a female, with a blue-grey back and rusty-orange breast, close

enough to identify with the naked eye.

## **Kabylia**

It hops briefly out of sight, behind the oak trunk, then walks obligingly along a branch, probing the creviced bark with its strong, straight beak. Soon a male joins the festivities, flitting from tree to tree as we crane our necks upward and try to focus our camera lenses.

To my ears, the male's call sounds more urgent and raucous than the familiar nasal crank of North America's red-breasted nuthatch. There's a bit more volume, and a trace of washboard too.

Considering the boldness of this performance, I don't know how to explain why a detailed description of an Algerian nuthatch did not arrive until the same year as a photograph from the surface of Mars.

Local people must have been noticing it—and admiring it—for millennia. Karim reports that he has not heard of a word in Tamazight (a Berber language) for nuthatch, although one elderly man told him that its old name translates as “blue treecreeper,” a tantalizingly apt moniker.

Colonial observers might have dismissed it as one of the European nuthatches and therefore unworthy of further scrutiny. Or perhaps its habitat had already been diminished and fragmented by the time French forces temporarily subdued Kabylia in 1857.

## **Suppression**

These mountains have a complicated and violent history, even by Algerian standards. Kabyles led an unsuccessful insurrection against France in 1871.

After independence, in 1962, the landscape continued to inspire a range of activists, secessionists, and counter-counterrevolutionaries.

The civil war of the 1990s killed an estimated 150,000 people nationwide and left countless scars on daily life, ranging from the authoritarian suppression of dissent to an enduring ban on binoculars.

Though born in nearby Constantine, Karim was studying in Ukraine during “the Black Years,” earning a PhD in food technologies in 1998.

He returned to Algeria with his wife and three daughters in 2010 and began guiding birders in 2017, a year after Tamazight was recognized as an official language, alongside Arabic, by constitutional resolution.

## **Checkpoints**

His original client was Peter Kaestner, the former U.S. foreign service officer who recently became the first person to log 10,000 different species of birds.

In the years since, Karim has shown the nuthatch to about 170 people, of whom Sarah is only the second woman.

Peter told me that, when he was here, there were many security checkpoints on the way from Constantine to the forest. Early in 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for a failed suicide bombing at a Constantine police station, while a branch of Al Qaeda was continuing its attacks on government forces.

“I don’t recall now if there were 10, 15, or 20,” he wrote. “But there were a lot and Karim was essential to pass them.”

## **Inshallah**

Seven years later, however, we have encountered no checkpoints at all. Widespread peaceful protests in 2019—dubbed “the Revolution of Smiles”—diminished during the onset of the pandemic then crumbled under lockdown and have not resumed.

Algerian nuthatches are assumed to be resident birds, without the migratory instinct of swifts or swans or humans.

What Karim would like to know is whether they are willing to move among the six known sites, which overlie Kabylia like six irregular islands.

If they were capable of such flights, then the status of the entire population would feel much less precarious.

With the help of miniaturized GPS transmitters, it would be a simple thing to find out. All he needs is the proper funding and support, Inshallah.

## **Direction**

On our way back down the hill, I allow my eyes to wander. The sun is warm now, and our footsteps frighten several Algerian sand lizards, which scabble noisily away.

Among the dry leaves, we find a few bright, early blossoms, relatives of the buttercup, crocus, and daisy.

We are satisfied with the day, though the nuthatches seem disinclined to relinquish our attention. A lone bird flies directly across my field of vision and then alights on a horizontal branch.

Fifteen minutes later, another repeats this manoeuvre. I laugh aloud, like a child pointing at a carnival, but Sarah and Karim are already looking in another direction.

## **Peter W. Fong**

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## **P.S.**

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<https://theecologist.org/2024/may/21/bird-they-no-longer-expected>

This Author

- Peter W. Fong is a journalist and author. His work has appeared in *High Country News*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *New York Times Sophisticated Traveler*. His most recent book, [Rowing to Baikal](#), is an account of a thousand-mile journey by horse, camel, kayak, and rowboat.