

## IX. *ANSER ANSER* IN TUNISIA

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### Historical position

*A. anser* has long been a winter visitor in good numbers to Tunisia. Blanchet (whose notes were not published until 1955, though they had been written in the 1940s on observations in the 1920s and 1930s) calls the species "a very regular visitor" and notes that "flocks, sometimes quite large, stay from November to March in the Ichkeul marshes, especially in the northwest part, at the stuary of the Oued Sejenane". Heim de Balsac and Mayaud (1962) echo *Blanchet's* views, adding that *Zedlitz* (1923) had recorded an "exceptional" case of nesting at Lake Fetzara nearby in Algeria.

The author, who lived in Tunisia in the 1960s, took part in goose counts organized at west Palearctic level by IWRB's Goose Research Group, the results of which were published by *Timmerman et al.* (1976). His observations from the 1960s, together with some counts he made during return visits in the 1970s are summarized in University College London (1977), and include peak counts at Ichkeul of 7000 (January 1969), 9250 (January 1974) and 6600 (December 1975).

Ichkeul, in northwest Tunisia, is the only site in Tunisia where *A. anser* occurs regularly in numbers. The species is recorded in smaller numbers further up the Sejenane valley at Sidi Mecherig, and there is another sizeable wintering flock, just across the border in Algeria, in the plain of the Oued el Kebir (especially at Garaet Mekhada) where 5000 were recorded in 1977 and 8000 in 1978 (*Van Dijk and Ledant* in press). Ichkeul and Mekhada are clearly the two major North African sites.

The origin of the Ichkeul birds is well attested by a series of ringing recoveries. Most come from Czechoslovakia (4 adults, 4 young birds); there is one from Lake Neusiedl in Austria (ringed as a gosling), two post-juveniles from Poland, and, rather surprisingly two from as far west as Sweden (a gosling from Uppland and an adult, presumably moulting, from Gotland).

Despite careful searching at Tunisia's many other major wetlands, the author has only ever seen the odd straggler, at very infrequent intervals, at Lake of Tunis, Garaet el Kebira (near Fahs), Sebkhet Sidi Khalifa and Garaet Hadj Kacem. It is possible that these birds had overshot Ichkeul, but since the sites are much further to the south and east it is likely that their departure point from the northern shores of the Mediterranean was Yugoslavia or the Balkans. This seems the more probable as they were in the company of other geese species, rarely recorded at Ichkeul.

The feeding behaviour of *A. anser* at Ichkeul has always been strikingly different from that familiar in most of the winter range (*Cramp et al.*, 1977). Instead of grazing on grassland the birds feed in the shallow waters of the lake

often upending like swans or dabbling ducks to reach submerged vegetation and coming to dry land only to rest. The ecological conditions of the lake and the surrounding winter-flooded marshes have undergone very little change in recent years, and the geese have not been obliged to adapt their traditional feeding habits. In most of the other great North African freshwater lakes (eg Lake Fetzara) drainage works have produced massive ecological change.

### Recent information

Much valuable new detail has been provided by the work, as yet unpublished, of M. Fay, an American botanist and ornithologist, who worked full time for two years from mid-1978 at Ichkeul in connection with the establishment of the National Park. He noted first arrivals of *A. anser* in mid October, numbers rising rapidly to a peak of 12 000 birds in early December (counts of 10 000 on 10 December 1978, 9000 on 20 December 1979), with a normal midwinter figure of 8000 birds. Numbers were decreasing rapidly by mid February and only a few stragglers stayed until mid March. Odd birds, perhaps injured or sick birds occurred even later. They may even stay all summer (the author has seen odd birds in May and August).

Fay's observations on feeding are more detailed than those of any preceding observers. He records that Ichkeul geese split into two main flocks, one on the southern (Joumine), the other on the northern (Sejenane) marshes. In the Joumine marsh, where the *Scirpus maritimus* growth is not extensive, the main diet is *Scirpus maritimus* roots and *Cyperus laevigatus* culms; they also feed on *Potamogeton* and, to a lesser extent, in hay fields. In the Sejenane marshes, the *Scirpus* cover is more extensive; in the early part of the winter *Scirpus maritimus* is the main food; the geese generally feed in the areas where the *Scirpus* is less dense, because in such areas it is easier to get at the roots, and to watch for predators; there is as a result local overgrazing as well as other untouched areas and Fay suggests thinning of *Scirpus* by burning as a management measure. Later in the winter, green food become available and *Eleocharis palustris* stems and *Cyperus* are important foods. Fay supports these observations of feeding behaviour with analysis of about 150 goose droppings.

With the establishment of the National Park, the Forestry Direction of the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture maintains permanent staff at Ichkeul. They have reported that numbers may have been as high as 15 000 in winter 1980/81, and have suspected breeding (not impossible in the light of Zedlitz's observation in Algeria).

### Conservation measures

The Tunisian government has declared Ichkeul a Ramsar and a World Heritage site, and in December 1980 it became, by government decree, one of Tunisia's first national parks. This will ensure conservation of the habitat within the park boundaries. Plans are however well advanced for the construction of dams on feeder rivers (outside the confines of the park); the effect

of these dams, needed for Tunisia's social and economic development, will be to reduce inflow of fresh water in winter and thus permit salt water to flow in from the other outlet the sea. Discussions are at present in progress on ways of limiting these effects — by releasing a minimum amount of fresh water from the dams, and by constructing a sluice between lake and sea.

One other effect of the National Park is the end of hunting in the area. In general, shooting pressure on waterfowl in Tunisia is very low, with only a few hundred waterfowl hunters in the whole country. Naturally enough, however, in a large wetland as rich in waterfowl as Ichkeul, there was a local goose-hunting tradition. Though the number of geese shot was not large, the disturbance caused by hunters way well in the past have prevented the geese from feeding adequately. With permanent staff now on the spot, the ban is being strictly enforced.

### Future points of interest

A number of points merit further study:

(i) How many geese are there? A long run of exact counts would be of great interest, to indicate whether the apparent increase is real, and also whether the birds wintering in Algeria transit through Ichkeul. Do 25 000 *A. anser* winter in North Africa, and, if so, where do they all come from?

(ii) How do they get to North Africa? There are no observations of major staging points for large goose flocks between central Europe and North Africa. Do the birds fly direct without stopping, and is the creation of new reserves in Italy likely to tempt them to linger?

(iii) What will be the effect of the shooting ban and its strict enforcement? If the geese increase and stay out of the park, then it may be easier to satisfy the goose hunting tradition.

### Other geese in Tunisia — a footnote

Since *Thomsen* and *Jacobsen* (1979) seem unclear on this point, this may be an appropriate opportunity for the author to place his observations on record. All other species are in any case most unusual.

— *Anser albifrons*: 3, Garaet el Kebira (60 kms south of Tunis) on 10 January 1974, in company with 1 *A. anser*. 1 Garaet Hadj Kacem (west of Sfax) on 28 January 1975, in company with 2 *A. anser* (and 1 *Plectrophenax nivalis*!!).

— *Anser fabalis*: 1, Garaet el Kebira on 5 January 1977. *Blanchet* commented that *A. fabalis* might occur accidentally in Tunisia, though he knew of no authentic observation. R. Thorpe (pers. com.) reported a small flock with *A. anser* at Ichkeul.

— *Branta bernicla*: 1 immature, of the race *Branta bernicla bernicla* at Lake Kelbia on 11 December 1975, grazing on winter grain with *Anas penelope*. Also observed by Dr. L. Hoffmann and personnel of the Tunisian Forestry Direction. In the light of this extraordinary observation, Loche's 1867 remark that the species is rare and accidental in Algeria seems more credible.

While the *A. albifrons* and *A. fabalis* presumably reached these more southerly Tunisian sites by overshooting from the general area of Yugoslavia, one can only speculate on the origin of the *B. bernicla*. Ex Africa semper aliquid novi!

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