Ecology Matters Ring Ouzel Project.

Ringing Trips in the Atlas Mountains, Morocco
Winter 2011 – 2012

Mick Green **February 2012**

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Introduction

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus* breed across the upland areas of Europe and Fennoscandia and winter mainly around the Mediterranean and North Africa. Populations have been in decline in Britain since at least the 1970's and declines are considered to be at such a serious level that the species is now included on the UK 'Red List'.

The reasons for the declines are not obvious, but have been attributed to a range of possible factors, including habitat change in the breeding and wintering areas, climate change, predation, and hunting pressures during migration.

As part of a study of the wintering ecology of Ring Ouzels in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco two visits were undertaken in winter 2011 – 2012 to attempt to catch and ring some birds. It is thought that most Ring Ouzels breeding in the UK winter in Morocco, but ringing recoveries from birds ringed on the breeding grounds are few. The aim was both to learn more about the races present in Morocco and to mark birds hoping for re-sightings on migration and on the breeding grounds.

Methods

Due to the large areas of potentially suitable habitat and the dispersed populations of Ring Ouzels our experience (as found on previous ringing trips by other researchers) was that birds can only really be caught when they come to water. The sites with available water are limited making suitable areas very attractive to birds.

Two suitable ringing sites (sites 1 and 3 – see below) had been identified on previous surveys and a third was found during the first ringing trip. Mist nets were erected either at first light or pre-dawn in areas around the watercourse.

Ring Ouzels were ringed with a metal BTO ring on the right leg and a yellow colour-ring with a unique two-letter combination on the left leg.

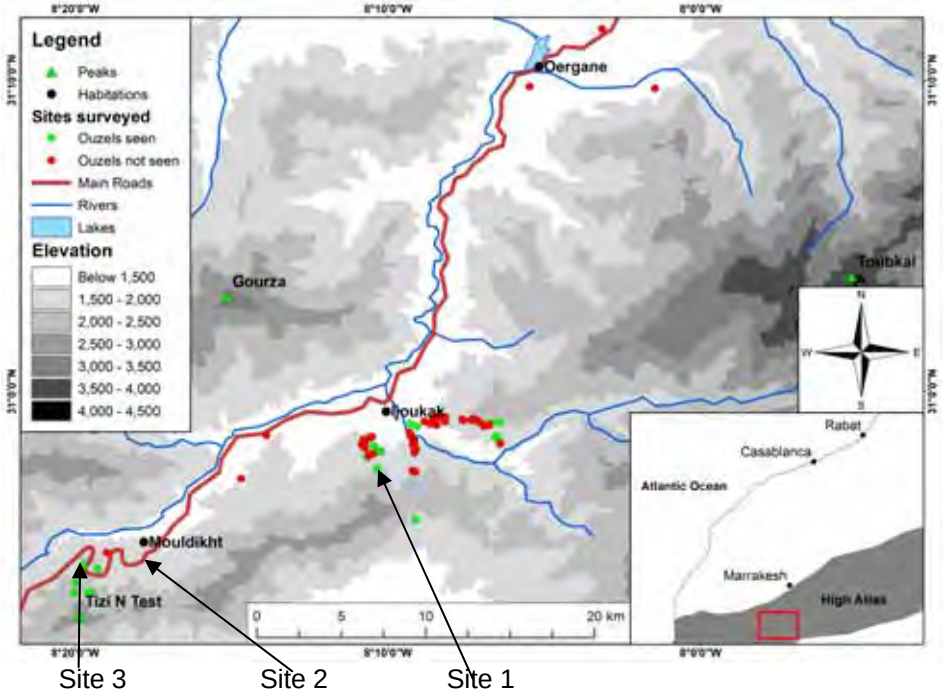
Personnel

Trip 1 – December 12th – 19th 2011. Tony Cross, Paddy Jenks and Mick Green

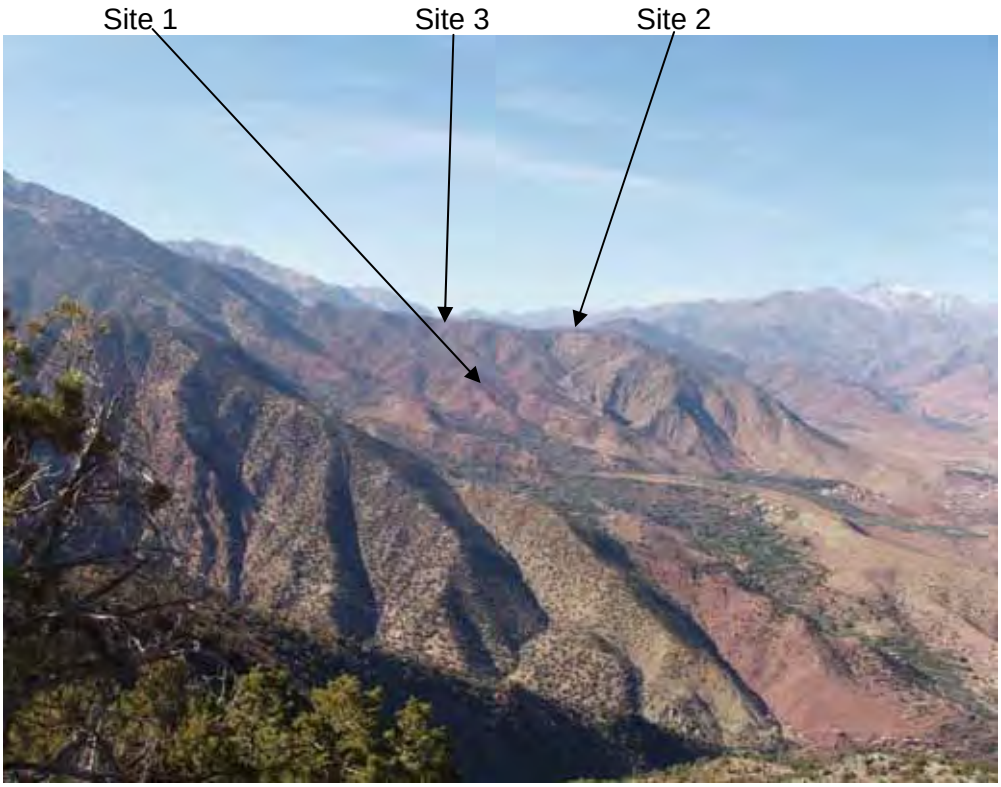
Trip 2 – January 7th – 14th 2012. Innes Sim, Mike Nichol, Graham Rebecca and Mick Green.

Results

Ringing was undertaken at three sites:



Location of ringing sites and areas previously surveyed for Ring Ouzels.



Approximate location of ringing sites within the Oued Nfiss (valley) between Ijoukak upstream to Tizi-n-Test showing the large areas of available habitat

Site 1 (30 57 59.1 08 10 39.7) – an area of cultivated ground around a permanent running stream amongst scattered juniper.

Site 2 (30 55 02.4 08 17 36.1) – a valley with scattered juniper and a permanent running stream.

Site 3 (30 63 57.9 08 19 50.3) – an open area near the Tizi n Test pass with very scattered and poor quality juniper with a small pool of water in a stream bed and a larger artificial pond adjacent to a conifer plantation. Trees in the background are Holly Oak.

In total 9 Ring Ouzels were caught and ringed on Trip 1 and 5 on Trip 2. 11 birds were of the nominate *Torquatus* race and three were *Alpestris*.

Ring No.	Species	age	sex	colour ring	wing/mm	weight/g	location	race
LE43201	Ring ouzel	4	M	**AA**	145	105	SITE 1	Torquatus
LE43202	Ring ouzel	4	M	**AB**	149	98.5	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43203	Ring ouzel	4	F	**AC**	143		SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43204	Ring ouzel	4	M	**AD**	144	95	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43205	Ring ouzel	4	F	**AE**	142	88.5	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43206	Ring ouzel	3	M	**AF**	143	100	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43207	Ring ouzel	4	F	**AH**	145	95	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43208	Ring ouzel	4	F	**AI**	143	104.5	SITE 3	Torquatus
LE43209	Ring ouzel	4	F	**AJ**	146	98	SITE 3	Alpestris?
LE43210	Ring ouzel	6	M	**AN**	147	99	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43211	Ring ouzel	6	F	**AP**	143	99	SITE 2	Torquatus
LE43212	Ring ouzel	5	F	**AS**	143	102	SITE 3	Alpestris
LE43213	Ring ouzel	6	F	**AT**	138	103	SITE 2	Alpestris
LE43214	Ring ouzel	6	M	**AU**	142	97	SITE 2	Torquatus

Adult Female caught at Site 2

Adult Female caught at Site 2

The terms of our ringing permission were such that we were only able to ring Ring Ouzels. All other species caught were released un-ringed but were recorded. Species caught were:
Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Robin, Moussier's Redstart, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Wren, Sardinian Warbler, Tristram's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Firecrest, Jay, Hawfinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Serin, Chaffinch and Rock Bunting.

A selection of the other species caught - clockwise from top left: Sardinian warbler, Tristrams warbler, hawfinch and rock bunting.

Discussion

The total caught was disappointing. Whilst there were good numbers of Ring Ouzels in the catching areas (and higher numbers than on some previous survey trips) they were extremely wary. Where birds were observed regularly coming down to water, once nets were set, and especially once visits to nets had been made, the birds moved away from the area. It was interesting that other thrushes were far less wary.

Previous ringing trips have also found catching to be 'painfully slow' but overall totals were higher. Trips to a site near Tounfite, in the north of the Atlas, caught 32, 32 and 54 birds respectively during three one-week trips in 2001 (February), 2002 (January) and 2003 (February). These trips however involved a larger number of personnel operating a greater number of nets.

Options for future work to ring Ring Ouzels therefore include larger teams operating more nets. From the experience of the 2011/12 trips and the 2001-2003 trips then more

birds may be caught, but still not in high numbers. Further work could be done to find more suitable sites. These may or may not exist but an ‘ideal’ site would provide a single water point with limited cover nearby. It would also be sheltered and shaded for as much of the day as possible. As such a site has yet to be discovered the option to create an artificial drinking pond in an area known to be used by Ring Ouzels is one possibility. This would require further work in reconnaissance, permissions etc. but may prove to be successful. Catching birds on the ground as they drink with a ‘whoosh’ net may also be a possibility, although it is thought that you would only get one go a day due to the disturbance caused.

At site 3 one of the problems was that the birds had an alternative water source just within the adjacent Mouflon reserve, which is fenced. Birds disturbed from the netted pool moved to join greater numbers drinking at the adjacent water. If permission to ring in the reserve could be obtained this could be a much more promising site.

Given the wariness of the birds they are unlikely to be caught in high numbers. However, there is the potential to try additional methods and/or increased effort so that further trips should not be ruled out if resources are available.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Office of the High Commission for Water and Forests, Kingdom of Morocco, for permission to ring and for Mr Alaoui El Fels at the University Cadi Ayyad, Marrakech for obtaining the permission on our behalf. Also, the British Trust for Ornithology for permission to use UK metal rings.

The trips were funded by the Ecology Matters Trust and I would like to thank all the volunteer ringers from both trips.

Finally, I would like to thank El Mahjoub Abkhar for his hospitality in Ijoukak.