



Marj Sanour

A Palestinian Bird Paradise

Long-legged
buzzard.
Photo by
Anton
Khalilieh.



By Yara Dahdal

I still remember the first time my husband took our family to visit Marj Sanour. We were passing through the village of Aqaba in the Toubas district, and we stopped on a hill to look at the scenery. Five kilometers to the west of our standing point, we saw a large lake whose sparkles reflected the warm sunrays of the spring season. Our geography curriculum had never mentioned a lake in Jenin, I thought to myself, realizing how little I knew about this unique place.

Marj Sanour, the third largest plain in the West Bank, covers about 18,000 dunums of fertile agricultural land and is located in the southeast portion of the Jenin district. The plain is surrounded by seven villages, namely, Sanour, Meithaloun, Siris, Judeida, Sir, Misilya, and Jarba. The plain has adjacent mountains in all directions, whereas its basin is covered with a thick layer of low-permeability soil. During the winter season, rainwater runoffs from the mountains accumulate in the plain, and as the plain

has no natural water outlet, a large water reservoir (lake) is formed. The rectangular lake extends between five and eight kilometers in length, and between two and four kilometers in width, depending on the amount of precipitation each year,* creating an unfamiliar, exceptional seasonal ecosystem and habitat. The water in the lake starts to build up at the beginning of the winter and remains in the plain until the beginning of the summer season.

Marj Sanour is not only the largest flooded plain in the West Bank, its water also remains in the lake for almost six months a year, sometimes even longer. This exceptional combination attracts more than 140 bird species that can be seen all year round; some of them

are resident breeders, others are summer visitor breeders, migrants, and winter visitors. Moreover, Marj Sanour is located on the west-central migration route of the soaring birds during their biannual journey – from Europe to Africa in the autumn and vice versa during the spring season. Migratory song birds, soaring birds, and waterfowl favor Marj Sanour for its distinct habitat. As a result, Marj Sanour is considered by many ecologists as an important stopover site for various bird species of different sizes and behaviors. These migratory birds might spend between a few days and a few months to rest and feed before they continue their journey, especially in the spring when water is present and food available.

Hundreds of white storks resting at Marj Sanour during their spring migration. Photo by Waseem Dawwas.



Some large birds such as the white storks, black storks, great white pelicans, and Armenian gulls are so fond of the place that they can be seen for up to three months (from mid-February until mid-May) during their spring migration before they spread their wings wide and take off to their destination. Other birds, such as the black-winged stilt, moorhen, little ringed plover, black francolin, and mallard, take advantage of Marj Sanour's habitat to breed and raise their chicks. If you are lucky, you will be able to see some rare birds visiting the plain during the winter, such as the marbled duck, pygmy cormorant, and common pochard. Other interesting common water bird species that can be seen during the winter season are the shoveler, teal, grey heron, and green sandpiper. In addition, four types of harrier species can be tracked in the plain, namely, hen harrier, pallid harrier, Montagu's



Marj Sanour currently faces many threats, and a proper management plan is critically needed to ensure that its distinguished biodiversity can flourish alongside human prosperity.

Photo by Anton Khalilieh.

Sanour village and the lake.
Photo by Waseem Dawwas.

harrier, and the largest and most common among them all the marsh harrier. Other resident and summer breeding raptors enjoy foraging in the plains, such as the long-legged buzzard, short-toed snake eagle, common kestrel, and the black-shoulder kite, because they can effortlessly spot and hunt their prey of rodents, reptiles, and birds.

Bank, the western Caspian turtle, can be spotted easily in the ponds, as well as the rougtail rock agama that can be seen basking on the surrounding rocks.

So, to all the dear readers, nature enthusiasts, and bird watchers out there, if you want to discover Palestine during winter and spring, and are looking for beautiful



White storks and their reflection in the seasonal lake of Sanour. Photo by Waseem Dawwas.

While birds are the most notable at Marj Sanour, the plain also has a rich diverse flora that includes some plants that only bloom in this habitat, such as the starfruit and the flowering rush. Furthermore, three amphibian species reside in the plain. The Levant green frog, European green toad, and Middle East tree frog's trills, chirps, and croaks can be heard from a distance, especially during the breeding season. In addition, several reptilian species thrive in the marj, including the coin-marked snake, the black whipsnake, and the dice snake (known locally as the water snake). The only freshwater turtle in the West

scenery coupled with a unique and rich biodiversity, then Marj Sanour is the place to go. Visiting the Marj twice a year is highly recommended by our family, especially our kids, since you will be treated to the sight of hundreds of gulls and storks, as well as flocks of lapwings, among other water birds. Until the winter season begins, as a teaser, please watch this short movie about Marj Sanour, filmed by Wasseem Dawwas using a drone: <https://fb.watch/dw7Kz-qsAl/>.

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* Sayel Weshahi, Majed Naser, Siren Abu Jamous, Ayman Rabi, Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment: Marj Sanour Watershed, technical report, July 2013, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323497883_Vulnerability_Resilience_Assessment_Marj_Sanour_Watershed_Social_Ecological_and_Agricultural_Resilience_in_the_Face_of_Climate_Change_SEARCH.



Flooded lands side by side with fertile agricultural lands at Marj Sanour. Photo by Waseem Dawwas.



Night Heron.
Photo by Anton Khailiieh.