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## FEATURE STORY

### FIRST STEPS IN BEIRUT'S UPCOMING GUERRILLA GARDENING INITIATIVE

On **January 23, 2016**, I attended a **workshop in basic gardening** in Achrafieh - Beirut, organized by the **Art Hake** initiative in preparation of their **Guerrilla Gardening** project. A friend had referred me to the Art Hake Facebook page a day before the workshop, and I was curious to see what they were up to.

The location was a rented ground floor apartment managed by the newly founded cooperative Dammeh, on the road from Sodeco Square to Sassine. At the door there was a donation box where visitors were free to place a suggested contribution of LBP 10,000. Surprisingly enough, the space had a beautiful backyard garden full of loquat and lemon trees.

There were around **20 people** present, and more kept coming in during the presentation. *Mustapha Itani* (a master's student at the American University of Beirut), started by asking participants to name the plants they had "killed" and say how they did it. We heard stories about basil, aloe vera, orchids, etc., all victims of over-watering or insufficient sun exposure. Mustapha reassured us that he himself had killed a lot of plants and learned so much about their requirements in the process. He then gave an overview of urban gardening including reasons to do it, choice of space, matching the plants' needs to the microclimate of our balconies or roofs, etc. He also listed different types of plants that can be easily grown in urban environments, such as rosemary which can tolerate salt and pollution.

The theoretical part ended with an overview about how to take care of plants in an urban environment and fight off pests and diseases. While Mustapha didn't hesitate in recommending the use of strong chemical pesticides, without even mentioning safety issues, I don't think the participants will just start spraying their balconies randomly.

We then moved to the backyard where Mustapha un-potted a large aloe vera plant, separating the different "baby" plants. Each participant got to transplant one baby in a new pot which he/she took home.

Although I didn't quite agree with Mustapha's pest management approach I was happy to see such an initiative in place and feel the interest. I was also glad to meet Carol and Kathy, 2 of the 3 co-founders of Art Hake - a newly founded association aiming to promote [...]

*Continued on Page 2*



**PLANTING CHANGES.**

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*Continued from Page 1*

[...] non-violent efforts to create social, political, economic and environmental change. They told me this workshop was part of a bigger Guerrilla Gardening project in Beirut. In partnership with the United Nations Development Program and Banque Libano Française, it aims to empower communities to take back public spaces and plant them to make their house or street more beautiful, grow food, attract butterflies, save endangered species, or simply have fun. For them this type of gardening is an eco-tool for social change. And with the ongoing garbage crisis, the focus will be on planting in any container they can upcycle.

A series of basic gardening workshops is planned to recruit volunteers who would help in the project's core activities. These will include: workshops with youth to upcycle planting containers, as well as clearing and planting public or abandoned spaces in the suburbs of Beirut, with the engagement of the local community.

On my way out I smiled when I spotted a small hole in the soil where the users of the space recycle their organic waste.

To know more about the Guerilla Gardening project follow [Art Hake's Facebook page](#)

*Shared by Rita Khawand*



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## LETTER FROM A LEBANESE CITIZEN ON THE SHORE OF ADLOUN

This is my first visit ever. I ask the man smoking his *nargileh* if this is the public beach of Adloun, where the ruins are. He says there are no ruins here and wants to know who sent us. "A friend from Adloun," I answer truthfully. I don't tell him we asked the one-armed shopkeeper up the road for directions because I didn't ask for his name and it somehow seems indecent to me that I should refer to him as an amputee only.

Behind us, bulldozers are plowing into the windswept beach's sand and the algae washed up on the shore. The man continues: "On whose behalf are you here?" I smile and indulge him: "On my own behalf, as a citizen, this is a public beach and we're here for a stroll." I must seem harmless to him because he smiles condescendingly and explains that he is the architect of the new marina being built on this beach. He extends his arm to show us the breadth of the shoreline. He tells us there are some who would claim there are ruins here, "I dare you to find any." Three garish gold rings shine on his fingers as a ray of sun hits them.

A lone fisherman is casting his line in the sea against the backdrop of noisy bulldozers. I furtively snap a picture of the tenacious fellow and move on.

The northern part of the shore is a sandy treasure trove of seashells and dead crabs probably washed up by the waves during the last storm. We pick up a few seashells, hollow crab claws and any interesting piece of colored glass or tile that has been smoothed by the salt-water's ebb and flow. Bittersweet mementos that remind me of my childhood years.

The machines are getting nearer. We work our way down south to a rocky outcrop where strange plants have managed to grow in nooks filled with salt and coarse sand. The rocks themselves are silent and eerie witnesses to past human activity probably over two thousand years old. We're not archeologists, but we exercise enough reason to posit that we are standing among man-made salt collection basins, draining canals and primitive mooring points for fishing boats. It is quite humbling to imagine the weathered hands that patiently carved these massive stones to eek out their living. We are standing on the same ruins that the "architect" dared us to find. It wasn't even a challenge.

The machines are here. We finish photographing what we've seen for the first and last time. We head back to the sand beach and cross it just as the first bulldozer reaches the rocks. Tonight we'll share our photos and add the hashtags that dozens of other activists use on social media, and we'll lament the loss of this public beach, its ecosystem and our heritage.

Then we'll wonder helplessly what we could have possibly done to prevent this, and how long until we become true citizens entitled to our history and our space in our own country.

Sincerely,

*A Lebanese citizen on the shore of Adloun*



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## LET'S FOCUS

### ON THE JOY OF WWOOFING AND ITS BENEFITS

I first heard about **Wwoofing** in London, 2011 through a friend of mine as we exchanged stories about our travels. WWOOF, which stands for World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, is a world organization dedicated to developing and managing platforms that link volunteers to independent farm owners and growers. This effort to support the organic movement began in England in 1971. Back then it was called "Working Weekends on Organic Farms".

What pushed me towards this organization was my desire for an affordable way to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and live a simple life in the countryside, closer to all that is healthier and more natural. Having said that, WWOOFing is not a vacation or a wellness retreat. Well, it is, and isn't at the same time. It comes with a price, which is that you actually have to work and earn your sleeping-space and food. I say sleeping-space, because quite often you don't have the luxury of sleeping on a bed, nor a mattress for that matter. Luckily, before going on what counts as the most rewarding experience of my life, I did plenty of research.

The first question you want to ask yourself is "Where?" since there are more than 50 WWOOF groups worldwide and hundreds of independent farms across 70 countries. This is especially important if your choices are limited by your travel documents and your eligibility for a visa.

The second question is "What?" since farm work can range from planting and harvesting to building and woodworking, feeding animals and collecting manure. This would answer the "When?", because if you have a certain affinity to the smell of fermenting cow dung or if the idea of making compost excites you, then you can travel pretty much any time during the year, since animals never stop pooping. Picking strawberries, however, you can only do in the spring, within a very small window during a specific month, depending on where you choose to go.

I had pre-determined that I would take my trip in September (2015). Back then I didn't know the "What". All I knew is I wanted to learn something new and develop some useful skills (and controlling my gag reflexes wasn't one of them). Several blogs recommend starting your research early - sometimes six months in advance. Some of the best farms get pre-booked quite early; the ones that don't could basically be the most remote, or hygienically more challenging (how do you feel about compost toilets?) or ones with a history of nasty farm owners who won't turn the water heater on nor provide any food. Bare in mind that some of these farms could be hours away on foot from the nearest bus stop. So how do you find the good farms?

First you need to become a member of a WWOOF group. I chose Italy and logged onto <http://www.wwoof.it/> an individual membership fee is 35 Euros and is valid for a whole year. It will give you access to a huge database of hosting farms that you could search for based on your preferences: region, type of accommodation, type of farm work, spoken languages, preferred diet, Wifi or not, etc. A good host profile will show you a map of the exact location, a good farm description explaining a little about what to expect and what would be required, who the hosts are and what they do for a living (I found that most organic farm owners in Italy are seasonal farmers and actually have other full-time jobs. That's why they often seek the help of volunteers). Most importantly, you want to look out for the tone of voice. If you are hoping for a kind and nurturing environment where hosts are happy to teach you things, then it will be evident in their writing.

I was quite fortunate to find the **Giovannini's** farm, surrounded by a pine forest on a hill, 10 kilometers north of the charming town of **Verona** (famous for being the backdrop for Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliette). This family-run farm became my home for 10 days during the **Rondinella grapes** harvesting season. What is unique about these grapes is that in the second week of September, they reach a particular level of ripeness, at which point bunches are scrupulously hand-picked at tremendous speed to ensure that only the highest quality grapes are collected just before the first autumn rain. This first harvest of the grapes goes towards making one of finest and most expensive types of Italian wine, **Amarone**. Depending on the size of the farm and the number of workers, the first harvest may take one to three consecutive days, a relatively very small window, considering the speed and efficiency at which these grapes have to be collected. Once the Amarone grapes are secured, all other grape bunches are harvested, whether ripe or not, to make other types of regular wine.

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*On the way to Verona for the music festival*



*The view from my window*



*Italian vine roots are prone to disease so the tree was grafted on an American vine base*

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## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

*Continued from Page 3*

During my stay with *Egon, Esperanza*, their two sons *Mattia* and *Simone*, and their sweet dog *Cira*, I shared lodgings with their family friend Mauro and another two young volunteers from Germany, *Michela* and *Hanna*. We settled down quite quickly and were doing almost everything together. A typical day began at 6:30 in the morning by sharing a really nice breakfast of home-made bread, locally produced cheese, jams that were made and gifted by the neighbors, milk, biscuits, tea or coffee and home-produced honey (Simone was the beekeeper in the family). Almost all the produce was organic and homegrown.

At 8 we would walk over to the nearby vineyard or take a 5-minute tractor ride to the neighbor's vineyard where Egon also rented another plot of land to grow grapes. We would pick grapes non-stop while we all got to know each other. We talked about everything: nature, conservation, music, politics, religion, art, culture, our home countries, some of our funniest and most memorable travels and experiences, and of course in the process, we learned a lot about the processes of growing and producing wine organically, and the business of owning a vineyard and selling wine. Although we worked for long hours, it was never boring. We got one short 5 minute break for a drink of water and snack from a nearby fig tree before breaking for lunch for a couple of hours at noon.

We all participated in preparing lunch, helped set the table and tidied up afterwards. Then we would resume work until around 6 or 7 in the evening, just as the sun would start to set. Smelly, sticky and exhausted, we would take turns in the shower and finally sit together for a delicious homemade dinner, drink wine and laugh and talk. We would eventually hit the sack sometime between 10:00 pm and midnight.

Hanna, Michela and I occasionally made dishes that were native to our countries. They were all quite shocked when I told them that vine leaves could be cooked and eaten. Imagine that! So on one of the days, I took charge of the kitchen while Hanna and Michela assisted me in making vegetarian stuffed vine leaves (made with organic pressed olive oil from the olive trees in the farm, of course), hummus, kofta and fattouch. Most ingredients came from the farm's vegetable garden, the rest were organic and bought at health stores in Verona. I must say, it gave me a real sense of satisfaction to see them all enjoying Lebanese food. We even began discussing the prospect of producing vine leaves on their farm in addition to grapes.

We ate really well at the Giovanninis. Everyone in that house could turn simple ingredients into delicious nutritious food. When Simone's birthday came along, we had a really special dinner with extra wine, and a kick-ass homemade tiramisu by Esperanza. Naturally we exchanged several recipes and sometimes even experimented. Have you ever tried making apple rice with a hint of curry powder? We had that with broiled haddock one night. Delicious.

When picking Amarone grapes, there are several things to look out for. Firstly, the color of the skin has to be a reddish purple black. Fruits within a bunch of grapes should not be too close to each other, to allow for air to flow between them. This is important because Amarone grapes have to be dried first for 3 to 4 months, and therefore to avoid rotting, moisture has to be allowed to escape easily. Individual fruits must be firm, yet not too hard to the touch.

Fruits that have been squashed or partially eaten by insects or birds should be snipped out with cutters, to avoid their juices running into the rest of the grapes and causing them to rot. If you squeeze a fruit and its juice is red, that's an indication that it had already started to rot, and so it needs to be extracted otherwise it would affect the acid and sugar content of the grapes and the wine. The inside of the healthy fruit should be a transparent pale green or yellow.

One of the greatest pleasures of picking grapes is that you get to eat a lot of them while working. They are absolutely delicious. Of course harvesting is quite tiring, you have to move fast, make sure that you don't injure your hands with the gardening shears, make sure that you don't squeeze the grapes as you try to untangle them from between the twisted branches and metal wires, make sure that you fill up the crates neatly (one layer of grapes per crate, yet packed tightly enough to take advantage of all the space). We were instructed to aim for 6 kilos per crate.

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*It is extra tiring for the vertically challenged*



*Loading crates - no time for dinner*



*Making stuffed vine leaves (wara' eenab)*

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## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

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Of course, there are lots of creepy crawlies that you have to learn to love, because they will be all over you. A word of advice though, do spray on some insect repellent, and keep the bottle with you for a top up later in the day, because some insect bites can be excruciatingly painful as Hanna can tell you. The poor girl had a massively swollen leg for 3 days just from a bite, and she doesn't even suffer from any known allergies.

Once we were done harvesting for the day, one of the guys would drive a tractor truck in between the rows of trees. Two of us would walk behind the tractor, loading full crates in the back, while another two stood there to stack them neatly and efficiently (transporting the crates back to the main farm building was quite daunting and we wanted to make as few trips as possible, especially when nearing nightfall). This is probably the hardest work, but it will strengthen your core muscles, and tighten up your glutes. I couldn't complain.

On days when we'd gathered huge piles of crates, we would skip dinner and continue working to forklift them into a van that the Giovannini's had rented. We would then drive the van for 20 minutes into Verona where we'd deliver the crates to the wine maker's warehouse. There, we would forklift them out, weigh them on a huge scale, then label them and stack them in tight rows with just enough space for a person to be able to walk between them for inspection. Finally, we would switch on huge electric fans that would help speed up the drying. The grapes would remain in there for the next 3 to 4 months until it was time for them to be pressed into the Amarone wine. On one occasion, we made a couple of these trips in one night, and eventually returned home at 1:30 am. We slept quite well at the Giovannini's. Considering that I am quite the insomniac, every night, I fell into deep sleep within seconds.

This experience was extremely rewarding on so many levels. First, I made new friends; some of the nicest, kindest and most generous people I have ever met. We were made to feel like members of the family, cared for, entertained and all our needs were met with no hesitation. Second, the sky was always breathtaking. I can never forget the huge flock of yellow and orange clouds against the deep blue sky at sunset. It was magnificently surreal. It felt like an enormous painting was hanging over my head. Third, I got in touch with what is natural and real. I felt alive and accomplished. Prior to my arrival to the farm, I had planned to fully document my experience on Instagram and share my photos with friends and family back home. Three days into being there, I simply stopped carrying my phone with me. I didn't care about anything other than getting a fully immersive experience that engaged all my senses, all the time.

I really recommend WWOOFing. Besides this organization there are many similar entities around the world and you could even approach some of the independent local farms near your hometown. In the struggle to maintain a healthy and sustainable existence (and it is extremely challenging) let us also be proactive in embracing this culture with open hearts and able hands. If you wish to find out more or share some stories, please e-mail me at [dana.ahdab@gmail.com](mailto:dana.ahdab@gmail.com)

Shared by Dana Ahdab



*The dream team*

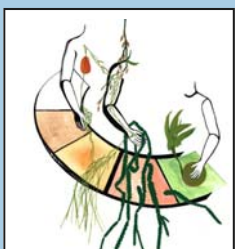


*An overhead painting*

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### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### "LANDVERSATIONS BEIRUT" EXHIBITION AND PUBLIC DIALOG SPACE



**STARTING**  
**FEBRUARY 10, 2016**  
**6:00 p.m.**

**Daily: 11:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.**

**Beirut Art Center, Jisr Al Wati**

**Living exhibition about Beirut's land, people, laws and nature**

<https://www.facebook.com/Beirut-Art-Center-310192115671316/>

#### "BE THE CHANGE OF LEBANON" ANIMAL RESCUE CENTER FUNDRAISING EVENT



**FEBRUARY 12, 2016**  
**Starting at 7:30 p.m.**

**Artscape, Makhoul Street, Hamra - Beirut**

**Dancing and networking event to support animal welfare groups.**

**\*Entrance fee: \$5/person (Drinks not included)**

<https://www.facebook.com/events/575043399317565/>

#### "ORIGAMI WORKSHOP" PAPER ART & UPCYCLING SESSION



**FEBRUARY 27, 2016**  
**2:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.**

**Aleph B, Furn El Chebbak, facing Big Sale**

**Paper folding art workshop for children starting 7 years old.**

**Fees: LBP 20,000/person**

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1956545084570922/>

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## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

### EVERYONE'S A WINNER WITH LEBANON'S NEW CARPOOLING APP

Some **300,000 cars** enter Beirut every day - and that's not counting the existing cars in the capital. To exacerbate the problem, most cars have one or two commuters at most. No wonder then that traffic jams have become the nightmare of every Lebanese driver.

For the developers of the ride sharing app **Carpolo**, carpooling sounded like a simple and effective way to start reducing the number of cars and the resulting congestion. And why not take this opportunity to help people make new social connections?

Having relied on carpooling to tour Europe during his studies abroad, Computer Science graduate **Mohamad Nabaa** was behind one of the many initiatives to promote the carpooling concept in Lebanon. Because it is still a "foreign" concept, he started thinking of ways to make carpooling as culturally relevant as possible - for example, giving people the option to ride with commuters of the same gender. And so the idea of a ride-sharing app was born. Originally named Tulos, it was an app intended to make it easier for students or employees of the same institution to share car rides.

Nabaa had won the **North Lebanon Startup Weekend Competition** for his idea which he had developed as his senior project at the Beirut Arab University (BAU). He then teamed up with 3 other university graduates and together they won the **Samir and Claude Abillama Eco-Entrepreneurship Award in 2015**, a prestigious recognition that also included a \$20,000 prize towards the development of the idea. Recently, the Carpolo team was selected among the first 6 startups to benefit from a 3-month acceleration cycle by Speed@BDD. The program helped Carpolo develop their project and explore ways of expanding their business concept to include wider communities and organizations.

To make people more comfortable with the carpooling concept, Carpolo decided they would target specific institutions - which would also allow more control. The app requires users to sign up with their work emails only, and matches them with their colleagues and peers based on their location in real-time thanks to an advanced verification algorithm.

With the lack of proper public transportation in Lebanon, Carpolo not only helps users **reduce their fuel and parking costs**, but also contributes to **lowering car emissions** that pollute the air of our cities. And of course, less cars means **less traffic**.

In addition to these obvious benefits, Carpolo offers the advantage of an enhanced UX. The app includes social and gamification features whereby users earn points per ride, which they can exchange for gifts and rewards - this way, Carpolo creates an incentive to increase user engagement and conversion.

"Our business model is based on a combination of two elements: a points exchange system and an association with lifestyle brands," said Nabaa.

Carpoolers exchange points instead of money. For example, whenever a successful ride is completed, a passenger pays the driver a certain number of points to join a ride, the driver will earn 60% of these points, which he/she can accumulate and exchange for vouchers or discounts at partner retail stores, or donate to causes. The remaining 40% will be converted to "experience points" that help both passenger and driver "level up" or earn "trophies" within the app.

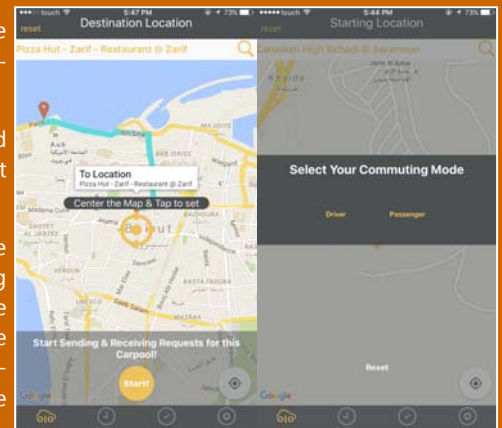
Carpolo will launch their app on the Apple Store in February 2016, and the Android version will follow by April 2016.

The app will be available for institutional (both academic and corporate) users wishing to benefit from the system. With such a structured and incentivizing system in place, the developers hope their user base will grow by word of mouth and peer pressure. "Our initial focus will be on university students in Lebanon but we will also proactively explore opportunities in Egypt, Jordan, and the Middle East," said Nabaa.

Are you interested in carpooling? Stay tuned to the app's website for updates, or send your inquiries to the developers.

Shared by Rita Khawand

This article was originally published on the ArabNet website: <http://news.arabnet.me/lebanon-carpooling-app-speed-accelerator/>



## LET'S SHARE OUR NEWS

### MEET THE FIRST CLASS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHAMPIONS FROM LEBANON

On **December 30, 2015**, the **Environmental Championship Program "Abtal Al Bi2a"** held a gathering for its first class of environmental champions for the year 2015, and celebrated the winners of its first **Eco-Competition** for solutions against waste and littering.

38 children between 10 and 12 years took part in the 3 editions of the program in its first pilot year. Each time, children selected from different public and private schools across Lebanon participated in a 5-day camp during which they discovered different environmental themes. The curriculum was based on the experiential learning approach with hands-on educational, fun and creative activities designed to teach the children how everything in our ecosystem is linked, and how our actions have an impact on nature - and ultimately on our own lives.

At the end of the camp, the children became official "environmental champions" and returned to their homes, schools and neighborhoods. As ambassadors for a better environment, the children were invited to take part in an Eco-Competition to launch environmental initiatives in their communities and rally others around them to start making a difference.

At the gathering, the children who participated presented their projects for the Eco-Competition in front of their fellow champions and the Abtal Al Bi2a team who awarded the projects that had the most impact and the widest outreach (on the scale of small eco-projects). The children's initiatives ranged from recycling and upcycling initiatives to creative videos and songs about the environment.

First place went to *Sara Baroudi* who initiated cleaning campaigns with her school and village, and also encouraged upcycling projects. *Rebecca* and *Mariella Khawand* undertook similar actions in their village and were the first runners-up. The second runner-up was *Lea Cortas* who convinced all her classmates to replace plastic water bottles with re-usable ones and started paper recycling in her class and other ones.

All participants were presented with the *Green Quest* board game of the **Association for Forests Development and Conservation - AFDC** (<https://www.facebook.com/AFDCLebanon/timeline>) and the top winners also received gift vouchers from partner organizations.



Check out the gallery of all the participants and winners' projects on this link: <https://abtalelbia.wordpress.com/projets/>

The program is the brainchild of the **Lebanon Mountain Trail Association** and the **EcoConsulting** firm, with the support of numerous volunteers, friends and activists.

This year, 4 to 5 Environmental Championship Programs will be organized for **40-50 children**, starting end-April and throughout the summer. We are looking for corporate sponsors to support each program and we always welcome private donations.

In parallel, we will be screening environmental or educational movies and documentaries every 2-3 months at the Dawawine center in Gemmayzeh, Beirut, to spread awareness and fundraise for our programs. At the end of the year, we will hold another annual competition for all our graduating champions to keep growing and nurturing our community, keeping the children involved and supporting them in their roles as ambassadors.

Shared by the Abtal Al Bi2a Team



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## PHOTO OF THE MONTH

You sent us your submissions and you voted for your favorites. Here it is, the PHOTO OF THE MONTH:  
To send us your photos, email us on [contact.soilslebanon@gmail.com](mailto:contact.soilslebanon@gmail.com)



*Palestine sunbird (Cinnyris osea) - Lebanon*

Photo by Fouad Itani

Birds of Lebanon and the Middle East <https://www.facebook.com/birdsoflebanon/>

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## GET IN TOUCH, GET INVOLVED


**Do you enjoy reading this newsletter?**


Send us your feedback and suggestions, share your news, photos, tips or thoughts, or find out more.


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Editor in chief: Alexis Baghdadi

L.E.T.S. Lebanon is published by  
**SOILS Permaculture Association Lebanon**

 [www.soils-permaculture-lebanon.com](http://www.soils-permaculture-lebanon.com)

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## A THOUGHT TO SHARE ...

**“There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.”**



**–Robert Wilson Lynd (1879-1949)  
*The Blue Lion and Other Essays***

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