

MOROCCO 23 NOVEMBER TO 1 DECEMBER 2012

Every birding trip is exciting, but especially so when it's to a warm country when it's dull and cold at home! Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse from Doncaster organised this one, with the lively and social group comprising Rob Adams, Mike Bayldon, Mick Clay, Richard Collis, Pete Cottam, Stephen Elliott, Pete Greaves, Andy Hirst, Martin Limbert, Len Reaney, Richard Scott and Richard Sprakes.

Friday 23 November:

Arriving to a warm and sunny Marrakesh, we promptly collected our three hire vehicles and were soon skirting the city walls on our way towards Ait Ourir, a small town at the foot of the lofty Atlas Mountains.



Of course a few roadside stops were made; firstly for close views of several *mauritanica* Maghreb Magpies sporting a blue skin patch behind their eyes, and on the other side of the road, a small golf course produced Sardinian Warbler, Serin, Spotless Starling, Laughing Dove and three Spanish Sparrows. Within an hour we were unloading our luggage before spending the last hour of light along a nearby stream-filled wadi. Birds came thick and fast, nothing outrageous but a nice introduction to Moroccan birds: African Blue Tit, Chaffinches of the lovely north African race *africana*, singing Cirl Bunting, a couple of Moroccan Wagtails (*subpersonata*) and a single Dipper. Meanwhile the hotel garden held many Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs, plus the first of daily sightings of House Bunting and Common Bulbul. The main avian highlight of the day was a group of about 40 Little Swifts wheeling about over town, and some nice views were to be had. Retiring to the hotel, a welcome and tasty tagine meal was washed down with several cooling beers.



Saturday 24 November:

After breakfast we set off on the long drive up and over the Atlas Mountains. Brief stops were made as and when the habitat looked interesting. Open pine forest produced Crossbills, some Rock Buntings, a surprise Brambling and a little later on, excellent views were had of a female Levillant's Woodpecker.



It wasn't long before we began to notice a few roadside Black Wheatears, several of which were photographed and ultimately some 17 were logged by the end of the day. As we climbed still higher, the scenery became more montane and with precipitous slopes on each side it was no surprise that we encountered both Alpine and Red-billed Chough. The Tizi'n Tichka pass is the highest point on the road and an opportune place to have lunch. Whilst waiting for that, a soaring Golden Eagle traversed a distant ridge. Descending from the Atlas we made our way towards Boumalne du Dades along the semi-desert plain, picking up a speeding ticket en route! Stopping occasionally we scored with a stunning male Desert Wheatear at close range, as well as several Thekla and Desert Larks. Here on the plains, White-crowned Wheatears had replaced the Black Wheatears, and 18 were logged before nightfall. As we passed through the city of Ouarzazate, two low soaring raptors proved to be a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, and cracking views were had from the roadside.



Sunday 25 November:

Everyone was up at dawn for a pre-breakfast look at the famous Tagdilt track, and we were amply rewarded by some stunning views of the specialities here. One of the first shouts was for a pair of Thick-billed Larks, a species not guaranteed on trips to Morocco, so the 12 we observed at close quarters were very well received. In addition, Desert, numerous Lesser Short-toed, Thekla and many

Temminck's Horned added to the lark-fest, all giving great views and excellent photographic opportunities.



Before long several close Red-rumped Wheatears added to the excitement, which continued when a flock of over 30 Trumpeter Finches was spotted.



Shortly after breakfast we were back, adding more larks to the list, namely four Hoopoe Larks and three Bar-tailed Larks.



We had to move on shortly after midday, but not before a further 50 Trumpeter Finch, a close Lanner Falcon, several Long-legged Buzzards, an adult Bonelli's Eagle, a Hoopoe and a flock of 12 Black-bellied Sandgrouse had been seen along with several scorpions unearthed from under large rocks! Moving on towards Er Rachidia we made a stop at a known Scrub Warbler site, and with patience, eventually managed views of at least four of these top birds. It was here that we spotted

the first Moussier's Redstarts of the trip, a popular sighting, being for many one of the key target birds of the trip. Two each of both Spectacled and Tristram's Warblers and several Stonechats ended the day.



We drove back at dusk after a tremendous days birding to enjoy a nice meal and a few beers in our modern hotel at Er Rachidia.

Monday 26 November:

Not everyone had frame-filling views of the Scrub Warblers, so we started the day back at the Scrub Warbler site, staying until all had enjoyed great views of this species.



Several groups of foraging Lesser Short-toed Larks attracted a lone Hen Harrier whilst White-crowned Wheatears reached a day total of 35. Driving further south towards the Tafilalt, a roadside stop in more sandy terrain produced yet more Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, and later a roadside wadi yielded further great views of Scrub, Spectacled and Tristram's Warblers, as well as a pair of the Maghreb race of Crested Lark.



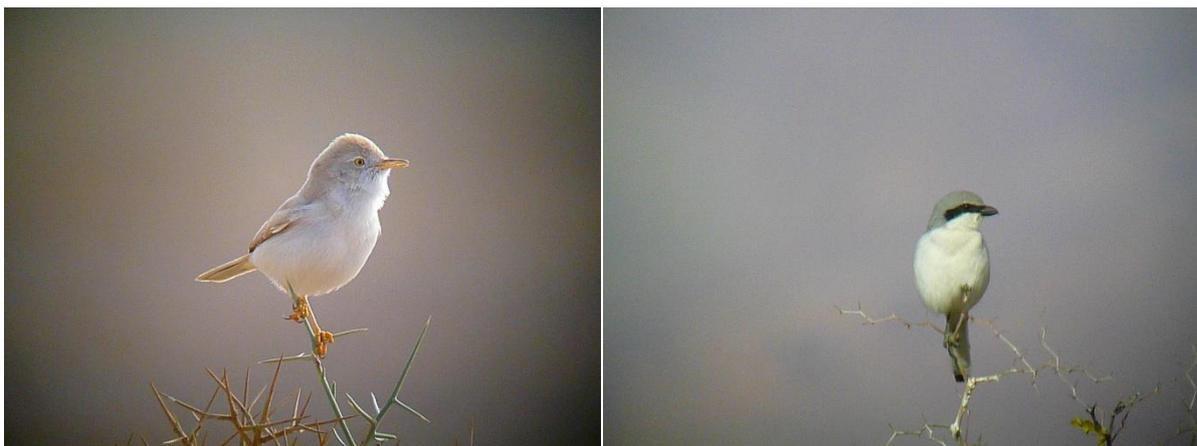
Late afternoon we visited a rocky gorge where we found a Pharaoh Eagle Owl at its day time roost.



The same area held at least one Lanner Falcon, over 100 Brown-necked Raven, several Spanish Sparrows, more Moussier's Redstarts and a couple of 'flava' wagtails in the wadi, probably of the Spanish *iberiae* race. Just before dark and following a tip off from a local birder, we stopped in date palms on the edge of Rissani and duly enjoyed close views of a dozen Fulvous Babblers. At dark we continued on through Rissani, before striking out across the desert towards a distant light in the dark – our hotel for the night; the isolated Auberge Derkaoua, itself close to the magnificent Erg Chebbi sand dunes.

Tuesday 27 November:

We awoke to some unexpected rain and cool temperatures, not the sort of start our desert setting promised. A pre-breakfast stroll around the hotel was unusually quiet, though as the day began to warm up we visited nearby sand dunes and scrub, where we enjoyed superbly close views of one, and then another, African Desert Warbler. Here too were Tristram's Warbler, more Hoopoe Larks, 'Maghreb' Larks, Bar-tailed Larks and Desert Grey Shrike, the latter species seemingly present at nearly every stop we made south of the Atlas.



A pleasant lunch in the hotel garden was followed by a drive to meet a young local bird guide who had vowed to show us close views of sandgrouse. He didn't disappoint and in a remote spot, hidden away from roads and desert tracks, we enjoyed superb views of approximately 300 Spotted Sandgrouse, some approaching at very close range to our vehicles. Here too were two male Maghreb Wheatears at point blank range; a photographer's delight.



A return visit to see the Pharaoh Eagle Owl proved a hit, with Crag Martins swooping close to the watching owl. Our hotel this evening was the Auberge Yasmina and we were joined for our evening meal by a White-crowned Wheatear which perched in the rafters of the hotel restaurant, and at one point broke into song (the Wheatear that is, not us following our wine and beer!).

Wednesday 28 November:

This morning we took a half day desert 'safari' ride out into the Sahara, guided by locals who know their way around the desert tracks close to the Algerian border . One of our main target birds was Desert Sparrow, and a pair duly obliged with close views at a nearby Bedouin camp. From here we drove deep into the desert, en route noting a couple of passing camel caravans setting forth across the sands following remote trading routes (though these days they are mostly tourists on adventure holidays!) .



Close views were had of a Cream-coloured Courser and all too brief views of a Houbara Bustard, mostly in flight. Clearly these birds are getting ever scarcer in this part of Morocco. A Barbary Falcon circled overhead and other species included four more Desert Wheatears, two more Maghreb Wheatears, another African Desert Warbler, eight Hoopoe Larks and 20 Bar-tailed Larks. The seasonal lake near the hotel held some water, and 78 Ruddy Shelduck and several Kentish Plovers were counted.

After lunch at the Yasmina, we were delayed in Erfoud having a puncture repaired, which then meant we had a long drive, mostly in the dark, towards our next hotel in Tinerhir.

Saturday 29 November:

Having already had good views of Bonelli's Eagles we decided not to spend time in the Todra Gorge as planned, but to press on for a second look at the Tagdilt track. This became a particularly good idea when we ventured outside our hotel to discover that we had succumbed to another puncture! With the crocked state of many of the roads and tracks we had driven on, this was perhaps not unexpected, but it was still a disappointment which delayed our start by more than an hour. Most of the group remained at the hotel, which provided some decent birding in its own right - time to scope a Barbary Falcon for instance on a nearby communications tower, but also several House Buntings, African Blue Tits and Blue Rock Thrushes as extras.



Approaching the Tagdilt we opted for lunch in Boumalne, and after an extraordinarily large chicken couscous lunch we made another stop at the Tagdilt track, which produced more close views of all the various larks, six Red-rumped Wheatears, seven Long-legged Buzzards and a stunningly close Lanner Falcon eating prey besides the vehicle.

We then proceeded to our next overnight stop, the Les Tourmalines Hotel near Ouarzazate. After dumping our bags we elected to bird the nearby reservoir, hoping for some different species to those we had watched previously on the trip. We had a very enjoyable couple of hours evening birding which produced water birds including Ruddy Shelduck, Wigeon, Shoveler, Pintail, 10 Marbled Duck, Great-crested and Black-necked Grebes, four Greater Flamingos, four Great Egret, 175 White Stork and eight Eurasian Spoonbills.



Our French owned hotel, situated in a very picturesque setting overlooking the reservoir, produced cuisine which was simply top notch, washed down as ever with a few beers and wine.

Friday 30 November:

We began the morning again at the reservoir, where the shallow slopes produced some nice muddy margins, and further views of 23 Marbled Teal, three Ferruginous Duck, a single Osprey, several Marsh Harriers, 400 Cormorants, and a few more wader species new for the trip such as Black-winged Stilts, Little Stints and Wood Sandpiper. A Red-throated Pipit joined us on the dried out mud, walking around close to the group and un-characteristically out in full view.



The next stage of our journey involved a return drive north over the Atlas Mountains, stopping a few times for roadside birding and a cafe lunch. More Red-billed and Alpine Choughs were seen and our only Common Ravens of the trip. Groups of Meadow Pipits were feeding in the alpine meadows, having completed their journey south from north European summering grounds. We were aiming for the mountain village of Oukaimeden, where a range of high altitude species would have rounded off the trip in real style. However as we crossed the Atlas, the weather began to deteriorate with much cooler air producing sleet and then snow; the roads required much caution. As we drove yet higher, the road to became more and more treacherous, and finally, just five kilometres from our scheduled stop at the ski-resort of Oukaimeden, we were forced to abandon the journey. It was almost dark so a quick decision was needed, this being to retreat to Ait Ourir just north of the mountains, a location within easy reach of Marrakesh and its airport.

Saturday 1 December:

We made the best of our alternative plans and spent the morning birding the agricultural fields between Marrakesh and the old 'hippy' town of Ourika. Even here we were not disappointed however with close views of some nice species: several Stone Curlew, flocks of wintering finches including many Serin, a few European Chaffinches mixed in with their African counterparts, Corn Buntings, several Moussier's Redstarts, and finally two Black-winged Kites which were very much admired.

We ended the trip with a cafe stop en-route to the airport. Some 133 species had been recorded, but it was the quality of the views of our target species that we will remember most about this trip.



Hopefully the photos, kindly offered by Pete, Andy, Rob, Richard, Mike and Mick, will remind everyone of the terrific birding Morocco has to offer.

A LIST OF TARGET SPECIES SEEN:

Ruddy Shelduck: a total of 85 on 28th and 120 on 30th

Marbled Duck: up to 23 on the lake at Ouarzazate

Ferruginous Duck: three on 30th at Ouarzazate

Black-winged Kite: two near Ourika on 1st

Bonelli's Eagle, two adults over Ouarzazate on 24th and one adult on Tagdilt track on 25th

Lanner: singles on 25th, 26th and 29th

Barbary Falcon: singles on 28th and 30th, two on 29th

Houbara: single on desert trip on 28th

Cream-coloured Courser: just one on desert trip from Yasmina



Spotted Sandgrouse: 300 near Rissani on 27th

Black-bellied Sandgrouse: 12 over the Tagdilt on 25th joined a much larger group of about 100 in the distance

Pharaoh Eagle Owl: singles on 26th and 27th

Little Swift: 40 Ait Ourir on 23rd

Levaillant's Woodpecker: close views of a female on 24th poorer views of a second that day

Hoopoe Lark: 24 bird days

Bar-tailed Lark: 37 bird days



Thick-billed Lark: 12 Tagdilt on 25th

Maghreb Lark: four on 26th and again 4 on 27th

Temminck's Lark: 55 on 25th and 12 on 29th

Fulvous Babbler: 12 on 26th and one on 29th

Scrub Warbler: two on 25th and 11 on 26th



African Desert Warbler: two on 27th and 28th

Spectacled Warbler: two on 25th and nine on 26th

Tristram's Warbler: two on 25th, one on 26th and five on 27th

Moussier's Redstart: 24 bird days

Maghreb Wheatear: two on 27th and one on 28th all males

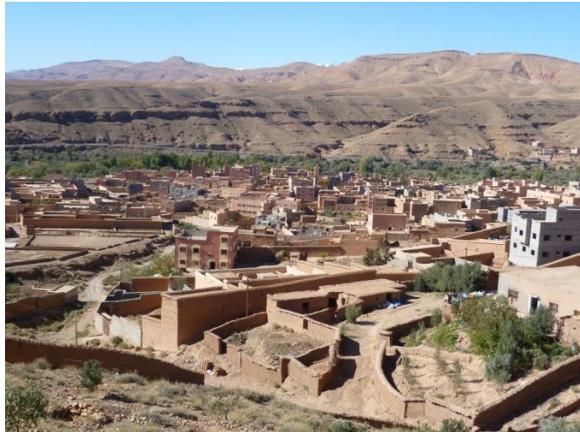
Red-rumped Wheatear: 18 on 25th and six on 29th

Desert Wheatear: a male on 24th and one male and two females on 28th

Red-throated Pipit: a fine adult (female) on 30th at Ouarzazate

Trumpeter Finch: seen on five days, max 100 On 26th

Desert Sparrow: a pair on desert trip on 28th



View from Auberge de Soleil Bleu.



Team shot.



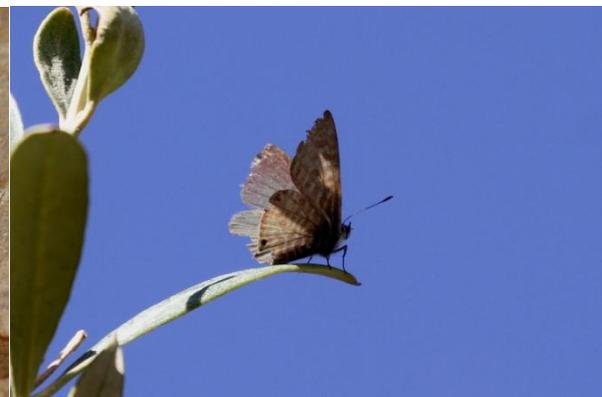
Desert safari.



Beautiful desert scenery.



Red-veined Darter, Auberge Derkaoua.



Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Auberge Derkaoua



Sunrise.



Erg Chebbi from Cafe Yasmina



And sunset.....



Until next time!