

Morocco

High Atlas & Sahara

Tuesday 03 April – Thursday 12 April 2018

Leader: David Walsh

2018 Cost **£2,099** single room supplement **£100**



Morocco is just a short flight from the UK but has birds, culture and scenery which seem a world away! Our spring tour focuses on the mountains and deserts of inland Morocco, avoiding the long drives to and from the coast, and as such it provides a perfect complement to our autumn trip based in Agadir. April is an excellent time to visit the country, as we will not only see a superb array of sought-after resident species, but also a range of migrants heading north from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. The variety of scenery on this trip is truly awe-inspiring! During our stay we will visit a wide range of habitats: high mountains, inland lakes, pine forests, spectacular gorges, stony desert and, perhaps most exciting of all, breath-taking sand dunes on the very edge of the Sahara. We hope to see some real specialities including African Crimson-winged Finch, Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Egyptian Nightjar, Spotted Sandgrouse, Desert Sparrow, African Desert Warbler, Cream-coloured Courser, Fulvous Babbler, Moussier's Redstart and several wheatears and larks. Ornitholidays has now visited this country over 30 times, and the tour will be led by David Walsh who has been to Morocco on 19 occasions.

ITINERARY

Days 1 & 2

We fly from London (or Manchester) direct to Marrakech where we meet our driver and transfer to our hotel in the south of the city where we stay for two nights. The following day we head for the alpine area around the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, marvelling at the superb mountain scenery with its snow-covered peaks. Here we hope to find African Crimson-winged Finch, Horned Lark, Common Rock Sparrow and the recently split Seeborn's Wheatear. Large flocks of Alpine and Red-billed Choughs frequent the area, whilst other likely species for us to enjoy include Black Redstart, Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and White-throated Dipper. After the first of many fine tagine lunches, we will drift down to an area of pines, orchards and woodland hoping to find Common Crossbill, Firecrest and Rock Bunting alongside Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and Moussier's Redstart, two species endemic to the Maghreb region (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). Other typical birds of the area include Sardinian Warbler, African Blue Tit and Hawfinch. The distinctive North African race of Common Chaffinch is numerous in the valleys, whilst the songs of Common Nightingale and European

Serin will become very familiar sounds. Moroccan Hairstreak and Scarce Swallowtail are among the butterfly possibilities.

Day 3

This morning we cross an area of plains south-east of Marrakech, keeping a look out for Crested Lark and Great Grey Shrike of the desert race *elegans* along the way. We then head south-east, travelling uphill through some of the most spectacular landscapes in Morocco. Our route takes us over the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass at around 2,260m. By the roadside, boys attend stalls crowded with gems and fossils, products of the local mountainsides and valleys. Our journey should provide opportunities to view Thekla Lark, migrant European Bee-eaters and Woodchat Shrikes and several raptors, including perhaps Booted and Short-toed Eagles. Tristram's Warbler favours the stunted vegetation of the dry slopes and we will search for it, but it can sometimes be a difficult species to locate. From the dizzy heights of the High Atlas, we drop down into the desert and should start to notice smart White-crowned Wheatears. We have our first opportunity to locate the elusive Maghreb Wheatear, a recent split from Mourning, before heading to our hotel in Ouarzazate.

Days 4 & 5

Having woken to the sounds of House Bunting and Common Bulbul, we make the five minute drive to Mansour Lake, a magnet for both resident and migrant species including White Stork, Ruddy Shelduck, Eurasian Spoonbill, Squacco Heron and both Gull-billed and Black Terns. The Saharan race of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler breeds here, whilst we have our first chance of seeing Fulvous Babbler, the colourful Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and the long-billed race of Crested Lark which is given specific status by some authorities. After spending much of the morning around the lake, our journey will continue eastwards along the picturesque Dadès valley, aptly named both the 'Valley of a thousand Kasbahs' and the 'Valley of Roses': the beautiful pink roses are harvested annually to make scented rose water. After lunch overlooking the river we reach our impressive hotel in Boumaïne, our base for the next two nights.

The late afternoon, and the following morning, should be among the most exciting of the trip! We make the short drive to the arid plain south-east of the town, the "Tagdilt Track". Species to be anticipated include Trumpeter Finch, Cream-coloured Courser, both Desert and Red-rumped



Egyptian Nightjar

Moussier's Redstart



Barbary Partridge

Wheatears and an amazing array of larks including Thick-billed, Temminck's, Greater Short-toed and Bar-tailed. We will take time to watch these closely and enjoy noting how different they are from each other! This area also holds Black-bellied Sandgrouse which we may see as they fly to and from their watering holes. We return for a late breakfast before heading to the magnificent Todra Gorge. Eurasian Crag Martin and Desert Lark breed here and we will scan the high cliffs for the local pair of Bonelli's Eagle. Migrants might include Eurasian Wryneck and Western Subalpine Warbler. After lunch we drift back westwards, looking for migrating flocks of raptors seeking roosting sites in the late afternoon as well as further passerine migrants; if we are lucky we may find a feeding Eurasian Hoopoe, or a Rufous Bush Robin strutting between the bushes.

Days 6 & 7

This morning we leave Boumalne; the drive today will be relatively long, but with fine scenery and birds to enjoy throughout the journey. We gradually descend and, as we do so, parts of the desert will become sandy rather than stony. We search for Spectacled and Saharan Scrub Warblers en route before, beyond the town of Errachidia, turning off the main road and heading south along the wonderful Ziz valley towards the edge of the Sahara. We should see Common Raven and Long-legged Buzzard overhead before, having passed through the town of Erfoud, we reach our hotel near Merzouga which will be our home for the next two nights. Merzouga is on the edge of Erg Chebbi, famous both for its classic Saharan sand dunes and for being the place where part of 'Lawrence of Arabia' was filmed!

The following day will undoubtedly live long in the memory! Using 4x4 vehicles, we first head into the desert bordering Erg Chebbi. Target species in this area include Greater Hoopoe Lark, Brown-necked Raven, Barbary and Lanner Falcons, the beautiful African Desert Warbler and the very local Desert Sparrow. The most likely sandgrouse is Spotted, joined occasionally by Pin-tailed and Crowned. If we are lucky, our local guide may be able to show us Egyptian Nightjar and Pharaoh Eagle Owl at their daytime roosts. In some years, a desert lake is formed; if it holds

water we can search for flocks of Greater Flamingos and Marbled Ducks as well as groups of waders and hirundines. Lunch at a desert auberge will provide a welcome break in the heat of the day.

Day 8

Before breakfast we have a further opportunity to search the tamarisks near our hotel for migrants. Then we head westwards via Jorf and Tinejdad through Boumalne and onwards to Ouarzazate for a one night stay. We have another chance to see some of the special desert birds, whilst migrants could be found almost anywhere, seeking verdant oases in the otherwise dry habitat. Hopefully we will bump into resident 'Moroccan' White Wagtails as well as groups of Yellow Wagtails, giving us the chance to separate the various distinctive subspecies. Warblers could include Western Olivaceous and Western Bonelli's, whilst yet more flocks of European Bee-eaters are likely to pass overhead.

Day 9

In the morning, we have a second opportunity to look for waterbirds at Mansour Lake, where there are likely to be a number of different migrants for us to enjoy. Black Kites or Montagu's Harriers might be seen passing overhead, whilst waders could include Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plover, Wood Sandpiper and perhaps even a group of Collared Pratincoles. We then head north-west through a beautiful valley and back over the Tizi-n-Tichka pass, stopping to enjoy another relaxing lunch at a well-positioned restaurant from where we can look for Barbary Partridge as well as Knapweed Fritillary and Black-eyed Blue. In the afternoon we pause in the pine forest where we hope to locate the Moroccan race of Short-toed Treecreeper and have another chance to find Levaillant's Green Woodpecker. Eventually we descend into Marrakech, arriving in time to enjoy the atmosphere of this special Moroccan city as well as see Little and Pallid Swifts and the distinctive local subspecies of Common Magpie, a likely future 'split'.

Day 10

There may be time for some final sightseeing before we fly from Marrakech to London (or Manchester).

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly to Marrakech
Day 2	Marrakech
Day 3	Ouarzazate
Days 4-5	Boumalne du Dadès
Days 6-7	Merzouga
Day 8	Ouarzazate
Day 9	Marrakech
Day 10	Depart Marrakech

Party Size

Maximum of 10 clients.

Accommodation

Comfortable accommodation in twin-bedded and single rooms, with private facilities.

Transport

By minibus (and 4x4 vehicle on day 7).

Includes

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, entry fees, services of the leader, airport taxes and tips.

Gradings

 Good

 150

 Cool to Hot

 Moderate

 Normal

 Moderate

 Good

 Moderate

 Scheduled

Crowned Sandgrouse

