

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO MOROCCO

Birds and Berbers

26 March - 6 April 2002

A Personal Diary



Leader: Paul Rogers

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO MOROCCO

Birds and Berbers

26 March - 6 April 2002

A Personal Diary

Tuesday 26 March

Check in at Heathrow's Terminal 2 was efficient and painless with our baggage checked all the way through to Marrakech. Unfortunately the Royal Air Maroc flight called in at Tangier before Casablanca. However, we arrived at Mohammed V International Airport on schedule and after a wait of an hour we made the short leg to Marrakech in just over half an hour.

We cleared immigration and customs quickly and were in our hotel in the new part of the city just before midnight. It had been a long day and we were ready for bed and asleep without much rocking.

Wednesday 27 March

We awoke to a bright but breezy morning. Breakfast, a continental buffet was taken at the leisurely hour of 8.30am and we were off to the Menara Gardens an hour later. The simple task of changing money en route was not as simple as it might have been but at least we were solvent in the currency of the country.

Our introduction to birding in Morocco was a walk through an ancient Olive Grove surrounding a large water tank established in the 12th century but refurbished in the mid-19th. A pair of Pallid Swifts and a lone Swallow skimmed the choppy water. The strong breeze made birding difficult in the swaying branches but fortunately both Spotless Starlings and the North African race of Chaffinch fed on the ground. Common Bulbuls sang their cheery song from the depths of the thick leathery leaves and only offered fleeting views but we did have excellent views later on.

The sky was blue and despite the breeze the temperature was pleasant and we were soon rewarded with good views of Montagu's Harriers. A group of four followed each other in quick succession heading northwards. A single Black Kite had neither elegance nor urgency in its flight. A light-phased Booted Eagle, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk and a pair of Common Kestrel completed a productive spell of raptors.

Along a sheltered hedge a Woodchat Shrike appeared briefly. Whilst we looked for it we found a number of warblers feeding in the bushes, several Willow Warblers searched the leaves along with an elusive Western Bonelli's Warbler. As we sat in the sunshine first an Orphean Warbler gave us prolonged views and then a male Subalpine Warbler. Along with a pair of resident Sardinian Warbler it had been most productive for species that can usually be seen only fleetingly.

Barn Swallows swooped low between the trees joined occasionally by Red-rumped Swallows whilst Little Swifts mingled with House Martins. Lone White Storks circled high above us as they searched for food on the outskirts of the city.

A lunch of meat and chicken tagine was taken in an American style roadside one-stop garage complex, a recent popular development. The food was excellent and the service efficient.

After some lengthy monetary negotiations we climbed aboard two horse-drawn caliches for a tour of the city, in style. Our route took us around the ancient pink walls where the pavements and gardens were under repair and refurbishment for the new king's marriage in April. Once inside the walls we threaded our way through the narrow streets and alleyways of the Medina. Here modern developments of computers sat side by side with tailors and leatherworkers whose pattern of life had remained the same for centuries. One of many sites worth visiting is the Saadien Tombs, only discovered after studying aerial photographs of the city taken in the First World War. The bodies of the ruling families of the Saadiens are buried in halls of fabulous decorative work of plaster, cedarwood and mosaics. The work carried out in the 13th and 15th centuries has stood the test of time and has not been restored.

We enjoyed a drink on one of the café terraces that overlook the Jemaa el Fna square, " the square of the dead". A reminder of the bloody past of this now vibrant city that was once the capital of the Berber tribes of the High Atlas Mountains. We watched the comings and goings of the local Berber traders, the colourful costumes of the water sellers competing with snake charmers for tourist tips. Traditional apothecaries had cures and potions for all ills but, judging by the number of teeth on display at the dentists, the cure for toothache was not too successful. As usual the storytellers and play actors had the largest audiences and as the sun sank the square came alive and was the throbbing heart of this magical city.

A very different day for most of us but one filled with many memorable sights, sounds and smells.

Thursday 28 March

Most of us were awakened from our slumber by a torrential hailstorm in the middle of the night. All was dry for our departure after breakfast at 7.30am but the dark heavy clouds did not bode well for our trip into the High Atlas.

As we headed south through the outlying villages of Marrakech, a Roller perched on a wire brought us to an abrupt stop. Not a bad species for the first bird of the day and one we could thank the storm for "grounding". Nearby a Southern Grey Shrike also used the wires as a look-out post.

We made our way along the Ourika Valley - a verdant strip compared to the surrounding area. The clouds clothed our ascent and reduced visibility. During a brighter period a Blue Rock Thrush perched on a boulder by the roadside and a little further on a pair of Barbary Partridge scuttled across the road. Once amongst the rocks they are difficult to find and we could not relocate them.

We made a brief stop by the small lake near the ski resort at Oukaimeden where several Seeborn's and a Northern Wheatear were found. Around the chalets and apartments both Yellow-billed and Red-billed Choughs gathered in good numbers. A flock of fifty or so Rock Sparrows picked amongst the stones on the side of the road for tit-bits.

Whilst the weather was reasonably bright and glimpses of the snow covered peaks gave us a little indication of the splendours we were missing, we walked some of the rocky slopes. The main hope was for Crimson-winged Finches but despite covering a large area, Black Redstarts were the only reward for our troubles.

Perhaps a new location would bring rewards so we tried the slopes on the way up to the Tizerag TV relay station at an altitude of 2,740 metres. Again the clouds rolled in and we had difficulty seeing each other never mind little brown jobs picking amongst brown earth. Terry brilliantly spotted a dozen or so of these LBJs and after some searching as the mist cleared then thickened we saw the group of the Atlas race of Shore Larks. The males were in fine plumage with their chestnut heads and napes clearly showing - at least we had some reward for persevering when all seemed a lost cause.

At the relay station the cloud persisted and so the magnificent panorama that lay beneath us was all in the mind. A Blue Rock Thrush looked a little forlorn in the damp conditions but the Moussier's Redstarts that Terry found still looked stunning.

The idea of a picnic did not seem a good one so we opted for a hot meal in one of the cafés that have appeared over the last few years. As always tagines were on the charcoal burners so we opted for two vegetable ones, piping hot, with plenty of bread. The downside was that we had to eat them outside but we were supplied with parasols, to keep us from the snow. Several photographs were taken to record this bizarre meal of Tagine à la neige!

Once fortified and a little warmer we made our way down the twisty road. The light snow had turned to heavy rain and cancelled an intended walk, although Peter braved the conditions to photograph a group of Petticoat Daffodils. Another break in the weather gave us an opportunity to check out a large stand of mature Walnut Trees dark and bleak with no sign of the new growth appearing. As we admired the colours of the local race of Blue Tits, John called out woodpecker! Obliging a Levillant's Green Woodpecker landed in a large tree just on the other side of the road for us all to see well. This northwest African endemic is very local and not always easy to find, more remarkable was the fact that a few minutes later a Great Spotted

Woodpecker flew into the adjacent tree. The rain returned and curtailed our viewing as it did for the rest of our journey to the hotel.

The large plain near Tahanoaut can be productive for larks but because of the heavy rain we would have to look for them another day. The inclement weather gave us a chance to purchase some postage stamps at Asni but it also meant we arrived at the hotel a little earlier than anticipated.

Once settled into our rooms the weather improved and gave us a chance to explore the garden. Soon we were watching a variety of migrants flitting amongst the trees and the flowering Wisteria. The majority was Willow Warblers but amongst them were Common Redstart, Common Nightingales and Olivaceous Warbler. The nesting White Storks made several visits to add more material to an already enormous nest to bring the day to a rewarding end.

After drinks in the bar and an excellent dinner we were pleased to see a clear starlit sky and the promise of good weather for the next day.

Friday 29 March

As we wished a bright clear morning greeted us, but with a chill in the air at this altitude. The pre-breakfast walk in the garden was enriched with the sweet smell of orange blossom. Some people had no need for an alarm as the song of Nightingales woke them. Hawfinches gave us splendid views as they sat on top of two of the taller trees in the garden and allowed us to enjoy this normally shy bird through the telescope. Last night's migrants were still present and to their numbers we added Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Subalpine Warbler. A pair of Red-rumped Swallows made frequent visits to a puddle to collect mud for their nest situated beneath the river bridge. A lone Sand Martin looked a little out of place as it mingled with its more colourful and elegant cousins.

After breakfast we slowly made our way to Asni stopping to watch a Long-legged Buzzard preen in the warm morning sun. A dry field on the outskirts of the village appeared empty but after a little perseverance Terry found a pair of Thekla Larks and shortly afterwards a fine male Black-eared Wheatear.

Another area at the start of the Mizane Valley was again a little disappointing but eventually yielded a pair of Moussier's Redstarts and a Short-toed Eagle passed over head.

The swollen river had a superb Grey Wagtail on the rocks - it sounds like a new exotic cocktail! A single European Bee-eater looked stunning in the bright light. After yesterday we counted our blessings that we could enjoy the snow-covered peaks that were appearing as we rounded every twist in the road, whose course had been altered by the winter storms.

Once in the village of Imlil, a Berber village that supplies the guides for the walkers and trekkers visiting this part of Morocco, we made our ascent by foot to the Kasbah du Toubkal. We stopped at frequent intervals to photograph the mountains, to watch the colourful Blue Tits or simply to catch our breath.

Once in the Kasbah, at 5850ft, we simply stood back and enjoyed the awe-inspiring scenery. No wonder they decided to film the life of the Dali Lama here because it is very like Tibet. The view is described, as one of the best in North Africa and on a cloudless blue sky with bright sunshine and snow on Jbel Toubkal, we were not about to argue.

As we sat down to our tagine with figs and walnuts a large flock of Yellow-billed Chough tumbled over our heads. A superb traditional Berber meal was concluded with mint tea; fortunately both the Long-legged Buzzard and the Golden Eagle waited for a lull in the proceedings before they put in an appearance. It truly was a memorable meal in really magnificent scenery - thank heavens the clouds cleared!

After our relaxation and indulgence we viewed an area on the banks of the river and located a pair of Black Wheatears as they hopped from boulder to boulder. Unfortunately the sightings of raptors on our way back to the hotel did not materialise but maybe the appearance of some thick clouds had some effect.

Switching our attention to smaller species we tried a walk through some olive and almond groves and were soon rewarded with views of Woodchat Shrikes and a male Cirl Bunting. As we watched a Common Cuckoo flew overhead as we enjoyed the last of the warm sun. A group of warblers were a little elusive as they flitted in the olives but most were Sub-alpine Warblers. Our last sightings was of a group of six Short-toed Eagles circling on a thermal above a ridge before moving onto to the next thermal in the weakening sun. It had been a remarkable day, with a limited number of species, but looking for them in such scenery is a real pleasure and always memorable.

Saturday 30 March

Today was the first of our two long journeys. Most of the migrants of the past two days had moved on with only Willow Warblers and Blackcaps present in the garden. Nevertheless it was good to see the Hawfinches again before our departure at 8.00 am.

Again we were fortunate enough to have a clear blue sky and bright sunshine. We made a stop on the edge of the Asilah Plain to search for the Calandra Larks we had missed on the way through due to the rain. At first only Southern Grey Shrikes and Thekla Larks were evident but searching the dry fields with the High Atlas as a backdrop was no hardship. Eventually after a change of location a Calandra Lark perched on a large stone for all of us to see well through the telescopes.

It was then full speed ahead through the town of Ourika to stop for morning coffee on the edge of one of the King's hunting forests. Whilst the kettle boiled we scanned the ridge opposite. Raptors that have migrated over the mountains often roost overnight on the ridge and when the temperature increases use the thermals to continue their journey. It was not long before a few Black Kites circled above us along with several Booted Eagles. A number of Lesser Kestrels skimmed along the ridge but a perched larger falcon remained unidentified despite the fine optics of Ken's Leica telescope. An Egyptian Vulture passed high over our heads and was particularly difficult to locate in the blue sky. An unexpected bonus was the sight of a Wild Boar sow with half a dozen striped youngsters, more future sport for the young king but after his wedding, no doubt.

Once at the higher altitudes we made a couple of stops in the hope of finding Tristram's Warbler but it was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. As we climbed higher and higher around the tortuous bends the vegetation became sparser but the scenery more dramatic and dictated a couple of stops for photographs.

Once at the top we parked on a grassy plateau for lunch and whilst Mohammed prepared our picnic we explored the area. A small wood that normally harbours a few tired migrants was very quiet although a Common Crossbill was a little unexpected. The only sign of migration were two fine male Northern Wheatears and a single Black-eared. The occasional Barn Swallow flew north and a group of Bee-eaters called but even at over 6,000 feet they were so high we could not see them.

We enjoyed a fine picnic and only a single Raven came to investigate. That is until our unwanted food was devoured by six boys with smiles as broad as the original Mr Happy. It was a treat to see them enjoying the food and Wendy hopefully captured their joy on film.

Once over the col our descent was fairly rapid to a very different landscape of red cliffs and sandstone. A stop at a normally productive gully produced a single Subalpine Warbler and we were content to blame the wind direction rather than our birding skills.

The stony desert was devoid of birds and we hoped that tomorrow might produce some of the specialised species. A visit to the picturesque Kasbah at Tiflout as the sun sank gave us the chance to run off a few shots and enjoy a male Blue Rock Thrush before checking in to our hotel in the centre of town. After last night's quaint Sanglier this modern facility seemed a little soulless but the buffet at dinner was certainly adequate.

Sunday 31 March

After a good night's sleep and an excellent buffet breakfast we left the hotel under a cloudy sky. The oasis town of Ouarzazate has grown enormously over the last five years or so mainly due to a thriving film studio

and tourists. Consequently the demand for water is now much greater and the barrage or reservoir has suffered. Our first task was to make an attempt to reach the shoreline but it had retreated for over two miles and the long trek out of the question. A small smelly gully did attract some displaying Little Ringed Plovers, a Common Snipe and two Green Sandpipers. As we watched them a pair of Ruddy Shelduck flew past. They were no doubt searching for the water as well.

Just east of the town we had our first "taste" of desert birdwatching by walking along a gully. We walked for several hundred metres without the sign or sound of a bird. At last the song of a White-crowned Black Wheatear was heard and we had good views of the songster as it sat on top of a ridge. A pair of Desert Larks appeared from nowhere and we watched them as they scurried amongst the dried vegetation. A third species appeared in the form of a Spectacled Warbler, at first it was elusive but eventually it perched on a thorny shrub for us to see every detail. Our winning run continued with a stunning male Desert Wheatear that was later joined by a female. After a slow start it turned out to be a fruitful walk.

Continuing eastwards we headed in the direction of the lake by an area of cultivation. The lack of water had made crop growing a difficult task and most of the area had been abandoned. Crested Larks seemed to favour the drier areas along with a well plumaged Northern Wheatear. The larger Tamarisks provided some shelter from the stiffening breeze for several Subalpine, a Western Bonelli's and an Olivaceous Warbler. The overcast conditions made walking comfortable and as we searched the numerous Tamarisks we were lucky enough to see three Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, they perched on exposed branches for us to admire them through the telescopes.

After morning coffee we enjoyed a party of European Bee-eaters flying a few yards in front of us and then landing on the sand for us to admire their fabulous colours. From a spur that ran out towards the lake we were able to scan the distant waters. Two dozen or more Great Crested Grebes were present with one pair displaying. A pair of Mallard and a Ruddy Shelduck were close to the shore whilst two pairs of Grey Herons had nests on a ruined Kasbah on an island.

The skies had not brightened by the time we had our picnic lunch in fact there were spots of rain in the air so we did not linger over the meal. It was then on to Boumalne-Dades along a road dotted with ancient Kasbahs and through the heart of the Rose Water industry.

We checked in at our hotel, a different one from our previous tours because our first choice had closed down. It is always a difficult task to keep up with opening and closing of hotels, particularly in areas away from the main tourist towns.

At 4.30pm we made our first excursion onto the desert around the Tagdilt Track. The wind was strong and conditions dull so we did not have particularly high hopes. However, it was not long before we found a pair of Temminck's Horned Larks and a Thekla's Lark. A little further along the track we watched a small flock of Greater Short-toed Larks but due to the windy conditions and their cryptic plumage they were not that easy to see. We were fortunate to locate a pair of Thick-billed Larks that had passed overhead a little earlier. The mass of plastic bags from the local tip did not add to the scene but at least some of them acted as location points in finding the larks.

As we drove the tracks a Red-rumped Wheatear sat briefly on a nearby stone but it did not linger. The same applied to a Barbary Falcon that sped passed the vehicle but unfortunately did not land. Our last sighting was of a pair of Temminck's Horned Larks at close range but unfortunately the light was too poor for photography. Considering the conditions it had been quite a productive sortie and we hoped that the wind would have dropped by the morning.

Monday 1 April

The weather certainly made fools of us today with heavy rain all through the night and all morning. We had no real need to make the early start as planned due to the combined effect of the weather and the lack of electricity, the town being the victim of a power failure. So breakfast was a leisurely affair with plenty on offer including fried eggs.

We set off into the stony desert watching from the comfort of the mini-bus and when the rain eased we took a couple of exploratory walks. Despite covering a fair amount of ground only Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears could be found. A loud chip brought our attention to a pair of Temminck's Horned Larks sheltering beneath a rock and occasionally venturing out to feed. No doubt most of the other birds were following suite, so it was hardly surprising that we could not see them.

The rain continued to fall heavily and by mid-morning small lakes were beginning to form and the dry wadis of yesterday were raging torrents of terracotta coloured water. It was an extraordinary sight but one we would have preferred to have missed. Cutting our losses we returned to Boumalne for a welcome drink and then to the hotel to dry out. A hot lunch in the hotel was also welcome and then it was a matter of literally chilling out to see what the weather would do.

We reassembled at four with a patch of clear sky in view and no rain, so we opted out of the safe option of driving the new tarmac road towards Tagdilt. As soon as we turned off the main road birds started to appear; first a Lesser Short-toed Lark and as we watched a pair of Cream-coloured Coursers flew by, unfortunately we could not relocate them. Our search was not in vain because a Trumpeter Finch landed to feed by the side of the road and was intent to be photographed at the closest possible range, down to a yard in one instance.

We made a stop to photograph a temporary lake in the desert with the snow-clad High Atlas as a unique record of the freak conditions. Not only was the scenery spectacular but also the birdwatching. By the "lake" were Ruff, a dozen Little Stints, a Green Sandpiper and several Yellow Wagtails. It illustrated their route over the barren deserts that some species use. It was fascinating to record such migration, which meant so much more than reading about it in a book. Also present were some of the resident species such as Desert Wheatears and the first good sightings of Red-rumped Wheatear. For good measure we also saw a few Cream-coloured Coursers, a species high on most peoples 'wants list'.

Such was the activity that both Temminck's Horned Larks and Greater Short-toed Larks almost went unnoticed. A sandy ridge looked a likely place for Hoopoe Lark and we were not long out of the vehicle before one flew past us. It was some time before we managed to locate it but eventually we had very close views of a pair, one busily trying to devour a scorpion that it constantly beat against stones.

As the sun sank in the now clear sky two Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew overhead the low light picking out their golden backs and black bellies. It brought to an end a fabulous couple of hours birding and one of the best sessions of desert birding I had ever experienced. Morocco is a country of contrasts and today certainly lived up to unimaginable extremes.

An excellent dinner brought the day to a close with the lights flickering on and off as if transmitting some secret morse code message. We retired to bed hoping that there would be no rain and the rivers would have subsided between Boumalne and Ouarzazate and the road reopened. Today was the first serious rain in the region for over three years and provided us with an April Fool's day we would not forget.

Tuesday 2 April

A glorious sunny morning greeted us with clear air and a backdrop of the snow-laden Atlas Mountains. Unfortunately we had to leave for the long drive to Taroudannt. After a good breakfast we were on the road west at 7.30am. Many of the fords were covered in sand and silt but did not prove a problem that is until we reached some work being done on the construction of a new bridge 12kms west of Ouarzazate. The torrential rains had washed away the temporary surface and the road was impassable and from the number of vehicles queuing had been for some time. Heavy plant machines were scraping away the mud and rebuilding a new road.

As it would be some time before the work would be finished and the traffic cleared we decided to have a drink by the side of the lake. A real bonus was the sight of two hundred or so Collared Pratincoles hawking over our parking spot for insects. Like us they had been held up by the weather and provided us with a real spectacle.

After an hour and a half delay we were on our way, something we could have done without but it did have some compensation.

Once through the hold up we made good speed in an attempt to catch up lost time. To some extent we turned a blind eye to most birds but a single flying Black-bellied Sandgrouse was seen and a perched Lanner Falcon merited more than a quick glance. The bird, an adult male of the *erlangeri* race sat on top of a rocky ridge for some time allowing us to enjoy it through the telescopes before taking to the air. The whole experience was summed up by Mohammed's reaction when he looked through the telescope "magnifique".

As we headed for lunch a pair of Cream-coloured Coursers brought us to another halt as we watched three birds close to the road, providing much better views than the ones we had yesterday.

A picnic lunch was taken on the edge of a quiet orchard just west of Tazenakht. Whilst the food was being prepared we took a stroll amongst the trees in the hope that some of the migrants would be present. We were not disappointed. Melodious, Willow, Subalpine and Western Bonelli's Warblers, Common Redstart Black-eared and Northern Wheatears and a very tired Turtle Dove kept us occupied for some time. As we enjoyed the fresh bread, cheese, sardines, dates, fruit etc., European Bee-eaters diverted our attention from the serious business of eating.

Once back on the road a few people snatched forty winks or more. A stop at the Aoulouz Gorge gave us a chance to stretch our legs but the breeding Bald Ibis are long gone. A few stops for raptors in the hope of something exciting only produced Long-legged Buzzards, a species we were thrilled to see a week ago.

The rain clouds were still present over the Sous Valley and heavy rain was still falling in various parts. Fortunately we managed to miss it but saw the lightening over the Anti Atlas Mountains to the south. The storms did not affect the local goats that have learned to climb the Argan Trees in search of the nutritious fruits. They did however literally ground about five hundred Black Kites on a newly ploughed field. It was another spectacle of active migration with all these birds waiting for the weather to improve before they could cross over the mountains.

It was then slow progress through the citrus growing area of the valley, before reaching our hotel in Taroudannt just before six o'clock. Considering the long delay we had made remarkably good time.

Once in the sumptuous surroundings of the hotel we had time to relax in a traditionally decorated room that did have constant lighting. The power supply had weathered the storm much better than our previous hotel.

Wednesday 3 April

A bit of a lie-in this morning and a leisurely breakfast so we could savour the atmosphere of the surroundings.

At nine we left to visit the small local airport to search for Fulvous Babbler. We walked the hedges and scrub without success but we did find three new species for the tour, Linnet, Common Whitethroat and Tawny Pipit.

Plan B was to try a second sight that had proved successful in the past but this was even quieter than the first with only a Spur-thighed Tortoise a surprising find.

To hide our disappointment we opted for a spot of retail therapy in the Berber Souk. Quite a different experience from shopping in M & S. After a while everyone got into the swing of bartering and despite an initial reluctance, struck hard deals with gusto. Purchases included belts, woodcarvings, pottery, spices and tagines to use the spices in. It was frantic but an enjoyable experience and an integral part of a visit to Morocco.

Trying to find a picnic spot was almost as difficult as finding the Babblers due to the muddy conditions but eventually we found a spot under the shade of some Argan Trees. Wendy had a lesson in how to make Mint Tea and her new teapot would be put to the test when back home.

Another try was made for the missing species but only plenty of Bee-eaters, Booted Eagles and a Marsh Harrier. Back near the bridge over the Sous River we did have excellent views of Black-headed Bush Shrike

and Zitting Cisticola. A shrike was the subject of some discussion but in the end it was considered to be a race of Southern Grey Shrike. A herd of camels had ventured close to us and Wendy took the opportunity to photograph them but she got more than she bargained for when the herder got the hump at her, in a big way.

We had made a real effort for both the Babbler and Black-shouldered Kite and we had failed so reluctantly we pushed onto our next stop on the outskirts of Agadir. We had time for a quick look at the end of the Sous Estuary before checking in to the hotel.

The recent heavy rains, nearly three inches in a day and a new drainage system had changed the contours of the mud flats and gullies since my last visit. Nevertheless there was still plenty to see with many familiar waders present and a few not so common back home such as Black-winged Stilts and Curlew Sandpipers. A Little Gull fished a stream with several Gull-billed Terns and a quartet of Spoonbills dozed in the shallows occasionally showing their bills. As we watched, birds appeared then vanished, first a Ruddy Shelduck, then a Glossy Ibis and lastly a distant pair of Stone Curlews.

After a frustrating morning it had been a pleasant hour or so with plenty to keep us occupied with the promise of more to come.

Thursday 4 April

A reasonably early start and hour or so drive south to the Oued Massa National Park. We started however just outside the park in the village of Massa. The rains had flooded several of the fields and provided good feeding for a variety of species. Marbled Duck mingled with Mallard and Shoveler on a muddy patch. Thirty or so Glossy Ibis dwarfed Black-tailed Godwits which in turn dwarfed Wood Sandpipers, Redshanks and Common Snipe. Splashes of colour was added by dozens of the blue-headed race of Yellow Wagtails. As we sorted through the species Zitting Cisticolas refused to be ignored constantly drawing attention to themselves with their calls and Stonechats flitted from reeds to sedges and back again. A pair of Laughing Doves in a palm was a good find as they have a precarious toehold in this area but do seem to be holding their own against the fierce competition from the recent arrival of the Collared Dove.

It was pleasant bird watching in the warm sunshine with the villagers going about their daily business with a welcoming "Bonjour". It was with some reluctance that we changed location to the bridge a little further along the track. Whilst Mohammed brewed up we walked in the shade of a stand of Eucalyptus Trees along the reed fringed river. The constant purring of numerous Turtle Doves enlivened the proceedings. Both Reed and Sedge Warblers flitted nervously in the vegetation and a Great Reed Warbler gave a brief burst of song but did not put in an appearance. Little Grebes in fine plumage squabbled over territorial rights and Tufted Ducks looked a little out of place. Several Squacco Herons flew along the reeds and one sat out in the open for us to see well through the telescopes but a Little Bittern was not so obliging. There was a good selection of hirundines present but it took a little time before we had acceptable views of Plain Martin, eventually perched on a long reed.

After a welcome drink it was time to visit the reserve but not before we stopped to watch two Little Owls sunning themselves, one on a pile of rocks and the other on a tall succulent. From an elevated position we could survey the extent of river all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Common Coot skittered across the brackish water and a Purple Heron flapped lazily down stream. The collection of cacti and succulents on the dry banks gave Wendy and Peter much pleasure and would not have looked out of place in the dry garden at Kew.

Whilst lunch was prepared we scanned the reedy islands and shores. An Osprey made a couple of attempts to acquire its lunch but failed. A real surprise was a Wild Boar that swam across the water to reach one of the larger islands. Closer to us we enjoyed the stunning colours of a male Moussier's Redstart. We had first seen them on top of the High Atlas and now here they were at sea level, a very wide range of habitats. Several Serins sang and displayed above our heads as we returned for our picnic.

The walk to the sea is a long one so we took our time and opted for a turn around point about half way. It was a stop-start walk as we checked the water at regular intervals. A pair of Pochard were near the distant bank but the best and closest views were towards the end of the walk. A few Wigeon were scattered amongst the more numerous Pintail, some of the males in full splendour in contrast to the female Garganey that

necessitated closer scrutiny. The waders were well represented with several new species for the tour, Black-tailed Godwit, Avocet, Kentish Plover and several Temminck's Stints. The star bird was picked out by Terry's keen eyes a Red-necked Phalarope, a rare winter visitor to this part of the world.

A pair of Cream-coloured Coursers delayed our journey back to the hotel but we did have time for a drink before setting off to the Oued Sous. Our intention was to stay to dusk to see Red-necked Nightjars but as the King was in residence the palace guards had other ideas. We did manage to overlook the estuary and see a good selection of waders as well as Greater Flamingos and Slender-billed Gull. A large wader needed careful observation in the failing light and we failed to come to a definite conclusion as to its identity was it a Curlew, a Whimbrel or something more exciting? We would have to return when the light was better and hope it was still there.

We were not able to get to the prime spot for the nightjars but a tape did elicit a response but we did not see the bird and we were not too pleased with the King.

Friday 5 April

We took a change in direction for today as we drove an hour to the north and the village of Tamri. This is the best area away from the inaccessible breeding cliffs to see Bald Ibis. The sun was shining although there was a haze when we disembarked at 8.30am. From a cliff top we scanned the fields and cliffs but only a Raven briefly raised our hopes. It was then a matter of climbing over the sandy ridges to an elevated position to wait and search. All was ominously quiet and even the boys who are always keen to earn a few dirhams were unusually subdued.

After some time we drove to the north of the estuary to the fields where I had seen them before. Here the ridges were not so steep but the soft sand tiring. Birds few and far between and our attention wandered to butterflies, flowers, lizards and Scarab Beetles rolling balls of dung but not ibis dung. After what seemed like miles of walking two boys suggested we tried an area near to the sea and as we approached two Bald Ibis flew directly over our heads. It was with some pleasure and relief we gave them a few dirhams for their efforts. A fine male Spectacled Warbler delayed our return to the vehicle.

As the ibis flew some distance we tried to locate them but without success. On the sandy beach at the mouth of the estuary we checked a roost of sea-birds that included the commoner gulls and Sandwich Terns. As we headed back to the road another pair of ibis circled over head. From exactly the spot we had tried first of all, we saw four birds in all but again they did not land. We were delighted to have seen one of the rarest birds in the world and enjoyed our cliff top picnic just that little bit more.

The sun shone over the blue sea as the Atlantic rollers crashed onto the rocks it was a superb spot and it was good to finish our tour in some hot weather. Only a few distant Gannets were added to the list. On one of the beaches a group of gulls had a few Audouin's amongst them but by now the light was poor and the views were not good.

The bird watching finished with a final visit to the Oued Sous. This time the light was good but the birds more distant. We saw a good selection of waders including Oystercatchers and Bar-tailed Godwits for the first time. Several more Slender-billed Gulls were present, a Little Gull and a Mediterranean Gull but the count of 90 Gull-billed Terns was exceptional. We also found a typical Curlew but as the King was still in residence access to the mouth of the estuary and a mass of birds was denied. We will never know the true identity of the bird that we saw on the previous visit but it was perhaps only a strange coloured Curlew with a very slender bill!

We were back at the hotel in plenty of time to pack and enjoy a drink before dinner that was appropriately Tagine du Poulet. After a final checklist we retired to bed in preparation for our early start in the morning.

Saturday 6 April

Breakfast was taken at the unearthly hour of 4.30am and we set off to the airport by 5.00am. The check-in at Agadir was very efficient and fast and we took off on schedule. At Casablanca most took the opportunity to do some duty free shopping whilst waiting for the on going flight to London. It was very sunny at Heathrow but also very busy. The baggage reclaim area was rather chaotic so it was some time before our luggage

arrived safe and sound. We said farewell to our new-found friends and continued on the last leg of our journeys.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mohammed for his excellent picnics and safe and careful driving. Most of all I would like to thank all of you for your contributions, your excellent spotting, for sharing your sightings and telescopes, your punctuality and your good humour. I am sure that you have many varied memories of this fascinating country and enjoyed seeing some of the places that the average tourist does not. Thank you for travelling with us and I hope we will meet up again and relive some of the many magic moments.

E. Paul Rogers
Ornitholidays
29 Straight Mile
Romsey
Hants
SO51 9BB
Tel: 01794 519445
E-mail: info@ornitholidys.co.uk

July 2002

Itinerary and Weather

26th March	London Heathrow to Marrakech via Casablanca
27th March	Marrakech - Menara Gardens - City Tour, Saadiens Tomb. Fine and sunny with a strong breeze 28°C
28th March	Marrakech - Ourika Valley - Oukaimeden - Ouirgane Snow, heavy showers and cool breeze max 15°C
29th March	Ouirgane - Asni - Imlil, Kasbah, Toubkal-Margera Fine and sunny 22°C
30th March	Ouirgane- Asilah Plain - Taferiat - Tizi'n'Tichka pass - Ouarzazate Fine and sunny 23°C
31st March	Ouarzazate - Barrage- El -Mansour - Skoura - Boumalne-Daes Overcast with light drizzle and breezy .max 15°C
1st April	Boumalne, Tagdilt Track early morning and late afternoon. Torrential rain clearing up late afternoon max 10°C
2nd April	Boumalne- Ouarzazate - Tazenakht - Taroudannt Sunny max 18°C
3rd April	Taroudannt - Oued Sous - Souk - Sous Estuary - Inezgane Fine and sunny max 24°C
4th April	Oued Massa National Park - Oued Sous late afternoon Hot and sunny max 27°C
5th April	Tamri - Cap Rhir - Sous Estuary Fine and sunny max 28°C
6th April	Agadir to Casablanca connecting flight to London Heathrow.

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded	Location	Abundance Scale
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days	M areas around Marrakech	1 = 1 - 4
	HA High Atlas, Imlil, Oukaimeden, Ourgane	2 = 5 - 9
	Oz Areas around Ouarzazate	3 = 10 - 99
	OM Oued Massa	4 = 100 - 999
	OS Oued Sous	5 = 1,000 - 10,000
	Co Coastal sites such as Cap Rhir and Tamri	
	SV Sous Valley and area around Taroudannt	
	B Desert areas, Boulmane, Tagdilt Track and Ouarzazate	
	T Species seen at most locations throughout the tour	

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Location	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Little Grebe	1	OM	2	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	2	Oz	3	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Northern Gannet	1	Co	3	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	4	Oz OM OS	2	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Bittern	1	OM	1	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
Squacco Herons	1	OM	2	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Cattle Egret	10	T	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	3	OM OS	3	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron	5	Oz OM OS	2	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	2	Oz OM	1	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
White Stork	7	HA Oz SV	3	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Glossy Ibis	3	OM OS	3	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Bald Ibis	1	Co	2	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	3	OM OS	2	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Greater Flamingo	2	OS	3	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Common Shelduck	3	OM	3	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	3	Oz OS	2	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Common Teal	1	OM	1	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Garganey	1	OM	2	<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Mallard	2	Oz OM	2	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	1	OM	3	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Northern Shoveler	1	OM	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Marbled Duck	1	OM	2	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>
Common Pochard	1	OM	1	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	1	OM	1	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Honey Buzzard	1	OM	1	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
Black Kite	4	HA SV	4	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Egyptian Vulture	1	HA	1	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Short-toed Eagle	1	HA	1	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Marsh Harrier	2	OM SV	1	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	3	M SV	1	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	2	HA M	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	1	Co	1	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	3	HA B SV	1	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Golden Eagle	1	HA	1	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Booted Eagle	6	HA OM Co M	2	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
Osprey	1	OM	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Lesser Kestrel	2	HA SV	2	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
Common Kestrel	8	T	1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Lanner Falcon	1	B	1	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
Barbary Falcon	1	B	1	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>
Barbary Partridge	1	HA	1	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>
Common Moorhen	1	OM	2	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Common Coot	1	OM	3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Oystercatcher	1	OM	2	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Black-winged Stilt	3	OM OS	3	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>

Avocet	2	OM	OS			1	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Stone-curlew	2	OS				1	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>
Collared Pratincole	1	Oz				4	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>
Cream-coloured Courser	3	B	OM			3	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
Little Ringed Plover	1	Oz				2	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Great Ringed Plover	3	OM	OS			2	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kentish Plover	1	OM				1	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Grey Plover	3	OS				2	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Sanderling	2	OS				2	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Little Stint	3	B	OM	OS		3	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Temminck's Stint	1	OM				1	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
Curlew Sandpiper	3	OM	OS			2	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Dunlin	3	OM	OS			3	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Ruff	3	B	OM	OS		2	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	2	OM	OS			1	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	OS				1	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1	OS				1	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Redshank	3	OM	OS			3	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Common Greenshank	3	OM	OS			2	<i>Tringa nebularis</i>
Green Sandpiper	3	Oz	B	OM		1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Wood Sandpiper	1	OM				2	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Common Sandpiper	2	OS				1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Common Snipe	2	Oz	OM			1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Red-necked Phalarope	1	OM				1	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
Little Gull	2	OM				1	<i>Larus minutus</i>
Black-headed Gull	3	OM	OS			3	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Slender-billed Gull	2	OS				1	<i>Larus genei</i>
Audouin's Gull	1	Co				1	<i>Larus audouinii</i>
Common Gull	1	OM				1	<i>Larus canus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	3	OM	Co			4	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	2	OS	Co			3	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Gull-billed Tern	2	OS				3	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>
Sandwich Tern	1	Co				3	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Crowned Sandgrouse	1	B				1	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	2	B				1	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	10	T				3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Wood Pigeon	8	T				2	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	8	T				3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Turtle Dove	5	SV	OM	Os		3	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Laughing Dove	1	OM				1	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Common Cuckoo	1	HA				1	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Little Owl	1	OM				1	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Red-necked Nightjar	-	1h	OS			1	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>
Common Swift	1	CS				2	<i>Apus apus</i>
Pallid Swift	7	T				3	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
Alpine Swift	2	HA	OS			1	<i>Apus melba</i>
Little Swift	5	HA	OM	OS	SV	3	<i>Apus affinis</i>
European Bee-eater	6	HA	B	SV		3	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	2	Oz				2	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>
European Roller	1	HA				1	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	3	B	SV			1	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Levaillant's Green Woodpecker	1	1h	HA			1	<i>Picus vaillantii</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	3	HA				1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Desert Lark	1	Oz				1	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
Hoopoe Lark	1	B				1	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
Thick-billed Lark	1	B				1	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>
Calandra Lark	1	M				1	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	2	B				3	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Lesser Short-toed Lark	1	B				1	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>
Crested Lark	2	Oz	M	Co		3	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Thekla Lark	4	HA	B			3	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
Horned Lark	1	HA				3	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
Temminck's Horned Lark	2	B				3	<i>Eremophila bilofa</i>

Plain Martin	1		OM			2	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
Sand Martin	4		HA	Oz	OM	2	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Crag Martin	3		HA			3	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Barn Swallow	9		T			3	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	8		T			3	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
House Martin	6		T			2	<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Tawny Pipit	2		SV	Co		1	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
Tree Pipit	1		M			1	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Yellow Wagtail	4	1h	B	OM	Co	3	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
Grey Wagtail	3		HA			1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	1		SV			1	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Garden Bulbul	9		T			3	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
Winter Wren	3		HA			1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
European Robin	3		M	HA		1	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Rufous Nightingale	1	4h	HA			1	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
Black Redstart	1		HA			2	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>
Common Redstart	4		HA	SV		1	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Moussier's Redstart	6		HA	OM	Co	1	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>
Common Stonechat	2		HA	OM		1	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
Northern Wheatear	7		T			1	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Seeborn's Wheatear	1		HA			1	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi</i>
Black-eared Wheatear	2		HA	OM	Co	1	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>
Desert Wheatear	3		B			2	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
Red-rumped Wheatear	2		B			2	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>
White-crowned Black Wheatear	3		B			1	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
Black Wheatear	3		HA			1	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	2		HA			1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Common Blackbird	9	1h	T			2	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Mistle Thrush	2		HA			1	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Cetti's Warbler	1	1h	HA	OM		1	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Zitting Cisticola	3		OM	OS		2	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Sedge Warbler	1		OM			1	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Reed Warbler	1		OM			1	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Great Reed Warbler	1h		OM			1	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>
Olivaceous Warbler	3	1h	HA	SV		1	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>
Melodious Warbler	2		B	SV		1	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>
Spectacled Warbler	2		B	Co		1	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>
Subalpine Warbler	7		T			2	<i>Sylvia cantilans</i>
Sardinian Warbler	7		T			2	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Orphean Warbler	2		M	SV		1	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>
Common Whitethroat	1		SV			1	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Blackcap	3		HA	SV		1	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Western Bonelli's Warbler	5		HA	SV		1	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
Chiffchaff	2		HA			1	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Willow Warbler	6		HA	OM		2	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Great Tit	4		HA	M		2	<i>Parus major</i>
Blue Tit	3		HA			2	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
Black-crowned Tchagra	1	1h	SV	OM		1	<i>Tchagra senegala</i>
Southern Grey Shrike	6		M	SV	OM	2	<i>Lanius meridionales</i>
Woodchat Shrike	8		T			2	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Common Magpie	5		M	SV	OM	2	<i>Pica pica</i>
Red-billed Chough	2		HA			4	<i>Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax</i>
Yellow-billed Chough	2		HA			4	<i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i>
Common Raven	3		HA	Co		2	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Spotless Starling	5		M	OM	OS	3	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
House Sparrow	10		T			3	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Rock Sparrow	1		HA			3	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Common Chaffinch	7		T			3	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Serin	8		T			3	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
European Greenfinch	7		T			2	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Goldfinch	7		T			3	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Common Linnet	3		OM	OS		1	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Common Crossbill	1		HA			1	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>

