

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO MOROCCO
High Atlas & Sahara

04 – 13 April 2017



Leader: David Walsh

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A Personal Diary

The April 2017 Ornitholidays tour to Morocco produced a full house of target birds in a range of impressive settings: we really did miss nothing! Starting in the Atlas Mountains, we found Seebohm's Wheatear and African Crimson-winged Finch at Oukaïmeden having already seen Moussier's Redstart on the way up. The following day we found Levaillant's Green Woodpecker before heading over the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass and down to the desert near Amerzgane where we quickly located a male Maghreb Wheatear. As usual, Mansour Lake was worthy of two morning visits, with Collared Pratincole and Red-throated Pipit amongst numerous highlights. Cream-coloured Coursers and Greater Hoopoe Larks were unusually common in the desert close to Boumalne this year. The Todra Gorge gave us awe-inspiring scenery and close views of both Barbary Partridge and Tristram's Warbler. As we drove east, a roadside wadi not only produced the hoped-for Saharan Scrub Warbler but also a singing male Thick-billed Lark and a pair of Fulvous Babblers. Our day in 4x4 vehicles was simply incredible. We started east of the picturesque Erg Chebbi sand dunes where 350 Spotted and 150 Crowned Sandgrouse arrived in small groups to drink at a tiny pool; nearby we found a pair of Desert Sparrows in an isolated settlement then a co-operative African Desert Warbler. A proud local nomad showed us 'his' pair of Egyptian Nightjars before we adjourned for lunch. In the afternoon we completed the set with a Pharaoh Eagle Owl on its chosen cliff, then we returned to our auberge where several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were in residence. The following morning we found a newly arrived Rufous Bush Robin as we started our journey back towards Marrakech, where on our last afternoon the grand finale was provided by a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos!

By concentrating on the mountains and desert, and not making the long trek to the coast, our itinerary once again allowed us to spend more time birding and less time driving, and we enjoyed looking for migrants in a number of locations. We recorded a record number of interesting butterflies during the trip, including Moroccan Hairstreak, Spanish Festoon and Desert Orange Tip. As I write every year, the scenery on this tour is simply magnificent and, as in 2016, it was seen at its very best in the consistently sunny weather. We also had lots of chances to see local people going about their daily lives, both in rural villages and in the towns as we drove along. The hotel dinners were a mix of buffets and tasty tagines, whilst our daily sit-down lunches included a wide selection of dishes and provided the chance for our excellent local driver to rest. This was my 19th visit to Morocco; to repeat what I wrote last year, it is only a three hour flight from the UK but feels a world away!

Tuesday 4th April

With strong tail winds, the late afternoon flights from Gatwick and Manchester both arrived early, but the lengthy immigration queues at Marrakech meant that it was 10pm before we met up with Oussama, our driver for the tour. The journey to our hotel took just 15 minutes, and after a speedy check-in we headed to our rooms where we were brought a light supper. We retired eagerly anticipating our first day's birding.

Wednesday 5th April

The sound of Common Bulbuls greeted us as we strolled down for our 7am breakfast, freshly made omelettes a popular choice. We departed in our spacious 18-seater bus at 7.50am, impressed by the automatic door and the USB chargers! Once we had re-routed around a road block, we proceeded steadily along the busy road which headed south towards the Atlas Mountains, bathed in sunshine on a beautiful morning. We noted the plentiful olive groves before, after around 40 minutes, entering the Ourika Valley with its pot shops and camels! Soon we turned right onto the Oukaïmeden mountain road, drifting through orchards and villages before entering the first area of pines and continuing upwards through a number of hairpins. I was keeping a look out, but there was nothing to detain us until, almost at the tree line, we spotted a soaring raptor and disembarked. A group of pale phase Booted Eagles was passing over on migration, a wonderful sight against the blue sky. Even better was to follow, as a male Moussier's Redstart was located singing atop one of the pines; our first target species seen splendidly through the telescope, setting the tone for the whole tour.

We passed through Oukaïmeden at 10am and made a brief pit stop before making the five minute drive to the top car park by a ski lift. There was very little snow, but the intrepid locals were making the most of what remained! We wandered up the track and had super views of Common Rock Sparrows on the wires, one even showing off its yellow throat patch. Black Redstarts and Mistle Thrushes were noted before we found what turned out to be our only Atlas Horned Lark; fortunately, it showed superbly at point blank range before flying off. Several Seebohm's Wheatears were seen, the males very territorial having recently returned from their wintering grounds. Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady were our first butterflies, the second something of a surprise for me as it was a 'write-in'; we would see a number most days during this trip. We potted a little further, photographing the mainly deserted houses, before returning to the bus at around noon.

We enjoyed a super chicken tagine, preceded for some by Moroccan salad, before adjourning to a café for coffee and to make the most of their up market facilities. Our first North African Chaffinch was well-watched before, at 1.25pm, we drove down the road, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs seen in large numbers both in flight and on the ground. We spent an hour or so at three sites alongside the fast-flowing stream which headed down the valley. At the first, we found Grey Wagtail and Blue Rock Thrush as well as a resplendent male Pied Flycatcher! A little further up we enjoyed close looks at a Moroccan Hairstreak, with Greenish Black-tip and Red Underwing Skipper also noted by some. Just below the dam, we finally saw what we were looking for, a White-throated Dipper of the endemic race watched feeding from the bus! A Green Sandpiper was something of a surprise.

At 2.35pm we arrived back at the top car park, more in hope than expectation, and decided we should 'give it till 3pm'. At 2.55pm, two birds flew in and landed on a fence: African Crimson-winged Finches! They were incredibly confiding and allowed us to obtain amazing views. I was elated, as this was a species I really didn't want us to miss. Buoyant, we headed down, pausing briefly at our favourite café before stopping in the first section of pines, where a Firecrest was singing its heart out. At a photo stop a little further on we were treated to super views of an exceptionally bright male Rock Bunting. A male Common Crossbill flew off all too quickly from my chosen layby, the inquisitive Coal Tits some compensation, before we spent our remaining birding time in search of Levaillant's Green Woodpecker. Oussama took us to a new site up a side road; it looked promising, but today it was birdless so we returned to a spot where, exactly as in 2016, a woodpecker tormented us by drumming and calling but staying hidden.

At 5.20pm we declared. It took exactly an hour to drive back to our hotel, and we had plenty of time to freshen up before meeting in the bar where we savoured every drop of the expensive Casablanca beers. The buffet dinner in the busy restaurant included a variety of meat, plus turnips which looked very much like potatoes and an excellent selection of salads. We headed to bed delighted at an action-packed and bird-filled day in the mountains.

Thursday 6th April

We had breakfast at 6.45am this morning, thinking we might beat the rush, but everyone else had the same idea! Some of us tried a dish looking rather like porridge; we were all pleased to find a large bowl of fruit salad. Spotless Starlings and Little Swifts were seen from the car park before, having loaded our bags, we headed off just a little after our intended time of 7.30am. I decided that, although it wasn't quite en route, we should head back to the Ourika Valley, and it proved a good decision. We concentrated on one spot where a footpath took us away from the road and, our arrival coinciding with the first rays of sunshine on the hillside, the birds were active and, mostly, co-operative. A male Cirl Bunting sat up nicely, and both Sardinian and Western Bonelli's Warblers were enjoyed at close range. I had found Tristram's Warbler here in 2016 and was chuffed to hear one this morning, but it decided not to play so most of us only had flight views. In contrast, Moussier's Redstart, Rock Bunting and Chaffinch were all very obliging, and we admired the Red-rumped Swallows gliding overhead. We noted how different the Speckled Wood butterflies were from the ones in the UK before getting back on the bus. We made the ten minute journey back down the valley before turning right in Ourika, across a bridge offering panoramic views of the mountains to our right, and then drove onwards through the lowland plains. Corn Buntings, Desert Great Grey Shrikes and Crested Larks were seen regularly on the wires. We made a planned stop hoping to get better views of them, but a scope view of a lark was the best we could manage, although Northern Wheatear, White Stork, Western Dappled White and a flock of sheep provided some entertainment! We scoped a House Bunting on the café roof before making a pit stop at a garage which, as a bonus, gave us the opportunity to buy ice creams or oranges.

I hadn't intended to stop along the main road, but a male Black-eared Wheatear on a wire was far too tempting to resist! We noted a female too, as well as a Common Cuckoo. After around 40 minutes we paused in a section of pines where, bang on cue, a Levaillant's Green Woodpecker was spotted feeding in the sunshine! We had fabulous views for ages; I even had time to fetch the scope from the bus. A group of passing Dutch birders were very grateful! African Blue Tit and Brimstone were noted before, with the traffic quite heavy, we decided to head on, soon finding our first Common Ravens. An area of bushes and scrub on a hillside is a traditional spot for Tristram's Warbler; I tried to find one from the road, but without success, so there was no option but to negotiate the slope. We didn't have to go far before finding three birds, one of which, a male, sat out in full view for us. A little earlier I had flushed a pair of Barbary Partridges, but they didn't show for the group, who in turn had been watching a displaying pair of Bonelli's Eagles in the distance. Scarce Swallowtail, a stunning Spanish Festoon and a confiding Chapman's Green Hairstreak were further additions to the butterfly list.

It took just under an hour to reach our lunch spot where the food is always excellent and today was no exception, mixed grill, brochettes and vegetarian tagine amongst the fare on offer. We were also served complimentary oranges and mint tea. Replete, we potted up the track on the other side of the road; the Black-eyed Blue butterflies were especially numerous today.

We negotiated the hairpins on the much-improved highway and paused to take photos of the mountains before heading over the 2,260m Tizi-n-Tichka Pass. Most took the opportunity to have a snooze as we drove on, before a chance roadside stop allowed Oussama to take a call and the rest of us to watch our first Laughing Dove! At 4.40pm we turned right for an hour's desert birding. As always, it looked unpromising at first, but we persevered and found Desert and White-crowned Wheatears, then a pair of Desert Larks, before hitting the jackpot with a male Maghreb Wheatear! It was distant, but the scope views were very respectable, and it was great to see what has often been the hardest of the target species to find on this tour.

A little before 6pm we made haste for the bustling town of Ouarzazate. Our hotel check-in was quick and efficient and we did the bird list on the bar terrace, tonight drinking sensibly priced Flag beers; as the light faded, a Black-crowned Night Heron flew over: perfect timing! We then enjoyed a fine buffet supper including some succulent lamb, reflecting on another cracking day with a longish journey complemented by some super birds including a couple of important 'must-see' species!

Friday 7th April

Our 6.45am breakfast included a fine Berber omelette and our keen-to-please waiter produced oranges as requested! Those watching the sunrise on the terrace were rewarded with a bonus Eurasian Hoopoe.

At 7.35am we set off, making the ten minute journey to the west end of Mansour Lake. The water levels were very low this year, so we had to walk a little further than in previous years, but our stroll was highly productive. Having seen Pallid Swifts over the town, we noted a passage of Common Swifts near the lake. We then scoped a Desert Little Owl, which was at its traditional perch on a building to our right, before concentrating on the birds in and around the tamarisks. We had two specific targets here, Maghreb Crested Lark and the Saharan race of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, and both were relatively numerous. We then decided to walk briskly to the furthest point and drift back with the sun behind us, but there were plenty of birds to delay us en route, including a plethora of raptors, with Black Kite, Montagu's Harrier and Western Marsh Harrier each putting in an appearance. A Squacco Heron also flew past, surprisingly our only one of the tour. Shorebirds were in short supply, but we enjoyed comparing Green and Wood Sandpipers and noted a distant flock of 50 Little Stints. The main interest was provided by the passerines feasting on the insects by a channel. Careful scrutiny of each and every bird produced Sedge Warbler, Common Chiffchaff and Whinchat, as well as Meadow, Tree and Red-throated Pipits; the latter was a pristine summer plumage male, the first I had ever seen in Morocco. A Moroccan White Wagtail was well-watched before we explored the drier area where we scoped several Spanish Yellow Wagtails and were pleased to find another Black-eared Wheatear and our first Woodchat Shrike. We were about to begin our return walk when a wader was seen heading towards us; it proved to be a Collared Pratincole and, although the views were brief, we were able to see all its diagnostic features. Via a perched Vagrant Emperor dragonfly we wandered back, our departure delayed by a splendid selection of birds in the trees which included a fine Western Orphean Warbler.

We popped back to the hotel before doing a spot of shopping in town, making sure we had adequate provisions as our next base was a 'dry' establishment. Thereafter we headed east for around an hour and a half, eventually

arriving at a restaurant in El Kelaa M'Gouna with a terrace overlooking a verdant river valley. We relaxed over another fine lunch, and the butterfly connoisseurs were pleased to note a Desert Orange Tip in the small garden.

Continuing along the aptly-named Valley of Roses (although the roses aren't out in April), it took just half an hour to reach our wonderful base in Boumalne. The rooms weren't quite ready, but we were treated to mint tea, and a Trumpeter Finch entertained those keen to carry on birding. There was time to swim, explore or simply relax before we met up again at 4.30pm. Along the main road it was clear that the pace of development was continuing apace, more and more buildings being constructed on what had been prime habitat. We drove for around 20 minutes before heading off piste onto a track; the wind had got up and, with dust blowing, conditions were hardly optimal for our first chance to see the desert species close to the fabled Tagdilt Track, but we persevered. The first bird we saw was a Temminck's Lark, and we quickly realised that it was on a nest! Fortunately, it didn't seem unduly disturbed by our presence. A little further on we stopped and scanned and I spotted a Greater Hoopoe Lark, so we disembarked. The next few minutes were extraordinary. A male Montagu's Harrier flew slowly past, allowing everyone the chance to watch it in the scope, and on its journey it flushed first a small group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and then the first of several Cream-coloured Coursers. We found more coursers on the right hand side, and I managed to round them up by pretending to be a shepherd so the group got wonderful views, as did the same group of Dutch birders we had bumped into the previous day. We explored the track to our right, seeing a number of Fat Sand Rats, before declaring and heading back to base.

We met up at 8.00pm in the restaurant which was busier than usual. Moroccan Soup was followed by chicken and vegetable tagines, and we enjoyed making inroads into the liquid refreshment we had purchased. A French party hadn't realised that they wouldn't be able to buy any wine here so were very grateful when I donated our spare bottle of *vin rouge* to them! Local drummers entertained those keen to listen before the last of us retired. We had had another highly successful day, with a great variety of species at the lake and some highly sought-after birds in the desert.

Saturday 8th April

We met up in the courtyard at 7am on a chilly but cloudless morning, and moments after leaving we were watching the sun rise over the desert in front of us. We headed back to the same area we had explored the previous evening; conditions were much improved, and we tried to balance driving in the vehicle to cover more ground with having the chance to get out and enjoy the fresh air. We had fabulous views of Cream-coloured Coursers and Greater Hoopoe Larks, both at point blank range, before heading onto a new track a little to the south. Here we finally found Red-rumped Wheatear, with two pairs allowing close observation; this species is locally common but it can sometimes take a while to find, so I was relieved! The second of two groups of Greater Short-toed Larks was noted before it really was time for breakfast, which we enjoyed on the terrace which gave awesome views along the Dadès valley.

We set off again at 10.15am, seeing Thekla Larks close to our hotel, then stopped for fuel and replenished our wine supplies in Tinghir. We turned left onto the Todra road and made the first of several photo stops before pausing to order lunch. I knew where we had eaten the previous year, so went there, but this confused the driver. We eventually discovered that this was because the staff from last year's spot had moved to a different place and taken the name of the restaurant with them! So we moved too, and things having calmed down we drove up through the magnificent gorge to a place where it opens out. We slowly ascended some steps to a spot which afforded even better views, and our reward was a confiding pair of Tristram's Warblers! I knew that this species was said to occur in this area but had never previously found it. Desert Lark, Black Wheatear and Eurasian Crag Martins were also noted, and we marvelled at the way a herd of goats was rounded up despite the steep-sided nature of the valley.

There was time to potter in the gorge, mainly for the scenery but with 'proper' Rock Doves and a Blue Rock Thrush as bonus birds, before we returned for our 1.30pm lunch. Portions were very large here so we decided that a stroll was in order once we had finished. A helpful local suggested that we walked on a path through the fields in the valley, and we were very pleased to have heeded his advice. The highlight was a pair of Barbary Partridges seen right out in the open for ages! We also found Melodious, Cetti's and Western Olivaceous Warblers, Common Nightingale, Common Redstart and several European Serins. Three Cattle Egrets flew in to investigate what we were doing and gave unusually close views, another memorable moment. Small Copper

and Wall Brown were added to our butterfly list before we headed down the valley, scoping European Bee-eaters and scanning through parties of hirundines.

Once back at the main road we drove west for half an hour before briefly exploring an 'oasis' area of trees where in the past I had found a number of migrants. Today there was, as it turned out, little on offer so we made haste for the hotel, arriving back at 5.40pm with a couple of hours to spare before we reconvened to do the list and enjoy another tagine dinner. The Todra Gorge is always worth a visit for its incredible scenery, and today it had proved to be an excellent birding spot too.

Sunday 9th April

Our hotel helpfully provided us with breakfast at 6.30am, allowing us to set off nice and early on our journey east. After around 90 minutes we stopped for coffee at a place where, much to our delight, maps, postcards and fridge magnets were on offer! Purchases duly completed, we headed beyond Tinejdad, photographed a male Desert Wheatear and passed through the roadworks of Goulmima before, eventually, stopping at an area of roadside bushes which looked much like any other but was a 'stake-out' for several desert species. It took just eight minutes, definitely a record, to find our main quarry, a Saharan Scrub Warbler showing well if briefly both on the ground, tail cocked to order, and in flight! We had seen it so quickly that we had over an hour to birdwatch and see what else we could discover, and our rewards were many and varied, with our first Bar-tailed Lark trumped by a pair of Fulvous Babblers and, even better, a stonking male Thick-billed Lark which we whistled in to a few metres! This species had been extremely difficult to locate for most groups this spring so we were very fortunate indeed.

We set off at noon and passed a Houbara Bustard breeding enclosure before stopping in Errachidia for a magnificent brochettes lunch which we had ordered in advance. An hour later we stopped at a viewpoint where it is possible to look down on the Ziz valley, full to the brim with palm trees. It really was quite a place, and we wondered what birds might be discovered there with time and a few mist nets! We were pleased to pop into the visitor centre, selling more souvenirs than ever before, and I felt rather smug when both Common Raven and Atlas Long-legged Buzzards flew over exactly as specified in the brochure!

In previous years the journey from Erfoud, through the busy town of Rissani, round a number of bends and finally on a dirt track across the desert, had taken around an hour and a half. So the advent of a metalled road straight to Derkaoua and on to Merzouga, reducing our journey time to 25 minutes, was most welcome! We were soon settling into our rooms and enjoying the pool before meeting up at 5pm for a preliminary exploration of the garden and surrounding area. Over 20 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters were in residence, and it was very difficult to tear ourselves away from them, but eventually we did so, finding both male and female Western Subalpine Warblers, a Woodchat Shrike and a male Common Redstart. Our couscous dinner in the courtyard under the stars and a full moon was extremely pleasant, and we retired mellow and excited about our 'desert day' tomorrow.

Monday 10th April

We met for breakfast at 6.15am and, 45 minutes later, boarded two 4x4 vehicles for our 'desert day'. Hamid, the brother of Brahim who had made the arrangements for the day, was our local guide, and I was delighted that once again Utman was to be one of the drivers as he also knew all the sites.

As last year, we needed to keep to time during the first part of the day, as we had an 8am rendezvous on the east side of Erg Chebbi with sandgrouse and they wouldn't wait if we were late! In fact it was not long after 7.30am when we saw the first group of Spotted Sandgrouse in the desert, and we positioned the vehicles to watch them in perfect light. Then we placed the jeeps an appropriate distance from a tiny puddle of water and waited. At 8.01am the first sandgrouse came in to drink! At first they were all Spotted, but after a while we heard a different call, and a group of Crowned Sandgrouse came in to join them. For well over half an hour we were transfixed by the birds as they flew in, calling all the while, and landed a short distance from the water, before walking in, taking a few sips, and heading off once again. In total we estimated around 350 Spotted and 150 Crowned. It was little surprise that jointly they were voted *Bird of the Trip*. To see and hear both species so well, and in such numbers, was an amazing privilege. And all this was against the backdrop of the Erg Chebbi dunes which looked magical in the morning light.

The action eventually stopped, so we headed off, seeing our first Brown-necked Ravens, several Bar-tailed Larks and a point blank Cream-coloured Courser. These sightings were trumped by two Greater Hoopoe Larks which we watched singing and displaying: yet another experience in the 'awesome' category!

Soon we made for our second target species. We watched a pair of Desert Sparrows feeding and drinking at a nomadic settlement, the birds giving prolonged views, in contrast to last year. We were given mint tea, and some were able to buy small toys from a young girl who brought them out specially for us.

Suitably refreshed, we drove a little further north, noting a Lanner Falcon in flight. One species which can prove tricky to find is African Desert Warbler. The key is to find suitable habitat, grassy tussocks on the dunes, then spread out and search. Today it wasn't long before I heard one so we gathered together, and we were thrilled to find that the singing male bird was remarkably co-operative! The colour of this species is very similar to that of the sand!

After a while we continued north and, with the aid of various phone calls, drove towards a lone figure in the desert. As in previous years, a nomad had got up before dawn to locate Egyptian Nightjars at their daytime roost, and today he had had to walk four kilometres! On arrival I was a little concerned by the fact that two photographers had got there before us, and seemed extremely close to the birds, but I need not have worried. We watched two birds for ages, one in sun, one in shade, and as always it seemed rather surreal.

We enjoyed a relaxing lunch at an auberge close to the dunes, giving us yet more photographic opportunities, and were in no rush to head out again, but at around 2.15pm we did so. We headed north, past our auberge, and having driven a short distance along the new main road, we turned left into the desert. We drove to the far side of a line of cliffs, identified a particular hole, and waited. At first it seemed as if there was no-one at home but this proved not to be the case as very soon a wonderful Pharaoh Eagle Owl came to the front door! We had fabulous scope views for a while before it headed back inside.

Six out of six targets achieved, we drove into Rissani, seeing a Barbary Falcon en route. Brahim was there to meet us at his new shop and he gave us a very welcome cup of mint tea; it was good to catch up with him once again. Then we headed back to base, arriving there a little after 4.30pm which gave some an opportunity to enjoy the bee-eaters and others the chance of an extended swim.

At 7.30pm we met up to celebrate our unforgettable day's birding, enjoying a beef and apple tagine washed down with a couple of bottles of red wine courtesy of Ornitholidays. For me the Morocco spring desert day is perhaps the most exciting it is possible to have in the whole of the Western Palearctic; today had been my fifth in five years and, hard though it is to believe, it really had been even better than the previous four.

Tuesday 11th April

The new road to Erfoud meant that there was plenty of time for some final birding in and around the garden without adding 'time pressure' at the end of the day. Bob was thrilled to see five different species in one small bush including our first Common Whitethroat, and Lyn found a Eurasian Wryneck which showed well to most of us after we had enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. White-crowned Wheatear was one of many species affording Simon yet more photographic opportunities, and Andy continued to get to grips with the various warblers and Sue searched for a close European Bee-eater in amongst the Blue-cheeked.

We set off at 9.40am, more or less on time, and drove north to Erfoud then west through Jorf, new territory for us. I had an hour or so earmarked for birding somewhere in this area, and it seemed sensible to use it at a wadi where I hoped we might see Spectacled Warbler, an obvious gap on our list. The area was splendidly birdy. Almost at once we found a Rufous Bush Robin, recently arrived from its wintering grounds, and it gave us several prolonged views. A better look at Desert Great Grey Shrike had been requested, and one of them must have heard us as it flew onto a nearby signpost. After a lull, and with things hotting up, I was nearly back at the bus when one last scan duly produced a fine male Spectacled Warbler! We then took photos of a well, with a splendid variety of animals surrounding it, before getting back on board. Our departure was delayed slightly by a pair of Trumpeter Finches flying in to drink right next to us; we had brilliant views to round off another super morning.

We had lunch at a busy restaurant in Tinejdad before most people dozed as we headed west through Tinghir and onwards towards Boumalne; the only stop en route was for a fine juvenile Bonelli's Eagle. At 4pm we stopped for tea before heading to a spot with a panoramic view over the north side of Mansour Lake. Great Crested and Little Grebes, Little Egret and Purple Heron were four new species for the trip list, all predicted beforehand, but otherwise it was pretty quiet birdwise.

Just before 6.30pm we arrived in Ouarzazate, glad to have completed the longest journey of the tour, and we were pleased to find that a fine buffet was available in the restaurant.

Wednesday 12th April

We had breakfast at 7am and, an hour later, headed back to the west end of Mansour Lake. It's always worth making a second visit here, and this year was no exception. We walked as close to the main body of water as was possible, and through the scopes we were able to see a flock of around 40 Greater Flamingos as well as a small number of Eurasian Spoonbills roosting on an island. A flighty group of Marbled Ducks was equally distant, whilst an adult Yellow-legged Gull was something of a surprise. We added two raptors to our list, an Osprey drifting around and a Peregrine flying repeatedly over the water, presumably hoping to catch out one of the ducks! In the channel next to where we were standing we had super views of a party of Black-winged Stilts and were able to compare Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers. In addition to the eight 'trip ticks' we had a number of other interesting sightings, including two Cream-coloured Coursers and four Black-bellied Sandgrouse, all seen in flight; I had never previously seen either species at this site. A smart Blue-headed Wagtail was seen well by some, two Short-toed Eagles soared against the mountains and to round things off nicely we saw yet more Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

After a brief visit to our hotel we headed west to Amerzgane before enjoying the drive up to the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass; with the sun behind us the views were awesome. We returned to the same restaurant where we had been on the outward journey, and the food didn't disappoint! We were keen to stick to our schedule so, after a brief stroll up the valley opposite, we continued on our journey, with three important birding stops still ahead of us.

We tried briefly but without success for Tristram's Warbler at the usual place, but were rewarded with super views of the breeding race of Western Subalpine Warbler; Common Blue and Comma took the butterfly count to 20 species, a record for this tour. As planned, we had an hour to look for birds in and around the pines a little further on. The traffic was irritating as always but the birding, yet again, exceeded expectations. We found a number of Hawfinches, a couple of which perched up for us well away from the road, before I heard what I was listening out for, and we had close looks at three Moroccan Short-toed Treecreepers, one of which was in song. Sue had stayed with the vehicle and was pleased to have found another Levillant's Green Woodpecker.

Oussama had promised us a viewpoint from which we could take panoramic photos, and conveniently it was actually right by a café, so coffees, ice-creams and more postcards were duly purchased! We weren't intending to stop between here and Marrakech, but a bird on the wire had other ideas; having quickly disembarked, we were soon enjoying a fine European Roller!

We had just one more piece of unfinished business, so headed straight to a particular spot where we had seen Maghreb Common Magpies on the last two tours. It didn't take long before we found one, and through the scope we were able to see the blue spot behind the eye; the long tail was very obvious in flight. We were pleased to get better views of Crested Lark and were on the verge of declaring when two long-tailed birds flew straight towards us: Great Spotted Cuckoos! This was a Moroccan first for me, and what an incredible finale not just to a lovely day but to an amazingly bird-filled tour!

It took just 20 minutes to reach our hotel, where the reception staff surpassed themselves and produced our keys within seven minutes despite the arrival of another large party. We said an official goodbye to Oussama before heading to our rooms. We were given access to a special, quiet, room next to the bar to do our final bird list, then we headed to the restaurant which was very busy so we were pleased to have organised a table in the garden. The wine we had ordered took a while to arrive but not long to consume; we were pleased to have noted that, as in 2016, two half bottles cost less than a full one!

Thursday 13th April

We were able to have a leisurely breakfast at 7am before making the short journey to the airport at around 8.15am. The late morning flights to Gatwick and Manchester were bang on time; we would have expected nothing else given the consistent success and good fortune we had experienced on this tour!

Birds of the Trip (voted by the group)

- 1st Crowned/Spotted Sandgrouse
- 2nd Pharaoh Eagle Owl
- 3rd African Crimson-winged Finch
- 4th Thick-billed Lark
- 5th Greater Hoopoe Lark
- 6th Levaillant's Green Woodpecker
- 7th Desert Sparrow
- 8th White-crowned Wheatear
- 9th Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
- 10th African Desert Warbler

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to James Lidster for his help and encouragement before and during the tour; it was great to have bird news which was up to date. Thanks as always to our ground agents. Oussama, our driver, drove carefully and was always punctual and helpful. Thanks to all of you for being such expert bird finders as well as good company; I look forward to travelling with you again. Finally, thanks to Simon Smith for allowing us to use your images in this report.

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June 2017



Itinerary and Weather

- 4th April Afternoon flights from London Gatwick and Manchester; transfer to our hotel in south Marrakech for a two night stay (elevation 450m).
- 5th April Birding in and around Oukaïmeden (ski resort at elevation 2,700m).
Sunny, 16-30°C.
- 6th April Birding in the Ourika valley (elevation 1,100m) then lowlands, woodland and mountains en route to lunch just north of the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass (elevation 2,260m). Afternoon drive up and over the pass then down to the Amerzgane desert road and onwards to Ouarzazate for a one night stay (elevation 1,150m).
Sunny, 15-28°C.
- 7th April Morning birding at Mansour Lake. Lunch at El Kelaa M'Gouna en route to Boumalne du Dadès for a two night stay (elevation 1,600m). Short break at hotel before late afternoon birding along the Ikniouen Road.
Sunny am, mainly sunny but increasingly windy pm, 15-26°C.
- 8th April Pre-breakfast birding along the Ikniouen Road. Lunch and early afternoon birding in the Todra Gorge. Afternoon birding in an 'oasis grove' east of Imiter.
Sunny, 6-25°C.
- 9th April Drive via Tinejdad and the desert east of Goulmima to Errachidia for lunch. Afternoon drive down the Ziz Valley to Erfoud then onwards to Derkaoua for a two-night stay (elevation 750m).
Sunny, 10-28°C.
- 10th April Desert drive in 4x4 vehicles between Merzouga and Rissani, with a restaurant lunch near the Erg Chebbi sand dunes.
Sunny, 15-29°C.
- 11th April Drive from Derkaoua to Ouarzazate for a one night stay. Morning birding en route west of Jorf. Lunch in Tinejdad. Afternoon birding on the north side of Mansour Lake.
Sunny am, cloudy pm, 17-30°C.
- 12th April Morning birding at Mansour Lake. Drive to Marrakech via the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass, with stops in open and woodland areas, for a one-night stay.
Sunny, humid, 17-28°C.
- 13th April Transfer to Marrakech airport for late morning flights to London Gatwick and Manchester.



CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded

1 2h means seen on 1 day
and heard on 2 other days

Locations

M = Marrakech and lowlands
A = Atlas Mountains/Ourika Valley
O = Ouarzazate area inc Mansour Lake
B = Boumalne area inc Tagdilt/Todra
D = Eastern Deserts

Abundance scale

Maximum seen (on one day)

1 = 1-4
2 = 5-9
3 = 10-99
4 = 100-999
5 = 1,000+

| Species | No of days recorded | Locations | | Abundance Scale | Scientific Name |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Ruddy Shelduck | 3 | | O | D 4 | <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i> |
| Mallard | 3 | | O | 3 | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> |
| Marbled Duck | 1 | | O | 3 | <i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i> |
| Barbary Partridge | 1 1h | A | B | 1 | <i>Alectoris barbara</i> |
| Little Grebe | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i> |
| Great Crested Grebe | 1 | | O | 3 | <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> |
| Great Cormorant | 3 | | O | 2 | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis</i> |
| Black-crowned Night Heron | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i> |
| Cattle Egret* | 6 | M A | O B | 3 | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> |
| Squacco Heron | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Ardeola ralloides</i> |
| Little Egret | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> |
| Grey Heron | 3 | | O B | 3 | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> |
| Purple Heron | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Ardea purpurea</i> |
| White Stork | 4 | M | O B | 3 | <i>Ciconia ciconia</i> |
| Eurasian Spoonbill | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Platalea leucorodia</i> |
| Greater Flamingo | 1 | | O | 3 | <i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i> |
| Osprey* | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> |
| Short-toed Eagle* | 2 | | O | D 1 | <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> |
| Booted Eagle* | 2 | M A | | 2 | <i>Aquila pennata</i> |
| Bonelli's Eagle | 3 | A | B | 1 | <i>Aquila fasciata</i> |
| Black Kite | 3 | | O | D 1 | <i>Milvus migrans</i> |
| Western Marsh Harrier | 4 | | O B | 1 | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> |
| Montagu's Harrier | 2 | | O B | 1 | <i>Circus pygargus</i> |
| "Atlas" Long-legged Buzzard* | 4 | A | B D | 1 | <i>Buteo rufinus cirtensis</i> |
| Eurasian Sparrowhawk | 1 | M A | | 1 | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> |
| Common Kestrel | 8 | M A | O B D | 2 | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> |
| Peregrine Falcon | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> |
| Barbary Falcon* | 2 | | B D | 1 | <i>Falco pelegrinoides</i> |
| Lanner Falcon* | 3 | | B D | 1 | <i>Falco biarmicus erlangeri</i> |
| Eurasian Coot | 2 | | O | 3 | <i>Fulica atra</i> |
| Black-winged Stilt | 1 | | O | 3 | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> |
| Cream-coloured Courser | 4 | | O B D | 3 | <i>Cursorius cursor</i> |
| Collared Pratincole | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Glareola pratincola</i> |
| Little Ringed Plover | 3 | | O | 2 | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> |
| Kentish Plover | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> |
| Little Stint | 1 | | O | 3 | <i>Calidris minuta</i> |
| Wood Sandpiper | 2 | | O | 3 | <i>Tringa glareola</i> |
| Green Sandpiper | 3 | A | O | 1 | <i>Tringa ochropus</i> |
| Yellow-legged Gull | 1 | | O | 1 | <i>Larus michahellis</i> |
| Black-bellied Sandgrouse | 2 | | O B | 1 | <i>Pterocles orientalis</i> |
| Spotted Sandgrouse | 1 | | | D 4 | <i>Pterocles senegallus</i> |
| Crowned Sandgrouse | 1 | | | D 4 | <i>Pterocles coronatus</i> |
| Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) | 9 | M A | O B D | 4 | <i>Columba livia</i> |
| Common Wood Pigeon | 3 | A | | 3 | <i>Columba palumbus</i> |
| Eurasian Collared Dove | 9 | M A | O B D | 3 | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> |
| European Turtle Dove | 2 1h | M | O B | 1 | <i>Streptopelia turtur</i> |
| Laughing Dove* | 5 | | O B D | 1 | <i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i> |
| Common Cuckoo | 1 | A | | 1 | <i>Cuculus canorus</i> |
| Great Spotted Cuckoo | 1 | M | | 1 | <i>Clamator glandarius</i> |
| Pharaoh Eagle Owl* | 1 | | | D 1 | <i>Bubo ascalaphus</i> |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| "Maghreb" Tawny Owl* | - | 1h | | | B | | 1 | <i>Strix aluco mauritanica</i> | |
| "Desert" Little Owl* | 1 | | | | O | | 1 | <i>Athene noctua glaux/saharae</i> | |
| Egyptian Nightjar | 1 | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Caprimulgus aegyptius saharae</i> | |
| Common Swift | 5 | | | | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Apus apus</i> |
| Pallid Swift | 5 | M | | | O | B | | 3 | <i>Apus pallidus</i> |
| Little Swift | 4 | M | | | | | | 3 | <i>Apus affinis galilejensis</i> |
| Eurasian Hoopoe | 5 | | | | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Upupa epops</i> |
| European Bee-eater | 7 | M | | | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Merops apiaster</i> |
| Blue-cheeked Bee-eater | 5 | | | | O | | D | 3 | <i>Merops persicus chrysocercus</i> |
| European Roller | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Coracias garrulus</i> |
| Levaillant's Green Woodpecker* | 2 | 1h | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Picus vaillantii</i> |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Dendrocopos major mauritanus</i> |
| Eurasian Wryneck | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Jynx torquilla</i> |
| Crested Lark* | 2 | M | | | | | | 2 | <i>Galerida cristata riggenbachi</i> |
| "Maghreb" (Crested) Lark* | 3 | | | | O | | D | 3 | <i>Galerida (cristata) macrorhyncha</i> |
| Thekla Lark | 6 | M | | | O | B | D | 2 | <i>Galerida theklae</i> |
| Greater Short-toed Lark | 2 | | | | | B | D | 3 | <i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i> |
| Lesser Short-toed Lark* | 1 | | | | | | D | 3 | <i>Calandrella rufescens minor</i> |
| Desert Lark* | 3 | | | | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Ammomanes deserti payni</i> |
| Bar-tailed Lark | 3 | | | | | | D | 3 | <i>Ammomanes cinctura arenicolor</i> |
| Thick-billed Lark | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i> |
| "Atlas" Horned Lark (Shore Lark)* | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Eremophila alpestris atlas</i> |
| Temminck's Lark | 2 | | | | | B | | 2 | <i>Eremophila bilopha</i> |
| Greater Hoopoe Lark* | 3 | | | | | B | D | 2 | <i>Alaemon alaudipes</i> |
| Common Sand Martin* | 2 | | | | | B | D | 1 | <i>Riparia riparia</i> |
| Eurasian Crag Martin | 3 | | A | | | B | | 3 | <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i> |
| Barn Swallow | 9 | M | A | | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> |
| Red-rumped Swallow | 2 | M | A | | | | | 2 | <i>Cecropis daurica rufula</i> |
| Common House Martin | 1 | | | | | B | | 1 | <i>Delichon urbicum</i> |
| Meadow Pipit | 1 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> |
| Tree Pipit | 1 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Anthus trivialis</i> |
| Red-throated Pipit | 1 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Anthus cervinus</i> |
| "Moroccan" White Wagtail* | 2 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Motacilla alba subpersonata</i> |
| "Blue-headed" Yellow Wagtail* | 2 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Motacilla flava flava</i> |
| "Spanish" Yellow Wagtail* | 2 | | | | O | | | 3 | <i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i> |
| Grey Wagtail | 4 | | A | | | B | | 1 | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> |
| "Atlas" White-throated Dipper* | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Cinclus cinclus minor</i> |
| European Robin | - | 1h | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> |
| Common Nightingale | 3 | 4h | M | A | | B | D | 2 | <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i> |
| Rufous Bush Robin* | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i> |
| Common Redstart | 4 | | | | | B | D | 1 | <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> |
| Black Redstart | 1 | | A | | | | | 3 | <i>Phoenicurus ochruros gibraltariensis</i> |
| Moussier's Redstart | 2 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i> |
| Northern Wheatear | 7 | M | | | O | B | D | 2 | <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> |
| Seebohm's Wheatear* | 1 | | A | | | | | 2 | <i>Oenanthe seebohmi</i> |
| Black-eared Wheatear* | 2 | | A | | O | | | 1 | <i>Oenanthe hispanica hispanica</i> |
| Maghreb Wheatear* | 1 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Oenanthe halophila</i> |
| White-crowned Wheatear | 7 | | | | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Oenanthe leucopyga leucopyga</i> |
| Black Wheatear | 5 | | A | | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Oenanthe leucura riggenbacchi</i> |
| Desert Wheatear | 7 | | | | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Oenanthe deserti homochroa</i> |
| Red-rumped Wheatear | 1 | | | | | B | | 1 | <i>Oenanthe moesta</i> |
| Whinchat | 4 | | | | O | | D | 2 | <i>Saxicola rubetra</i> |
| Mistle Thrush | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Turdus viscivorus deichleri</i> |
| "Moroccan" Common Blackbird* | 9 | M | A | | | B | D | 3 | <i>Turdus merula mauritanicus</i> |
| Blue Rock Thrush | 3 | | A | | | B | D | 1 | <i>Monticola solitarius</i> |
| Garden Warbler | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Sylvia borin</i> |
| Blackcap* | 2 | | A | | | | D | 1 | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> |
| Western Orphean Warbler | 1 | | | | O | | | 1 | <i>Sylvia hortensis</i> |
| Sardinian Warbler | 2 | | A | | | | D | 2 | <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i> |
| Common Whitethroat | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Sylvia communis</i> |
| Spectacled Warbler | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Sylvia conspicillata</i> |
| Western Subalpine Warbler* | 6 | | | | O | B | D | 2 | <i>Sylvia inornata iberiae</i> |
| Western Subalpine Warbler* | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Sylvia inornata inornata</i> |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|
| Tristram's Warbler | 2 | | A | | B | | 1 | <i>Sylvia deserticola</i> | |
| African Desert Warbler* | 1 | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Sylvia deserti</i> | |
| Saharan Scrub Warbler* | 1 | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Scotocerca saharae</i> | |
| Sedge Warbler | 1 | | | | O | | 1 | <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> | |
| Cetti's Warbler | 1 | | | | | B | 1 | <i>Cettia cetti</i> | |
| Melodious Warbler | 2 | | | | | B | 1 | <i>Hippolais polyglotta</i> | |
| "Saharan" Eastern Olivaceous Warbler* | 4 | 1h | | | O | D | 2 | <i>Iduna pallida reiseri</i> | |
| Western Olivaceous Warbler* | 4 | | A | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Iduna opaca</i> | |
| Willow Warbler | 4 | | A | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> | |
| Western Bonelli's Warbler | 4 | | A | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i> | |
| Common Chiffchaff | 2 | | | | O | B | 2 | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | |
| Firecrest* | 1 | 2h | A | | | | 1 | <i>Regulus ignicapilla balearicus</i> | |
| Winter Wren* | - | 1h | A | | | | 1 | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | |
| Pied Flycatcher* | 3 | | A | | | D | 1 | <i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i> | |
| Great Tit | 1 | 1h | A | | | | 1 | <i>Parus major excelsus</i> | |
| "Atlas" Coal Tit* | 2 | 1h | A | | | | 1 | <i>Periparus ater atlas</i> | |
| African Blue Tit* | 3 | | A | | | B | 1 | <i>Cyanistes teneriffae ultramarinus</i> | |
| "Moroccan" Short-toed Treecreeper* | 1 | | A | | | | 1 | <i>Certhia brachyactyla mauritanica</i> | |
| "Desert" Great Grey Shrike* | 5 | | M | | | B | D | 1 | <i>Lanius excubitor elegans</i> |
| Woodchat Shrike | 6 | | A | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Lanius senator</i> | |
| Common Bulbul | 9 | | M | A | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i> |
| Fulvous Babbler | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Turdoides fulva maroccana</i> |
| "Maghreb" Common Magpie* | 3 | | M | | | | | 1 | <i>Pica pica mauritanica</i> |
| Red-billed Chough | 1 | | A | | | | | 3 | <i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax barbarus</i> |
| Alpine Chough | 1 | | A | | | | | 4 | <i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i> |
| "North African" Common Raven* | 3 | | A | | | | D | 2 | <i>Corvus corax tingitanus</i> |
| Brown-necked Raven | 2 | | | | | | D | 3 | <i>Corvus ruficollis</i> |
| Spotless Starling | 4 | | M | | | | | 3 | <i>Sturnus unicolor</i> |
| House Sparrow | 9 | | M | A | O | B | D | 4 | <i>Passer domesticus tingitanus</i> |
| Desert Sparrow | 1 | | | | | | D | 1 | <i>Passer simplex saharae</i> |
| Common Rock Sparrow* | 1 | | A | | | | | 2 | <i>Petronia petronia barbara</i> |
| "North African" Common Chaffinch* | 3 | | M | A | | | | 3 | <i>Fringilla coelebs africana</i> |
| Common Linnet* | 1 | | M | | | | | 1 | <i>Carduelis cannabina</i> |
| European Goldfinch | 2 | | | | | B | | 2 | <i>Carduelis carduelis parva</i> |
| European Greenfinch | 4 | | M | A | O | | | 1 | <i>Chloris chloris voousi</i> |
| European Serin | 4 | 2h | A | | | B | D | 3 | <i>Serinus serinus</i> |
| Hawfinch* | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes buvryi</i> |
| "Atlas" Common Crossbill* | 2 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Loxia curvirostra poliogyna</i> |
| Trumpeter Finch | 3 | | | | O | B | D | 1 | <i>Bucanetes githagineus zedlitzi</i> |
| African Crimson-winged Finch* | 1 | | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Rhodopechys alienus</i> |
| Cirl Bunting | 1 | 2h | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Emberiza cirrus</i> |
| Corn Bunting | 1 | | M | | | | | 1 | <i>Emberiza calandra</i> |
| Rock Bunting | 2 | 1h | A | | | | | 1 | <i>Emberiza cia</i> |
| House Bunting* | 9 | | M | A | O | B | D | 3 | <i>Emberiza sahari</i> |

BUTTERFLIES

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Scarce Swallowtail | <i>Iphiclides podalirius</i> |
| Spanish Festoon | <i>Zerynthia rumina</i> |
| Large White | <i>Pieris brassicae</i> |
| Small White | <i>Artogeia rapae</i> |
| Bath White | <i>Pontia daplidice</i> |
| Western Dappled White | <i>Euchloe crameri</i> |
| Greenish Black-tip | <i>Elphinstonia charlonia</i> |
| Desert Orange Tip | <i>Colotis evagore</i> |
| Clouded Yellow | <i>Colias croceus</i> |
| Brimstone | <i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i> |
| Chapman's Green Hairstreak | <i>Callophrys avis</i> |
| Moroccan Hairstreak | <i>Tomares mauretanicus</i> |
| Small Copper | <i>Lycaena phlaeas</i> |
| Black-eyed Blue | <i>Glaucopsyche melanops</i> |
| Common Blue | <i>Polyommatus icarus</i> |
| Painted Lady | <i>Vanessa cardui</i> |

Comma Butterfly
Speckled Wood
Wall Brown
Red Underwing Skipper

Polygona c-album
Pararge aegeria aegeria
Lasiommata megera
Spialia sertorius

DRAGONFLIES

Vagrant Emperor

Anax ephippiger

MAMMALS

Barbary Ground Squirrel
Fat Sand Rat

Atlantoxerus getulus
Psammomys obesus

Notes on the bird list

The bird list broadly follows the order, nomenclature and taxonomy of the Collins Bird Guide 2nd Edition (Svensson et al, 2009) which we used throughout the week, with a number of additions to English names reflecting the distinctive subspecies which were seen on the tour.

The guide was reprinted in 2015, and the new version contains a small number of significant changes (see the link in the references for a full list). Many of the updates are also found on the Collins Bird Guide App. In the checklist, birds with the same genus are listed together, even if this means the order is slightly different from that in Collins.

The following gives some background notes on nomenclature/taxonomy/plumage for the species marked * on the list, with particular reference to the IOC World Bird List and the HBW Illustrated Checklist.

Cattle Egret

The IOC splits Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* of Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Indian Ocean Islands, North and South America from Eastern Cattle Egret *B. coromandus* of south/east Asia and Australasia. It is not split in the HBW Illustrated Checklist.

Osprey

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, widespread throughout the world (except from Australasia to Sulawesi) is split by the IOC from Eastern Osprey *P. cristatus* (found in Sulawesi, through the Lesser Sundas to Australasia, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia).

It is not split in the HBW Illustrated Checklist.

Short-toed Eagle

The IOC uses the name Short-toed Snake Eagle.

Booted Eagle

Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist use the scientific name *Hieraaetus pennatus*.

'Atlas' Long-legged Buzzard

Collins illustrates the North African subspecies *cirtensis*, sometimes known as Atlas Long-legged Buzzard.

Barbary Falcon

The IOC continues to give Barbary Falcon specific status as *Falco peregrinoides*, but it notes that "Barbary Falcon is genetically similar to other subspecies of Peregrine Falcon." The HBW Illustrated Checklist treats it as a subspecies of Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus peregrinoides*, stating that "it appears geographically and morphologically too indistinct a taxon to merit species status."

Lanner Falcon

The North African subspecies *erlangeri* is illustrated in the Collins Guide.

Laughing Dove

Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist use the scientific name *Spilopelia senegalensis*.

Pharaoh Eagle Owl

Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, inhabiting deserts in North Africa and the Middle East, has been split from the larger and darker Eurasian Eagle Owl *B. bubo* of the forests and mountains in Europe and the northern Middle East.

The IOC uses the name Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

'Maghreb' Tawny Owl

The race in Morocco is *mauritanica*; its call is subtly different from the UK race of Tawny Owl.

'Desert' Little Owl

Two races occur in Morocco, *glauca* and *saharae*, pale forms colloquially known as Desert Little Owl; another, similar, subspecies (*lilith*) is illustrated in Collins.

Levaillant's Green Woodpecker

The IOC uses the name Levaillant's Woodpecker, whilst the HBW Illustrated Checklist calls it Maghreb Green Woodpecker.

Crested Lark/Maghreb Lark

Several races of Crested Lark occur in Morocco; Collins illustrates one of the North African subspecies, showing the ground colour and bill shape. In lowland fields south-east of Marrakech we saw *riggenbacchi* (which mainly occurs west of the Atlas Mountains). The birds seen around Mansour Lake, and further east, were *macrorhyncha*, which we referred to as Long-billed Crested Lark (for obvious reasons); this has very recently been given specific status by the IOC as Maghreb Lark *G. macrorhyncha*, but is not split in the HBW Illustrated Checklist.

Lesser Short-toed Lark

Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist use the scientific name *Alaudala rufescens*.

Desert Lark

The Moroccan race *payni* is illustrated in Collins as an example of the geographical variation of Desert Lark.

'Atlas' Horned Lark (Shore Lark)

The race *atlas* is one of 42 subspecies listed by the IOC and is endemic to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. The IOC notes state that "gene trees suggest that Palearctic clades comprise five independent evolutionary units that merit species status." Their list includes *atlas*, so the Moroccan birds may well be split as a separate species at some stage in the future.

Greater Hoopoe Lark

The IOC uses the name Greater Hoopoe-Lark.

Common Sand Martin

The IOC uses the name Sand Martin.

'Moroccan' White Wagtail

The distinctive Moroccan Wagtail *subpersonata* is illustrated in Collins; an uncommon breeding bird, it is treated as a full species by some authorities, but not by the IOC or the HBW Illustrated Checklist.

Yellow Wagtail

There are numerous races of Yellow Wagtail, many of which are illustrated in Collins. We had good views of Spanish (*iberiae*) and Blue-headed (*flava*) at Mansour Lake. The former was especially numerous and vocal.

The IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist both split Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* from Eastern Yellow Wagtail *M. tschutschensis*.

'Atlas' White-throated Dipper

The race *minor* is endemic to north-west Africa.

Rufous Bush Robin

In the field we used the old name Rufous Bushchat. The IOC uses the name Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin.

Seebohm's Wheatear

Collins treats this as a full species *Oenanthe seebohmi*; it breeds in the mountains of north-west Africa, wintering in West Africa. It is also split in the HBW Illustrated Checklist, which uses the name Black-throated Wheatear. The IOC continues to regard it as a subspecies of Northern Wheatear: *Oenanthe oenanthe seebohmi*.

Black-eared Wheatear

The race which breeds in Morocco is *hispanica* and is illustrated in Collins.

Maghreb Wheatear

Collins gives Maghreb Wheatear *Oenanthe halophila* specific status; unlike Mourning Wheatear *O. lugens*, which occurs in the Middle East, there is clear sexual dimorphism. Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist continue to treat it as a subspecies of Mourning Wheatear: *Oenanthe lugens halophila*.

'Moroccan' Common Blackbird

Compared with UK birds, the female of the race *mauritanicus*, Moroccan Blackbird, is much greyer and has a yellower bill. It is not illustrated in Collins.

Blackcap

Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist use the name Eurasian Blackcap.

Western Subalpine Warbler

The 2015 revised version of Collins illustrates three distinct species, Eastern Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* (south-east Europe), Moltoni's Warbler *S. subalpina* (Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia and north Italy) and Western Subalpine Warbler *S. i. inornata* (south-west Europe and north-west Africa). We saw the breeding race of Western Subalpine Warbler *S. i. inornata* in the hills, whilst migrant birds were seen regularly during the tour; these were most likely to have been *S. i. iberiae*.

The IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist both split Moltoni's but neither have split Western and Eastern.

For details on the plumage differences between *inornata* and *iberiae*, see the Surfbirds paper by Brian Small listed in the references below.

African Desert Warbler

Collins follows the IOC in splitting African Desert Warbler *Sylvia deserti* (North Africa) from Asian Desert Warbler *S. nana* (Middle East and Asia).

Saharan Scrub Warbler

The 2015 revised version of Collins splits Saharan Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca saharae* of north-west Africa from Levant Scrub Warbler *S. inquieta* which is found in the Middle East. The IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist continue to treat them as one species, Streaked Scrub Warbler, the Moroccan birds *S. i. saharae*.

Within Saharan Scrub Warbler, it is widely considered that there are two races, with the birds seen in eastern and southern Morocco *saharae* and a different, endemic, subspecies *theresae* found in south-western Morocco (eg near Guelmim). Both are illustrated in 2015 Collins. A recent paper in *Dutch Birding* suggested that in fact the birds in Morocco are all the same race, with plumage variations based on ecological circumstances.

Western and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers

Western Olivaceous Warbler is called Isabelline Warbler in Collins and was seen and heard singing on a few occasions during the tour. We saw the race *reiseri* of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler, often called 'Saharan' Eastern Olivaceous, in the bushes at Mansour Lake and in the garden at Derkaoua. It is clearly different from Western, being smaller, and constantly pumping its tail.

Firecrest

The IOC uses the name Common Firecrest.

Winter Wren

The IOC uses the name Eurasian Wren, using the name Winter Wren for the North American species *T. hiemalis*.

Pied Flycatcher

The IOC uses the name European Pied Flycatcher.

'Atlas' Coal Tit

The race *atlas* is endemic to Morocco.

African Blue Tit

Collins splits African Blue Tit *Cyanistes teneriffae* from European Blue Tit *C. caeruleus*. The subspecies in Morocco is *ultramarinus*, illustrated in Collins; it has a wing-bar, unlike the race on Tenerife. All races have a grey-blue, not green, back and a dark, blackish-blue crown.

'Moroccan' Short-toed Treecreeper

The uncommon resident race *mauritanica* is restricted to north-west Africa; it is darker than the nominate race and has a distinctive song which we heard in the pines on our return drive to Marrakech.

'Desert' Great Grey Shrike

In Collins 1st Edition the Moroccan birds were illustrated as *L. e. algeriensis*, a race of Great Grey Shrike, with birds of various races throughout Europe and beyond also considered subspecies of Great Grey. Subsequent to its publication, some other authorities split the birds in North Africa, Iberia and Southern France, calling them Southern Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis*. However, the Collins 2nd Edition doesn't use the name Southern Grey at all; it has split only the birds from Iberia and Southern France, calling them Iberian Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis*, and leaving the North African birds as subspecies of Great Grey Shrike as in the 1st edition. This taxonomy is also used in the HBW Illustrated Checklist. In the future, it seems likely that the birds in Morocco may actually be split further as Desert Grey Shrike *L. elegans*; this split has already been proposed. It has a somewhat

bigger white wing patch and whiter underparts, making it distinctly different from the birds seen occasionally in winter in the UK. The IOC lists the birds in Morocco as a race of Southern Grey Shrike, *Lanius meridionalis elegans*.

'Maghreb' Common Magpie

The north-west African race *mauritanica* is clearly identifiable by the blue spot behind the eye and the very long tail, and is illustrated in Collins. The IOC notes say that "MtDNA phylogeny suggests that Eurasian Magpie comprises several potential species including Korean Magpie *P. sericea*, Maghreb Magpie *P. mauritanica* and Asir Magpie *P. asirensis*." The HBW Illustrated Checklist has made the split, using the name Maghreb Magpie.

'North African' Common Raven

The race *tingitanus* which occurs in Morocco is smaller than the nominate race and its call is not as deep. The IOC uses the name Northern Raven for this species.

Common Rock Sparrow

The IOC uses the name Rock Sparrow.

'North African' Common Chaffinch

North African Chaffinch (*F. c. africana*) is very distinctive, with the male having crown/nape blue-grey, mantle bright green and the breast/belly pale pink.

Common Linnet

Both the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist use the scientific name *Linaria cannabina*.

Hawfinch

The race *buvryi* is endemic to north-west Africa and is distinguished by its slightly paler head and body and less white in the tail.

'Atlas' Common Crossbill

Common Crossbills gradually become paler from northern Europe down to north-west Africa. The subspecies in Morocco is *poliogyne*, sometimes known as Atlas Common Crossbill; the ground colour of the plumage is ash-grey, the feather tips of the head and body of adult males are pink-red, the rump is uniform rosy-pink, the belly is rosy-red with some white spots/streaks. The song and call are, to the trained ear, different from those of UK birds.

The IOC uses the name Red Crossbill for this species.

African Crimson-winged Finch

Collins 2015 follows the IOC and the HBW Illustrated Checklist in splitting *sanguineus* (Turkey, Middle East and Central Asia) from *alienus* (Atlas Mountains, NW Africa). African Crimson-winged Finch is subtly larger with a longer bill and a shorter tail; the face is less red, with none before the supercilium; the nape is greyer, and the back/flanks lack dark spotting; the rump is darker rufous, ie not so pink; there is also less pink in the wing; the male has more restricted black on the cap; the chin and throat are pale grey-white.

House Bunting

House Bunting *Emberiza sahari* (North Africa) is now an established split from Striolated Bunting *E. striolata* (Middle East).

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These lists represent the birds, butterflies, dragonflies and mammals recorded by the group members on this tour.



African Crimson-winged Finch



African Desert Warbler



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater



Brown-necked Raven



Common Bulbul



Cream-coloured Courser



Crowned Sandgrouse



Spotted Sandgrouse



Great Spotted Cuckoo



Greater Hoopoe Lark



House Bunting



Levaillant's Green Woodpecker



"Maghreb" (Crested) Lark



Moussier's Redstart



Pharaoh Eagle Owl



Seebohm's Wheatear



Tristram's Warbler



Western Bonelli's Warbler



White-crowned Wheatear



Desert Wheatear



Temminck's Lark



Thick-billed Lark



Egyptian Nightjar



"Moroccan" Short-toed Treecreeper

Front cover: Desert Sparrow

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