

Morocco Birding Tour 9-19/24 April 2013

Report by Michael Mills, photos by Terry Counihan



On our inaugural bird tour of Morocco we spent eleven days visiting the southern and central parts of the country with Tom Gullick, followed by four days in northern Morocco without Tom's assistance. We started in Marrakech, driving to Tamri on the coast near Agadir, through Argan woodlands with strategically placed goats decorating the trees. At Tamri we concentrated our efforts on finding Morocco's most threatened bird, **Northern Bald Ibis**, and also visited Cape Rhir briefly to look for seabirds. Continuing on through the sprawling city of Agadir we visited the coastal wetlands of the Oued Souss and the Oued Massa before arriving at Tiznit for the night. From Tiznit we turned inland following the edge of the desert on to the Tata/Tissint area, concentrating our efforts on rivers and palm oases here, and eventually on to Ouarzazate and Boulemane du Dadès, with a lucky sighting of **Houbara Bustard** en route. From Boulemane we visited the famous open scrubland of the Tagdilt Track for a morning. Next on our agenda was the desert plains, large sand dunes (Erg Chebbi) and lake of the Arfoud/Merzouga area and the tall cliffs for breeding owls and falcons near Rissani. A side trip to the Er Rachida area produced the incredible **Thick-billed Lark**. From here we continued on through some spectacular rocky gorges to Midelt with **Bonelli's Eagle**, from where we visited the Zeïda plains for **Dupont's Lark** and some of the surrounding cedar forests in the Atlas Mountains. For the final stretch with Tom we completed the loop back to Marrakech and spent a day in the Oukaïmeden/Ourika area, climbing up into alpine grasslands at 2600 m set against the spectacular backdrop of the high Atlas with the birding highlight of **African Crimson-winged Finch**.

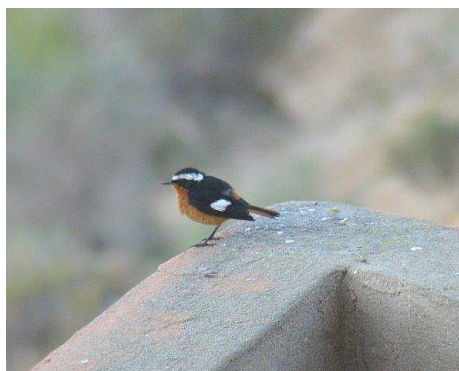
On our northern loop we struck out immediately towards Casablanca in order to visit the productive Lake of Sidi Bourhaba with **White-headed Duck**, after which we continued on up the coast past the wetlands of Merja Zerga to Larache and the Asilah area, where habitats included farmland, wetlands, mudflats and cork oak forest. Finally we turned inland to the highlands area of Ifrane where we birded the lake of Dayet Aoua and various alpine habitats around Ifrane with **Atlas Pied Flycatcher**, before looping back via the Zeïda plains to Marrakech.

We fared exceptionally well on the birds, seeing virtually all North African specialities and logging 225 species in total. Birds around our hotel in Marrakech included our first of many **House Buntings** and **Eurasian Collared Dove**, **Pallid Swifts** breeding in the adjacent buildings, **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Spotless Starling**, **Western Olivaceous Warbler** and **Common Wood Pigeon**, and a lone **Booted Eagle** which drifted by. Leaving Marrakesh towards the coast our first stop in open, rocky shrublands produced **Greater Short-toed Lark** and **Black-eared Wheatear**, and shortly thereafter we stopped for a roadside **Little Owl**. Further on we paused for roadside **Black-winged Kites**, **Black Wheatear** and **Calandra Lark** and then stopped in some Argan woodlands where our first **Common Chaffinch**, **European Greenfinch**, **European Goldfinch**, **Moussier's Redstart**, **Corn Bunting**, **European Turtle Dove**, **Southern Grey Shrike** and **Woodchat Shrike** were seen. Once near the coast we started to watch out

for **Northern Bald Ibis** (right) and it wasn't too long before we were enjoying close-up views of up to 40 birds in the perfect afternoon light. Here too we spotted our only **Short-toed Snake Eagle** of the trip. Down at the river mouth near Tamri we studied a large flock of gulls that included **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, **Yellow-legged Gull** and a few **Audouin's Gulls**. A lone **Western Osprey** sat nearby. At Cape Rhir many **Northern Gannet** were feeding offshore.



The following morning we started with good views of a lovely **Spectacled Warbler** before breakfast, at which we spotted **Sardinian Warbler**, **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Great Tit** and **Moussier's Redstart** (below) from the hotel. We then headed for the Oued Souss south of Agadir, with a good study of **Pallid Swift** made en route. Bird numbers at Oued Souss were very unimpressive by normal standard (perhaps due to disturbance from new construction), but we did see the local *mauritanica* race of **Eurasian Magpie** with its blue eye patch, *iberiae* race of **Western Yellow Wagtail**, **Eurasian Stone-Curlew**, our first **Eurasian Blackcap** and the only **Sand Martin** of the trip, as well as a variety of wetland birds including a small flock of **European Spoonbill**, **Common Redshank**, **Little Ringed Plover**, **Kentish Plover** and **Spotted Redshank**.



Due to the lack of birds here we didn't linger too long, instead heading for the nearby Oued Massa. While having lunch here we tracked down **Black-crowned Tchagra** and watched **Brown-throated Martin** along the river, after which a few hours of very productive birding followed. **Cetti's Warbler** showed well at the edge of some reeds, a pair of **Marbled Duck** were studied in detail, resident *maroccanus* and migrant *carbo* **Great Cormorant** flew up and down the river, **Cirl Bunting** was watched singing at close range, another **Little Owl** was seen, our first **European Serins** put on a good display, **Common Kingfisher** was scoped along the river and a small flock of **Glossy Ibis** was roosting in the middle of the river.

The next day our first stop east of Tiznit turned up a lovely pair of **Western Orphean Warbler** and our first **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin**, and further on we paused for our first **Trumpeter Finches**. Other stops along the way to Tata turned up our first **Desert Larks** but not much else. Exploration in the Tata and Tissint areas produced many good birds, including our first **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, **White-crowned Wheatear**, **Crowned Sandgrouse**, a single **Spotted Sandgrouse** and six **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** drinking after dark. We also saw our first **Brown-necked Ravens** and **Fulvous Babblers** and along the rivers found **Ruddy Shelduck**. The pale desert form of *Red Fox* was the mammal highlight. Palm oases were a haven for many trans-Sahara migrants on passage and among the hundreds of **Willow Warblers** we picked out several **European Pied Flycatcher**, **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin**, and singles of **Garden Warbler**, **Melodious Warbler**, **Western Bonelli's Warbler** and **Sedge Warbler**, **Common**

Redstart, **Subalpine Warbler**, tail-ticking **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** alongside **Western Olivaceous Warbler**, **Tree Pipit** and a lovely male **Ortolan Bunting**.

Continuing east and then north to Ouarzazate we were in for the surprise of the trip as we spotted five roadside **Houbara Bustard**. We slammed on brakes and were soon watching them stride across the open desert plains. Passing through some rocky areas we then enjoyed close-up views of **Trumpeter Finch** and **Pale Crag Martin** and later on our first **European Crag Martins**. Lunch to the west of Ouarzazate turned up our first **Desert Wheatears** and **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** but not the hoped-for Mourning Wheatear.

Next on the cards was the Tagdilt Track, where lovely **Temminck's Larks** and **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** allowed detailed study, **Red-rumped Wheatear** was common, sleek groups of **Cream-coloured Courser** were active, two flocks of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** were seen in flight and on the ground and our first **Long-legged Buzzard** was spotted. After a late breakfast we continued east to the Merzouga/Arfoud area with the only long-billed **Maghreb Larks** and **Whinchat** of the trip seen en route. An afternoon in the Rissani area turned up some great birds: first a **Pharaoh's Eagle-Owl** was watched on its cliff-roost, a pair of **Lanner Falcon** was seen at the nest, **Crowned Sandgrouse** and **Spotted Sandgrouse** were seen well where they foraged and a pair of **Barbary Falcon** was watched near the nest. Arriving at our comfortable accommodation out in the desert there was time for a quick try for **Egyptian Nightjar** (below) which showed exceptionally well at dusk.



Our time in the Arfoud/Merzouga area was very successful, and included all the regular specialties. We worked hard for decent views of **Streaked Scrub Warbler** which darted about rapidly from bush to bush, but we all had reasonable views in the end and even managed to approach the bird within a one metre, although it still wasn't easy to see! By contrast **African Desert Warblers** were easy to spot as they perched up nicely and sang and **Bar-tailed Lark** was particularly tame. Later on a pair of **Desert Sparrow** was studied in detail at their nest. **Egyptian Nightjar** was seen again after dark and also admired the next day at its day roost. Palm oases turned up **Fulvous Babbler** and more **Common Redstart** and **Eurasian Golden Oriole**, **Common Nightingale** and **Subalpine Warbler** were seen at our hotel. The *subpersonata* race of **White Wagtail** was seen well at a river. And the lake near Merzouga was home to **Gull-billed Tern**, **Whiskered Tern**, **Kentish Plover**, lots of **Ruddy Shelduck** and **Common Pochard**. A worthwhile detour to the Er Rachida area produced another **Streaked Scrub Warbler** and some amazing views of the incredible **Thick-billed Lark** (below). Some of the group also enjoyed a memorable camel trek through the large, red sand dunes of Erg Chebbi.



From Arfoud we turned away from the Algerian border, passing through rocky gorges with **Rock Bunting**, **Black Wheatear**, **Rock Sparrow**, **Grey Wagtail** and a pair of low-flying **Bonelli's Eagle**, and on to the Midelt area. Towns on the way were the breeding sites of numerous **White Storks** which sat on their large stick nests placed on top of any suitable structure available. In the Midelt area our first target bird, **Tristram's Warbler**, showed well in some open juniper woodland where **Western Orphean Warbler** and **Moussier's Redstart** also put in appearances. Then on to the Zeïda plains for a hot lark chase. **Greater Short-toed Lark** and **Lesser Short-toed Lark** were rather



common and after about an hour of carefully scanning we managed to pick out the unusual **Dupont's Lark** (left) which allowed us to get quite close, but was also very skilled at vanishing before our eyes. We then continued on to some nearby cedar forests for the afternoon. Here new birds came thick and fast and included **Coal Tit**, **African Blue Tit**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Black Kite**, some skittish **Stock Doves**, a brief over-flying **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Northern Raven**, amazing views of **Common Firecrest** and **Greater Spotted Woodpecker**.

The next day we completed our loop back to Marrakech with roadside stops turning up **Eurasian Skylark**, **Eurasian Jay**, **Common Linnet**, **European Robin**, a flushed pair of **Barbary Partridge**, some **Black-necked Grebes** on a lake and a breeding colony of **Spanish Sparrows** as we approached Ourika for an overnight stay. After dark here a **Tawny Owl** put in a brief appearance but called mostly from its hidden perch. The next day we made our final assault on the high altitude habitats of Oukaïmeden. Before breakfast some **Hawfinches** near our hotel frustratingly disappeared before the group could see them. As we climbed we stopped to look for **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, which after a bit of patience showed very well. Arriving at Oukaïmeden we were soon watching large flocks of yellow-billed **Alpine Chough** and **Red-billed Chough** and a group of the often-tricky **African Crimson-winged Finch** showed exceptionally well, perhaps due to walnuts being put out for them to feed on. Next were **Seeböhm's Wheatear** and **Horned Lark**, followed by **Mistle Thrush**, more **Rock Sparrows**, **Black Redstart**, **Spectacled Warbler**, **Booted Eagle** and **Eurasian Wren**. On our way down we stopped to look for **White-throated Dipper** and after a short walk along the river soon found a pair feeding actively along its shore. **Blue Rock Thrush** was also spotted here and **Common Nightingale** was seen well further down.

Then it was back to Marrakech for the end of the main trip and the start of the northern loop, which saw us heading straight for Lac Sidi Bourhaba north of Casablanca. Here a wonderful afternoon was spent admiring **Red-**

knobbed Coot, White-headed Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck and Common Pochard at close range and **Purple Swamphen** a little more distantly. **Western Jackdaw** showed nearby too. We then continued on up the coast past Merja Zerga where all the birds were a bit distant but we managed to see **Northern Lapwing** and our first **Montagu's Harrier**. Arriving in the Larache area we headed straight for some marshes where we quickly tracked down **Savi's Warbler** and **Moustached Warbler** and enjoyed some excellent views of these two reed-bed species. Near Larache we also saw **Peregrine Falcon**, breeding plumage **Black Tern, Common Stonechat, Little Tern, Collared Pratincole, Common Ringed Plover, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Dunlin** and **Kentish Plover**. Cork Oak forest nearby turned up **Woodlark, Sardinian Warbler** and a lovely male **Dartford Warbler**. The farmlands around Asilah were visited next but appeared way too disturbed to hold any hoped-for bustards, although did turn up a lovely pair of **Melodious Warbler**, our only **Tawny Pipits** and more **Calandra Larks**. Finally we turned back inland to the picturesque alpine areas of Ifrane, pausing to admire hunting **Lesser Kestrel** and **European Roller** en route and also seeing **Spectacled Warbler** again. At Dayet Aoua we found **Hawfinch** immediately on arrival and enjoyed some excellent views of this smart finch. Large numbers of waterbirds were present and included the only **Gadwall** and **Northern Shoveler** of the trip. After dark we watched **European Scops Owl** calling at close range.



The next morning some very productive woodland birding turned up fantastic views of a singing **Western Bonelli's Warbler** and two singing and fighting male **Altas Pied Flycatcher** along with a female, which had presumably just arrived and were actively setting up territorial boundaries. **Stock Dove** sat up and called for the scope. And we enjoyed repeat views of **Great Spotted Woodpecker, Common Firecrest, Coal Tit, African Blue Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, European Robin, Eurasian Wren, Eurasian Golden Oriole** and **Eurasian Blackcap**. All that remained was the drive back to Marrakech with a short stop at the Zeida plains for last looks at **Dupont's Lark**.