

Morocco Birding Tour

18-30 April 2015

Report by Michael Mills

This private tour of Morocco took in the best of the southern and central parts of the country in 13 days. We met in Marrakech and started our birding in the nearby Oukaïmeden/Ourika area. With the spectacular backdrop of the High Atlas our first birds included **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, **Seebohm's Wheatear** and **Barbary Partridge**. From here we descended to Tamri on the coast near Agadir, through Argan woodlands with **Western Orphea Warbler**. At Tamri we enjoyed point-blank views of more than 60 **Northern Bald Ibis**, and found our first **Spectacled Warblers**. Continuing on through the sprawling city of Agadir we visited the coastal wetlands of the Souss and Massa Rivers, seeing **Marbled Duck**. Next was the Guelmim area where we tracked down **Streaked Scrub Warbler** and impressive **Thick-billed Lark**, before turning inland and following the edge of the desert on to Tata with **Fulvous Babbler** and **Trumpeter Finch** en route. At Tata a dusk vigil produced excellent views of 14 **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse** and an **African Wolf**! The Tissint area was memorable for flocks of drinking **Spotted Sandgrouse** and **Crowned Sandgrouse**, from where it was on to Boulmane du Dades and the open scrublands of the Tagdilt Track with **Cream-coloured Courser** and **Temminck's Lark**. On our way to the desert and sand dunes of Merzouga we found **Mourning/Maghreb Wheatear** and more **Streaked Scrub Warblers**. Excellent rains in the Merzouga area had turned the desert into a green blanket and attracted **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** to the area. The highlight here was prolonged views of a **Houbara Bustard**, with a supporting cast of **Thick-billed Lark** on the nest, **Pharaoh's Eagle-Owl**, **African Desert Warbler**, **Desert Sparrow**, **Barbary Falcon** and nocturnal and diurnal views of **Egyptian Nightjar**. From here we continued on through some spectacular rocky gorges to Midelt with **Tristram's Warbler** en route, from where we visited the Zeïda plains for **Dupont's Lark**. Next was the Ifrane area which turned up a lovely male **Atlas Pied Flycatcher** and **European Scops Owl** at the nest. Then it was down to the coast to Sidi Bourhaba where **White-headed Ducks** cavorted, and finally to the Zäer where **Double-spurred Francolin** showed well, before continuing back to Marrakesh to complete our loop through Morocco. Besides the great birds we enjoyed spectacular landscapes, great food, friendly people and interesting hotels.

The top 10 birds of the trip were:

1. Northern Bald Ibis
2. Houbara Bustard
3. Tristram's Warbler
4. Dupont's Lark
5. Cream-coloured Courser
6. European Scops Owl
7. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
8. Moussier's Redstart
9. Barbary Partridge
10. Maghreb Wheatear

After spending the first night of the tour soaking in the traditional atmosphere from our riad in the heart of Marrakesh's ancient medina district, we made an early start for nearby Oukaïmeden. One of our first stops on the lower slopes proved excellent, with **Levaillant's Woodpecker** quickly located near the road. We watching it on-and-off for a while, distracted at the same spot by **Greater Spotted Woodpecker**, **Rock Bunting** and **African Blue Tit**. Higher up a **Booted Eagle** circled overhead, and our arrival at Oukaïmeden was welcomed by the usual

throng of **Red-billed Chough** and **Alpine Chough**. Next were **Seebohm's Wheatear** and **Horned Lark**, followed by **Mistle Thrush**, more **Rock Sparrows**, **Black Redstart**, delightful **Moussier's Redstart** and **Eurasian Wren**. We ascended slightly after lunch to quickly locate **White-throated Dipper**, with **Blue Rock Thrush** and **Black Wheatear** nearby. But despite persistence the hoped-for African Crimson-winged Finches were absent this year. A pre-breakfast outing the next morning was rewarded with good looks at a pair of **Barbary Partridge** as they moved across some bare mountain slopes, but still no finches.

Leaving Oukaïmeden for the coast we made rapid progress down the freeway to Agadir, the only roadside stop for **Black-eared Wheatear** and lunch stop adjacent to Argan woodland producing excellent views of **Western Orphean Warbler**. From Agadir we followed the winding coastal road for an hour to Tamri, where an afternoon session produced incredible views of **Northern Bald Ibis**, at times less than 20 m away and in excellent light. We counted more than 60 in total! Nearby we found **Spectacled Warbler**, our first **Sardinian Warblers** and **Yellow-legged Gull** and **Audouin's Gull**, before returning to Agadir for the night. Early the next morning a nightjar outing drew a blank. After breakfast we focussed our attention on the waterbirds of the Souss River Estuary. Small numbers of waders were present, including **Common Redshank**, breeding plumage **Dunlin** and **Kentish Plover**. Along the banks was a single **Great Egret** and nearby ponds held **Pied Avocet** and **European Spoonbill**. In the surrounding thickets we found **Zitting Cisticola** and the local race of **European Magpie**, before continuing on to the Massa River with **Little Owl** en route. We quickly connected here with **Black-crowned Tchagra** and enjoyed some excellent views of it in the bush beside us. Also in evidence were **Yellow Wagtail** (*iberiae* race), **Cirl Bunting**, **Marbled Duck**, **Common Kingfisher** and **Cetti's Warbler** that showed only briefly. All too soon time had come to continue to Guelmim for an overnight stay, with an incredible colony of **Spanish Sparrows** admired at length near our accommodation.

Early the next morning the desert plains south of Guelmim turned up some great birds, including **Red-rumped Wheatear**, **Desert Wheatear**, **Bar-tailed Lark**, a confiding party of **Streaked Scrub Warbler** and distant **Cream-coloured Courser**. After breakfast we continued our journey inland towards Tata, soon stopping for **White-crowned Wheatear** and later a roadside **Desert Lark**. At the same spot the distinctive flight of **Thick-billed Lark** got our hearts pumping, and after a short chase we enjoyed excellent views of this impressive lark. We also found our first **Thekla Larks** here, comparing their bill shapes to the previously-seen **Crested Larks**. Further along the road some promising-looking thickets quickly revealed a party of **Fulvous Babblers**. And our first **Trumpeter Finches** were a welcome addition. An early dinner at Tata allowed us to get out in time for a sandgrouse vigil, with a surprised **African Wolf** en route to the drinking ponds. Soon after sunset we were rewarded with superb views of 14 drinking **Lichtenstein's Sandgrouse**, some even tolerating the torch beam.

An early start the next morning brought us to the Tissint area, where over 30 minutes we took our time to admire **Crowned Sandgrouse** and **Spotted Sandgrouse** coming in to drink. Although they were fairly distant, the scopes allowed for a lengthy study. At the same spot we found our first **Ruddy Shelduck**, and migrants present included **Little Ringed Plover** and **Red-throated Pipit**. A nearby palm oasis turned up our first **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin** and **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**. From Tissint we continued east and then north, pausing for a tasty roadside tagine at lunch and spending the afternoon unsuccessfully chasing Mourning Wheatear, seeing lots of **Trumpeter Finches** instead. In the late afternoon we made our way to Boulmane du Dades.

With most of the Tagdilt track specials already seen in the Guelmim area, we needed only a short time to track down the missing **Cream-coloured Courser** and **Temminck's Lark**. Cultivated fields were hopping with migrants and produced our only **Melodious Warbler** of the trip. Here too we were surprised to see our first **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**, which gave reasonably fly-by views in the crisp morning light. As we continued east we stopped at some promising looking hills, and after a short walk found a female **Mourning/Maghreb Wheatear** feeding a fledgling. Then it was on to the spectacular Todra Gorge, where we made a detailed study of **Streaked Scrub Warbler** although saw little else. Nearing the Arfoud area some roadside stops for **Maghreb Lark** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** were appreciated, before we rolled in to our comfortable accommodation for an early dinner followed by a successful **Egyptian Nightjar** outing.

The next day was certainly the most memorable of the trip. Driving out across the normally-birdless plains, this year they were green and full of birds. Large numbers of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** were present and it wasn't long before we enjoyed some great looks on the ground. Good looks at **Short-toed Snake Eagle** followed, but ultimately we had an appointment with a bustard, so we didn't pause long, and after a couple of hours driving across endless plains we were carefully guided to where a **Houbara Bustard** was feeding. Our arrival caused it to hide, but after a few minutes of waiting patiently it went back to its normal business, and over the next 30 minutes we watched it through the scopes as it strode among the bushes. Just brilliant! Once we'd had our fill it was time to turn back, but the morning was not yet over and our local guides had some other goodies in store; **Thick-billed Lark** and **Pharaoh's Eagle-Owl** on the nest. **Spotted Sandgrouse** were found near the vehicle on the way back, and by lunch time we were back at our hotel reflecting on a superb morning.

After a good siesta we returned to the field, and our three main targets for the afternoon proved easy with some expert local guidance. First up was a lovely **Egyptian Nightjar** asleep below a bush, next **African Desert Warbler** was watched at close range and finally **Desert Sparrow** was studied atop its nest tree.

Some leisure birding the next morning found us at the lake at Merzouga. A surprise male **Little Bittern** gave great views. Waterfowl were represented by large numbers of **Ruddy Shelduck**, and smaller groups of **Common Pochard**, **Ferruginous Duck** and **Marbled Teal**. A short detour to Cafe Yasmina turned up a few more migrants, including **Green Sandpiper**, before a relaxed lunch and siesta. In the late afternoon we found ourselves stood beneath a tall cliff near Rissani, where our guide pointed the scopes at what he claimed to be a **Barbary Falcon** on a nest. Only the wing was visible at first, and I was sceptical having heard that others had been led to Peregrine Falcon nests. But we bade our time, and eventually the bird sat up nicely and walked to the cliff face, showing its buffy, almost unmarked underparts clearly before taking off. She gave a great display as she hunted along the cliffs, even revealing her diagnostic tail pattern for study in the scope.

From Arfoud we turned away from the Algerian border, following the Ziz Valley northwards with the *subpersonata* race of **White Wagtail** along the river and **Western Olivaceous Warblers** calling in the palm groves. Rocky gorges held **Eurasian Crag Martin**, and as we neared Midelt we paused for a walk in the hills. The going was tough, and the precipitous terrain meant that our first **Tristram's Warbler** got away largely unseen, but we managed to find a flatter area and were soon enjoying super views of these pretty little birds. Happily we made our way to our hotel in Midelt for lunch and a siesta, before an afternoon outing to the Zeïda plains. Here the wind had picked up and was making life difficult, and at first all we could see were **Greater Short-toed Larks**. However, the distinctive song of **Dupont's Lark** soon met our ears, and after some initial frustration we finally managed to spot it on the ground. Initially views were distant and brief, but after a while we managed to close in on it and it conveniently sat up on the bushes to sing, giving us time to study it through the scope. Eventually we were satisfied, and turned our attention to the missing **Lesser Short-toed Lark**. To our amazement, however, we kept finding Dupont's Lark instead, and the views kept getting better and better until Dupont's Lark was watched at length, no more than ten metres away. Finally we tore ourselves away and located one of its drabber cousins, **Lesser Short-toed Lark**, with more **Greater Short-toed Larks** seen nearby for comparison.

The next morning a short stop at the plains turned up nothing new, so we continued to the Azrou area, our first **Long-legged Buzzard** seen en route. As short walk in some cedar forest turned up **Coal Tit**, **African Blue Tit**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Common Firecrest**, **Eurasian Jay** and **Eurasian Nuthatch**, and in a clearing we found a singing **Woodlark**. Moving on we paused for some roadside **Barbary Macaques**, and a walk in the surrounding woodlands turned up **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, **Great Tit** and **European Robin**, and best of all, a lovely male **Atlas Pied Flycatcher** in full song. We watched it for a while in the treetops until it eventually dropped lower down and we could admire its big white forehead and generous white wing patch. Happily we continued to Ifrane for lunch and a rest, with a circling **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** en route, before striking out to Dayet Aoua for the afternoon. Lakeside trees quickly turned up **Hawfinch**, and out on the water hundreds of **Black-necked Grebes**, **Gadwall** and **Northern Shoveler** were welcome additions, and we improved our views of **Ferruginous Duck**. **Lesser Kestrels** hunted overhead, **European Roller** was seen a couple of times and after dark we enjoyed point-blank views of a lovely **European Scops Owl**.

A final stint of birding in the Ifrane area the next morning turned up some smart **Stock Doves**, before we headed down to the coast, stopping for **Calandra Lark** at the roadside. After another excellent tagine at Kenitra we headed to the nearby lake of Sidi Bourhaba, where **White-headed Duck** and **Purple Swamphen**, and more **Ferruginous Ducks** were easy to spot. **Western Jackdaw** showed nearby too. On to Rabat for the final night of the tour, and our last morning found us in the Zäer, where **Double-spurred Francolin** was eventually persuaded to give good views, and other newbies included **Common Cuckoo** and **Eurasian Golden Oriole**, bringing our trip total to a shade over 200 species. All that was left was to drive back to Marrakesh.