

Waveney Bird Club

Trip to Morocco

23rd April to 4th May 2014

Introduction

This eagerly awaited 12-day tour of the mountains and deserts of Morocco was to be Waveney Bird Club's sixth foreign trip. Our party consisted of 15 members and was led by Steve Piotrowski and Andrew Green supplemented by a local guide in the desert regions. Attendees included: Steve Piotrowski (leader); Andrew Green (co-leader); Eric Patrick (Tour Recorder); Robert and Helen Gooderham; Will Brame; Ali Riseborough; Richard Walden; Richard Weale; John and Rebecca Bedwell; John Garbutt; Carol Elliott; Ivan Levett and Brenda Sullivan.

Photo Gallery One – (mostly) bird photos



















Wednesday 23rd April

Fly (EasyJet) from Stansted at 16.45 p.m. to arrive at Marrakech at 20.50 p.m. and transfer to hotel Golden Tulip Rawabi, Marrakech where will stay overnight.

We arrived late in the evening and were met at the airport by our trusty drivers Mohammed and Mahund who took us the short drive to our palatial hotel, 'The Golden Tulip' at Rawabi, which is located on the outskirts of Marrakech. The buses (one 9-seater and one 12-seater) were more than adequate for the needs of our party with a lot of leg room to allow people to spread out. However, the smaller bus had tinted windows that restricted views, so there would be a gradual transfer of people to the larger bus over the following few days. In addition, those on the larger vehicle were able to enjoy a full commentary (when he was awake!) of birds seen from the bus windows by the "Tour Recorder" Eric Patrick. We soon arrived at The Golden Tulip where hotel porters eagerly grabbed our bags and distributed them to our rooms. Although a new hotel complex, a lively cockroach was kindly provided in our bathroom and this was to be our first close encounter with Moroccan wildlife. We ate a late but delicious meal then off to bed.

Rob and Helen Gooderham

Thursday 24th April

Take an early breakfast and then drive to Ourika Valley (1 hour 30 mins) to 'bird' a valley path and then take lunch at the beautiful Chez Larbi Restaurant. In the afternoon, 'bird' the lower reaches alongside the mountain road that leads to Oukaimeden and overnight at Hotel Ourika.

Following an early breakfast, the hotel gardens were found to be alive with House Buntings, Common Bulbuls and Spotless Starlings whilst several Red-rumped Swallows wheeled around in the skies overhead amongst groups of Little Swifts. As we made our way through the suburbs of Marrakech, we admired the beautifully manicured gardens that lined the King's route into town. We needed to stock up with bottled water for the day, but it was still very early so were forced to wait until the water shop opened for business. This urban area was scanned for birds as we didn't want to waste a minute and a number of species were added to the trip list. The sky was filled with Pallid Swifts. It was pleasantly hot and the streets were busy with a display of astonishing driving techniques to which we were soon to become accustomed. Now we are off and this is to be full-on wall-to-wall birding!

Today, we would be based in the lower Ourika Valley, so we took the mountain road out of Marrakech that led to the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass, one of only two passes that crosses the High Atlas Mountains. As our two minibuses trundled through the villages, our trip list grew rapidly with a number of birds claimed from the windows. All species would be encountered many times later in the tour except for Maghreb Magpie, a single noted beside the road being the one logged for the whole trip! We climbed for several miles and stopped at 'camel corner', which was our marker for the start of a short walk up a narrow river valley. This was our first experience of persistent sellers of fossils and necklaces. It was still only 9.00 a.m., so we had plenty of time to explore the valley and familiarise ourselves with Moroccan birds. The path took us above the almost dry river that showed signs of massive deluges of water off the Atlas in the spring. This area was very bird rich with the ubiquitous Atlas Chaffinch, Nightingale, Common Redstart, Western Olivaceous and Sardinian Warblers, Woodchat Shrike, African Blue Tit, Serin and Cirl Bunting. The walk culminated in an impressive rubbish tip, glistening with plastic bottles, but which also hosted Stripe-necked Terrapin and the impressive Mauritanian (or Berber) Toad. The walk back provided Barbary Partridge, a party of 10 soaring Griffon Vultures and several Barbary Ground Squirrels. We had been told that Barbary Partridges would be difficult, but in fact one called from the top of a crag, a pair ambled along the dry river bed and an enthusiastic camel driver near the bus got into the spirit of birding by running up the mountain side in an attempt to catch one for us! The day warmed up and lunch called! We were driven further up the valley to the delightful Chez Larbi Restaurant where we sat on the roof terrace shaded by oak and walnut trees above the gardens of flowering shrubs and fruit trees and enjoyed the views, cool breeze and birdlife surrounding us. Water rushed along a stream below and we were treated to fly-pasts of Golden Orioles, Red-rumped Swallows and Cattle Egrets. A herdsman was watched tending his goats as they slowly streamed across the rocky mountainside opposite the restaurant.

After lunch, we travelled further up the steep-sided, winding mountain road with simple villages and small agricultural fields and orchards on either side. A birdwatching stop produced good sightings of Coal Tit, Moussier's Redstart and Alpine Chough and a few of us saw or heard a small group of Atlas Crossbills. We worked hard to eventually get distant views of Levillant's Woodpecker. There were many migrating eagles and buzzards and we had good views of a Booted Eagle carrying sticks

for nest building across the valley. It was extraordinary to see singing resident birds alongside more familiar species on migration making their long passage to central and northern Europe. Our return journey took us down the valley road and we enjoyed seeing the local population promenading in the cool of the early evening. We returned to the Hotel Ourika where we were to stay overnight. Little Swifts nested over the projecting balconies and Dick Walden declared that he had obtained blistering views of Levaillant's Woodpecker in the hotel gardens whilst the rest of the party was at the bar! There were a few groans! A late log accompanied by a cool beer took us through the day's events, which was compiled by our always diligent Recorder, Eric Patrick.

Our travels across Morocco took us mainly into rural and natural areas showing us the gritty lives of country people. The buildings are extraordinarily timeless in their form and construction. At higher altitudes they are built with stone rubble, but elsewhere overwhelmingly of earth and straw, flat roofed with thatched tops to walls to protect them during the short wet season. Buildings of all sizes from animal enclosures to fortified Kasbahs were constructed in this manner and painted with mud slurry in subtle hues of reds and greys blending softly into the landscape. This form of construction is called pisé, similar to the construction used in vernacular buildings in East Anglia, which we know as 'clay lump'!

Rob and Helen Gooderham

Friday 25th April

Drive from Ourika Valley to Oukaïmeden (1 hour 30 mins to top). Locate the furthestmost car park by ski-lift and then walk up a gentle slope for about a mile. Lunch at Chez Juju Restaurant then walk down to the lake and follow stream down valley. Return to furthestmost car park late afternoon if we hadn't located African Crimson-winged Finch!

We woke up to a very different dawn-morning chorus with Bulbuls certainly making their presence known. A wander around the hotel's small garden yielded good views of a pair of Hawfinches, Spotted Flycatchers, Turtle Doves and Greenfinches. Dick had made friends with the resident donkey! We set off from the Ourika Hotel and took the long and winding mountain road to Oukaïmeden, a winter skiing resort famous amongst birders as a wintering and breeding spot for African Crimson-winged Finch. Winter flocks are regularly encountered in early spring, but as our tour was running much later in the season and the birds would have by now paired up to breed deep in the mountains, we

knew that we would have to work hard and finding them was by no means a certainty! Our first stop was in a deep gorge where we were able to tick off Alpine Chough, Northern Raven, Kestrel, House Martin, Crag Martin and Rock Sparrow. A leisurely walk along a track beyond the furthest car park produced Atlas Horned Lark, Seeborn's Wheatear (both male and female) and several Black Redstarts. I took advantage and stayed low, whilst everyone else hiked up the valley in the hope of finding the elusive quarry. I managed to make lots of new Moroccan friends, most of them trying to sell me necklaces or fossils! The main party returned with grim faces, they hadn't had a sniff of African Crimson-winged Finch, but had seen many more Seeborn's Wheatears, a Western Black-eared Wheatear and flocks of Rock Sparrows. When walking back to the village for lunch, our attention was drawn to a very familiar song that we immediately recognized as that of a Woodlark. We eventually located the bird as it descended to sing from a mountainside boulder.

We lunched at the Chez Juju Restaurant watching three-figure flocks of both Alpine and Red-billed Chough circling overhead and feeding on the ground. The service in the restaurant was poor to say the least and the food wasn't up to much either, but the views were spectacular. Several birds whizzed about overhead (most of which I missed), but nothing that we hadn't logged already. Two Booted Eagles glided over the valley signalling perhaps that their northward migration was still ongoing. The afternoon was spent by the lake, which was bubbling with frogs and we spotted two Black-winged Stilts feeding in the shallows on the far side. We were joined by another birding party at the lake, a group of Americans, all sporting expensive cameras and enormous lenses, being led by Brahim Mezane. Their leader was reputed to be the best bird guide in Morocco and it had been previously agreed that our group could tag along when we reached the desert resort of Auberge Derkaoua later in the trip. We had a brief discussion with the Americans about the planned reunion before they sped off in their four-wheel drive to an Alpine Accentor site (a bird that we didn't see) further up the mountain slopes.

One or two of our party had glimpsed at least one White-throated Dipper as it zipped downstream ahead of them. This sparked a mad "dipper-hunt" as we tried to catch up with the bird as it descended along the fast-flowing stream. Most of us eventually glimpsed the bird (some of us had good views), but we also logged Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Grey-headed Wagtail, Western Olivaceous Warbler and

Black Redstarts, along with a Mistle Thrush that was heard singing. I enjoyed the scurrying Barbary Ground Squirrel, a tick for me! As evening approached, it was time to return to the furthest car park to search again for African Crimson-winged Finch, our target bird that had managed to elude us throughout the day. We waited and we waited and we waited some more, all the time trying to pretend that we were really interested in all the other birds that blessed us with their presence. We must have scanned every boulder and, by doing so, did manage to locate at least three Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, whilst a Peregrine dashed across mountain slopes in front of us. As dusk approached, anxiety increased and we became more-or-less resigned to the fact that we weren't going to see this bird! We watched the Americans returning in their four-wheel drive, but they stopped to search an area further down the valley. Brahim left the vehicle and looked around. Had they found the Alpine Accentor or do they know a secret stake-out for African Crimson-winged Finch? Their vehicle then came towards our group as we waited in the car park, so we would soon know we thought! But no, they sped straight passed us, not a wave, a nod, or any acknowledgment of our presence – strange indeed we thought! With darkness approaching and after a final period of searching, Steve declared "OK, that's it, we give up, let's get back on the buses." And then a sudden cry from Eric "STOP, I've got it!" and there was the little ****er immediately in front of us, perched on a wire that led to the ski-lift tower! Not only did our bird put in a special appearance (over an hour late by all accounts as we were told they/it turned up at the same site every day at 5.00 pm), but a most confiding Atlas Horned Lark joined it and gave spectacular views, both species within a few feet from our group. Now Steve was happy and we all went to bed with a smile on our face – well nearly all of us as Ali probably grumbled about the meal!

Brenda Sullivan (The Lesser Spotting Birder)

Saturday 26th April

We will take the long but slow drive (nine hours including stops) through the Tizi-n-Tichka pass over the Atlas Mountains and down the valley to Ouarzazate. There will be stops whenever bushy-type habitat is encountered, lunch will be taken at Argan Tichka Restaurant and we'll 'bird' along dry river bed for birds and butterflies. During late-afternoon we will visit a desert site near Amerzgane and overnight at Hotel Perle du Sud in Ouarzazate.

The initial part of our long journey took us across vast expanses of agricultural land, where we made frequent stops to tick off Corn Bunting and Crested Lark. Several Desert Grey Shrikes were noted perched on distant bushes. As we began to climb into the mountains, one of our party from the trailing bus spotted a European Roller perched on a television aerial. We were quickly on to the walkie-talkies suggesting that the leading bus should turn around. We watched this magnificent bird for several minutes; hardly daring to move a muscle in case we flushed it before the leading bus returned. Camera shutters were clicking furiously, but the rest of the party were missing! We tried again on the walkie-talkies, but this time we couldn't make contact, which suggested that they were out of range? After what seemed like an endless wait, we managed to make contact again and the bus returned. Needless to say, just as they arrived our bird flew away deep into the valley, but we did manage to relocate it albeit more distantly. Another European Roller appeared from our right flying at great speed across the road in front of us and as it plunged down into the trees it performed its characteristic and very acrobatic half roll, hence its name.

Onwards and upwards! We continued climbing the steep mountain road and stopped in a layby next to a small café at Taddert where some of our number couldn't resist popping in to top up their breakfast! Opposite the café was an area of thick scrub growing on a steep slope that seemed ideal for breeding Tristram's Warbler. Most of the party gingerly manoeuvred their way up the slope and quickly located several singing Western Subalpine Warblers. Eric then claimed a Tristram's Warbler, which started an exhaustive but fruitless search by the rest of the party. The breakfast crew had by this time caught up but, with time pressing, we decided to move on and everyone was summoned to make a swift return to the minibuses. However, our exodus would not go without further incident as a loud rumbling signified the arrival of a gigantic boulder, which suddenly crashed out of the undergrowth, rolling speedily down the slope and smashing onto the track in front of us, to be quickly followed by a tumbling Andrew Green. Somehow, Andrew managed to land on his feet, but the comment was made that the timing of his spectacular descent occurred in the right order with Andrew chasing the boulder rather than the other way round! We continued our journey looking for further opportunities to search suitable Tristram's Warbler habitat, but none were forthcoming or at least none where it was safe to park the minibuses. Our next stop was at the roadside Argan Tichka Restaurant, it was now noon and we were in the heat of the day, but we

weren't quite ready for lunch, especially those who had a double breakfast! It was decided that the dried up wadi immediately opposite the restaurant should be explored and it was found to be full of migrant birds. Melodious Warbler, Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Whitethroat and Willow Warbler were soon added to the trip list and a pair of Barbary Partridges was watched feeding on the slopes. Some of the party spotted a rufous-brown bird skulking under some bushes. It showed all the characteristics of a Rufous Bush Robin but, by the time the main party arrived, it had disappeared into dense vegetation. We watched intently for some time, each of us occasionally getting fleeting views. Eventually, a similarly coloured bird hopped out, but this one was a Nightingale! Was it the same bird? No way, the "two-bird theory" was put into operation to save any further embarrassment! The wadi led to a delightful village where shepherdesses were herding cattle and sheep and we enjoyed amazing views of Woodchat Shrikes, Western Olivaceous Warblers and a Western Orphean Warbler – another first for the trip.

In the hot midday sun, we enjoyed a wonderful lunch on the balcony of the Argan Tichka Restaurant that overlooked the pass. Although the views were amazing, it was hardly peaceful as juggernauts continuously trundled up and down the hill with frequent gear changes and excessive revving of engines. Eric spotted a wolf breaking the skyline on a distant ridge, but realised that it was a sheepdog when it started to bark! As we departed, the girls decided it was time for a bit of shopping, but they first went to watch the Berber women skilfully grinding argan nuts to make argan oil, hence the name of the restaurant! Argan oil is plant oil produced from the kernels of the argan tree (*Argania spinosa*) that is endemic to Morocco. The oil is used to dip bread in at breakfast or to drizzle on couscous or pasta. Worldwide, it's gaining a reputation both as an ingredient at the high-end of personal-care commodities and as a heart-healthy gourmet product. The argan fruits are first dried in the open air and then the fleshy pulp of the fruit is removed and usually fed to livestock. The next stage involves cracking the argan nut to obtain the argan kernels. One of our party suggested in a factual manner that the argan oil becomes more palatable if the kernels have passed through the digestive system of goats! Was somebody kidding me here? The boys were becoming increasingly impatient with the girls' absenteeism, but there was a bonus as amongst a sparrow flock in a small bush below us was a flock of three Spanish Sparrows. Eventually, the girls were rounded up and we were on our way once again. The next part of

the journey was really uneventful. There was little to report as we rounded the summit, but Nightingales seemed to be singing from every bush as we made our descent. We were anxious that we made the desert in good time to give ourselves a good opportunity to find Maghreb Wheatear, a speciality of this region and a species that is sometimes notoriously difficult to pin down. As we crossed a shallow river on the minor road to the south of Amerzgane, a small group of European Bee-eaters were noted hawking from the banks.

It was then onward into the desert to find a lone tree, which was to be our marker for our main quarry. We scanned the area intently from the bus to ensure that we didn't inadvertently flush the birds as Maghreb Wheatears do have the habit of flying long distances when disturbed. There were a few false alarms, the first being a creature that kept appearing and then disappearing in the shimmer and constantly nodding its head. What was it? We were struggling to get any definition as the light was most definitely against us! Someone said that it had an orange head and then another claimed a vivid blue body. What on earth could it be? The mystery creature turned out to be a large desert lizard called a Changeable Agama and it wasn't long before more were found. There were more false alarms, first a White-crowned Wheatear and then Desert Wheatears, both trip ticks and lifers for some, but not what we were looking for! We had another encounter with Brahim and our American friends and it became obvious that we were completing parallel tours. In my experience, birdwatching is a social experience throughout the world and normally American birders are a friendly bunch, but this lot certainly were not and there seemed to be some resentment to the idea that our largish party could be joining them later in the tour. As we were talking to them, a male Maghreb Wheatear zoomed in to our right, chased a female Desert Wheatear and sped off northwards again and disappeared. There was some grumblings from the Americans, so we decided to leave them to it. We tried to hunt this bird down but to no avail, although we did manage to locate a female some distance away which was watched for some time. We spent the rest of the day trying to hunt down the male, but as darkness approached we were forced to give up.

There was lots of hustle and bustle when we reached the Hotel Perle du Sud, which was on the main street in Ouarzazate, but we were all knackered, so it was a quick wash and brush up, back down for dinner and then bed. However, a few stayed up to watch a local band with

dancers and Brenda, in particular, really got into the Moroccan spirit of things. Saturday night in downtown Ouarzazate was one to remember!
Steve Piotrowski

Sunday 27th April

This should be a relaxing day! We will make an 8.00 a.m. start and 'bird' a gully known as Oued Ouarzazate and then on to Barrage El-Mansour-Eddahbi. At midday, we will drive to Boumalne (two hours from Ouarzazate), lunch at Hotel Rosa Damaskina and should reach our hotel (Hotel Xaluca) at around 3.00-4.00 p.m. After checking in, we'll explore the Tagdilt Track (10 minutes from hotel) until dusk and then return for dinner and the log. We had been pre-warned that alcohol wouldn't be available, so carry-outs from the nearby very posh tourist hotel would be desirable!

As the Moroccan drummers chanted and beat their way around the Hotel the previous evening, somebody said "we should be alright we are on the third floor!" How wrong they were! Once the drummers ceased, the nightclub next door seemed to disgorge hordes of people at regular intervals up to 4.00 a.m. At 5.00 a.m., the call to prayer was heard. At 6.20 a.m. the local population drove past the front of our Hotel sounding their horns for 15 minutes. So much for sleep! Down to breakfast, a buffet laid out with various delights, none more so than the lady chef making fresh 'pancakes'. It was a pity about the lack of orange juice in the dispenser, which was replenished after we had finished eating. After breakfast, the minibuses were reloaded with suitcases, 'scopes and people and set off through the streets of Ouarzazate, replenishing water supplies on the way. As the houses and shops faded away, an area of scrub and water was encountered. This was the Oued Ouarzazate, which flows into the Barrage El-Mansour-Eddahbi. More of this later! As we disembarked the minibuses, the group was greeted by a Desert Little Owl perched on a large mud wall. Walking down to the water a plethora of waders was found including a single Green, ten Wood and eight Common Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, seven Collared Pratincoles and a small group of Little Ringed Plovers. They were accompanied by 12 Long-billed Crested Larks and a Moroccan White Wagtail. Overhead, a Western Marsh Harrier was noted, just like being back home! On the alluvial soil around the water tamarisk was growing and in these bushes were Saharan Olivaceous Warblers, Melodious Warblers and a Whinchat. Flying high above us was a flock of Honey Buzzards, which found a thermal and spiralled higher and higher. A

lovely sight! The local people were cultivating this flood plain soil in an ingenious way. They had cut out holes in the track in which a cereal crop was sown. The next hole, smaller, was planted with a piece of tamarisk and the next some sort of gourd or squash. This continued all along the flood plain area. The assumption was that the tamarisk was planted to shelter the food crops from desert sandstorms? Many locals were working this fertile soil amongst a background of sand. Whilst scanning this area, some of us found a small flock of Cream-coloured Coursers feeding just beyond the cultivations. Others were far more interested in comings and goings of a Fat Sand Rat (according to Eric!), which kept scurrying around by its burrow. Eric was adamant that he had correctly identified the species, although Will Brame considered it to be a Moroccan Jird (*Meriones grandis*), a species of rodent from the family Muridae, which is endemic to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Walking back towards the buses, we were treated to amazing views of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters as they hawked over the water and more warblers were found in the scrub. A Black Kite flew low over the reed bed, whilst a distant Long-legged Buzzard was watched and admired.

Moving a little way east and driving down a very sandy bumpy road the main reservoir came into view. The minibuses parked on a raised area overlooking the water where good but distant view of many of the birds on and around the reservoir was possible. Lots of Great-crested Grebes, Little Egrets, Eurasian Coots, Purple, Squacco and Grey Herons, Greenshanks and Little Stints were seen. Several terns were flying up and down hunting and included Gull-billed, Whiskered and Black. The group split up with some walking the shoreline to the east, whilst others searched for migrants in the bushes and trees around the minibuses. A good selection of birds was found including Western Orphean, Western Olivaceous, and Western Subalpine Warblers. A Rufous Bush Robin was seen very well posing atop a wire fence. The shore party split and Dick Walden carried on a lot further east. He came across eight Marbled Duck, but by the time the rest of the group had caught up with him the birds had disappeared behind a very large island, again shades of Minsmere.

Time was now getting on and we should have had lunch by now, so getting back on the buses we continued along the edge of the reservoir. One of the vehicles went down into a gully in the road to help a car which had become stuck in the sand only to also get stuck. Most of the group went to its rescue and it was finally freed from the sand's grip. The second bus had to now navigate the same area, but apart from one

small wheel spin got through without incident. Back onto tarmac, we headed for our lunch stop at El Kelaa and the Hotel Rosa Damaskina. We were led onto a terrace overlooking a fairly wide shallow river. Hoopoes were flying around and Little Ringed Plovers were on the shingle, Bulbuls were constantly calling from the trees to the side of the terrace with African Blue Tit, House Sparrow, Nightingale and Blackbird all singing for attention. Upstream from the hotel, the locals were washing their rugs and other laundry in the river. This seemed to be achieved by beating the article on the rocks and then laying it over the rocks to dry. There were masses of people using this natural “laundrette”, but in a land where water is a scarce resource needs must. A large lorry was driven into the river and it was thought that it too was going to be washed but it seemed it was only taking a short cut! Our meals seemed to take an age to arrive, but the birds kept us entertained and in one of the back rooms a few locals (one sporting a Chelsea top) and our drivers were watching Liverpool versus Chelsea live on TV. This proved to be a major distraction with Brenda and other football fanatics disappearing at regular intervals, returning to give the rest of the party updates on the score. Chelsea won 2:0 which more or less ended Liverpool’s Championship title challenge. After the meal, more tarmac and we slowly progressed to Boumalne, arriving at Hotel Xaluca later than expected. We quickly checked in, dumped our bags and returned to the minibuses, hoping for a productive birding session at the Tagdilt Track before dusk. The essential stop for alcohol carry-outs was made en route.

Most of the group were not prepared for the sight that greeted them as progress was made down this track. Tons of rubbish (most of it in blue plastic bags) was strewn over a vast area of what should have been beautiful desert landscape, its distribution no doubt aided by the desert winds. It hardly bothered the birds though as ten Temminck’s, two Thick-billed and nine Thekla Larks along with 20 Red-rumped, a White-crowned and three Desert Wheatears were busy feeding amongst the bags. Swallows, swifts and a distant Long-legged Buzzard were seen flying over. A very surreal sight was a Cream-coloured Courser feeding on flies around these bags, the bird taking on the blue hue. As it was getting quite dark and clouds were building, a move back to the hotel was thought desirable. A quick wash and brush up in short time and down for a meal, which was a very nice chicken (or was it beef?) tagine. After the meal the customary log was presided over by Eric. The day’s sightings were scrutinised, queried and entered onto the official

spreadsheet. However, the proceedings were brought to an unscheduled halt by the strains of the Archer's theme tune coming from a tablet which the owner could not shut off! The log meeting descended into hilarity and was closed. Wandering back to the rooms the night sky was a mass of stars, a fitting end to a very eventful day.

Ivan Levett

Monday 28th April 2014

An optional pre-breakfast visit to the Tagdilt Track before we start today's long drive (4 hrs 30 mins including stops) to the remote Auberge Derkaoua Hotel. We'll check suitable areas of scrub en route to our lunch stop at Ar-Rachidia from where we will proceed southwards (2 hrs 30 mins) along the Ziz valley.

The hardy birdwatchers amongst the group got up for a dawn exploration of the Tagdilt Trail. Birds of note around the rubbish-strewn area were ten Thick-billed larks, five Cream-coloured Coursers and a Greater Hoopoe Lark plus a good number of Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears and Temminck's and Thekla Larks. Retuning for breakfast, we left the hotel at around 9.10 a.m. for our long drive towards the desert. There was nothing of note from our back seat birdwatcher Eric and after a couple of hours we passed through the town of Goulmima. We stopped at an area east of here, (Gosney Morocco: the deserts, Page 16, site 3) to look for Scrub Warbler. Ali and Dick found it quite quickly and called us all over. We had very good views of it flicking its tail and running around through the bushes and perching for some photos. Four Greater Hoopoe Larks were also seen in the area plus, among other things, a Red-throated Pipit, a Melodious Warbler, one Spotted and two Pied Flycatchers and a Whinchat. A flock of six Desert Larks were flushed from the plain. No sooner had we located the Scrub Warbler, when a four-wheel drive came across the desert with Brahim and the obnoxious yanks. Steve went over to tell them that we had located the Scrub Warbler to which they replied that they would rather find their own thank you very much and commanded Brahim to find another one! He quietly proclaimed that this was the only one he knew to which their 'leader' retorted loudly "well we haven't got much choice then" and their group proceeded to the spot where we had last seen the bird. We left them to it, boarded the minibuses and headed for our lunch stop at the Kenzi Rissani hotel in Ar-Rachidia.

A very nice lunch in a hotel and a bit of shopping for some of us! Back on board, we drove along the Ziz valley, through Erfoud and on to the area around Rissani where we looked for the site for Pharaoh Eagle Owl. After retreating from a dead end in a village watched by bemused locals, we found what was thought to be the right area. A close examination of the hillside and all likely crevasses produced nothing, but we did have good views of three Brown-necked Ravens flying against the hills and the brown neck was clearly visible. During our wait to find the owl, our driver entertained us with owl songs, mountain climbing, arm flapping and what became a refrain if things went wrong “Whaley Whaley Whaley” (when he thought he had broken someone’s scope). Needless to say with all these activities the owl was nowhere to be seen. We then moved to another site to look for sandgrouse. The minibuses eventually could go no further on the dirt track so we stopped and piled out. In the very far distance, sandgrouse were seen and we trekked out onto the plain to get a better look. The birds were still very distant and it was nearly dusk, but when they flew off the eyes of the experts declared that there were about 400 Spotted Sandgrouse. On our return to the bus, a most unconfiding lark was seen spending most of its time hiding behind the low bushes. It was identified as a Desert Lark, but no one had good views.

By the time we set off towards our hotel in the desert the light was fading quickly. In the darkness, we took a turn off the main road onto a gravel road crossing what appeared to be featureless desert but, eventually, lo and behold, we arrived at the Auberge Derkaoua. A quick freshen up, the evening log, chicken tagine, followed by lemon tart and ice-cream!! A perfect end to a great day’s birding. There were some last minute adjustments to tomorrow’s itinerary concerning our four-wheel drive trip into the desert. We learnt that our American friends were not happy about us joining them on the trip (surprise, surprise!), so Brahim would not be available. Instead, we would be led by a local Moroccan guide Lahcen Oucha who, by sheer coincidence, we had been trying to contact earlier that day to help us find the Pharaoh Eagle Owl!

Rebecca Bedwell

Tuesday 29th April

A very early breakfast and then transfer to 4WDives and head towards the gateway settlement of Merzouga being guided by local guide.

Overnight again in Auberge Derkaoua.

Our 6.00 a.m. breakfast was what promised to be the start of an exciting day in the true desert regions of South-east Morocco taking in the areas around Erfoud, Merzouga and Rissani. Lahcen, together with our four-wheel drive vehicle drivers, were found waiting outside the hotel. Our mode of transport was the only way to negotiate the rough tracks and sandy terrain that we would encounter. Telescopes and equipment were loaded and we set off on a track and soon encountered our first bird of the day, a Marsh Harrier flying over the desert. Brown-necked Ravens were also seen and before long we stopped to look at two Bar-tailed Larks that showed well alongside the track. Hoopoe Larks and White-crowned Wheatears were also seen. We followed a desert track that led onto a tarmac road that took us through Moroccan villages with all the early morning hustle and bustle of children cycling to school and traders preparing for the day ahead.

We then travelled through an area lush with palms and vegetation on the edge of the village, soon to take a right turn and stop where Lahcen pointed to some bushes 50 metres from the road. Within minutes, two Fulvous Babblers appeared carrying food to feed nestlings within the bush. These thrush-sized, long-tailed, sandy-brown birds continued to entertain along with a supporting cast of Palm Dove, Turtle Dove, Crested Lark and Cuckoo. Back in the four-wheel drives, we continued to the next stop, pulling off the tarmac road and bouncing over the desert to a range of sandstone cliffs. It was exactly the same spot as we had visited yesterday without success! Lahcen started searching cracks, holes and fissures in the rock face where we were parked before setting off across the desert to another line of cliffs where he quickly found a Pharaoh Eagle Owl roosting in a hole near the top of the cliff. Good scope views were enjoyed by all. The desert floor and the cliffs here were full of fossils of sea shells and corals indicating that the area was once the bed of a shallow tropical sea – difficult to imagine looking at the arid desert it is now. Before leaving, a Desert Red Fox was seen on the cliff face entering a fissure in the rock. Unfortunately, it did not re-appear. We were on the move again to another cliff face, where a large falcon flew in from the left and showed well for all observers. Some controversy here as Lahcen identified it as a Barbary Falcon, but it appeared to lack the rufous nape and underparts associated with that species. As many consider Barbary Falcon to be conspecific with Peregrine Falcon, the exact identity of this bird may remain in doubt. Sandgrouse were also seen flying over the cliffs with hirundines always trickling past. Back to the four-wheel drives and a short drive later, another Pharaoh Eagle Owl

was located, again in a hole in the cliff face. A few hundred metres further along, we stopped again, this time for a Lanner Falcon perched up on a ledge. This stunning bird was bigger than a Peregrine and it continued to sit on its perch, giving excellent scope views for everyone. Ivan Levett, our fox-finder extraordinaire, unbelievably found another with its eyes, muzzle and ears showing above a rock? This time good views were enjoyed by all. A flock of 46 Brown-necked Ravens were seen flying further down the ridge.

We set off for a longer drive deeper in to the desert, the temperatures now in the mid-thirties and rising. Our drivers most obviously were enjoying the drive and showed a competitive edge, bouncing and crashing across the desert leaving a trail of dust in their wake. After several kilometres, we stopped to discover our vehicle had a totally flat rear tyre, the wheel rim looking as though it had sustained one bash too many! We spread ourselves out amongst the other vehicles and set off leaving the driver to sort the puncture. Arriving at a Berber Nomad camp we were greeted by a tall thin gentleman in flowing robes who spoke little but had a great presence. He led us from his camp and through his 'garden' for several hundred metres to a sandy rise overlooking some low bushes. In the shade at the base of one of the bushes, two Egyptian Nightjars, one either side, were noted. These sandy-coloured mottled birds, eyes tight shut were perfectly camouflaged and would easily be overlooked. They were fabulous birds, which we were to see flying at another site later in the trip.

We returned to the Berber camp and were invited into a circular dome shaped building constructed from mud and straw. Sitting on mats we were served traditional tea in small glasses with sprigs of mint. Superb hospitality and gratefully received by all. Around the camp were small areas of cultivation where many migrants were feeding including Melodious Warbler, Pied Flycatcher and Saharan Olivaceous Warbler. The repaired four-wheel drive had re-joined us, so we set off again to another Nomad camp where we had great views of Desert Sparrow in trees around the buildings. We were led into an area of scrub deep in the desert to search for Desert Warbler, but this time without success. We scoured the area in the scorching sun and some of us were stationed next to shrubby bush, which (according to Lahen) was where a pair had been feeding chicks a few days earlier, whilst he searched an area further afield. Whilst he was away, Eric poked his head in the bush and declared that the chicks had flown, so it was time to give up.

On our return to the camp, more migrants were present with a steady stream of hirundines moving across the desert. It was late afternoon with the temperature approaching 40oC when only mad dogs and birders would venture out, so we set off for a very late lunch before continuing to the Auberge Yasmina (or Café Yasmina). An extensive area of tamarisk and scrub can be found at the rear of this hotel, which acts as a magnet for birds migrating through the desert. The area was alive with quality birds including Rufous Bush Robin, Bonelli's Warbler, Desert Grey Shrike, Saharan Olivaceous Warbler, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Golden Oriole, Common Redstart, a probable Atlas Flycatcher (identification confirmed later from photographs) and many more. Every bush had a good bird in it – top class birding. With dusk approaching, we set off back to our hotel where Woodchat Shrike, Pied and Spotted Flycatcher and Common Redstart were showing in the grounds. The end of an amazing day in the desert – one of the most memorable birding days I have ever had.

Richard Weale

Wednesday 30th April

Another long drive over Atlas Mountains to Midelt. Initially we'll search desert wadis for migrants and then the scrubby areas as we descend the northern slopes. Overnight at Hotel Kasbah Asmaa at Midelt.

The explosive bubbling song from the many Common Bulbuls that breed in the hotel gardens awoke most of us from our slumbers, so it was out for some pre-breakfast birding for some of the group. The well-vegetated grounds of the excellent Hotel Auberge Derkaoua act as a magnet for passage migrants and this morning's search would yield good rewards. A walk along the track a few hundred metres from the hotel revealed a good fall of birds and included: Common Redstart, Woodchat Shrike, Melodious Warbler, Rufous Bush Robin, Turtle Dove, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Sand Martin and Swallow. Parties of Brown-necked Ravens were noted in the distance and White-crowned Wheatears were much in evidence. After breakfast, the minibuses were loaded ready for our long drive to Midelt, but the group first returned to the area where the migrants had been found and added six European Bee-eaters, Whinchat, Common Whitethroat, Common Swift and a calling Greater Hoopoe Lark to the day list. There were so many birds that it was difficult to drag ourselves away, but onward was a must. It was going to be a slow journey with frequent stops whenever suitable habitat was located.

Our first stop was at Kasbah Said for another crack at African Desert Warbler, again unsuccessful, but we did see a Greater Hoopoe Lark displaying while Will found a second pair of Egyptian Nightjars. The four “walkie-talkies” that we were using proved invaluable here as the news was spread quickly for everyone to get close views of these magnificent birds again. Our second stop was at the Fossil shop at 11.00 a.m. and it was now 92 degrees. This proved very productive for birds in a relatively small area with loads of Yellow Wagtails mainly of the Grey-headed and Spanish forms, two Rufous Bush Robins, lots of Common Redstarts, Northern Wheatears, Bar-tailed Desert Larks, to name but a few. We made a short stop at Erfoud to load up with more water before heading to Ar-Rachidia for lunch at the Kenzi Rissani hotel where Dick had the remarkable sight of 11 European Turtle Doves gathered together in the hotel garden, whilst the rest of us were eating lunch or sipping mint tea. The day-total for this species reached 25, a count now unlikely to be achieved in UK! It was then on to Tizi-n-Tahrent Pass for the Tristram’s Warbler site and it wasn’t long before a singing male was located, eventually perching and singing in the trees above our heads. It was soon joined by a second male close by competing for territory. A splendid male Pied Flycatcher was also seen and just as we were about to leave Rebecca found two superb Moussier’s Redstarts. What stunners these birds are? We then completed our long journey to Midelt staying at the Hotel Kasbah Ashaa for one night ready for a big day tomorrow. “Atlas Flycatcher” perhaps?

Ali Riseborough

Thursday 1st May

An optional, pre-breakfast visit to Zeida Plain and then drive from Midelt to Ifrane. Stop for Barbary Macaques and forest birding on the approach to Ifrane and then walk the shores of Lake Dayat Aoua late-afternoon.

Overnight at Perce Neige, Ifrane.

As our blurry-eyed team gathered in the pre-dawn darkness outside the Hotel Kasbah Asmaa in Midelt, they would have had little idea of the exciting day that lay ahead of them. The early start was necessary to give us the best chance of seeing the elusive Dupont’s Lark, our first target of the day. Most sources claim that it ceases singing at daybreak and becomes extremely difficult to observe. Dawn, therefore, found the group walking a track on the Zeida plain where at least two Dupont’s could be heard singing from the low vegetation. There then followed some anxious minutes scanning the plain where several larks were seen

causing excitement, but these proved to be mainly Lesser Short-toed with a few Thekla Larks. Eventually a Dupont's was located and the tension eased and, as the minutes passed, more were located somewhat dispelling this bird's elusive reputation! The group estimated that they had seen at least six birds. We started to drift away towards the minibuses with breakfast on our minds. However, the Zeida plain had one more surprise for us as a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew in and landed a hundred metres from the group giving good views over the next 15 minutes.

Driving back through Midelt, one bus made a fortuitous stop to check out some Kestrels. This allowed some members of the group to have close encounters with Cattle Egrets (c.700 in total) and White Storks (88), both species nesting in trees a few feet above the town centre pavements. After a very late breakfast, we continued our long drive from Midelt through the Atlas Mountains to the ski resort town of Ifrane. The first stop of the day was at a lake five kilometres south of Timahdite where we had close encounters with nesting Red-knobbed Coots. The second stop was in the Cedar forest, amusement provided by a group of Barbary Macaques taking proffered nuts from people's hands. Short-toed Treecreeper was also added to the list at this stop and a female flycatcher was most likely to have been an Atlas Flycatcher.

Lunch was taken in a pavement restaurant in the town of Azrou where Cattle Egrets, White Storks, Lesser Kestrels and Pallid and Alpine Swifts provided a welcome distraction to the restaurant owner's lack of sartorial elegance and hygiene! We made our way through the modern town of Ifrane destined to Lake Dayat Aoua a few kilometres further on, but we stopped briefly by the roadside to view a group of up to 16 European Rollers perched on wires and rocks. Despite the hordes of people on the lake shore enjoying a Moroccan bank holiday the area teemed with birds. The lake is 1,460 metres above sea-level and submerged and emergent flora is abundant. It is surrounded by a mosaic of grazed wet meadows and holm oak and cedar forests. An estimated 2,000 each of Black-necked Grebes and European Coots and 150 Red-knobbed Coots provided the bulk. Flocks of wildfowl were also present amongst floating vegetation including 72 Ferruginous Ducks. However, eyes also turned to the skies as Egyptian Vulture, Bonelli's Eagle and Northern Goshawk were quickly added to the trip list. A Black-crowned Night Heron perched in a dead tree was to be the only record of the trip for this species. Seven Hawfinches were seen in lakeside trees and as the afternoon

progressed a small passage of European Honey Buzzards was noted involving some 42 birds.

As the sun dipped below the surrounding hills, the weary team retired to their hotel in Ifrane, reminiscing over another bird-filled day in this wonderful country.

Dick Walden

Photo Gallery Two – people and places photos



















Friday 2nd May 2014

Search the forests south of Ifrane and again visit Dayat Aoua in the afternoon. Overnight in Perce Neige, Ifrane.

Today was the day to seek out the Atlas Flycatcher. Minibuses were boarded by 7.40 a.m. and we headed in the direction of Azrou on the N5, passing the airport where a large number of Lesser Kestrels were seen, before arriving at a site recommended by Gosney, (see note 3, page 32 of his Morocco: Coasts and Mountains). We fanned out either side of the road in this forest of magnificent oak trees and the first Atlas Flycatcher was found at 08.05 a.m.! It looked exactly like the bird seen two days earlier at Café Yasmina. Altogether, 12 birds were noted, including two at a nest site, together with Mistle Thrush, Nuthatch, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, African Blue Tit, Eurasian Jay, Great Tit, Coal Tit, European Robin, Blackcap, Honey Buzzard and Rock Sparrow – this last nesting in a tree. So, with the target bird in the bag, it was decided to return to Dayat Aoua.

We parked at the dam end and a leisurely stroll ensued. Birds on the lake were pretty much as yesterday, although wildfowl numbers were down. This time there was more emphasis on butterflies and dragonflies than birds, but Golden Orioles in the poplars by the dam were a highlight. An impressive total of 16 species of butterfly and 11 species of dragonfly were noted; the latter included a number of species that few of us had seen before. These included Iberian, Small, Desert and Mediterranean Damselflies (or Bluets), Broad Scarlet, Dainty Damselfly, Goblet-marked Blue-eye and Violet Dropwing. A return was made to Ifrane for lunch at the Hotel Le Chamonix where the set lunch was excellent value. The hotel's name is a reminder that Ifrane is a ski resort and is well known for having the coldest temperature ever recorded in Africa and the Arab World, having recorded as low as -24°C (-11°F) on 11th February 1935.

After lunch, another visit was made to Dayat Aoua preceded by a stop at a small lake visible from the N8. Another leisurely stroll resumed from where we finished at lunchtime and that was the pattern for the rest of the day, a somewhat relaxed pace after the intensity of the previous days. Raptors seen included Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard and a pair of displaying Bonelli's Eagles, there was a quantity of European Rollers and the huge number of birds on the water ensured continual interest. Stumps were drawn at 7.15 p.m. and the return to Ifrane was followed by the log and evening meal plus packing in anticipation of tomorrow's early start for our long journey to the coast.

John Bedwell

Saturday 3rd May

An early breakfast at 6.00 a.m. and then a long drive to the coast at Merdja Zerda. We were hopeful of finding Hassan ("Ali the Nomad") who would take us by boat to explore the estuary and then to the marshes at dusk. We will then take the long and arduous drive back to Fez where we will overnight at Hotel Sofia ready for tomorrow's early-morning flight.

Our penultimate day began early under a cloudless sky, but there was crispness to the air reflecting our altitude of over five thousand feet. By 7.15 a.m. we were on the road north from Ifrane on what was to become a long and arduous descent to sea level. Once we had descended from the Middle Atlas, the landscape gave way to extensive cereal fields and, nearing Meknes, vineyards. We did manage to add two species to the trip list, Stonechat and a hovering Black-shouldered Kite, but otherwise the journey proved largely uneventful along poorly maintained roads and through endless seemingly chaotic villages. Finally, after over five hours on the road, we arrived at our destination, the seaside resort of Moulay Bouselham.

The arrival of two tourist minibuses seemed to cause pandemonium amongst the local boat operators as they actively touted for potential business, but miraculously from the hubbub we were approached by Hassan, the local bird guide we were seeking. After some quick negotiations, we headed for the beach, passing through a hectic fish market, to board three small boats for a tour of Merdja Zerda, a vast tidal lagoon. It wasn't long before our three boats closed in on an area of mudflats and we were treated to stunning views of Ringed Plover of the northern race tundrae, Kentish Plover, Dunlin and Grey Plover in the strong midday light. Careful scanning located a few Whimbrels, a summer-plumaged Knot and the first of several Curlew Sandpipers, many again in striking summer plumage. As we proceeded further into the lagoon, other waders were added to the species list, including Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Avocet, Greenshank and Bar-tailed Godwit. Waders aside, we encountered a sizeable gathering of Eurasian Spoonbills feeding in the shallow waters, the odd Grey Heron and a small flock of Little Terns. Near the mouth of the lagoon a roosting flock of gulls included some 24 Audouin's Gulls amongst the numerous Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a small group of Sandwich Terns.

Back ashore, Hassan suggested that we took lunch and he would return to guide our party to the Marsh Owl site within an hour. As we walked

from the harbour, he further suggested that if we spoke to the fishermen that were unloading their catch and purchased about five kilos of fish, the restaurant would be happy to cook it for us. Now this caused a great deal of consternation amongst our party – what buy fish that aren't in packets! Realising that this simple task was quite beyond us, he then told us to go to the restaurant and order something from the menu! We all sat down in the FISH restaurant when Ali (Ali Riseborough not Ali the Nomad) declared that he didn't like fish and then enquired as to what sort of fish was being served and whether they were the ones with a head at one end and a tail at the other! By this time, we were all quite tired so there was a suggestion (in two words) that Ali should take his custom elsewhere as this was, after all, a FISH restaurant! Ali trudged off only to return ten minutes later. After pondering over the menu and moaning intently, he called the proprietor over and suggested that his menu should be more varied to cater for a culinary connoisseur like himself. Eventually the staff served him an omelette, whilst the rest of us enjoyed an amazing fish lunch.

When birding recommenced, we were joined by a party of Danish birders keen for Hassan to guide them too to the main quarry of the day, views of the breeding Marsh Owls for which Merdja Zerda is world-renowned. We stopped after a short distance to view the lagoon from an area of higher ground. From here a group of Greater Flamingos were distantly visible, a stunning male Montagu's Harrier made a fly past and Lapwing was added to the species list. With time rapidly pushing on, we proceeded in convoy along very rough roads and finally along even rougher tracks out into potato fields. Once parked up, we were joined by the 'guardian of the marsh' and quietly we followed him and Hassan out onto the edges of the marsh, accompanied by the sound of numerous Zitting Cisticolas. We stopped by an extensive area of five-foot high juncus and waited while Hassan and his assistant continued forward. It wasn't long before they flushed our quarry. Over the course of the next fifteen minutes or so we were treated to superb views of two magnificent Marsh Owls, including times when one of the owls perched on a nearby post and the brown un-streaked upperparts, dark face mask and dark eyes were strikingly obvious.

With the sun setting we made our way back to the minibuses excited by the magical experience. After dropping off Hassan and thanking him for a wonderful afternoon's birding, we were on our way and contemplating the four-hour drive to Fes, along surely some of the worst roads Morocco could throw at us and our final night in Morocco. An argument

ensued amongst our two drivers as one was religiously following his Satnav and the other had wanted to take a quicker albeit less-direct route. We eventually arrived in Fes and, after completing several circuits of the town centre, found the Hotel Sofia and checked in. It was by now 10.30 p.m. and the restaurant was closed, so no final celebratory dinner in fact nothing to eat at all! The hotel staff had no intention of helping us with anything and even organising an early breakfast for our 07.35 a.m. flight was most nearly impossible. Perhaps a large tip would have helped? After some rigorous negotiating, the manager did promise that a breakfast of coffee and rolls would be laid out for us, so at least we would have something at the start of our long journey home.

Andrew Green

Sunday 4th May

Early rise to get to Fez airport by 06.00 to depart at 07.35 hrs (Ryanair), arriving Stansted 11.00 hrs.

Our promised early breakfast hardly lived up to expectations, the coffee being stone cold with the man on duty having little or no intension of rectifying the matter. So, without further ado we piled into the minibuses and headed for the airport. Needless to say the Hotel Sofia in Fez is not one that we would recommend! It was dark so there was no chance of spotting any birds on the journey, so our “Last bird in Morocco competition” was abandoned. We said our goodbyes to our excellent drivers who were overwhelmed with their tip and dragged our suitcases into the airport. As the sun began to rise, some of us gazed out from the airport lounge to see if we could add a few species to the day list. In gloomy light, we managed ten all told with a Western Marsh Harrier being the best of the bunch. We boarded the plane just after daybreak and the last birds of the trip was a pair of Spotless Starlings, which were watched from our seats as they frantically took nesting material into the wheel housing on the wing of our plane. Thankfully, the plane took off on time, so the birds didn’t have time to complete their nest!

This was truly a dream tour and the team notched up just over 200 species of birds, five mammals, 12 dragonflies, 26 butterflies and 13 reptiles/amphibians. It was all down to lots of planning and we are grateful to WBC member Jon Warnes who visited Morocco with Richard Smith and Peter Naphthine three weeks before our tour and forwarded up-to-date information.

Our greatest thanks go to David Walsh who inspired us with his talk to WBC members on birding in the Moroccan deserts in January 2014 and

helped enormously, not only with the whereabouts of key species, but also the logistics, e.g. when to tip and not to tip, payments for bottled water, travel length in time and distance between sites and how long to stay at each site. David leads several tours for Ornitholidays to a number of worldwide destinations each year, including annual spring and autumn trips to Morocco (see www.ornitholidays.co.uk). He is undoubtedly one of the best tour leaders for birders visiting this wonderful country.

Steve Piotrowski