

Wingspan Bird Tours

In Morocco

March 10th – 17th 2007

Trip Report by Bob Buckler.

This was a whirlwind tour with my good friend Richard Headford to recce the country in order to add this superb birding venue to the growing list of destinations for Wingspan Bird Tours. The trip was essentially taken in order to seek out routes, hotels and certain birding sites, we traced a planned route in 7-days, my future tours will take the same route but over a longer 10 day period and will include a full day's 4-wheel excursion into the desert to locate Houbara Bustard using a local, reliable guide.

Saturday 10th March

Our flight from Gatwick to Marrakech arrived on time at 11:20 am and after a long wait at customs we eventually picked up our vehicle for this seven day whirlwind tour. We left the airport at 12:30 in bright sunshine and 22°C, we headed directly for Oukiamedan high up in the atlas mountains some 70 kilometers away. Within minutes we were ticking off species with Barn Swallows, House Sparrows and Spotless Starlings being the first to be identified.

As we edged our way through the suburbs the distant snow capped mountains looked fantastic in a clear blue



sky. A short roadside stop found us watching a large “kettle” of some 100 White Storks as they circled on thermals, gaining height, for their northward journey towards Spain. We made numerous stops as we climbed the foothills, quickly locating Common Bulbuls in small, vociferous parties, Cattle Egrets littered the meadows, Wood Pigeons flashed across the road and Eurasian Kestrels sat on roadside poles. We took a short walk in a small fir copse and found Firecrest, Coal Tit, the African race of Chaffinch (a very smart bird), and also the African race of Blue Tit, looking very bright and colourful.

As we reached the snowline, the mountainside became less vegetated, beside a babbling brook we found Grey Wagtail and our first Red-billed Chough. At Oukaimedan a large pool held two Ruddy Shelduck an unusual sighting of this species at such an altitude. Huge numbers of both Red-billed and Alpine Chough formed large flocks and could be seen in all directions, these birds roamed in mixed flocks of 2-3 hundred birds, a spectacular sight in outstanding scenery.



It was now late afternoon and many of the skiers and hill walkers were returning from the ski-lifts heading for their warm hotel rooms for a little après ski entertainment, whilst we decided to do the opposite, we parked up and headed out to the ski lifts. We encountered numerous locals who were trying to sell us souvenirs and were quite annoying in their persistence, but we shook them off and we were left alone to go birding. Black Redstarts seemed to be everywhere and once passed the ski lift we veered off the beaten track towards some derelict stone dwellings where some unfamiliar bird calls were emanating. The calls got louder as we approached a large patch of snow when we saw movement at the snowline. A small flock of some 18

Crimson-winged Finches fed amongst the scree and gave us superb views and a pair of Little Owls watched us from a nearby stone wall. Having bagged our target species we returned to the ski lift which was now almost deserted, several Horned Larks were feeding alongside the footpath, a somewhat strange encounter as we normally associate these birds with the coastline of eastern Britain during the winter.

The temperature had dropped from a comfortable 22 degrees to a cold 6 degrees, but we still had an hour or so of daylight left so we drove back into the village and ventured up a track alongside a row of houses. We found numerous Rock Sparrows giving their wheezy call and more Horned Larks flew over us, a Pair of Black Wheatears graced one garden and several Alpine Accentors were located behind another house. Two loud Ravens flew over as we walked further along the rising track a House Bunting sat on a nearby roof for a short while and many more Rock Sparrows fed along the track. We approached a summit which gave unbelievable views and soaring below us were 3 Long-legged Buzzards calling constantly, we witnessed a territorial battle with astonishing aerial manoeuvres and no sooner had they arrived, they were gone. We continued climbing the track and found Mistle Thrush, Ring Ouzel more Black Wheatears and Black Redstarts, but not much else.

It was getting cold and dim so we decided to call it a day and headed for our hotel, which had lovely heated rooms and breathtaking views. We ate tajines in the deserted restaurant, (it was now the end of the skiing season), and took an early night in anticipation of an early morning walk.

Day 2. Sunday 11th March.

A cold start to a bright sunny day and our pre-breakfast walk produced more Chaffinches, Mistle Thrushes, Black Redstarts, Choughs of both species all just outside the hotel. Further along the track that we had climbed last night we found a flock of Barbary Partridges, several Serins and a Blackbird.

After breakfast we set off down the mountain road heading for Boulmalne Dades, a drive of some 480 kilometers passing through some fantastic scenery along the way. Our first of many, many stops produced a



Rock Bunting sitting in the middle of the road and along a nearby stream we found White-throated Dipper, Winter Wren and Goldfinch. Lower down and back below the tree line we stopped to look for Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, and although we heard a couple of calls we only managed the briefest of glimpses. In the nearby scrub we saw, Blue, Great and Coal Tit, Winter Wren and Common Bulbul.

Passing through the very busy town of Darkait Ouriki we headed for Ait Ourir and stopped a couple of kilometers out of town. Some nice scrub habitat stretched either side of the road and soon we were onto our first Moussier's

Redstart, two females, also Stonechat, both Crested and Thekla Larks and Moroccan Black-billed Magpies having less white in their flanks and with a blue flash on the side of the head. The weather was bright, sunny and warm with good visibility, we were able to pick out a Black-shouldered Kite sitting on a pylon about a mile away in the valley below us and we scoped a Marsh Harrier quartering distant fields.

Moving on we stopped many times between Ait Ourir and Quarzazate adding two more Moussier's Redstarts, Common Bulbuls, Collared Doves, Laughing Doves, White-crowned Wheatear, Black-eared Wheatear, Northern Wheatear, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, White Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Wood Sandpiper, Corn Bunting, Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Lark, Barn Swallow, House and Sand Martin.



At Quarzazate we scanned the reservoir finding Great-crested Grebe, Little-ringed Plover, Mallard, Cormorant, Marsh Harrier and Blue-rock Thrush. Finally we made a brief visit to the famous Tagdilt Trail, in very windy conditions and fading light we found many Red-rumped Wheatears, Common Kestrel, Temminck's Horned Lark and a distant Raven was the last bird of the day. We checked into our hotel nearby for a welcome rest, shower and dinner.

Day 3. Monday 12th March.

We were up at 6 am and walked the garden of the hotel which was built on the edge of the town and adjacent to a huge expanse of open stony plains or pebble desert. The few shrubs and trees of the garden provided shelter to a number of Warblers and it not long before we had listed Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, House Sparrow, blackbird, House Bunting and Barn Swallows.

After breakfast we set off for a more thorough search of the desert plains around the Tagdilt Trail. We drove 10km out of town and turned south along a tarmac lane and then west onto the plain. Making frequent stops we saw many Red-rumped Wheatears, Black-eared Wheatears, Crested Larks and large flocks of Short-toed Larks. As the light grew brighter and the air warmed in good sunlight bird song came from all directions, groups of Black-bellied Sandgrouse gave their bubbling call and 2 distant Spotted Sandgrouse alerted us by their distinctive call. More Black-bellied (15) were found on the ground along with more Temminck's Horned Larks. Soon the melodic song of the Hoopoe Lark was heard and we located the first of many as it ran to a large tuft of grass before taking off and performing a fantastic flight display. Many Cream-coloured Coursers ran from the vehicle as we drove deeper into the desolate expanse of sand, stone and scrub, birds of

prey began to appear in the mid-morning heat, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Black Kite, Short-toed Eagle and a Lanner Falcon put in a brief appearance. We found more of the same on the return loop adding Black Wheatear, Northern Wheatear and more Hoopoe Larks to the list.

It was now time to move on so we continued eastwards on the empty open road towards Errachidia, stopping off at the spectacular Todra Gorge. We spent little time there as it was full of tourists and the irritating hoards of hawkers. We noted Rock Doves, had great views of a perched Barbary Falcon and saw several Crag Martins before driving ever further eastward.

We searched roadside wadis for Scrub Warbler and Desert Warbler with no luck but we did find Moussier's Redstart, Hoopoe, Hoopoe Lark, Spectacled Warbler, Southern Grey Shrike, White-crowned Wheatear, Desert Lark and another Marsh Harrier.

We pressed on to Erfoud via Rissani noting Laughing Doves and more W C Wheatears along the way. The major sand dune system of Erg Chebi loomed menacingly in the distance as we approached our Auberge hotel in semi-darkness where we were to stay for the next 2 nights.

Day 4. Tuesday 13th March.



We were up at first light in the chilly desert conditions but we were soon warmed by the sight of a party of Trumpeter Finches, these delightful little birds were everywhere. The walled garden of the Auberge provided an oasis of trees and shrubs that attracted many birds. Dozens of Chiffchaff were seen, along with Sub-alpine, Sardinian, Spectacled Warblers and Blackcaps.

Later we drove to a wadi just south of the nearby Auberge Said, we searched for a reported Desert Warbler but failed to find one, however we found many of the species already noted.

Next we drove south to Merzouga, in very warm conditions, we visited a large seasonal pool called the Dayet lake. Many birds were there with a huge raft of duck in the centre of the lake. There were Shoveler, Garganey, Pintail and over eighty Marbled Duck, a truly lovely sight as I have only seen very small groups of these ducks in Spain. An Egyptian Vulture dropped in on the lake shoreline (a good bird for Morocco), Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, White Stork, Spoonbill, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Kentish and Little-ringed Plovers added to tally of this birding oasis.

We drove much nearer to the desert proper and visited the infamous Cafés Yasmina and Caravanne (infamous because so many birders fail to find them), both were supposed to hold small colonies of Desert Sparrow. Fortunately for us we found half a dozen Desert Sparrows as soon as we arrived at Café Caravanne. We also found a small family party of newly fledged White-crowned Wheatears and in the distance we watched in amazement as a Lanner Falcon harassed a flock of feral pigeons until it singled out one and chased it into the distance, we never saw the outcome.

Our last port of call was an Eagle Owl site just west of Rissani, we arrived in good time with plenty of light



left. In the scrub below the rocky escarpment we found our only Tristram's Warblers of the trip along with more Trumpeter Finches, Spectacled Warblers and Sardinian Warblers, a flock of Brown-necked Ravens flew noisily overhead. A Black-crowned Night Heron flew passed as we approached the owl site, and yes, the Eagle (pharaoh) Owl was showing well in a small cave up high in the cliff face a fitting end to another marvellous day. Later after dinner we staked out the swimming pool area behind the Auberge hoping to see Egyptian Nightjars, we saw a few bats and one or two flying objects that could have been Nightjars but we were uncertain.

Day 5. Wednesday 14th March.

Dry, hazy sunshine, very warm.

We were up and out at 6am walking across to a nearby wadi, soon we were amongst the scrub and grassy banks where we quickly noted the usual fare of Chiffchaff, Sub-alpine and Sardinian Warblers, Trumpeter Finch, Hoopoe and W C Wheatear. After an hour or so we finally latched onto our target bird the Fulvous Babbler as a small flock worked their way through the wadi away from us, next we found our only Common Whitethroat of the trip, an early migrant.

We left our little oasis at the Auberge and headed west to the Atlantic coast, a journey of some several hundred kilometers, we planned to achieve this over two days in a relaxed easy going pace.

A few kilometers outside of Erfoud we stopped by the side of a stony plain which had quite a lot of bird activity, a small flock of large lark-like birds was picked up in the middle distance and on scoping them we quickly identified them as another target species, Thick-billed Larks, a great result.



We made many more stops on the return journey seeing many species including: Linnet, Woodchat Shrike, W C Wheatear, Northern Wheatear, Red-rumped Wheatear, Desert Wheatear, Cream Coloured Courser, White Wagtail, Iberian Wagtail, Corn Bunting, Cattle Egret, Wood Sandpiper, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Black Kite, Short-toed Lark, Hoopoe Lark, Crested Lark, however, when we stopped for the night at Tazenakt we ventured onto another stony plain and had a wonderful hour. We had our first sightings of Bar-tailed Desert Lark alongside its cousin the Desert Lark, we saw 9 Hoopoes, Northern and Desert Wheatear, Hoopoe Lark, Great Grey Shrike, Black-bellied Sandgrouse and several warblers. We spent the night in a hotel in the town centre.

Day 6. Thursday 15th March.

We set off before breakfast and made good time on clear roads hoping to spend as much time as we could afford in the Sous valley. From the car we saw the usual fare but as we entered the Sous valley the terrain changed from the dry stony desert to a lush green low lying valley, with flat agricultural fields of wheat and other crops. We saw many species there, wheatears, finches, larks, Black-winged Kite, “kettles” of White Storks, huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows, Goldfinches, Linnets, Thekla Lark and Bulbuls.

At a site near the Argana forest we saw our first Black-crowned Chagra, Lesser Kestrels, and more shrikes. We visited the airfield at Tourradant and saw more C C Coursers, Stone Curlews and in the hedgerows we listed Willow Warbler, Garden warbler, Blackcap, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, overhead were Little Swift, Red-rumped Swallow, Barn Swallow and Long-legged Buzzards. The midday heat drove us away and as we neared the coast we headed for Oued Massa, an estuary and nature reserve, South of Agadir.



We first visited the heathland above the estuary and located Stone Curlew, Thekla Lark, Spectacled Warbler and Short-toed Lark. Along the main track towards the river mouth we added:- Grey Heron, Spoonbill, Little Egret, L B B Gull, Yellow legged Gull, Cormorant, Pintail, Teal, Common Pochard, Gadwall and Mallard. Waders included:- Snipe, Little Stint, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Pied Avocet, B W Stilt, Eurasian Curlew, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Little-ringed Plover, Kentish Plover, Cattle Egret and Little Grebe.

New passerines to our list included:- Cetti's Warbler and Zitting

Cisticola. We had our best views of Laughing Dove and a superb male Moussier's Redstart posed for photographs.

A little further down the coast on the other side of the village of Massa we found some excellent track-side pools with very obliging birds in them. Several waders, including the delicate Marsh Sandpiper, another excellent find for Morocco, refused to be flushed by us and gave fantastic close views, Moustached Warblers were everywhere, another male Moussier's Redstart put in an appearance and several of our target bird, the Plain Martin, fed over the water. Darkness was drawing in as we left this wonderful place leaving us to find our hotel, in the dark, back in Agadir.

Several beers washed down a wonderful meal in our hotel, followed by a relaxed evening retracing our steps on the map.

Day 7. Friday 16th March.

Our last full day began as all the others did, with a pre-breakfast jaunt to the nearest birding site. This was another estuary, the Oued Sous, we had perfect weather for it, no wind and a bright clear morning. We drove the short distance from the hotel to the river where the road stands several meters above the water. From this vantage point we quickly listed several waders, Pied Avocet, Greater Flamingo, Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Grey Plover, Greenshank, Sanderling, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, plus herons and egrets.

Moving further down river we had a great panoramic view of the river mouth from across some low lying heathland. From there we saw Whiskered Tern, Sandwich Tern, Audouin's Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Eurasian Curlew, and a Red-breasted Merganser (another excellent find for Morocco). Overhead we recorded Marsh Harriers moving through in small groups and we found an Osprey on a telegraph post eating a fish.



After breakfast we drove through the seaside resort of Agadir and headed northward towards Tamri, our first stop was at Oued Tinkerat just south of Tamri where there were many gulls and waders.

It was from the river mouth that we scanned the far hillside and found a flock of 46 Bald Ibis, however the birds promptly flew off and were never seen again. We searched the surrounding countryside to try and get closer views of these mega rare birds but only succeeded in putting up a Quail! A flock of 50+ Audouin's Gulls was an impressive sight and several waders ran along the river mouth but the Ibis was the jewel in the crown.

We continued northward and just south of Essaouira we stopped at Oued Ksab where we found another stony river bed and estuary. More Audouin's Gulls were found and our first Moroccan White Wagtail, an impressive bird with lots of black to the head neck and face. We reached Essaouira in the early evening and realised that was the last of the birding. We celebrated the trip with a great meal in a seafront restaurant and we vowed to return to discover more of this fascinating country.

Day 8. Saturday 17th March.

We set off on our pre-dawn journey to Marrakech arriving at 9am in good time for our noon flight, we noted one new bird on the trip to the airport and that was Calandra Lark. After checking in our bags we killed time by walking around the airport grounds in lovely warm sunshine. A House Bunting was singing from the terminal building, Spotless Starlings were nesting in it and Common Bubuls sang from nearby bushes. We located a Woodchat Shrike's nest, saw Pallid Swifts, Black Kites, White Storks, Common Swifts, Red-rumped Swallows, Collared Doves, Serins and our one and only Booted Eagle, bringing the tally to 165 species and terminating a fabulous week on a high note!

For further details of future trips to Morocco please check out the Wingspan website at:

www.wingspanbirdtours.com