

# Morocco

16-27 January 1998

## Participants:

Bob Bailey

Alan Davies

Stuart Davies

Chris Holt

Bill & Susan Hughey

Granville Pictor

David Robinson

John Sands



## Leaders:

Vaughan Ashby

Peter Lansdown

Picture: Tristram's Warbler

**Day 1:** Group met at Heathrow at 15.00 and flight left 20 minutes late at 17.40 but arrived at Casablanca on time due to a tail wind. We were met by Mustafa, who was to be our driver for the next 11 days, in a nice new minibus with plenty of room for the luggage. We met the last member of the group, Chris Holt from his later flight and drove into Casablanca where, unfortunately, Mustafa got lost! Eventually arrived at 22.00 and checked into our excellent new hotel and, after a brief introductory talk, turned in early.

**Day 2:** Breakfast at 06.30 and departure at 07.00 with Bill & Susan deciding to spend the day exploring Casablanca. Unfortunately, Mustafa still hadn't mastered the Casablanca road system which somewhat delayed our arrival at Sidi Bettache. Despite our best efforts and our completely scouring the whole area, we failed to hear or see any Double-spurred Francolins. We did, however, have superb views of several Black-shouldered Kites & Long-legged Buzzards as well as seeing many Sardinian Warblers, Cattle Egrets & European Serins & a Southern Grey Shrike. Returning through Rabat we purchased the ingredients for a picnic lunch (a daily feature of the tour) before crossing the river where there were numerous Lesser Black-backed & Yellow-legged Gulls. On arriving at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba we immediately had excellent views of several Crested Coots before driving round to the picnic area for lunch. This was the only place in Morocco that we experienced problems with mosquitoes, probably due to the unseasonal warmth, but this did not put us off from seeing our first Marbled Ducks! As we walked along the edge of the lake we searched through large numbers of common waterbirds and found 2 male Garganeys and 2 Ferruginous Ducks. Western Marsh-Harriers continuously quartered the margins of the lake whilst Cetti's Warblers & Zitting Cisticolas called from all around us. A flock of 10 of the African race of Black-billed Magpie were seen before we climbed the steep hill up a nature trail to the open agricultural area at the top which held the first of many Crested Larks, White Wagtails & White Storks seen on the tour. Our final stop of the day was at the marsh at the north end of the lake where, after much anticipation and just as it was getting dark, a single Marsh Owl was seen to leave its roost & surprisingly fly up the hill to hunt over the agricultural land!

**Day 3:** Left Casablanca at 07.00 heading towards Marrakech & Mustafa found the right road first time! Before long we had seen our first Common Bulbuls together with a Black Redstart &, at a roadside stop, we had excellent views of 2 Thekla Larks & a Spanish Sparrow together with distant views of our first Spotless Starling. A little further on we saw our first Little Swifts over the town of Settat &, whilst watching them, also our first House Bunting. Arriving at Marrakech souk at 12.00 we took an hour off from birding to experience the atmosphere and take lunch (a sausage sandwich!). There was the usual selection of snake charmers & carpet sellers with non stop sales patter but, even from the market square, we managed to divert our attention and saw House Bunting, White Stork & Common Kestrel! Heading south into the High Atlas towards Oukaimeden at first we saw very little until we got to a spectacular gorge where we saw a pair of Bonelli's Eagles whilst, below us on the river, was a Grey Wagtail. Further up on the mountain slopes were a mixture of cultivation and deciduous & stunted pine trees with several Rock Buntings & a male Cirl Bunting. Eventually arriving at Oukaimeden about 16.15, we had time to walk around the flat valley bottom but, other than large numbers of Red-billed Chough, we were disappointed to see little. Walking back towards the hotels, however, our fortunes changed dramatically with point-blank views of a male Crimson-winged Finch. With a little light still left, we declined the warmth of the hotel

and were rewarded with a flock of about 70 Rock Sparrows together with Black Redstarts, Chaffinches & more Rock Buntings. By now, as well as getting dark, it was becoming very cold, so we returned to check in to the hotel where we received an extremely warm welcome with hot mint tea served while we filled in the ubiquitous registration cards. There was now plenty of time to relax and shower before the evening meal which was taken in a very leisurely fashion as we were the only guests in this luxurious new hotel.

**Day 4:** After a substantial early breakfast, at dawn we walked up towards the radio masts at the top of the mountain to look for the specialities. Immediately we saw the Rock Sparrows again together with a group of 3 Crimson-winged Finches with 4 others further on. Black Redstarts were everywhere and Yellow-billed Choughs descended in their hordes together with smaller numbers of Red-billed Chough. Eventually, after some half an hour, we saw our first Alpine Accentor with a total of 4 being seen well in the garden of a house. Surprisingly, Chaffinches were common here and an excellent find was a male Blue Rock-Thrush. We finally arrived at the top of the mountain to be greeted with spectacular views of both the snow-covered mountains and the plains stretching out for miles in the distance. Another Alpine Accentor was seen at the top plus a Mistle Thrush but there was little else of note except a rock which looked incredibly like a raptor! Descending by road this time, we eventually located a pair of Black Wheatears which gave very good views on the rocks below. Further down the road in a marshy area on the snowline we found the first Shore Larks. Some of the old dwellings here are extremely picturesque and make the modern hotels and chalets look rather incongruous! In the flat valley bottom were more Shore Larks together with Rock Sparrows. After packing our cases and leaving the hotel we hadn't gone far when both Water Pipit and Dipper were seen on the small reservoir. Descending the valley to kilometre 5 we restarted our search for Levaillant's Woodpecker but saw only Chiffchaff, Coal Tit and Mistle Thrush at first. Several Crag Martins were seen in the deep gorge but raptors were surprisingly conspicuous by their absence despite the beautiful weather. Just when the cause looked lost, a Levaillant's Woodpecker was located by the shadow it was creating on the side of the tree. Finding which tree however, took a little more time but eventually everyone had distant but good views and a Ring Ouzel was also seen. By stopping for lunch close to the area of trees some of the group went for closer views whilst others just enjoyed a picnic lunch in the sun with Rock Buntings for company. Just as we were leaving 2 Levaillant's Woodpeckers were seen and we descended back to the plains around Marrakech in high spirits. The traffic conditions were chaotic to say the least and everyone admired Mustafa's ability to stay calm! On the road to Agadir we found our first Moussier's Redstart, a fine male, close to the side of the main road. As we started to climb up into the High Atlas again, a short break was taken during which time we saw another Bonelli's Eagle and a Moussier's Redstart and our first Common Stonechat. Continuing our journey, it became apparent that this was a very busy lorry route with very little road discipline, culminating in an overturned lorry with the road covered in oranges. As we entered Agadir in the dark it was a far cry from the congestion of Casablanca and, as it was Mustafa's home town, he knew it like the back of his hand and we were soon in the hotel.

**Day 5:** The day got off to a good start with a large flock of gulls on the beach at Amesnaz. There were good numbers of Audouin's Gulls with 2 races of Lesser Black-backed Gull. Offshore were Sandwich Terns and large numbers of Northern Gannets whilst a flock of 10 Cory's Shearwaters flew close inshore south. Whilst checking through the terns a Great Skua was picked out chasing a bird north but was surprisingly outpaced! A couple of Barbary Partridges were seen well by several members of the group but, regrettably, for most it was only flight views. Further up the coast a brief stop to look at a falcon gave us superb prolonged views of a Black-crowned Tchagra singing & preening on a dead stump, allowing us time to compare it with an adjacent Southern Grey Shrike and a Pomarine Skua flew north. On reaching Tamri, we started to walk up the track towards the fields in the scrub on the hillside and almost immediately had excellent telescope views of a Barbary Falcon perched on a bush. In the scrub all around us on the hillside were numerous Spectacled Warblers, some of which were already paired up, with males singing and displaying. Unfortunately, despite a great deal of effort, after 2 hours we gave up looking for the Northern Bald Ibis as there were evidently none present in the area. Buying lunch in the village of Tamri we then headed north to an open area to eat it whilst scanning areas of open field. This proved to be a very good move as one of the group picked out 4 Northern Bald Ibises flying distantly south along the cliffs. After quickly finishing our lunch we returned south to the estuary but there was no sign of the ibis on the lagoon. Hundreds of gulls were present, however, again with good numbers of Audouin's and a few Yellow-legged and 2 more Northern Bald Ibises flew north. 3 Kentish Plovers were found and, as we scanned the hillside north of the estuary, 2 Lanner Falcons were located sat on rocks. Whilst admiring the closer of the 2 birds, a member of the group found 3 Northern Bald Ibises at long range walking out of the scrub down on to the sand dunes. Whilst moving closer for a better view and trying to shake off a persistent local youth, a lens went missing from a telescope resulting in a chase to recover it. With another member of the group having a small camera stolen from his pocket here, it is a place where it is best to keep the local children at arms length. Noticing several local fishermen walking very close to the ibises we decided to return north of the estuary and walk down into the fields. On the way down we flushed several Barbary Partridges before re-finding the ibises which gave even better views. We also found the perch where the Lanner Falcon had been! Well satisfied with our views, we retraced our steps to the minibus where Mustafa had found a small covey of Barbary Partridges which gave everyone prolonged telescope views. On the return journey to Agadir, we stopped at the cliff site where Northern Bald Ibis used to breed, where we saw a female Blue Rock-Thrush and several Balearic Shearwaters. Heading south again we saw a further party of 10 Northern Bald Ibises flying north, presumably to roost.

**Day 6:** Headed south from Agadir with a stop en-route for better views of Spotless Starling and more House Buntings. On arrival in Massa village the track down to the river proved difficult to locate due to recent building work. While we were searching, however, we saw our first Laughing Doves with more Spotless Starlings, Common Bulbuls, House Buntings, Moussier's Redstarts & Spanish Sparrows. When eventually we reached the river we immediately had good views of a Squacco Heron which landed on the river bank. By now a small flock of hirundines had appeared and amongst the Barn Swallows, a single Plain Martin was seen although unfortunately half of the group were a little too far ahead and missed it, seeing only Crag Martins. Although there were plenty of

birds around the river they were mainly Common Coots, Common Moorhens, Tufted Ducks & a Common Pochard with numerous Common Chiffchaffs. Looking downstream we could see another flock of hirundines close to the road by the bend in the river so we returned to the minibus and drove there. Unfortunately, as is often the case, by the time we had driven there the hirundines had moved but we were compensated by a very obliging Little Owl sitting on a Prickly Pear! Driving further down the track parallel to the river we found a flock of 6 Common Cranes together with a similar number of Greater Flamingoes. Single Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit & Common Sandpiper were seen together with an Osprey, 3 Black-winged Stilts & a number of Common Redshanks before the surprise bird of the day was found, a juvenile Great Northern Diver. By now it was getting near to lunch time so we drove up onto the semi-desert plain to get a wide panorama to look for desert species. Whilst eating our lunch the only thing apparent was an extremely large flock of sheep which to our surprise was followed by a Bonelli's Eagle which was obviously looking to see what the sheep disturbed. As we were about to pack up to move on, 2 Stone-curlews were found, one of which gave very good views on the ground. Returning to Massa village we followed another more southerly track down to the river, passing close by a Black-shouldered Kite sitting on the top of a tree. Another surprise was in store, however, as, whilst we were looking in the fields for warblers, 2 large pipits were seen very well, a first-winter and an adult Richard's Pipit. Eventually, when we got down to the river we found another hirundine flock which contained at least 9 Plain Martins & 2 House Martins allowing those who had missed the earlier bird to catch up. Other birds seen included a flock of 12 Yellow Wagtails with several males of the Spanish race, Reed Warbler & Green Sandpiper. With daylight running out, we returned to the minibus and drove back north to the Oued Sous where at our first stop, whilst the smell was certainly bad the birds liked the area and we saw European Spoonbills, Grey Plovers and a lone Gull-billed Tern. Following the track out as far as we could we spent the last half hour of daylight scanning the huge flocks of birds present and finding Dunlin, Little Stint, Ruff, Bar-tailed Godwit, Ringed Plover, Mediterranean & Slender-billed Gulls and more Black-winged Stilts, European Spoonbills & Greater Flamingoes as well as an Osprey.

**Day 7:** With the longest drive of the tour ahead, we left Agadir eastwards towards Taroudannt, where we made our first stop to purchase lunch, during which time we saw 2 Pallid & a Little Swift. Continuing east, we started to scan the Sous plain for Tawny Eagle but, although Black-shouldered Kites were liberally scattered around, large raptors were conspicuous by their absence. By scanning over large areas of the valley we added 4 Black Kites, 2 Barbary Falcons & a male Hen Harrier to our lists and eventually found a large eagle perched on an electricity pylon. Perched birds of prey are often more difficult to identify than those in flight & this was no exception although it was apparent that it was not a Tawny Eagle. Eventually, when it flew, we were able to satisfy ourselves that it was a sub-adult Bonelli's Eagle that had wandered down from the mountains. During further stops a Black-crowned Tchagra & numerous Common Bulbuls were seen with Southern Grey Shrike also being a regular feature. Eventually, as we left the Sous valley below us, we made one final scan from an escarpment & saw another large raptor sat on a pylon in the distance. By driving as close as possible we were disappointed to find that it was another Long-legged Buzzard. As we steadily climbed up from the Sous valley, Black Wheatears became almost common and then we started to encounter high semi-desert plains with larks flying around so we stopped and found a group of 5 Bar-tailed Larks & a Hoopoe Lark. Our final stop just before dusk was for a group of Desert Larks which kept us going for the last part of our journey to our hotel in Boumalne-du-Dades. The hotel consisted of mock cave-dwellings and would have been quaint but for the fact that we had a power cut! With candles & torches, however, we struggled to sort ourselves out and find our way to the dining room where we were greeted with excellent local food followed by live local music. The music at first was very atmospheric, but after half an hour, when we wanted to do the log, it became a bit monotonous so, not wishing to offend our hosts, we had a collection, stood up & clapped in a break & walked out: one - nil to diplomacy! We then managed to do the log in one small 'cave' by candlelight followed by a spectacular view of the night sky outside with absolutely no light pollution. Jupiter could be seen with its 4 moons & spot, Saturn with its rings, the Milky Way & the Horse Head Nebula; what a superb end to the day.

**Day 8:** Our day for the Tagdilt Track started rather slowly with the hotel staff oversleeping and our breakfast not being ready!. We therefore decided to make an early morning visit & then return for breakfast. Fairly quickly we found the first of many Temminck's Larks & Red-rumped Wheatears and had distant flight views of a flock of Crowned Sandgrouse, but there appeared to be a dearth of birds on the plains. Returning to breakfast, however, we flushed a single Black-bellied Sandgrouse then a group of 13 which all gave extremely good views. Our return visit to the plains again resulted in scattered Temminck's Larks & Red-rumped Wheatears with occasional Hoopoe Larks but it was evident that there were just not many birds around and those that remained appeared to have already paired up for breeding. Just as we were about to give up and move on, 2 Thick-billed Larks flew across the track and landed close by giving excellent prolonged views. After eating lunch by the agricultural station and watching Red-rumped Wheatears & a flyover Thick-billed lark, we continued east seeing more Red-rumped Wheatears & some Long-legged Buzzard. As we passed through Tinerhir a White-crowned Black Wheatear was spotted on some waste ground and on returning to investigate we found that there were 3 birds including one with a dark crown, together with 2 Desert Larks & a single Trumpeter Finch. As by now it was getting quite late, we continued our journey without further stops until we came to Touroug where an Eagle Owl of the desert race was seen on the top of a telegraph pole. Arrived at Erfoud after dark for a 2 night stay in a good standard hotel.

**Day 9:** We were met by 2 almost new Land Rovers for our day out in the desert. Leaving at 07.00 we drove south towards Merzouga stopping en-route at the rubbish dump where we saw good numbers of Brown-necked Ravens. Continuing to the end of the tarmac road, we walked up 'Frenchmans' Wadi looking for Fulvous Babbler but without success seeing only Desert & Crested Larks, Southern Grey Shrike & White-crowned Black Wheatear. In the Tamarisk bushes around Kasbah Dakaoua we saw our first Tristram's Warbler. Whilst we were watching it, however, we met the acquaintance of a particularly objectionable & obnoxious Frenchman who in no uncertain terms insisted that we left alleging that the whole desert around his walled house also belonged to him! Resuming our journey into the desert we reached Café Yasmina where the reception could not have been more different. We

were welcomed with open arms & offered coffee as we watched Desert Sparrows in the evocative setting of the Erg Chebbi sand-dunes. During our relaxing hour visit here we also saw Tristram's Warbler, Bar-tailed Larks, our first Desert Wheatear, Trumpeter Finches & Brown-necked Ravens and, for many, this was the highlight of the tour. Reluctantly moving on, we visited a large oasis deep in the desert where we spent a fruitless and hot 2 hours looking for Fulvous Babbler seeing only Blackbirds & more Tristram's Warblers. Retracing our steps towards Merzouga we made 2 impromptu stops, firstly for a superb male Desert Wheatear & a pair of Hoopoe Larks and secondly for a male Mourning Wheatear, a most unusual find here. Whilst watching the wheatear our attention was drawn to another small bird following it which showed itself to be a Desert Warbler, a species that habitually follows wheatears, presumably for the protection of their alertness. Arriving at Merzouga, we ordered an omelette & chips lunch (always willing to be adventurous & try the local food!) and, whilst waiting for it to be prepared, we searched the palms & cultivation. Numerous Chiffchaffs were present together with a few Tristram's Warblers & a male Moussier's Redstart but the highlight was 2 Fulvous Babblers seen by most of the group. After lunch we re-found the Fulvous Babblers for the remainder of the party before heading to Lake Merzouga which, unfortunately, was dry. A thorough examination of all the vegetation around the perimeter of the dried out lake bed, however, gave us Hoopoe, Bar-tailed &, surprisingly, 5 Thick-billed Larks. Another 2 Desert Warblers were seen (both following White-crowned Black Wheatears) before we ended the day on a very high note with excellent views of 3 Cream-coloured Coursers. With the drivers of the Land Rovers observing Ramadan and the time approaching 18.00 when they could resume eating & drinking, we stopped again at the café in Merzouga for a very relaxing evening coffee before returning to Erfoud across the desert in what can best be described as Paris-Dakar fashion!

**Day 10:** With every possible species seen the previous day with the exception of Houbara Bustard, which has been virtually hunted out by Arab falconers, we took the opportunity to head north earlier than planned. We passed through Ar Rachidia and stopped at Barrage Hassan Addakhil reservoir. Immediately it was evident that there were large numbers of birds present, particularly waterfowl, with 197 Marbled Ducks, 96 Ruddy Shelducks, approximately 300 Common Pochards, 4 Black-necked Grebes and smaller number of Tufted Duck, Northern Shoveler, Common Shelduck, Northern Pintail, Great Crested & Little Grebes & Great Cormorant. The real surprise, however, was an adult male Ring-necked Duck, potentially the second for Morocco! Other birds seen around the lake included Cattle & Little Egrets, Grey Heron, 1 Squacco Heron & 6 Greater Flamingoes. Of the passerines, both Bar-tailed & Desert Larks were present together with a few Common Chiffchaffs &, another surprise, a second male Mourning Wheatear. Continuing north over the pass at Legionnaire's Tunnel, we stopped for a further break where we had brief, distant views of a very large raptor which escaped identification; it could have been a Lammergeier. A Peregrine was seen making an incredible stoop and with 60 Rock Doves about it was obvious why it was present! Black Wheatears, House & Rock Buntings & a Blue Rock-Thrush were also seen and we had excellent, prolonged views of 2 Barbary Ground-Squirrels. Our next stop was an unscheduled emergency stop when an immature Lanner Falcon was seen & photographed well as it sat on a small rock at the side on the road and, whilst watching it, we had yet another Bonelli's Eagle, this time displaying. By the time we arrived at Zeida to look for Dupont's Lark, the weather had taken a turn for the worse with horizontal snow! Our picnic lunch was therefore taken in the cramped warmth of the minibus although one of the leaders found a warm sheltered spot outside by the radiator! When the snow had relented, we spent 2 hours walking through the tussock grass in near gale force winds but saw only Black & Red-rumped Wheatears, Thekla & Lesser Short-toed Larks, Moussier's Redstart & Common Raven. In view of the conditions we decided to finish early and return to our hotel in Midelt.

**Day 11:** Dawned bright sunny & extremely cold, with a bottle of drink frozen solid in the minibus! Despite yesterday afternoon's disappointment, we returned to Zeida Plain in high spirits in anticipation of finding Dupont's Lark in the much better conditions. Despite trying every strategy, however, after 2 hours we had seen only the same birds as on the previous day but with the addition of Brown Hares & superb views of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Just as we were about to give up, a Dupont's Lark was briefly sighted and, after half an hour, all but one of the group had had reasonable views of it before it just vanished into thin air! Everyone now appreciated the difficulties the location of this species causes even where it is relatively common. With a long journey ahead of us, we set off towards Casablanca making a lunch stop after a couple of hours in a picturesque valley where Grey Wagtail, Black Redstart & Blue Tit were seen. Continuing the journey through beautiful Cedar forests amid snow capped mountains the journey didn't seem so long until we reached the featureless agricultural coastal plains & mining areas. At rubbish tips however, we saw large numbers of White Storks & Cattle Egrets with an occasional Long-legged Buzzard & Black-shouldered Kite plus a Little Owl & several Southern Grey Shrikes. Our final stop for the day yielded Calandra & Sky Larks & Corn Bunting before arriving at our hotel without getting lost! As we settled in our rooms, however, a large roost of Cattle Egrets in the park was seen from the window and this roost contained 3 Black-crowned Night-Herons making the final tour bird total a nice, round 170.

**Day 12:** Early breakfast for 06.10 departure to Casablanca airport for the 08.50 flight back to London Heathrow via Tangiers.