

Morocco

17–28 FEBRUARY 2009

Participants:

Mel Ab Owain
Chris Baines
Helen Cadogan
Peter Clement
Graham Hopwood
Colin Kirtland
Kath Oram
Nigel Oram
Tony Phizacklea
Gerald Robinson
David Woodhouse



Leader: Peter Lansdown

House Bunting

Morocco's diverse and often spectacular scenery formed the backdrop for our many sightings of some special birds. We flew to Marrakech, where a House Bunting actually inside the airport arrivals hall was clearly a good omen. During our afternoon drive to the coast we paused to watch Calandra Larks, one of the fourteen lark species we were to see on the tour.

We visited cork-oak woods, lakes and marshes to the east and north-east of Casablanca. Marbled Ducks, Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous Ducks, Red-knobbed Coots and a Goshawk all showed well and we also saw distant Glossy Ibises and Barbary Partridges and heard Double-spurred Francolins. The region's star bird, Marsh Owl, gave us prolonged close-range views and we saw three in total.

Our south-easterly journey over the Middle Atlas and the High Atlas was punctuated by stops at a mountain lake, cedar forests, high plains, rivers, rocky gorges and gravel deserts. We saw Red-knobbed Coots, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Dupont's Larks, Plain Martins and Short-toed Treecreepers as well as a single Black-shouldered Kite, Alpine Swift, Moroccan White Wagtail and Tristram's Warbler. Our desert hotel was reached through a brief but fierce sand-storm.

We explored the edge of the Sahara in four-wheel-drive vehicles, visiting gravel and rock deserts, sand dunes, dry wadis, oases, temporary lakes, a high escarpment, remote villages and agricultural areas. Avian rewards included a Lanner, a Barbary Falcon, Cream-coloured Coursers, a Pharaoh Eagle Owl, a Short-toed Lark, Bar-tailed Desert Larks, an African Desert Warbler, a Tristram's Warbler, an Iberian Chiffchaff (in the hand), Isabelline Wheatears, Fulvous Babblers, Desert Sparrows and Brown-necked Ravens.

It took two days to drive west to the coast, firstly across gravel and stone deserts and the rugged Anti Atlas and then down the fertile Souss Valley. During this journey, and at chosen sites, we encountered Spotted Sandgrouse, Temminck's Horned, Short-toed, Bar-tailed Desert and Thick-billed Larks, Red-rumped Swallows, Woodchat Shrikes, Spectacled Warblers and Red-rumped Wheatears.

After the desert, bustling Agadir was something of a culture shock, but it was the perfect base for our trip north to the Tamri area, where we soon located Bald Ibises and watched a Spectacled Warbler, for our venture south to the famous Oued Massa reserve and its surrounding countryside, where we enjoyed a Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibises, Marbled Ducks, a Ferruginous Duck, Common Cranes,

Black-crowned Tchagras and a calling Iberian Chiffchaff, and for our visits to the local Oued Souss estuary, where we saw an Osprey, Barbary Partridges, Red-necked Nightjars and Subalpine Warblers.

Leaving the coast behind, we travelled via Marrakech to a ski resort in the High Atlas. The journey produced Golden Eagles and Red-rumped Swallows, while Alpine Accentors, Crimson-winged Finches, Rock Petronias and Alpine Choughs were all seen during our stay in a snowy valley. The second Moroccan White Wagtail of the tour was found on our final drive, to Marrakech, where a walk around the famous square and souk was bizarrely interrupted by an exceptionally heavy hail-storm.

Further notable species, all encountered on three or more days, included Cattle Egret, Spoonbill, White Stork, Greater Flamingo, Ruddy Shelduck, Black Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, Lesser Kestrel, Quail, Black-winged Stilt, Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls, Laughing Dove, Pallid and Little Swifts, Hoopoe, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Lesser Short-toed, Desert, Hoopoe, Crested and Thekla Larks, Crag Martin, Common Bulbul, Southern Grey Shrike, Sardinian Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Blue Rock Thrush, Desert, Black and White-crowned Black Wheatears, Moussier's Redstart, African Blue Tit, House and Rock Buntings, Trumpeter Finch, Serin, Spanish Sparrow and Spotless Starling.

The total number of species recorded by the group was 191. Thanks are due to Mel Ab Owain, Chris Baines, Helen Cadogan, Peter Clement, Graham Hopwood, Colin Kirtland, Kath Oram, Nigel Oram, Tony Phizacklea, Gerald Robinson and David Woodhouse, who contributed hugely to the success of the tour.

Birdfinders will be repeating this exciting tour in February 2010.

Peter Lansdown