

Morocco

31 March–11 April 2012

Participants

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Black-crowned Tchagra

Leader Peter Lansdown

Day 1: Most of the participants assembled at London Gatwick Airport and flew to Marrakech, where individuals arriving from Bulgaria and Germany completed the group. We met our driver, boarded the minibus and travelled to our hotel in Temara Plage, pausing at fields in the vicinity of Benguerir to watch Calandra Larks. Further notable species seen, and which we would record on at least five days during the tour, were Cattle Egret, White Stork, Black Kite, Kentish Plover, Pallid and Little Swifts, European Bee-eater, Crested Lark, Red-rumped Swallow, Southern Grey Shrike, Common Bulbul, Spotless Starling and House Bunting.

Day 2: A visit to the scrub-covered hillsides of the Zaers produced Black-shouldered Kites, Booted Eagles and Barbary Partridges as well as a heard-only Black-crowned Tchagra, although we failed even to hear the sought-after Double-spurred Francolin. Our next locality was the attractive Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, where we saw Greater Flamingos, Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks, a Purple Swamphen, Red-knobbed Coots and Zitting Cisticolas. Lastly we reached the marshes at the edge of Merdja Zerga, a large lagoon near Moulay Bouselham where we would spend the night. Views of Glossy Ibises, a Barbary Falcon, a Zitting Cisticola and a Tawny Pipit were eclipsed by the spectacle of a majestic Marsh Owl flying in broad daylight. During the day we also saw Black-winged Stilt, Gull-billed Tern, Woodchat Shrike, African Blue Tit, Sardinian, Subalpine and Western Bonelli's Warblers, Black-eared Wheatear, Common Chaffinch *africana* and European Serin, all of which we were to encounter on at least five days.

Day 3: Glossy Ibises were found at some roadside pools near Souk-el-Arba-du-Rharb while Lesser Kestrels were spotted at two sites near Ifrane. The day's main birding was at Dayet Aaoua, a mountain lake, where we saw Ruddy Shelducks, Marbled, Ring-necked and Ferruginous Ducks, a Booted Eagle and Red-knobbed Coots. More Ruddy Shelducks were encountered in the Middle Atlas at Aguelmame de Sidi Ali, a lake which we passed on our way to our hotel in Midelt. Thekla Lark and Northern Wheatear *seebohmi* were also watched during the day and would be seen on at least five days on the tour.

Day 4: Zeida Plain produced a fly-over Ruddy Shelduck, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Desert Wheatears and a Tawny Pipit before revealing the Dupont's Larks we had been searching for on our pre-breakfast excursion. We saw Booted Eagles, a Montagu's Harrier, Eurasian Crag-martins and Blue Rock-thrushes during the drive south over the High Atlas and Desert and White-tailed Wheatears on the journey across the deserts further south. Near Rissani we watched Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and Fulvous Chatterers before continuing to our desert hotel to the east of the town for a two-night

stay. Eurasian Hoopoe and Black Wheatear, both of which were to be recorded on at least five days, were also seen during the drive south.

Day 5: Today two four-wheel-drive vehicles in convoy transported us to various spots on the edge of the Sahara Desert. We began by searching a wadi not far from our hotel: here we discovered Greater Hoopoe-larks, an African Desert Warbler and Desert Wheatears. Next we headed towards the spectacular tawny sand-dunes of the Erg Chebbi, with many stops along the way for opportunistic birding: Cream-coloured Coursers, Spotted Sandgrouse, Brown-necked Ravens, Eurasian Hoopoe, Bar-tailed and Thick-billed Larks, Desert and White-tailed Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches and Desert Sparrows were our rewards for deliberately making it a slow and somewhat zig-zag journey. At the picturesque Café Yasmina we enjoyed both refreshment and birds, which included a Barbary Falcon, Laughing Doves, a Eurasian Wryneck, a Melodious Warbler, a Western Olivaceous Warbler, an Iberian Chiffchaff, Desert and White-tailed Wheatears and Desert Sparrows. During our drive along the edge of the Erg Chebbi we found a smart Lanner Falcon and a Brown-necked Raven while Lake Merzouga produced Greater Flamingos, Ruddy Shelducks, Marbled Ducks, a Montagu's Harrier, Barbary Falcons, a Collared Pratincole, Short-toed Larks and Trumpeter Finches. The day's last stop was in mountains west of Rissani, where we saw Barbary Falcons and Eurasian Crag-martins and heard a young Pharaoh Eagle-owl.

Day 6: The garden of our hotel got us off to a fine start with a Montagu's Harrier, Spotted Sandgrouse heard only, Alpine Swifts, a Eurasian Wryneck, a Western Orphee Warbler, a Western Olivaceous Warbler and Desert and White-tailed Wheatears. The tamarisks at Oued Ziz in Rissani gave us a Laughing Dove and an Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *reiseri*. At Oued Rheris we found Montagu's Harriers, a Barbary Falcon, Cream-coloured Coursers, Eurasian Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Larks, a Melodious Warbler, Desert and White-tailed Wheatears and a Tawny Pipit. Lastly we saw a Long-legged Buzzard, a Cream-coloured Courser, Temminck's, Short-toed, Bar-tailed and Thick-billed Larks, a Spectacled Warbler, Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches on the stone desert of the Tagdilt track near Boumalne du Dades, where we spent the night.

Day 7: During the journey to Barrage El Mansour, a large reservoir close to Ouarzazate, we spotted a Montagu's Harrier, Desert, Red-rumped and White-tailed Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches, while the reservoir itself produced Ruddy Shelducks, a Marbled Duck, a Montagu's Harrier, a Barbary Falcon, Collared Pratincoles, a Eurasian Crag-martin, single Melodious, Western Olivaceous and Eastern Olivaceous *reiseri* Warblers, Desert Wheatears and White Wagtails *subpersonata*. On the remainder of our long drive to Agadir, where we were stay for three nights, we saw Short-toed and Desert Larks, a Mourning Wheatear, Desert and White-tailed Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches.

Day 8: At Cap Rhir we recorded a Cory's Shearwater, Bald Ibises, Barbary Partridges, a Short-toed Lark, Black-crowned Tchagras, a Western Orphee Warbler and Moussier's Redstarts. We continued north to the beach at Oued Tamri, where there were Audouin's Gulls, then returned south and headed inland along a picturesque gorge and up to Imouzzar, where we found a Tristram's Warbler, Moussier's Redstarts and a Blue Rock-thrush. The day's final stop was at Oued Sous. The estuary itself produced Greater Flamingos, a Slender-billed Gull and Caspian and Whiskered Terns while the trees and scrub gave us a Laughing Dove, Zitting Cisticolas and, at dusk, Red-necked Nightjars.

Day 9: We began the day with a short visit to Oued Sous, where we looked unsuccessfully for a reported Lesser Flamingo among the Greater Flamingos, and then we headed south to Sidi Wassai. Here, along Oued Massa and in the adjacent small-scale agriculture, we saw a Black-crowned Night-heron, Laughing Doves, Brown-throated Martins, a Western Olivaceous Warbler, Zitting Cisticolas and Moussier's Redstarts and heard Black-crowned Tchagras. Further down-river, towards the reserve entrance, a Whiskered Tern, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, a Western Orphee Warbler, Zitting Cisticolas and Moussier's Redstarts were seen while a Black-crowned Tchagra was heard. We ended the day back at Oued Sous, once again looking through the Greater Flamingos but also recording a Squacco Heron, Marbled Ducks, a Black-shouldered Kite, Collared Pratincoles, Audouin's Gulls and Caspian Terns.

Day 10: Barbary Partridges were the only birds of note seen during the drive from Agadir to Marrakech. We continued up into the High Atlas, spotting Booted Eagles, a Moussier's Redstart and a Rock Bunting on our way to the ski resort of Oukaïmeden, where we quickly found a Long-legged Buzzard and both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs. It took more effort, however, to locate stunning Crimson-winged Finches before we headed down to our hotel at Ourika. There was a very welcome interruption to our journey down the mountain by an eventually-obliging Levaillant's Woodpecker. A Moussier's Redstart was seen during the same stop.

Day 11: Our hotel garden produced Barbary Partridges, Moussier's Redstarts, Rock Buntings and a Cirl Bunting while on the trip back up to Oukaïmeden we saw a Eurasian Crag-martin, a Blue Rock-thrush and a Rock Bunting. We enjoyed our final birding of the tour at the ski resort itself, where a Long-legged Buzzard, a Levaillant's Woodpecker,

Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs, Moussier's Redstarts, Blue Rock-thrushes, an Ortolan Bunting, a Rock Bunting and Rock Petronias were located. In the afternoon we returned to Marrakech to experience the sights, sounds and smells of the famous square and souk before settling in to our city hotel for the night.

Day 12: Sadly, Marrakech Airport was our only Moroccan destination today as we all headed home.

We recorded a total of 197 species during the tour. More importantly, we saw almost all of the key species possible in Morocco in early April.