

Morocco

14–25 February 2012

Participants

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Moussier's Redstart

Leader Peter Lansdown

Day 1: The group assembled at Gatwick and flew to Marrakech. We were transported by minibus to the ski resort of Oukaimeden in the High Atlas, where we saw Levaillant's Woodpeckers, Yellow-billed Choughs, Rock Buntings, Crimson-winged Finches and Rock Petronias. The day also produced several species destined to be seen on at least six days during the tour: Cattle Egret, White Stork, Crested Lark, Eurasian Crag-martin, African Blue Tit, Common Bulbul, Sardinian Warbler, Black Wheatear, Spotted Starling and House Bunting.

Day 2: A Levaillant's Woodpecker was spotted on the short trip back to Oukaimeden, while in the picturesque hanging valley itself we watched Yellow-billed Choughs, Alpine Accentors, Crimson-winged Finches and Rock Petronias. A Calandra Lark and Spanish Sparrows were seen on the long journey to the coastal resort of Temara Plage, where Audouin's Gulls were found close to our hotel. Other species seen during the day which we would encounter on six or more days were Southern Grey Shrike, Zitting Cisticola, Blue Rock-thrush and European Serin.

Day 3: Although we saw a Black Kite, a Black-shouldered Kite and a Long-legged Buzzard in the Cork-oak and Sandarac woodland of the Zaer, a Black-crowned Tchagra and Double-spurred Francolins were largely heard only, with one of the latter being glimpsed by just a single observer. Lesser Kestrels were seen en route to Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, where Ferruginous and White-headed Ducks, Purple Swamphens and Red-knobbed Coots awaited us. Finally, a superb Marsh Owl, flying in daylight, was our reward for enduring the pot-holed roads around the Merdja Zerga. Further species watched during the day which we were to see on at least six days were Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt and Thekla Lark.

Day 4: Roadside pools near Souk-el-Arba-du-Rharb produced a surprise in the shape of Brown-throated Martins. Dayet Aaoua was packed with birds, the highlights being Ruddy Shelducks, a Marbled Duck, an unexpected pair of Ring-necked Ducks, Ferruginous Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots, while we spotted Black-shouldered Kites, Long-legged Buzzards and Lesser Kestrels during our drive to Midelt.

Day 5: We began the day on the vast Zeida Plain, where we watched Lesser Short-toed Larks, a Temminck's Lark, Red-rumped Wheatears, a flyover Ruddy Shelduck and, eventually, Dupont's Larks. Our reward for pausing at the Legionnaire's Tunnel was a fine pair of Bonelli's Eagles. On the journey into the Sahara Desert we saw White-tailed Wheatears, a Mourning Wheatear, a Laughing Dove and our first Moussier's Redstart, a species we were to encounter daily thereafter.

Day 6: This was our day in 4 × 4 vehicles in the desert. Here we found Lanner Falcons, Cream-coloured Coursers, Brown-necked Ravens, Eurasian Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Desert Larks, an African Desert Warbler, Tristram's and Spectacled Warblers, Desert and White-tailed Wheatears, a Mourning Wheatear, an Isabelline Wheatear, a Trumpeter Finch and, most importantly, two pairs of Desert Sparrows. We ended the day near Rissani, where looks at a pair of Barbary Falcons were eclipsed by a low flyover by a Pharaoh Eagle-owl at dusk.

Day 7: Deserts provided the backdrop to our journey today and we explored three distinct desert habitats on foot, seeing a Long-legged Buzzard, a Lanner Falcon, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Brown-necked Ravens, Temminck's Horned, Lesser Short-toed, Desert and Bar-tailed Desert Larks, Greater Hoopoe-lark, an African Desert Warbler, Tristram's and Spectacled Warblers, Fulvous Babblers, Desert, Red-rumped and White-tailed Wheatears, an Isabelline Wheatear and Trumpeter Finches.

Day 8: More desert birding and travelling gave us a Black Kite, Long-legged Buzzards, a Lanner Falcon, Temminck's, Lesser Short-toed and Thick-billed Larks, a Desert Lark, Red-rumped and White-tailed Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches. We found Squacco Herons, Great White Egrets, Ruddy Shelducks, Marbled Ducks, a Rock Martin, an Iberian Chiffchaff and Red-throated Pipits at the wonderful Barrage El Mansour near Ouarzazate, where we spent the night.

Day 9: Black Storks were seen at Barrage El Mansour in addition to a Great White Egret, Ruddy Shelducks, Marbled Ducks and Red-throated Pipits. The long drive to Agadir produced Black Kites, Desert Larks, White-tailed Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches and a Rock Bunting and was punctuated by two short birding stops: at the Aoulouz Gorge, where we saw a Short-toed Eagle, a Lesser Kestrel and Rock Petronias, and in the old city of Taroudannt, where we discovered a Pallid Swift and Little Swifts.

Day 10: North of Agadir we encountered a Balearic Shearwater during a sea-watch and found iconic Bald Ibises, Barbary Partridges, Audouin's Gulls, a heard-only Black-crowned Tchagra, Subalpine and Spectacled Warblers, a Tawny Pipit and Spanish Sparrows. Returning south we visited Oued Sous, where we saw Marbled Ducks, a Slender-billed Gull and, at dusk, Red-necked Nightjars.

Day 11: In and around the famous Oued Massa reserve we watched Glossy Ibises, Black-shouldered Kites, a Lesser Kestrel, Laughing Doves, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Pallid, Alpine and Little Swifts, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Brown-throated Martins, Black-crowned Tchagras and Spanish Sparrows. A repeat visit to Oued Sous gave us Barbary Partridges, an Audouin's Gull, a Slender-billed Gull, Spectacled Warblers and, again at dusk, Red-necked Nightjars.

Day 12: Barbary Partridges, Slender-billed Gulls, Subalpine Warblers and Spanish Sparrows were seen at Oued Sous before the drive to Agadir airport, where we boarded our flight to Gatwick.

We recorded a total of 201 species, equalling the highest number recorded on a Birdfinders winter tour to Morocco. Birdfinders will be repeating this popular tour in 2013.