

# Morocco

11–22 February 2014

## Participants

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**Marsh Owl**

## Leader Peter Lansdown

**Day 1** Following our flight from Gatwick to Marrakech we were greeted in the airport arrivals hall not only by our minibus driver but also by a House Bunting, a species we would record on a further eight days. The spectacular drive up to Oukaimeden, a ski resort in a hanging valley in the High Atlas, and, later, the much shorter trip down to our hotel in Ourika produced a Cattle Egret, a Southern Grey Shrike, Black Wheatears and Spotless Starlings, all of which we were to see on at least five days during the tour. While at snowy Oukaimeden itself we found Black Wheatears, a Rock Bunting and Rock Petronias and obtained very close views of a party of stunning Crimson-winged Finches.

**Day 2** A smart Levaillant's Woodpecker kindly visited our hotel garden before we set off back up to Oukaimeden, where we saw a Barbary Partridge, a second Levaillant's Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Choughs, Alpine Accentors and Rock Petronias. Birding stops during our journey down the mountain and across the plain produced, respectively, a Bonelli's Eagle and Calandra Larks. During the day we also recorded Crested Larks, Crag Martins, Common Bulbuls and Moussier's Redstarts, all species we were to see subsequently on at least seven days. We spent the night at Temara Plage, just south of Rabat.

**Day 3** We left early to visit the Zaer, an area of cork-oak and Sandarac woodland and scrub, where we saw Barbary Partridges and heard Black-crowned Tchagras but failed even to hear our main target species: the hard-to-see Double-spurred Francolin. Next we drove through Rabat to the beautiful Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, which produced White-headed Ducks, Purple Swampheens, Red-knobbed Coots and African Blue Tits. After lunch we headed north to Merdja Zerga, a large lagoon with surrounding marshes, where we enjoyed close flight views in daylight of a superb Marsh Owl and also saw a Caspian Tern. Long-legged Buzzards, Thekla Larks, Sardinian Warblers and a Zitting Cisticola were seen during the day; all would be seen on at least five days on tour. We stayed overnight in Moulay Bouselham.

**Day 4** During the drive to our hotel in Midelt we made several stops: near Souk el Arba du Rharb for Black-winged Stilts and many other waders, in Sidi Kacem for Little Swifts, at Oued Sebou for nothing at all, as Plain Martins were apparently not breeding there this year, and in El Hajeb for Lesser Kestrels. Our main birding stop, however, was at Dayet Aaoua, in the Middle Atlas, which produced Ruddy Shelducks, Marbled Ducks, Red-knobbed Coots, more Black-winged Stilts, African Blue Tits, Short-toed Treecreepers and a

Rock Bunting. A Black-shouldered Kite and more Ruddy Shelducks and Lesser Kestrels were seen during the journey.

**Day 5** The Halfa grass and wormwood steppes of the vast Zeida Plain were our first destination today and they did not disappoint, producing a Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Lesser Short-toed Larks, a Red-rumped Wheatear and Rock Petronias as well as our main target species, the elusive Dupont's Lark, and all before breakfast! We saw a Desert Lark and a Rock Bunting during a short stop at the Legionnaire's Tunnel, while the journey to our hotel in the desert south of Erfoud gave us Brown-necked Ravens. During the afternoon we explored two wadis on foot from our hotel and saw more Brown-necked Ravens, Hoopoe Larks, more Desert Larks, a Bar-tailed Lark and a Tristram's Warbler. This was the first of five days on which we were destined to see Blue Rock Thrush and White-crowned Black Wheatear.

**Day 6** Forsaking our minibus for the day, we climbed aboard two 4x4 vehicles and set off to the south deeper into the desert. By careful searching from the moving vehicles and by stopping many times both to investigate sightings and at known localities, we discovered Cream-coloured Coursers, Brown-necked Ravens, Hoopoe Larks, Bar-tailed Larks, an African Desert Warbler, Tristram's Warblers, Desert Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches, Desert Sparrows and an unexpected, tight-sitting Egyptian Nightjar. Two stops near Rissani towards the end of the day produced firstly an African Blue Tit and a party of Fulvous Babblers and secondly a Lanner, though a vicious sand-storm prevented our waiting until dusk for a hoped-for Pharaoh Eagle Owl. Nevertheless we returned to our desert hotel in great spirits, little suspecting that the calm, sunny weather of the first half of the tour would not return for two-and-a-half days.

**Day 7** Strong winds, with some blown sand, greeted us as we drove towards our next hotel in Boumalne du Dades. These conditions affected our long walk near Oued Rheris, where we saw only Cream-coloured Coursers and Desert Wheatears. Our other two stops were both on the stony desert known as the Tagdilt track, where there was less blown sand in the wind and where we saw Temminck's, Lesser Short-toed and Thick-billed Larks, Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches. The day's drive produced Laughing Doves, which we would record on five days in total, Lesser Kestrels, Brown-necked Ravens and a Desert Lark.

**Day 8** Returning to the Tagdilt track, albeit to a different area, we recorded Cream-coloured Coursers, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Larks, a Desert Wheatear and Red-rumped Wheatears. We then drove towards our next hotel in Ouarzazate, a journey which gave us a Desert Lark and our only Mourning Wheatear of the tour. We stopped at Barrage El Mansour, where sand was again airborne, the reservoir's shoreline was unusually distant and the apparently firm ground before us was actually a hard, but thin, crust concealing glutinous mud. Despite the long-range views of Greater Flamingos and Ruddy Shelducks, the close Black-winged Stilts and Trumpeter Finches and the discovery of an Isabelline Wheatear, this was not one of the tour's highlights as we all had to retreat following close encounters by some with the underlying mud. At another, less exposed and better-vegetated site adjacent to Barrage El Mansour a Barbary Falcon put on a dramatic flying display and we also had views of a Pallid Swift.

**Day 9** Birding from the minibus as we crossed the Anti Atlas proved to be productive, perhaps because the wind was now much lighter, with Hoopoe Larks, Desert and Thick-billed Larks, Red-rumped Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches all being seen. We stopped for coffee in Taliouine, finding an African Blue Tit and Spanish Sparrows, before dropping down into the upper Sous Valley and discovering a Spectacled Warbler and more Spanish Sparrows at our lunch stop. Other birds seen in the Sous Valley as we continued our journey to the final hotel in Agadir were Lesser Kestrels at Aoulouz Gorge and a Black-shouldered Kite east of Taroudannt.

**Day 10** As we headed north from Agadir, in calm, sunny conditions once again, a Barbary Partridge was spotted from the minibus before we stopped at a beach near Taghazout to admire a flock of Audouin's Gulls. Then we proceeded to Cap Rhir, where we recorded Black-crowned Tchagras, a Rock Bunting and Spanish Sparrows. Next we watched Bald Ibises to the north of Tamri and also saw a Lesser Kestrel and Subalpine

and Spectacled Warblers there. Returning south to Agadir we saw Greater Flamingos, Barbary Partridges and Slender-billed Gulls at Oued Sous before waiting there until dusk fell. With the prime Red-necked Nightjar viewing site seemingly now being closed to the public, we had to stand some distance away, which resulted in just two of us hearing an individual and only one person glimpsing a nightjar flying low over the scrub.

**Day 11** South was today's direction from Agadir, to Oued Massa. Our first stop was near Sidi Wassai village, where, in a landscape of tiny irrigated fields and hedges, we found Pallid Swifts, a Little Swift, Black-crowned Tchagras and Spanish Sparrows, though our primary target species, Plain Martin, was clearly not present along the river. Near Sidi Binzaren we found a Barbary Partridge and a Caspian Tern before returning north to Oued Sous and seeing Greater Flamingos, Black-winged Stilts and a Slender-billed Gull. We chose a different vantage point at dusk which enabled everyone to hear Red-necked Nightjar but again just one of us had a very brief view of a low-flying individual.

**Day 12** Travelling a little further south today, to a different, fairly dry, stretch of Oued Massa, we discovered Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Pallid Swifts, a Black-crowned Tchagra, a Subalpine Warbler and our final target species: Plain Martin, which we watched at close range. We returned to near Sidi Wassai, recording another Black-crowned Tchagra and Spanish Sparrows, before heading for the airport at Agadir and our return flight to Gatwick.

Although virtually all of Morocco's special resident and winter-visiting species were seen on the tour, we recorded a total of only 185 species. This slightly lower tally than in recent years was because of a combination of a dry winter resulting in less standing and running water, the very windy conditions in the middle of the tour and a later-than-usual spring migration. Birdfinders will be repeating the Morocco tour in 2015.

**Peter Lansdown**