

# Morocco

17–28 February 2015

## Participants

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## Thick-billed Lark

**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 House Buntings, which we would record on a further seven 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 Southern Grey Shrikes, Common Bulbuls and Spotless Starlings, all of which we were to see on at least ten days during the tour, as well as Eurasian Crag-martins. At snowy Oukaimeden itself we found Yellow-billed Choughs, Black Wheatears, Rock Buntings and Rock Petronias and obtained very close views of about 90 stunning Crimson-winged Finches.

**Day 2** The journey back up to Oukaimeden, the valley itself and the return drive to Marrakech again produced quality birds: Little Swifts, Yellow-billed Choughs, Eurasian Crag-martins, a Moussier's Redstart, Rock Buntings, a Crimson-winged Finch, Rock Petronias, a total of six Levaillant's Woodpeckers and a party of five Alpine Accentors. As we travelled across the plain towards the coast we saw a Black-shouldered Kite and Spanish Sparrows while a stop near Ben Guerir gave us a group of about 120 restless Calandra Larks. During the day we also recorded Crested Larks, African Blue Tits and Sardinian Warblers, all species we were to see subsequently on at least five 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 found Barbary Partridges, Pallid Swifts and a Black-crowned Tchagra and saw and heard a grand total of eight Double-spurred Francolins. Next we drove through Rabat to the beautiful Lac de Sidi Bourhaba which produced Greater Flamingos, White-headed Ducks, Purple Swamphens and Red-knobbed Coots. After lunch we headed north to Merdja Zerga, a large lagoon with surrounding marshes, where we saw a Black-shouldered Kite, Black-winged Stilts and a Caspian Tern before grabbing a late-dusk view of a Marsh Owl. A Long-legged Buzzard and Zitting Cisticolas were seen during the day; both species would be seen on five further days on tour. We stayed overnight in Moulay Bouselham.

**Day 4** During the drive to our hotel in Midelt we saw a Black-shouldered Kite as well as a Laughing Dove, a species we would see on a further six days. We also made three stops: near Souk El Arba-du-Rharb, where we saw a Purple Swamphen, numerous Black-winged Stilts and many other waders, near Ifrane for Lesser Kestrels and, our main birding stop, at Dayet Aaoua in the Middle Atlas, which produced two Marbled

Ducks, Red-knobbed Coots, even more Black-winged Stilts, a Short-toed Treecreeper and Rock Petronias. For the fourth consecutive day it had been cloudy, windy and cold.

**Day 5** The Halfa grass and wormwood steppes of the vast Zeida Plain were our first destination today and, despite a thick covering of snow, they did not disappoint, producing Lesser Short-toed Larks as well as our main target species: the elusive Dupont's Lark, and before breakfast too! During our difficult, snow-disrupted journey over the High Atlas, which included short stops at the Legionnaire's Tunnel and at Barrage Hassan Addakhil, we saw a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, Desert Larks, Thekla Larks, Eurasian Crag-martins, Blue Rock-thrushes, Black Wheatears and a Rock Bunting. The onward drive to our hotel in the desert south of Erfoud gave us a pair of Lanner Falcons as well as White-tailed Wheatears. Here, in the Sahara Desert, the sun was in evidence and the wind had eased but it was still rather chilly.

**Day 6** Forsaking our minibus for the day, we climbed aboard two 4 x 4 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 Ruddy Shelducks, Cream-coloured Coursers, Spotted Sandgrouse, Brown-necked Ravens, Greater Hoopoe Larks, Bar-tailed Larks, a Thick-billed Lark, two African Desert Warblers, a Tristram's Warbler, Desert Wheatears, White-tailed Wheatears, an Isabelline Wheatear and a pair of Desert Sparrows. Two stops near Rissani towards the end of the day produced firstly a party of nine Fulvous Chatterers and secondly a pair of Lanner Falcons, though the hoped-for Pharaoh Eagle-owl failed to put in an appearance. We spent a second night at our desert hotel.

**Day 7** Today's first stop, as we headed towards our next hotel in Boumalne du Dades, consisted of a long walk near Oued Rheris, where we saw Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagles, Spotted Sandgrouse, a very much-appreciated Pharaoh Eagle-owl at rest on the desert floor, Greater Hoopoe-larks, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Bar-tailed Larks, a Thick-billed Lark, Thekla Larks, Spectacled Warblers, Scrub Warblers, a Fulvous Chatterer and a Desert Wheatear, while a Trumpeter Finch was heard only. Our only other stop was on the stony desert known as the Tagdilt track, where we watched Temminck's Larks, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Thekla Larks and Red-rumped Wheatears. The day's drive, together with an incidental stop, produced a Desert Lark and White-tailed Wheatears.

**Day 8** Returning to the Tagdilt track, albeit to a different area, we found Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Larks, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Thekla Larks and Red-rumped Wheatears. White-tailed Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches and a Spanish Sparrow were seen during short stops which punctuated the drive towards our next hotel in Ouarzazate, though we failed to locate Mourning Wheatear. Our main stop on the journey was at Barrage El Mansour, where we found Greater Flamingos, Ruddy Shelducks, Black-winged Stilts, an Iberian Chiffchaff and more White-tailed Wheatears and witnessed a passage of three Black Storks and around 10 Short-toed Eagles as they arrived over the Anti Atlas only to continue to head north over the High Atlas.

**Day 9** During the mountainous initial part of our long drive west to Agadir we saw a Desert Lark, Thekla Larks, Blue Rock-thrushes, White-tailed Wheatears and Black Wheatears, though not the desired Mourning Wheatear. Birds seen in the Sous Valley as we continued our journey to the coast included Ruddy Shelducks and Moussier's Redstarts at Aoulouz Gorge and a Black-shouldered Kite east of Taroudannt. We were to stay for three nights in Agadir.

**Day 10** In calm, sunny conditions we headed north from Agadir. Our first stop was at a beach near Taghazout to admire a flock of Audouin's Gulls while our second stop was at Cap Rhir where, following a sea-watch, we recorded a Thekla Lark, Moussier's Redstarts and a Black Wheatear. Next we watched about 25 Bald Ibises to the north of Tamri and also saw Barbary Partridges and Spanish Sparrows there. Returning south to Agadir we saw an Audouin's Gull at Oued Sous before waiting there until dusk fell. With the prime Red-necked Nightjar viewing area now being closed to birders, we had to stand some distance away, which resulted in just a heard-only record.

**Day 11** South was today's direction from Agadir, to Oued Massa, seeing a Black-shouldered Kite on the way. Our first stop was near Sidi Wassai village where, in a landscape of tiny irrigated fields and hedges, we found Squacco Herons, a Caspian Tern, Pallid Swifts, Black-crowned Tchagras, Moussier's Redstarts and Spanish Sparrows, though our primary target species, Plain Martin, was clearly not present along the river. As a result, we travelled further south to another stretch of the Oued Massa where we were delighted to find a pair of Plain Martins with a youngster peeping out of the nest-hole. We ended the day back near Sidi Wassai.

**Day 12** Our final two-thirds of a day was spent at Oued Sous, where we recorded Greater Flamingos, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles, Barbary Partridges, an Audouin's Gull, Pallid Swifts and a Black-crowned Tchagra before heading for the airport at Agadir and our return flight to Gatwick.

Birds not mentioned in the above account (UK non-rare species), together with the number of days recorded in brackets, are as follows: Little Grebe (5), Great Crested Grebe (4), Black-necked Grebe (1), Balearic Shearwater (1), Northern Gannet (2), Great Cormorant (9), Black-crowned Night-heron (1), Grey Heron (6), Purple Heron (1), Great Egret (3), Little Egret (7), Cattle Egret (9), Eurasian Spoonbill (1), White Stork (8), Common Shelduck (1), Mallard (6), Gadwall (2), Green-winged Teal (3), Northern Pintail (1), Northern Shoveler (5), Red-crested Pochard (1), Tufted Duck (1), Common Pochard (3), Ferruginous Duck (3), Common Scoter (2), Osprey (3), Black Kite (5), Golden Eagle (1), Western Marsh-harrier (7), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (3), Peregrine Falcon (2), Common Kestrel (11), Common Quail (1), Water Rail (1), Eurasian Moorhen (4), Common Coot (7), Eurasian Oystercatcher (2), Pied Avocet (2), Common Ringed Plover (3), Little Ringed Plover (6), Kentish Plover (3), Northern Lapwing (2), Dunlin (1), Little Stint (1), Temminck's Stint (1), Sanderling (1), Common Redshank (2), Spotted Redshank (2), Greenshank (4), Common Sandpiper (4), Wood Sandpiper (1), Green Sandpiper (6), Ruff (1), Whimbrel (1), Eurasian Curlew (2), Common Snipe (2), Eurasian Thick-knee (3), Great Skua (1), Arctic Skua (1), Black-headed Gull (5), Mediterranean Gull (2), Common Gull (2), Yellow-legged Gull (4), Lesser Black-backed Gull (8), Great Black-backed Gull (1), Sandwich Tern (2), Rock Dove (12), Common Wood-pigeon (7), Eurasian Collared-dove (12), Tawny Owl (1), Little Owl (2), Common Kingfisher (2), Great Spotted Woodpecker (5), Eurasian Hoopoe (5), Eurasian Magpie (7), Eurasian Jackdaw (2), Red-billed Chough (2), Common Raven (5), Horned Lark (2), Sky Lark (2), Sand Martin (3), Red-rumped Swallow (2), Eurasian Swallow (11), Common House-martin (5), Woodchat Shrike (2), Coal Tit (1), Great Tit (3), Eurasian Wren (4), White-throated Dipper (1), Cetti's Warbler (5), Sedge Warbler (2), Reed Warbler (2), Blackcap (5), Subalpine Warbler (3), Common Chiffchaff (10), European Robin (3), Bluethroat (1), Common Redstart (1), Black Redstart (10), Whinchat (2), European Stonechat (11), Northern Wheatear (1), Eurasian Blackbird (12), Ring Ouzel (1), Redwing (1), Song Thrush (2), Mistle Thrush (2), Common Starling (1), White Wagtail (12), White Wagtail *subpersonata* (2), Grey Wagtail (8), Yellow Wagtail *iberiae* (8), Yellow Wagtail *cinereocapilla* (1), Meadow Pipit (5), Tree Pipit (1), Water Pipit (1), Corn Bunting (5), Cirl Bunting (2), Common Chaffinch (2), Common Chaffinch *africana* (9), European Greenfinch (6), European Goldfinch (7), Eurasian Linnet (7), European Serin (8) and House Sparrow (12).

Despite the dull, cold, snowy and windy conditions experienced during the first five days of the tour, almost all of Morocco's special resident and winter-visiting species were seen and we recorded a total of 196 species. Birdfinders will be repeating the Morocco tour in 2016.