

Morocco

20 Feb–3 March 2018

Participants

Mike Boote
Peter Day
Hamish Fletcher
John Garr
Julia Gibson
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Leader Peter Lansdown

Driver Mohammed

Fulvous Chatterer

Day 1 The EasyJet flight from Gatwick landed on time at Marrakech and after negotiating passport control and seeing our first birds – House Buntings – we met up with our driver and set off for the ski resort of Oukaimeden. Stops en route produced a Coal Tit (heard only), two Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Black Wheatears and Firecrests as the best birds. At Oukaimeden, we encountered a large flock of the African race of Crimson-winged Finches with smaller numbers of (Atlas) Horned Larks and Rock Petronias and both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs along with Black Redstarts, Common Chaffinches of both the nominate and African races, Eurasian Linnets and Rock Buntings. After this long but satisfying first day, we moved down the mountain to our hotel, the recently opened Kasbah Aurocher, where we enjoyed a very good meal.

Day 2 The group rose early for a return trip to Oukaimeden, seeing Grey Wagtail at the hotel and Peregrine Falcon on the journey, with the main target at the ski resort itself being Alpine Accentor. After an uphill walk through the snow, we duly found two birds at the top of the mountain that houses the communication masts. While we did not spot any additional species to those seen yesterday, apart from Mistle Thrush, it was noticeable that there were far greater numbers of Yellow-billed Choughs in the area. We then settled down for a long drive to Temara Plage on the coast north of Casablanca. A couple of stops some way down the mountain gave us a Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Crag-martins and Red Crossbills (heard only). Another stop, at farmland near Ben Guerir, produced Calandra and Crested Larks and Eurasian Skylarks (heard only), a Eurasian Hoopoe, Corn Buntings and Spanish Sparrows. Birds seen from the minibus on the drive included Glossy Ibis, Black Kite and Black-winged Stilt, while common birds seen during the journey and subsequently on most days were Cattle Egret, White Stork, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Yellow-legged Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon, Eurasian Collared-dove, Eurasian Magpie (subspecies *mauritanica*), Crested and Thekla's Larks, Eurasian Swallow, Common House Martin, Southern Grey Shrike, Common Bulbul, Common Chiffchaff, Black Redstart, European Stonechat, Eurasian Blackbird, Spotless Starling, Common Chaffinch (*africana*), Eurasian Linnet and House Sparrow.

Day 3 Our first stop was to an area of remnant cork oak woodland at Zaers. Immediately on leaving the bus, a Double-spurred Francolin was heard, but finding it proved far harder. Eventually, thanks to Mike Boote's amazing ability to locate birds, which he demonstrated throughout the tour, the francolin was located several hundred yards away, perched in a tree; all obtained good views through Mike's telescope – a great result. Some of the group also heard, then saw briefly, a Black-crowned Tchagra, while other birds seen were Sardinian Warbler, European Serin and African Blue Tit. We had only just set off again when a group of Glossy Ibises was noticed in a flooded field, their plumage iridescent in the sunshine. At our next stop, Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, good views were obtained of Great Crested and Little Grebes and several ducks including Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Red-crested Pochard and White-headed Duck. In addition, Western Marsh Harriers, Western Swamphen, Red-knobbed Coots, Audouin's Gulls, Common Ravens, Eurasian Jackdaws, Bank Swallows (Sand Martins), Cetti's Warblers and a European Robin were recorded. Lunch was eaten by the lake before we boarded the bus for Merdja Zerga. On arrival, Common Quail and Northern Lapwings were seen, along with Zitting Cisticola and Meadow Pipit seen while waiting for our main target species, Marsh Owl. The wait was worth it as two owls were seen in daylight at very close quarters, giving those present excellent photographic opportunities. Problems were encountered with our hotel at Moulay Bouselhan, so Peter Lansdown very quickly found vastly improved accommodation at Larache – many thanks, Peter.

Day 4 Because yesterday had been a long day we had a later start than usual. We had not yet left the hotel grounds when a Little Owl was observed perched on a pillar – a good start! Shortly afterwards, the only Common Starlings of the tour were encountered and Eurasian Jackdaws and Eurasian Thick-knees were also spotted. A break was taken during the long drive to the Ifrane area to see some Lesser Kestrels. We had hoped to see Black-necked Grebes at Dayet Aaoua but the lake proved to be completely dry! Despite this setback, we ate lunch on a track by the side of the dried-out lake where we saw Eurasian Jay, Hawfinch, Cirl Bunting, European Goldfinch, Mistle Thrush and Great Spotted Woodpecker, with the star bird being Levillant's Woodpecker. Moving further along the track, Wood Lark was seen along with more Levillant's Woodpeckers, Thekla's Lark, Great Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Red Crossbills. Shortly after departing on the journey to Midelt we stopped to look at a small lake on the outskirts of Ifrane, which produced Ferruginous Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots.

Day 5 An early start was required as we set off to the windswept plains near Zeida. Despite over two hours of searching, no Dupont's Larks were seen, although two or three of the group, with more acute hearing than most, heard some snatches of song. Apart from a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, some Lesser Short-toed Larks and a Red-rumped Wheatear, few birds were seen. Our long drive to the accommodation at Kasbah Hotel Said, near Merzouga, was brightened by Little Owl, Desert and White-crowned Wheatears and some perched Brown-necked Ravens near the roadside plus a stop by the Legionnaire's Tunnel, which produced an eclectic mix of Great Cormorant, Common Sandpiper, Desert Lark, Eurasian Crag-martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Black Wheatear, Blue Rock-thrush, House Bunting and, best of all, an Alpine Accentor. After booking into our hotel, a short walk into the semi-desert produced Tristram's Warbler, Desert and White-crowned Wheatears and a Moussier's Redstart in the hotel grounds.

Day 6 This was perhaps the most anticipated day of the tour, being our trip into the desert in 4x4 vehicles; we were not to be disappointed. We started by observing a group of Fulvous Chatterers, and then saw several Spotted Sandgrouse in flight followed by a party of Crowned Sandgrouse at extremely close quarters on the ground near a known drinking pool, and a male Trumpeter Finch under one of the parked vehicles! We then had the novel experience of watching our drivers, in their vehicles, push a group of Cream-coloured Coursers towards us, akin to dogs herding sheep! A move to a spot with a few low, mud-brick buildings produced a total of nine Desert Sparrows, eight of them females. We then walked up a sparsely vegetated wadi, noting both Spectacled and African Desert Warblers. In another area of sparse vegetation an Isabelline Wheatear was seen. A short drive to a rocky escarpment produced a Pharaoh Eagle-owl – after a long search and a scramble up a scree slope. Two separate groups of Fulvous Chatterers were seen by the roadside as we drove to a cliff which produced the final bird of the day – a Lanner Falcon, perched on top of the highest point of a rocky

promontory. During the course of the day we had seen several Brown-necked Ravens, Greater Hoopoe-larks, Bar-tailed Larks and Northern, Desert and White-crowned Wheatears.

Day 7 We began the day with a short walk outside the hotel, gaining good views of Bar-tailed Lark and Greater Hoopoe-lark and Tristram's, Sardinian and Spectacled Warblers, plus a distant view of a Lanner Falcon, before setting off for Boulmalne du Dadès. We stopped at a couple of locations, noting Brown-necked Ravens, Maghreb and Thekla's Larks and Trumpeter Finches, but strong winds and blown sand made for difficult birding. Nearing Boumalne, we pulled in by the side of the New Tagdilt Track Road and had close views of a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on the ground. Rain was now falling in tandem with the strong winds but despite this we decided to bird the Tagdilt Track. Thankfully, the rain soon stopped and we were rewarded with very close views of Thick-billed and Temminck's Larks and Red-rumped Wheatears – albeit in the particularly insalubrious setting of an extensive, smelly and unsightly rubbish dump. Cream-coloured Coursers were spotted as we drove towards our hotel.

Day 8 A brief foray was made to the Tagdilt Track: not to the dump but to an area of farmland, noting Cream-coloured Courser, both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, various larks including our only Greater Short-toed Larks of the tour and several wheatear species. We returned to Boumalne and stopped at the river bridge, seeing a female *subpersonata* White Wagtail. A further, this time emergency, stop near Skoura, after a cry from Peter of “Maghreb Wheatear”, was very well received: there they were by the roadside, a pair of this difficult to track down bird – is it a separate species or merely a subspecies of Mourning Wheatear? I subscribe to the first-mentioned option! We then drove to the Barrage el-Mansour-ed-Dahbi near Ouzazarte. A Little Owl posed nicely atop an old building during our lunch break. Low water-level meant a long walk to get at all close to the water's edge and this, combined with a heat haze, made identification difficult. However, as the afternoon progressed conditions improved and a good selection of species was seen. These included Greater Flamingo, a Black-necked Grebe, Ruddy and Common Shelducks, four Marbled Teal and a Tufted Duck. The waders included the ubiquitous Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocets (well spotted Jo), Ruffs, Common Redshanks, Common Greenshanks and Wood Sandpipers. Two Lesser Kestrels and several Maghreb Larks were seen during our two walks and there were Laughing Doves in the courtyard of our hotel in Ouarzazate.

Day 9 The itinerary for today would take us from Ouzazarte to Agadir, via Amerzgane, over the Anti-Atlas and along the Sous Valley. A stop near Amerzgane, to try and locate Scrub Warbler, proved unsuccessful, although it did yield the first Subalpine Warbler of the tour. A second stop, at a small stream, gave excellent photographic opportunities for our first Western Yellow Wagtail and a second Subalpine Warbler, while the non-photographers viewed a varied selection of hirundines flying overhead, together with Pallid Swifts. From the minibus we saw a number of Desert Larks, a Woodchat Shrike, Moussier's Redstart, Desert, White-crowned and Black Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches. A stop in the Sous Valley failed to produce the hoped-for Western Orphean Warbler (perhaps they were late arriving this year?) but did give most of us our first Barbary Partridges as they burst from cover. As we neared Agadir, the skies darkened and the rain started. Nevertheless, Nick managed to point out a Black-shouldered Kite and later a second bird was seen. That evening, we booked into the functional Anezi Tower Hotel in Agadir for our final three nights.

Day 10 After being awakened at 04.00 hours by wind and rain, I was disappointed to note that conditions had scarcely improved a few hours later. Heading north towards Tamri, we stopped at Taghazout and Cap Rhir for some sea-watching. Northern Gannets were omni-present while at the second stop Arctic Jaegers were frequent with lesser numbers of Great Skuas and Pomarine Jaegers. The deep troughs in the waves made viewing difficult but Balearic and Cory's Shearwaters were seen by some. Other species seen during sea-watching included Cream-coloured Courser and Blue Rock-thrush. We passed through Tamri, where the Oued Tinkert had broken through the sand bar and was rushing seawards, in a torrent, carrying with it much debris. On the hillside to the north, thirty-two Bald Ibises were seen at very close quarters – deep joy! Moving back to the estuary, a pair of Barbary Partridges was flushed and Ruddy Shelducks, many Audouin's Gulls, Grey and Little Ringed Plovers and a Common Kingfisher were seen, but the highlight was watching two male *subpersonata* White Wagtails surfing on the flotsam and flying back to repeat the process once they

reached the incoming waves – obviously a game of wagtail chicken! We headed back to the Sous Estuary to wait for evening and Red-necked Nightjars, occupying ourselves by identifying the numerous waders in the estuary; those not previously recorded were Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Spotted Redshank, Eurasian Curlew and both godwit species. Also present were Common Shelducks, Eurasian Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises, some 270 Greater Flamingos, Osprey, Western Marsh-harrier and Water Pipit. A Little Gull, an Audouin's Gull and many Mediterranean Gulls were present, as were a few Sandwich Terns. Wandering along the Camel Track, Nick picked up a Eurasian Wryneck, subsequently seen by most of us, but when dusk came the Red-necked Nightjars were heard only, and that by just two of the group. However, four Marbled Teal were seen flying overhead in the gathering gloom and a Black-crowned Night-heron and several Eurasian Thick-knees were heard after dark.

Day 11 On this, our last full day, we set off south to Oued Massa. At our first stop, in some farmland, Cream-coloured Coursers and a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were seen, while a Little Owl posed on a nearby building. Moving on to the bridge across the oued at Arhbalou, the most interesting birds noted were Laughing Doves, a party of European Bee-eaters, a Woodchat Shrike, Subalpine Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas, Moussier's Redstarts, Western Yellow Wagtails, Tree Pipits and Spanish Sparrows, but Black-crowned Tchagras were heard only. At the next bridge, near Massa, we saw Little Ringed Plovers, Common Sandpiper and Common Greenshank. Retracing our steps a little, we all saw at least three Plain Martins, pointed out by Peter, flying among a mixed group of hirundines across a wheat field near the water. A bonus bird, in the shape of a male Montagu's Harrier, was also seen over this field. Our walk along the river, here just a line of pools, produced two Squacco Herons, a Common Snipe, two Gull-billed Terns and some Green Sandpipers – surprisingly the first ones positively identified on this tour. A Western Olivaceous Warbler was heard, but not seen, as was a Black-crowned Tchagra. After the mandatory stop for round bread, sardines and triangular cheese slices (the vache qui rit may still have been laughing but were we?) we took our final foray in the area in our quest to find Black-crowned Tchagra: along the Massa river towards the nature reserve. This species continued to elude us, but we were not helped by high winds. On our return walk, the wind dropped a little. Five Common Quails exploded from beneath our feet in the tiny fields and more European Bee-eaters were seen along with our first non-flying-away Barbary Partridges. Finally, just as we neared our vehicle, two Black-crowned Tchagras obligingly appeared, not in the riverside vegetation but on the hillside, moving between cacti and other low vegetation, giving us very good views – success! A stop by a garage on the main Agadir road produced not only the usual Pallid Swifts but also some Little Swifts – Peter told us they nest there. Not a bird, but the mammal highlight of the tour occurred today, when Roger saw an Egyptian Mongoose.

Day 12 As our flight did not take off until the evening, we were able to undertake a morning's bird-watching at the Oued Sous, where the water level had dropped dramatically. Birds new for the tour were Kentish Plover, Little Stint, Red Knot, Slender-billed Gull and Great Spotted Cuckoo. Other notable sightings included a Northern Pintail, a Marbled Teal, a Common Quail, two or three Ospreys, a group of Sandwich Terns, the Little Gull and Spanish Sparrows. At one point, the miserable weather drove us away from the estuary for a coffee break!

Summary This trip was expertly led by Peter Lansdown, who not only brought us to the birds but also fast-tracked our way into hotels in what can be a most bureaucratic environment. Mike Boote's ability to find birds and help others see them has already been noted and Julia Gibson needs a mention for providing invaluable medical support to one of the group on a number of occasions. Finally, we were fortunate to have a driver of Mohammed's calibre, who not only drove in a most assured fashion over long distances but was also a competent spotter of roadside birds. This report does not contain any photographs or a full list of birds that were seen. The full list can be seen on the Birdfinders' website, as can a number of superlative photographs taken by Peter Day; my photographs would look shabby in comparison! The group gelled well together, thus enhancing both the birding and the tour in general. We recorded 197 species in a variety of environments and I, for one, enjoyed a most worthwhile and fun holiday.

Hamish Fletcher