

Morocco

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Participants

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Leader Peter Lansdown

Maghreb Magpie

Day 1 “Enjoy the warm Morocco weather” was the goodbye message from the dear ones. How little they knew. True, the sun shone every day and some afternoons were very warm, but we were glad to have brought our extra insulating layers of clothing. This was especially the case on the day of our arrival, when our infinitely patient driver, Abdul, took us straight to the snow-clad High Atlas and the hanging valley of Oukaimeden. Other tourists had to make do with souvenir-buying, sledging and pony rides, since the snow was too wet for skiing, while we enjoyed the groups of **Red-billed Choughs** and larger flocks of **Yellow-billed Choughs**. The buildings and trees were the haunt of ‘African’ **Common Chaffinches**, accompanied at this elevation by our more familiar race of **Common Chaffinch**, and by **Bramblings**. **Mistle Thrushes** and **Eurasian Blackbirds** were conspicuous, a **Blue Rock-thrush** was found and we were relieved eventually to find **Crimson-winged Finches**. Other birds to help us get the tour started included the first of many **Black Redstarts** and **Black Wheatears**. But what had happened to the expected flocks of **Horned Larks** and **Rock Sparrows**? We would have to come back tomorrow. We spent the night at the impressive Kasbah Aurocher, run by a very pleasant French lady and her small beribboned dog. This was at a much lower elevation but still above the present snow line, and chilly.

Day 2 Planned early-morning birding in the garden was abandoned because of an unexpected forwarding of the clocks – it was too dark! So we set off uphill as daylight came, soon encountering our first **Levaillant’s Woodpecker** in the roadside trees. Further species encountered included **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Rock and Cirl Buntings**, **African Blue Tit** and the ubiquitous, noisy **Common Bulbul**. This tour was notable for finding some of the special birds on the second day of searching for them. Hence, on our return to the resort village of Oukaimeden, the missing **Rock Sparrows** and **Horned Larks** duly appeared in small flocks and a **Water Pipit** put in an appearance. Abdul did not hesitate in driving his bus up the rough, icy track to the guarded transmitter station on the high point above the village, where we searched for, and soon found, an **Alpine Accentor**. There was a long drive ahead of us for the first of our three crossings of the country, and so we left the snow at mid-morning. There were a few stops for birding on the way, of course. We added **Little and Cattle Egrets**, **European Serin**, **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Peregrine Falcon**, **Little Swift** (at a site discovered before the start of the tour by our German contingent),

House Bunting, Sardinian Warbler, Eurasian Blackcap, European Stonechat, Spotless Starling and a few other species to our list before reaching the autoroute beyond Marrakech. The onward journey produced **Great Grey Shrike** and **Black Kite**. The wheat fields along our route, which might have held a variety of larks, produced only **Crested Lark**. **Corn Bunting** and **Glossy Ibis** were also added, as was our first mammal, a **Red Ox**, looking much sleeker than our familiar, scruffy town animal. Accommodation for the night was at the splendid La Felouque, at Temara Plage, which is surprisingly well concealed at its beach-front location and found only with difficulty.

Day 3 The inefficiency of La Felouque's kitchen, suspected at dinner yesterday, was confirmed by the lateness of breakfast. A long day of birding meant that an early breakfast had been ordered. It was produced only as we were on the point of leaving hungry. A walk among dense shrubs in the remnant woods of the Zaers as daylight came was rewarded with the appearance of our main target, **Double-spurred Francolin**. It was tricky to find at first through the tangled branches, but once Graham had located it we all had a good look. **Eurasian Blackbirds** were notably abundant here and a good diversity of other birds nearby included **Eurasian Spoonbill, Long-legged Buzzard, Glossy Ibis, Song Thrush, Green Sandpiper, Sardinian Warbler, European Greenfinch** and **Eurasian Jay**. A pond held **Eurasian Coot, Northern Shoveler, Little Grebe, Eurasian Teal** and **Red-crested Pochard**. **Maghreb Magpie** (like our European Magpie but with a bright blue bare patch behind the eye) started to appear on the day's north-bound journey, but was to prove even more common around Agadir, much further south, later in the tour. Vast numbers of **White Storks** occupied the outer suburbs of Rabat as we passed through. Further on, our first **Lesser Kestrels** and **Pallid Swifts** were seen close to our day's chosen grocery shop. The early-afternoon was spent by Lac de Sidi Bourhaba. The first waterside stop produced **Greater Flamingos, Red-knobbed Coots, Red-crested Pochards, White-headed Ducks** and **Eurasian Marsh-harriers** (a species widely seen during the tour). Better views of these were had from the causeway crossing, from where a **Ferruginous Duck** was also seen and **Cetti's Warblers** were heard. The picnic site at the end of the lakeside road was buzzing with **Great** and **African Blue Tits**. Also seen from here were **Common Pochards** and another **Ferruginous Duck**, but the special bird (for me anyway) was a **Western Swamphen** that paraded and swam in front of the reeds opposite us. By late afternoon we had arrived at our northernmost site, the flat marshes and wet fields at the edge of the Merdja Zerga. Our three-hour vigil here was relieved by a **Great Spotted Cuckoo, a Common Quail, Zitting Cisticolas, Meadow Pipits** and a **Common Snipe**, as well as our only swirling, though small, flock of **European Starlings** (**Spotless Starling** being the common and widespread species). **Northern Lapwings** were on the more distant marshes. It was still daylight when a **Little Owl** was spotted perched on a tree, but daylight and our hopes were already fading when a local man and his dogs flushed a group of three **Marsh Owls** (our reason for being here) from their roost in the rushes. They performed beautifully, but were no doubt less impressed with the situation than we were. Our arrival at the Relax Hotel in Kenitra, again a nice place but less than easy to find, was quite late, and I confess that I was too tired for dinner and decided to miss that and also, I assume, a session of drooling over those wonderful owls.

Day 4 After a later start (to compensate for a late night), our grocery-shopping stop in El Hajeb was conveniently adjacent to a **Lesser Kestrel** colony. Travelling towards the Middle Atlas through extensive, impressive stretches of holm oak (*Quercus ilex*), where it apparently grows in mixed forest with Atlas cedar (*Cedrus atlantica*), we reached the modern, very rich-looking town of Ifrane, a resort for winter sports and activities such as golf; no point in stopping here then. We turned north to a lake, Dayet Aaoua. Perhaps because of the very low water-level, the anticipated Black-necked Grebes were absent. We found just **Mallards** and a **Ferruginous Duck** on the lake, with a **Common Firecrest** and **African Blue Tits** in the woods. During lunch and a walk in the hills above the lake, where abundant pale-purple gentians brightened up the ground, we found **Common Ravens, Mistle Thrushes, Hawfinches, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, a Short-toed Treecreeper, a Rock Bunting** and a **Black Redstart** as well as **Red-knobbed Coots** on a small pond. While crossing the Middle Atlas in the afternoon we stopped to scan a plain at Aguelmame de Sidi Ali, a RAMSAR site according to a notice board. Here were about 130 **Ruddy**

Shelducks and a **Long-legged Buzzard**. Later we reached the impressive, almost palatial Hotel Taddart, near Midelt.

Day 5 During the night, the competitors in the Desert Trophy Rally had arrived with their spectacular array of modified cars, ranging from 1970s Fiat Pandas upwards. Our first journey out from here, to the Zeida Plain to find **Dupont's Larks**, was entirely successful, with **Lesser Short-toed Larks** thrown in for good measure. After a quick coffee and loading of baggage back at the hotel, our mountain crossing continued. The **Black Wheatears** seen on the way were replaced by **White-crowned Wheatears**, a common bird once we were through the Legionnaire's Tunnel. A lay-by stop just beyond the tunnel gave us spectacular views of river valleys, dry mountains and distant dusty plains. There were also some genuine, beautifully-marked **Rock Pigeons** as well as **Eurasian Crag-martins**, **Grey Wagtails** and other common birds. This was also where we watched the antics of our second (and last) mammal, a **Barbary Ground-squirrel**. Travelling on, we stopped for lunch and found a **Tristram's Warbler**, **Desert Larks** and, of all things, a small flock of **European Goldfinches**. Eventually we reached the real desert – the Sahara no less! – and settled in for a two-night stay at the isolated, walled compound containing the Kasbah Said Hotel, in the Merzouga district. This place was a real treat – efficient, well-organised and with especially good food, all of which seemed to be the responsibility of one polite, stoic gentleman, almost the only person I saw working there. There was even a **Moussier's Redstart** in the central garden. It was still daylight but not warm enough for a dip in the pool, and so we took the opportunity to search a nearby wadi, actually just a thin branching flush of greenery in the desert. We found **Greater Hoopoe-larks**, **Bar-tailed Larks** (which, surprisingly, replace Desert Lark in the true desert) and **Desert Wheatears**.

Day 6 Leaving Abdul to enjoy a well-earned rest, we went off for the day in two somewhat cramped 4x4s. Since we were unable to find any pools, probably because of the recent exceptionally dry weather, neither of the sandgrouse species, Spotted and Crowned, which drink from such pools during the mornings, were seen. Otherwise, our first target was **Desert Sparrow**. It was surprisingly absent from permanent buildings, where it might have benefitted from nest sites and a food source. Eventually we found some obliging individuals around a large tented settlement, apparently a kind of mobile tourist hotel. Other species, in addition to those seen last night, included **Brown-necked Raven**, **Spectacled Warbler**, **Greater Short-toed Lark**, **Great Grey Shrike**, **Maghreb Lark** (a paler desert replacement for the similar Crested Lark), **Tristram's Warbler** and **Trumpeter Finch**. An **Isabelline Wheatear**, the first of three that we saw, confirmed that its distribution shown in most field guides is incorrect. Near here was a dazzling display of bright yellow flowering spikes of desert hyacinth (*Cistanche tubulosa*), really a kind of broomrape, parasitizing one of the scarce desert trees. Driving on, we came to the large Lake Merzouga (Dayet Srji), which held many **Greater Flamingos** and **Eurasian Coots** and a few **Red-crested Pochards** and **Ferruginous Ducks**, with **Kentish Plovers** at the edge. Eventually we reached the north-south road and spent some time searching an area near Rissani where groups of foraging Fulvous Chatterers are usually found. This is an unusual area of tiny fields, each surrounded by a mud wall; the few fields that were in use held wheat crops. It seems to be a kind of paddyfield system in which the plots are presumably flooded, drained and fertilised before the wheat is planted. Wheat is grown by different methods and in different conditions all over the country, but the crops I saw were usually uneven and often poor (maybe because of a too-dry season). I wonder how they manage to bake such excellent bread here. Back to the subject: we found no chatterers today so we'll have to come back tomorrow. That usually works for us. Then it was on to a canyon area to spend a long time scanning the cliff-face and cliff-top, without success, for the expected Lanner Falcon. As we were boarding the cars to leave, however, the local watcher became suddenly animated, shouting and jumping with excitement. A **Lanner Falcon** had just landed at the top of the cliff immediately above us. Cameras quickly came out again. No, wait! Her mate was now arriving too, and they mated. I assume the photographers get extra points for that photo. There was still daylight and our next stop was in "owl canyon". Whilst most telescopes were scouring crevices in the usual rock face, Katharina had hers cannily focused on a completely different rock wall. Maybe she had spotted the giveaway white splashes, but she very soon announced that she had found the **Pharaoh Eagle-owl**. It was fully visible and

facing us, though partly in shade. As light faded it gradually moved out of its crack in the rock to give us a full frontal in sunlight. Great stuff.

Day 7 Before leaving Kasbah Said we had another, longer walk at a nearby shallow wadi. The usual birds were all present and correct. **Spectacled Warblers** were easy to find among the low scrub and a **Tristram's Warbler** was found, but our main target, **African Desert Warbler**, was much more elusive. Only one bird was seen in fact, and by only two of us, Martin's sharp eyes recording its diagnostics. Now we had to retrace our journey through Erfoud to Rissani to look once more for **Fulvous Chatterer**. Peter eventually spotted one. It gave us all good views but we soon left it in peace as it was clearly feeding a family. Maybe an early, dry spring had brought forward the breeding season, which might explain the absence of foraging groups. During our drive to the west, we stopped near Oued Rheris and found a number of repeat desert species including **Fulvous Chatterer**. In the early evening we arrived in the town of Boumalne du Dadès, nestling below a dry mountain ridge. Here we were greeted at the Kasbah Xaluca Hotel by a drum band and ladies in splendid costume, as well as by trays of fruit juice and cakes. We were either expected or mistaken for someone important. This new, busy hotel is multi-storey and dominates the high part of town.

Day 8 After seeing **House Buntings** at the hotel, we headed straight for the rubbish tip, as you do. The first sighting was of a pair of **Little Owls**. Then the more expected birds quickly started to show: **Desert Wheatears**, **Thekla's Larks**, **Red-rumped Wheatears** (a target), **Thick-billed Larks** (another target), **Greater Short-toed Larks**, **Meadow Pipits** and plenty of the more common species including our first **Yellow (Spanish) Wagtails**. Eventually some wonderfully cute and tame **Temminck's Larks** were found – my favourite bird of the tour. Excellent birding. Further out on the plain known as the Tagdilt track we had good views of a pair of **Cream-coloured Coursers** and more **Trumpeter Finches**. At the start of the journey west, Boumalne du Dades proved to be a much bigger town than expected, straggling through its mountain valley. The Moroccan race of **White Wagtail**, *subpersonata*, was exactly where it was supposed to be, below the bridge on Oued Dadès. By mid-afternoon we had reached the much depleted reservoir at Barrage El Mansour and we spent some time on its dried-out shore. The highlight was a group of **Red-throated Pipits**, one of which showed some red, a skulking **Bluethroat** and several **Maghreb Larks**, but there were also **Water** and **Meadow Pipits**, **White** and **Yellow Wagtails**, a **Great Egret**, a **Black-necked Grebe**, **Ruddy Shelducks** and other more common birds. Then it was on to another busy hotel, Hotel Le Fint in nearby Ouarzazate.

Day 9 This was always going to be a major travelling day as we headed west back to the coast, this time further south at Agadir. An early stop in the mountains produced **Desert Larks**, **Trumpeter Finches** and, eventually, a pair of **Mourning (Maghreb) Wheatears**. This target bird performed beautifully. Travelling through the middle of the day produced now-familiar species including **House Bunting**, **Desert**, **Black** and **White-crowned Wheatears**, **Black Redstart**, **Blue Rock-thrush** and **Long-legged Buzzard**. Eventually we arrived in the Sous valley. We were in an area in which the hills and valley floor are covered entirely by argan trees (*Argania spinosa*), endemic to and near this valley and to an area in Algeria. As a result (I read), the Sous valley is designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve. We happened to stop for lunch under a tree in which a **Western Orphean Warbler** was singing. A short walk produced two more, as well as a **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **Crested Larks**, a **Eurasian Wryneck** and **Woodchat Shrikes**. Further down the valley a **Black-winged Kite** was spotted by the roadside. By early evening we had reached our final hotel, and home for three nights, the multi-storey Anezi Tower in central Agadir.

Day 10 Our first day out from Agadir was to the north, first to a beach, Plage Imi Ouaddar, where **Audouin's Gull** was obligingly present in good numbers among the more usual gulls. Next we walked out to Cap Rhir for some sea-watching. This was not as easy as it might have been, with only one fishing boat, far out at sea in fog, attracting a crowd of seabirds. These were mostly gulls, but telescopes revealed several **Great Skuas**. Single **Arctic** and **Pomarine Skuas** and a **Common Scoter** were also seen. **Northern Gannets** were the exception, passing close by in good numbers, often close inshore. A party of four **Pied Avocets** seemed a little odd. The rocky ground was home to **Eurasian Thick-knee**, **Blue Rock-thrush** and **Thekla's Lark**, while the sparse bushes held **Moussier's Redstarts**. Next we had to find our day's special

bird among the dunes in the Tamri area. We saw our first **Northern Bald Ibis** close to its nesting area near the sea, as we approached on foot along the track from the coast road. Inevitably, the warden of ibises came to shoo us away, while allowing non-birding tourists access on foot and by car to viewing points overlooking the colony. But he helpfully directed us to a higher viewing point further to the south, where 30 or more ibises had flown the short distance to feed. They were exceptionally tame and photogenic. A **Great Grey Shrike** here was of the coastal *algeriensis* race; earlier, paler ones had been *elegans*, I understand. The main job done, our final stop in the area was at a section of beach that led to a lagoon, notable for a single **Greater Flamingo**, **Red-crested Pochards**, **Kentish Plovers**, an **Osprey**, two **White Wagtails** *subpersonata* and the usual water birds. The day was not quite done, and we finished with a visit to the Sous estuary, just south of Agadir. The north shore, where we parked, is a wide shrubby sandscape populated by small birds including **Sardinian Warbler**, **Zitting Cisticola**, **Moussier's Redstart**, **European Serin**, the larger **Eurasian Thick-knee** and **Barbary Partridge** and a crunchy surface of waste plastic. The river banks held a good variety of waders including **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Black-bellied (Grey) Plover**, **Ruff**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Pied Avocet**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Eurasian Curlew**, **Red Knot**, **Common Redshank** and **Common Greenshank**. The usual **Black-headed**, **Lesser Black-backed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** were augmented by **Mediterranean Gulls**, a **Slender-billed Gull** and **Sandwich Terns**. There were a few **Northern Pintails** and plenty of **Greater Flamingos** too. We stayed until dark, in case a Red-necked Nightjar called or appeared. It did neither, perhaps because it was cool and breezy, but most probably because we were prevented from getting close to its once-accessible haunt by security guards around the royal palace walls.

Day 11 On this, our last full day, we drove south from Agadir after noting **Pallid Swifts** over the hotel. Our first stop, near the small settlement of Arhbalou, was initially for good views of **Laughing Doves** and our first **Black-crowned Tchagra**. We then had delightful walks along two stretches of the Massa River. The first was mainly to find **Plain Martins**, nesting in the freshly-eroded river bank. There were also a few **Bank Swallows (Sand Martins)** around. Here were also very co-operative and photogenic **Black-crowned Tchagras**, **Moussier's Redstarts** and **European Stonechats**. A few **Spanish Sparrows** were with the much more common **House Sparrows**, while **Zitting Cisticolas** and **Common Chiffchaffs** were numerous. I am almost certain that one individual I studied was an Iberian Chiffchaff. The many other watchable species included **Subalpine Warbler**, **Eurasian Linnet**, **Corn Bunting** and, briefly, **Common Kingfisher**. **Little Ringed Plover** was a first for the tour and two **Great Spotted Cuckoos** were seen very briefly. The second walk, after our picnic lunch, was notable particularly for a **Black-crowned Night-heron**, along with **Green Sandpiper**, **Eurasian Blackcap** and **Eurasian Moorhen**.

Day 12 We returned to the Sous estuary on our last morning, initially finding the same mix of species but in slightly different proportions except that there were no small waders other than **Common Sandpiper**. This time we walked out to the sea, unintentionally flushing **Eurasian Thick-knee** and **Barbary Partridge**, spotting **Eurasian Spoonbills**, **Audouin's Gulls**, an **Osprey** and a **Great Egret** and delightedly watching flights of about 25 **Marbled Teal** flushed from ponds near the palace wall (before a policeman on a quad bike had a chance to flush out the flushers – who were not members of our group). The teal provided a final, successful flourish. Fortunately, our German friends, who had gone off independently to get best use of their one-day hire car (they were staying until tomorrow), had also found Marbled Teal of their own, and so all were satisfied.

My personal conclusion: an entirely successful tour. Our bird list was not the longest, but that was undoubtedly influenced strongly by the year's weather conditions, especially in the desert. Even so we had been given, and taken, the chance to see all the special, important birds in the country. A wonderful experience, thanks to Peter's knowledge and expertise. Abdul was a great asset and I hope he recovers sufficiently from the experience to do it all over again on future tours. I thank Peter and Abdul, as well as all my co-participants for their cheerful companionship and shared birding skills.

Geoff Bateman