

# Western Sahara

27 Feb–3 March 2016

## Participants

Robert Duckhouse

Keith Fisher

John Holtham

Paul Housley

David Plant

Rynton Sullinge



**Leader** Peter Lansdown

## Black-crowned Sparrow-lark

**Day 1** The group flew from Gatwick to Agadir, where we met up with our leader Peter Lansdown before transferring to a hotel in Agadir for the night.

**Day 2** In the morning we drove north to a beach near a fish factory at Anza on the outskirts of Agadir. Our objective was to find an adult Kelp Gull which had recently been reported amongst thousands of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a few Yellow-legged Gulls assembled on the beach and massing around an outfall. We had no luck with the gull but we did get the tour going with Common Bulbul, Spotless Starling and Zitting Cisticola. It was back on the bus for the short journey to Oued Sous, an estuary on the southern edge of the city. A vast array of birds was on the shores of the estuary and in some nearby shallow pools. On show were Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, White Stork, Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Slender-billed, Mediterranean and Audouin's Gulls and Sandwich Terns. A short walk away from the estuary produced Barbary Partridge, European Serin, Sardinian warbler and Spanish Sparrow. At midday we drove back to the airport to board a flight to Dakhla via Laayoune. We drove the short distance to our hotel for our evening meal. It would be an early start next day with a long drive ahead of us through the desert.

**Day 3** We encountered three security checkpoints as we travelled north up the Dakhla peninsula but we weren't held up. We then headed southeast on the road to Aousserd, birding as we went. Black Kite, Cream-coloured Courser, Brown-necked Raven, Long-legged Buzzard, Southern Grey Shrike, Greater Hoopoe-lark and Black-crowned Sparrow-lark were identified from the minibus. The best bird, however, was an adult Lanner Falcon perched on a roadside bush. Our main target species were to be found further along the road so we kept going. Recent sightings had been noted at specific kilometre marker-posts and our searches would be made at these sites. Our first stop, though, was to check out an area around a leaking water tower where an Allen's Gallinule, an extreme rarity in the Western Palearctic region, had been seen the previous week. There was no sign of the bird so we pressed on. At our third stop there were a number of larks and African Desert Warblers in an area of small bushes and patches of grass not far from the roadside. The wind had got up; making viewing more difficult, but we did get brief views of Dunn's Lark. Further on, as we approached Aousserd, we came to a line of trees and bushes extending into the desert on both sides of the road. The wadi covered a large area but it needed to be searched if we were to find another 'priority' bird: Cricket Longtail. Checking tree by tree we found several migrant species including Subalpine, Spectacled, Sardinian and Western Orphean Warblers, Common Chiffchaff, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes, Common Kestrel and White-tailed and Black-eared Wheatears. After about half an hour we found what we were really looking

for: a pair of Cricket Longtails, which showed really well in the tops of the bushes much to everyone's delight. Back on the road we had one more stop to make. We pulled up to a spot where there were some seemingly derelict buildings, a couple of trucks, a large puddle and a small area of cultivated land with a couple of bushes. This looked to be perfect Desert Sparrow habitat and so it proved to be as we found over thirty birds there. On the way back along the road we added Crested, Desert Lark and Thick-billed Larks to the day's haul. It had been a very long drive but it was well worth the effort to see all of our main desert target birds on our first full day in Western Sahara.

**Day 4** The day involved very little driving as we would remain on the Dakhla peninsula. In the morning, we walked out across the extensive sands of upper Dakhla Bay with the main aim of seeing Royal Tern. Our route across the wet sand and mud was initially dictated by the channels of deeper water and sodden seaweed but it soon became obvious that we were going to get wet feet whichever way we went as the birds seemed to be as far away as they could be. We could see groups of gulls and a few terns, which were probably on the distant hazy shoreline. As we got further out, Audouin's, Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls and Caspian and Sandwich Terns could be identified. Finally we found a group containing Royal Terns. This was a new Western Palearctic bird for all of us and well worth getting our feet wet for. On the walk back we paid closer attention to the great variety of shorebirds, all feeding in preparation for their spring migration. One of them wouldn't be making it, though, becoming a meal for a Lanner on the beach. We made a quick visit back to the hotel to change our footwear and then drove to the south of Dakhla to search through flocks of gulls. As in the Agadir area, the flocks were dominated by Lesser Black-backed Gulls with just a few Yellow-legged Gulls mixed in, so we decided on a spot of sea-watching from a headland on the Atlantic coast. The fresh wind forced the passing birds quite close to our viewing point as we watched a steady stream of Bonxies, perhaps sixty in all, pass by. We also saw several storm-petrels struggling to make any progress against the northwest wind. We identified a European Storm-petrel and several Band-rumped Storm-petrels. Back at our hotel the marine theme continued with oysters and two enormous fish for dinner.

**Day 5** Again we left the peninsula and drove southeast down the Assouerd road, stopping mainly at the same kilometre posts. The birds were still in the same areas, though we did add Red-rumped Wheatear to our tally on the journey. The winds had thankfully eased by early afternoon which made getting decent views of the birds a good deal easier. In fact, we had good views of all the larks of the area with Dunn's Lark showing particularly well. At the big wadi we met a group from Germany whom some of us had met on a previous Birdfinders tour. They had just seen Great Spotted Cuckoo and Fulvous Babbler. Following their directions, we found both of these species and also saw Tree Pipit, Common Kestrel, Black-eared and Northern Wheatears, Temminck's Lark, Woodchat Shrike and Cream-coloured Courser in the area. On the return journey there were more Black Kites and Western Marsh-harrier and Osprey were also seen. As we drove back into Dakhla we saw Black Redstart and Pallid and Little Swifts to round off an excellent few days' birding. Many thanks to Peter Lansdown for his planning and expertise and to all the participants for their contributions in making the trip so rewarding and so enjoyable.

**Bob Duckhouse**