

Morocco

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Participants:

Robert Duckhouse
Anthony and Ruth Eades
David and Janet Kingman
Leslie Morpeth
Brian and Christine Shaw
Rynton Sullinge
Ian Ward
Ian Windle

Leader: Peter Lansdown



Bald Ibis

Day 1: The group assembled at Gatwick and flew to Marrakech, to be greeted by our minibus driver. The long journey to the coastal resort of Témara Plage produced Black-shouldered Kites, a juvenile Lanner, Little Swifts and Calandra Larks as well as several species destined to be seen on at least five days during the tour: Cattle Egret, White Stork, Pallid Swift, Southern Grey Shrike, Crested Lark, Black Wheatear, House Bunting and Spanish Sparrow.

Day 2: Our first full day in Morocco began with a visit to the Zaër, an area of cork-oak and Sandarac woodland. In dull conditions, showers and a strong wind, we managed views of Double-spurred Francolins and a Black-shouldered Kite. Our next birding site was Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, where we saw Marbled Ducks, Red-crested Pochards, Ferruginous Ducks, White-headed Ducks, Red-knobbed Coots and an Audouin's Gull. The extensive flooding and severely potholed minor roads experienced as we travelled north were the result of many weeks of rain in the region. At the day's final site, the famous Merja Zerga lagoon, we all endured wet feet in order to access the area where, despite very strong winds, we saw a Caspian Tern and, as darkness approached, a pair of Marsh Owls. Other species seen during the day, which we would encounter on at least five days, were Barbary Partridge, Black Kite, Long-legged Buzzard, Red-rumped Swallow, African Blue Tit, Common Bulbul, Zitting Cisticola, Sardinian Warbler, Spotless Starling and European Serin.

Day 3: We watched Audouin's Gulls from our Moulay Bouselham hotel before setting off towards Meknes. Our preferred route was closed to us, however, due to the widespread flooding, so seeing Plain Martins was cruelly removed from the day's agenda. A Black-shouldered Kite and a party of Lesser Kestrels provided some compensation during our journey through heavy showers to Dayet Aaoua, set amongst the cedar forests of the Middle Atlas. Here, in dull light, intermittent rain and strong wind, we watched Ferruginous Ducks, Black-necked Grebes, Red-knobbed Coots and Black-winged Stilts, but we were dismayed to find a large fallen tree blocking a much favoured birding track leading away from the lake. We sought alternative similar habitat nearby, where we found a Levaillant's Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreepers, Cirl Buntings and Rock Buntings. Although we saw Ruddy Shelducks and Horned Larks during the subsequent drive south over the Middle Atlas, once again the weather was the dominant feature. A leaden sky soon produced sleet, which turned to heavy snow as we climbed higher, and snow ploughs were soon encountered. As we dropped down the other side of the mountains, the snow cleared and we enjoyed a smooth drive in the dark to our hotel near Midelt.

Day 4: After the poor weather of the previous few days we could hardly believe the clear sky and light breeze that awaited us at Zeida Plain, where we saw Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Dupont's Larks and Lesser Short-toed Larks. The journey to our hotel in the Sahara south of Rissani produced Desert Larks, Crag Martins, White-crowned Black Wheatears and Rock Buntings. In the hotel garden and the desert areas close to the hotel we saw Eurasian Hoopoes, Greater Hoopoe-larks, Bar-tailed Larks, an African Desert Warbler, Spectacled Warblers, a Dartford Warbler, more White-crowned Black Wheatears and Desert Wheatears. Further species found during the day, which we were to see on at least five days during the tour, were Woodchat Shrike and Blue Rock-thrush.

Day 5: Our driver took a well-earned rest today as we headed south into the Sahara in Toyota Landcruisers to visit several sites. Although we drew a blank with Desert Sparrow, we did see a Lanner, a Barbary Falcon, Cream-coloured Coursers, Brown-necked Ravens, Greater Hoopoe-larks, Bar-tailed Larks, Short-toed Larks, an Iberian Chiffchaff, a Tristram's Warbler, a Dartford Warbler, a Subalpine Warbler, White-crowned Black Wheatears, Desert Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches. We then turned north to explore the area around Rissani, where we saw a Bonelli's Eagle, a Pharaoh Eagle-owl, Hoopoes, more Brown-necked Ravens, Crag Martins, a Spectacled Warbler, another Subalpine Warbler, more White-crowned Black Wheatears and Fulvous Babblers.

Day 6: Before we were reunited with our minibus and driver to leave our hotel in the Sahara and head off to our next base at Boumalne du Dades, we again looked around locally and discovered a Eurasian Hoopoe, a Greater Hoopoe-lark, Bar-tailed Larks, Spectacled Warblers, a Tristram's Warbler, a Subalpine Warbler and White-crowned Black Wheatears. We broke our drive in the desert near Oued Rheris, where we saw a Common Quail, Spotted Sandgrouse, Brown-necked Ravens, another Greater Hoopoe-lark, another Bar-tailed Lark, Desert Larks, Short-toed Larks, Thekla Larks, a Scrub Warbler, more Spectacled Warblers, more White-crowned Black Wheatears and Desert Wheatears. The next part of the drive produced more White-crowned Black Wheatears, Mourning Wheatears and a Red-rumped Wheatear, while Eurasian Thick-knees, a Thick-billed Lark, more Thekla Larks, Temminck's Horned Larks, an African Desert Warbler, more Red-rumped Wheatears and Trumpeter Finches were found at various sites on the gravel desert that is the well-known Tagdilt track.

Day 7: Our long drive to Agadir was, for the most part, through rugged terrain and included traversing the Anti Atlas. During this portion of the journey and its one birding stop in a remote valley we saw a Common Quail, Cream-coloured Coursers, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a Laughing Dove, a Bar-tailed Lark, Desert Larks, Thick-billed Larks, Thekla Larks, Horned Larks, Moussier's Redstarts, White-crowned Black Wheatears, Desert Wheatears, Red-rumped Wheatears, Tawny Pipits and Trumpeter Finches. Towards the end of the drive we entered the Sous Valley with its argana forest and agriculture. We stopped several times in this fertile valley and recorded a Lesser Kestrel, more Laughing Doves, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Eurasian Hoopoes, a Crag Martin and more Moussier's Redstarts.

Day 8: On our first day based in Agadir we travelled north along the coast, pausing for a sea-watch at Cap Rhir. This stop produced a Balearic Shearwater, a Pomarine Skua and a Moussier's Redstart. At our destination, an area of cliff-top scrub to the north of Tamri, we saw Bald Ibises, Spectacled Warblers and more Moussier's Redstarts. We returned to Agadir, to the Sous Estuary, seeing a Bald Ibis on the way, only to find a golf course under construction across the approach road to the reserve. Eventually we found an alternative route, albeit one which involved a lot more walking, and this allowed us to fully explore the estuary and find Greater Flamingos, a Great White Egret, Eurasian Spoonbills, an Osprey, Eurasian Thick-knees, Black-winged Stilts, a Slender-billed Gull, an Audouin's Gull, Laughing Doves, a Red-necked Nightjar and a White Wagtail of the Moroccan race.

Day 9: We headed south on the second of our days based in Agadir and stopped at two localities in the Sidi Wassai area, where we saw Marbled Ducks, a Greater Flamingo, Squacco Herons, Glossy Ibises, Laughing Doves, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, a Eurasian Wryneck, Black-crowned Tchagras, Plain Martins, a Subalpine Warbler and Moussier's Redstarts and experienced our second feet-wetting of the tour. We then moved on to the nearby famous Oued Massa reserve, where we enjoyed Ferruginous Ducks, a White-headed Duck, the

Greater Flamingo again, the Glossy Ibises again, Eurasian Spoonbills, a Black-winged Stilt, more Laughing Doves, another Black-crowned Tchagra, more Subalpine Warblers and more Moussier's Redstarts. The semi-desert portion of the reserve produced a Lanner, Eurasian Thick-knees, Cream-coloured Coursers, a Lesser Short-toed Lark and Thekla Larks. We returned to the Sous Estuary in Agadir and saw more Greater Flamingos, a Red-necked Nightjar and more Moussier's Redstarts.

Day 10: Leaving Agadir we headed for Oukaimeden, a ski resort in the High Atlas. We saw a Black-shouldered Kite, a Booted Eagle, Laughing Doves, Little Swifts and a Calandra Lark on the drive to the start of the steep climb up the High Atlas and Short-toed Snake-eagles and a Golden Eagle during breaks made on the ascent itself. In the picturesque hanging valley we found Red-billed Choughs, Yellow-billed Choughs, an Alpine Accentor, Rock Buntings and Rock Petronias.

Day 11: We stayed the whole morning in the hanging valley, seeing a Lammergeier, Golden Eagles, Red-billed Choughs, Yellow-billed Choughs, a Crag Martin, a Rock Bunting, Crimson-winged Finches and Rock Petronias. During a stop made on the descent we recorded Levillant's Woodpeckers and another Rock Bunting, while Little Swifts were much in evidence when we experienced the sights, sounds and smells of the famous square and souk in Marrakech before we headed to our hotel in the city.

Day 12: Although there was no time for birding, Little Swifts were seen on the way to Marrakech airport, where we boarded our return flight to Gatwick.

The total number of species recorded by the group was 197, an excellent total considering the poor weather and consequent adversities encountered during the first few days of the tour. Thanks are due to Bob Duckhouse, Tony and Ruth Eades, Dave and Jan Kingman, Les Morpeth, Brian and Chris Shaw, Ryn Sullinge, Ian Ward and Ian Windle, who contributed hugely to the happy mood and success of the tour.

Birdfinders will be repeating this exciting tour early in 2011.

Peter Lansdown