

Western Sahara

25 February–3 March 2012

Participants

Bill Bailey
John Boulcott
John Fraser
John and Christine Richardson
Perry Smale
Bob Swann
Judy Swift
Annette Volfing
Nigel Warren
Neil Westwater



Cricket Longtail

Leaders Vaughan Ashby and Peter Lansdown

Day 1 Having met up at Gatwick Airport we took an Easyjet flight to Agadir. The flight arrived on time and after clearing passport control and collecting our bags we met up with Peter and Judy. It was 19.00 when we got on to our nice spacious minibus for the three-hour drive down to Goulimine, where we arrived rather late in the evening and some of us managed a very late meal.

Day 2 Up for an early 06.00 breakfast before continuing our journey south. The first stop was at Oued Boukita about 10km south of Goulimine, where we walked up through the wadi. Flitting about in the scrub were a few Common Chiffchaffs and a Spectacled Warbler. Got nice views of our first Southern Grey Shrikes and eventually we got good views of a Streaked Scrub-warbler of the local *theresae* race. Out in the adjacent more open desert areas we found both Desert Wheatear and Red-rumped Wheatear. Overhead two Western Marsh-harriers followed each other on their migration north. We continued down the road and, after a sudden unscheduled stop, got good views of a roadside Thick-billed Lark. Next stop was at the Tan Tan 100km marker. Here we walked through some nice habitat on the west side of the road. Typical desert birds included many Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears, Greater Hoopoe-larks including a few singing and one doing display flights and a nice group of six Trumpeter Finches. The highlight, however, was a Pharaoh Eagle-owl that we flushed from an area of open desert and then got good views of it sitting by the base of a bush by the road. Perversely, in the middle of nowhere, it was flushed by a passing pedestrian before it could be photographed! As we continued our walk, we had some flyover Thick-billed Larks and two Cream-coloured Coursers, flushed a Common Quail and found another pair of Streaked Scrub-warblers. Continuing on our way south, roadside birds, though scarce, included Long-legged Buzzards, Black Kites and Crested Larks. During a brief stop in Tan Tan for supplies we saw our first House Bunting and had three flyover White Storks. As we progressed south we hit the coast and were soon enveloped in fog rolling in off the sea. Luckily, by the time we reached the first inlet at Oued Chebeika, the fog had cleared and on the roadside lagoons we found a few waders including Eurasian Oystercatcher, Sanderling, Kentish Plover and Little Ringed Plover. We also got nice views of our first Audouin's Gulls. Further south, a stop at Pont Sur Oued el Waaer revealed warblers on the move, including an Iberian Chiffchaff with the more numerous Common Chiffchaffs as well as a Subalpine Warbler. On a roadside crag we found our first Black Wheatear and flying back and fro a Rock Martin. Eventually, we reached our final site for the day, Khnifiss Lagoon, a long sea

inlet where a strong, quite cool, wind was blowing in off the sea. It was high tide and large groups of Eurasian Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlins and Sanderlings were roosting on the shore. Amongst them were Eurasian Curlews, Whimbrels, Common Redshanks and a Pied Avocet. Also roosting along the shoreline were two Ruddy Shelducks, many Grey Herons, Great Cormorants (of race *maroccanus*) and an Osprey. There were lots of gulls on the saltmarsh areas, mainly Lesser Black-backed Gulls, with a few Yellow-legged Gulls and Slender-billed Gulls. Eight larger gulls all appeared to be Great Black-backed Gulls. Along the cliff edge we got nice views of a male Bluethroat and a male Black Wheatear. As the light faded, we headed on the long journey south to our hotel in Tarfaya where unfortunately no-one had heard of our hotel. It appeared that the driver has misunderstood a key bit of information as the hotel was actually in Akhefenner which we had passed earlier! We turned around, drove back north and over three hours later after a 220km detour finally checked into our hotel for yet another very late, though very nice meal, accompanied by some complimentary local wine!

Day 3 After a nice breakfast we emerged to find the coast once again enveloped in thick fog. Went into Akhefenner to get supplies (bread, cheese, sardines, yoghurts – which was to become our standard fare) and then drove back to Khnifiss Lagoon. On the way down to the car park flushed a roadside Eurasian Thick-knee. It took over an hour or so for the fog to lift, though a strong cold wind continued to blow in off the sea for much of the day. Meanwhile, a walk through the cliff top scrub revealed Eurasian Hoopoe, a few migrant Northern Wheatears, ridiculously tame resident Black Wheatears and Red-throated Pipits. When we could finally scan the inlet, we could see the tide was out and lots of waders including Common and Curlew Sandpipers, Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones and a Common Greenshank were feeding on the muddier areas whilst Caspian Terns and Sandwich Terns flew up and down the inlet in their search for food. More surprising was a juvenile Glaucous Gull, which flew down the inlet towards the mouth. Small groups of Pallid Swifts passed overhead feeding along the cliff edge. Pete, Bill and I hiked down to the mouth of the inlet to check out the larger black-backed gulls. All were Great Black-backed Gulls bar one rather strange bird that had the characteristics of both Great Black-backed and Kelp Gull, possibly a hybrid. As we walked back we found a Woodchat Shrike, a couple of Tawny Pipits, another Bluethroat, a Black Redstart and several Spanish Yellow Wagtails. Groups of Eurasian Spoonbills passed over as they migrated north whilst up to three Ospreys hunted over the lagoon. On our return to the car park we joined the others checking out the inlet. Here we were entertained for about 15 minutes with excellent views of a hunting Lanner Falcon chasing and catching at least one Yellow Wagtail that it plucked and ate on the wing. Rather obligingly, the ‘hybrid’ gull flew along the cliff edge allowing Vaughan to photograph it. Again we stayed till the light began to fade before the short journey back to our very comfortable family run hotel, where we got another very nice meal with some complimentary beers as well as wine.

Day 4 Another early 06.00 breakfast before we started our long journey south. Just beyond Tarfaya we crossed into Western Sahara, now part of Morocco. Our first stop, apart from the many bureaucratic police checkpoints, was for supplies in Laayoune. This gave us an opportunity to check the lagoon on the north side of town. Feeding out on the mud were lots of Common Coots and Common Moorhens along with waders such as Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets and a roosting Ruddy Shelduck. Out in the deeper water were Black-necked Grebes whilst over the reeds groups of Barn Swallows were feeding alongside a few House and Sand Martins. Vaughan thought it wasn't a very good idea to bird adjacent to the local military base so we quickly moved on continuing south through fairly uninteresting flat featureless desert with few birds, bar the occasional Long-legged Buzzard or Desert Wheatear. Our next stop was Café Chtoukan 169km north of Dahkla. This was the site where Pied Crows had been present since 2009. Unfortunately, there had been no sightings of them since last summer. All we could find were about 20 Brown-necked Ravens, a Black Kite, a Common Kestrel and a Lanner Falcon. A small channel behind the café held a few Common Chiffchaffs, a couple of Bluethroats, a few Spanish Yellow Wagtails and Crested Larks. Around the buildings were small groups of Trumpeter Finches. Disappointed with the lack of crows we checked out a local coastal village, but were encouraged to move on by a local official. Fourteen hours after our departure we eventually arrived in Dakhla and checked in to our rather grand hotel.

Day 5 Another early start as we left Dakhla, headed round the bay and down the Aousserd road. A Golden-backed Jackal near Gleb Jdiane was a nice start. We drove straight down to Oued Jenna, stopping at km192. It

took just over three hours and we then had our picnic breakfast provided by the hotel before we started to check out the wadi. Despite it being around 10.30 a strong wind meant it was quite cool. We walked in line down the wadi south of the road and then did the same on the north side. This took several hours and it soon warmed up. We quickly found small flocks of Desert Sparrows, probably 30+ in all. There were also two groups of Fulvous Chatterers and several Southern Grey Shrikes. Feeding in the acacias were small numbers of Common Chiffchaffs, Subalpine, Spectacled and Sardinian Warblers. Other migrants included Eurasian Hoopoes and a Woodchat Shrike. Lots of Barn Swallows were passing through along with the occasional Rock Martin, no doubt feeding on the local flies that were beginning to annoy us. Frustratingly, there were no signs of any Cricket Longtails. We had a late picnic lunch before we drove further down the Aousserd Road, stopping 8km before the town. Here we split into two groups to check the vegetation either side of the road. The south side held little bar a group of Desert Sparrows, with some Eurasian Collared-doves and six Brown-necked Ravens near a small encampment. The group on the north side came up trumps however, when John Boulcott spotted a warbler flitting between grassy tussocks and Pete confirmed it as a Cricket Longtail. The news was radioed out and after some fast yomps across the desert everyone eventually got good prolonged views of a pair of this most highly sought-after target species. The wind had dropped so it was now very hot. We returned to the minibus and began the long journey back north. A couple of roadside stops produced good views of Bar-tailed Larks and another small group of Desert Sparrows. The wind got up as we progressed and sand blasting across the road made things difficult for the driver. It was 21.30 before we got back to the hotel where a nice meal awaited us.

Day 6 We decided to pay another visit to the Aousserd Road. First stop was at 68km down the road. It was cold and windy with much sand blasting, so we had our breakfast in the minibus, ably organised by Christine. We then checked the scrub north of the road for African Desert Warbler – no sign, the desiccated scrub was birdless. Next stop was at km126. This was a noted lark site, but once again there was a distinct lack of birds. We continued southeast spotting a few roadside Desert Wheatears, Bar-tailed Larks and Greater Hoopoe-larks. We stopped for lunch at km173 following which we walked out to check the vegetation on the north side of the road. A nice mixed flock of Greater Short-toed Larks and Black-crowned Sparrow-larks was soon found. We got very good views of about 30 of the latter both in flight and on the ground. In the same area we had two Fulvous Chatterers and a small group of Desert Sparrows. Lots of Barn Swallows were passing north and with them a few House Martins and a Red-rumped Swallow. Working the desert area had been hard work, with bird densities far lower than we expected. There had obviously been no rain at all this winter and as a result there was little in the way of new growth so it is possible that many birds had moved out. Numbers of most species were much lower than had been reported by visiting birders in previous springs. Not wanting to be too late we returned north and managed a quick scan of Dahkla Bay in the failing light. No sign of terns, though quite a lot of distant waders with a few Eurasian Spoonbills, Little Egrets, Grey Herons and Greater Flamingos.

Day 7 Our final day in Dakhla and still one key target species to find. First stop, after a slightly delayed start, was at the north end of town just before the bridge to the port. Behind the beach was a small lagoon, which along with the adjacent beach held a few of waders. There were also lots of gulls, mainly Audouin's, Black-headed, Slender-billed and several immature Mediterranean Gulls. Roosting terns included a few Sandwich and 40+ Caspian Terns, but not the species we were searching for. One of the Mediterranean Gulls had a green colour ring 8T7. It had been ringed as a chick in Vendee, France in June 2011 and seen in Finistere, France in late August before it headed south. We then checked out the western Atlantic side of the peninsular. Huge waves were breaking on the beaches and little was seen bar large groups of Lesser Black-backed Gulls so we returned to the east side and to km18 where the road comes close to the bay. Unfortunately, as was the case the previous evening, the tide appeared to be miles out. In the far distance we could see some very distant gull roosts so there was nothing for it but to walk out across the sandflats. Some of us skirted a wet area of eelgrass which was being dug over by shell-fishers whilst others got wet feet! The digging attracted lots of waders mainly Dunlins, Sanderlings, Common Ringed and Grey Plovers, Common Redshanks and Bar-tailed Godwits, with smaller numbers of Ruddy Turnstones, Common Greenshanks, Curlew Sandpipers, Red Knots, Kentish Plovers, Eurasian Curlews and Whimbrels. It took over 45 minutes to reach the waters edge where large flocks of roosting Audouin's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were soon located. We continued along the shore line and down a spit where at the tip, we eventually found a roost of terns

containing 30+ Caspian Terns, a Sandwich Tern and thankfully, four Royal Terns. We got reasonably close views but worries about a rising tide meant that most folk quickly headed back towards the safety of dry land. Delighted by our success we returned to Dahkla, where we were treated to a nice lunch in a local restaurant on the shore, which had been recommended to us by Annette. As we waited for our meal we were entertained by Laughing Doves, Little Swifts, Red-rumped Swallows and offshore groups of Northern Gannets. As not all the group had seen the Royal Terns we revisited this morning's site but the water was still well out in the bay, the tide possibly being held back by the continuing strong northeasterly wind. A few Greater Hoopoe-larks, along with some Black and Desert Wheatears along the cliff edge were our only reward. In late afternoon, we drove the short distance to Dakhla Airport for our Royal Air Maroc flight to Agadir via Casablanca. It was again quite late when we arrived in our hotel.

Day 8 After a leisurely breakfast, we drove south to the Oued Massa. New birds seen en-route included Eurasian Blackbird, Spotless Starling and Eurasian Magpie. We navigated our way through the narrow streets of the village till we reached a bridge over the river where we found Little Grebe, Common Moorhen, Common Coot and Northern Shoveler. Roosting on a small sandbank were two Spotted Redshanks with three Black-winged Stilts and we flushed two Green Sandpipers. In the reeds along the river edge, we spotted a roosting Black-crowned Night-heron and got brief views of a female Little Bittern. Other birds seen from the bridge included a Common Kingfisher, a Grey Wagtail and six Glossy Ibises that flew downstream. We then wandered through the adjacent cultivations where the small fields held European Robins, Common Stonechats, Moussier's Redstarts (some cracking males), Zitting Cisticolas and a few Cattle Egrets followed by excellent views of a Black-crowned Tchagra feeding along the edge of one of the fields. Feeding over the fields were many Barn Swallows, with a few House and Sand Martins, Eurasian Crag-martin and at least two Brown-throated Martins. Around the field edges were small groups of European Greenfinches, European Goldfinches and a pair of Eurasian Linnets. Noisy parties of Common Bulbuls chased each other round the bushes. The bushes also held Laughing Doves and warblers, mainly Common Chiffchaffs, but with a few Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers and two Blackcaps. Cetti's Warblers sang from dense cover, though we did manage to see one. We walked back along the south side of the village where we found a couple of Black Redstarts as well as House Bunting and a group of Spanish Sparrows with the House Sparrows. Little new was seen as we walked upstream from the bridge bar a Woodchat Shrike before two flyover Northern Bald Ibis gave Neil yet another lifer. We then drove east of the village stopping by a car park close to the river for our final picnic lunch. It was now a warm sunny day and for once there was virtually no wind. On the rocky crags above us we found a pair of Blue Rock-thrushes, the riverside bushes held European Serin and Great Tit whilst in the fields we found Tree and Meadow Pipits along with the White and Yellow Wagtails and a late wintering Song Thrush. After lunch, we returned back north, stopping at the Oued Sous just south of Agadir. The tide was out and a large flock of 200+ rather dirty White Storks were roosting on the mud. There were also lots of gulls, mainly Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed, but also a couple of Mediterranean Gulls. One of the Lesser Black-Backed Gulls had a yellow colour ring V3TC, it had been ringed as a chick in June 2011 at Korsor in Denmark. There was also a scattering of waders including three Black-tailed Godwits, our first of the trip. Feeding on the mud were a few White Wagtails and eventually Christine spotted one of the Moroccan race (*subpersonata*) just below where we were standing. A single Osprey sat on one of the pylons and as we returned towards the bus we flushed a Common Quail. With the birding over we headed for the airport to connect with our 19.00 Easyjet flight back to Gatwick, which again arrived on time.

Bob Swann