



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT MOROCCO

14TH MARCH – 24TH MARCH 2017

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TOUR LEADER

Dave Gosney

PARTICIPANTS

Bob Flood

Ashley Fisher

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For the 5th year in a row we managed an almost complete 'clean-up' of all the special birds of this part of Morocco. One participant began with a list of 38 target birds that he'd never seen before. By the end of the trip he'd seen all of them well apart from just two: Red-necked Nightjar (heard only) and Houbara Bustard (no reliable sites this year). As ever, the participants were delighted with the views we got of so many species, as proven by the terrific photos shown here, taken by one of the group, Steve Edwards, using just a Nikon Coolpix and his scope. Many thanks to Steve for letting us use his images.

TUESDAY 14TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly warm but breezy*

The flight arrived in the middle of the day so, after dropping our bags at the hotel, we still had time for a tasty shawarma at a street cafe before spending our first afternoon birding at the Oued Souss. It wasn't long before we'd enjoyed great views of unfamiliar species such as Common Bulbul, Moroccan Magpie and House Bunting.



Moroccan Magpie



House Bunting

As we walked out towards the mouth of the estuary we crept carefully up to a gap in the reeds in the hope of seeing some waterbirds before they flew. By doing so we were able to get great views of two Barbary Partridge on the open path in front of us; we later had more typical sightings of two more pairs flying away from us when flushed. It can be difficult to view the pools without flushing the birds but we managed to see a few ducks including Pintail, herons including Spoonbills and lots of waders including Avocet, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. That's not to mention the 4 Ospreys that were present too. Our time enjoying these birds was cut short by a military intervention. Some soldiers pointed out that we weren't allowed to look at the birds because that would involve pointing our optics towards the Royal Palace. This site is part of the Souss-Massa National Park – supposedly a nature reserve but one where you are told you can't look at birds! The soldiers assured us there were plenty of birds to see looking the other way towards the estuary – so why would we need to look towards the Palace? (Er, because there might be birds like Marbled Duck, Pratincoles and Purple Herons on the pools). As it happens we did indeed see lots of birds on the estuary; we got terrific views of lots of shorebirds and two Moroccan White Wagtails plus more distant sightings of a Mediterranean Gull, 2 Audouin's Gulls and 3-4 Slender-billed Gulls. None of which were half as exciting as the 8 Stone Curlew that perched or crouched within a few metres of us giving amazing views. On our way back, as we passed the pools again we managed to see at least 8 Marbled Ducks that had previously been hidden but we felt we shouldn't linger to enjoy them in view of the soldiers. In late afternoon, lots of birds were passing overhead, especially Pallid Swifts which were pouring through, accompanied by a couple of Little Swifts and a distant flock of maybe 70 European Bee-eaters. We stayed to look for Red-necked Nightjars. Now that the guards are so obstructive it's impossible to get to the areas where it used to be easier to see them so instead we had to stand some distance away and hope for a bird flying around. We did hear 2 birds calling from the 'out-of-bounds' areas in the distance but failed to see them.

WEDNESDAY 15TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly warm and calm*

In search of Northern Bald Ibis, we first explored the areas just north of Cap Rhir. After getting our first views of Black Wheatear, Black-eared Wheatear, Spectacled Warbler and female Moussier's Redstart we eventually found two Bald Ibis feeding on a distant clifftop, just close enough for us to

see them clearly in the scopes. As we drove north from there, our Moroccan driver spotted some birds flying down the road towards us; 8 more Bald Ibis passed close to our minibus but just kept on going. At the Tamri estuary we were, as usual, greeted by a couple of Moroccan White Wagtails in the car park. The lagoon was rather quiet, bird-wise, but as ever we enjoyed great views of over 60 Audouin's Gulls in a full suite of plumages.



Audouin's Gulls (with Lesser Black-backed Gull)

Two Ruddy Shelducks on a sand bar were an unexpected bonus. We didn't have any Ibises coming to the pool but did spot one standing on a distant building. A long drive north took us to the estuary of the Oued Ksob to the spot where, in 2016, we'd had such fantastic views of Brown-throated Sand Martin. At first it seemed there were none there but we lingered because there were so many other birds to look at: Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Kingfisher, Laughing Dove, Moroccan Wagtail, (Iberian) Yellow Wagtail, Serin and the exotic-looking African Chaffinch and African Blue Tit. A Black-crowned Tchagra sang nearby and Heather found a male Moussier's Redstart at an impossible distance away but these were birds we expected to see again later; it was the martins that were the priority. Eventually, after a few glimpses we got a decent view of one flying down the river. Meanwhile, Bob and Ashley had found more martins at a site nearby so we stopped there and enjoyed about 20 birds flying low around some reeds. Just over half of these were Brown-throated Sand Martins so it was fascinating to work out how to separate them from the more familiar Sand Martins. Their small size, shorter-tails and more agile, acrobatic flight made them seem almost bat-like and in plumage they were significantly duskier-looking below.

THURSDAY 16TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly warm and calm*

The trip to the Oued Massa was our big chance to get better views of those two Moroccan stunners, Black-crowned Tchagra and Moussier's Redstart, especially when we'd passed on the opportunities

the day before. Thankfully it wasn't long before we'd had fantastic views of both species including a Tchagra, spotted by Heather, perching in an almost bare tree before belting out its fabulous song.



Black-crowned Tchagra

The loud Cetti's Warblers wouldn't show themselves but we got decent views of a couple of Western Olivaceous Warblers singing their songs, scratchy with distinctive screechy bits. At the 'secret pool' we were treated to fantastic views of the Glossy Ibis with over 100 birds present. We also had great views of 2 Purple Herons but our attention was drawn mostly to the photogenic Moussier's Redstarts that seemingly wouldn't leave us alone.



Moussier's Redstart

We sometimes see Black-shouldered Kite on the Oued Massa or on the roads between there and the airport but, despite careful scanning we failed to spot one before arriving at our hotel beyond Tarouddant. We therefore went out for an evening stroll at a site where I'd seen this species on each of the last 3 trips. Probably within a minute of disembarking from the bus, Shaun spotted a kite flying over and we all watched as it flew away from us trailing something in its feet, probably a lizard. We stayed until almost dusk, hoping that it would return for more grub but it wasn't seen again. There was still plenty to look at though. As ever there were dozens of finches, bulbuls and a few Corn Buntings, attracting the attentions of a Sparrowhawk. We heard Barbary Partridge and managed to see two of them. Quail were calling too and some of us were lucky to see one in flight as it was flushed from beside the path. For many though the best birds here were probably the pair of Woodchat Shrikes that kept sitting on branches and fence posts right in front of us in lit by the warm glow of the late afternoon sun. Gorgeous.



Woodchat Shrike

FRIDAY 17TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly warm and calm*

The pre-breakfast walk was optional but nobody chose to stay in bed. At first it seemed like the only reward would be great views of more shrikes (Woodchat and 'Desert Grey'), finches, sparrows (including lots of Spanish), Red-rumped Swallows and Thekla Larks but a distant 'pee-pee' sound allowed us to close in on a troop of Fulvous Babblers; up to 4 birds kept popping up in front of us over a period of half an hour. Some tour groups fail to see Fulvous Babblers even in the desert areas so it's always good to get this species under our belts.



Fulvous Babbler

The drive towards Ouarzazate was fairly uneventful, apart from glimpses of species such as Desert Lark and Rock Bunting by the road; we could have a proper look for those later. Our main aim was to find Maghreb Wheatear so we made a stop before lunch at a site where we'd found them for several years running. At first there was nothing, almost literally. It was a while before we saw any birds at all but we did eventually get sightings of Desert Wheatear and Trumpeter Finch before Dave finally spotted a Maghreb Wheatear. It was a male and it stayed around long enough for all of us to get fantastic views. Another tricky bird safely seen well.



Maghreb (or Mourning) Wheatear

The Barrage el Mansour at Ouarzazate can be simply fabulous for birds when the water levels are high but this wasn't one of those years. We did get views of flocks of Ruddy Shelduck and Northern Shoveler but the water was so distant that we needed scopes to identify the plovers, shanks, stilts and sandpipers on the water's edge. However, Bob and Ashley found migrants in the bushes including a Western Bonelli's Warbler. A dashing falcon showed none of the field marks for either Lanner or Barbary so we assumed it was a Peregrine. We had great fun studying the larks in the dried areas. These included a few Short-toed Larks and 2 Skylarks and this was our first chance to get really good views of 'Maghreb Larks'. These birds, sometimes called Long-billed Crested Larks, really did have monstrous bills, apparently for battering the encrusted soil which they dug into in search of insects. As we were scoping one of these, another bird hopped into view and stood next to it, feeding in the open. We couldn't believe our eyes because it was a Quail. It pottered around with the larks in full view for over half an hour. Suffice to say none of us had had views like this of Quail before. Through the scopes we able to study every detail of its plumage – and fully appreciate the intricate and delicate markings of its head, breast, belly, flanks and mantle. Who knew they were so gorgeous?



Quail

SATURDAY 18TH MARCH 2017 - *Sunny but with a bitterly cold SE wind becoming calmer by the afternoon*

Early morning on the Tagdilt track threatened to be ruined by the weather as a bitterly cold wind blasted across the plains. However, 8 hardy souls exposed themselves to the elements but clung to whatever shelter they could get from the body of the minibus. Our first stop, 'the sandgrouse pool' had rather few birds last year but this time we arrived to a bewildering array of species. Within minutes, Temminck's Horned Lark, Red-rumped Wheatear, Desert Wheatear, Short-toed Lark, Lesser Short-toed Lark had all been seen but our first priority was to make sure everyone saw the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse that Ashley had spotted on the far bank. When the excitement calmed down a

bit we were all able to view each species with more care, apart from the Lesser Short-toed Larks which didn't return.



Temminck's Horned Lark



Desert Wheatear

As we waited for more sandgrouse we were rewarded by sightings of Cream-coloured Courser, Long-legged Buzzard, a large Barbary-type falcon, not specifically identified, and a passing harrier which turned out to be an immature Montagu's. Eventually a group of about 20 sandgrouse were spotted coming to land in the desert behind the minibus – more Pin-tailed. We moved to a different part of the desert where we had views of a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying past the van and then tried to explore an area where coursers, sandgrouse and Thick-billed Larks had been seen in previous years. The bitterly cold wind made this a difficult experience and we left having found only 2 more groups of coursers. Back in the minibus we got our first views of Hoopoe Larks and counted 4 birds altogether. It had been a pretty good morning, despite the weather, but we still hadn't seen what, for many, was the most desired species – Thick-billed Lark. So we next visited a part of the desert which had proved to be the most reliable for this species in the last few years. Once again, there were lots of birds to look at, especially Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears, and, before long, Dave homed in on a Thick-billed Lark, then another, then another pair. We counted 5 birds altogether and got terrific views – one of them was even singing.



Thick-billed Lark

After lunch back at the hotel, the leader decided to take a gamble. Instead of the planned trip to the Gorge du Todra to look for Bonelli's Eagle, he suggested that we should try a site he'd never visited before because others had seen Tristram's Warbler there. We had another site in the Atlas mountains for Tristram's Warbler and, though we'd never previously failed to see them, the leader was nervous about how difficult they might be. It would be good to have already seen one before we got there and the group agreed that this was a higher priority than the Bonelli's Eagles. So, an easy walk up a mountain wadi took us to the supposed site for the warbler and, sure enough, we soon located two birds, one of which was a male that gave stunning views, often on the outer edges of bushes and sometimes giving a brief scratchy song. These views were far better than any we'd previously managed in the Atlas mountains so everyone was delighted. Shame about the Bonelli's Eagles though.



Tristram's Warbler

But then, as we got back to the minibus the leader screamed 'Bonelli's Eagle' and we watched two adults pass along the cliffs above us, one of them displaying, before landing on a ledge above our heads. No doubt now about whether it had been the right decision. We had time for one more birding experience so we next visited a site where other birders keep insisting that Pharoah Eagle Owl can be seen. We scanned the prescribed ledges and for the fourth year running failed to see the bird. Instead though we had our first views of very close Desert Larks and our best views of Trumpeter Finch.



Desert Lark

A big falcon somehow disappeared before we could name it but the best sighting was of a group of 28 Barbary Partridge which Sally spotted creeping across a flat rocky area in the open. This was an exceptional opportunity to get good views of this often secretive species.

SUNDAY 19TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly sunny and calm*

A much calmer day, weather wise so in the morning we went back to the 'sandgrouse pool' with high expectations. Strangely, though, there were far fewer birds this time and no sandgrouse. At least, without the wind, we were able to listen to the songs and calls of some of the larks and wheatears and pick out the calls of coursers enabling us to watch 4 of them flying over. We also had 5 more Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight but so far away we couldn't hear them. Our next stop was deeper into the desert at a site that is best known for its Streaked Scrub Warblers. Within a couple of minutes we heard one calling in the scrub next to where we'd parked. Marvellous, but instead of giving the hoped for views, it cleared off across the desert. Only then did we realise what an exciting bunch of other birds we had arrived upon. In this same patch of roadside scrub there were Spectacled Warblers, a Desert Grey Shrike, a few Common Redstarts and a surprising variety of wheatears: not just Desert Wheatears, Northern Wheatears, 2 Black-eared Wheatears and our first decent views of White-crowned Black Wheatears but also the first of at least 6 Isabelline Wheatears that we found at this site. Never mind the famous Wheatear Wall, this was Wheatear Wadi.



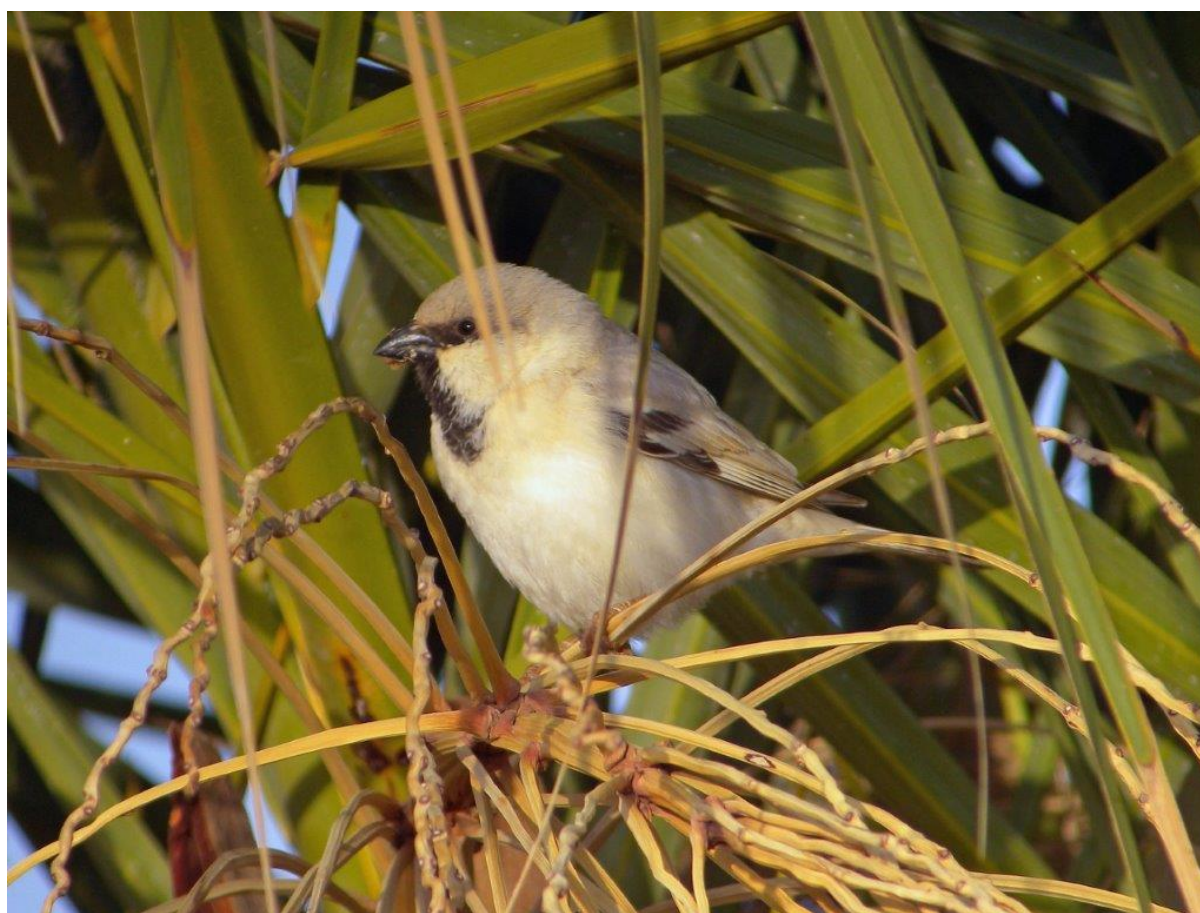
Isabelline Wheatear

As we went in search of more amenable Scrub Warblers we came across more good birds: hundreds of Short-toed Lark, a few Lesser Short-toed Lark, 2 more Thick-billed Larks and our first singing Bar-tailed Desert Lark. It took a while, but eventually we caught up with another pair of Scrub Warblers and we all got decent, if rather brief views. Still time for a couple more surprises; not only had Elaine spotted another Fulvous Babbler close to the van but also we had a big raptor passing close to us –

nothing less than a young Golden Eagle giving much better views than this species usually offers. Driving on, we just about had time for some brief desert birding before we retired to the hotel. At first we were seeing only Hoopoe Lark and the occasional Spectacled Warbler but we did eventually get views of an African Desert Warbler too. It was a bit distant and against the light so we hoped we'd see more the next day.

MONDAY 20TH MARCH 2017 - *Sunny and pleasantly warm and calm*

The Big Day. We've billed this as one of the best day's birding you can have in the Western Palearctic so we hoped it wouldn't disappoint. It didn't. The whole day was spent cruising in 4 x 4s around the desert areas beyond the magnificent Erg Chebbi sand-dunes. Our first stop allowed us to watch the sun rise at remarkable speed over the distant horizon before we stopped again at a little oasis in the desert. Almost immediately we found a male Desert Sparrow and we realised that there was also a female at a nest in the next bush. There were two pairs of Desert Sparrows here but already the site was being invaded by House Sparrows.



Desert Sparrow

Having drooled over the Desert Sparrows until we'd had our fill, we looked at the other birds here. The warblers in the bushes were mostly Western Subalpine Warbler but we kept hearing a louder, stronger, call 'trrrt trrrt'. It turned out it was coming from one of the Subalpine Warblers but one with paler, pinker underparts. Blimey, Moltoni's (Subalpine) Warbler. In the distance, a flock of Bee-eaters were wheeling around another patch of greenery. It's always good to see Bee-eaters but these were a bit special – green above, copper-coloured below, they were about 20 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. We also had distant views of another bird that was new for most of us – Brown-necked Raven. Now and then we heard the 'whackoo' calls of Spotted Sandgrouse and managed to get views of them flying over. Our guide assured us we would see them again. Sure enough, he took us to a spot where there were open pools on the desert floor and we soon had several flocks of Spotted

Sandgrouse flying around us and settling nearby. ‘They will come’ said the guide. And they did. Before long we had a group of Spotted Sandgrouse settling to drink at one of the pools right next to us.



Spotted Sandgrouse

Another flock flew around making a different call ‘kuk-uk-carooo’ – Crowned Sandgrouse. They also landed close enough for us to get terrific views of those too.



Crowned Sandgrouse

When it comes to delicacy of plumage tone and pattern there's simply nothing more gorgeous than sandgrouse especially when seen at such close range. By the end we'd seen about 60 Spotteds and maybe 25 Crowned. We even had two Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying over as well. Driving around, we kept getting more views of now familiar birds such as Cream-coloured Coursers, Hoopoe Larks and Bar-tailed Larks.



Hoopoe Lark



Cream-coloured Courser

Often the driver would stop right next to a bird and give us a chance to study it or photograph it. When we spotted a Desert Warbler, though, we had to get out of the jeeps to try and get close to it. They can be elusive so and so's but at one point when we had it surrounded, it popped up on top of a bush and sang right in front of us. Magic.



African Desert Warbler

We almost didn't notice the pair of Desert Sparrows on the walls of a nearby well. It was during another such stop that Steve pointed out a falcon flying behind us. Another big falcon but which type? This time it was close enough for us to see its pale crown and smaller moustache. This one was obviously a Lanner. In fact there were two of them, one larger than the other, male and female hunting together in text-book fashion. The birds just kept on coming.



Egyptian Nightjar

Next we called on Mubarak, the Nightjar Man and carried him pillion fashion on one of our 4x4s as he guided us to a line of bushes in the desert. 'There!' Sure enough, tucked under a bush, an Egyptian Nightjar was facing towards us, squinting. 'Two birds'. We looked around and a few feet away was another one, in profile, half-hidden by a stone. We've now made many trips with Mubarak over the years and what's amazing is that every year he takes us to somewhere different. How many times does he have to find and re-find these birds? And how on earth does he do it?

There had been one or two sightings of Houbaras this year but the guides didn't have a regular site and, during our visit, none of their watchers managed to spot one that we could go looking for. Even so we spent a little time quartering up and down a few wadis in the hope of coming across one. But not on this visit. Instead we went in search of Pharaoh Eagle Owl, stopping to check a couple of trees in which they often roosted and scanning a section of rocks where one often sat. One of the guides went for a walk to check a greater length of rock face and returned sweating but disappointed. Oh dear – were we actually going to miss out on a target bird?

For lunch we were taken to one of the café's on the edge of the desert where we enjoyed some welcome shade and cool drinks. The planted gardens of the café kept us alert to the possibility of migrants. As ever there were mostly Subalpine Warblers and Chiff-chaffs but Bob's careful checking enabled us to pick out another different Subalpine Warbler, this time an Eastern Subalpine Warbler. Once again the call was different, always a double note 'tt-tt' or a multiple 'tt-tt-trr-t-tt' but this time it was the plumage that was most startling – the red plumage of the breast ended almost abruptly and there was no colour at all on the belly and flanks – truly a 'red-breasted warbler'. For the rest of the afternoon, we cruised around more desert areas, enjoying more of the birds we'd seen already. Once again we were treated to fantastic views of Spotted Sandgrouse which our guides managed to drive very close to. By the end of the day it's fair to say we were exhausted but exhilarated. We'd seen lots of fabulous birds often amazingly well – just a shame about missing the owls this time.

TUESDAY 21ST MARCH 2017 - *Sunny calm and warm, becoming hot by the afternoon*

A chance to explore desert areas on our own without the help of the desert guides and their 'go-anywhere' 4 x 4s. Now the birds we most wanted to see were Barbary Falcon (because we hadn't yet had a convincing view of one) and, of course, Pharaoh Eagle Owl. But first we were interrupted by the sight of some Bee-eaters on roadside wires – Blue-cheeked again. We piled out of the minibus and enjoyed fantastic views of these gorgeous birds.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater

On the same wires were some more Maghreb Larks giving us another chance to see just how bonkers big their bills are.



Maghreb (or Long-billed Crested) Lark

Soon we were at our main destination - a cliff where Pharaoh Eagle Owl often nests, not too far from a pair of Lanner Falcons. Dave's old mate, Ali the Nomad, arrived almost immediately and warned that the Lanners weren't there this year. He also cycled along the foot of the cliff-face and came back without finding the owl. But he said he would check another site for the owl while we searched all the usual ledges ourselves. We had more views of birds like Desert Lark and Brown-necked Raven but Ali seemed to be right about the Lanner and Eagle Owl. When we got back to the bus, the driver's mobile rang. It was Ali. He'd got a Pharaoh Eagle Owl and he gave the driver instructions for how to find him! It was a bit of a trek in the minibus but soon we were following Ali up a wadi until he stopped and pointed. Wow! There in a cave, maybe 60 metres away, was a Pharaoh Eagle Owl glaring at us. It looked totally awesome through the scope (as did some Trumpeter Finches at the same spot).



Pharaoh (or Desert) Eagle Owl

Delighted, we left the bird in peace. But Ali hadn't finished. Did we want to see Barbary Falcon? Ten minutes later we were studying the plumage of a Barbary Falcon through the scopes: unbarred below, buff on the face and underparts, large pale area behind the moustachial lobe, red in the crown... Thanks Ali. Our next stop was equally delightful as our driver had offered us lunch at his family home in Rissani so we dined splendidly in the company of his family and friends with his young children excited but somewhat bewildered by these strangely clad visitors. The afternoon was rather hot but we first checked out a site for Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (race reiseri or 'Saharan' Olivaceous Warbler). Nothing doing. Perhaps we were a day or so too early – they should be arriving any day now. We then explored an area in the palm groves of Rissani where we enjoyed more views of Woodchat and Desert Grey Shrikes and Maghreb Larks. In the distance we heard the piping calls of Fulvous Babbler again. It was a bit hot to go chasing after them BUT WE DIDN'T NEED TO – WE'D SEEN THEM ALREADY ON THE TRIP. We did however make a special effort to see Egyptian Nightjar again before dusk. It would have been nice to actually see one in action as opposed to laying half-asleep under a bush but we failed to see or hear them at a traditional site and, unlike last year, we didn't get them on the road at dusk either.

WEDNESDAY 22ND MARCH 2017 – *Pleasantly warm and calm*

This day is officially just a driving day for getting us back to Ouarzazate but we always find time to squeeze in some extra birding. Some of the group went for a pre-breakfast walk and enjoyed 29 European Bee-eaters coming out of a roost and 8 Black-crowned Night Herons presumably looking for one. After breakfast we stopped to have another go for the 'Saharan' Olivaceous Warblers and this time there were at least two birds singing. It's difficult to get good views of birds in tamarisks but eventually we all managed to see at least one of them well. The drive was fairly uneventful as far as the pass at Tizi-n-Tinifit where we strained to get decent views of the martins. Some years ago it was claimed that they were Rock Martins but this idea is now generally dissed in favour of Crag Martins. Sadly the views we got failed to confirm things either way. Our last birding stop of the day was at another part of the Barrage El Mansour. Once again we could distantly see flocks of birds like Ruddy Shelduck, White Stork, Spoonbill and flamingo, plus Maghreb Larks, Ospreys, Marsh Harriers etc plus, this time, a distant flock of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters. The best birds though were the Black Kites which swirled around over the lake. Eventually there was a flock of over 100 birds, clearly coming to roost here to break up their migration. The only bird we spotted with them was a ringtail harrier but it was too far away to be sure whether it was a Pallid or a Monty's.

THURSDAY 23RD MARCH 2017 - *A sunny start but a viciously cold easterly wind ripped through the mountains. Calm and cloudy by the afternoon, turning to steady rain by evening.*

Today we headed for the Atlas mountains. The most important target bird for the day was Levaillant's Green Woodpecker so we headed straight for a site which had provided fantastic views in the past. This time, though, the birds remained silent and hidden but we still managed to enjoy some terrific birds including Moussier's Redstart, African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Cirl Buntings, our first good views of Rock Bunting, a lovely Western Bonelli's Warbler and our first Mistle Thrushes of the Moroccan race. As we climbed the Tizi-n-tichka pass it became shockingly colder. In the biting wind we all scrambled for our suitcases to pull out the rest of our warm layers but the wind still made us want to stay in the van. Even so we braved the elements to see some birds on meadows near the pass. As we were trying to enjoy a few Rock Sparrows and big flocks of Choughs of both species, Ashley shouted that he'd found another of our target birds – Seeböhm's Wheatear. Crouching in the shelter of the minibus we managed to watch 2 males and a female.



Seebohm's (Northern) Wheatear

We motored on to our lunchtime stop which offered perhaps our best chance of Levaillant's Woodpecker. We had lots of other species here too, including Coal Tits of the Moroccan race, a lovely Firecrest, singing Short-toed Treecreeper, a flock of 20+ Crossbills overhead and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. We did manage to hear a Levaillant's Woodpecker but it was so far away we couldn't justify racing after it. And anyway, by now it was starting to rain and as we progressed towards our hotel the weather got steadily worse. Soon we were passing the site where we've always managed to find Tristram's Warbler in the past. It would be even harder to find it in the rain but WE DIDN'T NEED TO – WE'D ALREADY SEEN IT EARLIER. So we got to our hotel where some of us went for a walk in the rain, hoping for Levaillant's Woodpecker, but got nothing more than a few bedraggled Red-rumped Swallows and a calling warbler, probably Olivaceous.

FRIDAY 24TH MARCH 2017 - *Pleasantly warm and sunny until lunchtime when dense fog descended onto mountains.. Visibility better at lower altitude but light snow falling. Sunny and warm in Marrakech!*

So, still no Levaillant's Woodpecker. Would we miss out on this North African endemic? We went for a pre-breakfast walk and heard some calls that proved we were in the right area. Remarkably Bob spotted a woodpecker on a far distant pole – but it was a Great Spotted. Still, at least we saw our first Cuckoos of the year. The leader had two more Levaillant's sites that had been productive in the last two years. At the first of these we stopped and quickly got more views of Cirl and Rock Buntings before a Levaillant's started calling. It was Ashley who spotted it first, sitting up on a telegraph pole. A bit distant but nicely scopable. Phew! After that we made straight for the ski resort at Oukaïmeden but stopped a few km short of the resort because Dave had spotted a perched falcon. As we jumped out, it flew over us, close enough for us to see that it was another Barbary Falcon. At the resort we lingered a while to photograph the many Red-billed and Alpine Choughs before driving on to the most likely spot for our last two target birds – Atlas Horned Lark and Crimson-winged Finch. When there's lots of snow around, both these species can be expected around the car parks and even around the restaurant tables but today there were lots of snow-free areas for them to disappear to. Even so,

we soon heard and then saw a couple of Horned Larks in the car park giving great views from just a few metres away.



Atlas Horned Lark

The stall holders in the car park promised us that we would see the 'rosy's' if we came back in the afternoon. This was our plan all along but we wandered around in search of them more immediately. This searching at least produced a couple more Seebohm's Wheatears and some Black Redstarts until Dave heard a Crimson-winged Finch and pointed to one sitting on one of the ski-lift cables. We didn't all see this bird well but over the next hour we all got reasonable views of two birds.



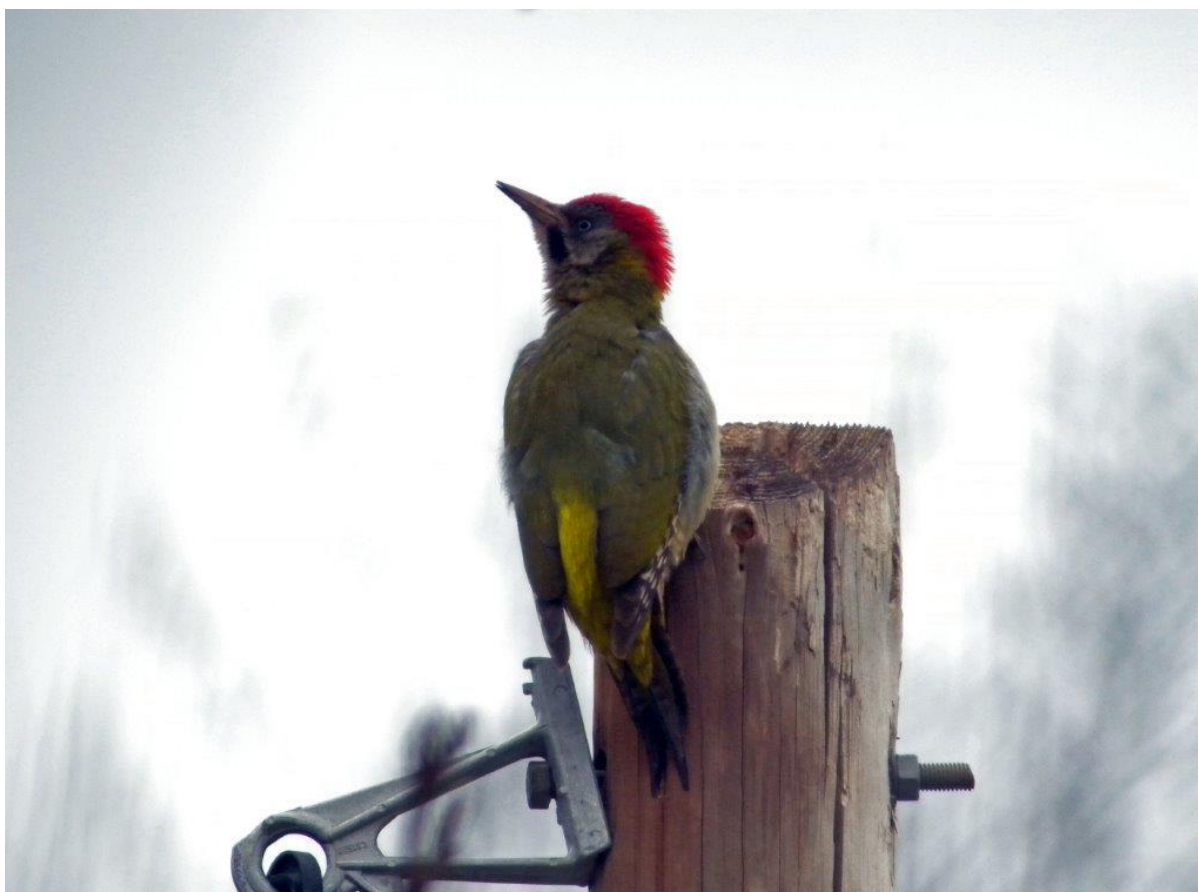
Crimson-winged Finch

We then retired for lunch, happy in the fact that we'd already seen all the most desired species. All we needed next was maybe an Alpine Accentor and some dazzling views of Crimson-wings around our feet. But we hadn't bargained for the change in the weather. Out of nowhere, clouds came down and engulfed us in thick fog. We went in search of Alpine Accentors but could barely see the rocks next to the path. We went to the Crimson-winged area where by now we couldn't even see the far side of the car park. The finches would have to be at our feet for us to see them at all! That might have happened if we'd waited long enough but we might have had to wait hours in the cold and the fog. IT DIDN'T MATTER – WE'D ALREADY SEEN THEM. Another birdwatching group there hadn't been so lucky and were having to contemplate leaving the mountain without seeing the finches. Like us, they decided to head for lower ground because it was better to watch SOME birds than no birds at all. By the time we had dropped down below the cloudline we were amongst the villages and orchards on the mountain slope. We'd seen all of our target birds already but we stopped the bus in an area which Dave thought looked promising for Levillant's Woodpecker and would anyway give us our last views of African Chaffinch, African Blue Tit, Moussier's Redstart etc.



African Chaffinch

Such birds were indeed viewable here, along with a few Cirl Buntings and several Rock Buntings but we were delighted when a Levillant's Woodpecker started calling not too far away. We walked towards it as snow floated down around us, until we were almost underneath its song post! Even in the grey conditions the views were amazing. We must have had at least three birds at this spot, the others being presumably a female and a replying male. Brilliant.



Levaillant's Woodpecker

That was it. We sped back to our Marrakech hotel for some well-earned warmth and comfort, able to put our feet up knowing that between us we'd found all the birds we'd set out to see. As ever, it had been very much a group effort with everyone playing a part in finding the birds and making it such a lovely crowd of people to spend time with.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1 Ruddy Shelduck
- 2 Eurasian Teal
- 3 Mallard
- 4 (Northern) Pintail
- 5 (Northern) Shoveler
- 6 Marbled Duck
- 7 Tufted Duck
- 8 Barbary Partridge
- 9 Common Quail
- 10 Little Grebe
- 11 Great Crested Grebe
- 12 Shearwater sp
- 13 Northern Gannet
- 14 Great Cormorant
- 15 (Black-crowned) Night Heron

- 16 Cattle Egret
- 17 Little Egret
- 18 Grey Heron
- 19 Purple Heron
- 20 White Stork
- 21 Glossy Ibis
- 22 Bald Ibis
- 23 Eurasian Spoonbill
- 24 Greater Flamingo
- 25 Black-shouldered (-winged) Kite
- 26 Black Kite
- 27 Marsh Harrier
- 28 Montagu's Harrier
- 29 Eurasian Sparrowhawk
- 30 Long-legged Buzzard
- 31 Golden Eagle
- 32 Bonelli's Eagle
- 33 Osprey
- 34 Common Kestrel
- 35 Lanner Falcon
- 36 Peregrine Falcon
- 37 Barbary Falcon
- 38 Moorhen
- 39 Common Coot
- 40 Oystercatcher
- 41 Black-winged Stilt
- 42 Avocet
- 43 Stone-curlew (Eurasian Thick-knee)
- 44 Cream-coloured Courser
- 45 Little Ringed Plover
- 46 Ringed Plover
- 47 Kentish Plover
- 48 Grey Plover
- 49 Sanderling
- 50 Little Stint
- 51 Curlew Sandpiper
- 52 Dunlin
- 53 Ruff
- 54 Black-tailed Godwit
- 55 Bar-tailed Godwit
- 56 Eurasian Curlew
- 57 Common Sandpiper
- 58 Green Sandpiper
- 59 Spotted Redshank
- 60 Greenshank
- 61 Wood Sandpiper

- 62 Common Redshank
- 63 (Ruddy) Turnstone
- 64 Mediterranean Gull
- 65 Audouin's Gull
- 66 Lesser Black-backed Gull
- 67 Yellow-legged Gull
- 68 Black-headed Gull
- 69 Slender-billed Gull
- 70 Sandwich Tern
- 71 Crowned Sandgrouse
- 72 Spotted Sandgrouse
- 73 Black-bellied Sandgrouse
- 74 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
- 75 Stock Dove (Pigeon)
- 76 Wood Pigeon
- 77 Collared Dove
- 78 Turtle Dove
- 79 Laughing (Palm) Dove
- 80 Common Cuckoo
- 81 Little Owl
- 82 Desert (Pharaoh) Eagle Owl
- 83 Egyptian Nightjar
- 84 *Red-necked Nightjar*
- 85 Common Swift
- 86 Pallid Swift
- 87 Little (House) Swift
- 88 Common Kingfisher
- 89 Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
- 90 European Bee-eater
- 91 Hoopoe
- 92 Wryneck
- 93 Levaillant's Green Woodpecker
- 94 Great Spotted Woodpecker
- 95 Bar-tailed Desert Lark
- 96 Desert Lark
- 97 Hoopoe Lark
- 98 Thick-billed Lark
- 99 Short-toed Lark
- 100 Lesser Short-toed Lark
- 101 Crested Lark
- 102 Long-billed Crested (Maghreb) Lark
- 103 Thekla Lark
- 104 Sky Lark
- 105 Atlas (Horned) Lark
- 106 Temminck's (Horned) Lark
- 107 Plain (Brown-throated Sand) Martin

- 108 Sand Martin
- 109 Crag Martin
- 110 Barn Swallow
- 111 House Martin
- 112 Red-rumped Swallow
- 113 Tawny Pipit
- 114 Tree Pipit
- 115 Meadow Pipit
- 116 Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail
- 117 Grey Wagtail
- 118 White (Pied) Wagtail
- 119 Moroccan White Wagtail
- 120 Common Bulbul
- 121 Wren
- 122 Robin
- 123 Common Nightingale
- 124 Black Redstart
- 125 Common Redstart
- 126 Moussier's Redstart
- 127 Common Stonechat
- 128 Isabelline Wheatear
- 129 Northern Wheatear
- 130 Seebohm's Wheatear
- 131 Black-eared Wheatear
- 132 Desert Wheatear
- 133 Red-rumped Wheatear
- 134 Maghreb Wheatear
- 135 White-crowned Black Wheatear
- 136 Black Wheatear
- 137 Blue Rock Thrush
- 138 Blackbird
- 139 Mistle Thrush
- 140 Cetti's Warbler
- 141 Zitting Cisticola (Fan-tailed Warbler)
- 142 Streaked Scrub Warbler
- 143 *Grasshopper Warbler*
- 144 Sedge Warbler
- 145 Reed Warbler
- 146 Western Olivaceous Warbler
- 147 Eastern (Saharan) Olivaceous Warbler
- 148 Blackcap
- 149 African Desert Warbler
- 150 Spectacled Warbler
- 151 Tristram's Warbler
- 152 Western Subalpine Warbler
- 153 Moltoni's Warbler

- 154 Eastern Subalpine Warbler
- 155 Sardinian Warbler
- 156 Western Bonelli's Warbler
- 157 Common Chiffchaff
- 158 Willow Warbler
- 159 Firecrest
- 160 Fulvous Babbler
- 161 (African) Blue Tit
- 162 Great Tit
- 163 Coal Tit
- 164 Short-toed Treecreeper
- Black-crowned Tchagra (-headed Bush
- 165 Shrike)
- 166 Desert Grey Shrike
- 167 Woodchat Shrike
- 168 *Eurasian Jay*
- 169 Moroccan Magpie
- 170 Yellow-billed (Alpine) Chough
- 171 Red-billed Chough
- 172 Brown-necked Raven
- 173 Common Raven
- 174 Spotless Starling
- 175 House Sparrow
- 176 Spanish Sparrow
- 177 Desert Sparrow
- 178 Rock Sparrow
- 179 African Chaffinch
- 180 European Serin
- 181 Greenfinch
- 182 Goldfinch
- 183 Linnet
- 184 Common Crossbill
- 185 Crimson-winged Finch
- 186 Trumpeter Finch
- 187 Cirl Bunting
- 188 Rock Bunting
- 189 House Bunting
- 190 Corn Bunting

Italics = heard only

OTHER WILDLIFE

- 1/Deer sp (Red Deer is only deer listed for Morocco)
- 2/Barbary Ground Squirrel
- 3/Large lizard sp (poss N African Eyed Lizard)
- 4/Terrapin sp (prob Spanish Terrapin)
- 5/Fat Sand Rat
- 6/Fennec

7/Brown Hare
8/bat sp
9/'gerbil' sp
10/Rabbit
11/Migratory locust
12/Swallowtail butterfly

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