



TOUR REPORT
Morocco
8th March – 19TH March 2022

www.oriolobirding.com

info@oriolobirding.com

TOUR LEADER

David Gosney

PARTICIPANTS

John Hickerton, Jane Taylor, Viv Waugh, Chris Arnold, Sean O'Hara, Ben Judge, John Hipwood, Susan Judge, Tony Moverley, Keith Tinworth

WEDNESDAY 9th MARCH - *Pleasant and warm with little wind.*

Having arrived at our hotel the night before, we were able to spend the whole day birding. Our first destination was the Cap Rhir/Tamri area where our main target bird was Northern Bald Ibis, in the only part of the world where these birds are not descended from captive stock. We began our exploration of this coast at Cap Rhir where we enjoyed birds such as **House Bunting, Thekla Lark, Blue Rock Thrush, Spanish Sparrow, Black Wheatear** and had our first views of that stunning Moroccan speciality, the **Moussier's Redstart**.



Moussier's Redstart – always a crowd-pleaser. Photo Jane Taylor

A pair of **Stone Curlews** here gave particularly good views. At sea were plenty of **Northern Gannets** and a few **Sandwich Terns** but nothing more unusual. Bald Ibis can be unpredictable in their location and on this occasion we had none at Cap Rhir, or on the drive to the Tamri estuary but we were compensated by terrific telescope views of a large falcon perched on a roadside pylon. We hoped it might be a Barbary Falcon, as they breed along this coast, but the views showed clearly that it was 'only' a **Peregrine**. It was a bit of a shock to find that the lagoon by the beach at Tamri had shrunk to a fraction of its usual size, meaning the birds were fewer and further away than on any previous visit. The limited water had **6 Ruddy Shelduck, 10 Northern Shoveler, a few Eurasian Coot and Little Grebe, 3 Little Ringed Plover and a Pied Avocet** on the shore and a **Western Marsh Harrier** coasting around. There were more birds on the beach where we had good views of about 50 **Audouin's Gulls** amongst the **Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backs**. But still no Ibis. We drove on, still hoping to spot some by the road but they remained elusive until we explored a track off to the side. There, at last,

were some **Northern Bald Ibis** scattered across a hillside. We had great scope views of these birds which turned out to be a group of twelve.



Bald Ibis – what DO they find to feed on? Photo Jane Taylor

After lunch we drove back to Agadir to explore the Souss estuary where we immediately had a chance to look at **Maghreb Magpies**, recently split from the European species. The estuary is always good for birds but the best birding is usually on the pools between the river and the Royal Palace. However, this year the pools were almost dry. We barely managed to see any open water but there must have been some, as birds such as **Pied Avocet, Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Teal** were occasionally seen flying around in small flocks. We concentrated on the estuary where there were groups of waders including **Black-winged Stilt, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank, Little Ringed Plover, a few Kentish Plover and some more Stone Curlews**. Over 200 **Greater Flamingos** made a spectacular sight and there were a few **Great White Egrets and 20 Eurasian Spoonbill** as well as the **Little and Cattle Egrets**. Amongst the loafing gulls were good numbers (40 plus) of **Mediterranean Gull** in various plumages and 7 **Gull-billed Terns**. We also had a couple of **Slender-billed Gulls**, one of which performed for us at wonderfully close range. An **Osprey** was perched on a sand bar, eating a fish. Perhaps the most exciting birds here were two raptors. First was a large falcon which flew more or less overhead giving terrific views. The moustachial stripe looked suspiciously narrow and the pale upper tail, graduating to a dark tip confirmed it was a **Barbary Falcon**. Our second raptor was an eagle which, a little unexpectedly, turned out to be a young **Bonelli's Eagle**.

We made a special effort to look for another Moroccan speciality, Plain or Brown-throated Sand Martin, by visiting a river bank where they'd been breeding two years earlier. However, the bank had collapsed and we saw little here but we did spot a group of hirundines further upriver. Sadly, when we finally got close to them they proved to be just **Barn Swallows**.

We lingered in the area until the sun set over the estuary and then went for a little walk in an area where **Red-necked Nightjars** have previously given terrific views. With the light fading, a bird finally

started to call so we tried to get closer to the source of the sound. As we did so, a nightjar flashed in front of us, a brief but exciting view.

We'd made a great start to the trip but some species had eluded us such as Little Swift, Plain Martin, Barbary Partridge and Marbled Duck. Had we missed our chance for these?

THURSDAY 10th MARCH - *Pleasant and warm all day*

We started the day by visiting the hotel in Agadir where we used to stay. This hotel has closed since Covid-19 but we stood outside hoping to see the Little Swifts that were usually there. However, none could be found and indeed even **Pallid Swifts**, previously numerous, were hard to find. We drove on to the Oued Massa and explored the cultivated areas between the river and the town. Birds here included **Iberian Yellow Wagtail**, **European Stonechat**, migrant **Tree Pipits**, passing **European Bee-eaters** (heard but not seen), parties of **Glossy Ibis** and **Gull-billed Tern**, a **Little Bittern** that dived into the riverside vegetation and a **Western Olivaceous Warbler**, picked out by its song. In previous years we've struggled to find **Plain Martin** here so we were delighted when one flew towards us and over the river. Scanning around we reckon there were at least six of these special birds and, even better, there were a few **Little Swifts** in the sky too. We also caught up with **Barbary Partridge** when two birds scuttled across one of the fields below us. The main target bird here was **Black-crowned Tchagra** but their numbers seemed to be well down on previous years. When we did hear what we thought was a singing bird it surprisingly turned out to be a **Thekla Lark**, singing from a date palm and imitating not just the Tchagra but also a Kestrel and a Yellow Wagtail. We lingered for ages but, since there were no singing Tchagras, we set off back to the minibus. In doing so, we spotted a Tchagra in a hedge by the road. It promptly dropped from view but then flew up in its display flight, singing loudly before disappearing into a date palm where it remained hidden again. Not everyone saw it well but at least we'd all seen it in flight and seen its spectacular display. We drove on to our hotel near Taroudannt where we rested on the roof terrace whilst still scanning for birds. In the past we've sometimes had **Black-winged Kite** from here and once again it wasn't long before we were watching one through our scopes, hovering over the plain. Before the evening meal we went for a stroll from the hotel to a site where we've often found **Fulvous Babblers**. On this occasion though, the best birds were **Woodchat** and **Great Grey Shrikes** and more views of the **Black-winged Kite**.

FRIDAY 11th MARCH - *Pleasant and warm all day*

An optional pre-breakfast walk gave us another chance to look for the babblers but again there was no sight or sound of them. We hadn't found them on our last trip in 2020 either, so maybe they have gone from this site. We had also hoped this site might give us better views of Tchagra but none were seen or even heard. The best birds were probably the **Spanish Sparrows** which had roosted here; about 450 were counted spilling out of one bush alone.

After breakfast, as we drove up the Souss valley we kept an eye open for raptors and storks rising from the plain to continue their migration. This enabled us to get great views of a pale morph **Booted Eagle** and several views of small parties of **Black Kites**. We also had our first views of the local buzzards, previously described as Long-legged Buzzards but recently shown to be a sub-species of **Common Buzzard**, quite distinct from the Long-legged Buzzards of eastern Europe and the Middle East. Our next stop was at a bridge where in recent years we'd enjoyed views of Spotted and Little Crakes. However, on this occasion, the site was being chewed up by digger trucks and they were dumping their piles of rubble into the reedbeds, leaving only tiny areas where water birds might linger. The best water birds we managed were a few **Sedge Warblers** and **Common Moorhen**! In compensation we found a **Great Spotted Cuckoo** in the nearby scrub and a **Black-crowned Tchagra** singing nearby. We followed up where the song was coming from and this time managed to get much better views close to the roadside.

It's a long drive from Taroudannt to Boumalne but we always break it up with a visit to a desert area which, over the years, has proved to be the most reliable site for Maghreb Wheatear. Indeed we haven't failed to find them here on any visit since 2012. Until now. It was a calm afternoon, perfect for birding, but we found it really difficult to find any desert birds at all at this site. In our struggle to find Maghreb Wheatear we spent longer and covered a wider area than usual but all we could find were a few **Theklas**, **2 Desert Larks** and a **couple of Desert Wheatears**. A bit worrying really. Would the Tagdilt track prove to be equally as devoid of birds?

SATURDAY 12th MARCH - *Another lovely day, pleasantly warm with minimal wind*



Birding on the famous Tagdilt track. Photo Jane Taylor

The so-called 'Tagdilt track' is a name etched in birding folklore as one of the great places to look for desert birds. As usual we began the day by visiting an area where all four species of sandgrouse have been recorded. In some years it has been used as a sandgrouse drinking site, but in recent years the 'puddles' have been dry. This year, despite obvious signs of drought elsewhere, there was plenty of water in the hollows. While waiting in the hope of sandgrouse, we had time to really study a range of desert species, getting good scope views of **Red-rumped Wheatear**, **Temminck's Horned Lark**, **Trumpeter Finch**, **Desert Wheatear**, not to mention Fat Sand Rats. There was always something to look at. By checking every movement we also spotted a **Thick-billed Lark**, often a difficult species to find, and by looking carefully at every rounded lump in front of us, one of the group noticed that one such lump was a sandgrouse. Through the scopes we could see it was a male **Crowned Sandgrouse**. The sound of their distinctive calls told us that more birds were around and soon there were 13 of them, shuffling across the slope in front of us. Fantastic.

We tried to move on to another patch of desert but the track we usually take was eroded and impossible to cross in the minibus. We therefore had to explore a slightly different area on foot, which turned out to be no bad thing. As well as more **Red-rumped Wheatears**, **Temminck's Larks** etc we also had our first views of **Cream-coloured Coursers** and a few **Greater Short-toed Larks** on the ground. This latter species is sometimes present in hundreds but we probably had less than 20 birds, plus a flock of 16 which flew past, sounding suspiciously, but not definitively, like Lesser Short Toed. A more distinctive call alerted us to the presence of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** and we managed to briefly catch sight of them in flight before they disappeared into a gully, never to reappear. Even more exciting, by scanning around we also picked up a falcon on a post and through the scope we could clearly make out the head pattern of a **Lanner Falcon**. Another bird in the distance was so far away and so small that it was nothing more than a dot. But it was a dot that kept jumping vertically into the air and tumbling down again. It had to be displaying **Greater Hoopoe-lark**. The only way to get closer was to drive around to see if we could find a track in that part of the desert. We did this and eventually got close enough to see this most dramatic of desert birds at relatively close range. It wasn't yet lunchtime but we'd seen almost all the hoped-for desert species including such 'difficult' species as Thick-billed Lark, Lanner Falcon and Crowned and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse.



Tristram's Warbler – endemic to north-west Africa. Photo Jane Taylor

In the afternoon we went to check out a site where we'd previously had **Bonelli's Eagle**. Whilst scanning the skyline we were distracted by a scratchy little song which enabled us to spot another Moroccan speciality – a **Tristram's Warbler**. This delightful little regional endemic gave terrific views on both sides of the road – another tricky species safely under our belts.

We had to wait a bit longer for the eagle but eventually an adult came gliding out over the escarpment before later returning and disappearing again. We all had good views of the black-and-white pattern of the underside. After also enjoying views of a singing **Black Redstart** and a furtive female **Rock Bunting** we moved on to look for another target species – Desert or Pharaoh Eagle Owl.

We decided to arrive early at the site because two years earlier we'd also seen Maghreb Wheatear at the same spot and this was a species we'd missed the day before. We walked the area and failed to find the wheatear and we checked out a day-time roosting site for the owl and couldn't find that either. We were on our way to check another roosting site when we met a local shepherd who spoke no English or French but had a card with a picture of the owl. He offered to show us the owl and his gesticulations suggested he might know where to find Maghreb Wheatear too! He walked us back to exactly where we'd been looking and set up one of the scopes on a spot on the cliff-face. There, on a different ledge, was a **Pharaoh Eagle Owl**, staring down the barrel of the scope and showing all the key features that distinguish it from Eurasian Eagle Owl. The 'guide' walked a little further on and up popped a wheatear – a male **Maghreb Wheatear**, exactly where we'd just been looking. We rewarded the guide for his efforts and he wandered on back to his home in a cave under the cliffs! We had other birds here too such as **Desert Larks, Trumpeter Finches and a Lanner Falcon** on a nest. We have sometimes had to wait until dusk for the owls to appear but this time we could go back to the hotel, having had one of the best days ever in this area: Thick-billed Lark, Crowned and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, 2 Lanners, 2 Bonelli's Eagles, Tristram's Warbler, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Maghreb Wheatear and just about all the other desert species in the area, all on one day.

SUNDAY 13th MARCH - *Warm, sunny and with little wind.*

It's another long journey from Boumalne to Merzouga but we made several stops, the most important of which was to a wadi where we hoped to see another of Morocco's most-prized birds – Scrub Warbler. Almost immediately we spotted 3 birds disappearing into one of the few bushes – Fulvous Babblers. Hooray. However, most of the other expected birds were very few and far between – a couple of **Desert Wheatears**, a distant singing **Bar-tailed Lark** and only a few **Greater Short-toed Larks**. We had to go further than usual in search of the **Scrub Warblers** but we did eventually locate a pair by their trilling little calls. As ever they were really difficult to see well, but everyone eventually managed to spot one, either bouncing on the ground or briefly waving its tail before falling off the top of a bush.

When we arrived at Merzouga we had time for a walk in the desert, close to the immense sand dunes of the Erg Chebbi. Once again, though, it was the lack of birds that was striking. On a beautiful calm evening we walked for over a kilometre and hardly saw or heard a bird: just a **Desert Wheatear** a **Bar-tailed Lark** and a few **Greater Short-toed Larks**.

MONDAY 14th MARCH - *Windy all day with gusts strong enough to blow over a tripod and throw sand across the desert and into the air. If you opened the wrong window you'd get covered in sand which got everywhere, hair, eyes, clothes, optics... Apparently the sand blew far enough to cover cars in the UK!*

I have previously described our day in the desert in the 4 x 4s with Lahcen and his team as one of the best days birding you can have in the Western Palearctic. But this year it was obvious that the strong winds and concomitant sandstorms would make birding difficult. To make matters worse, Lahcen reported that the sandgrouse drinking pools, which had previously been such a highlight, were no longer reliable. We gave it a go anyway and were rewarded with some fantastic birds. First up were two parties of **Crowned Sandgrouse**, creeping across the desert, even closer than at Tagdilt.



Crowned Sandgrouse – perfectly camouflaged against most desert backgrounds – but not this one.
Photo Jane Taylor

Next, we were joined by one of the people who eke out a living in this environment. He rode by clinging to the side of Lahcen's 4 x 4, guiding us to where he said we might see Houbara Bustard. We parked and walked up a hill until the guide stopped and said 'there'. He pointed to a hollow in the ground with two eggs. We instantly turned heel, chided the guide and explained to those still arriving that we couldn't go there because there was a nest. We got back to the cars and drove away, to a site from which we hoped to scope the bird from a distance. No joy with Houbara but we did see some sandgrouse in flight including one flock of **Spotted Sandgrouse**. Normally we identify them by their calls but we never heard them, because of the wind, and had to rely on their more contrasting plumage for the identification. We drove on to look for a different viewpoint and, in doing so, spotted a **Houbara** walking across the open desert. We were far enough away to get out of the jeeps but close enough to study it in the scopes. It's a bird that is now seen so rarely here that we never expected to get views like this.

This was followed by another of the highlights of the whole trip. There are many scattered but remote date palms in the desert but we stopped at one that was special. In the crown of the tree was an old nest of a **Brown-necked Raven** and in the Ravens' nest were a pair of **Desert Sparrows**. Previously we've found them in the remotest outposts of human habitation but now they have retreated even from there, no doubt pushed out by invading House Sparrows. Now they are confined to these isolated palms. For long periods there was nothing to be seen, but we sat it out for long enough to get views of the male and female Desert Sparrow. What stunning birds they both are.

We drove on to check out the now famous sandgrouse drinking site but, as Lahcen predicted, there were no sandgrouse there, or anywhere else in the immediate vicinity. We continued to explore the desert, stopping whenever we spotted birds from the vehicles. We managed to find most of the usual desert species, **Cream-coloured Courser**, **Brown-necked Raven**, **Greater Hoopoe-lark**, **Bar-**

tailed Lark and Greater Short-toed Lark but only in remarkably low numbers. Even so, we were able to get great close-up views of a **Greater Hoopoe-lark** performing its spectacular tumbling display and we also located other exciting species such as **African Desert Warbler, Spectacled Warbler and Thick-billed Lark**.



Hoopoe Lark – a spectacular bird both at rest and in flight – photos Jane Taylor and Keith Tinworth

We also had a most unexpected find when a warbler that was jumping around under a bush turned out to be a **Scrub Warbler**, allowing us to get much better views than we had the day before. This is the first time the leader has seen Scrub Warbler in his many visits to the Merzouga area.



Egyptian Nightjar – eyes like Pistachio nuts. Photo Keith Tinworth

Our next appointment was with another desert guide. We picked him up from his home in the desert and drove for several more kilometres. We stopped, parked, walked about 50 metres then stopped again and he said 'Two' and pointed to the ground in front of us. Usually **Egyptian Nightjars** are so well camouflaged that even from a few metres away they can be almost impossible to detect. However, this time they were almost completely in the open and sideways on so it was immediately

obvious they were nightjars and not rocks. At such close range we were able to study them in phenomenal detail, noting for example that their eyelids had an uneven surface like a walnut shell.



Fulvous Babbler – with two halves of a Grasshopper. Photo Keith Tinworth

Moving on we were aiming for our lunch stop when we were waylaid by the sight of a **Fulvous Babbler** next to the vehicles. This bird performed wonderfully for us, at one point snatching a large grasshopper and proceeding to break it apart and eat it in front of us.

Despite the weather we'd now seen just about all the key species in the desert so after lunch there wasn't much left to look for. However, we set Lahcen the task of finding us some more sandgrouse because until now our views of Spotted Sandgrouse had been distant birds in flight only. Lahcen's abilities to find and spot sandgrouse are legendary so we drove around the desert with high hopes. We continued to find more birds such as **Cream-coloured Courser** and **Thick-billed Lark** but the sandgrouse remained elusive. We followed routes which, in the past, have given us views of several parties of sandgrouse but on this occasion we couldn't find any. Lahcen was visibly disgruntled and even amazed at the lack of sandgrouse. He kept going with some determination but eventually had to concede defeat.

In another year we might have stayed out longer to enjoy the waterbirds of the Dayet Srji but this temporary lake had no water at all this year. Still, it had been an amazing day, even in those winds, and we'd seen our first Houbara Bustard for several years and our first ever Scrub Warbler in this part of the desert.

TUESDAY 15th MARCH - *Cold (less than 5C) and often drizzly in the morning becoming more pleasant in the afternoon.*

In theory this is always planned as a day to clean up on any desert species we may have previously missed but we'd already seen almost all the target birds. The main request was to try to get better views of Spotted Sandgrouse but this was always going to be difficult without the use of 4 x 4s. Even so, we spent the morning visiting two desert areas which at least offered that possibility. Thankfully, yesterday's wind had abated but we were now faced with two new problems – rain and cold. As we walked across the desert, in our coats, hats and gloves, we mused that they were probably having better weather in Manchester. Maybe the weather was to blame but there were spectacularly few birds to be found in the desert. We walked the length of a wadi which was silent apart from one singing **African Desert Warbler**, a **Greater Hoopoe-lark** and a handful of migrating **Short-toed Larks**. Not a single Desert Wheatear – such scarcity was previously unheard of. One bonus though was a dark bird that kept flitting out of one bush and disappearing into another. Unexpectedly it turned out to be a **Bluethroat**. In the second wadi we checked, we were again shocked by the lack of birds: just a few **Desert Larks**, **Trumpeter Finch**, **Chiffchaff** and **Subalpine Warbler**, but at least this time we had a couple of **Desert Wheatears**.

After a magnificent lunch of the local speciality, Pizza Berbere, we checked out a site for another species, **Maghreb Lark**, a long-billed version of Crested Lark that has only recently been split. The favourite site had become so parched that it took us a while to get decent views of the larks. Meanwhile, repeated high-pitched calls enabled us to get pretty good views of another **Fulvous Babbler**. There were no Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters on the wires but we were presumably a little early for those.

Our next stop was at the Auberge Derkaoua. The gardens there often attract migrants but have been less productive in recent years as they have been somewhat neglected since the previous owner passed away. He would be horrified to find that the whole establishment now appeared to be closed and pretty much abandoned. Even so we managed to find a few birds including a **Common Nightingale**, a **Common Redstart**, a **Black Redstart**, a **Pied Flycatcher**, a few **Subalpine Warblers** and **Chiffchaffs** and, best of all, a couple of fabulously clean-looking **Western Bonelli's Warblers**.



Western Bonelli's Warbler – just look at those silky-white underparts. Photo Keith Tinworth

WEDNESDAY 16th MARCH - *Sunny and pleasantly warm all day*

Our long drive back to Ouarzazate was enlivened by a day-count of over 50 **White-crowned Wheatears** but only 4 **Woodchat Shrikes** and 2 **Great Greys**. Despite a few stops and lots of scanning from the van, the journey was otherwise uneventful. At Ouarzazate we aimed for the Barrage El Mansour, a site which in the past had been a fabulous wetland full of ducks, waders, herons, gulls and terns. However the water level has been falling for years and, despite driving for several km further than in previous years we still couldn't see any water, let alone birds. We tried walking to where some water might be but never managed to find more than a puddle with one **Green Sandpiper**, one **Iberian Yellow Wagtail** and a **White Wagtail**. Oh dear. Despite this lack of water we still had some really enjoyable birding. There were plenty of **Maghreb Larks** to look at - the receding water had left lots of perfect habitat for them – and the birds in the air included **Alpine Swift**, **Eurasian Crag Martin** and a few **Pallid Swifts** that came really close in perfect light. One highlight was the sight of over 300 **White Storks** and 500 **Black Kites**, both species no doubt on migration and coming down to roost on the drying plain, the former joined by a few **Black Storks**. Other raptors here included **Western Marsh Harriers**, at least two gorgeous male **Montagu's Harriers**, a **Short-toed Eagle** and a second year **Bonelli's Eagle** that gave such good views we could see that the incipient white panel on its back consisted of two parallel white feathers.

THURSDAY 17th MARCH - *Cloudy and cool in Ouarzazate became breezy and bitterly cold on the Tizi-n-Test, remaining cool and sunless for the rest of the day.*

Our first stop in the Atlas mountains was to look for **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, a Moroccan speciality and likely a new bird for most of us. For a while it seemed like it would elude us. We had views of **African Blue Tit**, **Moussier's Redstart**, **Black Redstart**, a distant **Rock Sparrow** and a surprising singing **Corn Bunting** and were just about to leave when a woodpecker called. We marched off in the direction of the call but still it remained out of view until suddenly it flew towards us and landed in the nearest tree. From our elevated position the bird was at head-height just a few metres away, close enough to study its face pattern (grey, not black, face, black moustache with a pale border) and note its white eye. It was a male with a bright red crown and it called incessantly until it flew off down the valley. Wow.

We tried again to look for woodland species at the famous site at Toufliht but found that this site is now practically a write-off. Not only has the newly-widened road cut a swathe through some of the best habitat for species such as **Levaillant's Woodpecker** and **Firecrest**, but also many of the best trees nearby have been felled, leaving a clearing where good woodland birds used to be. The only decent bird we found here was a singing **Common Crossbill**.

The long drive to Ouirgane was uneventful apart from a flock of about 50 **Maghreb Magpies** and three displaying **Booted Eagles**. Once again, we failed to find **Tristram's Warbler** in the juniper scrub but, having already seen them so well, maybe we weren't trying very hard. After settling in at the hotel we went for a short stroll. This hilly site was popular with many of the species we find back home but a party of **Red-rumped Swallows** were a nice addition.

FRIDAY 18th MARCH - *Began cloudy and cool but then sunny in midday until mist descended onto mountain.*

On the optional pre-breakfast walk we enjoyed a classic Moroccan dawn chorus of mostly **Eurasian Blackbirds** and **Common Bulbuls** plus species such as **Sardinian Warbler** and **European Serin**. We had spectacular views of **Cirl Bunting**, a calling **Levaillant's Woodpecker** and an unexpected singing **Rock Sparrow**.

After breakfast we zig-zagged across the mountain to a wooded area which proved to be terrific for birds such as **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Common Firecrest**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Common Crossbill** and **Coal Tit**, all seen well, plus another **Levaillant's Woodpecker** calling.



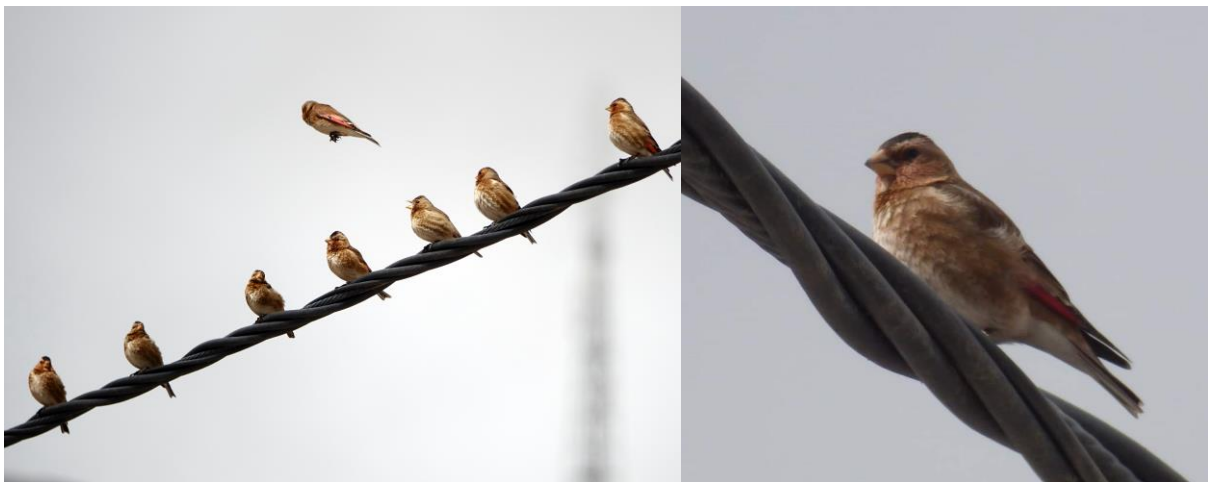
Firecrest – it's always exciting to get views like this. Photo Jane Taylor.

As soon as we arrived at the ski resort of Oukaimeden we had really close views of both **Red-billed** and **Alpine Choughs** which were abundant around the cafes and fields.



Two species of Chough at Oukaimeden – Photos Jane Taylor

There was lots of snow, which we hoped would mean the birds would be restricted to the roads and car parks and therefore easier to find. However, the snow meant that the area was highly attractive to local people who arrived in their hundreds to play in the snow. We found a quieter area where, with a bit of patience we had a flock of about **40 Atlas Horned Larks, a few Rock Sparrows, Black Wheatears, Black Redstarts and a Water Pipit**. We also had a brief view of the bird we most wanted - a **Crimson-winged Finch** - but it flew before we could study it. The key to finding this species is often to wait for them to come to feed on broken walnut shells left around the food-stalls but this year it looked like no-one was buying walnuts! Maybe this could be tricky. However, after lunch, as we returned to look for the one we'd seen earlier, we found a flock on the wires right beside the minibus, right in the middle of the swarms of day-trippers. We leapt from the van and all enjoyed amazing views, much to the amusement of the many passers-by.



Crimson-winged Finch – ‘on the wires right next to the minibus’ – Photos Jane Taylor and Keith Tinworth



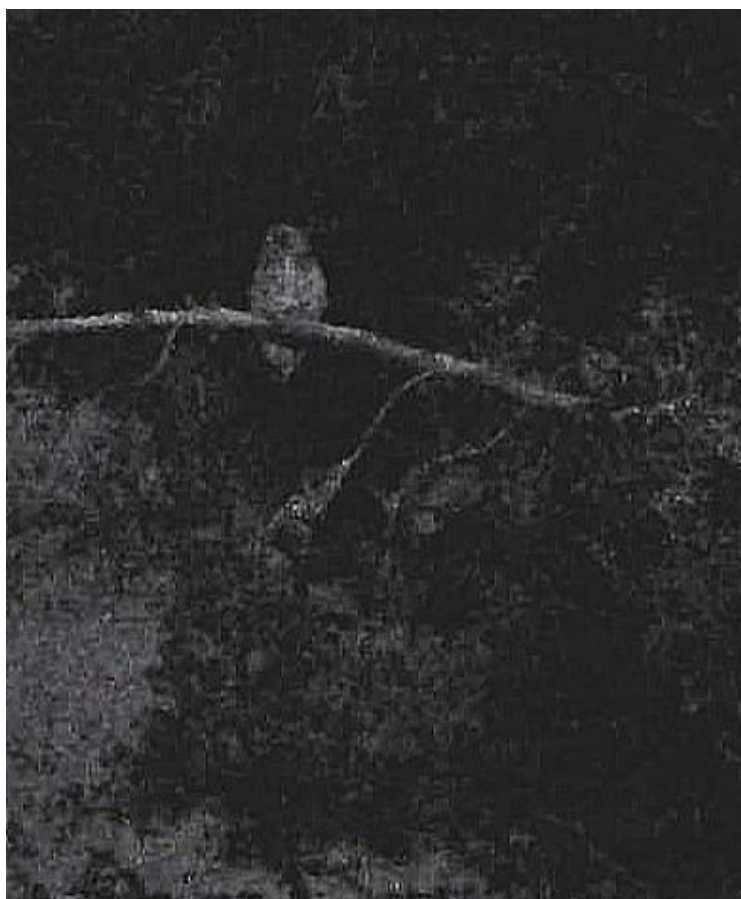
Atlas Horned Lark – genetically more different from our Shore Larks than Temminck's Lark is.
Photo Keith Tinworth

We made a concerted effort to find another Moroccan speciality, the Seebohm's Wheatear but instead had to be content with more views of **Atlas Horned Larks, Crimson-winged Finches and distant Rock Sparrows**. Seebohm's often don't arrive at this altitude until late March, especially when there is this much snow, so presumably we were just too early to find one.

By now the mist was closing in but we still made an attempt to look for Alpine Accentor at the edge of a cliff. However, visibility was so awful that we saw almost literally nothing and we abandoned the search.

On our way back to the hotel we stopped for one last walk around one of the mountain villages where we had more views of both **Great Spotted and Levaillant's Woodpeckers**. We left with the sound of a call to prayer ringing in our ears.

We arrived in Marrakech at a hotel we hadn't used before. The gardens around the hotel offered such an expanse of mature trees that we mused it could be a site for **Maghreb Wood Owl**. Some of us went for a walk in the grounds after dark but heard nothing. Later, however, one of our party was packing his bags with his patio doors open and heard a Tawny-Owl-type song outside his window. He stepped outside and was amazed to find the bird sitting in the open, on a horizontal branch, lit by moonlight. Lots of frantic knocking on room doors meant that most of the party managed to see this bird staring down at us with its dark eyes. We could see how heavily-barred the plumage was and how the head looked smaller and more rounded than a Tawny's.



Maghreb Wood Owl – enigmatically lit by moonlight in the gardens of our hotel. Photo Keith Tinworth

Maghreb Wood Owl has only recently been split from Tawny Owl. Even though the leader had, in the past, heard them elsewhere in Morocco, he'd never actually seen one, so this was a lifer even for him.

Having just had a conversation over the meal about the best bird of the trip, many of us were asking if we could change our minds. It was certainly a dramatic way to end the trip in which, despite the lack of wetlands, the loss of a sandgrouse drinking spot and remarkably low numbers of larks and wheatears, we'd still managed to find almost all the birds we'd come looking for and we'd been rewarded with bonus birds such as Houbara and the Wood Owl.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1 Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
2 Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
3 Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
4 Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
5 Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
6 Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>
7 Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
8 Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
9 Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
10 Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
11 Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
12 Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
13 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>
14 Spotted Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>
15 Crowned Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
16 Houbara Bustard	<i>Chlamydotis undulata</i>
17 Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>
18 Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>
19 Egyptian Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus aegyptius</i>
20 Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>
21 Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
22 Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
23 Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
24 Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
25 Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>
26 Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
27 Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
28 Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
29 Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
30 Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
31 Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
32 Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
33 Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
34 Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
35 Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
36 Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
37 Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>

38	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
39	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
41	Cream-coloured Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
42	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
44	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>
45	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>
46	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
48	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
49	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
50	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
51	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
52	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
53	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
54	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
55	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
56	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
57	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
58	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
59	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
60	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>
61	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
62	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
63	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
64	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circus gallicus</i>
65	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
66	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>
67	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
68	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygarrus</i>
69	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
70	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
71	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
72	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>
73	Pharaoh Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>
74	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
75	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
76	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
77	Levaillant's Woodpecker	<i>Picus vaillantii</i>
78	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
79	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
80	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
81	Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>
82	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
83	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
84	Maghreb Magpie	<i>Pica mauritanica</i>
85	Red-billed Cough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>

86	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>
87	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
88	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
89	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
90	Thick-billed Lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>
91	Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>
92	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
93	Atlas Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila (alpestris) atlas</i>
94	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
95	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
96	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
97	Maghreb Lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>
98	Plain Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
99	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
100	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
101	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
102	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
103	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>
104	African Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae</i>
105	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
106	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
107	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
108	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
109	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
110	Scrub Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>
111	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
112	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
113	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
114	Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>
115	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
116	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
117	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
118	African Desert Warbler	<i>Sylvia deserti</i>
119	Tristram's Warbler	<i>Sylvia deserticola</i>
120	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>
121	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
122	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>
123	Fulvous Chatterer	<i>Turdoides fulva</i>
124	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
125	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
126	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
127	Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>
128	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
129	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
130	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
131	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
132	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
133	White-crowned Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>

134	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
135	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
136	Mourning (Maghreb) Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>
137	Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>
138	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
139	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
140	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
141	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
142	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
143	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
144	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
145	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
146	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
147	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
148	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
149	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs africana</i>
150	Crimson-winged Finch	<i>Rhodopechys sanguineus</i>
151	Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>
152	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
153	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
154	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
155	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
156	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
157	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
158	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>
159	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
160	House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>
161	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
162	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
163	Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>
164	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>

Other taxa

165 Barbary Falcon

OTHER WILDLIFE

1/Red Fox

2/Rabbit

3/Fat Sand Rat

4/Barbary Ground Squirrel

5/bat sp

6/Bibron's Agama

7/Painted Lady-type butterflies

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