



ORIOLE BIRDING



Photo: Martin Garwood

TOUR REPORT MOROCCO

10th March – 19TH March 2020

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TOUR LEADER

David Gosney

PARTICIPANTS

Nancy Houlihan, Pat Moynahan, Jo Dowle, Steve Saxton. Malcolm Clayson, Ann and Antony True, Peter Hilton, Rob Jones and Martin Garwood

At the start of this trip, Covid-19 was just becoming an issue in the UK. We spent most of the tour simply enjoying wonderful birding without any worries about it, but that serenity came to an abrupt end when we heard that the Moroccan government were suspending all flights to and from the UK. This meant that our last couple of days were spent getting to and then queueing at Marrakech airport before finally making it home on one of the last rescue flights out.

This had meant we had to truncate our time in the deserts and miss out on mountain birding altogether. Even so we managed to find almost all of our target species, getting close views of most of them and photos of a great many.

TUESDAY 10th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm with little wind*

In lovely sunny weather we drove to our hotel, dropped our bags, pointed out some Little Swifts and Pallid Swifts, picked up a picnic lunch from a street café and set off for the estuary of the Oued Souss.



Pallid Swift – note the contrast between inner and outer wing. Photo: Steve Saxton

We ate our lunch in a park area with close views of Maghreb Magpies and a few warblers including Sardinian and Chiffchaff. Some of the group photographed a female redstart which proved to be our first of many Moussier's Redstarts.



Maghreb Magpie – also smaller and daintier than our Magpie, with less white. Photo: Peter Hilton

We walked out towards the mouth of the estuary where we enjoyed views over pools that were full of birds: ducks including Shelduck, Shoveler and Teal, waders including Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Curlew Sandpipers and a glorious flock of over 80 Pied Avocets and herons including Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis and lots of Grey Heron. In the scrub we enjoyed the usual views of Sardinian Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas and Spanish Sparrows and also managed to see no fewer than 6 Barbary Partridge. We scanned the gulls and terns at the mouth of the estuary and picked out our first Audouin's Gulls and some extra species such as Oystercatcher. On the way back to the coach we appreciated the glorious pink of over 50 flamingoes, scanned the shorelines for new waders such as Little Stint, Dunlin and Kentish Plover and we also had fabulous views of 'Moroccan' White Wagtails with their striking stripey face pattern.



Moroccan White Wagtail – quite a stunner. Photo: Peter Hilton

We also studied the local Thekla Larks, a number of Meadow Pipits and had views of Ospreys and Stone Curlews too. A soft cry overhead alerted us to what were probably the best birds of the day. Three Collared Pratincoles flew around us showing their copper underwing before settling on the near shore where we could admire them through our scopes.

We just had time to visit another site on the river where the leader had found Plain Martins the year before. By now though, the light was fading and, although we got some views of the martins, the views weren't very satisfactory.

We stayed out to look for Red-necked Nightjars which the leader had seen well the night before. Despite the constraints of having to get back in time for the evening buffet we did manage to hear a calling nightjar and had the fortune of having one pass across an open space in front of us, perfectly silhouetted against the darkening sky. It was a great view - for those lucky enough to be looking in the right direction at the time!

WEDNESDAY 11th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm with little wind.*

One of our group was struggling with a swollen knee and almost decided to stay in the hotel. However he was persuaded that that he might see some terrific birds even from the coach. Sure enough, as we alighted near Cap Rhir, it was he who was the first to shout out 'Bald Ibis'. We were then able to overlook 11 Northern Bald Ibis feeding on the coastal plain where we also added birds such as Great Grey Shrike, Subalpine Warbler and Moussier's Redstart and had several more sightings of Barbary Partridge. A Black-crowned Tchagra sang in the distance.



Moussier's Redstart – never disappoints. Photo: Peter Hilton

At the 'Tamri estuary' we had more views of Northern Bald Ibis as 3 flew close overhead and we had a selection of other waterbirds including over 30 Audouin's Gulls, 5 Ruddy Shelduck, 2 Western Marsh Harriers, 2 Spoonbills, 2 Moroccan White Wagtails, a Kingfisher and a selection of waders including Little Ringed Plover.

The adrenaline really got going when we started to head into the nearby mountains and almost immediately screeched to a halt when an eagle was sighted. We all piled out in time to see that it was an adult Bonelli's Eagle. In fact there were two, as there was a juvenile soaring with it. And yet

another bird was in view too which proved to be a Barbary Falcon. Wow, what bird should we look at? We followed the adult eagle as it came closer, and closer before alighting on a pylon on the hillside above us. Heart-pounding stuff, especially when it was joined by a 3rd Bonelli's Eagle – another adult. The two of them sat together on the pylon as we studied them through scopes until we had seen enough and left them there.

Other birds seen in the mountains included Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear and more Moussier's Redstarts but our main target species here, Tristram's Warbler, proved elusive. We spent at least half an hour at a site where they'd been so easy to find last year but failed to see or hear one. In compensation though we did have views of another 2 Bonelli's Eagles. Crikey! Five Bonelli's Eagles, more than any of us, including the leader, had seen in a day before.

THURSDAY 12th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm with little wind until mid-afternoon when we witnessed a spectacular thunderstorm.*

We were hurtling along towards the Oued Massa when the leader shouted 'Coursers' and we came to an abrupt halt. We got out in time to watch a group of 8 birds, creeping away from us but still giving great views through the scope.



Cream-coloured Courser creeping away. Photo: Martin Garwood

This surprising diversion was made even more exciting when we heard the burbling call of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a party of 7 flew low overhead and settled in the same area as the coursers. On the ground these were harder to spot but again we could see them clearly enough through the scopes. As if that wasn't enough we also had a 'large' falcon flying over which was almost certainly a Barbary. Three terrific birds and we hadn't even reached our destination.

The Oued Massa itself is no longer the fabulous wetland that it used to be but it still makes an enjoyable place to go birding. We had two particular reasons to go there, as we still hadn't had decent views of Black-crowned Tchagra and Plain Martin.

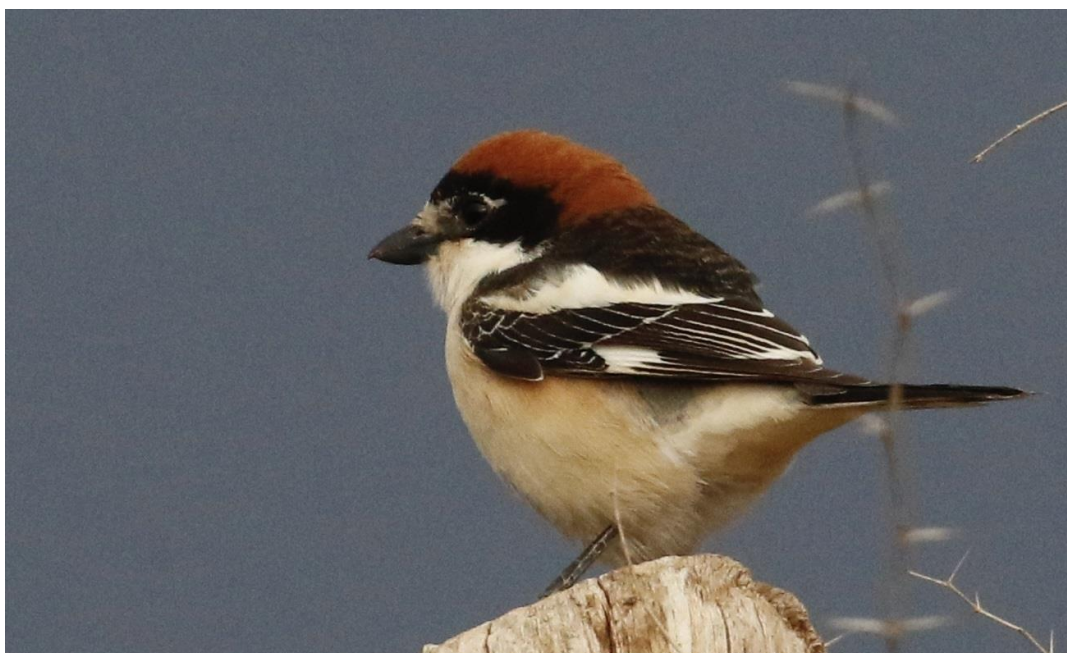
We first concentrated on a site where we have always found Tchagras in the past, usually giving fabulous close views. But this time they were nowhere to be seen – all we managed was the sound of one singing distantly. We did see plenty of other birds including more Moussier's Redstarts, Iberian Yellow Wagtails, passage Meadow and Tree Pipits, singing Corn Bunting and a couple of elusive Western Olivaceous Warblers. Overhead we had some passing Glossy Ibis and Purple Herons.

We moved on to check a site for our next target bird, Plain Martin, and, sure enough, managed to spend some time studying a few birds carefully as they flew around over the river. The relief of seeing these was compounded when we also spotted a Black-crowned Tchagra flying across the river before diving into a waterside bush. It reappeared only briefly so, although some had seen it well, others had still only had poor views. Better than nothing though. It was here that we had our best views of the local Chaffinch, a distinctive looking (and sounding) bird but still not split from our Chaffinch.



African Chaffinch – spectacularly different from our own. Photo: Martin Garwood

As we drove to our hotel, east of Taroudannt, the sky became threateningly dark and from the rooftop terrace of the hotel we then watched as the storm headed our way. In front of the storm, hundreds of hirundines were fleeing; amongst them we had an Alpine Swift and several Red-rumped Swallows. After an impressive display of thunder, lightning, and a brief deluge, the storm cleared surprisingly quickly and we were able to go for an evening walk from the hotel. Here we managed to get great views of species such as Woodchat and Great Grey Shrikes, Cirl Buntings and Serins. Once again a Tchagra called distantly.



A very obliging Woodchat Shrike. Photo: Peter Hilton

FRIDAY 13th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm in the morning with little wind until the afternoon when a strong wind blew in with intermittent rain storms*

As usual we went for a pre-breakfast walk in search of Fulvous Babblers near the hotel. For the first time in several years we failed to find any; some promising sounds were probably imitations from the local Thekla Larks! We were still hoping for better views of Tchagra but, although one was heard, we again missed out on seeing one. Apart from the usual enjoyable selection of shrikes, buntings and larks, the walk was notable for two highlights. First we had the pleasure of watching no fewer than three Black-winged Kites hovering in search of prey in the early morning; one of them was also viewed at rest on top of an argan bush. Secondly we spotted that one of the 'Sardinian Warblers' in the bushes was actually a Western Orphean Warbler, a species that will be numerous on passage later in the season but is difficult to find on such an early date.

We timed our drive up the Souss valley to coincide with the departure of migrating raptors and storks from their overnight roosting sites on the plain. Frequent stops of the coach meant that we were able to get views of Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Osprey and Long-legged Buzzard. We saw 5 Long-legged Buzzards in the day and noted that this North African form, sometimes called Atlas Buzzard, is smaller and less rangy than those in the Middle East; it is suggested that it should be regarded as a race of Common Buzzard as it is genetically closer to this species than to Long-legged. One of the most exciting spectacles of the whole trip was a veritable skyful of Black Kites, 'kettling' up from the ground – impossible to count but well over 1000 birds in view at once. At one of our stops we also found a Western Black-eared Wheatear.

Our next stop was at a bridge where last year we'd seen 3 Spotted Crakes in the riverside marshes. This time we'd just started to enjoy some Sedge Warblers, a Squacco Heron, a Green Sandpiper and a Ruddy Shelduck when we heard another Black-crowned Tchagra. This would be our last chance of the trip to see one so we dashed off to try to locate the bird. It took a while but eventually we didn't just see the bird, we also watched it perform its fabulous song-flight. When we got back to the coach we'd all seen it well apart from the group member with the painful knee. He'd stayed on the bridge

and had photographed a bird that he thought was a crake. When we studied the photos later it proved to have been a Little Crake. Happily, before the coach set off, the Tchagra appeared singing right next to the road so he even managed to see that magical species too!



At last! A singing Black-crowned Tchagra in full view. Photo: Peter Hilton

Our next target species was Maghreb Wheatear but by the time we reached the site where we usually find them, the wind had picked up considerably. In theory this would make it much more difficult to find the wheatear but in practise we spotted a male right by the road as soon as we stopped the coach! For the next few minutes we pointed scopes and cameras at it but then it disappeared. We couldn't relocate it, nor could we find a female.



Maghreb Wheatear flying away – never to be seen again.. Photo: Peter Hilton

We'd been so lucky with our timing. We wandered for a while in search of other desert birds but in that wind even the Trumpeter Finches and Desert Larks were hard to pin down.

As we drove on to our next hotel at Boumalne du Dades we passed through a number of rainstorms and reflected that this combination of rain and wind might make birding tricky the next day.

SATURDAY 14th MARCH 2020 – *Once again, sunny and calm in the morning but with wind and rain by mid-afternoon.*

Once upon a time an enterprising birder was staying in Boumalne and went for a walk across the desert along a track towards a place in the mountains called Tagdilt. What he found was a remarkable variety of larks and wheatears and the legend of the Tagdilt Track was born. When we started our own exploration we were blessed with a beautiful calm day. We began by standing in one place and watching everything that came into view. Before long we'd seen two of the local specialities, Temminck's Horned Lark and Red-rumped Wheatear and a number of other species such as Desert Wheatear, Greater Short-toed Lark, Trumpeter Finch, an unexpected pair of Tawny Pipits and a steady passage of maybe 10 Western Marsh Harriers.



Desert Wheatear – all-black tail. Photo: Martin Garwood

This time we had no sandgrouse at this site so we ventured further. Soon we were finding more of the species we'd had before plus lots of Cream-coloured Coursers a few Isabelline Wheatears, White-crowned Black Wheatears and our first Great Grey Shrike of the desert race, elegans.



Two Great Grey Shrikes: race algeriensis is altogether darker, race elegans has a bigger bill and more white in the wing. Both are genetically similar to each other but different from race excubitor from N Europe. One proposal is that these and the Canaries birds should be a separate species – Desert Grey Shrike. Photos: Peter Hilton and Martin Garwood

The numbers of coursers were phenomenal – one flock alone had over 80 birds.



Courser in flight – how often do you see that tail pattern? Photo: Martin Garwood

A Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over calling but, hey, we'd already seen that species. More exciting then was a Lanner Falcon which flew over giving decent enough views. We continued to search for

two other special desert birds, Hoopoe Lark and Thick-billed Lark both of which occur in fluctuating numbers from year to year. This year didn't seem good here as we found neither species but one of the group was sharp enough to pick out for us a Lesser Short-toed Lark amongst the commoner Greater Short-toeds.

We had lunch at our hotel where we watched Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Crag Martins and Atlas Buzzard from the verandah then set off up a scenic valley in the vain hope of catching up with Tristram's Warbler. We'd failed to find them at this site the previous year but, having missed them near Agadir, we gave it another go. For a while we seemed unlikely to find one but then a bird started calling and came close enough for us to get really good views.



Tristram's Warbler – like a Subalpine with rufous wings. Photo: Peter Hilton

That's not all. At the same site we also had Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martin, Black Wheatear and terrific views of another Bonelli's Eagle which briefly came close then soared away to perch, hidden, in a clifftop tree.

This gave us plenty of time to look for our next target bird, Pharaoh Eagle Owl. Sadly the weather became wet and windy again as we approached the site. We've often had views here in the past but sometimes it has involved waiting until dusk and not always getting a good view. Our stop here started well, with a timely break in the rain but when we checked a traditional daytime roosting site for the owl it wasn't there. We were then approached by a local shepherd who managed to convey that he could show us 'Hibou'. We followed him to a spot we hadn't visited before and, sure enough, there was a Pharaoh Eagle Owl sitting on a ledge in clear sight.

En route to the owl we also had another surprise – we flushed a wheatear which turned out to be a female Maghreb Wheatear. And nearby was a handsome male too.



In Maghreb Wheatear the female looks different from the male. Photo: Peter Hilton

Birding was difficult in the wind so when we tried to track down the calls of a 'distant' Desert Lark we were nicely surprised when it popped up within feet of us.

What a great day: all those desert birds on the Tagdilt track plus some bonus birds such as Lanner Falcon, Maghreb Wheatear and Bonelli's Eagle and two real superstars in Tristram's Warbler and Pharaoh Eagle Owl both seen exceptionally well.

SUNDAY 15th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm all day until late afternoon when the wind blew up a sandstorm*

Our day on the Tagdilt track had yielded most of our target species but we were still without Hoopoe Lark and Thick-billed Lark. The Hoopoe Lark we knew would be easy later in the trip but Thick-billed Lark wasn't so certain. So, before setting off to the deserts of Merzouga, we decided to have another look for this special lark at a site where we've succeeded for many years in a row. Once again we enjoyed sightings of desert birds such as Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears, Trumpeter Finch and Greater Short-toed Larks plus some passage birds including Meadow Pipits and a few surprises – a Red-throated Pipit, a Skylark and at least three Little Ringed Plovers. But when another lark flew up, it showed that classic black-and-white wing pattern – Thick-billed. It didn't fly far so we were all able to regroup and approach it carefully enough for everyone to get great views and, in some cases, some cracking photos. Yes.



Thick-billed Lark – an extraordinary bird. Photo: Martin Garwood

Our long drive to Merzouga was broken up by a mini-expedition to seek out another speciality – Scrub Warbler. Before reaching the oft-favoured bushes we were treated to some more views of Thick-billed Lark as well as the song and display of another classic desert species, Bar-tailed (Desert) Lark. It's a good job we'd found the Thick-billed Larks today because we had no more for the rest of the trip. By working the bushes we managed to find birds such as Moussier's Redstart and Common Whitethroat before finally making contact with a Scrub Warbler. As ever it was really difficult to see well, often hopping along the ground and only coming into view when it happened to appear in a bit of open ground that you could actually see. Even so, some of the photographers managed to get some amazing shots.



*Scrub Warbler: different from those in the Middle East – a proposed split, Saharan Scrub Warbler.
Photo: Peter Hilton*

They also succeeded in getting shots of Spectacled Warbler here, despite the briefest of views.



Spectacled Warbler male . Photo: Steve Saxton

Driving further on we made two unscheduled stops for raptors spotted from the coach. The first was a skinny-looking 'ring-tail' harrier. It could conceivably have been a Pallid Harrier but since we couldn't make out any convincing field marks we imagined it was probably just a Montagu's Harrier. The next one was a Lanner Falcon which stayed in the air long enough for some of us, at least, to get great views. A brief look at our first Brown-necked Ravens was more expected.

We tried to reach Merzouga in time for an evocative walk in the desert as the sun was setting but by now the wind was picking up. We braved the elements and set off in search of Hoopoe Lark and Desert Warbler but a sandstorm was brewing. When we did see a Hoopoe Lark it was literally blown over our heads into the distance. It was hopeless. We retreated to the coach as the sand battered us.

MONDAY 16th MARCH 2020 – *A glorious sunny day with little wind*

Thankfully we had perfect weather for our day in the desert with Lahcen and his 4 x 4s. We began by making a stop overlooking the magnificent sand dunes of the famous Erg Chebbi, in order to watch the sunrise over this epic landscape. Our next stop was at a lovely patch of perfect dune with well-established clumps of grasses spouting from each mini peak. The open sand was perfect for Greater Hoopoe Lark so we blissed out on fantastic views of this iconic desert bird.



Greater Hoopoe Lark – always fun to watch. Photos: Malcolm Clayson and Martin Garwood
But, equally, those clumps of grass were perfect for Desert Warblers and we treated ourselves to simply amazing views of this species too.



African Desert Warbler – sandier than Asian Desert Warbler. Photo: Steve Saxton

Next we visited a cluster of palms out in the desert where some locals were trying to eke out a living. They'd planted a few more palms and it was in these that a very special bird was nesting. This site had at least 3 pairs of Desert Sparrow and we all revelled in terrific views of both males and females and even watched a pair mating. We had our best views of Brown-necked Raven here too.



Desert Sparrows – male on the left. Photos: Steve Saxton and Peter Hilton

By now it was time for sandgrouse activity so we cruised the desert in search of feeding birds. Sure enough, Lahcen and his team had soon located some Spotted Sandgrouse and managed to get the 4 x 4s close enough to give wonderful views. The sounds of their calls alerted us to more flocks on the wing so we hurried to their drinking site in time to see the last of the Spotted Sandgrouse around the water.



Spotted Sandgrouse – it's the females that are spotted. Photo: Peter Hilton

However, the Crowned Sandgrouse were only just arriving, having travelled further from the distant mountains. Once again we managed to perch the 4 x 4s close to the birds. This is often difficult because the birds usually walk quickly away but one group didn't retreat. Instead they froze and just sat within feet of the vehicles for several minutes giving the best views the leader has ever had of any species of sandgrouse. At that range the detail in their feathering was just breathtaking. The feathering on the head was so dense it was as if three different colours of clay had been plastered on. Extraordinary.



Crowned Sandgrouse looks awesome when just a few feet away. Photo: Peter Hilton

We mentioned to Lahcen that we hadn't yet seen babblers so he detoured to a settlement with a walled 'garden'. At first we were just finding birds such as Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers and Common Redstarts but then we came across a troop of Fulvous Babblers which delighted us all.

Of course we were also enjoying lots of other desert birds: more Cream-coloured Coursers, Bar-tailed Larks, Desert and White-crowned Wheatears, Trumpeter Finches and the occasional Desert Lark and Black-eared and Northern Wheatears. Sometimes we would stop to watch a Hoopoe Lark performing its amazing somersaulting song-flight.



Hoopoe Lark flip-flopping. Photo: Peter Hilton

For our next bird we benefitted from the services of Moubarak, a man with a remarkable talent for finding an exceptional bird. We parked the vehicles, walked fifty yards and Moubarek pointed to some bushes and stones. 'Two birds!' Where? Oh crikey, yes. You see that line of stones under that bush? Well the two stones nearest the bush are Egyptian Nightjars. Never! Yes, take a look through the scope. Look at the eyelids, the bills, the nasal hairs. How on earth did he find them?



Yes, they really are Egyptian Nightjars. Photo: Peter Hilton

We stopped at one of the desert Riads for a pre-booked lunch and then wandered around the grounds in search of more birds. House Sparrows and Collared Doves were the dominant species even here but we did have a few Subalpine Warblers too. More exciting was another troop of Fulvous Babblers. We realised that the proprietor was putting out food for them which they were more than happy to consume. It was another great photographic opportunity.



Fulvous Babblers coming to bread! Photo: Martin Garwood

Our afternoons in the desert were usually spent exploring the margins of the lake at Merzouga for ducks, waders, pipits and wagtails but this year the lake was dry so instead we set off on a long drive to a distant hillside where Lahcen hoped to show us another Pharaoh Eagle Owl. We parked at a distance from a cliff and scanned. No joy. Lahcen said they often sat on a different cliff around the corner so we tried to approach to within sight of it. As we did, we flushed a bird from low down and it flew across the valley to the cliff opposite. Wow. Not only had we seen one in flight, we were now getting even better views of a bird in the open which we were able to admire through our scopes and cameras.



Pharaoh Eagle Owl – even better views this time. Photo: Peter Hilton

We kept birding on our return to the hotel, picking up a couple of Western Bonelli's Warblers, looking exceptionally bright in the afternoon sun, and some opportunistic Grey Herons and Little Ringed Plovers around a pool created during the previous day's rain

We returned to the hotel to the news that, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, Morocco was stopping flights to and from France and Germany. It seemed only a matter of time before UK flights would

stop too. If that happened there would be a scramble for seats and, as we were currently two days from an airport, we might miss out. Should we hope for the best and keep birding? In consultation with the office we decided to cut short our time in the desert and at least get closer to an airport the next day.

TUESDAY 17th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm with little wind*

Our planned day in the desert normally gives us a chance to see an exciting melange of species including, potentially, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Lanner Falcon, Barbary Falcon, Desert Lark, Fulvous Babbler, Tristram's Warbler, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Brown-necked Raven, Trumpeter Finch, Maghreb Lark and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler. Thankfully we'd already had great views of all of these birds except the last three and the Bee-eater and the Olivaceous Warbler were a bit unlikely anyway as they tend to arrive later. So we were able to move on from the desert without feeling we were missing out on too much.

Maybe we could even find the remaining target species, Maghreb Lark before we left the area. So we made a stop at a site where we've seen them before and, sure enough, within minutes we were watching a pair and noticing how massive their bills were



Maghreb Lark or Large-billed Crested Lark. *Photo: Peter Hilton*

Before leaving Rissani we stopped at the bank for some people to top up their spending money. This turned out to be a far more bureaucratic process than we expected so we were obliged to waste quite a bit of time in the town. But it wasn't quite a waste because behind the bank, at the top of the one tree visible in the town centre, were 2 Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters! Who'd have thought it.



Blue-cheeked Bee-eater – behind a bank in the middle of town! Photo: Steve Saxton

The long drive to Ouarzazate was enlivened by regular sightings from the coach of species like Brown-necked Raven, White-crowned Black and Desert Wheatears, Trumpeter Finch and Greater Short-toed Lark.



White-crowned Wheatear has to be identified by its tail pattern, not the, often non-existent, white crown. Photo: Malcolm Clayson

All the cafes had been shut down due to coronavirus so for lunch we diverted to a hotel. As we waited for the food to be prepared we had another look at some migrants including Western Bonelli's Warbler, Western Subalpine Warbler, Sedge Warbler and Common Redstart. The next big moment came when we spotted an eagle from the bus. We jumped out in time to get views of not one but three Bonelli's Eagles – two adults and an immature. This made it 9 Bonelli's Eagles on the trip! We're usually delighted to see just one.

At Ouarzazate we diverted to check the local reservoir. The birding here has been fantastic in the past but the water levels are receding making the birds more distant, harder to reach and sometimes fewer in number. On arriving we were dismayed to find the water level had shrunk even further. Former islands in the lake were now just hillocks on the shore. But we got close enough to realise that the birding was still spectacular with big flocks of birds like White Stork, Greater Flamingo, Great Cormorant, Avocet, Coot and Ruddy Shelduck and smaller numbers of Shoveler, Gadwall, Great Crested Grebe and Spoonbill. More exciting were the numbers of a species that had recently been tricky to find. Instead of just a few Marbled Ducks, this year there were at least 200 so we all had a chance to study one of the Western Palearctic's most threatened species. Around the shoreline were small numbers of waders, mostly Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers but also Ruff and Greenshank. Alongside were lots of Pied and Yellow (Iberian) Wagtails and a few pipits that turned out to be mostly Water Pipits. Where the banks were drying out, the area was becoming overrun with tamarisks and this proved to be a great hunting area for harriers, not the expected Marsh Harriers but no fewer than 3 Montagu's including 2 fabulous males. The sandy areas also had Tawny Pipits, Greater Short-toed Larks and a few Maghreb Larks. Our photos of the larks show that some had bills that were long and pointed but less massive – presumably Crested Lark here too. Overhead we had a few Little Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows.

We got back to the hotel to the news that flights to the UK would also be suspended, leaving us just 2 days to get out of the country. Seats on the rescue flights would be issued on a first-come-first-served basis so it was imperative that we join the queue at Marrakech airport as early the next day as possible. Thankfully we were now close enough to get there by 9am the next morning but only if we set off at 5am.

WEDNESDAY 18th MARCH 2020 – *Sunny and warm with little wind*

We drove through the Atlas mountains in the dark so we didn't even have a chance of choughs or Rock Sparrows from the coach. Beyond the mountains, as daylight broke, we did manage to spot a couple of extra species, Hawfinch and Cuckoo, before arriving at the airport at around 9am. By 5pm our long wait had been rewarded by 11 precious tickets on a flight to Gatwick the next day. We didn't even have chance to do some evening birding in the mountains because our hotel there had been closed down but instead we found a delightful hotel in the old part of Marrakech which provided a wonderful place to spend our last night in the country.

THURSDAY 19th MARCH 2020 – *Cool and rainy!*

Our flight was delayed, partly because the pilot wanted to ensure that every seat was occupied but we felt so grateful to be deposited at Gatwick airport at about 7pm, safely back in the UK, but not knowing what would transpire in the following weeks and months.

Despite the frustrations at the end it had still been a terrific trip full of unforgettable birding experiences.

Many thanks to Martin, Peter, Malcolm and Steve for making their photos available.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
6	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
7	Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>
8	Barbary Partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>
9	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
10	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
11	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
12	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
13	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
14	Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
15	Spotted Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>
16	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>
17	Crowned Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>
18	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
19	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>
20	Egyptian Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus aegyptius</i>
21	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>
22	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
23	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
24	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
26	Little Crake	<i>Porzana parva</i>
27	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
28	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
29	Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
30	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
31	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
32	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
33	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
34	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
35	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
36	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
37	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>

38	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
39	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
40	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
41	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
42	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
44	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
45	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
46	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
47	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
48	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
49	Cream-coloured Courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
50	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>
51	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
52	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>
53	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
55	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>
56	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
57	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
58	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
59	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
60	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
61	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
62	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
63	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
64	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
65	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
66	Northern Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>
67	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
68	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
69	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
70	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
71	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
72	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>
73	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
74	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
75	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
76	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
77	Pharaoh Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>
78	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
79	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
80	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	<i>Merops persicus</i>
81	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
82	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>

83	Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
84	Barbary Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus pelegrinoides</i>
85	Black-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>
86	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor algeriensis</i>
87	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor elegans</i>
88	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
89	Maghreb Magpie	<i>Pica mauritanica</i>
90	Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
91	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
92	Thick-billed Lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>
93	Bar-tailed Lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>
94	Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
95	Temminck's Lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
96	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
97	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Audala rufescens</i>
98	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
99	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklæ</i>
100	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
101	Maghreb Lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>
102	Plain Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>
103	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
104	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
105	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
106	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
107	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
108	African Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffæ</i>
109	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
110	Common Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
111	Scrub Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>
112	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
113	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
114	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
115	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
116	Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>
117	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
118	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
119	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
120	African Desert Warbler	<i>Sylvia deserti</i>
121	Western Orphean Warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>
122	Tristram's Warbler	<i>Sylvia deserticola</i>
123	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>
124	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
125	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
126	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>
127	Fulvous Chatterer	<i>Turdoides fulva</i>

128	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
129	Moussier's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>
130	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</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	Red-rumped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>
137	Maghreb Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens halophila</i>
138	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>
139	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
140	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</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	Moroccan White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba subpersonata</i>
147	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
148	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
149	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
150	Red-throated Pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>
151	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
152	African Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs spodiogenys</i>
153	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
154	Trumpeter Finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>
155	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
156	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>
157	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
158	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
159	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
160	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
161	House Bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>
162	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
163	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
164	Desert Sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>

OTHER WILDLIFE

- 1/Barbary Ground Squirrel
- 2/Terrapin sp (prob Spanish Terrapin)
- 3/Fat Sand Rat
- 4/Common Toad
- 5/bat sp (prob Pipistrelle)
- 6/Caracal?

7/ Algerian Hedgehog

8/ Lizards – probably Moroccan Rock Lizard

Butterflies (these species or something very much like them!): Clouded Yellow, Small Copper, Queen Painted Lady, Wall Brown

Other invertebrates: Dung beetles, Emperor and Lesser Emperor dragonflies