

NDOC Tour Report – Morocco March 2016

1st March – Travel out from the UK

Seven of us assembled at Gatwick airport where we met up with Dave Gosney who was to be our guide for the next 11 days. Dave has been watching birds in Morocco for 37 years! He has also published two DVDs and guide books to birdwatching in Morocco so was well qualified to show us around the country. We took an early flight, arriving at Agadir mid morning where we were met by our driver, Said, and a 14 seater mini bus. We left our luggage at the hotel and then went to explore the Oued Souss, the Souss river estuary just south of Agadir. The habitat here was mudflats, pools and scrub vegetation. We saw a lot of familiar waders including Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Avocet and nice close views of Stone Curlews, but there were some less familiar birds here too - Greater Flamingoes, Barbary Partridge, Moroccan Magpies, (a race of European Magpie with a distinctive blue skin patch behind the eye), and as dusk fell we heard Red Necked Nightjar calling. Around the hotel we had Common Bulbul, Sardinian Warbler, Laughing Dove, Little Swift, Pallid Swift, Blackcap and Chiffchaff.



Stone Curlew © Mike Ford

2nd March – Road Trip to Tamri and Essaouira

For our first full day we drove north along the coast to Essaouira, stopping at various sites along the way. The distance was 115km, but the driving took over two hours each way. One of the main objectives of the day was to stop at Tamri, a lagoon and reed bed behind a shingle beach. We came here to see the critically endangered Bald Ibis, almost the only the place in the world you can see these birds in the wild. Here we also found Moroccan Wagtail, with its distinctive strong face pattern and we got our first brief views of Black-crowned Chagra. Next stop, after a long drive north, was Oued Ksob at Essaouira, where we saw our target bird, Brown-throated Martin, similar to a Sand Martin but without the distinct breast band. We also saw Sand Martin, Barn Swallow, Little Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Cetti's Warbler, Marsh Harrier, Spotless Starling, a distant Cirl Bunting and the distinctive African Chaffinch with a grey rather than russet head. From the coach we briefly saw several interesting new birds by the side of the road, the wonderful Moussiers Redstart, White-crowned Black Wheatear with its diagnostic black central tail feathers and the dark 'algieriensis' race of Great Grey Shrike, which appears to be in the process of being split to Desert Grey Shrike.

3rd March –Oued Massa and Taroudannt

We started the day at an inland site on the Oued Massa, exploring the agricultural land around the river. One of the first birds we saw was a Kingfisher, showing extremely well in the early morning light. The fields around the river were growing alfalfa, heavily irrigated, and full of Iberian Yellow Wagtails and Cattle Egrets along with a few Redshank, Greenshank and Little Ringed Plover. However the star birds at this site were a couple of Black-crowned Chagra, which we heard calling to begin with and eventually had excellent views on a sandy track. Here also we saw a big flock of Corn Buntings and a few Laughing Doves.



Kingfisher © Mike Ford

After lunch at a nearby café we drove 2 hours east to a pleasant rustic guesthouse at Taroudannt. From the road we saw our first Black-shouldered Kites, and once we had checked in we had an hour or so to explore the surrounding scrubby fields finding more Desert Grey Shrike, a Woodchat Shrike and bird of the day, a Fulvous Babbler silhouetted against the setting sun.

4th March – Travel to Boumalne du Dades

We took an early morning walk around fields surrounding the guesthouse, it was misty and chilly. Viewing conditions weren't particularly good but some of us saw more Fulvous Babblers, a fleeting Western Orphean Warbler and the highlight of the walk were some Quail. These birds seemed to be calling from every field we walked through and we were lucky enough to see a couple of birds, one flying past in a whirr of wings and one crossing a path and making its way through a field of stubble. After the usual breakfast of eggs, bread, jam, olives and cheese we set off on the long drive to Boumalne. The drive was around 300km and took most of the day. During the journey we gradually left behind the fertile valley south of the Atlas mountains, with its extensive agriculture, for a more arid landscape of stones and scrub vegetation cut by river valleys with striking green ribbons of irrigated fields on either side. Our first significant stop of the day was next to a low rocky escarpment and shallow dry valley. This was a site for Maghreb Wheatear. We were lucky enough to find a pair of these birds on

territory, along with two Thick-billed Larks, another key target species, and Trumpeter Finch. Our second stop was at Barrage El Mansour, a large reservoir next to the town of Ouarzazate. We saw a good variety of birds here including lots of Ruddy Shelduck and some Marbled Duck. It took a couple more hours driving to get to the town of Boumalne du Dades where we were to spend two nights. Around the hotel we found Black Wheatear, House Bunting and Hoopoe.



Black-crowned Chagra © Mike Ford



Trumpeter Finch © Mike Ford

5th March – Birding around the Tagdilt Track

We spent this day birding not far from Boumalne, in the area of the famous Tagdilt track. The habitat was stony with arid scrub vegetation. Our first stop was a dried up waterhole that nevertheless retained some moisture, along with a great many birds including Temminck's Lark, Desert Wheatear, Red-rumped Wheatear, White-crowned Wheatear, Short-toed Lark, Lesser Short-toed Lark and a single nervous Pintailed Sandgrouse. A few miles on, along the Tagdilt track itself we picked up 4 Cream-coloured Coursers running through the scrub. Debby also picked up two Falcons in quick succession, a Barbary Falcon at first sitting on a rock before flying off, followed by another distant falcon, which we struggled to identify first - it had long wings, a grey back and a pale and seemingly unmarked breast. We identified it as a Lanner Falcon, and we got fantastic views as it flew over our heads. We also had a flypast of 3 Black-bellied Sandgrouse. In the late afternoon we drove to the spectacular Todra gorge and saw spectacular views of a Bonelli's Eagle stooping.

6th March – Travel to Merzouga

We had a long drive east to Merzouga on the edge of the Sahara, but before setting off we returned for an hour at the dried up waterhole near the Tagdilt track, and were rewarded with over 100 Pintail Sandgrouse that were walking across the road in front of our bus when we pulled up, as well as the same species we saw the previous day.



Pin-tailed Sandgrouse © Mike Ford

Around midday we stopped off at a patch of scrubby bushes, a known site for Scrub Warbler. We scoured the bushes looking for these elusive little birds and were eventually rewarded with brief but good views of them. In the gravel around the bushes we obtained excellent views of our first Bar-tailed Larks feeding on the ground and making their squeaky call. We also picked up Moussier's Redstart and Spectacled Warbler at this site. Late in the day we arrived on the western edge of the Sahara desert near Rissani, stopping just short of Merzouga to see what birds we could find before the light failed. We were rewarded with our first views of Desert Warbler, a pale sandy coloured Sylvia warbler with an orange iris, and Hoopoe Larks displaying as dusk fell.

7th March – Desert Safari

We spent the day in two FWD vehicles driven by Berber guides, touring the stony desert around Merzouga, mostly driving along the edge of shallow dried up wadis that contained desert vegetation and more likely to hold birds. As we set out we saw the first of many Brown-necked Ravens. We drove first towards a lone man standing in the desert who had found an Egyptian Nightjar for us. The bird was roosting in the shade of a small bush and we got excellent views before leaving it in peace. We quickly came across a large flock of Spotted Sandgrouse, along with some Cream-coloured Coursers walking across the gravel and we got good close views from the vehicles. An excursion from the cars yielded even better views of Desert Warbler and Hoopoe Lark, and then, possibly the highlight of the day, we disembarked once again to approach a spectacular desert escarpment with sand spilling down from the



Mousiers Redstart © Mike Ford

ridge, to see a Pharaoh Eagle Owl, both flying and then perched on a rocky crag. An isolated desert dwelling yielded a pair of Desert Sparrows, the only ones we saw, and our final notable species of the day, located after much driving around in gathering wind, were a small group of spectacular Crowned Sandgrouse, sheltering in a shallow wadi.

8th March - Birding around Merzouga

On our second day in the Merzouga region we birded in the area of Rissani, just 20 miles back down the road from our hotel. We visited another desert escarpment with a dried up stream full of tamarisk bushes growing from the bed. As we left the bus we saw a new bird for the trip running around not 15m away, Desert Larks, looking rather darker than Bar-tailed Larks. Mike quickly located the resident Lanner Falcons, and once again we enjoyed great views of these fantastic birds. We next turned our attention to the tamarisk bushes which were full of various warblers. The most common birds present were Chiffchaff and Spectacled Warblers, there were also Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers showing reasonably well, and after some persistent searching we found a Tristram's Warbler, all grey uppers and wings with white eye ring and rufous underparts. This was a good find as these birds are by no means guaranteed and in two weeks' time would probably have departed for their summer quarters on the slopes of the Atlas mountains. In the afternoon we searched the irrigated fields around Rissani finding Little Owl, Fulvous Babbler and a pair of Great Grey Shrike, at least one of which was very white and therefore of the 'elegans' race.

9th March – Travel to Ouzarazate

We spent most of the day on the road, taking a more southerly route than on the way out, driving over the spectacular mountain scenery of the Djebel Sarhro and stopping briefly near the high point of the road to view Crag Martins. In the late afternoon we visited the south side of Bharaj El Mansour, seeing similar birds to our previous visit but adding an Osprey to the list.

10th March – Travel to Ouirgane and Birding in the Atlas Mountains

Our penultimate day was spent driving over the Atlas mountains, but with lots of stops, principally looking for Levaillant's Woodpecker. We stopped a couple of times on the southern side of the mountains, scouring the poplar trees but not finding our target bird. We stopped briefly on the high point of the pass over the mountains, examining the mountain pastures for Wheatears and Pipits, but only finding Ravens and Kestrels. Towards the bottom of the northerly slope of the Atlas mountains we stopped for lunch at a restaurant with great views over the wooded slopes, allowing us to eat and bird watch at the same time. Here we saw some new species for the trip including African Blue tit, a race of regular Blue tit with a particularly dark blue head pattern, Firecrests and a great view of a

Crossbill. We heard our first Levalliant's Woodpecker, but were unable to find it. Another hour or so's drive brought us to the picturesque village of Ouirgane, the last 10 miles of approach were through juniper woodland which harbours breeding Tristram's Warblers later in the year, but we were unable to find any on our visit.

11th March Birding in the Atlas mountains

We were up early and birded around the hotel, searching for a Levalliant's Woodpecker that Dave Gosney had heard, but we were unable to locate. We did find Common Bulbuls, Black Redstart, Redstart and a distant Sparrowhawk in a tree picked out by Debby. We took a tortuous but picturesque route up to the Atlas mountains, stopping several times, finding Short-toed Treecreeper and once again hearing but not seeing Levalliant's Woodpecker. A bit later than we had planned we arrived at the Ski resort of xxx, to be greeted by clouds of Alpine Chough with their buzzing call, along with a handful of Red-billed Chough. We found Rock Sparrow and Rock Bunting in the trees between the buildings, meanwhile overhead was a huge passage of Black Kites heading north. We estimated that there must have been several hundred. Around the corner on a wall by the side of the road we found 4 Crimson-winged Finches showing very well as people walked past. A little further up the valley in between melting snow patches we found Atlas Larks, a race of Horned Lark, and lots more Crimson-winged Finch. After lunch we took the bus up an unmetaled road to the summit behind the ski resort, getting spectacular views across the Atlas mountains and down to Marrakech, along with a few Black Redstart, two Long-legged Buzzards and a Peregrine showing very well. Retracing our steps down the mountain we took a detour back to the last site we had looked for Levalliant's Woodpecker, and miraculously most of us were able to get brief views of a pair of these birds at last. From here we drove to Marrakech, handy for the flight home. We did manage a little shopping in the Souk first thing in the morning before the return flight to Gatwick.

Conclusion

We were quite early in the season and would have caught more migrants towards the end of March, however, at the end of the day it was the desert and mountain birds we went to see, so we didn't really miss anything we particularly wanted to see. We had a great 11 days birdwatching in Morocco, Oriole Birding did a good job of organizing things and Dave Gosney was a great guide. We saw roughly 180 species which is a good total for a short haul trip and most of us except Debby saw quite a few lifers. The desert and mountain landscapes in Morocco, once you leave the litter of the towns behind, were great, and we felt that the whole trip was good value for money. A big thanks to Jim for organizing a great birding holiday.





