

Morocco May 2023

Brian McCloskey

John Cusack, Peter Phillips, Gerard Murray, and I had booked a birding trip to Turkey for May 2023. However, when the earthquake hit near the Turkey/Syrian border in February, we decided to abandon our plans and choose another location. After a lot of indecisiveness, we finally choose Morocco!



Figure 1: Andalusian Hemipode near Sidi Abed!

Introduction: Unfortunately, Gerard ended up being unable to join us, so it was now just the three of us! I spent over two months sorting out a route and scraping together as much gen on difficult and tricky species as I could. Once a route was finalized, we decided that the driving distances between sites would be very tough on us. As Irish birders, we are used to short driving distances on relatively good roads. Morocco was going to be the complete opposite! Irish birder, Mark Stewart highly recommended Moroccan bird guide, Mohamed Bargache as a solid and reliable guide.

Having spoken to Mohamed over the phone, we decided that this was probably our best option. None of us wanted to volunteer to do an average of five hours driving every day! Mohamed sorted our accommodation, transport, breakfast, and dinner as well as having a driver! The trip was logistically stress free and was considerably cheaper than other guided options.

Our main target on this trip was Andalusian Hemipode. This enigmatic species was going to be tough to find. Mohamed admitted that he had no recent gen on the species. I had put a huge amount of effort into getting as much recent information on locating them as possible and was quietly confident we would see them. Getting accurate information was quite tricky, but there is enough information online to at least get an idea of where to start looking for them. There is only a small population remaining in the Western Palearctic and they are only really accessible in Morocco.

The three of us and our guide Mohamed worked well as a team. Mohamed's local knowledge combined with my weeks of work researching multiple reliable locations for each species led to an incredibly successful trip. We ended up completely cleaning up every one of our 48 target species.

During this trip we had three drivers. The first driver couldn't hack our long days in the field and quit after two days. He was replaced by Hussein who was a legend! A very friendly man who never complained once about our long days spent in the field. We had a third driver for the day in the desert in the 4x4.



Figure 2: L-R: John Cusack, Brian McCloskey, Peter Phillips

When to visit: Many people visit Morocco in February and March. Having done extensive research I thought that May might be a better option. If Moroccan specialities is high on your list of priorities, this is the month to visit. Atlas Flycatcher, Egyptian Nightjar, Seeborn's Wheatear, Western Olivaceous Warblers etc. are all back on territory having wintered further south in Africa. Andalusian Hemipodes are at their most vocal at this time of year, and the birds are on territory and singing. There is nothing in Morocco that you can see in February or March that you cannot see in May. Double-spurred Francolin is said to go quiet in May, however, we did not find this to be the case and surprisingly, did not struggle with this species. African Crimson-winged Finch is also meant to be easier in the earlier part of the year before the snow retreats, however, we got lucky with this species too.

Route: From Marrakesh, we headed into the High Atlas before heading west towards Agadir and Oued Massa. We then took the coastal route towards Sidi Abed, as we worked our way north as far as Merja Zerga near Moulay Bousselham. We continued east into the Mid Atlas before driving south as far as Merzouga as we finished our loop of Morocco back in Marrakesh, having travelled through Ouarzazate.



Figure 3: The route we took, starting and finishing in Marrakesh.

Target species: None of us had ever visited Morocco before, so we had quite a large target list, which we tried to squeeze into 11 full days of birding.

Target list:

Andalusian Hemipode, Marsh Owl, Double-spurred Francolin, Northern Bald Ibis, Dupont's Lark, African Crimson-winged Finch, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Atlas Flycatcher, Maghreb Owl, Tristram's Warbler, Saharan Scrub Warbler, Thick-billed Lark, Thekla's Lark, Desert Lark, Maghreb Lark, Bar-tailed Lark, Seebohm's Wheatear, Desert Wheatear, Black Wheatear, White-crowned Wheatear, Spotted Sandgrouse, Crowned Sandgrouse, Fulvous Babbler, Cream-coloured Courser, Marbled Duck, Western Swampphen, White-headed Duck, Red-knobbed Coot, Barbary Partridge, Black-crowned Tchagra, Moussier's Redstart, Maghreb Magpie, Rock Sparrow, Brown-throated Martin, House Bunting, African Blue Tit, African Chaffinch, African Desert Warbler, Desert Sparrow, Egyptian Nightjar, Greater Hoopoe-Lark, Maghreb Wheatear, Temminck's Lark, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, Lanner, Red-rumped Wheatear, Atlas Horned Lark and Western Orphean Warbler.

It might seem like a long list of species, but we succeeded in seeing every one of them, and seeing them very well. Some species were more difficult than others but with persistence, all of our targets fell. Species such as Houbara Bustard are no longer worth looking for in Morocco as they will almost certainly be captive bred for hunting. It is unlikely that there is any wild population left near Merzouga anymore. It is worth reading the chapter on these in the Sound Approach guide, 'Morocco: sharing the birds.'

Food and health: We were extremely careful in what we were eating and drinking. Things to remember, not just for Morocco but in general for a lot of countries are, no ice in drinks, natural bottled water only, well-

cooked food etc. Despite doing our best at this, none of us managed to last the whole holiday in fine health. Towards the end of the holiday, I was getting sick quite often. I still have no idea what caused it!

Accommodation: Accommodation ranged from top class around Agadir where I was picking up Cory's Shearwaters, European Storm Petrels and Black Terns from the balcony window to appalling in Merzouga where at least two of the three bedrooms had cockroaches.

Weather: Considering the week before we had travelled the temperatures in Morocco were in the low 40's, we were very lucky that temperatures usually varied between 22°C to 31°C. We experienced very variable weather, with torrential rain in the Mid Atlas and near-freezing temperatures (2°C) at Zaida Plains, near Midelt. Weather varies greatly, so be sure to bring extra layers of clothing, just in case!

Contact: Mohamed Bargache is a very knowledgeable guide who will try his absolute best to ensure all your target species are seen. He made our trip stress free and the three of us would recommend him. He can be contacted by email on mbargache@gmail.com or on Whatsapp at +212 615-885199.

For any further information, I can be contacted at Briangmccloskey@gmail.com or on Whatsapp at +353 873629458.



Figure 4: Oukaïmeden, in the High Atlas Mountains.

Species Updates:

White-headed Duck: This species was only encountered at Sidi Bougaba where there was a sizable flock of approximately 50 individuals. A single male showed quite close to the causeway from this location (34.252439, -6.666455) and the large flock could also be viewed distantly from here. Better views of the flock were had from this location (34.240984, -6.671098).

Marbled Duck: We recorded this species at two locations. The first was at Oued Sous from here (30.362305, -9.576056) which we had in flight only. The second location was again at Sidi Bougaba where there was a small flock feeding on the opposite side of the causeway as the White-headed Ducks. Viewed from here (34.252439, -6.666455).

Double-spurred Francolin: It is worth reading up on this species before deciding on which location to visit. In our view it makes total sense to forget about the traditional hunting lodge at the Sidi Bettache Forest, these birds in my view will always have a tarnished reputation due to known releases for hunting in recent years. This species is also far from guaranteed at that site, or at any site so we took a chance on the much less known Ben Slimane Forest c.18km to the south-west of Sidi Bettache. We arrived about twenty minutes after sunrise and started walking this track slowly and quietly (33.645000, -7.100500). Almost immediately a Francolin started singing close by. Only minutes later a feral dog ran ahead of us on the track and flushed up the Double-spurred Francolin, which gave us a lovely, prolonged flight view from approximately here (33.645218, -7.096099).

A few hundred meters down this track, another Francolin was singing from here (33.643200, -7.103400) and was later seen in flight with a second bird. Peter who tagged behind a bit, had another bird singing along the track between these two locations. Whether we just got lucky, or whether this will be the new go-to site, remains to be seen. We certainly did not struggle with this species, despite May not being the peak month for vocalisations.

Barbary Partridge: This was a species that we just bumped into. We didn't struggle with Barbary Partridge around the High Atlas and Agadir. We had excellent views of a pair near to where we found the Tristram's Warbler at (31.241762, -7.923042). In the desert area near Oued Massa we flushed eight from this site (30.055021, -9.644965). We also had one from the car as we headed towards to Merja Zerga.



Figure 5: Barbary Partridge.

Egyptian Nightjar: Without a guide or at least local knowledge this species would be very difficult. A 4x4 vehicle was completely necessary to get to the scrubby area near a local Berbers house. We tipped the Berber for showing us the day-roosting Egyptian Nightjar who makes a living out of locating it before any birders arrive. This prevents the birds from getting flushed and guarantees excellent views.

Spotted Sandgrouse: We got lucky with this species. Four birds gave a flyby at a known site for Saharan Scrub Warblers between Goulmima and Errachidia from here (31.758078, -4.840323). We did not locate any Sandgrouse in Merzouga apart from a very distant silhouette of one in flight which could not be confidently identified.

Crowned Sandgrouse: Having dipped both Sandgrouse targets in the desert, we were very lucky to chance upon a male near Tagdilt, feeding with a small flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse from approximately here (31.350052, -5.906629).

Red-knobbed Coot: This was a very easy species to find at both Sidi Bougaba (34.252439, -6.666455) and at Lake Zerrouka near Ifrane (33.545630, -5.096128) where the species was very numerous.

Western Swamphen: Only recorded at Sidi Bougaba where we had at least three individuals. They would only ever break from cover for a minute or so at a time. The best approach is to either scan from the causeway (34.252439, -6.666455) where we picked one up or walk the east or west shore scanning the opposite bank.

We were there in the afternoon which is probably not the best time for them to be active. Dawn and dusk would likely be a better bet.

Andalusian Hemipode: It would not be sensible to publish the location of the Hemipode online. There is enough information online to have plenty to work with. Even if I did publish the location, it would be completely useless to anybody in future due to crop rotation. We found two females in clover fields near Sidi Abed. Farmers will be able to help you pin them down, especially for a few dirhams. The farmers are extremely familiar with their low, almost Bittern-like song. We were assured by a local farmer that we could not miss them if we arrived at dawn. We completely fluked some wonderful views of a female Andalusian Hemipode at a field that they had been seen in before our trip. Later in the evening, another female was singing from another nearby field. The songs of the females are so low-pitched that you need to concentrate to hear the song. Cupping your ears helps to hear the song. This is a very tricky species in Morocco and a lot of planning needs to go into it before deciding to try for Hemipodes.

Lesser Crested Tern: Two adults were with a small mixed tern flock from here (30.077426, -9.673643) near Sidi Ouassay. I suspect any Tern flocks in May are likely to hold a few of these.



Figure 6: Lesser Crested Tern

Northern Bald Ibis: There are two main breeding colonies in Morocco, one near Massa and another near Tamri. We however visited neither and easily encountered this species. We had two flocks fly over Oued Massa from here (30.032295, -9.644559), another flock flew over us here (30.055021, -9.644965) and another single bird gave a close flyby as we walked back to the car from the Terns approx. here (30.079626, -9.668945). We took the coast road to Sidi Abed and found one Bald Ibis giving fantastic views at the roadside from approx. here (30.711834, -9.842507).

Marsh Owl: This is a species with a truly bleak future. Merja Zerga itself was a depressing location. Drought, water extraction for agriculture, and habitat loss have had a severe impact on this once impressive wetland. Marsh Owl habitat has shrunk to only two fields. There are only three pairs left of Marsh Owl at Merja Zerga. They are hemmed in on all sides by strawberry fields and large flocks of sheep. There is no funding available to support the farmers and the sole reason that there are still three pairs left is through donations by birders to the local farmer. We paid 200 dirhams which is about the equivalent of €20 where the farmer brought us down to the fields where the Marsh Owls were present, and we waited. The farmer is not keeping the habitat 'Owl friendly' for his love of birds but purely to make ends meet. An average day's wage for these farmers is about €7. Without eco-tourism, Marsh Owl in the Western Palearctic would, without doubt, be a thing of the past. Eventually, we had great views of two adult Marsh Owls flying around the marshy fields.



Figure 7: Marsh Owl

Pharaoh Eagle-Owl: For the sake of eco-tourism, I think I should leave out the exact location of this species. Precise locations can be found by using eBird. However, at the well-known location near the 'Falcon Nest' just outside Imiter on the way to Boumalne Dades, we were only able to locate three very large chicks, which we were able to scope distantly. However, this was quite unsatisfactory, so between Mohamed and a very helpful local, Lahcen, we were brought to a second site c.9km to the east. At this site, we had excellent views of a presumed adult male roosting in a crevice in the cliff face.

Maghreb Owl: This was a very easy species for us. It was also the first species that we recorded in Morocco! We had an adult in the torchlight only 15 minutes after leaving the airport in Marrakesh, thanks to some excellent gen from Bob Swann. We located three singing birds very quickly from here (31.645434, -8.017958). One Owl was singing from rooftop ariels on this building approx. (31.645791, -8.017441) and could be easily viewed from here, when it was on the ariel and when it was sitting in a roadside tree (31.645821, -8.017030). We had more singing birds around Ifrane, where the species is common.

Levaillant's Woodpecker: We had excellent views of one near Ourika Valley in the High Atlas from approx. here (31.309391, -7.740144). We heard many more in the Mid Atlas, but we did not spend any more time trying to get eyes on them.

Black-crowned Tchagra: We only recorded this species along Oued Massa where they are relatively common and easy to find. We walked the vegetation on the northern side of the bridge (30.031040, -9.644631) to approx. here (30.032210, -9.644925). This is a very reliable location for Black-crowned Tchagra.



Figure 8: Black-crowned Tchagra

Thick-billed Lark: We got very lucky with this species near our site for Saharan Scrub Warbler. A pair showed very well here (31.752133, -4.840315). This meant that we didn't have to check reliable sites for them near Boumalne Dades.

Maghreb Lark: This is a recent split from Crested Lark by the IOC. They were quite common in desert areas further south and we first encountered the species here (31.752133, -4.840315). They have been reported as far north as Zaida Plains, however, the only Crested type we had there were all Crested Larks.

Atlas Horned Lark: Horned Lark was very easy to locate on these slopes (31.204070, -7.854754) where they were quite common. We also had one at the Seebohm's Wheatear location here (31.204070, -7.854754).

Temminck's Lark: This species was fairly common around Tagdilt and we had double figures of them, including some juveniles around this area (31.350052, -5.906629).

Dupont's Lark: This is a very (!) difficult species but it is possible to see well with persistence. If you are unsure whether to try for this species or not, I would only give it a go if you had plenty of time to kill. I would imagine they couldn't be as difficult in Spain. At Zaida Plains, turn off the main road onto this track (32.792676, -4.938876). As you drive along this dirt track, the whole area to your right-hand side is where the Dupont's Larks will be. Unfortunately for the rest of my group, they felt that the habitat looked better for Dupont's on the left-hand side of the track which ended up costing them the bird!

To increase your chances of seeing this species, I would recommend an evening and dawn search. We arrived at the Plains at 16:45. This is far too early in the evening to hear them singing, but with very careful scanning, you might get lucky with one. The best approach is to walk very slowly and quietly and scan the vegetation every few steps. I eventually picked up a Dupont's from here (32.793273, -4.930984) and had excellent scope views of it for about 10 minutes.

We returned at dawn, but sadly, the weather wasn't in our favour as it was cold (2°C), and it was pissing rain! To make matters worse, another group arrived and were constantly tape luring which made it very frustrating and impossible to tell whether we were hearing a Dupont's or if we were just listening to their tape. Once or twice, we heard what was likely to be the real deal, but it was impossible to be sure. Very annoying!

Brown-throated Martin: We only recorded this species at one location. As with the Tchagra at Oued Massa, we walked the vegetation on the northern side of the bridge (30.031040, -9.644631). We were having some difficulty with getting good views of the Martins and soon discovered that about a dozen birds were feeding along the river c.500m from the bridge approx. here (30.031040, -9.644631).

Pale Crag Martin: A hirundine to the west of Rissani proved to be this quite unexpected species. Whether this is a reliable site for Pale Crag Martins or not, I cannot be certain. We had two adults in active moult from here (31.280274, -4.353950).

Saharan Scrub Warbler: This could potentially be quite a tricky species to connect with however, we did not struggle at the usual site between Goulmima and Errachidia (31.758078, -4.840323) where we had a minimum of five. This is the same site that Josh Jones had Scrub Warbler at over a decade ago! We also had a few in the desert near Merzouga while searching for African Desert Warblers.

'Moroccan' Bonelli's Warbler: This was purely for insurance purposes. The chapter on Bonelli's Warblers is worth reading in the Sound Approach book. The Bonelli's Warblers that breed in Morocco are a potential split from Western Bonelli's. As they differ genetically, we decided to try for them. After a lot of searching around Dayet Aoua (which was dry) in the Mid Atlas, we eventually located a pair on the slopes above the north shore here (33.655445, -5.036411). Western Bonelli's pass through Morocco in Spring so seeing birds in breeding grounds is the only way to be sure you have seen a 'Moroccan'. Time will tell if this was worth the effort...

'Saharan' Olivaceous Warbler: A potential split from Eastern Olivaceous Warbler is found in desert areas in the southeast of the country. I had saved several pin drops for them onto my Google Maps; however, this wasn't necessary as we found them very easy to locate. There were several in the tamarisks along this stretch here

(31.280274, -4.353950) and we found them to be very numerous in this area near Merzouga (31.141195, -4.021058)

Western Orphean Warbler: This species is likely easier earlier in the spring as birds pass through Morocco, but on our final day, we located a pair of Western Orphean Warblers in some woodland southeast of Marrakesh (31.548843, -7.526684).

African Desert Warbler: This would be a very tricky species without a guide or local knowledge. We had excellent views of an adult only a few hundred meters away from the Egyptian Nightjar in the desert near Merzouga. We got lucky as we connected with this species quickly, however, the tour companies have dipped this species a few times in previous years, so it is worth dedicating some extra time to ensure scoring this species.



Figure 9: African Desert Warbler

Tristram's Warbler: I had several sites for this species, however, we only needed one. We managed decent views of a very elusive male in the High Atlas (31.242355, -7.921933). I would imagine that time spent in the correct habitat in this area would uncover this species.

Fulvous Babbler: We dipped this species on our first try near Erfoud, however, just outside Rissani, we had excellent views of a pair which were nest building (31.241907, -4.305226). Later in the day, we had a further seven in a small flock in the oasis near Merzouga (31.141195, -4.021058). This seems to be quite a reliable location for Fulvous Babbler. Lastly, we had a pair land briefly on the roof of our hotel in Merzouga which were presumably the same birds that Peter had seen the previous evening (31.085723, -4.007611).

Atlas Flycatcher: Atlas Flycatchers don't return to breeding grounds until the last few days of April and the start of May. To give yourself the best chance of seeing this species, wait until at least the end of the first week in May. By this stage, they will be one of the most common woodland species in the Mid Atlas. Any random roadside stop near Ifrane will likely show this species. Our first Atlas Flycatchers were just to the west of Ifrane (33.550911, -5.170962). The next morning while checking Lake Zerrouka we located a singing male (33.545759, -5.096141). They can be easily found in the woodland around Dayet Aoua (33.652500, -5.043500) where they are common.

Once we left the Mid Atlas behind, we did not expect to see any more Atlas Flycatchers, however, in the oasis in Merzouga, we experienced a fall of Pied Flycatchers and among them was an adult male Atlas. I am not sure how often these are seen away from the Mid Atlas, but I would imagine that they aren't that uncommon in places like this in spring (31.141195, -4.021058).

Moussier's Redstart: This was a fairly common roadside bird in the High Atlas and around Agadir. We had them at several locations, but we probably had our best views at the same site as the Tristram's Warbler (31.242355, -7.921933). GPS locations aren't needed for this species as the first Moussier's of the trip will likely be picked up from the car on the roadside. As was the case with us.

Seebohm's Wheatear: We only had one pair in Oukaïmeden. This is by far the most reliable location for this species in Morocco and we easily found them on the slopes here (31.191757, -7.850285).

Red-rumped Wheatear: We had a distant male Red-rumped Wheatear near Tagdilt (31.350052, -5.906629) but excellent views were later had of a pair on the Tagdilt Track/Dump (31.328703, -5.922575) which were easily found in amongst the piles of stinking rubbish.

Maghreb Wheatear: We connected on our first try for this species between Imiter and Tinghir (31.447387, -5.660922). We walked up the rocky slopes and eventually located a male who was later joined by a female. This is a very reliable site for Maghreb Wheatear, and they have been present here for several years. We did not find any near the 'Falcon Nest' to the west of Imiter, although this is said to be a good location for this species.

Desert Sparrow: This species was very tricky for us, mainly due to the horrendous sandstorm that made birding very difficult. We eventually found a small family of Desert Sparrows (2 ad + 3 juvs) at a small house here (31.180585, -3.916258). We had checked several locations previous to this, before finding them in the middle of nowhere, so local guides are the only way to see this species in my opinion.

African Crimson-winged Finch: This is one of the few species that gets difficult after mid-March. In Oukaïmeden, as the snow retreats, so do the birds. That being said, they can still be found in the High Atlas the whole way through the summer. I had a feeling we could struggle with this species; however, we got very lucky! Before I had even gotten out of the car, I quickly latched onto two calling birds overhead. We soon re-found them and had excellent views for a few minutes at the layby here (31.198889, -7.859056). The birds are known to come down to the lake to drink. I would imagine that arriving here early morning or late evening would increase the chances of finding them.

Atlas Crossbill: This subspecies is regarded to be the most genetically distinct of all the Crossbills and is therefore worth seeing for insurance purposes. We stumbled across eight juveniles in the High Atlas approx. here (31.241762, -7.923042) before having good views of an adult male on the way to Marrakesh on our final day (31.548843, -7.526684)



Figure 10: The recently split African Crimson-winged Finch.

Daily accounts:

12th May: Dublin Airport

Our flight was delayed by an hour or so, so we didn't depart Dublin until after 21:00.

13th May: Ourika Valley, Oukaïmeden, High Atlas, Taroudant

We arrived in Marrakesh at 1:00 am. Outside the airport, we met Mohamed for the first time and our driver. Instead of going straight to our hotel, we decided to give a local site (thanks Bob Swann) for **Maghreb Owl** a try. Almost immediately after getting out of the car, we could hear the distant hooting of several Owls, right in the middle of Marrakesh! We got closer to one of the singing Owls and very quickly had lovely torch-lit views of one in the early hours. At least three birds were singing in this area. Our first bird species in Morocco!

We arrived at the hotel shortly after 2 am and we set the alarm for 7 am. After some much-needed sleep, we were on the road to the High Atlas. Around Marrakesh, we started seeing our first new species such as **Little Swift**, **House Bunting**, **Common Bulbul** etc. En route to Oukaïmeden, we stopped off at Ourika Valley, where we had our first proper taste of Moroccan birding. The woodland birding here was incredible with **African Chaffinch**, **African Blue Tit**, **Golden Oriole**, **Nightingale**, and **Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker** all being common. It took some effort to dig out a **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, but Mohamed located one on the riverbank which ended up showing amazingly well for about five minutes. This was the only Levaillant's that we saw during our trip, but in fairness, we didn't spend much time tracking down calling birds.



Figure 11: Levaillant's Woodpecker.

We continued onto Oukaïmeden. We stopped the car when we saw our first **Atlas Long-legged Buzzard** of the trip. At this stop, I picked up a **Melodious Warbler** in some scrubby habitat here (31.232727, -7.816900). Other roadside birds included **Moussier's Redstarts** and **Black Wheatears**. We arrived up at our first location for

African Crimson-winged Finch at c10:45am. As I opened the car door to get out, I immediately heard Crimson-winged Finches (literally the first bird we had at Oukaïmeden). I very quickly found the culprits in silhouette flying over me before landing nearby. Running over to them, they flicked up onto a telephone wire and gave amazing views! I envisaged that this could be one of our most difficult targets when, it was our easiest! (31.198889, -7.859056)



Figure 12: African Crimson-winged Finch (left) and Seebohm's Wheatear.

We walked around the edge of the lake and then started to gain altitude on the slopes. We quickly located our first **Atlas Horned Larks** which ended up being common in the right habitat (31.191757, -7.850285). The third main target up here was **Seebohm's Wheatear** which we located easily (31.191757, -7.850285). A pair gave excellent views at this location. **Rock Sparrows** were very common across the whole area.

A stop on the road up to the 'lookout point' (31.202492, -7.867069) yielded large mixed Chough flocks. We managed excellent views of some feeding **Alpine Chough** here in among the **Red-billed Chough**. This proved a worthwhile stop as we had our first **Rock Bunting** and **Blue Rock Thrush** of the trip. We also had some **Barbary Ground Squirrels**!



Figure 13: Atlas Horned Lark.

We had a brief stop back at the lake area to have one last check for African Crimson-winged Finches, however, we couldn't locate them again. We did, however, have excellent views of **Black Wheatear**, **Black Redstarts** and **Blue Rock Thrush** in this area (31.202492, -7.867069)

We had pretty much cleaned up all the main Oukaïmeden targets in only a few hours. We continued on the appalling roads towards Ifghane where we tried for Tristram's Warbler. After almost an hour we had excellent views of **Western Subalpine Warbler**, **Woodlark** and **Moussier's Redstart**, however, we were struggling with Tristram's. Mohamed was the first to locate one and with some persistence, we all managed decent views of a lovely male **Tristram's Warbler**.



Figure 14: Tristram's Warbler (left) and Western Subalpine Warbler.

We were only back in the car and driving less than a minute when Peter copped a **Roller** from the car window. We pulled in, and over the next thirty or so minutes, we experienced some amazing birding (31.241762, - 7.923042). As we watched the Roller, John picked up a male **Girl Bunting**. Our first **Barbary Partridges** of the trip gave excellent views as they tried to sneak out of the field to avoid detection. A vocal flock of eight juvenile **Atlas Crossbills** flew around the valley and ended up showing well. More **Moussier's Redstarts** were found here as was a **Mistle Thrush** which looked very out of place. The journey to Taroudant from Oukaïmeden is by far the worst drive I have ever been on. The windy mountain roads had the three of us in a bad way. It was six hours of hell, but we eventually got to our hotel albeit completely worn out.



Figure 15: Moussier's Redstart.

14th May: Souss Massa, Oued Massa, Agadir

After a good night's sleep, we were off to Agadir, with our first stop at Oued Souss (30.362335, -9.576347). Birding here was decent enough with good numbers of waders and it didn't take long before we picked up our first **Marbled Duck**. We only managed a flight view of it though, unfortunately. Scanning through the large flocks of **Dunlin** we easily picked out some **Little Stints** and **Curlew Sandpipers**. **Greater Flamingos** and **Spoonbills** were also numerous. As we walked to the end of the path along the estuary (30.362854, -9.585813), some **Maghreb Magpies** gave great views. Our first proper look at this recently split species. Very distantly, towards the mouth of the river, hundreds of Gulls roosted on the sand banks, but due to heat haze, these couldn't all be identified although it appeared that the flock mainly consisted of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** with at least a few **Yellow-legged Gulls**. As the tide covered the sandbanks, we hoped the Gulls might fly towards us, unfortunately, they did the opposite. Peter picked up two lovely **Gull-billed Terns** which gave a close flyby.



Figure 16: Maghreb Magpie.

Anxious that we were wasting time, we cut our losses and headed for Oued Massa. This was arguably the best birding location I have ever been to! It was completely alive with birds. We parked at the bridge (30.031316, -9.645210) and slowly walked the northern side of the river on the west shore. It didn't take long for us to hear our first **Black-crowned Tchagra** of the day. Tchagras have an amazing song! While looking for the Tchagra we had **Corn Bunting** and some **Thekla's Larks**. We had excellent views of a singing **Black-crowned Tchagra**, as it sang from a tree approx. here (30.032181, -9.644862). What followed was some real adrenaline-filled birding where I genuinely didn't know where to look. In the space of about thirty seconds, Tchagra, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin, Western Olivaceous Warbler and Brown-throated Martin were all called! I needn't have worried because we managed exceptional views of all these species. **Western Olivaceous Warbler** was very common here with a minimum of twenty counted on the stretch of river we walked. **Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin** was just as easy to find and was very obliging. **Brown-throated Martin** gave us the run around for a while before Peter realised that they were feeding a little further down the river (about 600 meters from the bridge) and we had great views of about a dozen of these range-restricted (in the WP) hirundines. It was very easy to age these birds as well with the adults in very active moult compared to the fresh juveniles.



Figure 17: Brown-throated Martin (top left), Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin (top right) and Black-crowned Tchagra (bottom).

As we were enjoying these birds, four silhouettes caught my eye as they soared over... **Northern Bald Ibis**! They were quite high up as they drifted northwest, but they were our first of the trip. Morocco is the only country in the world where there is still truly wild Northern Bald Ibis left. Peter brought our attention to a distant falcon which was coming our way. **Eleonora's Falcon**! This was quite unexpected at this location. A flyover **Peregrine** left me wondering what race it was, maybe *brookei*? Just before we left another flock of **Northern Bald Ibis** headed in the same direction as the last but this time there were seven! **Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Thekla's Larks, Purple Heron, Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, European Bee-eater** etc were just some of the supporting casts at this site.

After being completely satisfied with our views of everything, we headed for some desert-like birding to the north of Oued Massa near Sidi Binzarne (30.055021, -9.644965). We immediately picked up a small flock of **Cream-coloured Coursers**, which were very skittish. John and Mohamed had good views of **Greater Short-toed Lark**. This was the first location we had **Western Black-eared Wheatears**, which we eventually managed to get good views of. Peter picked up two lovely **Great Grey Shrikes** of the *algeriensis* race which showed well. They were hunting along a valley which ended up being very productive for us as we had excellent views of two **Little Owls** (potentially a split under the name **Cucumiau**). We also flushed a remarkable eight **Barbary Partridges** which showed well in flight and on the deck. A flock of six **Northern Bald Ibis** flew over us, these were much closer than the two flocks that we had had earlier in the morning. We had a quick look for the Greater Short-toed Lark on the way back to the car, but we didn't manage to locate it.

Our fourth and final stop of the day was a very enjoyable one. We headed towards the beach just to the north of Sidi Ouassay (30.076621, -9.674337). As we made our way towards the beach we had good views of two **Little Owls, Moussier's Redstart**, and a **Stone-curlew**. The mouth of Oued Massa proved very productive for both Gulls and Terns. We scoped a distant flock of Terns and as we made our way towards them, a **Kentish Plover** ran ahead of us. Peter was the first to scan the Terns and he immediately picked up an adult **Lesser Crested Tern**! A second Lesser Crested was picked up a few moments later. I then scanned the mixed flock of **Sandwich** and **Common Terns**, and I was very surprised to pick up two adult summer **Black Terns**. I would imagine that checking the Terns in this area later in the summer would produce West African Crested Terns at least occasionally. The Tern flock was very settled and approachable allowing great photographic opportunities. A flock of **Audouin's Gulls** roosted further up the beach, as did both **Yellow-legged** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**.



Figure 18: Lesser Crested Tern (second from right).



Figure 19: Two adult Black Terns.

We headed towards our accommodation in Agadir which was top class! Our rooms had a great view of the Atlantic and I couldn't resist an evening seawatch. It soon became apparent that we weren't in a bad seawatching location with **Cory's Shearwaters** passing very regularly. There was also a small feeding flock of about a dozen **European Storm Petrels**. I let the lads know that birds were moving offshore. Although the birds kept passing, there wasn't much variety in terms of species. I eventually pulled myself away from the scope and went for dinner with the lads.



Figure 20: Brian photographing one of the Lesser Crested Terns.



Figure 21: Discussing tactics near Sidi Ouassay.

15th May: Agadir coast, Sidi Abed

This was the biggest day of the trip for me. I was apprehensive as I had put a huge amount of work into getting sites and gen on Andalusian Hemipode and I feared it would all be for nothing! Before leaving the hotel, a short seawatch produced more **Cory's Shearwaters** and two **Black Terns**. The drive between Agadir and El Jadida is very long! Especially when you take the coastal route. In hindsight, I think we made the right decision taking the coastal route because we had a few species along the way that we only recorded once. We had a few stops around Tamri where we scanned for Bald Ibis (we didn't go towards the colony) and had a few short sea watches.

A quick stop at a random layby near Tamri was productive enough. We were half hoping to pick up a Moroccan Shag, but these appear to be exceptionally rare and are on the verge of extinction. Offshore we had our only **Northern Gannets** of the trip, more **Cory's Shearwaters** and **Black Terns** were moving with more than a dozen offshore. We headed further north stopping off here (30.707912, -9.860550) where there was a minimum of twenty **Black Terns** offshore in a very short scan. There must have been hundreds passing the coast that day. We had our only **Moroccan Wagtail** of the trip here too. Although only a subspecies, they could be easily missed without some effort.

Further up the road, Mohamed picked up a **Northern Bald Ibis** from the car. We walked back towards it and had exceptional views of it as it sat up quietly on a wall! (30.707912, -9.860550) **Ruddy Shelduck** was a species that I expected to see regularly, however, this wasn't the case and we only encountered them twice. Like the Bald Ibis, three Ruddy Shelducks were sitting on a wall opposite the Ibis! **Western Black-eared Wheatears** were abundant here and an unseen **Tree Pipit** buzzed around us a few times.



Figure 22: Northern Bald Ibis.

We managed to get a few hours of driving under our belt before having one stop for some showy **Eleonora's Falcons** and one stop for some water. We were rapidly approaching Sidi Abed in the early evening, and you could cut the tension in the car with a knife. I was very confident in the genning up that I had done, and we just needed a slice of luck to get our main target in Morocco, Andalusian Hemipode. **Collared Pratincoles** flew over the fields north of Oualidia. We arrived at the field outside of Sidi Abed just after 17:00. It was breezy which made hearing a little bit tricky. A farmer assured us that we were in the right area. He also mentioned (translated by Mohamed) that if we didn't get them this evening, we couldn't miss them at dawn. This was all promising! We walked very slowly around the outskirts of the field, listening very carefully as we went. **Common Quail**, **Turtle Dove** and **Zitting Cisticola** were all very common in this area. The clover was dense so we decided that two of us would stand at each end of a small track that ran through the crop and we would wait on the off chance that a Hemipode might walk out. After only about thirty minutes of waiting, I noticed a movement at the bottom of the crop! John, who was standing beside me, and Peter and Mohamed who were on the opposite side of the track had all picked up this movement simultaneously. What happened next was arguably the greatest moment that I have ever had in birding! An **Andalusian Hemipode** walked straight out into the furrow between the Clover and gave amazing views for about a minute! What a bird! The Hemipode had crossed the track so we expected that it would have to cross back at some stage! This is exactly what happened! John and I walked around to the lads, and we waited. As expected, the Hemipode returned and walked slowly along the track, showing wonderfully well before creeping into the clover, never to be seen again! One of the most adrenaline-filled moments I have had in birding! I also managed decent shots of the Hemipode which has only ever been done a handful of times in Morocco before.



Figure 23: Andalusian Hemipode! One of the hardest birds to see in the Western Palearctic.

A local farmer called us over and brought our attention to a singing female **Andalusian Hemipode** in a nearby field! Sure enough, after only a minute or two, the Hemipode started up its very low-pitched song. We tried to be clever with this bird too by waiting at gaps in the vegetation, however, this one behaved more like how Hemipodes should and didn't reveal itself. **Spotless Starlings** showed well in the fields, **Turtle Doves** sang on wires and **White Storks** flew over. It was such good birding. We had managed excellent views of one of the most difficult of all the breeding species in the Western Palearctic and we didn't even have to get up for dawn!

16th May: Merja Zerga

There was a change in the itinerary for today. Originally, we were to spend the day birding the wetlands between Oualidia and Sidi Bougaba, however, the forecast was giving very heavy rain around Moulay Bousselham the following day which would likely ruin any chance we had at Marsh Owl. So instead, we drove nearly five hours from Oualidia to Merja Zerga. En-route, sharp eyed Peter, picked up a **Short-toed Eagle** from the car. Pulling over, we managed good scope views of it as it rested distantly on a pylon. Mohamed had arranged before our arrival that the owner of the field would meet us and bring us down to the Owl fields. It was very eye-opening talking to the owner (again, Mohamed translating), just how bleak the situation is for Marsh Owls in Morocco. Two farmers have left two fields which are left alone to benefit the Owls, but the rest of the area is covered by strawberry fields. There are only two fields left in Morocco where Marsh Owls regularly breed. The sole reason that these Owls are still clinging on here is through eco-tourism. The farmer earns the equivalent of about €7 a day from harvesting strawberries. Economically, if the Owls no longer benefit the farmer, the remaining marshy habitat will be turned into strawberry fields. It is that bleak. We tipped the farmer the equivalent of €20 for bringing us down to the field which he was very appreciative of.

While waiting for the Owls, we had great views of a pair of **Black-winged Kites**, **Thekla's Larks**, **Corn Buntings**, and **Montagu's Harrier**. Eventually, the **Marsh Owl** was up, and it gave us a wonderful flight view over the fields. What an amazing bird! The eyes are almost like holes in its face! They are stunning Owls! It was a weird situation though, because I was delighted that I had seen Marsh Owl in the Western Palearctic but the truly depressing future this species has in Morocco was a bit of a dampener. I didn't realise just how bleak the situation was until visiting Merja Zerja and seeing it for myself.



Figure 24: Marsh Owl. A species with a very bleak future.

The remainder of the day was spent birding at Merja Zerja, the former wintering grounds of Slender-billed Curlew. This whole area is also being lost to irrigation with huge areas now desert-like. Everything just seemed so unsustainable in this area. Walking down to the lake we picked up a second, distant Marsh Owl in flight which quickly dropped back into the field.

The birding at the lake itself wasn't overly great, a few **Kentish Plover**, **Purple Heron**, **Cetti's Warbler**, **Marsh Harrier**, **Montagu's Harrier**, large numbers of **Iberian** and **Ashy-headed Wagtails** and a small mixed flock of **Ringed Plover** and **Dunlin** were about the best for us at Merja Zerga. We headed back towards Kenitra where we stayed that night.



Figure 25: Thekla's Lark (left) and Black-winged Kite. Both pics taken by Peter Phillips.

17th May: Ben Slimane, Sidi Bougaba, Ifrane

In the months leading up to this trip, I had done quite a bit of research on Double-spurred Francolin and for me, it was a no-brainer to forget about the traditional hunting lodge site near Sidi Bettache and to instead focus on the lesser-known Ben Slimane site. With sunrise just before 06:30 am, we left the hotel in Kenitra at 5 am planning to arrive at the Ben Slimane site for sunrise. This would give us the best chance at connecting with the Double-spurred Francolins. We arrived approximately 20 or so minutes after sunrise. I had some excellent gen from Diedert Koppenol who had visited the site the previous year. We turned off the main road here (33.645000, -7.100500), Francolins can be seen and heard anywhere beyond this point. We drove slowly with the windows down but did not stop until we reached this location (33.645380, -7.095235). Personally, if trying for this species I would go to this location first as it seems to have several birds in the area. We quietly got out of the car and walked slowly along the track. No more than two minutes after leaving the car, a **Double-spurred Francolin** started singing very close to the path (in hindsight, I reckon it may well have been on the path). We listened to it give out several belts of its song, but we failed to locate it sitting up. We very slowly made our way closer, when a feral dog came running out in front of us and off down the track ahead of us flushing the Francolin! The Francolin gave a wonderful flight view, allowing all of us to get the bins on it for several seconds at close range. Job done! and we were only out of the car for three of four minutes!! A very satisfactory view! We hung around this area (33.645218, -7.096099) where we had seen the bird but unfortunately, it had now gone quiet.



Figure 26: Double-spurred Francolin habitat near Ben Slimane.

John and I walked much further down the track to where we had our first **Whinchat** of the trip. It was now well after sunrise, and I was thinking that our chances of seeing or hearing any more Francolins were slim. To my surprise though, another started calling well after sunrise from here (33.643200, -7.103400). I worked out exactly where the bird was calling from but unfortunately, it was completely buried in the vegetation. I managed a few poor sound recordings on my phone of this vocal bird, but we failed to get any views of a Francolin on the deck. As I tried to reposition myself to get a better view of the area that the bird was calling from, two Double-spurred Francolins exploded into the air and landed a short distance away. The birds had gone silent by 7:30 am and as I walked back to the track, I had a final flight view of one more Double-spurred Francolin. Peter, who had stayed closer to the area where we had started, heard one more individual singing but he never managed to get eyes on it.

We all headed back towards the car feeling very satisfied with how our morning had gone! We had scored yet another extremely difficult species in Morocco! The best of the rest at Ben Slimane included **Woodchat Shrike**, **Hobby**, and three super **Booted Eagles**. We headed for breakfast in the small town of Ben Slimane before continuing back towards Kenitra to Sidi Bougaba (34.252406, -6.666346). The birding here is phenomenal! **White-headed Ducks**, **Marbled Ducks** and **Red-knobbed Coots** are hard to miss, with all three species being picked up only seconds after arriving! Mohamed went straight into Swampphen mode, and after only a few minutes he picked up a quality adult **Western Swampphen** from the causeway at the edge of the main lake. However, it only showed for a minute or so before disappearing back into the reeds. We had now seen all four of our targets for Sidi Bougaba within ten minutes!

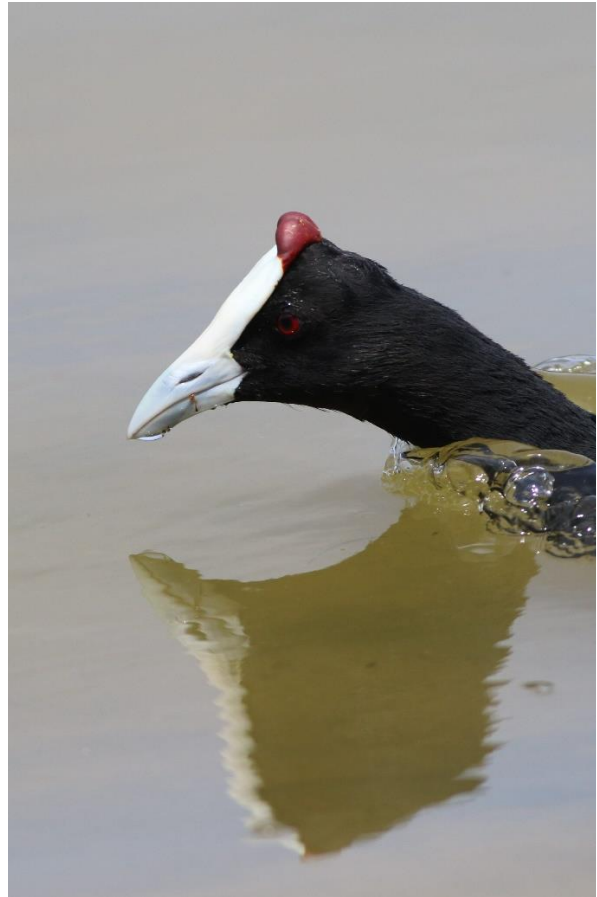


Figure 27: Sidi Bougaba specialties: White-headed Duck (top left), Red-knobbed Coot (top right) and Marbled Duck (bottom).

We birded the lake for a few hours which was very enjoyable. One adult male **White-headed Duck** showed well quite close to the causeway, while a flock of about 50 were further out on the lake. **Cetti's Warblers**, **African Chaffinches** and **African Blue Tits** were common around the lake, while **Black Kites** were in constant view. A **Marsh Harrier** gave a few flight views too. Other ducks on the lake included a single **Red-crested Pochard** as well as **Ferruginous Ducks** and **Common Pochard**. **Marbled Ducks** were mainly seen in flight, but some showed very well as they dabbled on the opposite side of the causeway (34.252573, -6.665899). **Western Swampheens** could be scoped with patience when they would briefly break from cover in the reeds, rarely showing for more than a minute. An adult **Squacco Heron** showed distantly in the reeds also. **Red-knobbed Coots** were common and very showy! Sometimes showing down to three or four meters, many of which had recently fledged young. There wasn't much variety in terms of waders at the site, but we still recorded **Common Sandpipers**, **Greenshank**, and breeding **Black-winged Stilts**. The birding here is superb and all key target species can be picked up very quickly.

By 14:30 we were on the road for the Mid Atlas! This was a long and uneventful drive. The rainfall radar was starting to look a bit dodgy and sure enough, the heavens opened, and we witnessed some of the heaviest rain we had ever seen! Thankfully, before we reached Ifrane, there was a break in the rain and as it was still only about 18:00, we decided to have a quick roadside stop (33.550911, -5.170962) for some woodland birding. Immediately after stepping out of the car, the first bird I got my bins on was a **Eurasian Nuthatch**! This was a long overdue tick for me but sadly it disappeared before the lads got on it. The woodland birding here was top-class! **Atlas Flycatchers** were very common here! Some of which showed very well. The males are quality! With very little effort we located an Atlas Flycatcher nest hole, which gave us some excellent views of a pair. **Atlas Great Spotted Woodpeckers**, **Firecrests**, **Golden Oriole**, and **Hawfinch** were all numerous. A **Levaillant's Woodpecker** called distantly. We managed about thirty minutes in the woodland before it started raining again. We packed it in and headed for our accommodation in Ifrane. After dinner, when reviewing my shots, I was distracted by a **Maghreb Owl** which had started to sing outside my window! A half-arsed attempt to see it failed but at least three Maghreb Owls were singing. This must be a very common species in the Ifrane area. This was a great way to finish an exceptional day of birding, starting with Double-spurred Francolin and finishing with Atlas Flycatchers and Maghreb Owls!

18th May: Ifrane, Zaida Plains

At dawn, a calling **Levaillant's Woodpecker** directly outside my window woke me up. I could get used to having that as my alarm clock! After a quick breakfast, we were out birding again! Most of the heavy rain had passed during the night, however, there was still a constant drizzle which had us soaked! Our first stop was at Lake Zerrouka (33.545559, -5.095855) where it was filled with **Red-knobbed Coots**. There was some excellent birding around here with singing **Woodlarks**, **Roller**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Golden Orioles**, **Jays**, **Atlas Flycatchers** and **Hawfinch**. An adult **Night Heron** also flew over the lake quite high up. John picked up a **Hobby** on a wire on the opposite side of the lake before we realised that our only **Lesser Kestrel** of the trip was sitting only a few meters away from it! A lovely adult male. Peter was quick to pick up an elusive **Reed Warbler** in a small patch of reeds which looked grand for a Eurasian. A **Grasshopper Warbler** reeled away at close range as it continued to drizzle. It was very hard to pull ourselves away from the birding here.



Figure 28: First-summer male Atlas Flycatcher.

We moved on to Dayet Aoua (33.652500, -5.043500) which was completely dry! This location was possibly my favourite of all the birding sites we visited in Morocco. The woodland around the lake was completely jammed with birds. As we got out of the car, a **Eurasian Scops Owl** started singing! This was late morning and very unexpected! It didn't take long until we were having frame-filling scope views of it as it roosted halfway up a tree. Off in the distance, we could faintly hear another Scops singing. Crazy to hear them singing during the day! **Atlas Flycatchers** occurred here in a very high density, with numerous territories around the lake. This was the first location where we had male Atlas Flycatchers at eye level which made for excellent photographic opportunities. **Eurasian Nuthatch** finally gave itself up to all three of us and we all managed lovely views of three individuals. The species here were very similar to that of Lake Zerrouka except in much higher numbers. **Atlas Coal Tit**, **African Blue Tit**, **African Chaffinch**, and **Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker** were common.



Figure 29: Eurasian Scops Owl (left) and 'Moroccan' Western Bonelli's Warbler.

Our main target here was 'Moroccan' Bonelli's Warbler. This is a potential split from Western and is worth a look if you're in this area. We found this quite a tricky species to locate. The slopes on the north side of the lake are the best bet for them (33.655445, -5.036411). We were failing miserably to locate any from the road, and it was looking like we might have our first dip of the trip. Peter suggested that we needed to get up higher where the habitat looked more pro- Bonelli's. With the rain pelting down, the four of us split up and walked the slopes. As I was about to give up, I pished one last time and I got a reaction from a phyllosc! The view was so brief, but I knew that it was worth seeing. I continued to pish and the phyllosc started to call and eventually sing... **'Moroccan' Bonelli's Warbler!** I didn't even manage to get my bins on the bird, but we had located our final Mid Atlas target! I rang the lads who came rushing down, to find that the bird had disappeared. The next twenty or so minutes were a bit nervy as the bird had completely vanished. Thankfully, Mohamed relocated the bird about 50 meters west of where I had originally had it. After a few blip views, it finally showed very well where it had been joined by a second. A male **Western Subalpine Warbler** sat out briefly too but unfortunately, the lads missed it. The weather wasn't helping us with the birds, and everything was very elusive as the rain got heavier. Delighted with the 'Moroccan' Bonelli's Warblers we started to head south, cold and soaked to the skin. We just need the IOC to split them now!

As it was still only about midday, we planned to head south towards Midelt, get some food and then spend the evening at Zaida Plains looking for the very difficult Dupont's Lark. As we approached Midelt, we had our first **White-crowned Wheatears** from the car. This species proved to be very common in desert areas to the south. We arrived at Zaida Plains at around 5 pm. Although not the known track for Dupont's, we parked on this track (32.793273, -4.930984) planning to slowly walk towards the traditional track (32.793735, -4.935453). **Desert Wheatears** and **Cream-coloured Coursers** were some of the first species we encountered at Zaida Plains. It had become immediately apparent as to why Dupont's Larks are so difficult, the area is huge and birdless. We sometimes went ten or fifteen minutes without seeing a bird! Over the next hour or so, we had only recorded a

handful of species. A **Hobby** flew through, as did two **Ruddy Shelducks**. Our first (and only!) **Crested Larks** of the trip showed here. These didn't appear to be Maghreb Larks to my eye anyway. A few **Mediterranean Short-toed Larks** showed well but other than that we had relatively little. We had walked the whole area slowly between the two tracks and it wasn't looking good. The other three lads felt that the habitat on the north side of this track (32.793735, -4.935453) looked better for Dupont's, however, I didn't feel comfortable leaving the area that I knew had Dupont's Lark territories. After some discussion as to what the best plan of attack was, we split up. I think this approach can only end badly for someone and it's something I hate doing! So, the three lads went off to check out the other side of the track and left me in the middle of the Dupont's Lark site on my own!



Figure 30: Zaida Plains with the snow-capped Atlas Mountains in the background.

My idea was to pick a line and walk twenty or so meters and then scan at each point for 10-15 minutes and continue that until the lads returned. I was starting to feel quietly confident that I would find a Dupont's! On my first scan, it only produced one bird, **Crested Lark**. I slowly walked up to another vantage point (32.793273, -4.930984) which was ever so slightly elevated, and I started to scan. Within about a minute, I picked up a Lark sprinting along the ground! The view was ever so brief, but my heart was now racing! It had run in behind an isolated tuft of grass and it would have to appear again. Seconds later, it was off running again but the view was very brief, but I had a strong feeling that I had picked up a Dupont's. I followed it as it weaved in and out of the tussocks, only seeing glimpses of it as it ran. After about 20 seconds of running, I could see that it had stopped. It started to climb up to the top of a small tussock and eventually, I managed an unobscured view of a stone wall **Dupont's Lark!!** The scope views were excellent as it sat there looking properly mega!



Figure 31: Record shot of the Dupont's Lark! A very tricky species in Morocco.

I very quickly rang Peter who was now a long way off with the lads and I told them that I had one. The Dupont's sat up in the open for close to thirty seconds I would guess but I sacrificed about ten of those seconds to get a short video of it. The bird climbed back down and started running again. I followed it on and off for about ten minutes before losing it in the longer vegetation. Unfortunately for the lads, when they arrived the bird had disappeared. They had brief views of a **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** on the far side of the track. Despite our best efforts over the next hour or two we never had the Dupont's again, although I did pick up a Lark running where I could only see the top of its back. John jumped into the scope and had the same view as me but unfortunately, the bird was far too obscured, and the views were inconclusive. It is never nice when some people in the group have seen the target species and others have not, but we had a second chance at seeing it the following morning. We returned to the hotel and set our alarms for 5 am.

19th May: Zaida Plains, Goulmima, Erfoud

We arrived back at Zaida Plains in some very harsh weather conditions. There was constant rain, and it was freezing at only 2°C. Another group of birders arrived and stayed in their car, and we walked to the area where I had seen it the previous day. We had barely even begun to listen for the Dupont's Lark when the other group of birders had the tape blaring out over the Plains. This was very frustrating as it was impossible to know whether we were listening to the Dupont's or their tape. Once or twice, we were nearly sure it sang but it was impossible to be sure. **Cream-coloured Courser** was about the only species of note. After an hour or so, the lads felt it was a waste of time and we cut our losses to get down into the desert. Our hands were numb with the cold, not what we expected during May in Morocco! We went back to the hotel for a hot shower and breakfast.



Figure 32: Mediterranean Short-toed Lark (left) and Maghreb Lark.

Feeling much warmer, we drove the three hours south to an area of desert near Goulmima which is a known site for Saharan Scrub Warbler. This can be a very tricky species in Morocco and is regularly dipped on. We parked along the main road approximately here (31.753318, -4.836408) and we started to walk into the desert. As we walked towards a small area of vegetation, four bubbling **Spotted Sandgrouse** gave a distant flyby. I managed to rattle off a couple of shots too. We continued down to a small area of bushes which held a female **Pied Flycatcher** and a **Eurasian Reed Warbler**. Our first **Maghreb Larks** were picked up here too. A **Bar-tailed Lark** also showed very well for us, which remarkably was my only Bar-tailed of the trip! I expected to be kicking these out of the way, but it certainly wasn't the case for us! However, we were struggling with Saharan Scrub Warbler! It must have been almost an hour of searching before Mohamed shouted that he had found a **Greater Hoopoe-Lark**. This peaked all our interest and as we approached him, Peter found the **Saharan Scrub Warblers**! (31.758078, -4.840323) My interest in the Hoopoe-Lark (which I had still not seen) quickly faded away as I sprinted over to Peter. We had point-blank views of five brilliant little Scrub Warblers as they paid no heed to us. The views were excellent, and we watched them for over an hour. A **Mediterranean Short-toed Lark** was picked up here too. After having our fill of these species, we walked back towards the car. A **Trumpeter Finch** flew over Peter and Mohamed, but John and I dipped out for now. As we tried to relocate the Trumpeter Finch, Mohamed picked up a **Thick-billed Lark**! (31.752133, -4.840315) This was completely unexpected at this location. We quickly located a second bird too. As with the Scrub Warblers, the Thick-billed Larks showed down to a few meters! We all managed some lovely shots and after about ten minutes they flew off with their White-winged Lark-like wing pattern. This was a very productive stop and has been known to be good for Saharan Scrub Warbler for well over a decade at least.



Figure 33: Saharan Scrub Warbler. A likely split from Levant Scrub Warbler.



Figure 34: Thick-billed Lark! What a beauty!

We continued further south towards Erfoud where we would spend the night. From the car, near Tizgaghine, I noticed a **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** in flight! Our driver jammed on the brakes, and we had fine views of several Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters! This was a very big target species for us. We watched several birds as they hunted and perched on wires approximately here (31.611549, -4.947652). This stop proved to be a good one as we managed excellent views of **Little Owl**, **House Bunting**, **White-crowned Wheatear**, and the **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**. Satisfied with our views, we continued south.



Figure 35: Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.



Figure 36: White-crowned Wheatear (left) and Little Owl.

We had one last birding stop before we headed towards the hotel. After two more hours of driving, we finally arrived at an area just to the west of Rissani (31.280274, -4.353950) which had previously been a reliable site for Pharaoh Eagle Owl and is one of the better sites for Fulvous Babbler which is found in the tamarisks at the site. On arrival, **Brown-necked Ravens** appeared to be everywhere. This is where we managed our first good looks at this species. The tamarisks held some migrants such as **Eurasian Reed Warbler** and **Spotted Flycatcher**. It didn't take us long to locate our first target, the '**Saharan**' **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler**. This is another potential split in Morocco, and we found them to be very numerous in this area. Initially, birding was a bit slow with the Olivaceous Warblers, Brown-necked Ravens and **White-crowned Wheatears** being the only species that we regularly encountered. As we walked along the base of the cliffs, a hirundine caught my attention. Swapping my bins for the scope I was sure the bird that I was watching was not a Crag Martin. Firstly, it was in active moult suggesting an early breeder. The undertail appeared light and the underwing coverts weren't as contrasting as I would have expected on a Crag Martin. I called the lads back to let them know I had a likely **Pale Crag Martin**. After much discussion, I stuck to my guns as I really couldn't see any argument for calling it a Crag. I focused on getting record shots, which was very tricky. Eventually, I managed to get some that were usable. Thankfully, it was possible to nail it as Pale Crag Martin which was very unexpected. There were at least two feeding around the cliffs. Peter and John also had a **Crag Martin** in the same area.



Figure 37: Pale Crag Martin. This was very unexpected!

John and I walked on a bit further and a lovely **Desert Lark** landed right in front of us. It flew up onto a rock where it was joined by a second. The scope views were excellent. I continued to watch these birds for quite some time while the lads tried to find Fulvous Babblers which were giving us the slip. As I was watching the Desert Larks, I picked up a flock of distant raptors coming towards me. I quickly threw the scope onto them, and I was delighted to find that it was a flock of nineteen **Honey Buzzards**! They ranged from very pale birds to very dark birds and everything in between. I shouted up to the lads who got onto these quality raptors before they slowly drifted out of sight. Amazing to think that they had likely just crossed the Sahara! Despite our best efforts, Fulvous Babbler was being a pain. We headed back to the hotel knowing that we would have several more chances at this species.

20th May: Erfoud, Merzouga

The target species for today was Fulvous Babbler. Having already dipped it, and knowing how easy they are to miss, I wasn't overly optimistic that we would connect today. We had a bit of a lie-in today as we were all exhausted from the travelling of the previous few days. We didn't leave the hotel until just after 8 am. A lovely **Barbary Falcon** was perched on a telegraph pole just outside our hotel which gave great views. A blocked road in a small village forced us to take another road to get back to the Rissani area. This ended up being extremely fortuitous as Mohamed picked up two **Fulvous Babblers** from the car! Our driver, Hussein, quickly pulled in at the side of the road and we ran back to where Mohamed had seen them. He was spot on! Two Fulvous Babblers gave amazing views as they gathered nesting material only ten feet away from us (31.241907, - 4.305226). This was the only target species that we had pencilled in for this day, and we had scored it within an hour of leaving the hotel! We spent a bit of time with the Babblers which gave us great photographic opportunities. **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** were common in this area too.



Figure 38: Barbary Falcon.



Figure 39: Fulvous Babbler.

Now with the Babblers under the belt, we decided to check several cliffs in the Rissani area to look for Pharaoh Eagle-Owl. We visited a few sites which held breeding Pharaoh Eagle-Owl and Lanner in previous years. We tried hard but failed miserably to locate either of these species with another **Barbary Falcon** being the only species of note. The scenery at some of these sites was amazing, but we hadn't travelled to Morocco for the scenery. We cut our losses and headed down to Merzouga. Even though we were down at the edge of the desert quite early, our day in the 4x4 wouldn't be until the next morning. We decided to spend our time in two different oases just outside Merzouga (31.141195, -4.021058). We were there quite late in the season for migration but even still, the area was completely dripping with migrants! This area is several hundred meters of lush vegetation and shallow streams. Any migrant passerine that finds itself here after crossing the Sahara must feel like it has won the lotto! What a haven for migrants.

The area was so large that we split up to cover as much ground as we could. Within seconds of arriving, I picked up a wonderful male **Pied Flycatcher**. This species was passing through in numbers as we had a minimum of twenty in here. A male **Common Redstart** was a new species for the trip list and was one of five that we found in here. The best species I managed to find in the oasis was an adult male **Atlas Flycatcher**! With Peter nearby, I signalled for him to get over beside me and we both managed an excellent view of this Atlas Flycatcher. Given the very large white patch on the head and the large white primary patch I think it was safe enough to rule out an *iberiae* Pied Flycatcher. Are these regularly seen on migration? I presume so. More good birds were still to come, with **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, numerous **Eurasian Reed Warblers** and **Melodious Warblers**, **Woodchat Shrikes**, **Spotted Flycatchers**, **Turtle Doves**, and **Whinchats**. A female **Golden Oriole** gave a few flybys as did a **Hoopoe**. A **Garden Warbler** fed on the ground in the open which was amazing to see. These are usually such skulking birds in Ireland. One of my favourite birds in this area was a **Tree Pipit** which drank from a small stream right in front of me! This is a species I really don't see too often and more than often they are only flyovers, so it was lovely to see one so well. Having struggled with **Fulvous Babbler** the previous day, we needn't have worried as we had another six in this area. **'Saharan' Eastern Olivaceous Warblers** were very common here too. A silent **Chiffchaff** type was very frustrating as it strongly resembled Iberian, however, it disappeared shortly after I found it, so it had to be let go. Pity. The birding here was like Great Saltee Island on steroids.



Figure 40: Tree Pipit (left) and Pied Flycatcher.

Hunger got the better of us after a few hours and we headed into the town for a quick bite to eat. We were soon out birding again, this time at another oasis (31.141195, -4.021058) just to the south of the one we were at previously. The birding here was just as good as before. This area was much better for species such as **Western Yellow Wagtails** and **Whinchats**. **Common Whitethroat** was a new species for the trip list. **Melodious Warblers** seemed to be everywhere as did **Eurasian Reed Warblers** and 'Saharan' **Eastern Olivaceous Warblers**. **Common Redstarts** and **Pied Flycatchers** were again common in this area. We also managed excellent views of some rather tame **House Buntings**. **Willow Warblers** were also abundant here. **Western Yellow Wagtails** were numerous here with **Iberian**, **Blue-headed**, **Ashy-headed** and **Grey-headed** types recorded. After some excellent birding, the heat was starting to get to us, so we headed for our accommodation in Merzouga. Peter went on a short walk from the hotel and located another two **Fulvous Babblers** and a **Great Grey Shrike**. On arrival at our rooms, John quickly realised that his room was infested with Cockroaches. He was given a room change but I was hoping my room wasn't going to be the same. A brief check of the room and everything seemed alright, that was until I came back from dinner. A lovely Cockroach welcomed me as I opened my door, and then another one and then another one and so on. There was no way I was going to be sleeping there. I packed my things, shaking Cockroaches out of my clothes as I packed. I moved into the spare bed in John's room where another Cockroach greeted us at the door. We slept with the light on as it is meant to keep them away. I couldn't wait to get out of that place the next morning.



Figure 41: Yellow Wagtails: Grey-headed Wagtail (top left), Blue-headed Wagtail (top right), Iberian Wagtail (bottom left) and Ashy-headed Wagtail (bottom right). Hybrids cannot be ruled out in some of these.

21st May: Merzouga, Timatraouine

An early start saw us meet our new driver, before heading out into the desert in the 4x4 Jeep. Two **Fulvous Babblers** landed on the roof of the hotel and were presumably the same birds that Peter had the previous evening. Mohamed communicated with our new driver for the day as we headed out across the sand. This wasn't going to be an easy day as the wind had strengthened during the night to a F6 and it was to get stronger as the day went on. Our first target was Desert Sparrow. To be honest, I didn't enjoy the desert birding. I found that the conditions were so tough, the birds were so few and far between, and we had to work so hard to get our targets which just made everything difficult. We kept dipping Desert Sparrow and after nearly two hours we only had a handful of species to our name. a very distant **Sandgrouse sp.** in-flight was the only bird of note as we searched hard for the Sparrows. We eventually cut our losses and headed on through the desert to a local Berber who had an Egyptian Nightjar lined up for us! A few **Maghreb Larks** were seen near the Nightjar site. After a short drive with the Berber, he pointed to the ground in front of us and there sat a stunning day roosting **Egyptian Nightjar**. This was another massive target for us, and we were all delighted and relieved to finally see a good bird in the desert. We watched the bird for about half an hour before going off to look for African Desert Warbler nearby. Apparently, the Desert Warblers are getting more and more difficult in this area and are regularly dipped on by tour companies, so they are far from a gimmie.



Figure 42: Day roosting Egyptian Nightjar!

We spread out and searched for the African Desert Warblers. Mohamed located a small family of **Saharan Scrub Warblers** which received very little attention. I could hear a **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** singing and as I walked towards it, I flushed a tiny pale warbler which landed directly in front of Peter who nailed it as an **African Desert Warbler**! I rushed over to him and had point-blank views of it. At one stage it landed at my feet about two to three feet away. It was easier just to look at it with the naked eye at that point. The views of it over the next few minutes were excellent. It was a lot paler than I had imagined that it would be. It flew off a short distance and we couldn't relocate it. This was a real stroke of luck as it was a huge area. We now had time to track down the **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** which I finally managed to get my eyes on. Third time lucky with this species. This is a very large bird. It was quite showy but difficult to approach. As with the Bar-tailed Lark a few days previously, this was my only Greater Hoopoe-Lark of the trip!



Figure 43: African Desert Warbler.

We moved on to try for Sandgrouse. We waited for a while around the area which they usually frequent but with visibility becoming an issue and the wind creating a sandstorm, we dipped. We feared we might have missed our shot at Crowned Sandgrouse. Desert Sparrow was still on our agenda, after dipping earlier in the morning. We tried a few more locations before arriving at a tiny house where we were met by a lady who assured us, she had Desert Sparrows breeding in a bunch of sticks beside her house. As we approached, a **White-crowned Wheatear** popped up onto the sticks and we all expected this to be the species that she meant but how wrong we were! The lady walked around the bunch of sticks and out popped three gorgeous golden juvenile **Desert Sparrows**, followed by an adult male and female! The two adults flew back towards the house leaving the three fledged juveniles alone. Viewing conditions were extremely difficult with us now standing in the middle of a sandstorm. We were only able to face towards and look at the sparrows for a few seconds before having to look away as the sand pelted against our faces. Having seen the birds well and managing some poor shots, we walked back towards the house to look for the adults. Both birds were sheltering on the roof of the house but were only viewable by climbing a ladder. It was amazing to see the adults sheltering from the very severe sandstorm on the roof of the tiny house. We took turns to view the birds and left them in peace. A unique experience but I am glad that I don't have to bird like that every day! I couldn't wait to get back to the main road. After what felt like hours, we were back on the tarmac.



Figure 44: Adult Desert Sparrows (left) with recently fledged young (right).

The plan for the remainder of the day was to make our way towards Boulmane Dades where we would spend the night. A brief stop at the roadside (31.264683, -5.262175) for my only *elegans* **Great Grey Shrike** of the trip, broke up the journey nicely. It was a good three-and-a-half-hour spin from Merzouga to a site that we had lined up for Maghreb Wheatear which was just east of Imiter (31.446074, -5.655302). This has been a reliable location for Maghreb Wheatear for years. We arrived around 18:30 and we found it to be quite a decent location. As we looked for the Wheatears, **Desert Larks** showed very well and were one of the commonest species at the site. A pair of **Trumpeter Finches** dropped down at my feet and gave excellent views for around ten seconds before flying off. As I missed these a few days previously near Goulmima, it was great to finally see this species. It didn't take long before we heard a Maghreb Wheatear singing higher up on the slopes. We walked up to where the song was coming from and were treated to wonderful views of a male **Maghreb Wheatear**. John picked up a female here too which was slightly more elusive than the male. This was the last of our Maghreb endemics checked off and we enjoyed the birds for some time. John's stomach was starting to act up, so we headed off to our accommodation. Up to this point, other than a slightly dodgy belly on Peter earlier in the week, we were all ok health-wise. This was soon to change. John skipped dinner and I probably should have too as I had very little appetite and I wasn't feeling the best. That night I woke several times to get sick, and most of the time I had barely made it to the bathroom. I was waking once or twice every hour to get sick, and I was feeling like death.



Figure 45: Desert Lark (top left), Greater Hoopoe-Lark (top right) and Maghreb Wheatear (bottom).

22nd May: Tagdilt, Boulmane Dades, Ouarzazate

When my alarm went off at 6, I still felt awful. The early alarm was to try for Sandgrouse near Tagdilt. The lads tried to make me feel better, but I was struggling. I managed to keep down about three mouthfuls of bread and half a glass of orange juice but that was it. We headed off to Tagdilt (31.350052, -5.906629). On arrival, a flock of Sandgrouse flushed. One **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** circled back and with a struggle, I managed to find the energy to lift my bins and have a look at it. The three lads went off to try to relocate the Sandgrouse, but I returned to the car to close my eyes for a while as I felt terrible. I took a few Panadols which helped a tiny bit. The lads failed to relocate them, so we tried another spot for the Sandgrouse. The lads wandered off but were always within shouting distance of me. They managed some **Temminck's Larks** and **Red-rumped Wheatears**, but I was confident I would get these later.



Figure 46: Black-bellied Sandgrouse

We returned to the location that the Sandgrouse had flushed from earlier in the morning (31.350052, -5.906629) and it was soon obvious that they had returned! I sat in the car while the lads scanned. Who knew that the best medicine for feeling like death was the shout of "**Crowned Sandgrouse**"! When I heard these words from Peter, it was like I had risen from the dead. I hopped out of the car and ran over to his scope. A male **Crowned Sandgrouse** sat there looking proper rare! What a bird! I suddenly felt an awful lot better. I got my scope out of the boot and found that the birding here was phenomenal! We all managed lovely views of the small flock of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and the single male Crowned Sandgrouse. It didn't take me long to pick up my first **Temminck's Larks** of the morning. **Trumpeter Finch**, **Desert Wheatear** and **Greater Short-toed Larks** were all common in this area. I only managed a poor distant view of **Red-rumped Wheatear** which wasn't satisfactory in the slightest. We all had a mammal tick here in the form of **Fat Sand Rat** which was very numerous in this area. **Temminck's Larks** were plentiful with double figures here including a few juveniles. A properly tick-able view of Red-rumped Wheatear still eluded me so we would have to try the dump later in the day for those.

After a very successful morning, I was now feeling a lot better. We headed a few kilometres east to an area near Imiter which is a known location for Lanner and Pharaoh Eagle-Owl. Mohamed pointed to a distant nest on a cliff just after we had arrived. The nest contained a large juvenile **Lanner** which was probably not far off-

fledging. John was the first to pick up one of the adults who was keeping watch from the top of the cliff. Views were distant so we decided that the best plan was to get the Owls first and then come back and enjoy the Lanners properly. As we walked towards the area that the Pharaoh Eagle-Owls were breeding in, we were met by a local man, Lahcen, who assured us that the juveniles were on show. We climbed up a steep slope which gave us a vantage point from which to scan. On the opposite side of the gorge, we picked up three very large juvenile **Pharaoh Eagle-Owls** which gazed back at us. As with the juvenile Lanner, these Owls couldn't have been far from fledging either. **Trumpeter Finch**, **Atlas Long-legged Buzzard** and **Desert Larks** were common here. Despite the best efforts of Mohamed, Lahcen, and ourselves, we all failed to locate an adult Pharaoh Eagle-Owl. This was very unsatisfactory. Even though we had seen the species, it was underwhelming not to have seen an adult.

Lahcen, who tried his best for us by checking as many crevices as he could had returned defeated. We gave him 200 dirhams for his troubles, and he was very appreciative of it before he headed off on his bike. We went back to look for the **Lanner** and we enjoyed incredible views as it tussled in mid-air with a light-morph **Booted Eagle**. As we watched the Lanner, Lahcen who helped us with the Owls had returned to tell us that he had found a different adult about 9km away! On hearing this news, we hopped straight into the car and followed him on his bike to a completely random pull-in. We followed him on foot for a couple of hundred meters across some uneven ground before he pointed to a small crevice at the top of a cliff. Inside, an adult **Pharaoh Eagle-Owl** slept! This was a truly unbelievable pickup by this local lad who didn't even have a pair of bins! Only for Lahcen, we would have missed out on seeing an adult. It was honestly the best 200 dirhams that I have ever spent! The Owl was quite distant, but the scope views were class. As there was no nest nearby, it was likely that this was a male. I was asked not to publicise this site. I finally felt like I could properly tick Pharaoh Eagle-Owl having seen the adult.



Figure 47: Lanner (left) and Pharaoh Eagle-Owl.

We said our thanks and goodbyes to Lahcen who had helped us out and we made our way to Tagdilt Track (31.328703, -5.922575). The dump is a very good area for Larks and Red-rumped Wheatear. The smell at the

dump was vile. John and Peter who had already seen Red-rumped Wheatear earlier in the morning, swiftly returned to the car after they got a whiff of the rancid odour. Mohamed and I kept going, holding our breath for as long as we could and almost immediately picked up a lovely pair of **Red-rumped Wheatears**. The male hopped around on the rubbish mounds only a few meters away. We watched them at close quarters before making our way back to the car as quickly as we could. **Black Kites** and **White Storks** fed in the mountains of rubbish. We had now completely cleaned up all our Moroccan target species with one more full day to go!



Figure 48: Red-rumped Wheatear.

We had a two-hour drive before we got to our next location near Ouarzazate where we would spend the night. By the end of the drive, I was starting to feel worse for wear. We arrived at a dried-up reservoir, which according to the lads was very poor for birds. I stayed behind in the car as once the adrenaline from the morning had worn off, I started to feel like death again. I managed some sleep in the back of the car while the lads had **Little Ringed Plover**, **Purple Heron**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Thekla's Lark**, and **Melodious Warbler** amongst some commoner species. After a few hours, they returned. On their return, they were greeted by me throwing up. I couldn't wait to get to the hotel. We all had an early night.

23rd May: High Atlas, Escale Forêt

This was our last full day in Morocco. We had a lie-in until 9 am and by the time we had our breakfast and packed to leave it was already 10 am. I didn't mind this as most of our birding was already done, and we all needed a good night's sleep. This was mainly a day of travel as we headed to our last destination, Marrakesh. We had a few random stops in areas where we thought the birding could be productive. A quick stop in the Atlas Mountains between Ouarzazate and Marrakesh produced a few bits but nothing major. A **Nightingale** came into my pishing and showed nicely out in the open. A female **Golden Oriole** was seen briefly. On the river, a **Little Ringed Plover** fed on the edge where it was likely breeding. **Corn Buntings** were singing from the wires too. Our eyes were glued to the sky as Bonelli's Eagle had eluded us throughout the entire trip!

We had a very productive stop at a woodland called Escale Forêt which can be reached by turning off the main road here (31.548843, -7.526684). We drove down this track a little and **African Chaffinch**, and **Spotted Flycatchers** were abundant. Just at the end of the conifer trees where the path opens (31.547287, -7.529491), a male **Atlas Crossbill** showed well, and we all managed decent views as it fed at the top of a tree. Once we had left the conifers behind, it started to become quite productive. **Woodchat Shrikes** seemed to be everywhere, with many adults feeding recently fledged young. A **Little Owl** flew along the valley which upset a **Western Black-eared Wheatear**. Several **Booted Eagles** were in this area including one dark morph bird. A call from Mohamed had us all scrambling to get down beside him, he had just picked up a pair of **Western Orphean Warblers**! They were elusive but did give lovely views through the bins. These can be quite tricky in summer, but it was a super addition to our trip list. This is the area where the Western Orphean Warblers were on territory (31.548843, -7.526684). There were quite a few **Sardinian Warblers** and with the Western Orphean Warblers, we decided to check a few areas for Western Subalpine Warblers as the lads had yet to connect with this species. We pished at a few areas but failed to locate any. After a few hours of relaxed birding, we strolled back to the car for the final leg of our trip.



Figure 49: African Chaffinch (left) and Common Nightingale.

We arrived in Marrakesh in the early evening and John, Peter and I walked around Marrakesh to have a look at the city which wasn't very impressive. **Common Bulbuls**, **House Buntings**, **Peregrine**, and **Common Swifts** were about the best in the city bird-wise. The birding was now finished, and I think we were all glad to be heading home the following day as it was a very strenuous eleven days with a huge amount of travelling involved to clean up our targets. Other than the Western Sahara, there is now no need for me to return to Morocco having seen everything in just one visit!

24th May: Marrakech Airport

A **House Bunting** inside the airport was the last species we saw in Morocco. We said goodbye to Mohamed and our driver Hussein, who had both gone above and beyond to ensure we connected with all our target species. We flew out of Marrakech at noon for our flight to London Gatwick and then a 19:40 flight from Gatwick to Dublin. I returned home just before midnight, completely exhausted.



Figure 50: L-R: John Cusack, Brian McCloskey, Peter Phillips, and Mohamed Bargache.

Recommended Reading: There are relatively few trip reports on www.cloudbirder.com for Morocco outside of early spring. These trip reports were completely invaluable. The bottom link is very useful if planning to locate Hemipodes.

- 1) https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=KOPPENOL_Morocco_0405_2022.pdf
- 2) https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=MACDONALD_Morocco_05_2015.pdf
- 3) <http://joshjrjones.blogspot.com/2012/07/morocco-trip-report-junejuly-2012.html>
- 4) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236031246_History_status_and_distribution_of_Andalusian_Buttoonquail_in_the_WP

I would also really recommend The Sound Approach Guide, Morocco: sharing the birds. This gives a thorough insight into the history of the Moroccan specialities as well as tips on how to hear and see some species. It is well worth having.

Species List:

Morocco May 2023		
1	Ruddy Shelduck	Three near Tamri and another two in flight at Zaida Plains.
2	Gadwall	Seen at Sidi Bougaba.
3	Mallard	Common.
4	Marbled Duck	Seen at Oued Massa and Sidi Bougaba.
5	Red-crested Pochard	Female at Sidi Boughaba.
6	Common Pochard	A dozen at Sidi Bougaba.
7	Ferruginous Duck	Five at Sidi Bougaba.
8	White-headed Duck	A flock of fifty at Sidi Bougaba.
9	Common Quail	Common in the crop fields at Sidi Abed.
10	Andalusian Hemipode	Incredible views of one and a further singing bird at Sidi Abed.
11	Barbary Partridge	Seen in the High Atlas, near Oued Massa and en route to Merja Zerga.
12	Double-spurred Francolin	At least five at Ben Slimane. Good flight views. Vocal.
13	Greater Flamingo	Seen at Oued Souss and Sidi Bougaba.
14	Little Grebe	Seen at Sidi Bougaba and Lake Zerrouka.
15	Great Crested Grebe	Seen at Sidi Bougaba.
16	Rock Dove	Present in several locations including some pure looking birds near Oukaïmeden.
17	Woodpigeon	Common.
18	European Turtle Dove	Common. Very plentiful around Sidi Abed.
19	Eurasian Collared Dove	Common.
20	Laughing Dove	Seen on a few dates.
21	Spotted Sandgrouse	Four in flight near Goulmima.
22	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Good views of a flock near Tagdilt Track.
23	Crowned Sandgrouse	One male seen well with the Black-bellied Sandgrouse flock.
24	Egyptian Nightjar	Excellent views of a day roosting bird near Merzouga.
25	Common Swift	Common.
26	Pallid Swift	Seen only around Marrakesh.
27	Little Swift	Only seen around Marrakesh.
28	Common Cuckoo	One seen in the High Atlas.
29	Water Rail	Heard at Sidi Bougaba.
30	Eurasian Moorhen	Seen at Sidi Bougaba.
31	Eurasian Coot	Seen on most waterbodies.
32	Red-knobbed Coot	Common at Sidi Bougaba and Lake Zerrouka
33	Western Swampen	Three seen at Sidi Bougaba.
34	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	One on the beach near Oued Massa.
35	Black-winged Stilt	Common.
36	Grey Plover	Seen at Oued Souss.
37	Northern Lapwing	Seen at Merja Zerga.
38	Kentish Plover	Seen at Merja Zerga.
39	Common Ringed Plover	Common at Oued Massa and Oued Souss.
40	Little Ringed Plover	Seen at a few locations.
41	Whimbrel	Seen at Oued Souss.
42	Eurasian Curlew	Seen at Oued Souss.
43	Bar-tailed Godwit	Common at Oued Souss.
44	Black-tailed Godwit	One at Oued Souss.
45	Red Knot	Common at Oued Souss.

46	Curlew Sandpiper	Three at Oued Souss.
47	Sanderling	Common at Oued Souss.
48	Dunlin	Common at Oued Souss and Merja Zerga.
49	Little Stint	Two at Oued Souss.
50	Common Sandpiper	Seen at both Oued Massa and Sidi Bougaba.
51	Wood Sandpiper	One seen at Oued Souss by John.
52	Greenshank	One on the rocks at Sidi Bougaba.
53	Common Redshank	A few at Oued Massa and Oued Souss.
54	Cream-coloured Courser	Seen at both Zaida Plains and near Oued Massa.
55	Collared Pratincole	Flight views at both Sidi Abed and Merja Zerga.
56	Black-headed Gull	Common at Oued Souss.
57	Audouin's Gull	One flock near Oued Massa.
58	Yellow-legged Gull	Common on the coast.
59	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Common on the coast.
60	Gull-billed Tern	Two at Oued Souss.
61	Lesser Crested Tern	Two on the beach near Oued Massa.
62	Sandwich Tern	Two on the beach near Oued Massa.
63	Little Tern	One near Sidi Abed.
64	Common Tern	A few dozen on the beach near Oued Massa.
65	Black Tern	Excellent views of three near Oued Massa and very common offshore. Passing through in small flocks.
66	European Storm Petrel	Common offshore at Agadir just before dusk.
67	Cory's Shearwater	Common offshore at Agadir just before dusk.
68	White Stork	Common.
69	Northern Gannet	Only seen offshore near Tamri.
70	Great Cormorant	Seen at a few places. No obvious Moroccan individuals.
71	Grey Heron	Common.
72	Purple Heron	Seen at Oued Massa, Merja Zerga and Ouarzazate.
73	Little Egret	Seen a few times.
74	Cattle Egret	Very common. One of the most numerous species in Morocco.
75	Squacco Heron	One adult at Sidi Bougaba.
76	Night Heron	One in flight at Lake Zerrouka.
77	Glossy Ibis	Common.
78	Northern Bald Ibis	Several flyover flocks around Oued Massa and excellent views of one near Tamri.
79	Eurasian Spoonbill	Seen a few times along the coast.
80	Osprey	One in flight over Marrakesh.
81	Black-winged Kite	Good views of a pair at Merja Zerga.
82	Honey Buzzard	A flock of 19 migrated over Erfoud.
83	Short-toed Snake Eagle	One on the way to Sidi Abed.
84	Booted Eagle	Common.
85	Marsh Harrier	Seen at both Sidi Bougaba and Merja Zerga.
86	Montagu's Harrier	Two males at Merja Zerga.
87	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	One seen by Peter from the car on the way to Merja Zerga.
88	Black Kite	Common.
89	Atlas Long-legged Buzzard	Seen a few times but not overly numerous. Mainly in the High Atlas.
90	Pharaoh Eagle-Owl	Three large juveniles still in the nest near Imiter. Good scope views of an adult c.9km away at a different site.
91	Maghreb Owl	Good views in the torch in Marrakesh. Heard in the Mid Atlas.
92	Marsh Owl	Two seen well at Merja Zerga.
93	Little Owl	Seen several times.
94	Scops Owl	Excellent views of a day roosting bird at Dayet Aoua.
95	Eurasian Hoopoe	Common.
96	European Roller	Seen a few times e.g., in High Atlas and Lake Zerrouga.

97	European Bee-eater	Common.
98	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	Common in desert areas.
99	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Common in the woodlands around the High and Mid Atlas.
100	Levaillant's Woodpecker	One seen well in Oukrika Valley and more heard in the Mid Atlas.
101	Lesser Kestrel	One adult male seen well at Lake Zerrouka.
102	Common Kestrel	Common.
103	Lanner Falcon	Adult and unfledged juvenile seen well near Imiter.
104	Peregrine Falcon	Seen a few times on the coast. Barbary Falcon seen twice near Merzouga and Erfoud.
105	Eurasian Hobby	Seen at Ben Slimane, Lake Zerrouka and Zaida Plains.
106	Eleonora's Falcon	Seen at Oued Massa and several between Agadir and Sidi Abed.
107	Black-crowned Tchagra	Excellent views at Oued Massa.
108	Great Grey Shrike	<i>algeriensis</i> near the coast and <i>elegans</i> seen in the desert.
109	Woodchat Shrike	Seen a few times e.g., Ben Slimane.
110	Golden Oriole	Common in woodlands in the High and Mid Atlas.
111	Eurasian Jay	Seen a few times in the Mid Atlas.
112	Maghreb Magpie	Common.
113	Red-billed Chough	Common around Oukaïmeden.
114	Alpine Chough	Numerous at Oukaïmeden and the High Atlas.
115	Eurasian Jackdaw	Only seen around Merja Zerga.
116	Brown-necked Raven	Common in desert areas.
117	Northern Raven	Seen in the High Atlas.
118	Greater Hoopoe-Lark	Seen three times at Zaida Plains, Goulmima and Merzouga.
119	Thick-billed Lark	Two seen very well at Goulmima.
120	Bar-tailed Lark	Only seen at Goulmima.
121	Desert Lark	Common in rocky desert habitat.
122	Horned Lark	Common around Oukaïmeden.
123	Temminck's Lark	Common around Tagdilt Track.
124	Greater Short-toed Lark	Seen near Oued Massa and at Tagdilt Track.
125	Dupont's Lark	One seen well by Brian at Zaida Plains.
126	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Seen at Zaida Plains and Goulmima.
127	Wood Lark	Seen and heard in the High and Mid Atlas.
128	Thekla's Lark	Common.
129	Crested Lark	Only definitely seen once. Zaida Plains.
130	Maghreb Lark	Common in desert habitat around Goulmima, Erfoud and Merzouga.
131	Brown-throated Martin	A dozen seen well at Oued Massa.
132	Sand Martin	One seen at Oued Souss.
133	Eurasian Crag Martin	Seen in the High Atlas and one seen by John and Peter at Erfoud.
134	Pale Crag Martin	Two seen well at Erfoud. Unexpected!
135	Barn Swallow	Common.
136	Red-rumped Swallow	Seen at a few locations.
137	House Martin	Seen at a few locations.
138	Coal Tit	Seen around Dayet Aoua.
139	African Blue Tit	Common in the High and Mid Atlas. Also seen elsewhere e.g., Sid Bougaba.
140	Great Tit	Seen a few times.
141	Eurasian Nuthatch	Common around Dayet Aoua and the Mid Atlas.
142	Short-toed Treecreeper	Seen in the High (near Oukaïmeden) and Mid Atlas.
143	Common Bulbul	Common.
144	Common Firecrest	Seen in the High and Mid Atlas.
145	Scrub Warbler	Five seen at Goulmima and another family part seen at Merzouga.
146	Cetti's Warbler	Common.
147	Moroccan Bonelli's Warbler	Two seen well on the north side of Dayet Aoua.
148	Willow Warbler	Only seen at the Merzouga Oasis.

149	Common Chiffchaff	One at the Merzouga Oasis.
150	Western Olivaceous Warbler	Common at Oued Massa.
151	Eastern Olivaceous Warbler	Numerous around Merzouga and Erfoud.
152	Melodious Warbler	Common on passage at Merzouga. Another seen in the High Atlas.
153	Sedge Warbler	One at Lake Zerrouka.
154	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Common migrant in Merzouga. Also seen at Lake Zerrouka.
155	Grasshopper Warbler	Reeling bird at Lake Zerrouka.
156	Zitting Cisticola	Common.
157	African Desert Warbler	Excellent views in the desert at Merzouga.
158	Western Orphean Warbler	A pair seen well at Escale Forêt.
159	Tristram's Warbler	One seen well after a lot of searching in the High Atlas.
160	Western Subalpine Warbler	Seen in the High and Mid Atlas.
161	Sardinian Warbler	Common.
162	Whitethroat	One on passage seen near Merzouga.
163	Garden Warbler	Excellent views of one feeding on the ground in the oasis at Merzouga.
164	Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin	Common at Oued Massa and Merzouga.
165	Spotted Flycatcher	Common on passage, mainly at Merzouga.
166	Atlas Flycatcher	Very common in the Mid Atlas and another seen on migration in the oasis at Merzouga.
167	Pied Flycatcher	Seen on passage at numerous locations, mainly in the oasis at Merzouga.
168	Fulvous Babbler	Seen a few times around Erfoud and Merzouga.
169	Common Nightingale	Common.
170	European Robin	Seen in the Mid Atlas.
171	Moussier's Redstart	Seen several times, mainly in the High Atlas.
172	Common Redstart	Common on passage at Merzouga.
173	Black Redstart	Common at Oukaïmeden.
174	Blue Rock Thrush	Seen twice at Oukaïmeden.
175	Whinchat	Seen at Ben Slimane and then common in the oasis at Merzouga.
176	European Stonechat	Seen at Oued Massa
177	White-crowned Wheatear	Common in the desert in the southeast of Morocco.
178	Black Wheatear	Seen several times in the High Atlas.
179	Seeböhm's Wheatear	A pair seen well at Oukaïmeden.
180	Maghreb Wheatear	A pair seen well near Boulmalne Dades.
181	Red-rumped Wheatear	Seen at Tagdilt Track and at the dump.
182	Desert Wheatear	Common in desert areas.
183	Western Black-eared Wheatear	Common, first seen near Oued Massa.
184	Mistle Thrush	Seen in the High Atlas.
185	Song Thrush	One seen near Merzouga.
186	Blackbird	Common.
187	Spotless Starling	Common. Seen on several dates.
188	Grey Wagtail	Seen a few times at Ourika Valley.
189	Yellow Wagtail	Grey-headed, Ashy-headed, Blue-head and Iberian Wagtails seen.
190	Moroccan White Wagtail	Only one seen near Tamri.
191	Tree Pipit	Migrants seen near Tamri and Merzouga.
192	African Chaffinch	Common in woodland areas.
193	Hawfinch	Common in the Mid Atlas
194	African Crimson-	Excellent views of two at Oukaïmeden.

	winged Finch	
195	Trumpeter Finch	Seen a few times around Imiter, Goulmima, Boulmalne Dates, Tagdilt etc.
196	European Greenfinch	Common.
197	Eurasian Linnet	Small numbers.
198	Red Crossbill	Seen in the High Atlas and at Escale Forêt.
199	European Serin	Common.
200	Corn Bunting	Seen a few times.
201	Rock Bunting	Seen at Oukaïmeden and another seen from the car on the way to Midelt.
202	Cirl Bunting	Only one seen near the Tristram's Warbler site.
203	House Bunting	Common in urban areas.
204	House Sparrow	Very common.
205	Desert Sparrow	Great view of a family party at Merzouga.
206	Rock Sparrow	Common around Oukaïmeden.