



MOROCCO ~ TRIP REPORT Oct-Nov 2001

By Karl Anderson / New Jersey Audubon Society

Leaders: Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow

MOROCCO BIRDS AND CULTURE

Morocco is at the northwestern corner of Africa, with coasts on both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, and it is at roughly the same latitude as South Carolina. Not counting the Western Sahara, it's a bit smaller than Texas, and has a population of about 30 million. It has a relatively fertile coastal plain. Inland, three mountain ranges - the Middle Atlas, the High Atlas, and the Anti-Atlas - more or less parallel the coast. South of the mountains the land becomes increasingly dry, finally merging into the Sahara.

Our group flew into Casablanca on October 27, (6 weeks after 9/11), and we spent our first few days on the coastal plain. We visited Rabat for some birding in the Chellah, a walled complex of gardens, Roman ruins, and the ruins of a 13th-century mosque and religious school, where we made the acquaintance of such palearctic birds as Sardinian warbler, blackcap, chiffchaff, and pied flycatcher while being viewed by white storks nesting on a ruined minaret. At Sidi bou Haba, a wetland reserve, we found greater flamingo, marbled teal, purple swamphen, redshank, and greenshank. Night was in Rabat.

We started the next day with an early morning visit to the Forest of Zaers to look for double-spurred francolin. In the afternoon, several hours were spent at the ruins of Volubilis, capital of the Roman province of Mauretania, Latin-speaking till the 9th century, now deserted except for blue rock thrushes, crested larks, and occasional lizards. Very impressive, and we had the place almost to ourselves! The beautiful mosaics which once adorned the homes of wealthy Romans are now open to the sky, evidence of a cultured and sybaritic society. Our night was in Fez, and we spent the morning of our third day touring the Medina of this fabled city with a local guide. This 14th-century "center city" had a character all its own - narrow streets, a wonderful blend

of smells and sounds, tiny shops crowded together, and mosques and religious schools decorated with beautiful, intricate, non-representational carvings and mosaics.

The next day took us inland, through groves of olives and eucalyptus and the Forest of Cedars, into the Middle Atlas. We saw Barbary apes, great spotted woodpecker, and Levaillant's green woodpecker. After a night in Midelt, an early morning visit to stony desert near Zaida produced DuPont's and thekla larks. Ruined casbahs and crumbling towers of adobe were perched on many strategic heights, perhaps evidence of the internal strife that plagued this country until the early 20th century.

Continuing south through mountain passes and past oases and groves of date palms, we reached the town of Erfoud on the afternoon of our fourth day in the field. And we began our fifth day by watching the sunrise over the huge red sand dunes south of Merzouga. That day was spent exploring the edges of the desert by Land Rover and on foot, and we found a surprising number of birds, including Moussier's redstart, fulvous babbler, desert sparrow, desert warbler, trumpeter finch, spectacled warbler, Tristram's warbler, and hoopoe lark.

The next few days found us skirting the southern slopes of the High Atlas. The road to Tinejad, through small villages, stony desert, and palmeries, past cliffs and mesas, took us to the Gorges du Todra - a spectacular canyon, much like some in the southwestern United States but embellished with house buntings, Moroccan wagtails, and Bonelli's eagles. Night was in El-Kelaa M'gouna, famed for its daggers and its roses.

The following day began with a visit to stony desert along the road to Tagdilt. This is barren country; it's amazing that birds can live in it. But we found Temminck's lark, thick-billed lark, long-legged buzzards, and several species of wheatears. Then, it was off toward Ouarzazate, through the Valee du Dades, with several birding stops along the way.

Our next few days took us into and out of the High Atlas, whose higher peaks reach over 14,000 feet. We began in the desert, then followed tortuous but well-maintained mountain roads through the Tizi-n-Tichka Pass, past Berber villages perched on cliffs and steep hillsides and surrounded by garden terraces, to our lodge at Oukaimeden. The next morning dawned cold and gray, with occasional gusts of snow, flocks of red-billed and alpine choughs, and a sprinkling of rock sparrows and crimson-winged finches.

After a few hours of montane birding we headed into the lowland to Marrakesh. Part of this ancient town is as up to date as any large city anywhere; but our interest here centered on the central square, the Djemma el Fna, and the surrounding souk. As in the Medina of Fez, tiny shops here sold almost anything imaginable; and acrobats, musicians, and snake charmers entertained the passing multitudes. But after a night in Marrakesh, it was back over the High Atlas through the 7,000 foot high Tizi-n-Test Pass and down into the Sous Valley to Taroudannt, our home for the next two nights.

Again in the coastal plain, we spent a day birding in the fields and palmeries near Taroudannt. As in any dry country, abundant water means abundant bird life, and this area was no exception. Some interesting birds were stone curlew, laughing dove, and Spanish sparrow. And on our eleventh day in the field, we made it back to the Atlantic Coast, near Agadir. A target bird here was the prehistoric-looking bald ibis, a declining species whose population hovers about at 200 birds. Thanks to information provided by several local children, we finally found five of these strange-looking birds, foraging for insects in desert scrub. Along the nearby coast, we were able to admire Audouin's and yellow-legged gulls. Afternoon was at the estuary of the Sous, which held bar-tailed and black-tailed godwits and many other shorebirds and waders. Night was in Agadir.

Our last day in the field was spent in and around Sous-Massa National Park, in a variety of habitats including agricultural fields, euphorbia-dominated heath, alluvial flats, river, and ocean shore. In terms of numbers of bird species, this was the best day of the tour, with about 80 species recorded. Many were repeats, but some additions to the list included little owl, booted eagle, plain martin, tree pipit, pochard, greenfinch, and black-bellied sandgrouse.

This was an excellent tour. As expected, we saw some very interesting cultural sites. The Moroccan cuisine was quite good. Most of our field lunches consisted of fresh-baked flat bread, local cheese, tomatoes, and olives - except for the tomatoes (and soft drinks) such a lunch as Odysseus might have enjoyed. One typical supper included a lentil and chickpea soup called harira, a slow-cooked combination of meat and vegetables called a tagine, fruit, and mint tea. And we recorded about 175 species of birds, including several endemic or near-endemic species. This is pretty good for the location; much of Morocco is desert or near-desert, and although over 400 species of birds have been recorded from the country, many of these are transients from Europe to Southern Africa.

Morocco is a Moslem country, but apparently relatively relaxed about it. The majority of men, particularly younger men, have adopted western dress; women in general, perhaps because of Islamic ideals of modesty, are a bit more traditional, though there is much regional and local variation. Technologically, it is a country in

transition; roads are paved, electricity universal, and even the smallest villages seem to have at least one satellite dish; but local transportation of farm produce and other goods is still by animal back or animal-drawn cart. Conservation is in its infancy; problems to be faced include loss of plant cover due to firewood collecting and overgrazing by livestock, soil erosion, and a rapidly falling water table.

Adrian Binns, with co-leader Martin Perrow and local guide Said Ahmoune, did an excellent job of leading the tour. He will be leading our tour to Scotland in July of 2002. Many thanks to participants Kareen Rosenberg, Fred and Gael Gardner, Suzanne Nicole, Sandra Keller, Joseph and Virginia Hughey, Fred Kaiser, Margaret Bray, and Joyce and Brad Payeur for their part in making the tour a success.