



**MOROCCO “Birding the Edge of the Sahara”  
TRIP REPORT March 2-19, 2013  
By Martin Perrow**

**Leaders: Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow**

**Day 1 – March 3**

**Zaers and Chellah: welcome to Morocco**

Mustapha had collected Martin and Andrew from the airport at 20.30 the previous night and ferried them to the Atlas Airport Hotel. Leaving the terminal we were surprised to experience rain. The accommodation had been better than the internet reviews had suggested, with the only problem being the touch-pad lift controls that seemed to have a personal preference for a particular finger type, which was certainly not Mustapha’s, who quickly decided such technology was not for him.

Having left at about 06.15, we fully expected to be waiting while the main group from the States cleared customs. We were most surprised to find everyone at the exchange buying dirhams. The pilot of the transatlantic crossing had clearly been on some sort of promise, and had exceeded 720 mph and reached Casablanca more than one hour early.

It was just light as we left the terminal, with Cattle Egret the first bird. In truth, the Brits had already had a Barbary Partridge, a White Wagtail, Pallid Swift and House Sparrow in the dark. As it dawned into a cloudy day, it was clear that the recent rain had greened the land.

Adrian quickly made the decision that we would head straight for Foret de Zaers, the haunt of Double-spurred Francolin, one of the Moroccan specialities. Highlight of the journey for Mustapha at least was the rather attractive traffic policewoman as he asked for directions for Sidi Bettache. Less attractive was the criticism by another traffic cop of our two fire extinguishers. A very large one in excess of 5kg was needed apparently.

For the rest of us, familiarisation with the common roadside birds ensued. Considerably more unusual was the Ostrich that someone had released within a fenced area. Perhaps this was part of a reintroduction scheme of which there is much discussion. Nearing the forest, we stopped for around 20 Stone Curlews in a grassy field. These birds are always a popular sight with their large piercing yellow eyes, and some were very close to the van. Upon reaching the forest we tried the track that had previously allowed access to the forest of stunted trees, but the understory of Cistus had become so dense so as to restrict movement, let alone the view. So we walked the track, noting our first African Blue Tit and the North African races of Chaffinch and Great Tit. We continued walking down the road to reach a stand of firs. Tracks under the trees allowed a view to a lake beyond. Many Ferruginous Ducks were noted amongst Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Mallard, Little Grebe and a single Great Crested Grebe.

A small party of calling Siskins flew into the firs, which after initially proving to be elusive, were eventually seen by all. After crossing the road, sharp calls alerted us to what appeared to be two Francolins flying away. We were further stunned when Mike and Joy saw at least one other bird at close range fly low through the undergrowth. A short stakeout followed to no avail although a male Sardinian Warbler did make an appearance.

Back in the bus, we stopped at a lake that was full of water, testament to the recent rains. Water means waterfowl and there were hundreds of Mallard, Teal, European Coot some Shoveler and a few Pintail. Adrian then found a Garganey pair. A fly-by by a Marsh Harrier briefly woke them from slumber and we were able to enjoy the striking markings of the male. Even the two Spoonbills lifted their heads to preen briefly.

We eventually managed to secure some hobs (bread) for lunch and after traversing Rabat, we stopped on the fringes of Chellah for our first picnic lunch. Mustapha was well prepared with table, plates, napkins and a variety of produce including locally grown avocados, tomatoes and bananas.

Inside Chellah, despite the Sunday crowds we enjoyed close views of Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Woodpigeon, and Wren amongst the greenery of the gardens. A fine male Black Redstart posed amongst the ruins and pairs of White Storks bill-clattered their greetings to a returning member of their pair atop their huge stick nests that adorned the minarets, walls and large cut-off eucalypts.

Reaching Kenitra, we navigated the confusing streets with only a couple of minor diversions, before asking directions for the Assam Hotel at a garage. Our noses for this new hotel for us had clearly been good as we were only a couple of hundred metres away. As we disembarked, a flock of about a dozen Glossy Ibis probed an area of rough ground on the other side of the busy road. Confusion reigned amongst the staff as they seemed ill prepared for what could easily be their largest party of the year. Kerfuffle over rooms, beds, towels and just about anything else was finally resolved and we prepared for dinner. Martin and Andrew took a walk to the nearby marsh, which proved to be so good, that we would have to fit it into our itinerary. Dinner, including a fine harare soup happened as we hoped and we retired early after a long day

## **Day 2 - March 4**

### **Foret de Zaers & Lac de Sidi Bourhaba: the francolins of fate**

Francolins are early risers and after a breakfast starting at 5.30 we were on the road by 6.45. It was raining quite hard as we navigated the busy Kenitra streets. Whilst the rest of us thought we were heading for Zaers, where we had been the previous day to search for Francolins, Mustapha clearly had other ideas and Martin just caught him as we were turning for Lac du Sidi Bourhaba, our destination for later in the day. A quick u-turn ensued.

We arrived late at Zaers, although the cloudy and blustery conditions meant that all was perhaps not lost and the birds would still be active. A couple of Barbary Partridges crossing the road was a good sign, and the rain had stopped. We stopped near the road bend where we had seen the fly-past Francolins the day before and walked back down the road in order to get a view of the tracks running across the hillside, as this was the only place the birds could be seen. Playing the tape soon had a bird responding from somewhere on the other side of the valley, but it wasn't that close and certainly not visible. A Marsh Harrier and a flock of Woodpigeons provided some distraction.

Then the twist of fate, aka Joan Baez, kicked in. A man purposely striding down the road in rubber boots and yellow waterproof garb, stopped and asked if we were "Cherchez le Francolin". A brief conversation between the man and Adrian led to Martin going back to collect Mustapha and the bus and soon we were heading back down the road to the edge of the forest, with our guide Mohammed (the gamekeeper for the estate) aboard the bus. We turned right down the track and suddenly we were right in the stunted forest with wide tracks. Stopping at a junction we glanced left and there, unbelievably, stood a Francolin a few hundred metres away, with another retreating into the undergrowth. We reversed and gently got out of the bus and lined up the more stationary bird in telescopes for all to see. We had achieved the impossible in just a few minutes.

A pursuit on foot didn't work out, although we did see another Francolin fly through the trees close by. After what seemed to be only a few minutes we emerged into an open area with a pond and then a lake near a farm. A dead prickly Ziziphus hedge produced, within a few hundred metres, first a Woodchat Shrike, then a Hoopoe and then a male Subalpine Warbler all at close range. Getting out

we strolled across the sort of field edge and rough floral pasture that is common in Spain and similarly full of birds. A distant singing Tchagra (Black-crowned Bush Shrike) drew us to the forest edge, where a singing Woodlark in flight became two on the ground. Giant slugs that we were later to call 'Moroccan Golden slug' also provided interest, at least to Ann and Janice.

After a brief encounter with some dogs accompanying a cow herder we cut back to the lake with its Little Grebes and what was thought to be a Green Sandpiper. Back into the forest, we encountered another Francolin on the track. This bird sat tight for a while, before running, Roadrunner-like away from us. And then the impossible happened again with the bird becoming 'trapped' against the fenceline on our left. The van got closer and closer until the bird emerged no more than 20 yards away and stood for a moment before turning, crouching and flying off over the fence. This was just astonishing stuff, especially as after a few more yards another broke cover, but this time it scorched the ground with its speed before breaking off down a track to the right. After emerging from the forest, we dropped off Mohammed back at the gate to the estate on the corner of the main bend, and with cash gripped tight in hand, he bade us farewell.

After encountering a few Black Kites on passage on the journey, a stop in Rabat saw us take in the Tour de Hassan, at the mosque that was never completed. A water seller with pedal pushers and knobby knees alongside another man selling dolls of said water seller, and with guards on horseback all provided additional visual enrichment. In fact, the minorette and the columns stolen from Volubilis (see Day 4 below) were more than impressive enough. Our guide, the second Mohammed of the day, escorted us to the tomb of previous kings, which was spectacularly ornate. The lower floor is then connected to the mosque commissioned from Hassan II (the father of the current king).

Back aboard the bus, we reached Lac du Sidi Bourhaba, reaching it after about an hour. The lake nestles behind the dunes fronting the coast and appears to effectively be a giant dune slack. The vegetation around the lake is populated with flowering shrubs such as *Retama monosperma* and is broadly natural apart from the planted Eucalyptus, under which we had lunch. By the time lunch had been prepared, we had seen one of the main target birds, White-headed Duck, with both males and females present. Over the visit we were able to count about 50 of these very smart birds. Only Red-knobbed of the two Coot flavours was present, with Northern Shoveler, numbering many hundreds perhaps even a thousand, dominant amongst the ducks. Andrew found a dapper male Tufted Duck and was able to show Janice and Joy. As we caught up with the rest of the group, he then had the task of re-finding the bird from a completely different angle and much further away. Fortunately, he managed. We then walked over a mile to the hide beyond the main car park. Unfortunately, Marbled Duck, the 'jewel of the marsh' as described by the signage, was missing.

We drove to the beach, where the first gull on the beach turned out to be an adult Audouins Gull: a nice find. Lesser Black-backed Gulls followed and at the next stop a debate started over the large second calendar year bird that was probably a Yellow-legged Gull that resembled Great Black-backed Gull. As we pulled away, a pair of Magpies was spotted foraging under the bucket of a digger that was digging up sand for no obvious reason. It was to our benefit though as the Magpies were very obliging and many pictures were taken.

At the harbour mouth, we weren't quite prepared for the sight that beheld us. There were hundreds of Lesser Black-backed Gulls with some immature Yellow-legged Gulls surface dipping at the edge of the rocks, where it seemed there was a discharge from the adjacent fish factory. It was really rather spectacular. Further back away from the large gulls, there were also a good number of Black-headed Gulls and after a few minutes searching an adult (or very near) Mediterranean Gull was found. Further second calendar (1<sup>st</sup> winter) and third calendar year (2<sup>nd</sup> winter) individuals followed.

The 10 km or so back to the hotel passed quickly and we soon found ourselves in the checklist for the day over dinner. It was more than satisfying to place a resounding tick next to number 170 - Double-spurred Francolin. Thinking back, if we had not been late to the site on account of the initial

mistake of heading to the wrong location, we would not have met Mohammed. But was this serendipity or simply meant to be?

### **Day 3 - March 5**

#### **Merdja Zerda: marshmen and Marsh Owls**

After a rather leisurely start of breakfast at 06.30, we were on the road by 07.30, enjoying the bright and warm sunshine. We ran parallel to the coast for much of the next hour and fifteen minutes, occasionally glimpsing the ocean. The region is dominated by agriculture on the flat and fertile soils. Banana cultivation clearly hugely important and occurs under plastic greenhouses. Plastic had also been put to use to protect citrus trees on three sides.

We pulled off the motorway at the junction for Moulay Bousellem and made our way to the seafront, where the giant lagoon, the Merdga Zerda discharges in the ocean. A few minutes seawatching rewarded us with Sandwich and Caspian Terns returning to the lagoon presumably to roost, some Northern Gannets including 3<sup>rd</sup> calendar year birds as well as adults, and a group of around 50 Cory's Shearwaters.

Our guide for the day, Hassan, arrived on cue and climbed aboard the bus. Our plan was to drive around virtually the entire lagoon to reach the southern edge, where we were to meet with the guardian of that part of the marsh. This large detour was necessitated by the fact that the roosting owls of the Campsite are not currently present, although it would seem that they might be in a private campsite with avocado trees. The owner, fearful of his valuable trees does not allow access by birdwatchers

The journey took us through growing country, and Driscoll's, the berry people, have a large factory. Despite the strong economic basis of agriculture in this area and the fact that transport of goods is essential, the road is very poor and rubbish lines the streets of the settlements. The schoolchildren in contrast, are very smart, as is the new college built with Government funding.

Stopping for birds was not really a priority compared to reaching the owl, although we did stop for some close Crested Larks. Someone then noticed the mixture of Spotless and European Starlings foraging over a ploughed field. It was really interesting to see both species alongside each other, with the Spotless appearing to be slightly larger and thicker-set.

Hassan tried calling the 'marsh guardian' we were due to meet to no avail. In fact, we were supposed to meet a younger relative that was to describe to Hassan where the owls had been roosting. With a lot of water in the lagoon, many areas appeared to be too wet for roosting owls. With no reply to his calls, we stopped at a likely area and Hassan set off, rapidly enlisting the help of boy herders. Much stomping about in the marsh ensued again to no avail, although we did see large flocks of Grey Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit swirl in the distance.

As we boarded the bus to try another area, an official from the local commune stopped to ask about our purpose. Information provided by Adrian seemed to suffice and we got under way for a few minutes before being stopped again by the sane official, this time with a request for Mustapha's papers.

We were now on the way back to an area nearer the canal that Hassan thought could hold owls, when a young man stopped us. He identified himself as Said, the person we had been looking for in the first place! He said there had been two owls roosting in the area, with the last sighting perhaps a week or ten days ago. With Said aboard the bus we turned around and went beyond the place we had just left. It was drier here and Hassan and Said set off. Although we had been instructed to stay put, we followed at a discreet distance unsure of what was to happen. Another boy and a relatively old man joined in walking through the marsh. Suddenly the old man, the closest to the track yelled and two Marsh Owls flew in front of us before dropping back into the rushes (*Juncus* spp.) beyond two palm trees.

We waited until the entire group was prepared, and Hassan and the boy walked around the position the owls had come down and then walked back towards us. Both owls took to the air within a few seconds and whilst one bird dropped back into the vegetation after a few seconds, the other made several passes before doing so, providing excellent views. There is no doubt about it; with its dark underparts, lighter face and dark eyes and a golden panel in the wing, this is truly a beautiful owl. As the bird landed and disappeared from view, spontaneous applause broke out, much to the appreciation of Hassan and friends.

With our compatriots paid off we boarded the bus and continued onwards, emerging at the other side of the lagoon mouth. Here we had lunch whilst Hassan raced off to get the boats. Our German friends that we had met previously at Lac du Sidi arrived. Replete from lunch we walked down the dune dotted with fresh purple-blue Barbary Nut *Gynandris sisyriochium* to the two boats where Hassan and friend were waiting. On the water, we headed to a roost of Audouins Gulls on a sandbar that also contained a couple of Slender-billed Gulls and then to a small sand bar with a Mediterranean Gull, the species that Adrian told us we would not see again.

The water was still high despite the fact that it was nearing low water. Perhaps we were on a spring tide exacerbated by the flooding of the hinterland? As a result wader numbers were relatively low (hundreds and not thousands) and many of the birds were still at roost on the extreme edges of the marsh. Nonetheless, we still managed reasonable views of many Redshank, some Greenshank, Grey (Black-bellied) Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Oystercatcher and some rather distant Dunlin, mostly against the light. The large roosts of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Cormorants were much closer. Mike called a strange looking gull with a large orange bill that Martin initially thought was a weird tern before quickly releasing that the bird had long legs, and then it dawned on us this was a leucistic Oystercatcher! Hassan's attempt to land on a cockleshell island unfortunately flushed all the birds and we were not to get a closer view of the Oystercatcher.

The wind was distinctly fresh from the northwest creating a reasonable chop over the very shallow waters, but at least it was sunny and the rain was to hold off for now at least. Perusing on what seemed to be more or less a random path in and out of the clumps of saltmarsh we gradually increased our number of species, adding Pied Avocet, Whimbrel and then a Rock Pipit, a rare wintering bird this far south. More distinctly pink-tinged Slender-billed Gulls followed and then a Caspian Tern at roost with yet more Audouin's Gulls. We must have seen a reasonable proportion of the world population of this endangered species by now.

The journey began to give an impression of how vast this lagoon really is, with our frequent groundings illustrating how shallow it is too. Whilst our skipper had a trusty stick to pole us off any sand or mud bars, Hassan had to resort to rolling up his trouser legs and getting out to push the boat off at one point. The wind eventually claimed Suellen's hat although it was recovered from the bottom of the boat and Adrian offered a more updated snazzy version with a clip, but the fact that it had been jammed on his head for the trip thus far rendered it less attractive than it might have been.

Nearing the southern edge of the lagoon back at Moulay Bousellem, we saw a Cormorant struggling with a large eel that it lost at one point and had to scoot into the water to grab it again. Defiant to the last, the eel was eventually gulped down. After landing the boats, and using a milk crate as a disembarkment step to avoid a wet landing we thanked the drivers and were on our way again.

Back in Kenitra after about an hour, we stopped at Kniffniss lagoon near the hotel where Andrew and Martin had enjoyed much success a couple of days previously. The rain was really threatening now, but Squacco Heron and Purple Swamphen were claimed those who had not seen them before. Good views of Ferruginous Duck were also had, and a fly-by Black-shouldered Kite was pointed out by Mustapha, before the rain came down.

Lashing rain and gale-force winds were with us for much of the night, flooding the base of some rooms and even the restaurant. Fortunately, by morning although the wind persisted, the rain had stopped and the skies had cleared.

## Day 4 - March 6

### Volubilis & Fez medina: the real meaning of Fez

Although we were on course for leaving at 06.45 as planned, a small problem with the gate saw us trapped. The solution to sensitive electronics lies in a screwdriver and a large piece of wood wielded by two men. After some struggling, Mustapha lent a hand and we were suddenly free.

From Kenitra we began to encounter the rolling hills of the wheat-lands of this part of Morocco. First stop was for a large falcon spotted by Mustapha. Even though it was initially quite close to the bird we didn't manage to catch the salient features against the light. The leaders were clearly a little rusty. The bird then swung away across the low hills where it was joined by another one. The larger female landed and mating occurred. A glowing head at this distance suggested Lanner Falcon. Linnet and Corn Bunting were also recorded.

At the 20 km signpost we pulled off the road. Calandra Lark was singing but could not be seen and we concentrated on the Crested Larks near the road, trying to sort out the features that would enable us (at 365 m above sea level) to separate Crested from Thekla later. A Calandra with long wings that were dark underneath then glided over at considerable height. We walked down the road trying to determine where the bird had gone down. Still, our target bird proved elusive. Thinking that the larks were actually still in flocks at this early part of the breeding season and may be feeding in lower vegetation, Martin headed for a stubble field. Suddenly, one, followed by around 40 Calandras took to the air. One landed on the road verge and was 'scoped to everyone's satisfaction. Our boots were clogged with the sticky clay-based soil of the area and although attempts were made to remove it, the inside of the bus was now a little worse for wear.

Less than half an hour later we again pulled over, this time to take in the panoramic view of the ruins of Volubilis, nestling in the arable landscape. Even from the side of the road, the arches and columns of this large site are truly impressive as well as unexpected. Along the entrance drive, numerous lesser Kestrels were on the wing. After parking the bus, we met with our guide, Idris, who was given the job of guiding us even though he had protested that his English was far from adequate. Never mind, he would try.

The rain had led to a floral profusion and if the weather had not been cloudy with intermittent showers, we would surely have been treated to lots of butterflies on the wing. Idris was doing his best and his tour de force came with Mike and Marianne sat on either side of a stone plinth. As one person shuffled backwards, it became clear that Mike was sporting a giant stone phallus and Marianne was astride it. The group hooted with laughter that could be heard by all other visitors close by. They must have wanted whatever we'd been taking!

Lunch was taken at the tables and chairs in the small café on site in return and the first mint tea followed at the small cafe where Ann was keen to feed the persistent cats with leftover sardines. The postcard salesman was pleased to find a taker in Stu before we boarded the van to continue our journey to Fez.

In the French quarter of the city we disembarked at the Hotel Volubilis, which was rather fitting considering this is where we had just come from. The eyes of the group seemed to light up at the prospect of staying in this rather plush tourist hotel. We were later to learn however that this does not guarantee that the doors and TV work properly. Internet access was also limited to the foyer.

We were outside the hotel again by 15.00 to meet Ali our guide for the afternoon. He first explained the real meaning of Fez, which is not linked to the tassled red hat, but to an axe. We first stopped at the King's Palace, where Alpine Swifts whistled overhead. Ali explained that lemon juice is used to freshen and clean the massive brass doors at the guarded entrance. The King was in town, which explained the plethora of guards on duty and the fact that the city was intensely clean.

We move through the Jewish quarter, from which there had been a mass exodus in the 1950's and 1960's and Ali explained that only around some 200 Jewish people remain from the 1000's that

had been present. Moving on to the Medina itself, the medieval city that is home to 450,000 people we were suddenly in a different world of tiny streets. We speculated on whether some people ever really left. As soon as we entered the city through one of the 14 gates, we were immediately in a dizzying new world and in danger of sensory overload with the sights, the smells of the variety of foods, and not to mention the prospect of being run over by the hand carts and beasts of burden. The 'no Donkeys' sign in one area of narrow streets seemed particularly appropriate.

Ali was in constant dialogue by this time recounting that the city comprised 187 neighbourhoods, with an internal gate marking the end of one and the beginning of another. We went into a mosque where Ali explained the 5 essential elements of each neighbourhood: a fountain, a mosque, a koranic school, a bakery and a hamman. The numbers five, seven and eight have particular meaning and there were five colours in the tiles and five components of construction.

Different sections of each neighbourhood are characterised by different produce. We visited a bakery and the a 14<sup>th</sup> century hotel that was now an area involved in the first stage of animal hide preparation that involves stripping the fleece from the skin. A few finished ultra-soft fleeces decorated the entrance/exit. We tasted almonds and dates and Ann was given the responsibility of choosing the dates that the group would be consuming in the van as a treat over the coming days. As a precursor, Ali carried almonds in the hood of his djelaba and we took turns in dipping into it as we walked.

Next stop was a family-run weaving business, where the main central area was open to the sky although the loom and the prepared garments were tucked in under the surrounding recesses. A young university graduate, who had returned to the family business to practice the skills that he had learnt from his days as a small boy at his father's knee, was operating the loom. His brothers and cousins demonstrated bedspreads, and then moved on to scarves. They began to illustrate the different ways scarves could be prepared, starting with Joy. Selecting different colours for skin and hair colour the young men then worked around the rest of the ladies - Suellen, Janice, Ann and Marianne - before starting on the men, beginning with Mark and James and ending with Adrian. After a group photo that became ten with the different cameras handed over and hung around the necks of our hosts, a few scarves were sold, with Martin buying a queen-sized bedspread that was a series of delightful shades of blue. Now, how to carry it in luggage over the coming weeks...?

As the dusk started to descend, we got to the tannery. Ann declined to enter and waited in the lobby at the top of the stairs. We were given sprigs of mint to hold under noses to help overcome the pungent smells from the tannery area below us. A lone man was at work in one of the white stone circular cells reminiscent of the honeycomb in a bee's nest. Ali described this as one of the toughest jobs in the world, with the dangers of working with caustic (and probably carcinogenic) chemicals. Working means half-body emersion. Pigeon droppings are part of the chemical cocktail to strip fat and grease at an early stage of the process before the various dyes are applied. At least there had been a move away from the use of human urine!

We emerged from the tannery into a car parking area where the bus was waiting to take us back to the hotel. Yet another accident had occurred on the way back, which had again gathered a crowd of unrelated bystanders. At the hotel, we said our goodbyes to Ali, who had been simply excellent as our guide. After a quick shower and change, we met for dinner that was a buffet-style affair in what is an international-style hotel.

## **Day 5 - March 7**

### **Moyen Atlas to the Zeida Plain: an extraordinary lark**

A bit of a lie-in was had by most this morning with breakfast at 06.15. Departure was a little delayed as the hotel had arranged the transport of the bags to the bus. This did however mean that we were able to enjoy the Alpine and Pallid Swifts cruising overhead in the skies of Fez. It turned out that Stu and Andrew had already recorded 15 species of birds from their balcony.

From Fez, we began the climb to Ifrane. The landscape changed rapidly with evergreen oaks *Quercus* spp. being generally dominant. Here and there, plantations of Almonds were beginning to flower along with the odd Cherry, although none of the Apple trees were showing any sign of life. A terrific amount of rain had clearly fallen and standing water was everywhere, perhaps exacerbated by snow-melt. In a small town, Mustapha purchased bread and some stretched their legs. Everyone marveled at the town's affluence, which has a very Alpine quality with stylish houses with steep-pitched roofs to keep the roofs as clear from snow as possible.

By the turn to Dayet Aoua (lake of the gulls), we had reached an altitude of 1495 m. Just after reaching the lakeside, we stopped the van to walk along the track and almost immediately encountered a Great Spotted Woodpecker in one of the bare Poplars on the lake edge. This was quickly followed by a Mistle Thrush. Amongst the Red-knobbed and European Coots were Little Grebe and an amazing number of Black-necked Grebes entering summer plumage. Some displayed to each other chest-to-chest before being interrupted by another bird keen to bet in on the action.

Turning our attention to the pines on the right side of the track, we went in pursuit of a calling Jay and Firecrests. By now we had accumulated a veritable pack of dogs and small puppies. These became an annoyance especially when the puppies started whining, but despite the distraction, a Jay responded to the tape and checked us out. After a bit of effort, everyone had got good views of this surprisingly elusive species. Moving back to the track, it only seemed to be a few minutes until Adrian had got onto a pair of Levaillant's Green Woodpeckers, again in the bald poplars. One bird was illuminated by the brilliant sunshine and was simply stunning.

Mustapha spotted some displaying raptors, that we thought may be Sparrowhawks. In truth, most of us could not see with binoculars what Mustapha could see with the naked eye. Firecrests then started calling from the edge of the plantation and again with a little patience we were all rewarded with good views. As if to attract our attention a Short-toed Treecreeper starting singing from the Poplars and after a few minutes everyone had seen that as well. A pair of pristine Grey Wagtails then followed. This was now really turning into a special birding experience. The consumption of dates, now neatly ensconced in a sock box (yes really) courtesy of Mustapha, combined with figs and the salted almonds bought from the Medina the previous day, constituted a small celebration.

Moving on a few hundred metres in the van provided views of Common and Green Sandpipers and then a pair of Black-winged Stilts. We 'scoped the lake and its islands and Ferruginous Duck, Pochard, Mallard and a female Garganey were added to our duck tally. Andrew found a Common Snipe and then a plover that was initially thought to be a Ringed Plover. Persistence over what was quite a distance paid off and the bird eventually showed a dark bill and a yellow eye-ring to identify it as Little Ringed Plover.

Mustapha was then onto the raptors again, with one on the far ridge identified as Short-toed Eagle. The bird was missing an inner primary, creating a curious pale area in its left wing. The bird came closer and closer, stalling in the stiff breeze at intermittent intervals as it hunted. It then became two birds passing on a similar flight line.

Leaving the lake, we climbed again, passing through more open areas. We stopped briefly at a viewpoint created alongside a number of sheds selling trinkets. On the backs of the sheds, posters showing the animals and plants of the region were displayed. This area had really been tidied up since the last time we had passed through.

We then began to encounter Atlas Cedar *Cedrus atlantica*. Upon entering a dense stand of forest, some Barbary Macaques were spotted. We stopped and got out of the van to the two females with two youngsters, probably from the previous year. A family of tourists then stopped and began to feed the monkeys with bread. Not content with just reaching up or down to feed the monkeys, the male of the family then thought he would show off his prowess by trying to climb into the trees with the monkeys to give them food. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what goes on in some people's heads. Hand-outs and increased human-monkey contact will inevitably led to issues as the powerful

primates become more pushy, as is the case in Gibraltar where many tourists are ruthlessly and efficiently mugged. Ultimately, the monkeys may be at risk of control as 'problem' animals.

A short distance later we pulled off onto a track on the left side of the road as a lunch stop. We parked amongst short bare trees with tremendous growth of Red-berried Mistletoe *Viscum cruciatum*. The short grazed turf was dotted with tiny spring-flowering bulbs, a species of *Romulea*. A Coal Tit put in an appearance but proved elusive for some. The Long-legged Buzzard that had landed in the trees nearby was more obliging. Lunch was punctuated by views of Ravens, a fly-past Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and another Coal Tit, as well as the dogs that had edged too close to the food.

After lunch, we took a brief walk amongst the magnificent Cedars and their understory of *Quercus*. More Coal Tits and Short-toed Treecreepers were found before our target bird, Eurasian Nuthatch was found. This performed quite well, feeding out along thick branches as well as the trunks of the cedars. Just as we got into the van, we watched some Moroccan tourists being given horse-rides and then hand-feeding two more macaques that had come from the forest.

Continuing our journey through the increasingly stark but beautiful landscape we reached the wide wetland plain near to the reservoir of Lac de Sidi Aquelmane. Here, large numbers of Ruddy Shelduck were displaying and feeding. A short walk from the van produced our first identifiable lizard in a rock pile. This was Iberian Wall Lizard *Podarcis hispanica*. A pair of Atlas Horned Larks with their yellow throats and black face banding and horns were a good find and then as we stood next to the van trying to work out where the Skylark was singing, a lark landed between the main group and Andrew who was sheltering from the wind in the lee of a wall. The russet tinged uppertail coverts and whitish underwing coverts confirmed it as a Thekla Lark. The relatively long bill, but still with a curved culmen, and russet tinged crown implied the ruficolor race. Two birds were now present and these performed quite well for us.

Further down the road, we began to drop through the pass to the Zeida Plain below. Trees became more abundant although quite a lot of the Cedars have died in this area for whatever reason. A large falcon again escaped identification and a surprise Grey Heron was present alongside a swollen stream. Black Kites started to appear and we quickly realised this was visible migration in action with the birds coming through the pass and then battling against the wind across the top of the ridge. We counted at least a dozen.

Dropping into the Zeida Plain, we stopped briefly for a couple of Black Wheatears that were seen well at distance but disappeared as we attempted to get a closer view. After a short distance, we turned off the road down a track and were immediately into the *Artemisia* (Wormwood) steppe that is the home of Dupont's Lark on the Zeida Plain. Adrian spotted a number of birds in a small gully, but these could not be re-located. As we were only a few hundred metres from the area we have caught up with Dupont's Lark in the past, the decision was taken to walk through the vegetation in a broad line to see what we could encounter. After a short distance, a wheatear was picked up on a low shrub. Face-on the bird was first thought to be Desert Wheatear, although when a russet-coloured female also popped up nearby, this changed the opinion. The male then turned showed his red tail and grey nape and back confirming this as a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears.

On the left-hand end of the human line, Martin headed for what appeared to be a good area of *Artemisia* and Halfa Grass *Stipa tenacissima* that is preferred by nesting Dupont's Lark. Soon after, a bird was seen running away. Stu spotted it too. The red-brown colouration, relatively upright posture and speed of the bird suggested Dupont's Lark and Martin called everyone over. Two birds were now evident, but there was some uncertainty over the initial identity as one bird flew, and Dupont's Larks rarely fly. Still we pushed forward until a relatively short decurved bill on the remaining bird was spotted, and now we were sure. With Andrew on one flank and Martin on the other we closed in. Mike was particularly close and the bird craned to look at him first around one side of a grass clump and then the other, before it suddenly flew back from whence it had come. Although we tried, we couldn't re-locate it. Nevertheless, this was a huge success to find Dupont's Lark without having to rely on a

pre-dawn excursion to hear singing birds. Although we tried the same tactic over the next half-mile or more, swinging around to also cover the other side of the track, no more birds of any kind were seen.

The journey into Midelt only took a few minutes and we marveled at the giant model apple as a fountain. This gives a clue for the basis of the existence of the town, which is not otherwise obvious, as the centre of Morocco's apple production. The Villa Midelt took a little finding but was helped by the instructions of a petit taxi driver and good signage once we got close. A man outside seemed to have been expecting us and opened the door to a walled courtyard. The inside of the Riad or Moroccan guesthouse itself was a revelation of all things Moroccan, and we were immediately plied with mint tea and snacks including peanuts and almonds. The lady of the house, Mounia, supported by Hanan, quickly organised our rooms, which were individual and all extremely colourful. Dinner was terrific with more snacks between the Harare soup, a mixture of fine salads and a vegetable and chicken tajine. Even the cinnamon oranges were in different league compared to those we had been previously served. A pity indeed that we would only be spending one night in this environment, but now that Dupont's Lark had been attained, we would get to have a lie-in and enjoy breakfast in our comfortable surroundings rather than attempt the pre-dawn quest, which can be extremely cold on the plain.

## **Day 6 - March 8**

### **Midelt to Erfoud: journey to the desert**

We said our farewells to Mounia and her small team, as a Little Owl looked on from the corner of the building opposite. I think we would all agree that another night in the Riad would have been most welcome, but there is little to keep birders in the area once the Zeida Plain has been explored. We were on the road by 08.00 and after a relatively short time were stopping for a few birds near the road edge. The first of these was a very close Spectacled Warbler that flitted away past a pair of Desert Larks and a Barbary Ground Squirrel. Whilst we successfully pursued the larks, leading to good views as they foraged on the opposite side of a wadi, the warbler proved elusive, as is typical for this species. A bright green Uromastix or Dab Lizard, with a dark head and tail was spotted basking on top of a rock allowing us to familiarise ourselves with at least one colour scheme of this rather large and spectacular species.

At the edge of a reservoir, there were 11 Greater Flamingoes that we assumed were en-route to or from the desert where a lake may form after heavy rainfall. This was our first hopeful sign that we may be rewarded with what is a truly remarkable sight. Alongside the flamingoes in this reservoir, other waterbirds including Great Cormorant, Black-headed Gull, Ferruginous Duck, Mallard, Pochard and large numbers of what we thought were Eurasian Coot in a shallow bay were recorded. We used the toilet facilities amongst the rocks and getting into the van a dead Barn Swallow was discovered dead on the road. Being hit by a vehicle in the middle of nowhere in Morocco was an ignominious end for an individual likely to be on its way back to Europe to breed.

We passed through Errachidia, an even larger town than Midelt. The reason for its existence is perhaps linked to its importance as a garrison town with an airport and very smart sports complex, which appears to be for the troops stationed there. In the centre of town we stopped for hobs. Gazing idly around we noticed a phone booth with no sides and then someone pointed out that it was actually on wheels. We speculated that this was an early version of a mobile phone.

Lunch was taken at the viewpoint over the Ziz Valley with its extensive palmeries bordering the river, a true ribbon of life in an otherwise rather barren landscape. Adrian walked the group around as lunch was being prepared, noting White-Crowned Black Wheatear amongst a range of other species. As we ate lunch, a male Trumpeter Finch and a Desert Lark foraged amongst the stones of an area just below us reached by a few steps. Sitting on the steps allowed an unrivalled close-up view of both species.

Erfoud, the gateway to the eastern sandy desert before the border with Algeria, has quite extensive date palms. Many plantations alongside the road were partly flooded, indicating just how much rain had fallen in the recent past. After a novel toilet stop in a garage rather than on the side of the road, we pushed on to Rissani and from there to the line of cliffs resembling a large recumbent predator on the edge of town. We stopped for a couple of Brown-necked Ravens, that immediately flew over us, revealing that much of the body, and not just the nape of the neck is brown. More Ravens joined the group and circled above giving the impression that they were waiting for at least one of us to succumb.

Rounding the line of cliffs we turned right down the track. Brahim, a local contact of Adrian's was already there with his driver and a client. A falcon was perched on a white-washed ledge, which we assumed was a Barbary Falcon until it took flight, and Martin's picture revealed it had a golden crown and evenly spaced barring on the tail. This was indeed a Lanner Falcon. The hole that used to be occupied as a roost by one of the Pharaoh Eagle Owl pair was empty. Unfortunately, the cleft that is generally also occupied was also sans hibou. Brahim was also rather surprised. As we became engaged with Monsieur Fossil or rather the three fossil guys that had seen us from the main road and raced in by bike and motorbike to intercept us, Andrew spotted a blotchy dark and pale Red Fox that quickly scaled the dune against the cliff and disappeared over the ridge.

Having taken some instruction from Brahim, there should have been no confusion over the location of the track that would lead us behind another ridgeline into an area frequented by sandgrouse. Nonetheless, whilst Mustapha thought the track was 25 km distant, Adrian thought it was 2 km. Perhaps in truth the instruction had been 2-5 km creating the discussion. After a false alarm on the first track chosen, the second led us into a sandy area with low vegetation representing a 'bowl' of perhaps several tens of square kilometres. Having started scanning immediately after getting out of the bus, Martin announced that he'd located sandgrouse at about 800 yards distant. All we had to do now was to close the gap to get a better view. Within about 150 yards or so, we counted around 35 truly beautiful Spotted Sandgrouse in this one group. Mustapha, well off to our right, found another group of 6. With another group off to our left, found as we searched for smaller passerines, there seemed to be 80 sandgrouse in all. The smaller birds present included a Short-toed Lark that initially evaded identification and a Desert Wheatear. A couple of Ravens and a Lanner that suddenly appeared on top of one of the tiny bushes with a stature measured in inches rather than feet completed our haul.

In the hope that the owl had been deep in the cleft rather than the entrance, we returned to the roost site. There was still no sign, but there were now two lanners atop the cliff face; a large female and a smaller, darker teircel (male). As we headed away, in a moment of déjà vu Andrew spotted another lighter-coloured Red Fox from the bus in the dusk. Photos confirmed it was carrying some sort of prey.

We now had about 45 minutes to travel to the Auberge Derkoua aka Chez Michel, although Michel is sadly no longer with us and the hotel is now run by Bouchra and Said. At our accommodation, we said farewell to Mustapha who would not be with us for a few days as we were to travel the desert in 4WDs complete with drivers.

The dark is complete in this rather remote location and the group would be unaware of the full beauty of our surroundings until the morning. Nevertheless, the grounds of the auberge we could see looked simply delightful, with numerous lanterns hanging amongst the olive trees. The rooms in different blocks across the site are traditional piste construction with an internal ceiling of a lattice of bamboo over the wooden beams. To complete our introduction, we had dinner by candlelight amongst the forest of lanterns and underneath the stars of a clear sky.

## Day 7 – March 9

### Erg Chebbi: Berber ski and a Bustard

At 05.15 we found ourselves stumbling around in the dark trying to get out of the hotel to reach the three 4WD (Toyota land cruisers), driven by reputed top bird guide Lachsen supported by Ali and Hassan, that had arrived to pick us up. Speeding to the desert, we encountered a Cape Hare that showed well in the fringes of the headlights as we followed it a short distance. A new road had just been constructed and this carried us some way into the desert. This was a far cry from previous trips when drivers had navigated according to tracks marked by small white stones or simply followed their noses, picking around any obstructions.

Suddenly we were alongside waiting camels and we abandoned one mode of transport for another under Adrian's instruction of "Pick your camel". Experienced horsewoman Suellen was first up as her camel unfolded its legs and shot her skyward. And then we were all at it, with some looking slightly more assured than others. Pairs of camels were hooked up to each other as the guides in Tuareg blue led us away.

A bird that we could neither see nor identify was calling overhead in the pre-dawn gloaming. Reaching the foot of a great dune, we scrambled upward each pulled by one or two of our guides as the 60 degree slope is tough on the legs. Although the sky showed great promise, unfortunately, cloud spoiled the sunrise at the last moment. It didn't matter though as the view was spectacular and then most joyously took part in 'Berber ski' (being pulled on a rug) on the way down the dune.

Nearing a well, the shout went up for a bird that turned out to be a female Desert Sparrow that was collecting red wool as nesting material. She flew to another well and was immediately joined by a male, giving the same call that we had heard previously. The female flew inside the grate of the well revealing where they were nesting. This has increased the number of known pairs in the area to two, and all from the back of a camel!

Back in the cars, we were to be whisked away to something special. Within a few minutes we had scored Desert Grey Shrike, Cream-coloured Courser and a bright Northern Wheatear. The migration theme continued with a lone House Martin that could have been heading to Martin's home village where they breed. We then drew up at the edge of a sandy wadi with quite a lot of vegetation. A shepherd just appeared from nowhere and after a brief exchange of greetings, we were guided to two small bushes. There between them was an Egyptian Nightjar, with another just to the right. A third bird behind the second was then spotted. The mottled camouflage and massive head and tiny bill gives the species a most un-bird like quality. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, two birds awoke and took flight although they quickly came down again after a few yards. As we walked back to the van, a Hoopoe Lark came to the edge of small dune as if to check us out. Our shepherd friend was duly paid off with great thanks and he simply walked off into the stony nothingness.

More than pleased with ourselves, we headed back to our auberge for breakfast that included various sorts of pancakes. We were out again by 10.30 am. Adrian and Martin, now with hand-held radios again divided themselves between vehicles, with Adrian in Lachsen in the lead. It became apparent that neither other driver ever upset the status quo of Lachsen at the head of the trio of vehicles, although the other two frequently jockeyed for the second position. Andrew and Stu were co-opted as a third honorary leader and radio operator for the third vehicle.

We took a slow drive at the basis of a wadi wall where an Eagle Owl may be found on the ground, but with no success. Adrian then told everyone to look out for small warblers in the bushes. He'd barely finished, when Mike saw a small warbler in the bushes. The news on the radios brought us to a stop and we all jumped out of the vehicles. Amazingly, a Desert Warbler was in full view hopping about in a bush for what seemed like minutes and then sat atop a grassy tuft posing for Martin and his camera. We had never seen such calm and obliging behavior from Desert Warbler before.

A Hoopoe Lark had started singing as if to demand our attention and we walked over to where we thought it was. In truth, the song has a rather ventriloquistic quality and some of us headed in the wrong direction before it was found engaged in display flight. This is a spectacular event with the bird starting to sing from an elevated position, in this case a small sand dune, and after it works itself up, the bird runs forward into flight. In the air, it climbs to a zenith, and then it loops over with broad black-and-white wings spread on display, before heading sandwards with closed wings, still singing throughout. Only at the last possible microsecond before it nosedives into the sand does the bird stop singing and spread its wings to sweep to land close to the position it first left. The bird shifted dunes and now being used to us, allowed an incredibly close approach to less than ten yards.

We then headed for Lachsen's bivouac for Desert Sparrow. The birds were initially found in an olive tree that he had planted, but these flew off for some inexplicable reason. Whilst we waited for them to return, mint tea was served in the main tent and we checked out their potential nest site in a small building. Return they did and we were soon enjoying terrific views of both female and then male Desert Sparrow amongst the local House Sparrows and a lone White Wagtail. Some goats in a dwelling originally built for people watched us through what would have been the windows

The drive for Houbara Bustard then began. About 30 minutes or so of driving down a sandy wadi, we emerged over a ridge and into what was described as the main area for what is almost a mythical bird. We cruised alongside the patches of vegetation, some quite dense and others pretty thin. And so it continued for the next three hours or so, punctuated only by a stop for Thick-billed Larks that Mike had spotted. Incredibly, we then stopped for some footprints in the sand. We're not quite sure how Lachsen had seen them from the wrong side of his vehicle, but see them he did. He jumped out and after a quick glance, continued with renewed vigour. As we drove past the spot, Martin at least was able to see the large prints of our quarry. Suddenly the myth had some basis in reality especially as Lachsen was convinced that some of the tracks were from today. However, we saw no further sign and after doubling back to the thickest vegetation, we went for a short walk to give the drivers a brief respite.

Birds were everywhere amongst this vegetation, with Desert Warbler and Wheatear, and a variety of larks seen in rapid succession. We got back into the vehicles and a short time we stopped on the top of a ridge with a view across the wide stony plain below. Scanning quickly, Martin radioed there was a possibility of a couple of birds at large distance and then seconds later uttered excitedly "Adrian, I've got one". We were all out of the vehicles in an instant, desperately trying to focus on the bird that was about a mile away and walking fast at an angle to us. There is always a rush of adrenalin in such moments, when a dream of a bird as spectacular as this, is realised. In the late afternoon, the bird was bathed in an orange glow, with all features such as the black line down the neck onto the chest clearly visible. Houbara has a slightly peculiar gait when walking quickly as it appears to be on tip-toe. Marianne summed this up aptly as "walking as though its feet hurt".

As we sought to close the distance a little in the vehicles, the bird took off and with great broad wings pulsing, was slightly reminiscent of a giant long-necked owl, albeit with bold black and white patterning. We left the vehicles and walked to the next ridge on foot. When re-located, the bird was nowhere near where we had thought it had landed again showing how much ground the bird can cover on foot in a short time. At more than half a mile distant the bird took off again but landed after a short distance, whereupon it continued to walk away. It had soon increased the distance between us to about two miles and at that point as the sun set, we stopped looking. Adrian took a picture of his grinning group with the spectacular sunset sky as a backdrop.

At another superb meal, talk was of the highlights of what had been a truly incredible day. Even Adrian ranked it as probably the best single day he'd experienced in the desert. Needless to say perhaps, Houbara topped the poll.

## Day 8 – March 10

### Merzouga & Rissani: Ali the Nomad and the Pharaohs

After the previous days success we had a bit of a lie in and did not leave the hotel until 08.00, heading south to Merzouga, in the opposite direction of many of the northbound birds we were hoping to encounter. A palmery forms the green heart of Merzouga, and a complex irrigation system where the delivery of water is blocked with mud dams for a specific amount of time to each plot in turn, allows the cultivation of a variety of low-growing crops under the palms. In this cool green world, Laughing Doves added to the cacophony of Collared Doves. A Tree pipit was discovered and then a bathing female Subalpine Warbler that prompted some discussion. The water also attracts amphibians as well as birds and we were lucky enough to find a beautiful Mauritanian Toad.

Unfortunately, the birding was a little slow and we soon found ourselves back at the bus accompanied by a gang of children trying to sell trinkets. Lachsen asked if we had seen the babblers that had been close by a few minutes earlier, and we turned back to look for the two he had seen. Before we had got far, Stu found a small bird that he described as having a blue throat before it dropped into the vegetation. This was indeed a Bluethroat skulking in the barley crop. Mike then found another and in the end there were probably three. We all eventually got onto one bird or other, albeit rather briefly.

We had heard from Brahim that the temporary lake outside Merzouga had indeed filled with water some six days earlier and whilst he had seen no birds there the day we met him, we were hopeful that sufficient time had elapsed for birds to find it. Just before we got there, we stopped for a sandy-coloured Wheatear that turned out to be a male pale-throated form of Black-eared Wheatear. From the lakeside it was immediately clear that our luck was in, with several pairs of Ruddy Shelduck obvious. A group of ducks asleep some distance out in the lake proved to be Marbled Duck, one of the Moroccan specialties we were hopping to see, and we walked forward for a better view. The more we looked the more we saw including both Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers. Vagrant Emperors looped in tandem (males grasp a female behind the head and the female loops her abdomen forward to make contact with the males genital opening) were everywhere, seeking to take advantage of the conditions while they lasted. The flamingoes on the far side of the lake were disturbed into flight by some local people on that bank, and did a neat fly-past before re-settling in the same area.

We drove to the far side of the lake for a short walk for warblers amongst the tamarisks. Unfortunately, the bushes were perhaps a little thin to be attractive if migration was indeed underway. The only evidence of this was a Booted Eagle being mobbed by a Raven. Martin was distracted by a pair of Maghreb (Long-billed) Larks and whilst taking a few photos, was approached by a family with two children: a girl and her older brother. Looking through the 'scope Martin prepared for them the Moroccan boy announced that this was "super powerful" and the "flamingos were walking on the water like ninjas". Adam was apparently the top of his class in English. As his mother was French he was probably pretty good in that too. Back in the car, Ali, who had majored in geology at University recognised the father as a biology lecturer at Meknes, where he'd studied. It really is a small world.

Lachsen then took us to a spot he knew that was good for sandgrouse. Here, we tracked alongside a strip of vegetation up to around 200 yards wide. No grouse were obvious for the first time in the two years Laschen had been coming to the spot. Perhaps distracted, he nosed his vehicle down into a sharply angled fold in the stony ground that was too narrow to climb out of. With the front of the vehicle resting against far side of the mini-valley, the first attempt at reversing out, simply led to spinning back wheels. Engaging 4WD and rocking the vehicle back and forth soon got him out however.

Lunch back at the hotel was an incredibly rich effort of three courses, with a salad of artichoke hearts amongst several other mixtures. Then the beef and egg main course arrived and we stared at it wondering how we would cope. Ann and Stu had separate meals comprised of spaghetti (the like of

which neither Adrian nor Martin had ever seen in Morocco), and a mushroom omelette. We switched around various parts of the different meals until all were happy.

Over lunch, we hatched a plan in which we would try another area for sandgrouse, drop into Rissani for yet another shot at the Pharaoh Eagle Owl and then visit the spot where Dunn's Lark had bred for the first time in Morocco the previous year and be back for 19.00. Not all shared the view that this would be possible! For those that wanted, there was the opportunity to chill at the hotel, go in the swimming pool or walk the grounds that are a magnet for small migratory passerines in particular. After some discussion, only Ann stayed.

At the sandgrouse spot, it looked like the 4WDs would trash what little vegetation was present and so we stopped the vehicles and continued on foot in a line across the habitat. The ground was hard and cracked into crazy paving, which is entirely unsuitable for sandgrouse, and not surprisingly there were no birds to be seen. James then saw a small long-tailed warbler, which Andrew got a brief view of, before it went to ground in a bush. Andrew thought this was a Scrub Warbler, which was confirmed as it emerged before flitting to another bush. We positioned ourselves and waited. Nothing happened and we assumed it had flown. Andrew moved in and was right on top of the bush before the bird scuttled to another and there it stayed amongst the basal stems where it could be seen from above and at some angles in binoculars. We backed off and waited. Ten minutes or more passed and so Adrian then played the calls of Scrub Warbler on his ipod. The bird immediately emerged and hopped along the ground from bush to bush, occasionally climbing at the top of one before flitting to the next and emitting a purring trill at intervals. In the end, we all got tremendous views of a species that Lachsen had only seen once before, in what is his local patch.

In line with our plan, we headed back to Rissani again to search for Pharaoh Eagle Owl. As we drove in along the track we passed a man standing with his bike. We were not to know at the time how our lives would become entwined. A scan in the first set of holes revealed the owl was not present. The man had now caught up with us and instead of trying to sell us fossils was explaining that the owl was not present and that he knew of another, but some distance away. After a brief discussion, the drivers loaded his bike on the roof of one of the vehicles and rather than getting in, he climbed up with it! We joked that he was looking to start an insect collection sampled from a moving vehicle. The craziness continued as we sped through villages with the man shouting at the cyclists to get out of the way. All the time the sun was sinking to the horizon and seemingly with it our chances of seeing an owl at roost. Turning down another track after passing through another village we found ourselves heading to an impressive escarpment; a place truly for the king of birds in this area. After coming to a rapid stop, we left the vehicles and ran down a sandy track to a view of a cliff face in a natural horseshoe-shaped arena. It took about five seconds to work out the best place to look as scopes were being assembled, and there on the ledge in front of a hole with a little whitewash on the cliff below, sat a truly magnificent owl.

Our guide, who had fortunately survived the wacky race intact, introduced himself as Ali the Nomad, known the world over! This inevitably created some amusement and Martin tried to quell the chatter, especially since an Eagle Owl had started to call, its deep low hoot resounding around us. Martin confirmed this was second bird and suddenly there it was in flight from right to left and the perching atop the cliff. After more calling, both birds were abroad and calling in the gloaming, with one flying to the closer cliff face immediately to our left. Stu re-found it and after a last view in the virtual dark we headed back to the vehicles.

The world-renowned Ali and his bike were dropped off at a roundabout on the main road and we headed back to Derkoua, only an hour late. Here, we thanked our drivers for their sterling efforts and skills. After a quick handwash, we related our tales to Ann and after sorting out what had become an issue with laundry, enjoyed another sumptuous meal.

## Day 9 – March 11

### Derkoua to Boulmane: Gorgeous Eagles and more Pharaohs

After saying our goodbyes to the staff at Derkoua and greeting Mustapha who had arrived to collect us in the van, we trundled a few miles down the road back to Merzouga to the spot where a pair of Dunn's Larks had bred for the first time in Morocco (as far as is known) the previous year. We again adopted our 'line walking' through the vegetation back towards the road. Desert Warbler, Desert Lark, a pair of Desert Wheatears, up to three Hoopoe Larks, and a Woodchat Shrike were all seen as we continued past the van and over the road. Stu then found some promising larks just as we were turning back. Martin and Mike joined him as we sought to get definitive views and pictures even though the initial signs were that these were Bar-tailed Larks. The rest of the group had joined us before that occurred though.

Invariably running late, we continued to Erfoud to head west on the main road. A chunky Kestrel doing an impression of a larger cousin prompted a further stop before Adrian again stopped the van for some slim birds on the wires. These were Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters in exactly the same spot near a school that we had seen them five years previously. These are truly exotically colourful birds and as they were completely oblivious to us, we were able to enjoy their finery in detail.

We picked up bread and some then headed into a market with a tremendous show of olives. Back in the van, we crossed a relatively flat landscape before beginning the ascent to Todra Gorge with luxuriant palmeries alongside the river. At the towering gorge, whilst the rest of the group walked along the road adjacent to the river, Mustapha and Martin went ahead to prepare lunch. Typically, during the migration period the airspace above the river is a veritable blizzard of swallows and martins; but not today. Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush were seen though.

At lunch, we marvelled at the climbers ascending the vertical faces of the huge cliffs. Mustapha recounted that a German climber had recently fallen to his death in the area. Immediately after lunch, we started to fan out from the van. Andrew had only potted a few yards when he called "Tristram's Warbler". This incredibly obliging male hopped amongst the roadside rocks and bushes whilst we picked over the subtleties of shape and plumage that distinguishes this species from other similar Sylvia warblers.

We no particular need to travel further down the road and many miles to cover, we drove back through the gorge to continue our journey. A quick stop on the other side, a Bulbul gave the impression of another species. Scanning the skies, we became aware that the Rock Doves were scattering and suddenly a pair of Eagles had whistled in and were sitting amongst the foliage of the single tree that was clinging to the vertical face virtually at the top of the gorge. One bird appeared to be eating prey. After a few minutes the pair took to the air, dispelling any lingering doubt that these were indeed Bonelli's Eagles, with pale underparts and dark upperparts with the upper back speckled with white markings. The size differential between the two birds was clearly apparent as a brief cruise along the gorge as if demonstrating ownership, was brought to a rapid halt as both birds landed back in the same tree. After the eagles, we laughed at the 'Ass Club' sign, before then stopping at a couple of incredibly scenic viewpoints with a ribbon of green nestling in the otherwise barren lands.

We pushed onto Boumalne continually checking for Maghreb (Mourning) Wheatear. A pair of Desert Wheatears was responsible for one false alarm where we had actually stopped and searched a hillside and small wadi. Further slow-downs for the odd shrike prompted the use of the phrase: 'three shrikes and you're out'. In what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, we turned off a track where we could see a man waiting for us. It seemed entirely natural to stop and pick him up. This was Youssef, who we instantly dubbed as 'Cat Stevens'. After only a short drive down the track we stopped on the edge of a wadi opposite a low cliff face. Within a few seconds we'd found another Pharaoh simply perched on a ledge out in the open and then another crouching on another ledge just below it! We showed Youssef 'his' owls through a telescope and as he didn't appear to have any

optics of any sort. This was probably the best view he'd had of the birds, unless his other clients had done the same.

We then walked on, guided by Youssef in search of the Maghreb Wheatear that was reputed to hold a territory in the area according to Brahim, who had arranged our link with Youssef. There was no sign of said wheatear, but Black Wheatear, Thekla Lark, Crag Martins, and mating kestrels were all seen. Whilst looking up at the Kestrels, it became clear we were being watched from a cave in the rocks above, which had a low wall across the front presumably to help protect the occupants from the worst of the weather. This turned out to be where Youssef and at least one relative/friend live. Watching over the owls appeared to be a permanent and full-time occupation and we speculated on how everybody fed themselves. With no obvious source of electricity, we concluded that Youssef must have charged his phone with a small solar panel. His phone was clearly essential to link with Brahim and maybe other guides to bring people to the spot and provide enough income for all to live.

Back at the van, we thanked our new friend and he seemed happy with the money Adrian had given him for the experience. Moving on, we continued our wheatear search. A brief glimpse of something promising prompted a further chase through a small quarry and across a hillside. Our quarry in the quarry turned out to be Red-rumped Wheatear and as this was confirmed, four Temminck's Larks were flushed that quickly settled to feed again.

In Boumalne, we check into the Kasbah Tizzarouine. After a little persuasion, many of the couples took in residence in the caves, which are a feature of this Kasbah. There had been a lot of work at the Kasbah since the leaders' last visit and the new rooms in one wing were a two-room affair with comfortable bench seats around the walls decorated with carpets. At dinner, another British group were already in residence and were noteworthy by being louder than us!

## **Day 10 – March 12**

### **Taghdilt track to Ouarzazate: the wild wheatear chase**

After clouds had covered the stars the night before, the day dawned bright and sunny. Breakfast was at 07.00 today, with the intention to leave by 07.45. We were bang on target as we began the short drive to the Taghdilt track. Turning right at the main junction we headed towards a depression that supports a series of small pools after rain and is a good spot for drinking sandgrouse. Another minibus linked to the British group we'd encountered the night before was parked there. We stopped short of the pools with the intention of working the hillside and retaining some distance from them to allow any birds to fly in to drink without being disturbed. Before we'd got anywhere, some Lesser Short-toed Larks with a Thekla Lark were spotted on the roadside.

As we walked across the hillside it became clear that active visible migration was in progress as a couple of small groups of Common Swifts passed low overhead followed by some Red-rumped Swallows and a House Martin. These were all migrating in a broadly westerly direction presumably to avoid crossing the snow-covered Atlas Mountains at this point. Thick-billed Larks, Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears and a Woodchat Shrike followed, along with our first Sand Rat. The obese specific name of this rodent gives the species its 'Fat' prefix for some commentators. Around the pools there were many Greater Short-toed Larks, with some of the Lesser Short-toed variety and a Tawny Pipit. Those that had previously missed Temminck's Horned Lark were able to catch up with them here. A Sand Martin briefly flew over the pools and more Common Swifts flew low over our heads as we neared the bus.

Mustapha was convinced that he had seen three species of wheatear including Maghreb at the spot we had just left. So, after some discussion we tried again. Both Desert and Red-rumped were on breeding territories, each in an area with a sheep-fold created by a pile of rocks. There was however no sign of the Maghreb Wheatear. Little did we know that this would set the tone for the rest of the day.

After a brief stop for a Red Fox spotted by Mustapha, we moved down the road to an area of Poplars growing alongside a watercourse with Olive trees growing in a series of terraces. A superb male Whinchat was seen on a bare tree. The migration theme continued with a wet Willow Warbler that had emerged from a bath and then two bright male Common Redstarts chasing each other. With no clear path through the terraces and with the fear that we would upset the owners, who were now warily watching us from the house on the opposite side of the road we abandoned walking through the plantation and stuck to the side of the road. After a roadside Trumpeter Finch we were on our way again.

Turning left off the road onto a track we had barely reached the low crest of a slope when about 20 sandgrouse took flight to the area in front of us, before settling again very quickly. We stopped and carefully got out of the van to view the birds with telescopes. An attempt to get a little closer led to them flushing, which at least gave us an opportunity to see they were all indeed Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

At Dave Gosney's 'wheat ear wall' that had knowingly held breeding Maghreb Wheatears up until at least four years previously, a Long-legged Buzzard and many House Sparrows were the only birds in residence. Brahim called on the phone to say he had seen Maghreb Wheatear at the rubbish dump the week before and as it was on our circuit, we passed through to see if we find it. Martin was shocked just how terrible the dump had become even compared to five years earlier. Rather than being relatively discreet, it was difficult to determine if there was a centre as the plastic bags were covering many, maybe even tens of kilometres. Then we found the foetid heart with its population of feral dogs (Adrian had counted 60 in his visit the previous December). We couldn't face getting out of the bus in this environmental disaster despite the fact that there a few birds hopping about, and we left quickly. Surely, this situation has to be brought under control?

We were now running at least half an hour late en-route to Skoura and our lunch stop. After stopping in Boumalne to buy bread and some rose-related products in a small shop, we looked to stop near the river as the road follows it for many kilometres. No stopping place could be found and we emerged into a barren landscape. As it was now 13.00, we attempted to stop behind a wall, but as it was not very suitable, we agreed that we would try and get through the next 20 miles or so to our destination. So the wall was turned into a short toilet stop instead.

A little ways down the road, after passing a mobile phone mast installation atop a hill, Adrian saw what he described as a white-chested Wheatear on the side of the road. There was nowhere to stop just over the summit and so we left the vehicle to scan back. The bird again appeared briefly on the roadside wall. As we walked away from the vehicle we realised just how strong the wind had become. The bird was then again seen briefly before flying on. With one group on the road and Martin and Andrew at the base of the rocky slope, we thought we should get a view. Suddenly a bird appeared and then flitted away becoming two just in front of us. Martin took some photos before one, and then the second flew away. After a couple of seconds, one then came back over our heads at height. Martin checked his photos to find he had pictures of White-crowned Black Wheatear, which is what both Andrew and Stu had seen. Mike meanwhile had seemed to be looking at another bird with a white chest. Four of us continued to re-find the missing White-crowned Black Wheatear, but with no sign of the Maghreb that Mike was now convinced he had seen.

Mustapha had moved the van behind the phone mast building, had decided it was too windy and left and then, with no alternative, returned to try again. Using the van as an extension to the corner of the wall, he created enough of a wind-break for us to have what was now a very late lunch. A number of helpers enabled a quick set-up and our group hunger was soon sated.

Moving on again, we began to see odd raptors crossing in front of us. A brief stop at a wadi that had supported Maghreb Wheatear in the recent past failed to produce a wheatear, but we did see around 100 Black Kites that had been forced down by the wind and were now 'kettling' before they seemed to decide that the best course of action was to stay put.

It was now clear that any attempt to bird around the reservoir near Ouarzazate would be next to impossible due to flying sand and so Adrian headed us to Ait Ben Haddou, a fortified town and Unesco site that is being restored and sits across a wide river. Here, Andrew finally chased down his ice cream in the form of a choc-ice, although in his haste knocked over the entire postcard collection of the shop! He finally caught up with us on the other side of the river after navigating the sandbags that allow the crossing.

As soon as we entered a small olive grove before one of the entrances to the fortified town, a Subalpine Warbler attracted attention. A larger, grey-olive warbler then became obvious and we realised we were watching our first Western Olivaceous Warbler of the trip. It was quite obliging and being so close we were quite happy with its ID.

We then split into groups with Adrian taking the shoppers into the Kasbah and Martin taking the rest. Skirting the edge of the settlement, the latter group found some dense stands of olives, but here the wind was pretty strong and although it was terrific habitat there was a dearth of small birds. It was only as began to leave the olives that at least some birds were seen. Most unexpectedly, these were four Little Ringed Plovers in a flooded field. Emerging onto the riverbank, we could see at least three more plovers on the shingle banks of the rapidly flowing river as well as some White Wagtails with very dark and extensive face markings – a sort of not quite version of the Moroccan race. A beautiful male Black-eared Wheatear of the black-throated form then appeared just in front of us in a bare bush. From here, we could also see the rest of our group just reaching the top of the Kasbah. It would clearly be some time before they would join us, even though we were almost at rendezvous time. It was probably for the best as we could stop at another small group of olives out of the wind. Immediately, a small pale, flitting warbler invited attention and the first view through binoculars revealed the distinctive ‘open’ face of Western Bonelli’s Warbler. This performed brilliantly, overlapping with another Olivaceous Warbler and a nice female Black Redstart.

The other part of the group emerged with their shopping trophies and we all headed back across the river. At one of the last shops along the cobbled track from the river, Ann bargained her way to an impossible price for a wooden camel and then decided against it before we boarded the bus. In Ouarzazate we began the search for supermarket beer and wine in some cases (notably Mark and James), to take to our ‘dry’ hotel. Our second attempt was successful before we checked in to La Gazelle in the dark.

## **Day 11 – March 13**

### **Ouarzazate to Oukaimeden: More wheatear chasing and the Atlas Crossbill**

The luggage was outside with no bus to put it in as one of the front tyres was flat and Mustapha had left to try and get it changed. Nowhere had been open but he had managed to put on the spare. However, we had barely travelled a couple of miles and had turned back to check out some Red-rumped Swallows over some irrigated fields in the bright morning sun, before it became clear that the front tyre was still misbehaving. The decision was taken to leave the group birding with Martin whilst Adrian and Mustapha went to try and replace the tyre and also acquire a missing locking nut.

The ‘flat tyre’ fields as they quickly became known were simply excellent with 50 or more Blue-headed (with a yellow throat) and Iberian (with a white throat) Wagtails. The more we looked the more birds we saw. Janice kept tally and we were soon up to 25 species including goodies such as low-flying Black Kites coming from a roost and then thermalling to gain height, three fly past Purple Herons, more Little Ringed Plovers, Northern Wheatears and Blue Rock Thrush: all this close to the centre of town.

After about an hour the boys were back and we headed out of town to recommence our wheatear chase. The road to Amerguane has been good for Maghreb Wheatears for us in the past and after about five miles of staring fixedly out of the windows for a small black and white bird we

stopped at a spot Adrian had seen our quarry the previous December. We split up covering both sides of the road, with Mustapha also driving around. Adrian, Martin and Mustapha kept in touch via hand-held radios. After about half an hour, Mike began waving as he had got within 10 yards of our target bird but had lost it as he sought to communicate the find to the rest of us. A fruitless search then got underway for what later transpired to be a pair of the elusive critters. After careful scanning, Adrian caught a glimpse of a black-and-white bird crossing the road. Martin crossed said road and meeting up Marianne, ended up in the same wadis that had been previously covered. The wind was now howling again and Martin tried to think like a wheatear and cover the more protected areas. A Desert Wheatear, initially looking very black-and-white in the strong sun initially caused some excitement.

In another wadi, Marianne got onto a nice Trumpeter Finch and then as he scaled down into the wadi, Martin saw the bird we were all after. After a quick radio call, Martin waited on the opposite side of the wadi to the wheatear, which was hanging around a few potential nest holes, warbling quietly to itself. Mike joined Marianne on the same side of the wadi as the bird. Everyone gradually arrived in dribs and drabs before Adrian arrived in style in the van, having guessed which track we might be down. We all enjoyed tremendous views of the relaxed wheatear that could have been wondering what all the fuss had been out.

Task complete we continued into the foothills of the Atlas, with the stiff wind rocking the van. Our lunch stop near the summit was incredibly windy with some rain and we used an abandoned building to house the table and lunch stuffs whilst many retired to the van to eat. The local dogs got bolder, culminating in one trying to enter the building to scrounge. Martin was not popular with some of the group for shouting at it to keep it back.

Those braving the wind saw Levallants's Green Woodpecker, both Great and Blue Tits and the first Red-billed Choughs, much to Stu's pleasure. After lunch, as we were trundling along, Mustapha spotted some Barbary Partridge on the road edge and at least some of us got a good view of their orange and blue-grey heads and bold toothpaste-striped flanks before they scaled the slope. As Marianne exclaimed, these sure are fancy partridges. A Barbary Ground Squirrel also posed briefly atop the ridge.

A little further on we stopped at a favourite spot of ours alongside the river with some small fields leading to trees bordering the river. Almost immediately Mike spotted a Rock Bunting on the ground. James noted a cat that caused both the bunting and another birds to flush to the trees. This was a Nightingale. Western Bonelli's Warbler close in the trees and a female Whitethroat on the ground followed. Mustapha then saw a male cuckoo fly in to the pines opposite, which looked tremendous in the 'scopes. He then saw another small bird in the top of a pine. Unbelievably this was a male Atlas Crossbill with bright pink-red rump and reddish crown, but with grey-brown wings and tail. The bill was large, presumably adapted to the cones of the native pines. Scaling the slope managed to get a few pictures of the male and a female feeding on the cones. Meanwhile, two Nightingales put on a show for the rest of the group.

Of course by now we were late and we pushed on into the rain and mist that cloaked the lower slopes of the mountains as we headed for the Marrakesh Plain and the turn back up the mountains to Oukaimeden. Although we hoped to emerge from the rain-soaked clouds as we climbed, it didn't happen and after passing through the barrier to the national park gate barrier, we were disappointed that the short turf lawns were shrouded in mist and the birds were conspicuous by their absence. Nevertheless, after disembarking and finding our rooms in Chez Juju, the hardy emerged into the rain at about 17.30. As we came out of the hotel, four Crimson-winged Finches flew across us, but were not for stopping and simply carried on flying towards the ski lift. We walked through the settlement, noting both Chaffinches and many Rock Sparrows. It was however difficult to get excited by what was a new birds for the trip as they were very bedraggled and all the optics were fogged. It was so wet that Adrian left his telescope at the hotel before we continued to the ski lift. Some Atlas Horned Larks scuttled around within a few yards of us trying to grab the last few food items before dark.

By now we were soaked, and with now further sign of the finches we headed back to the hotel. The wooden hunting lodge-style restaurant was very welcoming with its wood burning fire and soon we were being served with hot vegetable soup. We were then offered a choice of three mains, with most trying the wild boar in red wine. Adrian had also bought further vegetable dishes for us all to share. Another choice followed for desert with the apple pie and the crème caramel about even in the popularity stakes. Replete, most headed for bed at about 21.00, which had become more or less our normal bedtime.

## **Day 12 – March 14**

### **Oukaimeden to Taroudannt via the Tizi-n-Test: Chough city and a dipper**

Today, we went for an early morning walk before breakfast at 06.30. In a virtual repeat of the previous day, we ran across three Crimson-winged Finches within minutes of leaving the hotel. This time, they were on one of the wires. In stark contrast to the previous evening, the day had dawned bright and clear and thus relatively cold. Unfortunately, the sun had not yet reached us, and the finches looked a little dull. They seemed to know they were slightly anti-climatic and they suddenly took flight and simply kept going over the settlement and onto the mountains beyond.

A Levaillant's Green Woodpecker called close by, followed by another and then another at considerable distance. The pair then flew into the bare poplars in front of us and offered close-range views. Zizzing calls with a slight electric quality signalled the vanguard of Alpine Choughs, which prompted Adrian to explain what to look for in the two species of chough. Right on cue, a few Red-billed Choughs joined the aerial melée. With no obvious main source of rubbish following the apparent removal of the large bins (although the litter strewn across the short turf is considerable and unsightly), the birds headed for the army barracks, where there seemed to be scraps available behind the wall. The stray dog that had been following us attempted to go through a hole in the wall to join the party, but with no success.

After a no-frills breakfast, we were back out by 08.30 to try the ski lift for Crimson-winged finch. Only more Rock Sparrows, which seemed to be especially numerous this year and Black Redstarts were present. Just as we were nearing the bus after our short 'there and back' walk, a bird that was very close to us caught Martin's attention: an Alpine Accentor! This has become one of those mythical species that Adrian has diligently sought on every trip after finding one on his first trip, but with none since. A second bird flying away may have been another accentor, although fortunately the first bird stayed put. In truth it looked slightly bedraggled and then started feeding amongst some rubbish, before flying to the slope above us to sun itself. In an attempt to get some pictures Martin confirmed it had a leg injury that may have explained some of its behavior, although these birds may be especially confiding.

Continuing on to the radio station we were a little surprised by the fact that many sheep herders had already brought their flocks to these high pastures and that many lambs had already been born. After the short walk to the top, we took in the marvelous view as though we were on the roof of the world and many of us will no doubt have pictures of themselves above the clouds.

After packing the van, we stopped at the dam to look for Dipper. With no immediate success, we walked down the road checking along the length of the stream. There was no sign for about a kilometre or so, with a few false alarms as a result of two or three Green Sandpipers that flushed from alongside the watercourse. We also saw a kettling group of choughs accompanied by a couple of Long-legged Buzzards. Then suddenly, a glimpse of a bird in low whirring flight over the stream stopped the advance party in its tracks. As the others caught up, the bird emerged from between the boulders and began to forage in the fast flowing water, diving and emerging with tasty invertebrates. These were super views of this engaging species.

The journey down the mountain saw us agog at the stunning scenery with steep cliffs and gorges punctuated by mountain villages and their terraces cut into the mountainside. Many of the terraces were awash in a pale haze of flowering almonds. At the foot of the mountain, we journeyed across the plain, skirting Marrakesh, before then beginning our ascent into the Tizi-n-Test. More hours of spectacular landscapes around every bend followed. Nearing the top we stopped to enjoy views of Barbary Sheep that have been reintroduced in the mountain pastures behind a fenceline that tracks across the mountain. Just beyond, at the top (2058 m), we were suddenly engulfed in cloud in a spectacular demonstration of the difference between the wet and dry sides of these mountains. On the other, dry, side we stopped for mint tea at the café, where a brisk trade in both beverages and souvenir stone owls ensued. A search for the Atlas Dwarf Gecko failed to produce the goods, presumably as the sun was shrouded in cloud and it was relatively cool.

Our descent into the Souss valley was marked by a very lush growth of the endemic Argan tree with many specimens carrying large crops of fruit (nuts). This was suggestive of good winter/early spring rains. The situation was rather different in the Souss valley itself with the majority of the few trees present being rather denuded as a result of overgrazing. We passed through the ever-expanding and developing settlements, with it being difficult to tell where we actually entered the outskirts of Taroudannt. There is, at least, no doubt where the old city begins with its rather spectacular fortress walls. The evening promenade was still in progress along the pavements next to the city walls and we experienced the traffic mayhem amongst the narrow streets populated by cars, mopeds, donkeys and pedestrians. A few turns later and we found ourselves parked in a short drive amongst the three and four-storey buildings. Our hosts spilled out of the door at ground level and we were whisked into the cool, beautifully tiled interior. If the group members were suitably impressed at their surroundings, expectations were probably exceeded by the first of the amazing meals we were served a short time later. Welcome indeed to Taroudannt.

## **Day 13 – March 15**

### **The Souss Valley: birding in the dark**

After a long journey the day before there was a chance to catch up on a little sleep, with a leisurely breakfast at 7.30 am. We ventured out by 08.30, heading just out of town onto the other side of the wadi of the River Souss. Looking at the lack of water now, it seemed unbelievable that in spite, the river had washed away the bridge a couple of years previously requiring it to be completely rebuilt. Adrian commented on the amount of debris and rubbish that had accumulated since the previous December.

After the bridge we turned right and then left along the small track crossing a small open rubbish dump. The dump dogs scattered as we crossed the 'fenceline' of cut thorn bushes through a small gap. Initially there was relatively little to see apart from some very distant Bee-eaters. However, Mustapha had continued up the track in the bus and was now gesturing that there was something ahead. Martin caught his drift and quickly got onto a group of babblers moving through the cut thorns and the low vegetation. One emerged with a large bug and with the rest of the group now present we watched them go through a repertoire of typical inquisitive babbler behavior. As we re-joined the bus, a Tchagra was singing in the distance.

We moved onto Freija, which is a series of mostly uncultivated and rocky 'fields' separated by low thorny hedges bordering an area of crops under plastic. The recent rains meant it was delightfully floral and a number of butterflies were out and about. A warbler that Adrian saw as a Dartford Warbler prompted some searching, although only a male Subalpine Warbler was subsequently uncovered. The Crested or Thekla Lark debate continued and in order to resolve the issue Martin took a series of photos. Remarkably, this only succeeded in demonstrating just how difficult it can be, as in one picture the underwing of a singing bird looked orange-buff, whilst in the next it looked cream, simply

depending on how the light fell. On balance, these were judged to be Thekla Larks, although the presence of both species could not be ruled out.

Chasing a singing bird over a low hill led to an area of hives that some locals were keen that we did not encroach upon. Fortunately, the Tchagra also moved on before settling in an Argan tree. Here, Martin acted as a 'blocker' at around 15 m away on the far side of the tree and the Tchagra hopped about amongst the branches and on the ground providing excellent views for all. A neat Southern Grey Shrike flew in to check out what was going on. As we turned to leave, a couple of Laughing Doves posed on the periphery of the plastic greenhouses. It is remarkable how quickly this species has recently expanded its range in Morocco, which now includes the Souss Valley. Just as we boarded the bus, a couple of Magpies flew just overhead.

We headed for Aoulouz on the old road, but before long, Adrian and Mustapha had seen a large raptor from the front of the bus. We all piled out looking to the right, perhaps expecting to see a Short-toed Eagle. Adrian's words of "you know what this is" really had Martin scrambling with thoughts of Tawny Eagle. Although not that species, the presence of an immature Golden Eagle in the Souss Valley was perhaps only slightly less remarkable. The bird cruised effortlessly overhead for several minutes before gliding away leaving us to speculate if this was a broadly local bird or a migrant from further afield. We did know of breeding in the hills in Aoulouz area in the past, but this had been some time ago and it was nice to think this was still going on.

By the time we reached the Aoulouz Gorge itself, it was very hot. As lunch was set up the group took a short walk into the gorge from the right side looking upstream. No large falcons were in evidence either flying or on the usual places on the vertical cliff faces. It became clear that we would not be able to cross the wadi as a result of high river flow. A number of small pools were also testament to previous even higher flow and in one a number of fish had been trapped. Epaulet Skimmer *Orthetrum chrysostigma* and ovipositing Mediterranean Bluet *Coenagrion caerulescens* were present nearby.

After lunch, the van was moved to the other side of the road bridge over the wadi and we walked back across the bridge for a view of the Stripe-necked Terrapins both in and out of the water. A Kingfisher that flew across the channel was missed by most and was then elusive and could not be relocated. During the search however, we did finally catch up with a Cetti's Warbler at eye-level in a bush. A very nice pale phase booted eagle also drifted overhead.

We then re-crossed the bridge and took the path into the gorge. This proved to be a lovely walk, with highlights including Blue Rock Thrush, a male Cirl Bunting at close range in an olive tree and a roost of Black-crowned Night Herons. A couple of male Moroccan Day Geckos *Quedenfeldtia moerens*, no more than 5 cms long jostled and displayed as they competed for a patch of rock alongside the path. There was still a general lack of large falcons, although there were many apparently nesting Common Kestrels behaving more the Lesser variety as they called and wheeled overhead. On the way to the bus, we also finally caught up with Moroccan Wagtails amongst the cobbles of the various river channels.

We returned to Taroudannt relatively early for an early dinner as the plan was to undertake a nocturnal sojourn for Red-necked Nightjar. The idea of night birding was clearly not for everyone as there were a few people missing. Enthusiasm undeterred, we set off into the night. After crossing the road bridge, we drove the same track alongside the wadi of the Souss we had explored earlier in the day, and where we had previously been successful. No eyeshine (reflection from the tapetum at the back of the eye) was revealed by the lights of the van or the flashlights that several of us had brought along, and we moved on to Freija where Said had been successful but had been relatively unspecific about exactly where. After a few hundred metres past the turning into Freija, the cry of "owl" went up from the back of the bus that had appeared in Mike's torchlight on the right. We reversed gently and as the grey shape was illuminated, it became clear this was not the Tawny Owl we had expected, but a Long-eared Owl! The bird stayed put and the camera shutters started firing.

Flushed with success we then tried a track near the beehives. Lights came on in the tents and the guys were clearly nervous of an alien vehicle bristling with lights punctuating the darkness. As the track we were following was seemingly heading to an area that had caused some consternation with the beekeepers during the day, and was anyway becoming too rough, we turned back, continued down the main track before then taking another on the left. The rocky habitat interspersed with low bushes and the stony track itself started to look really good for nightjars. Then, a single red-orange spot amongst the rocks on the left about 30 m from the bus had Martin yelling. A quick stop from Mustapha and Adrian quickly supplied an additional light to confirm this was indeed eye-shine from a nightjar. We disembarked and after amazing views in the 'scope, we moved closer. A few more pictures and then we left the bird, which did not move throughout, in peace. With our quest concluded, we returned to Chez Anglais happy.

## **Day 14 – March 16**

### **The Souss valley: Ait Agas?**

The day had dawned cloudy and after another relatively leisurely breakfast we were off to try out a new spot mentioned in Dave Gosney's guide. It seemed simple enough from the description: in the village of Ait Agas there was a signposted turning for the Argania D'Or hotel along a track that led to an area of cultivated land and Argan trees that was good for a variety of passerines. Unfortunately, the search for said village, said hotel, and said cultivated area was nowhere easy as it should be. And then we started asking people for "Ait Agas?" Including a shepherd, two sets of kids, one of which demanded money for pointing at the wrong hotel, and finally with a vegetable seller with his hat on sideways. He ironed out that the Argania D'Or was actually in the next village and hadn't been replaced with the hotel that everyone had tried to send us to. Moving on to the next village, we found the signpost without an issue. In simple terms, the Gosney guide mixes up the village and the hotel.

Finally, we were on the right track so to speak. We stopped the van and started to walk. Greenfinch, Cirl Bunting and Sardinian Warbler were quickly seen and as we cleared the buildings and entered an area of Argan under arable cultivation, we added Woodchat and Maghreb Grey Shrike. The pair of Woodchats was trying to displace the interloper from their breeding territory. A Quail then began to call 'wet-my-lips' from a flowery field in front of us. This was not entirely fallow as it still retained large pumpkins dotted here and there, but it was perfect for Quail. Adrian played a tape and the bird responded and moved closer. We were all now hanging over the green mesh fence around the field trying to get a sighting. Martin got the first brief view as then the tallest members, Mike and Stu, got the briefest full view as the bird crossed a small open patch, before disappearing. It then stopped singing and despite being within about 10 yards of numerous pairs of eyes, the bird remained invisible and deadlock ensued. After about 25 minutes we gave up and moved off to explore further.

Every Argan we passed seemed to contain lots of migrant Blackcaps but little else, although Corn Bunting was singing and a couple of Bee-eaters flew over. We then found ourselves mobbed by goats and sheep along with their accompanying herders making their usual mix of remarkable noises. With that it was time to move on and we headed for Tioute. En-route, we stopped at the women's cooperative. Continuing the comedy of errors theme we stopped at the cooperative building, which seemed to be closed. A quick question of the guys hanging around saw us drive around 30 yards and to the other side of the road, to park outside the new location for the women's cooperative! Inside, we were invited into the inner sanctum where the women were cracking the Argan nuts with a stone against a stone anvil. Veils had been donned as we had come in, although we were more than welcome and Suellen and then James and Janice had a go at what is a really difficult skill. The women were particularly pleased with James' efforts and positively giggled with glee as a few kernels hit the waiting basket. Invariably, we found ourselves in the cooperative shop where a number of items in the impressive range of Argan products were purchased.

In the palmery itself, the situation was as it had been earlier in the day, with hundreds of Blackcaps engaged in mass sub-song from Carob trees in particular. We looked for Garden warbler to no avail, although Martin, Mariannne, Janice and Ann did find three very nice Spur-thighed Tortoises, in one small fallow plot amongst the palms. We then heard Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and remarkably one flew to the trunk of a topless palm where it was joined two Laughing Doves. Levaillant's Green Woodpecker is typically a species of higher altitude, although it has been recorded in palm groves north of the Atlas around Marrakesh and does occur in the Zaers much further to the north. An appearance south of the Atlas in such habitat does not have an obvious precedent.

Moving further through the palmery, we encountered singing Moussier's Redstart, the odd Tree Pipit as well as the ubiquitous Sardinian Warblers. There was a dearth of water and the few frogs that were seen were trapped in a small pool in one of the stone drainage channels that move water around the palmery when it is available. Mike saw a sizeable snake that sadly slithered rapidly away before it could be identified. Other wildlife included a few butterflies on the wing, including Moroccan Orange-tip, one of which that actually settled to feed where it could be photographed. We took our lunch in the café, supplementing our usual fresh bread and salad stuffs, with soft drinks and mint tea from the bar.

Back in Taroudannt we set off to the souk with Said, the long-standing guide from Chez Anglais. The first purchase was a tajine dish for Joy followed by a plethora of spices, slippers and then jewelry. We then moved on to the carpet shop where Ann and Janice took a real interest in the wares on offer. Janice was well prepared as she had brought a little piece of curtain material from home to match a potential carpet.

After shopping, we returned to our lodgings for a fantastic dinner of chicken and almond bastille, with its delicious flaky pastry. After the meal, a few of us headed back into town in the bus with Mustapha. Our target was a Tawny Owl that our fellow tourists from Scotland staying at Chez Anglais had heard on several nights in the garden area near the Hotel Palais Salaam. The gardens were full of people, but almost straight away we became the target for a herd of boys, who taunted us and then snapped at our heels like yapping dogs. Adrian stood them off and confiscated a hat that was thrown. Some young men intervened on our behalf and after the hat was returned the boys backed off. We have only very rarely experienced this sort of behavior in Morocco and undeterred we continued our search of the gardens for an owl. Unfortunately, there was no sign or sound either in the gardens or from the rooftop after we returned to Chez Anglais.

## **Day 15 – March 17**

### **The Souss valley: one of the world rarest birds**

After an early breakfast, we said our sad farewells to all four ladies of Chez Anglais and slipped out the back way out of Taroudannt. During breakfast we had experienced thunder and a sharp shower, and now, at 07.30 am the day was promising to be bright. The journey to Agadir was punctuated by a few slow-downs and stops for falcons on pylons that proved to be Kestrels in all cases. The last part of the journey was taken on the new motorway and we entered the city amongst extensive new apartment developments. On the coastal strip, we journeyed past the more familiar landscape of the cement works and the sardine processing factory of this industrial city.

A brief stop provided another Kestrel, and then an Osprey atop a pylon. Some tourists were enjoying a camel ride on the beach at one of the other brief stops that in turn produced some Cormorants on the cliffs followed by a group of 18 Sandwich Terns and more gulls including Audouins Gull, whilst a few Gannets cruised offshore. A freshwater pool was popular with gulls and the differences between Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls could be closely studied as they bathed side-by-side. On the far side of the pool a lone Stone Curlew was found, whilst on the landward side, the flowering Sea Lavender *Limonium* spp. was particularly striking. Looking back over the hills behind us, a falcon came into view. Whilst distant, its chunky cigar-shaped body could

be readily seen indicating Peregrine-type genes, whilst the creamy underparts suggested Barbary Falcon. As if to purposely draw our attention to the next good bird, the falcon flew past a Short-toed Eagle sitting on a pylon that had previously gone unnoticed.

We stopped again in an area where the foothills of Atlas reach the sea where the warmer wind from the land reaching the cooler air at the coast had created a pall of low cloud. This sort of conditions can ground any migrants coming ashore. Sure enough a Black-eared Wheatear was present. We then found a single male Spanish Sparrow in a low tree. The fact that it was on its own suggested it was also a migrant. Rather than flying away, the bird went to ground in a bush at the edge of the road. Fearful of scaring it, some of us walked away. At that, the bird bolted back across road where two cars were crossing at the same time. Incredibly, Stu saw that the bird dodged the first car but was hit by the second. Birdwatching had all gone badly wrong and there was a silence in the bus as our thoughts were with the poor sparrow.

As we passed along the road on this Sunday morning, the fishermen seemed to be on every rock amongst the day-off crowds. Some of the fisherfolk were perched on the side of road holding up their catch to sell. Many more children were offering plastic bags of shellfish that had been gathered, mainly by women it seemed, from the rocks that had been exposed at low water. Surfing is also clearly a favourite pastime along this coast with many in the water having a go. We passed through Taghazoute, which could be described as the surf capital, with several surf shops. We particularly liked 'Berber Surf', perhaps as it complemented the 'Berber Ski' we had experienced earlier in the trip.

We then reached Tamri, and after parking on the side of the road at the top of the low cliff, we could take in the view across the lagoon, the bar at its mouth with the sea and the beach stretching off to the cliffs in the distance. There was football training going on amongst the sunbathers and near the footballers there was a large roost of gulls. And there on the shingle beyond the lagoon and amongst all of human life were 37 Bald Ibis, ~7% of the current population of one of the World's rarest birds. We thought we could get a better view and getting back in the bus we looped around the lagoon through the town before taking a track. This led us through a walled enclosure and down to an unused Marabou. Using the monument as cover, we were suddenly quite close and had a great view of the flock that included young birds with feathered faces. We watched the ibis drink from the relatively fresh water draining from the lagoon across the shingle, noting how they had to turn their heads sideways to a flattened position to do so. Stu also found a Moroccan Wagtail on the lagoon edge.

Flushed with our success, we turned back to the Cape Rhir area for lunch. Here there were some waders including Ruddy Turnstone on the rocks. To the landward side, there was spectacular cactoid euphorbia heath. Here, the different species from the viciously thorned forms were growing alongside the succulent fleshy and leafy varieties. Tiny Greenish Black-tip butterflies flitted past, occasionally sampling the flora. Martin took photos of the larks that were running around the open areas. These again proved to be Theklas of the ruficolor race with longish bills.

We then drive for about one hour to the Souss estuary. The lower part of the Souss has seen massive development of the coastal dunes into a golf course. All bushes alongside estuary have now been removed with the construction of a large flood wall of interlocking gabions (rocks encased in wire) behind which lies what can be best described as a large car park. The sun was now out and hot as we stopped alongside the estuary. It was low water, but there were virtually no birds sampling the exposed mud. This would never have been the case in the past. Our confusion extended to a Little Egret with a slightly drooping bill that that briefly became a Western Reef Heron before turning back into a Little Egret.

Moving further down the car park, we passed the former bird observation platform that was now isolated in the middle of it. Gangs of boys were roaming around and one well-to-do family with a

teenage girl and two young sisters were hanging out next to their car, blaring out western commercial hip-hop. Suddenly, it was though we were virtually anywhere in the modern world.

This was not a very promising landscape for birding, but we persisted by not taking the track along the edge of the estuary, but instead walked along the path marked by poles into the saltmarsh. Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticolas were suddenly commonplace, as were the mosquitoes. It looked like the path was blocked with Arundo (Giant Reed), but this was simply overhanging and as soon as we pushed through, a small pool came into view. Here were lots of Black-winged Stilts, two Ruffs and a Reeve (female Ruff), Green Sandpiper and then a nice Wood Sandpiper. After both Common and Little Ringed Plovers Adrian got onto a couple of Curlew Sandpipers amongst the Dunlin, with some individuals of both species coming into plumage. This was a nice comparison between the two species. We then moved up further to the main pool where Spoonbills were at roost on one side with Flamingoes on the other.

Mustapha radioed through that the park guards had approached him and that they wanted to chat to us. After about half an hour or so, as Martin was checking out whether we could cross safely to the path alongside the estuary itself, he saw a guard on a quad (motor)bike seemingly attempting to reach us. His path appeared to be blocked and he returned from whence he came.

Adrian then exclaimed and stood back from his 'scope that now contained a particularly good bird. Two stunning Collared Pratincoles were contained within, one sitting and one standing close by. All features were visible including the russet flankside and underwing as it flexed its wings. Stu then found a third bird a short distance away. Andrew followed this up with a winter-plumaged Spotted Redshank and the group was able to study the differences between this species and the Common Redshank walking behind. With the wader (shorebird) lesson now complete with quite a proportion of the possible species now seen, we headed back, tracking our outward footprints in return.

At the bus, what appeared to be the same park guard that had apparently wanted to talk to us hardly gave us a second glance as we boarded. It had obviously not been that important and we headed off to La Pergola for the night. This French run small hotel is set within a small enclosed garden that attracts migrant passerines crossing the city. Dinner was international in taste, with soup or salad followed by a main meal of sea bream and then lemon meringue or apple pie. Whilst this was satisfactory fare, we were now some distance from Taroudannt in more ways than one.

## **Day 16 – March 18**

### **Massa: strange warblers in the incomparable wetland**

We were attempting a relatively early start by leaving at 07.30 to enable a series of stops within the Massa wetland before getting back to the hotel by around 16.00 to enable ample time for packing and personal organisation. We left in cloudy conditions and soon rain began to spatter the windscreen. Fortunately, this did not last long and it was clear with the sun peeping through as we reached the bridge over the upper Massa river near the barrage. The journey time was improved by the dual carriageway (twin lane highway) that had been installed since Martin was last in Morocco in 2008. In Moroccan style, the original road markings looked liked they had been retained, thereby creating a wide inner lane and a skinny outer lane only suitable for bikes/motorbikes. No matter, as lane markings only seem to be a general guide anyway and many drivers we had seen seemed to think they were airline pilots geared to straddling any sort of white line.

We stopped on the redundant old road over the old bridge and from the bus we could see seven or eight of one of target species, Brown-throated Martin hawking over the pools. As we moved closer on foot a male Kestrel flew in to present a lizard to his mate perched on one of the ledges on the concrete bridge-side. A factory in the distance downstream (also new) seemed to be indirectly responsible for the recent earthworks around the pools which appeared to have created a suitable nesting cliff for the Martins.

Moving to the edge of said cliff, we saw Little Grebe, Green Sandpiper and then a singing Sedge Warbler perched in the open. Mike then found a Kingfisher perched in a distant Nicotinia bush at the back of the pools. The Kingfisher then flew and after some calling that appeared to involve two birds, Marianne located one of them in another Nicotinia with a large fish. The book was open on whether this could actually be swallowed or not. After what seemed to be endless beating and manipulation over the next eight to ten minutes, the fish eventually slid down, satisfying a large proportion of daily energetic requirements.

We journeyed fifteen minutes or so back towards Agadir, turning left towards 'Massa' village (actually a series of connected villages: Tassila, Massa and Arhbalou). We turned right at the T-junction and after collecting still-warm hobs we turned left at the school to wend our way through the village to the new bridge over the river. Here we were treated to views of another Sedge Warbler, Moorhen, Great Cormorant, Common Sandpiper and fly-over Moroccan Cormorant, Grey Heron and Alpine Swifts amongst their Common relatives. Reed Warblers sang from the marginal reed-beds and one was found in a low tamarisk. This was unlike the rich russet Reed Warblers in northern Europe and was more like Marsh Warbler in upperpart tone coupled with barely buffy off-white underparts. The bird also spent little time in the reeds themselves concentrating on the drier interface with the riverside bushes. Some sandier coloured individuals were then seen higher in the tamarisks that we took to be Western Olivaceous Warblers, one of which Andrew heard singing its rather more complex song.

The next stop to the east near the football pitch provided us, finally, with close fly-over European Bee-eaters. The flock then perched en-masse in a low palm, festooning its branches like so many exotically coloured oversized dates. Joy, James and Ann in particular were really taken by these glorious birds. Those that wanted to walk did so, whilst some rode in the bus to the next bridge over the river. Reed Warblers again sang from reeds, with numerous other warblers including more Olivaceous, Subalpine, Sardinian and Cetti's Warblers as well as Blackcap all evident. Andrew found another Bluethroat by standing quietly in a patch of emergent vegetation.

Adrian played European Reed Warbler song on his ipod and immediately a male in the stand of reeds in the centre of the upstream pool at the bridge popped up to investigate. It then flew over and began to sing from a few feet away above our heads in a tamarisk. As the digital song stopped, the bird flew back to its starting position. Whilst also interested in Olivaceous Warbler song, as demonstrated by emerging into view, our male bird only crossed the pool in response to Reed Warbler song. Curiously, it was clear that the song of our bird was subtly different to European Reed Warbler song without the repeated 'gary, gary, churg, churg' phrases typical of that species.

We tried the recording on another individual close to the bridge that was also throwing in bits of mimicry of House Sparrow and Barn Swallow into its song repertoire. Perhaps as were so close, this individual did not emerge, but simply sang harder. Overall, we concluded that the birds at Massa, although some form of Reed Warbler, cannot be readily assigned as European Reed Warbler on account of plumage features, song characteristics and particularly behavior by spending as much time in bushes as in emergent vegetation. In other words, our observations align with current theory on the Massa Reed Warblers. But whether the population at Massa is a different species will only be shown by more definitive scientific studies, particularly on genetic structure.

It was now time to move on to the lagoon further along the road. Amazingly, this was now a paved road quite different from the track we had experienced in the past. At the junction where a track runs to the lagoon behind stands of Eucalyptus trees, we met the Frenchman we had previously talked to. He described what he had seen including Glossy Ibis, which could be seen decorating a tree in the distance. These were likely to be the 50 or more we had seen fly by when we were looking at the Reed Warblers. Walking a short distance we saw a number of Tufted Ducks and two Marbled Teal as well as European Coot. There were a few Scarlet Darters *Crocothemis erythraea* and the first

of several very attractive Fringe-toed Lizards *Acanthodactylus erythrurus* that we would see at close range.

A calling Turtle Dove saw most of the group head off to track down that species, whilst Mustapha and Martin prepared lunch in the shade of the trees, as it was now quite hot. A former driving colleague of Mustapha's chanced by and he was keen for us all to come to his house for lunch and tea. Sadly, we had to politely decline as time was short and we had food anyway. As we were coming to the end of our last picnic lunch together, Mustapha produced a box of pastries and some figs-on-a-string (not to be confused with soap-on-a-rope). This was a nice touch from 'our man in Morocco'.

Following lunch, we drove back to the main road through 'Massa' village, turned left and headed for the main park entrance. We stopped briefly at a high point for a quick scan. There were next to no birds on the main channel, but there was a fine overview of the different habitats including the cactoid *Euphorbia* heath on the dry slope on the right side of the road at the top of the river valley. Descending through the small settlement, we stopped for a virtually inevitable very close 'Mooka' or Little Owl on a wall before reaching the unmanned entrance to the National Park. It remains quite amazing that the signs all sport an image of Ostrich as a bird symbolising the conservation value/work of the Park. Surely Northern Bald Ibis is the correct icon to use?

Stopping at the entrance to the track that runs throughout the protected strip and ultimately to the sea, Adrian gave the group the choice of either walking the track or going back to the hotel immediately, as it was clear that we were not going to get back to the hotel by 16.00 if we did any sort of walk. All stayed, donned sun cream, refreshed water bottles and set off, apart from James who was to stay and keep Mustapha company in the shade.

Virtually immediately, the flowers took the attention, with impressive Fennel *Foeniculum vulgare* plants followed by delightful shades of pink and yellow from a number of species set off by the dark-centred white blooms of *Chrysanthemum carinatum*. Joining Mike scanning the far dunes for Cranes Martin picked up the head and ears of a large sitting mammal on the horizon. This looked like a Red Deer, but surely this does not occur naturally? Some discussion of domesticated contenders followed, with Martin resisting all suggestions. Then the shout went up from Mark joined by Stu and Andrew of a further mammal on the near bank of the lagoon, but at some distance and slightly behind us on a small spit. What looked like an Otter had entered the water and then disappeared behind some vegetation. It then re-emerged standing on its hind legs before again entering the water, again doing a convincing impression of an Otter, until Adrian correctly pointed out that it was an Egyptian Mongoose. By now the distant Red Deer had stood up and turned into a Donkey. It had certainly made an ass of Martin!

What few birds were in the main lagoon, were rather interesting with a Great White Egret stalking the far bank shallows, some Glossy Ibis and a lone sleeping Spoonbill. A Caspian Tern then cruised past to land and paddle next to the Ibis. An Osprey also flew down river. Along the track, a series of Moussier's Redstarts added highlights to the flowery slopes that were painted with colour. The ever present Sardinian Warblers and Serins leaped into song flight from the bushes. A preening Tchagra was found, offering a tremendous close-up inspection of plumage details. Three individuals then emerged in flight as one pair sought to drive off an interloper. These birds appear to actively prefer the introduced 'mimosa' bushes that are actually the introduced *Acacia cyanophylla* from Australia. The dense yellow pom-poms of flowers from these bushes filled with air with a heavy scent prompting further comparison with the yellow brick road to Oz journeyed by Dorothy and friends.

Upon reaching a bend that allowed a view of the sand bar across the mouth of the lagoon, we stopped. A flock of gulls loafing and preening on the water were mostly Lesser Black-backed Gulls with a few Audouin's. A larger roost lay beyond on the beach itself and even further behind those and closer to the sea, was a large roost of a couple of hundred terns. It was too distant to properly check if any of the Sandwich Terns had an orange bill and was thus Lesser Crested Tern, or indeed if any

other tern species was present. Turning round, we walked back the way we had come and back to the bus.

The journey back to the hotel in the Agadir rush hour took us through the vibrant Arab quarter of town, with little evidence of Western influence, which was rather refreshing. Back at the hotel, it dawned on us that our birding was now complete. This seemed to generate a mixture of regret and relief! At dinner, after the checklist for the day was complete, we voted on our favourite bird of the trip. Stu was in charge of the scoring and each person was to provide a one-two-three, that gave three points for a 1<sup>st</sup> place, two for a 2<sup>nd</sup> and a one for a 3<sup>rd</sup>. Bird 'experiences' featured prominently, with Hoopoe Lark and its stunning song flight display in a surprising third place ahead of much more difficult to see species such as Egyptian Nightjar and any endemics. Pharaoh Eagle Owl boosted by Ali the Nomad and Youseff (Cat) was in second. Perhaps the rightful first place went to the mythical Houbara Bustard.

Overall, the total list of species, depending on how the cloth is cut over some of the species-subspecies-races debate and including those seen by a single person only, stood at 223, or 225 if you wanted to include the captive Ostrich and Helmeted Guineafowl we had seen. Some knew just many new species they had seen, which was 109 for Stu and 45 for Mike and Marianne. Even Martin, who had been to Morocco many times, had seen four species that he had never seen before. Yes, the trip had really been that good.

## **Day 17 – March 19**

### **Home: Wifi shenanigans**

Our simple breakfast of bread and pain au [where is the?] chocolat was enlivened with the second box of pastries from the previous day. Mustapha was there as always to collect the bags and ferry us to the airport by 07.00. It was quite emotional saying goodbye to our trusted friend, and Adrian and Martin were left wondering and hoping that they would be reunited with him on some future trip. Insh'allah.

Changing money was hampered by a lack of currency at the exchange booth in Agadir. Adrian had to wait until Casablanca, where he was initially refused permission to exchange the rather large amount of money that he had kept as a safety float during the trip. Intense negotiation with the officials followed and eventually sensibility prevailed and Adrian was simply escorted by an official to an exchange booth outside of the transit lounge, and told that he would never be allowed to do this again!

Fortunately, the mood of our journey through the airports had otherwise been improved by a number of amusing incidents. This started in Agadir when the lady in the gift shop asked Martin if "Madame would like some help?". She was most surprised at the reply from the deeper voice than she had expected and quickly apologised. The merriment continued with the wicked spoof in relation to the use of wifi on Suellen and then Joy and Ann. Adrian managed to convince the ladies that to access the internet, phones had to be scanned in front of the wifi sign that was some way off the ground. James added that the height, at tippy-toe for Suellen, was to allow some parental control to prevent small children from accessing the internet. Suellen, followed by Joy and Ann stretched and waved their phones in front of the sign again and again without obvious effect. The final straw was Adrian suggesting a right to left swipe, as this was an Arabic country. A young man with a laptop stared at bemusement at the spectacle before him, whilst another passenger moved forward to potentially engage with this intriguing practice.

Finally, as we were transferring to Casablanca, a man in the security queue in front of us asked for a tray for his small objects as he was passing his hand luggage through the scanner. As he fumbled in his pockets for said small objects, he put the empty tray down on the conveyor and gasped as it whisked away through the scanner. Now clutching his keys, the man got himself frisked!

We gathered ourselves in Casablanca, relaxing, reliving our shared experiences and drinking and snacking. Soon it really was time to go our separate ways, with most of the group to New York, Andrew and Martin to Heathrow and Mark and James to Barcelona, for a further holiday to both reflect upon, and recover from, the unforgettable one we had just completed.