



## MOROCCO

### *Birding the edge of the Sahara*

March 12-29, 2014

Leaders: Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow

Trip Report by Martin Perrow

#### **Day 1 – March 12**

##### ***Forest de Zaers and Kenitra Marsh***

Martin and Mustapha collected the group at 06.30 from the airport, having arrived the previous night. It was just light as we left the terminal, with what looked like a Pallid Swift as the first bird in the fog, followed by Cattle Egret on the grass.

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. After about an hour or so the fog had burned off and we cruised along one of the largest, fastest roads in Morocco in sunshine. Chris had not had these sort of roads thirty years previously. We managed to stop briefly on the hard shoulder for a Black Kite on a pylon as part of the familiarisation process with the common roadside birds.

At the forest, we collected Labidi, our passport to the tracks in the forest of low trees, with an understory of *Cistus* and other herbs. Doreene was the first to spot a pair of francolins from the back of the bus. Unfortunately, as we reversed into position the birds flushed. We tried a grassy clearing on foot, spotting an Egyptian Mongoose, three Stone Curlews and a raptor that we decided was Booted Eagle.

Some way further along one of the tracks our luck changed with another pair of francolins about 75 m down another grassy track. This time they just retreated into the vegetation where they could still be seen, although not easily photographed. We moved on and watched a Maghreb Magpie hacking off quite large twigs from a bush to build a nest. After turning the bus, we encountered the same pair of francolins crossing a track, allowing some pictures through the windscreen, although our excitable guide got in the way somewhat.

A pond in an open area was occupied by lots of European Coots, Little Grebes and some Ferruginous Ducks. A number of finches, as well as a Hoopoe, a pair of Jays in display flight and a smart Woodchat Shrike were seen at the forest edge, before we took a track out to the main road. Back at the point we had collected Labidi, we pushed under a stand of firs to get a view of the lake there. Both European and Red-knobbed Coots were noted as well as dapper Red-crested Pochard along with Pochard, more Ferruginous Ducks, Mallard, Little Grebe and a single Moorhen.

Labidi decided he would get a lift to a nearby town and on the way we stopped at one of the lakes formed in depressions in the otherwise arable landscape. A party of Spoonbills was present amongst the waterfowl and a male Lesser Kestrel hawked dragonflies a few metres from us. We stopped for lunch in the same stand of Cork Oaks that Doreene had provided us with a terrific view of Great Spotted Woodpecker from the bus earlier in the day. Here, a female Serin was watched nest-building as we enjoyed our first picnic lunch of the trip.

Reaching Kenitra, we checked into the Assam Hotel and had a brief rest before walking out again at 1700 to the Kenitra Marsh and Lagoon, beginning a few hundred metres away. The marsh does not disappoint despite the industrial backdrop and a busy road. Glossy Ibis, Little Egrets, Squacco Herons amongst the

myriad of White Storks, with a supporting cast of Common Snipe, Ruff (mostly Reeve), Spotted Redshank, a range of ducks and the ubiquitous Marsh Harrier. A number of Purple Swamp-Hens (Gallinule) were seen at relatively close-range. An Osprey (probably female) in a tree was a more unusual find.

Back at the hotel, after the list we experienced our first tajine of the trip, a Chicken and pea combination, slightly unusual but good nonetheless.

## **Day 2 - March 13**

### ***Lac de Sidi Bourhaba***

After leaving the hotel about 07.30, we couldn't avoid stopping at the small parking spot and turnaround at Kenitra Lagoon as the light was lovely and there were many birds present at close range. These included two ringed (banded) Spoonbills (white 5W1 and yellow 9VL). A pair of Marbled Teal dozing on a log was an especially good find, amongst the Ferruginous Ducks and Red-crested Pochard. A Chiffchaff provided a useful introduction to warblers in this part of the world.

Back aboard the bus, we reached Lac du Sidi Bourhaba after about an hour. The lake nestles behind the dunes fronting the coast and is effectively 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* along one side. We first stopped along the road, and as well as a number of Marsh Harriers and Black Kites, had a good view of 16 Greater Flamingoes wading in the shallow waters. Driving on to the reserve entrance, a brief Black-Shouldered Kite and Long-legged Buzzard passed over. We crossed the causeway on foot and quickly found ten or more of our main target bird, White-headed Duck, with both males and females present. Over the visit we were able to count about 80 of these very smart birds.

A Red-knobbed Coot with two youngsters would have to be diligent to guard against predation by the abundant Marsh Harriers which were sky-dancing over the small reed-bed in preparation of their own breeding season. Butterflies included abundant Speckled Wood and the odd Moroccan Orange-Tip and resplendent Cleopatras. Walking through the woodland, we worked to find the ever-elusive Cetti's Warbler, a classic LBJ if ever there was one. A chattering Wren as well as Blue and Great Tits were easier. Blackcap and Sardinian Warbler followed. After lunch in the parking area, we walked the short distance to the blind, but the jewel-of-the-marsh, the Marbled Teal was hidden, although a Red-knobbed Coot with the biggest knobs imaginable was some consolation.

We drove to the beach, although the presence of many people including guys working scallop dredges in the surf meant there were no birds. A short seawatch produced a shearwater battling north against the stiff breeze. The unusual circumstances meant we struggled to identify it. Moving on to the harbour mouth, hundreds of Lesser Black-backed Gulls of various ages were surface dipping at the edge of the rocks at the discharge from the adjacent fish factory. It was really rather spectacular. Broken fish remains littering the rocks were being gathered by a boy and packed into a sack. Further back and away from the large gulls, there were also a good number of Black-headed Gulls at a second discharge, but no sign of the Mediterranean Gulls found on previous trips, although a single Audouin's Gull passed overhead. A couple of Sandwich Terns were fishing for themselves. We tried another couple of spots to check out the gull roosts at various points of the estuary, finding a couple of Audouin's Gulls and Grey (Black-bellied) Plover in winter plumage and watched the Jackdaws spilling from the ancient fortress on the top of the hill.

Back at Kenitra, we decided to stop again at the lagoon and cover at least the areas of water on foot from the roadside path. A shepherd banged on a lamppost to control his flock and all the birds on the marsh took flight, including the Marbled Teal pair that we had found more or less in the same position they had been at the beginning of the day. Fortunately, another Marbled Teal was found as most of the birds returned. Adult Glossy Ibis were particularly reflective in the soft evening light. Another highlight was the lump of both adult and young Squacco Herons, with five in the same 'scope view. The waders (shorebirds) were still present but again difficult to see at the back of the marsh because of the reeds.

The hotel staff were still making an unnecessary fuss about the apparent mistake on the cheque that Adrian had left them and were refusing to hand over room keys. Whilst this was resolved, the general attitude of the hotel is not the standard to be expected and its only recommendation is its location very near to the lagoon.

### Day 3 - March 14

#### **Merdja Zerga**

After breakfast at 06.45, we were on the road by 07.30, enjoying the bright and warm sunshine after a short shower. 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 with banana cultivation under plastic greenhouses.

We pulled off the motorway at the junction for Moulay Bouselham and made our way to the seafront, where the giant lagoon, the Merdja Zerga discharges in the ocean. A few minutes seawatching rewarded us with a couple of distant adult Northern Gannets and then an Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger) just beyond the breakers. The skua alighted on the surface and then took off in attack mode heading towards us at high speed. Its target was a Sandwich Tern and a brief aerial one-way battle ensued, although it seemed the tern had no food to give up. A further surprise was a first-winter Oystercatcher probing the dry sand on the beach.

Hassan, our guide for the day, arrived with Anton and Anne from Germany, who joined us for the boat trip. We boarded two boats and once on the water, we headed to a roost of Lesser Black-backed Gulls with the odd first winter Yellow-legged Gull. A Kingfisher was seen briefly with a fish. A further roost contained Audouins Gulls. After we had doubled back to the main channel it was the turn of the Slender-billed Gulls (both adults and first-winters) that were initially asleep amongst Sandwich Terns. The gulls awoke and the adults started displaying, showing off their bright rosy tint on their underparts and black gape whilst calling. A further gull preening amongst the terns attracted interest and debate ensued as to its identity. Photographs later concluded the bird to be a Mediterranean Gull, albeit a relatively small individual.

We continued through patches of different species as well as largely birdless areas. A number of Caspian Terns were present amongst the gulls, including an immature still begging from its attendant adult. We then encountered a patch of Whiskered Terns with some in winter and summer plumages, a group of Whimbrel, some Ruddy Turnstones with Ringed Plovers, Grey Herons and a large gang of Coots standing in the shallow water. We got out on a cockle bank to 'make the telescope' as Hassan requested. There were thousands of waders in the areas not occupied by the hundreds of human, mainly female, cockle harvesters using short scraping tools in the shallow water. Most of the birds were Redshank, with Grey Plover and Greenshank, with a few Pied Avocet and groups of Spoonbills and Greater Flamingoes. As this was low water, the birds were strung out over tens of square kilometres of mud and shallow water.

We journeyed back, encountering many crabs on mudbanks, a foraging Slender-billed Gull and then a further group on the bank. Ringed and Kentish Plovers allowed close approach, enabling salient features to be assimilated. We disembarked on the southern shore to have lunch at what is a pretty spectacular viewpoint over the lagoon. Afterwards, with a little time before Hassan joined us at 14.00, we drove a short distance down the road and stopped on the edge of arable fields. The missing White Wagtails were in evidence amongst Meadow Pipits. A tethered donkey started calling and another untethered animal rushed in for the fight. This got serious as they reared and bit each other. Mustapha rushed in to defend the tethered animal and the sight of a rotund driver chasing a donkey with a stick was something to behold!

After collecting Hassan we journeyed through the narrow tracks of a village to reach the canal, where we due to meet Mohammed 'the marsh guardian'. Just like the previous year, he wasn't there but his son was. Borrowing some cut-off boots from Hassan, the son, Hassan and the quaker-bearded guy that had also helped us the year before started moving through the rushes (*Juncus* spp.). We joined in to create a line, but after a few minutes Hassan & Co. gave up and moved off saying we should wait for Mohammed. The group stayed in the rushes watching Mustapha hold court to the large group of children that had gathered. A hooded man appeared from nowhere and we immediately dubbed him as Obi-Wan Kenobi, who was going to fortify us with the 'force'. But, as Obi-one (green Obi) wandered off the force went with him. Hassan suggested a casual walk and after a brief confrontation with Adrian and Martin and some frenetic phone calls, a new story about Mohammed emerged and he would now meet us some place else on the other side of the lagoon. Strange that we picked him up along the edge of the canal after about ten minutes, but at least he seemed confident of the whereabouts of the owls.

We journeyed through growing country, where Driscoll's, the berry people, have a large factory. After about another twenty minutes, we turned down a track through a settlement before the track became a field edge. We continued as far as we could, past the guys making a fire from old sprinkler hoses. Now we were on foot, attracting an entourage of kids. Obi-two (black obi) was crouched on the field margin and immediately the force was with us as a male Montagu's Harrier glided past at close range. We were then shown across a final grazed field before the edge of the rushes. Mohammed disappeared inside and within what seemed like seconds an owl was in the air. Another, perhaps the same bird, was in the air with this landing on a pole, although we could only just see its head. A third owl then came up and this one circled a few times to the sound of the camera shutters. The fourth flew away and then landed in the open in the rough grass field and could be seen through the scopes, albeit against the sun. We moved forward and around to try and get a better view with the sun behind us. By now the owl had hunkered down with just its ear-tufts showing, although it did show a full face as a Cattle Egret got too close. Hassan continued to move, ending up about 10 m from the bird on the other side of it. Finally it flushed and glided a short distance into the rushes.

As we neared the spot where Obi-two had been, a fourth or fifth owl came up from beyond some guys working in a field and landed in a field of dense potatoes near Obi-three (red Obi). Hassan said they used potatoes when the water level was too high in the marsh. Back at the bus, we attempted to clean up from the sticky soils. We dropped the guides off at various points before journeying back to the hotel, as it was now about 17.15. We were more than satisfied with our owl haul, even though it had taken much longer than anticipated. But hey, this is Morocco.

#### **Day 4 - March 15**

##### ***Volubilis & Fez medina***

Although we were on course for leaving at 06.45 as planned, a delayed breakfast saw us leave about 20 minutes late. A hunting Black-shouldered Kite and an Osprey on a pylon, that must have roosted there overnight, provided interest although this did not immediately satisfy Chris' need for a 'bird-fix'.

From Kenitra we began to encounter the rolling hills of the wheatlands of this part of Morocco. In truth, a variety of crops such as Broad (flava) beans are grown in a patchwork of fields. Just past the 20 km signpost we pulled off the road at a ploughed field. A Calandra Lark in song flight glided over the top of the rise. We then saw what looked like Thekla Larks well along with White Wagtails, Yellow Wagtails (Spanish race *iberiae*) and a Black-eared Wheatear, the Calandras stayed out of view. A threatening Kestrel on a pole may not have helped. Eventually, we walked up the field margin to view the downslope and were rewarded by a super view of Calandra Lark singing on the ground as well as in flight and being chased by one wagtail or other.

After another 20 km or so we pulled over to take in the panoramic view of the ruins of Volubilis, nestling in a landscape decorated with olive groves and an lustrous orange ground flora of Field Marigold *Calendula arvensis*. Even from the side of the road, the arches and columns of this large site are as impressive as they are unexpected. At the end of the entrance drive, police on motorbikes and other security in black unmarked cars greeted us. It seemed as though the young prince was paying a visit. (We were later to see him and his young friends being shown around). We collected our guide, Majid, who turned out to be excellent.

A floral profusion greeted us and there were quite a few butterflies on the wing, including a beautiful Spanish Freston, which landed obligingly on a dead stem. Stonechat and Sardinian Warbler followed. A Long-legged Buzzard was later replaced in the sky with another large raptor. This time, the bird had a dark hood; a Short-toed (Snake) Eagle. As if it knew it was being appreciated, it drifted overhead showing barring across the underwings.

Majid then got Dan and Doreene to sit either side of a stone plinth. As one person shuffled backwards, it became clear that Dan was sporting a giant stone phallus. All hooted with laughter and Dan stayed quite some time with his new appendage being photographed by all in the group. Look out for the video on YouTube!

On the way out, a Small Heath butterfly was spotted, with this unusual North African form taking some time to identify in the book later. Marty then found the cutest Spur-thighed Tortoise, no bigger than a half dollar (£2 coin). It was dwarfed by Adrian's hand in the photos. As a result of the intense security surrounding the young Prince's visit, we drove away from Volubilis and lunched on the edge of an olive grove underneath some

Eucalypts. Mating Green-striped Whites *Euchloe belemia* provided additional entertainment, with Marty also producing an immense golden orange slug.

On the way to Fez, we stopped for an *algeriensis* Great Grey Shrike with a nearby white-throated Black-eared Wheatear. We reached Fez about 14.30 and met Ali our guide at the King's Palace. Ali first explained the real meaning of Fez, which is not linked to the tassled red hat, but to an axe. Ali is a veritable mine of information and was to keep us thoroughly entertained for the next three or more hours as we experienced the world-renowned Medina, the medieval city that is home to 450,000 people. The city is comprised of 187 neighbourhoods, with an internal gate marking the end of one and the beginning of another, serviced by some 9,600 tiny streets. Each neighbourhood contains the 5 essential elements: a fountain, a mosque, a koranic school, a bakery and a hamman. 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.

We visited a mosque and some time later the tannery. Here, we were guided through a nondescript door and climbed several levels of stairs after being given sprigs of mint to hold under noses to help overcome the pungent smells from the tannery area below us. Several men were working stripping hair from hides with large knives whilst another couple were treading the dye into hides in the knee-deep solution contained within the white stone circular cells reminiscent of the honeycomb in a bee's nest. This is one of the toughest jobs in the world, with the dangers of working with caustic (and probably carcinogenic) chemicals. 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! A number of poofs were bargained for and eventually bought, from the shop tannery.

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. Ali borrowed some scarves and began to illustrate the different ways these could be prepared. He selected different colours for skin and hair colour working on Gretchen, Linda, Laura and then Chris, who looked like a cross between Lawrence of Arabia, Spike Milligan and David Hasselhoff's older brother. A number of bedspreads were then bought.

We emerged from the tannery into a car parking area where the bus was waiting to take us to the recently constructed Dar Fez Medina, a *dar* rather than a *riad* without the garden of the latter. The air was simply alive with Alpine Swifts that were visiting the holes in the walls of the city, presumably to breed. We had never realised that they bred in the city until now. The bus was too wide for the narrow streets and we had to trundle our luggage in with the help of the hotel staff. Reaching the house we entered yet another world of tiles, fountains and cushioned seating areas. We were seated and served mint tea and Moroccan cookies. Dinner was a sumptuous affair on low chairs (designed especially for Martin!) with a super first course of a variety of salads followed by a beef, artichoke and pea tajine, with fruit 'soup' for dessert.

## **Day 5 - March 16**

### ***Moyen Atlas to the Zeida Plain***

As we left, the photographers got a shot at the cruising Alpine Swifts illuminated by the early morning sunshine. 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. In a small town, Mustapha purchased bread and Adrian treated us to croissants with and without chocolate. The quest was then on to find the chocolate.....

The houses here and later in Ifrane have a very stylish Alpine quality with steep-pitched roofs to keep the roofs as clear from snow as possible. There is clearly money in this part of Morocco.

By the turn to Dayet Aoua (lake of the gulls – although we have never seen one), we had reached an altitude of around 1500 m. There were already more people at the lakeside than we had ever seen in all years combined, especially when the school trip came in. It must have been the combination of beautiful weather on a Sunday. Nevertheless, we saw Firecrest as we opened the van door. Mistle Thrush and Coal Tit quickly followed after a short walk in the pine trees. An amazing number of Black-necked Grebes in summer plumage,

alongside the Red-knobbed (many) and European (few) Coots were on the lake. Strolling on the road next to the currently naked lakeside poplars, Short-toed Treecreeper and European Nuthatch were spotted. A pair of Sparrowhawks displayed overhead, to be followed by a pair of Long-legged Buzzards. On the lake near the Royal Hunting Lodge was a pair of Ruddy Shelducks, Gadwall, Pochard and Ferruginous Duck. Following Adrian's conversation in Arabic the guards around the Lodge were happy for us to pass through.

As the woodpeckers we had seen were of the 'wrong' flavour (i.e. Great Spotted), we decided to move up the small track to another small area of woodland amongst meadows and a small orchard. There were numerous birds here, but no immediate response to Adrian's tape. A bird flying past Martin prompted the exclamation of 'Hawfinch'. The bird landed and Dan and Laura had a brief view. The bird flew a short distance and disappeared in the vegetation (Against the light, Laura's shots were silhouetted and Martin had doubts. Only later with the magic of computer adjustment was Laura able to prove Martin's initial ID was correct.) As we searched, Adrian started shouting as a male Atlas Crossbill perched atop a pine. A number of Crossbills were present but were elusive, before the male remarkably came to sit in a bare tree giving Bill some of his best pictures yet. A male Cirl Bunting and a pair of Jays were noted as we descended back to the lake.

After leaving the lake, we climbed higher, and after the evergreen oaks we began to encounter Atlas Cedar *Cedrus atlantica*. Upon entering a dense stand of forest, some Barbary Macaques were spotted on the ground eating grass. A number of people then stopped to feed the monkeys with bread and then apples. Hand-outs and increased human-monkey contact inevitably leads 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. Amazingly, we then experienced the issue at first hand as a large male came from nowhere to wrench Linda's water bottle from the clip on her belt before making off with it. We were just grateful Linda was a) unhurt and b) not abducted as a macaque bride!

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*. Chris led a successful expedition for Woodlark and Stock Dove, after a minimal description of Woodlark song, whilst the leaders and Mustapha prepared a lunch minus tomatoes, which had gone missing.

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 where 202 Ruddy Shelduck (thanks to Dan our resident counter for the figure) were displaying and feeding. Mustapha found a beautiful yellow low-growing, but sadly unidentified alpine flower

Further down the road, we stopped for a strange female Black Wheatear with more than usual white colouration in the rump area, before finding a more typical bird. After a short while we dropped 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. After about half an hour or so, we turned left down a track and were immediately into the *Artemisia* (Wormwood) steppe that is the home of Dupont's Lark. In a good area that also incorporates some *Halfa* grass we aligned ourselves at about 50 m intervals before walking forward through the vegetation in a broad line to see what we could encounter. After a short distance, Martin called that he had two Dupont's Larks running at <100 m away. The others gathered into a semi-circular arrangement. Ever elusive the birds crouched, popped up, craned around the *Artemisia*. Bill recounted position and everyone got a good view and the shutters started to hammer in staccato symphony. Finally, the birds ran at Marty, who now looked pretty keen on birds. They stopped, and in unison took to gentle flight over our heads and back from whence they had come. All in all we had probably only travelled about 400 m and found this ultra-difficult bird in less than ten minutes. This was record time and everyone high-fived and Adrian produced some celebratory biscuits from somewhere on his person (?!).

We now concentrated on other species but in a less formal way and Chris and Marty soon found a male Red-rumped Wheatear. The female nearby was behaving a little oddly and proved to have a large seed or small stone trapped between her mandibles with the upper one forced upwards. It had to come out if she was to survive. Seven Trumpeter Finches then flew in and gave nice views. A pair of Desert Wheatears followed, before a Crested/Thekla Lark and a group photo with the mountains in the background. A female Northern Wheatear prompted some discussion of the distinguishing field marks of females Seebohm's Wheatear.

The journey into Midelt only took a few minutes and as the centre of Morocco's apple production it has a giant model apple as a fountain as a centerpiece in the road. Bill commented that we were now in the 'Big Apple'. Those linked to the Villa Midelt had installed signs to the edge of town and compared to the previous year was now easily found. The inside of the *Riad* or Moroccan guesthouse itself was a revelation of all things Moroccan. We learned that the former housekeeper Mounia had sadly left and the slight delay in the mint tea and snacks reflected this. The rooms were still great though as was the four-course dinner with *Harare* soup, a mixture of fine salads and vegetable and chicken and beef and prune tajines, followed by oranges. The laughter flowed, perhaps partly due to the relief that we could lie-in until after 0600 and enjoy breakfast in our comfortable surroundings rather than attempt the pre-dawn quest for Dupont's Lark on an extremely cold, high-altitude plain.

## **Day 6 - March 17**

### ***Midelt to Erfoud***

We were on the road by 07.30 heading first for Errachidia, an even larger town than Midelt. The reason for its existence is its importance as a garrison town with an airport. We stopped for *hobs* before heading to Goulmine. We stopped to the east of the town at a wadi containing the best spiky vegetation. After we disembarked Mustapha rolled the bus forward exposing Gretchen indisposed in the makeshift restroom behind the back doors!

As we walking in a line through the vegetation, a Black-eared Wheatear was spotted, with Chris then finding a number of larks on the stony *reg* beyond the vegetation. These proved to be a party of the nomadic Thick-billed Larks; a good find. Dan then spotted our target bird, a Scrub Warbler both on the ground and in low flight. It evaded us and took some relocating. It was quite elusive and only after Martin got ahead as a 'blocker', was it held up sufficiently that we got good views of not one, but two individuals of this rather extraordinary little long-tailed, sharp-eyed bird.

Back at the bus, a man in a 4X4 with a Qatar plate was waiting for us. It was interesting to find out that this was a release point for reintroduced Houbara Bustard. We were late now, but Mustapha pushing on, managed to reach our lunch stop at a viewpoint over the Ziz Valley by about 13.15. With its extensive palmeries bordering the river, the Ziz is a true ribbon of life in an otherwise rather barren landscape. Adrian took the group to see a Desert Lark as lunch was being prepared.

Erfoud, the gateway to the eastern sandy desert before the border with Algeria, has quite extensive date palms. There was standing water in some areas testament to recent rainfall. Laughing Dove was spotted on the roadside amongst the ubiquitous Collared Doves. We stopped in town to try and change some large banknotes for smaller denomination, but Adrian had to try three banks before completing the task.

At Rissani we turned right towards the line of cliffs resembling a large recumbent predator on the edge of town. From there we took a track behind another ridgeline into an large sandy area with low vegetation representing a 'bowl' of several tens of square kilometres. After about five minutes of walking, Martin announced that he'd located sandgrouse at only a couple of hundred metres distant. As we were closing the gap, a man on a moped approached doing a good impression of a fossil salesman. Fortunately and rather surprisingly, he hung back and we were able to get great views of several groups of truly beautiful Spotted Sandgrouse. Unfortunately, a more distant group became disturbed for some reason and this created a ripple effect and all birds, perhaps as many as 100, took flight. At this point, the man on the moped turned out to be Brahim, a young local guide of growing repute, who Adrian knows well. Leaving his moped with a fossil gatherer friend somewhere in the rocks, he joined us on the bus.

Back near the main road, we stopped for feeding Trumpeter Finches and then Brown-necked Ravens that would be better named Brown-hooded or even Brown-bodied Ravens. Brahim told us that the well-known Rissani Pharaoh Eagle Owl had not been seen for some time and we headed for another spot he knew. This turned out to be somewhere Adrian and Martin had been before: another impressive escarpment in a natural horseshoe-shaped arena that is a fitting home for this king of birds. We followed some footprints that ended some way up a sandy slope and Brahim set up the first telescope on the cliff behind us (not the facing cliff that Adrian and Martin were familiar with). On a ledge in front of a very large cleft sat a truly magnificent owl with piercing orange eyes.

After a few minutes, the owl started to look around and after coughing up a pellet (only noted from digiscoped images), flew a few metres upwards. From a ledge the owl emanated a deep low hoot that resounded around the cliffs. The bird could now be seen at closer distance and much more easily and the camera shutters began to rattle.

It was now about 18.00 now and with some distance still to go to our accommodation we set off. Just outside the escarpment, a pale Red Fox crossed the track and then lingered at the foot of the ridgeline, allowing an unusually prolonged view. We said goodbye to Brahim in Rissani before heading towards Merzouga. Off the road, it is still 5 km to Auberge Derkaoua across the stony desert. At the entrance, we were greeted by the owner, Said. After downloading the bags, we said a temporary 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 remote location and the group would be unaware of the full beauty of our surroundings until the morning. But even now, the grounds looked lovely with the pathways illuminated by 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. After completing our checklist around the first bar we had encountered on the trip, we settled down to dinner in the restaurant warmed by a real log fire.

## **Day 7 – March 18**

### ***Erg Chebbi and the Merzouga area***

At 05.15 we found ourselves stumbling around in the dark trying to get out of the hotel to reach the two Toyota Land Cruisers, driven by top bird guide Lachen and his brother Mohammed. After 20 minutes journeying along tracks or making new ones, we found ourselves alongside waiting camels and we abandoned one mode of transport for another. Doreene 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. We became a camel train as our guides led us onto the dunes. Here, there were lots of others scrambling for the sunrise both on foot and on camels. At a well, a male Desert Sparrow was chirruping sweetly; a great sighting from the back of a camel.

We stopped at the foot of a smaller dune and quickly overcame the 60° slope assisted by our guides to reach the ridge. Here we stayed to say goodbye to the almost full moon and say hello to the sun. Before long the burning orb peeked over the ridgeline where Algeria begins, to a low murmur of appreciation from the waiting crowd. The sun's climb into the sky is always surprisingly rapid. As singles or pairs, the group then took part in 'Berber ski' (being pulled on a rug) on the way down the dune.

Back in the 4WDs, we drove to a sandy wadi with quite a lot of vegetation. After a short while, the vehicles stopped and Lahcen greeted a shepherd. There, just over a low ridge at the foot of a bush was an Egyptian Nightjar. The mottled camouflage and massive head and tiny bill gives the species a most un-bird like quality. Its eye remained as a slit, clearly aware of us but remaining still.

More than pleased with ourselves, we headed back to our auberge for an *al fresco* breakfast that included Moroccan crepes and with frequent glances at the warblers in the tamarisks. By the time we left the auberge at around 10.45 Orphean, female Sardinian and a possible Melodious had been added to the numerous Subalpines. Adrian and Martin, now with hand-held radios again divided themselves between vehicles, with Adrian in Lachen's 4WD in the lead.

After various larks and wheatears we drove along a wadi wall where we stopped to greet a teenage boy. The 'guardian' walked us to a large tamarisk, where not one, but two Pharaoh Eagle Owls were perched. The one we could see easily started to walk around and then surprised us by flying from the tree to perch in the open and from there head to another tree further down the wadi. The second, much paler bird was much more relaxed and we could crawl forward to get a full whole-body view.

Back in the vehicles, we were soon stopping for a small warbler in the dense *Halfa* grass. Lahcen played the birds' song from his phone and the bird went into song flight and we then realised there were at least two Desert Warblers, which started to display to each other. A couple of Hoopoe Larks in the same area also drew attention after which Martin's vehicle was delayed by another small warbler that was quickly identified as a male Spectacled Warbler. The radios brought everyone together to enjoy this widely distributed,

but uncommon species. Lahcen had seen tracks of Fennec Fox and as Martin's vehicle stopped to check them out, Adrian came over the radio to inform of a group of Crowned Sandgrouse. The dozen birds were calmly walking over a stony area amongst the vegetation and allowed surprisingly close approach in the vehicles. There appeared to be two Spotted Sandgrouse in the group of mostly male birds.

We then headed for Lahcen's bivouac for lunch at which mint tea was served. Laura passed around the cookies, Gretchen revealed her fondness for the colour blue and everyone passed around Marty's shoe for inspection. We never did find out why! Desert Sparrow breeds in a building in the area and we were soon enjoying views of a male and two females as well as White-crowned Wheatear and *elegans* Desert Great Grey Shrike. The goats in a dwelling originally built for people got the benefit of the leftovers from lunch.

We tried a palmery for Fulvous Babbler with no luck, but as we left a young girl had set out her wares for sale. She proved to be a tough adversary in the art of bargaining and perhaps because she was cute, one after another of us paid more than we might have done. Back in the vehicles, we drove to reach an area of vegetation with interspersed sand and immediately, rather a large bird landed in front of us, seemingly flushed by the goats to our left. It remained hidden and speculation as to its identity followed, until eventually the bird took flight. Adrian called the first Short-eared Owl we had ever seen on a Moroccan trip. Noting where it had landed, the drivers got us to separate points where the two vehicles could see it. Lahcen was having trouble with his car and Mohammed warned not to start it after it had stalled. Unfortunately, he did and the bird flushed a little before digiscoped photographs of what is a very dark and striking grey form with lemon-yellow eyes, could be taken. We tried to re-locate it, but without success, although we did see a Hoopoe Lark and a female Desert Sparrow that initially defied identification, during the search.

An owl-like form on the ground caused us to stop again, but incredibly this was not the Short-eared Owl but another Pharaoh Eagle Owl. We watched it for a while, with Martin also trying digiscoping with Marty's camera adding weight to Kowa's claim of a 'universal' mount. Whilst this was happening some Cream-coloured Coursers ran into view and after getting back aboard the vehicles, we had some tremendous views.

The temperature had now cooled from the 23°C in the midday sun and clouds threatened with an increasing wind. We stopped to catch up with Brahim who was assisting another long-standing friend of Adrian and Martin's, Santi Villa (of Spainbirds) and his group. We swapped sightings and information. They had spent a lot of time searching for Houbara Bustard, without success, reinforcing Lahcen's lack of a recent sighting.

Back at Derkaoua, we had the usual task of spending time on our checklist (apart from Marty – who had lost his) before consuming another fine meal topped with Lemon Tart. We had seen pretty much all the desert specialities in one fantastic day, and the leaders knew this was unlikely to be bettered, and wondered what we would do for the next couple of days....

## **Day 8 – March 19**

### ***Merzouga***

After the previous days success we had a bit of a lie in with Adrian leading a brief walk in the hotel grounds before breakfast at 07.00, providing Common Redstart and flushing a group of eight Black-crowned Night Herons that were reluctant to push on against the stiff breeze. Marty and Adrian then went into the kitchen to cook the scrambled eggs Marty-style.

We left at just after 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 a small village about 5 km from Merzouga. Here, 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. Water attracts amphibians as well as birds and we were lucky enough to find a Mauritanian Toad with a second soon after. Passerines were thin on the ground, apart from the hordes of House Sparrows and Subalpine Warblers. After a while we did find a few Chiffchaffs but unfortunately only Martin saw the Common Whitethroat and Tree Pipit. A couple of Long-billed Larks patrolled the arid ground away from the palmery.

We then drove parallel with the giant sand dunes to Merzouga and its line of auberges. Birds were really thin on the ground and apart from a few groups of Short-toed Larks and the odd wheatear there was very little. Café Yasmina at the end of the line has an area of tamarisks around an area that becomes a temporary

lake after significant rainfall, although it was long dry today. The area is also used by Spanish ringers in Spring migration and after ordering some tea we searched the bushes. It was the same story as elsewhere with many Subalpine Warblers and the odd Chiffchaff amongst the resident House Sparrows and Collared Doves. After tea, we had no more time to try another spot as we were heading back to Derkaoua for lunch. Arriving back at 12.30, there was time for a short circuit of the inner garden, which produced an interesting red and black Burying Beetle whilst the Night Herons were still in a tree.

After lunch we relaxed for an hour before walking out to the wadi at the back of the hotel. There were few birds about so we amused ourselves with lizards, which proved to be Small Fringe-toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus dumerili*. Cool insects included an impressive ground beetle with white markings and ants releasing winged adults, also with white spots. After some Trumpeter Finches and pairs of Desert Shrike and Desert Wheatear, a bird flushed from Chris's feet. Looking rather falconesque, the Egyptian Nightjar flew for about 100 m before dropping down again. We moved forward slowly but it flushed again from about 15 m, and just as we were set to follow it again, another flushed from amongst us. We managed to find this individual on the ground in the telescopes before it flushed to another spot at the top of a grassy dune about 3 m high, more or less in the open. This was rather a contrast to the typical position of on the ground backed against a bush. Leaving the bird in peace we walked back flushing a third from the centre of the wadi. This one landed after 10 m for a few seconds before heading off again.

Back at Derkaoua, there were still many Subalpine Warblers and a lone Chiffchaff. However, another *Phylloscopus* with pale legs quickly attracted attention. The pale underparts contrasting with green upperparts and pale open face confirmed Western Bonelli's Warbler. The bird had a penchant for fly-catching as did the bat that Adrian spotted. This became two bats in the early evening sunshine and Laura, Bill and Martin spent some time trying to get a decent picture.

More mammals were to follow as after an early dinner, Lahcen and Mohammed arrived to take us out on a night drive. At just after 20.00 we headed out of Derkaoua towards Rissani and left the road after a few hundred metres on the right. Within about ten minutes or so, a rodent had been spotted with this haring away at high speed. As it was saltating (hopping like a Kangaroo), this can only mean Lesser Egyptian Jerboa. The animal went to ground at the base of a bush and we were able to get out and admire the massive back legs and feet and hugely long tail of our little friend in the torchlight.

Lahcen then called from behind us as he had found a Desert Hedgehog. This had rolled into a ball, and after a couple of pictures we decided to wait in silence (well almost) in the dark. Periodic checks with a torch were designed to show when it had started to move. But as Adrian was explaining the procedure in order to get some pictures, as we turned the lights back on it became clear that it had slipped away. Frenetic searching on foot and with the vehicles followed without success.

A few minutes later Adrian's vehicle was onto a Hare, and as we joined the chase both vehicles were quickly up to 40 km/hr as the animal sped away. Another was flushed, but this proved to be no Hare, but a Fennec Fox! It too shot away at speed, stopping in some bushes briefly and flattening, when we could see its giant ears to full effect. It shot away again and we let it go on its way into the night. Astounded by our success, we continued and after another few minutes a small rodent in a large grassy sand clump was spotted in the headlights. The photographers got out and with the aid of Mohammed and a torch, were able to watch the Lesser Egyptian Gerbil *Gerbillus gerbillus* going about its business looking for seeds and digging a hole, rather oblivious to the lights. Another hare was then seen, this time one that obligingly sat in the headlights for several minutes before jumping up and running away. In one incredible hour we had seen all the possible desert mammals, so it seemed appropriate to now find a Hoopoe Lark....

Dan, Doreene, Gretchen and Linda then left in Mohammed's vehicle and Adrian, Laura, Bill and Martin continued with Lahcen. Despite all efforts, we saw only another one Gerbil in the next hour and 45 minutes. Nevertheless, we were still ecstatic when we got back to Derkaoua at about 23.15 after completing our giant more or less circular tour of the whole area.

## Day 9 – March 20

### ***Derkaoua area***

Before breakfast, Chris and Marty found a Wryneck on the edge of the entrance track and Bill managed to get a great shot despite still being on 'tungsten' setting from the night before. Adrian assisted Marty in the kitchen with the eggs, introducing some onions and Moroccan flavourings particularly cumen. After breakfast we resumed wandering around the grounds but had little to add to the Subalpine Warblers apart from a male Moussier's Redstart.

We left late at around 08.45, looking for Babblers on the track to Merzgane with its fossil emporium. A guy had seen them a few minutes earlier but there was no sign of them for us. Martin, Bill and Marty accompanied Lahcen and in a mid-sized tamarisk spotted a Subalpine Warbler with what immediately looked like an Olivaceous Warbler. The bird flew before definitive pictures were taken and preceded to pass from bush to bush before disappearing. The rest of the group was called in. What looked to be the right bird flew over the fossil centre and we took off in search, also mindful of the babbler. Laura was missing and Martin went back to find her. She explained that the Olivaceous Warbler had returned periodically to the same tree and was often chased by the Subalpine Warbler.

The group was called back again and after one brief appearance and disappearance of the bird during which time it pumped its tail a little, we did the 'Big Sit' and waited for it in the warm (26° C) sunshine. It took about 25 minutes for our bird to return and we got a good view and some pictures. A loreal line was present with a reasonable supercilium and the upperparts had a greenish cast. The bill was quite long with slight down-curving at the tip, but we didn't think it had a particularly broad base. All in all, we were quite happy the bird was the *reiseri* race of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler that occurs in the Moroccan desert. After this success, we returned to Derkaoua for lunch. Even Laura ate the vegetable starter, before the *kefta* main course that kept up our egg intake.

The babbler quest resumed after lunch in more overcast conditions threatening rain. This could not dampen the spirits in the 'party bus' as Gretchen, Laura, Marty and Martin sang along to Johnny Cash and 'Ring of Fire', with Laura preserving it for prosperity as an i-phone video. By late afternoon, a dust storm sprang up and visibility reduced to a couple of hundred metres. As we searched an area of open ground, the presence of vehicles at various points around us confirmed the ladies rally-race that we had heard about had actually started.

Apart from a small 'purple' patch of a couple of Desert Warblers, a Desert Wheatear and a warbler that we eventually decided was a male Spectacled Warbler and not a Whitethroat, the pickings were slim. As we returned to our bus after visiting the same small plantation we had tried the day before for babblers, we found our young female entrepreneur friend had brought out her younger sister and her friend. Again, we bought nicnacs with Lahcen and Mohammed aiding negotiations with our hard-bargaining friends.

At another more extensive palmery with date palms and fields of wheat and other crops, we still blanked on the babbler but managed to buy another couple of things from some really cute kids. Nearing Derkaoua, we did manage a couple of Cream-coloured Coursers in the dusk and the increasing wind.

At Derkaoua, we thanked our guiding duo of brothers and Gretchen kindly passed on a secondhand bird book she had brought with her. The guys had really done a great job for us (again). Dinner included a good courgette soup that Chris voted as the best of the trip thus far, along with a nice chicken and vegetable tajine and the familiar Lemon Tart – we would miss it.

## Day 10 – March 21

### ***Todra Gorge and Tagdilt Track***

The wind had really howled in the night, blowing sand under doors and through door frames. But today the wind had dropped and we were back to warm sunshine. Mustapha had arrived bright and early and we were off by 07.15. We turned right off the road at Merzgane to again look for babblers. As we cruised a track, an interesting wheatear grabbed our attention. We turned the van and headed back as a Hoopoe flew past and landed in a tree. Another bird then popped up at the top of the same tree: finally a Fulvous Babbler. It paused for a few seconds allowing all to get a scope view before it flew off. We followed, but only succeeded in identifying our wheatear as a very bright Northern, found a group of beautifully rosy Trumpeter Finches and a

calling Desert Shrike that allowed close approach. The staining around its bill suggested he had just been living up to its colloquial name of 'butcher-bird'.

We continued to Erfoud to head west on the main road. Scanning the roadside wires Chris stopped us, a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, our target bird. The two individuals were a few hundred metres before the same spot we normally get them. Bee-eaters are exotically colourful birds and as they were relaxed, we were able to enjoy their finery in detail. One departed, but the other remained and flew out to catch a bee. Laura thought she was pleased with her first flight shots, until she saw the one in flight with a bee in its bill! Bill zoomed in a picture to show the red-eye in sharp detail.

In Tinejdad, we stopped at a bank for some of us to exchange a little more money, picked up bread and then headed into a market with a super 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. We climbed from about 1000 m to 1500 m. At the towering gorge, Mustapha went ahead to prepare lunch as the rest of the group walked along the road adjacent to the river. Crag Martins hawked overhead and a pair of Grey Wagtails picked insects from the water's edge. Rock Dove, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and House Buntings amongst the stalls were also seen.

At lunch, we marvelled at the climbers ascending the vertical faces of the huge cliffs whilst Laura and Marty nipped back to the stalls to buy some serving dishes made from fossil rock. We then moved 5 km up the road to an area with good bush cover on the slopes. Within seconds of the tape starting, a warbler flew towards us. The male Tristram's Warbler hopped amongst the roadside rocks and bushes on the other side of the wadi providing everyone with a good scope view. A little further on, the same procedure produced a pair, but this time much closer. Very pleased, we travelled back through the spectacular landscape the way we had come.

We pushed onto Boumalne continually checking for Maghreb (Mourning) Wheatear. In what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, we turned off a track down the track we stopped on the edge of a wadi opposite a low cliff face. This is a spot of Pharaoh Eagle Owls and Brahim often sees Maghreb Wheatear here too. Neither was in residence, although a scan along the left hand cliff looking up the wadi produced a large nest with a raptor actually on it. This was confirmed as a Long-legged Buzzard.

By now it was after 16.00 leaving us relatively little time to explore the vast Tagdilt track, a rocky steppe area with low growing *Artemisia* (similar to the non-sandy parts of Zeida Plain) punctuated by wadis. We turned off to the right along a track towards the pylons in the distance following some instructions we had received from Santi earlier in the trip. We scattered across the slopes on foot. Laura flushed a large hare with a russet hindneck and shaggy greyish fur along the back. This was a good candidate for African Savannah Hare *Lepus microtis*, if this species truly exists in Morocco. In combination, we found a number of Desert and Red-rumped Wheatears, some Thick-billed Larks in flight and some Temminck's and Desert Larks, but no Maghreb Wheatear. On the track out we stopped for Temminck's Larks that were very close to the van and Mustapha and Martin saw our first Sand Rat. The *obesus* specific name of this rodent gives the species its 'Fat' prefix for some commentators, perhaps a little unfairly.

We then navigated the terrible rubbish dump with odd piles of burnt plastic, metal and glass with plastic bags scattered across covering many, maybe even tens of kilometres. Still it was better than the previous year and there were far fewer feral dogs. After some Thick-billed Larks, we struggled a little to find the right track to Dave Gosney's 'wheatear wall' that had held breeding Maghreb Wheatears in the relatively recent past. A male Red-rumped Wheatear initially raised pulses a little and there were many Short-toed Larks and Trumpeter Finches. Breaking onto to the road, we were surprised to find one of a pair of Cream-coloured Coursers actually on the road.

In Boumalne, we check into the Kasbah Tizzarouine, where many other groups were already present, including a group of British birders (that we later learned was led by Dave Gosney of BirdGuides fame), an international group of Dutch and perhaps Spanish and French birders and a group of Italian dirt bikers. Adrian voted the *harare* soup as the best yet and the chicken in lemon with olives tajine was also popular. After dinner, a group of drummers entertained the crowds, but our group had long left either to bed or to struggle with the patchy internet that was only available in the reception area. At least the password of *trogloodyte* was fun.

## Day 11 – March 22

### **Taghdilt track to Ouarzazate**

Adrian had a chat with Dave Gosney and his group at breakfast at 07.00. We left by 07.45 and drove the short distance back to the Taghdilt track. We turned left along a track to the right of the wadi we had missed the previous afternoon when trying for the Maghreb Wheatear. We got out and spread out scanning for the bird. At the split in the wadi we checked both channels and reached a natural end-point. Adrian was waving us back as he had found something. The bird was pale-backed, but with a faint peach wash across the chest. The dark bill appeared to be quite long and the white from the short supercilium went across the top of the bill. Most striking was the upright stance as though it were leaning back on its tail. Everyone sought to get the definitive photographs and Bill and Laura between them provided everything including a broad black tail band to allow a safe identification of Isabelline Wheatear, a rare migrant through eastern Morocco. What a find!

On the way out, Laura questioned if there was a bird on a rock. In fact, the rock then flew away, rapidly powering out of view and we had missed our chance of our first Lanner or Barbary Falcon. A Little Owl on the shepherd's dwellings was nice, but did not really compensate.

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. Unfortunately it was dry, although the short vegetation was green. Before we'd actually got fully across the road, Fat Sand Rats of a variety of sizes showed themselves. Their long tails were particularly impressive as they chased each other. Temminck's Larks and a Hoopoe Lark in song flight were also seen. From here, we took a track right off the road onto a track. Adrian and Martin have seen sandgrouse in this area before, but despite our best efforts including scanning every few hundred metres with binoculars and telescopes we only added Thekla Lark to our tally of species, although we saw more and more Hoopoe Larks.

Stopping again at the 'Wheatear wall' we saw the British group scanning a ploughed field. Their bus had a teapot and glasses in the back, which made us jealous, but we wouldn't be swapping Mustapha, partly as the driver was so vague he was carrying Germans! A quick chat with Dave Gosney confirmed the group was checking out Thick-billed Larks and had only seen a couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight.

By now it was around 11.30 and we were on our way. After stopping in Boumalne to buy bread, Mustapha put his foot on the gas and we reached Skoura and our lunch stop by 12.30. Adrian took the group around the restored Kasbah (this also features on some 50 Dirham notes) whilst Mustapha and Martin prepared lunch in the shade created by a large tamarisk and date palms.

After lunch, we passed through Ouarzazate on the road to Amerzgane heading to a known spot Maghreb Wheatear, the most difficult wheatear to find in Morocco. In Ouarzazate we stopped for supermarket beer, wine and a bottle of fine whisky (Glenfiddich no less for Chris and Marty), to take to any 'dry' accommodation later in the trip.

Continuing onwards, we crossed a high point along the road where Laura spotted a raptor flying along at the ridge to a radio tower. Mustapha managed to stop on the busy road and the first glance through binoculars confirmed Bonelli's Eagle. Telescopes were quickly trained on it giving us a good view of the bird we had missed thus far.

Moving on to Amerzgane we took the left turn that quickly leads to a rather barren rocky landscape. Just before we reached the area we know, Martin saw a likely bird perched on a stone about 75 m from the road. We reversed to see a pale wheatear with a darkish mottled throat recalling Seeborn's Wheatear, but the back was buff-grey. This was a dark-throated female Maghreb Wheatear. After following her for a while we returned to the bus and headed about 1 km further down the road, where we split up to cover both sides. The irony here was that Gretchen and Linda stayed on the bus and saw a bright male that Mustapha spotted as he parked the vehicle. The bird then flew, back in the direction of the rest of the group, where we caught up with it briefly in a scope before it flew on and then again until we lost it.

Satisfied we returned the 40 km or so to Ouarzazate, where we turned towards the reservoir. Our destination tonight was the Riad Dar Daif, a *riad* formed from two houses. It carries *le clef verte* designation and it was easy to see why. Over four different levels it really was fantastically decorative with quite the best facilities we had encountered. We sipped mint tea and nibbled Moroccan biscuits on a balcony with a vine. At dinner, we climbed to the next level, changing our shoes for slippers to walk on the rugs. A series of octagonal

tables had been set for us. We were soon joined by a *lotar* (a four-stringed banjo-like instrument made from goatskin and wood) player who was reminiscent of Keith Richards' father. We were to experience our elderly friends full rendition over our meal. The French owner of the *riad* also came over to introduce himself.

The meal itself was quite simply the best we had experienced, with a terrific *legume* soup, a finely chopped Moroccan salad, chicken *bastille* with a exquisitely flavoured vegetable tajine, an orange banana and melon smoothie as a palette refresher and an apple and date tart for desert. Simply superb.

## Day 12 – March 23

### ***Ouarzazate to Oukaimeden***

We'd received reports that the water in the reservoir was too difficult to reach and from the rooftop Adrian and Martin could see that was indeed the case. So after a fine breakfast with effectively four sorts of carbs, we headed to Ait Ben Haddou the World Heritage Site that is being restored. At the photo stop just before we got there we saw a number of European Bee-eaters hawking above the trees and fields in the river valley.

After crossing the river on strategically placed sandbags we split into groups with Adrian taking the culture-holics into the kasbah and Martin taking those focused on birds. A Little Ringed Plover on the water's edge attracted attention, as did the Nightingale in full song. As we searched for it, male and female Blackcaps were seen. Martin then found the Nightingale in a pomegranate tree and everyone got a good view in the scope.

Skirting the edge of the settlement, the birding group found a dense stand of olive trees: great habitat but with a dearth of small birds apart from some Goldfinches. It was only when we cut back to the riverbank that some birds were seen including a pair of Trumpeter Finches and Crested Lark. From here, we looped back along the edge of the settlement, noting a couple of our favourite Subalpine Warblers, and met our compatriots at the river. After a bit of shopping (mostly for owls of one sort or another) and ice-cream, we were back on the bus.

Task complete we continued into the foothills of the Atlas to cross the Tizi-n-Tichka pass. We stopped at a favourite spot of ours alongside the river with some small fields along the roadside. There was some migration in evidence with Willow Warblers and around half a dozen Tree Pipits with one and then another showing well perched in trees. Adrian came down from the bus to inform that a bright red male Atlas Crossbill was perched in a bare tree no more than 8 m from the van! Unfortunately, the driver of the truck parked in the lay-by with us scared it by starting the engine and none of the rest of the group got to see it.

Our lunch stop near the summit was in delightful sunshine with the alpine meadows flushed with new grass stretching away from us. It was a pity that there were no passerines populating the slope although a Barbary Ground Squirrel and two species of lizard - Iberian Wall Lizard *Podarcis hispanica* and *Lacerta andreanskyi* – were seen. The latter were probably the target of the local Kestrels one of which stooped from a vantage point to grab something from the grass near us. As lunch was being prepared Levallants's Green Woodpecker responded to the tape and came to the top of a bare tree for the group to see. A couple of Ravens also cavorted in the skies above us.

After lunch, Adrian predicted three hours to Oukaimeden and this proved to be accurate. Bright sunshine illuminated the splendid scenery of the hairpin bends in the road as we traced the verdant river valley to the Marrakesh plain. We turned off before entering the outskirts of the classic city and after a short while took the single in/out road to Oukaimeden and began to climb. The road is decorated by a multitude of stalls with carpets, pottery and the like with a series of metalwork sculptures in one village. We passed through deciduous trees and then at higher elevation stands of pine trees, where there were parties of picnickers on a Sunday afternoon jaunt. There was cloud as we neared the summit masking the snow-covered peaks. We emerged onto the Oukaimeden short turf valley and checked into Chez Juju by 16.00.

After 15 minutes we emerged again minus Adrian whose flu-like illness over the previous three days had driven him to bed. Martin led the group towards the ski lift where we picked up Rock Sparrow and then Atlas Horned Lark. A couple of Dutch photographers arrived and informed us of around 40 Crimson-winged Finches near the snow line and a single male Seebohm's Wheatear somewhere on the grassy plain. We took the track past the shepherds huts on the hillside and quickly added Linnet, Black Redstart, Rock Bunting,

Mistle Thrush and a calling Levallants's Green Woodpecker to our tally. Mustapha assisted by offering a ride up the slope for those that were struggling with the altitude. At the top, Atlas Horned Lark fed within a few metres and a male Moussier's Redstart was seen. We then divided to search the meadow for the Wheatear but there were no birds apart from a Long-legged Buzzard and a Green Sandpiper on the edge of the dam.

Whilst most people had returned to the accommodation Chris and Laura had searched the slope on the way to the chairlift. After a further chat with one of the Dutch guys, Martin joined them and suggested that if he was a wheatear we would be amongst the sheep as a source of insects that otherwise seemed pretty scarce in the relatively chill conditions. And with a quick scan, there was Seeböhm's Wheatear! Chris returned to the hotel to get everyone else (although it later transpired that Gretchen and Linda had been missed). The bird perched at length on the wall and we speculated that he was preparing to roost for the night in one of the holes.

The meal that night in the wooden hunting lodge-style restaurant was one of the more unusual with vegetable soup, followed by a homemade quiche and a number of mains. Wild boar in red wine was popular, with chicken and lemon tajine, a sausage casserole and even lasagne. Replete, most headed for bed at about 21.00, which had become more or less our normal bedtime.

## **Day 13 – March 24**

### ***To Taroudannt via the Tizi-n-Test***

Today, we went for an early morning walk before breakfast at 06.30. Chris had relocated the Seeböhm's Wheatear for those that had not seen it. Two Crimson-winged Finches were right outside the hotel. A search for more near the snow did not produce finches but did give us a terrific look at a Levallant's Green Woodpecker feeding on the ground. By now the sun had started to illuminate the snowy tops and zizzing calls with a slight electric quality signaled the vanguard of Alpine Choughs. A couple of Red-billed Choughs also landed on a roof-top. Soon there were many Choughs, with Alpine far more common on the ground, in the rubbish bins, on wires and on buildings. In other words: everywhere. The incessant barking of a dog next to the hotel for much of the night had kept Martin awake and taking a few pictures in the lovely morning sunshine was some attempt at recuperation.

Breakfast comprised a fine omelette (after a fried egg problem) and the usual bread and jam (jelly) and we were back out by 08.30 to try the radio tower hill for Alpine Accentor passing the sheep flocks with many new 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. A couple of High Atlas Moroccan Day Gecko *Quedenfeldtia trachyblepharus* were sunning themselves and Daisy had her picture taken courtesy of Dan and Doreene. Moving back to the viewpoint below the towers, Blue Rock Thrush and Moussier's Redstart posed for us and then a couple of sparrow-sized birds were seen chasing about 150 m below us: Alpine Accentors! We stuck it out for around 20 minutes or so and eventually three (or was it four?) birds appeared very close to us revealing their intricate patterning and rusty lower breast and flanks patterned with white.

After Martys sensational trade of a fleece for three bracelets the night before, Martin caught the trading bug and the initial quite expensive purchase of a polished ammonite led to a job-lot trade with different guys, and offers of two for 100 Dirhams.

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 then Chris glimpsed a bird in low whirring flight over the stream. As everyone caught up, the bird went downstream again, but then returned to the same spot and began to forage in the fast flowing water. It then emerged and collected nest material before flying off upstream.

The journey down the mountain left 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. A stop at a cluster of pines produced some common birds and large *Agama* lizard bathing in the warm sunshine. At the foot of the mountain, we journeyed through Asni and stopped for lunch amongst the Lentiscs (a pistachio relative) near to a reintroduction site for Cuvier's Gazelle and Barbary Sheep. A flock of migrating Bee-eaters provided some entertainment. We then began our ascent into the Tizi-n-Test proper. More hours of spectacular landscapes around every bend followed.

Just north of Idni, Martin spotted a Blackbird or Blackbird-like bird diving into a tree and so we stopped. The bird was no longer present, but on opposite side of the valley, similar birds were chasing each other. One flew to our side revealing the silvery wings, white gorget and lemon-coloured bill of a male Ring Ouzel. Unfortunately, with no further close views, we had to resort to distant (150-200 m) scoping to find perched birds in trees. Eventually, everyone was just about convinced.

Nearing the top we stopped to enjoy views of reintroduced Barbary Sheep that have been in the mountain pastures behind a fenceline that tracks across the mountain. After a quick photo at the top (2100 m) we began the descent to stop for mint tea at the café with the ex-minibus on the edge of the precipice forming a unique trading post.

Our descent into the Souss valley was marked by extensive roadworks, with a number of diggers carving into the mountainside to widen the road. We squeezed past some and even went under the arm of one guided by the attendant workers. The first endemic Argan *Argana spinosa* trees were seen with some specimens carrying large crops of fruit (nuts). In the Souss valley itself we passed through the orangeries and other crops punctuated by ever-expanding and developing settlements, before reaching the old city of Taroudannt 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. Adrian, who was worse if anything, was put to bed to be visited by a doctor later that evening. While Adrian missed out, the rest of the group experienced the first of the sumptuous meals at La Maison Anglais.

## **Day 14 – March 25**

### ***The Souss Valley and Aoulouz***

After a long journey the day before there was no respite as we had breakfast at 7.00 am venturing out by 08.00. With Adrian in bed, Martin took over the leading in what is his old 'stomping ground'. First stop was for Little Swift amongst the myriad Pallid Swifts around the city walls. Up to 10 or so performed admirably with display flights, trilling chases and one bird flying into a nest hole where the lining material could be seen.

After the bridge over the River Souss or rather wadi of the Souss, we turned right and then left along the small track with a 'fenceline' of cut thorn bushes. With no obvious gap in the fence, we got out and walked the track in the warm sunshine. Woodchat Shrikes and Sardinian Warblers posed and we caught up with a female Orphean Warbler. Right on cue at about 09.25, a pale-phase Booted Eagle spiraled into the sky from its overnight roost to continue migration. A very large Spur-thighed Tortoise was found followed by a large yellow-headed blue-tailed *Agama* lizard running for shelter amongst the tree roots. Nearby, a Laughing Dove relaxed in a tree. It is remarkable how quickly this species has recently expanded its range in Morocco, which now includes the Souss Valley.

Nearing the end of the track we found some European Bee-eaters that were landing against a small sandy cliff and clearly prospecting. The burrows in the face suggested a nesting attempt was either underway or had occurred here in the past. Whatever the case, these spectacular birds were much appreciated.

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 lack of rain meant it was desperately dry and we quickly got a long way down the track seeing very little apart from a fine male Orphean Warbler and the ubiquitous Thekla/Crested Larks. Moving the van, Mustapha then started reversing and Martin guessed he had found something good. We jumped in and then jumped out again a few metres as two Fulvous Babblers hopped amongst the low *Launea* bushes. We watched them go through a repertoire of typical inquisitive babbler behavior, including pulling at a dead bush as though trying to collect nesting material and then copulating in the shade (well why not?).

We headed for Aoulouz on the old road passing many cultivated fields that Martin noting the location of the better ones for later. We stopped once after Mustapha had noted "many oiseaux sur les arbre". These proved to be a group of perched and flying Bee-eaters. Not that many people got out of the van at this testament to the fact that it was it was very hot (probably 30°C) and it was nearing lunch time.

We reached Aoulouz at 12.30 and as Martin was explaining what we would do, Chris spotted a Tchagra flying across the road. It flew back to our side, but only gave a brief view before disappearing. We spent about ten minutes on the bridge to judge where the best watery spots might be and then took the track southern side. The track had been partially blocked with rocks opposite a tree, but we squeezed the van through anyway to get to a lunch spot in the shade of some palms. As lunch was being set up, the group took a short walk into the gorge from the right side looking upstream. A pool produced a Greenshank, Little Ringed Plover, Grey Wagtail and the Moroccan race White Wagtail.

After lunch we took a track into the gorge for a view of the southern (right-hand side) rock walls. A pair of mating Kestrels (in the air no less) had Bill snapping. No large falcons were initially in evidence and then one launched into view, circling overhead in a series of zooming passes before landing. The jizz of the bird had already confirmed Barbary/Peregrine Falcon. It landed and could be seen clearly before flying again as a result of a man walking along the top of the cliff who had flushed it in the first place. The Barbary Falcon then flew up the gorge and landed again where we could still just see it. The bird had clearly acclimatized to the noisy construction activity in the valley floor but a person in its domain was just too much.

The van was then moved to the other side of the road bridge and we walked downstream across the cobbly dry channel to the edge of the water with vegetation in the form of stands of dark-green spiky rushes (*Juncus* spp), some *Typha* (cattail) and water-cress sprawling over the rocks. As Chris and Martin were watching a Sedge Warbler, this was replaced by a Kingfisher, which the whole group got onto. It that flew up the channel, hovered in mid-air and plunge-dived, emerging with a fish to return to its perch opposite us, ate the fish and flew away. What a show!

We added a pale phase Booted Eagle being mobbed by a Kestrel to the dark phase bird also being mobbed we had seen earlier. The fishing Little Egrets were accompanied by some Grey Herons and then a Purple Heron took flight. The warbler quest continued with Reed Warbler added to the earlier Sedge. A paler bird was later identified as Marsh Warbler. The heat had already driven Laura and Gretchen back to the van and the plan to walk the other side of the valley was abandoned. Moving back down the road, Martin decided to scan one of the excellent cliff faces. Scattering Rock Doves were the first sign of a cruising Bonelli's Eagle. This had taken all of five minutes to find! The bird then climbed and shot towards us at high speed, giving a great overhead view.

At the turn to Taroudannt, Martin decided to continue ahead to another cliff face, that Mustapha also remembered from some ten years previously! This time Mustapha was the first to spot the eagle cruising the ridgeline again being mobbed by a Kestrel. This was followed against the backdrop of the cliff and then into the sky where it became a pair of eagles, the larger female clearly visible. They landed, with one on a tree and the other seemingly on the ground, although this was tough to see at this extreme distance (well over 1km).

Very pleased we moved on. Just west of Igoudar we stopped at a Spanish Sparrow colony of loose nests in trees, but none were at home. A kilometre or so later we stopped for sparrow noise in a roadside olive. Walking up a small track, we encountered lots of Yellow Wagtails of three different races in a harvested strip amongst the barley crop. A Zitting Cisticola coming to a nest gave unbelievably close views, as did what we eventually decided was a Willow Warbler. A second arrived, and then what looked like a Sedge Warbler. Although we were surrounded by hordes of sparrows it was difficult to pick out Spanish for everyone. Eventually, a flock of birds landing in the barley enabled the males at least with their milk-chocolate heads, white cheeks and white underparts overlain by extensive streaky black markings to be picked out.

We returned to Taroudannt relatively early for an early dinner as the plan was to undertake a nocturnal sojourn for Red-necked Nightjar. We left at 20.15 and after crossing the road bridge, we drove the same track alongside the wadi of the Souss we had explored earlier in the day. A Red Fox crossing the track was the first success and then a small green eyeshine stopped the bus. Mustapha set off after it when no accompanying bird could be seen. The owner of the eyeshine was clearly not big as he was right above it and then he suddenly said "Spider!" And there it was, a spider about 5 cm or so across. Laura proved to have a spider superpower, picking out endless individuals. After a further Hoopoe from a tree we moved on to Freija.

A couple of bats and Crested Larks were seen before we turned left down the track we had tried in the past. A slightly brighter eyeshine proved to be our target, but it was difficult to reach for the whole group and the nightjar flushed and flew past before we could get a scope on it. The bird seemed to have been in almost

exactly the same spot we had seen one the year before on a rocky slope with low bushes. Pushing on we eventually emerged near the brige at Freija, after adding a Stone Curlew near some buildings to our list of night critters. With all our efforts we did not return until about 23.15.

## **Day 15 – March 26**

### ***Tioute palmery***

After the previous late night we did not venture out until 09.00 and headed direct for Tioute. On cue at about 09.25, a Booted Eagle was seen circling and we also stopped for Nightingale singing in a bush in an orange grove.

We stopped at the women's Argan cooperative. Inside, we were invited into the inner sanctum where the women were skillfully cracking the Argan nuts with a stone against a stone anvil at high speed. Although we were more than welcome, some women raised their veils at our entrance. Laura and Bill plugged away for a while to try and get the knack. We were then shown around all the processes from drying, to the filtration units where the oil was squeezed from the paste and then finally the packaging stage. 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, there was a lot of active cultivation under the palms with crops of barley, alfafa and beans. The latter were particularly attractive to birds with the full variety of common finches along with numbers of Willow Warblers. Blackcaps were associated with the date palms. A male Common Redstart was spotted low in a carob and Chris turned up a Whitethroat skulking in the material at the foot of a palm. A soft purring had us searching the palms and there was our first Turtle Dove of the trip. The subtle pink shading, chestnut marked back, necklace and red eye make this the most beautiful of all Western Palearctic doves.

Two hours simply flew by as we continued to search through the variety of passerines for something more unusual in the abundant and verdant vegetation. A male Moussier's Redstart carrying food indicated nesting was underway for the resident birds. On the way to lunch, we also uncovered a large Spur-thighed Tortoise in the alfafa and some North African Green Frogs amongst the concrete drainage channels distributing water around the palmery. We followed the track to the café where Mustapha was to have prepared lunch. In return for the use of the shaded interior under a 'tent' of Wisteria, we bought soft drinks and mint tea from the bar. More souvenirs were bought from the couple of excellent artists near the café, with one working soapstone and the other working limestone.

Back in Taroudannt we set off to the souk with Said, the long-standing guide from La Maison Anglais. The first purchase was a multitude of mini-tajines as serving dishes for Gretchen, whilst Chris noted the serving platters he was to come back for. Laura bought mini-hand drums for her grandchildren (we suspect to wind up her daughter!) followed by a plethora of spices, slippers, a purple djellaba for Doreene and then earrings for Linda. Bill had already bought a bracelet and something metal for the wall. After shopping, we returned to our lodgings for a fantastic dinner of pigeon bastille, with its delicious flaky pastry, a chicken and lemon tajine and vegetable couscous. Dessert was an apple, pear, apricot jam and almond delight.

After the meal, Chris, Dan, Laura and Martin headed back out to Freija for another try for Red-necked Nightjar. At the same spot as the night before, a Nightjar flushed from the track and flew around us in the torchlight behind the van. Martin set off after it on foot with the others behind. After a few hundred metres he re-found it on the ground near a bush at a distance of about 60 m. Leaving the others behind he went back to the van for a telescope and Mustapha, who was attempting to reverse back down the narrow track. The angle of the bird did not allow Dan to convince himself this was Red-necked rather than European Nightjar. The bird was twitchy, looking this was and that and it flushed in the attempt to get closer, perhaps because of the shadow cast.

Mustapha had been convinced that there had been a second bird at the first sighting and after a few metres, Laura picked up eyeshine about 45 m up the slope at the foot of a large bush. This time we worked in stages, with Martin and Laura taking pictures from the left of the torches and telescope. The bird was head onto us and to allow the definitive features to be seen we had to track left. We eventually closed the distance to about 8 m. The birds stayed put, offering a fabulous view for all. Even Mustapha managed a picture with his

mobile phone! Mustapha turned the bus around and we headed back to La Maison Anglais, more than pleased with ourselves.

## **Day 16 – March 27**

### ***Tamri and the Souss Estuary***

After an early breakfast, we said our farewells to Latifa, the cooks Fatima and 'little' Latifa and Nourdine. Said kindly dropped by with his and Latifa's children, Younis and Houda, to see Martin in particular. We slipped out of Taroudannt out the back way by about 08.15. The journey to Agadir was punctuated by a few stops for raptors including a dark-phase Booted Eagle, a Black Kite and a Kestrel doing a Cuckoo impression on the top of a small tree. The last part of the journey was taken on the new motorway and we entered the city amongst extensive new apartment developments and the football stadium. Things had changed markedly from Chris and Marty's trip 30 years plus earlier. 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 at Argoud produced good views of a number of gulls including Audouins Gull and allowed the differences between Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls to be studied. A number (~50) of white birds on the water prompted another stop. These proved to be Sandwich Terns, which are not known for resting on the water surface. Many more foraged inshore. Adrian then found a group of brown birds on the surface. Martin instantly recognized these as Balearic Shearwaters, a globally endangered species. There were over 50 in the raft, which broke up as the birds began to forage. The strong wind was proving too much for the separate groups of Little Egret and Grey Heron at sea, which seemed to be heading for land.

We passed through Taghazoute, which could be described as the surf capital of Morocco, with several surf shops including the aptly named 'Berber Surf'. 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. No Northern Bald Ibis were present so we continued until we were in the area of the nesting cliffs. The dunes and with natural vegetation are interspersed with areas with cereal crops coupled with grazing by sheep attended by shepherds. Research has shown the mixture of land use is important for foraging ibis and on cue four or so were spotted near the road. We got out and walked slowly along the verge parallel with the birds. More arrived and some left flying low in front of us providing a great opportunity for the photographers. In all, we thought we had seen around 20 birds.

Flushed with our success, we turned back to the Cape Rhir area for lunch, taking a track right to the beach with another group of resting gulls including many Audouins. The wind was very strong and a number of Northern Gannets passed close by along with Sandwich Terns and Balearic Shearwaters foraging together just beyond the beakers.

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 floodwall of interlocking gabions (rocks encased in wire) behind which lies what can be best described as a large car park. We took the road leading to the washed-out bridge, which although blocked by an earth bund, has a track around the obstruction. At the bridge, we worked back, stopping at several points and walking across the sandy hinterland to get to the edge of the mud. At the first stop, the birds were a little distant but included a flock of Dunlin and Ringed Plover. The second was better, with 7 Curlew Sandpipers with a Dunlin and some more Ringed Plovers. A large group of Flamingoes flew in and landed opposite whilst a flock of Pied Avocets whistled overhead. At the next stop, we headed towards a roost of gulls and terns. The latter included 23 Gull-billed Terns and a couple of Whiskered Terns. The gull roost was remarkable containing seven species including single second calendar year Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, an adult-plumaged Great Black-backed Gull and Audouin's amongst the more typical species.

The waders nearby flushed and expecting to see a raptor overheard, Martin was surprised by a small elongate bird standing on the mud edge: a pratincole! It took flight and flew overhead, but the silhouetted form prevented us from seeing the underwing colour. It flew away and continued until almost lost from view (maybe > 1km) before inexplicably turning around and heading back. It eventually landed about 50 m from us, but took off after a couple of minutes to head for the group of gulls and terns. Remarkably, the Great Black-backed Gull thought the pratincole would make a tasty snack and immediately pursued it in flight. The pratincole easily

dodged it's attacker and landed after the gull gave up. Eventually, we caught a glimpse of russet colouration confirming Collared Pratincole. Walking back to the bus the wind began to pick up dust and sand, as a number of Stone Curlews were found as they were disturbed by a flock of sheep.

Back in the car park, we scoped the same group of gulls and terns with the light behind us, also finding some Curlews, a Black-tailed Godwit and a Common Shelduck on the far side of the lagoon. Job done, we headed out the car park and true to Mustapha's prediction to Adrian a few minutes earlier he spotted a Barbary Partridge just inside the fence. Most of us caught a brief view before it disappeared into the vegetation. Martin suggested it would walk out into an open area at some point and we waited in the bus as joggers and walkers passed by. Adrian found partridge calls on his ipod and after the first noises, not one but two partridges popped into view. After disappearing, they appeared again in the open as predicted with perhaps three birds involved. To say the leaders we mightily relieved would be an understatement.

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 more international in taste than we were used to, with a choice of a good *harare* or a wide range of salad stuffs that often meets with wide approval. The main was chicken and lemon tajine minus the actual tajine dish and accompanied by potatoes.

## **Day 17 – March 28**

### ***Oued Massa***

We were attempting a relatively early start by leaving at 06.30 after breakfast at 06.00 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. Breakfast is actually a bit of a miserable affair with French rolls and chocolate croissants with a finger-poke of chocolate. Good job there were fruit and biscuits in the van. In retrospect, we should perhaps have harvested the animal protein in the form of the variety of insects encountered in the rooms.

The internet was now working and our resident weather lady, Linda, increasingly supported by Bill, informed us of the 100% chance of rain after the blowy front that had come in the day before. It was cloudy as we headed south for the bridge over the dam of the upper part of the Massa River. The dam generates a large permanent pool with reeds upstream and a series of pools downstream. Unfortunately, rampant construction was in progress with heavy machinery in action in the river channel, that Mustapha thought was linked to the building of a new military post.

After some Purple Herons, Moorhen and a pair of Black-eared Wheatears prospecting in old Brown-throated Martin holes in a sandy cliff, three of the Martins themselves flew close by heading upstream. Sadly, they didn't stop and could not be relocated even after we'd taken the van to the opposite side of the main road to view the dam. Afterwards, we moved back north to take the right turn for the barrage, an area where Mustapha and the guides have seen Black-bellied Sandgrouse in the past. On the way, a couple of Northern Wheatears were noted and then Mustapha reversed for three Cream-coloured Coursers close to the road. He then spotted a couple of sandgrouse in flight to the left and then, even more landing on a slope near a track to a village. Needless to say we took the track and soon found ourselves scoping the Black-bellied Sandgrouse. A Tawny Pipit was foraging within 30 m of us, but was regrettably ignored as we headed for the sandgrouse. More and more were landing and taking off around us and we eventually cottoned on to the fact they were coming to drink at a seep-line on the slope, which was supporting a line of wetland vegetation (rushes and the like). To be surrounded by these beautiful birds was quite an experience and as Marty commented on how surprising it is that cryptic species resembling clockwork rocks are actually so colourfully marked. The bubbling calls of this species are also quite entrancing.

We continued to journey back towards Agadir on the main road turning left towards 'Massa' village that is actually a series of connected villages: Tassila, Massa and Arhbalou. We turned right at the T-junction and then left down the paved road that leads to a lagoon. This can be good for ducks, but not today, with none at all present. We therefore continued to another junction where the road crosses a narrow channel. A number of warblers were present including Sardinian, Orphean, Cetti's and Western Olivaceous, although none were really playing ball as it started to rain.

With everyone sheltering in the van we tried driving down the road and after collecting *hobs* we turned left at the school to wend our way through the village to the new bridge over the river. The road was blocked with more roadworks so we retraced our steps and went the long way round on the paved road to the campsite near the sea. It was raining hard when we reached the bridge so we continued down the road across sandy heath to the sea and the campsite itself. The heath is supposed to be used by the Bald Ibis of the Massa sub-population, but we didn't see anything.

Returning to the bridge, with the rain easing we forged out as the very wet birds emerged. A Black-shouldered Kite passed by and a Zitting Cisticola amazingly landed on a stick a few metres from us. A Stonechat continued the theme, followed by a Cirl Bunting to the delight of the photographers in particular. A Western Olivaceous Warbler lingered long enough to allow distinguishing features to be noted and the alfafa was suddenly full of Spanish Yellow Wagtails. Laura pointed out seven Common Sandpipers in one of the fields. After a fishing Moroccan Cormorant, we moved on.

We passed the cactoid *Euphorbia* heath on the dry slope on the right side of the road at the top of the river valley, we took lunch at the park entrance under the stand of *Eucalyptus*. Whilst Mustapha and Martin prepared lunch, Adrian took the group to find a singing Tchagra. This proved to be highly successful as two birds displayed in song flight. A female Common Redstart and a Wryneck were also found.

Rather than walking the long track that runs throughout the protected strip and ultimately to the sea, we decided to get to the sea from the other direction by driving back up the road to take the road to Ksar Massa (a posh hotel) and the surrounding settlement. At the sea, Martin took Chris, Marty, Bill and the D's to attempt to view the sandbar at the end of the lagoon, which always supports roosting and foraging birds. We'd not even started before Sanderling was seen on the beach, another species closer to the record tour total of 223 that Chris was keen to beat. The number of species depends on how the cloth is cut over the species-subspecies-races debate.

Whilst Linda and Gretchen stayed near the van with Adrian, Laura did start to follow the splinter group but was invariably waylaid by the photo opportunities with the lizards amongst the floral show of the dark-centred white blooms of *Chrysanthemum carinatum* and the light purple hues of Sea Lavender *Limonium* spp. The dense yellow pom-poms of the 'mimosa' bushes - actually the introduced *Acacia cyanophylla* from Australia - complete the display. A Frenchman with the same interest offered to show her a Little Owl or was he trying to show her *his* 'little owl'? Being naturally wary of such situations, she managed to slip away and continue the photo theme by nailing the Peregrine that was patrolling the seaside soft cliffs and passed close to the group back at the van.

The walking group found the inevitable Moussier's Redstarts and Stonechats before taking a track to the beach. We followed the edge to a point where the birds on the end of the lagoon could be scoped. As we started to identify the birds, a park guard appeared and proceeded to try and say that the beach was out of bounds. In truth, there is no sign and we did not want to play the game of stepping back two feet, so we simply stayed put whilst we finished the ID, but agreed to go no further and walk away from whence we had come.

It was a pity because it looked like a Knot was present amongst the Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Caspian Tern and Cormorant, but it was slightly too distant to be completely sure. Doubling back to the beach we were at least rewarded with a view of 15 roosting Knot, with other groups of Sandwich Terns and a mixture of gulls. All in all, the walk in the sunshine along what is a beautiful beach with the azure-blue Atlantic and the snowy caps of the crashing surf had been a fitting end to our birding, not that it had entirely concluded as we did manage another Little Owl on a rock pile.

Before dinner we completed the checklist and recounted all bird species seen on the trip for a total of 226, a pretty phenomenal total especially considering we had dipped on usual certainties such as Lanner and Lesser Short-toed Lark. But then again we had cleaned up on all possible Wheatears including Seeborn's and the rare passage migrant, Isabelline Wheatear. Marsh Warbler was a further outrageous bonus and we discussed how the ID had been made from photographs and the use of the Advanced Bird ID guide by Nils van Duivendijk and the Aperture programme to zoom in our particular features. Our discussion attracted a Sicilian guide of a 13-strong, mainly Italian group and we discovered a number of mutual birding colleagues. The bird world is really that small. Flushed with the success of seeing two species that he had never seen before,

Martin helped Marty and Chris with the Glennfiddich purchased several days before, although in truth, Bill had already helped put quite a dent in the contents of the bottle.

## **Day 18 – March 29**

### ***Home***

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. The Moroccan saying *insh'allah* is entirely fitting in this respect.