



MOROCCO - TRIP REPORT March 11-27, 2015

By Phil Benstead

Leaders: Adrian Binns & Phil Benstead

Day 1 / March 11 **arrival, Zaers and Rabat**

Our Moroccan adventure began in Casablanca, a city famed by song and story. It took some coordinating to connect the US team with the Anglo and Moroccan sides, but finally we were all together at the airport and excited to begin our journey. Herded into the minibus, most of the group promptly started snoozing as we zipped along the highway; common roadside birds would be seen later, as Phil did not like to disturb anybody's slumber!

Morning fog cleared to gorgeous Moroccan scenery, highlighting palm trees, rolling agricultural fields and the odd mosque. As we neared Zaers we rallied energy to hunt for the double-spurred francolin along the dirt tracks in the reserve, aided by Labidi (our inside man in the royal hunting reserve).

Despite significant effort we did not manage to glimpse this elusive bird, but we enjoyed a nice variety of wildfowl in the surrounding wetlands, including red-crested pochard and tufted duck. The woodlands hosted numerous new birds, all of which we were to become familiar with over the next few days. We particularly enjoyed good looks at little owl and woodchat shrike.

Sunny clearings and tracks attracted such butterflies as the pretty Provence hairstreak and the more prosaic green hairstreak. Eventually we broke for lunch, a simple picnic under the shade of a eucalypt. Nearby Phil found the first damselflies of the tour, blue-eye (*Erythromma lindeni*), and John shared photos of a nice large psammmodromus (lizard) that he'd found on a stroll. Before leaving the site we checked some pools and found two spoonbills and a northern lapwing (a species by no means guaranteed this late in the season). Dragonflies appeared in small numbers here including red-veined darter, emperor and vagrant emperor. Like many of the pools we passed during the morning, this was covered in drifts of snow white *Ranunculus peltatus*.

We continued on to Rabat and dallied for a brief drive through the grounds of the Royal Palace; a thorough driveby was ruled out by security because of a state visit by the King and Queen of Jordan. We admired the Chella Necropolis from the road, then exited the van to explore area around the Tour Hassan. From here we could see a large flock of glossy ibis in a riverside wetland and our only Moroccan wagtail flew past. A few western jackdaws perched atop buildings.

The final hour was spent driving to Kenitra and our hotel for the next three nights. Our dinner was the first of many delicious culinary experiences, as we dined on harira soup and saucy beefy balls cooked in a tagine, with rafts of poached eggs and finished with a fruit salad. We retired happily after our first checklist session.

Day 2 / March 12 **Lac de Sidi Bourghaba**

This morning after breakfast we headed the short distance to the lagoon at Sidi Bourghaba for some great birding. The sun shone down and we enjoyed another very pleasant day. We started off at an overlook at the far end of the lagoon, hoping for flamingos, no sign of them here but we got great views of a nest-building pair of marsh harriers and perused the available wildfowl which included our first white-headed ducks and great crested grebes. The loud songs of the Cetti's warbler teased us from deep cover.

Driving round to the causeway we disembarked and bumped straight into the first of many small flocks of African blue tit to be seen during the morning. The causeway produced good looks at red-knobbed coot, many with small youngsters in tow. Marsh harriers displayed overhead, calling plaintively as they indulged in their roller-coaster stunts. Black kites appeared too. The emergent lakeside vegetation harboured Iberian bluetails (*Ischnura graellsii*) and a large psammmodromus lizard

Ambling along the shoreline we observed some great birds. A purple swamphen played hard to get before surrendering and swimming about in the open. Ferruginous ducks and white-headed ducks appeared close by and gave amazing views. Under the trees we teased out blackcaps, wrens and finally a great view of a singing Cetti's warbler. Adrian found six flamingos as we neared our picnic spot, which we viewed more closely after lunch from behind the blind. We had good views of a pair of Sardinian warbler and our first lesser emperor, cleopatra and red admiral gave us a few flybys. We enjoyed another creature found in the sands of the picnic spot, an impressive tiger beetle (*Lophyra flexuosa*).

Driving to the sea we had a look out from the beach, poor light here made for unpleasant conditions but we spotted a few Sandwich terns offshore and at one point a gannet flew through. It was more fun at the waste outlet of the nearby sardine factory. Here we found at least five Mediterranean gulls (including one adult) and our first black-headed gulls. Job done we headed for a look at the marsh at Kenitra near the hotel. This proved to be rather good for an urban fringe wetland. The easy highlight being a nice Bonelli's eagle hanging in the air high above the marsh and being attended to by a few irate marsh harriers. Reed warblers chuntered from the reedbed and appeared along the edge. Our first black-winged stilts were examined and a lone snipe flew by. Turning for the hotel most elected to head for a shower after a long day but a few of us headed out to the flooded fields near the hotel and were rewarded with a peregrine falcon, some little ringed plovers, and a painted frog found under some waste plastic

Tonight's culinary feast featured a tasty vegetable soup, a fishy ombrina tagine, and orange slices served with cinnamon sugar. Returning to our rooms with full bellies, we were delighted to find a large Moorish gecko hunting around one of the outside lights.

Day 3 / March 13 Moulay Bouselhem, Merja Zerga and Bargha

We headed north today after breakfast under a cloudy sky towards the small seaside town of Moulay Bouselhem. Driving into town we pulled up overlooking the sea and whilst Adrian made the necessary arrangements with our local guide Hassan, the rest of us gazed out to a flat, calm sea. In a very short seawatch we logged 8 Cory's shearwaters, a Balearic shearwater and a few northern gannets in the distance.

Soon enough we shuttled down to the boat landing and climbed aboard two small boats for a tour of the estuary - a very pleasant couple of hours! Puttering slowly upriver we enjoyed good looks at a few new birds, including sandwich terns soaring overhead, and gorgeous pink slender-billed gulls. A lone female Kentish plover was the sole representative of this species for us today.

Hopping out onto a likely-looking sandbank, we ticked common wader species: redshank, greenshank, whimbrel and curlew. Hassan pointed out a nice osprey perched nearby, while a Caspian tern hunted along the river behind us. A number of whiskered terns roosted amongst sandwich terns on the sand. We motored up another arm of the estuary, where the first boat spotted a nice male bluethroat playing hard-to-get in the bankside vegetation. Spanish yellow wagtails were easy to spot. Time flew, and eventually it was time to head back to the rivermouth and get to the van. En route another peregrine made a brief appearance. Before docking, we took a short detour to observe a fantastic flock of Audouin's gulls on the sandbank near the sea. Lovely birds.

Hassan next took us marsh owling along the eastern shoreline of the estuary. No sign at the first stop, although our first great grey shrike and goldfinch put in an appearance. The second stop produced the target birds. Here we met up with Hamid and with his excellent local knowledge we only had to walk a short distance before he put up three owls, two of which perched on the ground for great 'scope views. This really is an attractive owl.

With time in hand we elected to explore another lake a bit further north – Merja Bargha. Bumping down the track we found a nice roadside pair of Barbary partridge. The lake proper hosted a number of new birds including a late common buzzard, our first willow warbler, a very brief kingfisher and a single great egret. A nice end to the day.

For dinner we dined on tuna salad, couscous with chicken and vegetables, and a refreshing yoghurt to finish.

Day 4 / March 14 Volubilis and Fez

Up early again and into the buses for the drive to Volubilis and onto Fez. Our first stop was in the town of Sidi Kacem for a comfort break and here we found some great birds. A house bunting perched on a nearby balcony. Overhead three species of swift appeared. Nearby trees held amorous pairs of lesser kestrel. Driving a little further on we stopped in

rolling agricultural hills to look at long-legged buzzards and stonechat and search out the impressive Calandra lark and listen to singing quail.

After driving up into the foothills of the Middle Atlas we eventually came to the ruins at Volubilis and wandered around this amazing place with a local guide. An interesting set of ruins was livened up by the presence of blue rock thrush, a grey wagtail and a number of Sardinian warblers. Butterflies included Provence hairstreak and Western dappled white, and Edie found our first Moroccan hairstreak. Phil was pleased to find a single fresh sombre bee orchid (*Ophrys fusca*). Wildflowers were noticeable here and included the delightful red pea (*Lathyrus cicera*).

We took lunch in the shade of a eucalypt plantation near Volubilis. Here Donna found a lovely metallic green buprestid beetle (*Aurigena unicolor*) and Moroccan orangetip butterflies paused long enough for photos.

After lunch we drove onto Fez for a touristic tour of the old city highlighting palace, pottery works and medina. We enjoyed experiencing the sights, sounds and smells of this bustling and ancient commercial district. The tannery was an incredible place and the smell was quite something!

Dinner tonight was a sumptuous affair, possibly the best meal on a tour known for incredible eats. Nine different vegetarian cold dishes to start, followed by chicken tagine with prunes, apricots and almonds, and an onion puree. So good, we had no room for dessert!

Day 5 / March 15 Dayet Auoua, Forest of Cedars, Lac de Aguelmane and Zaida

Today we headed into the hills stopping first at Dayet Auoua, a lake surrounded by forest and heaving with birds. We quickly picked up mistle thrush, short-toed treecreeper, nuthatch, great-spotted woodpecker and firecrest in a flurry of activity. Chris saw a brambling and Phil a flyby male crossbill. Out on the lake we watched gangs of squabbling black-necked grebes amongst the coots. Driving on we soon stopped for a large flock that produced meadow pipits, along with cirl and rock bunting. Back in the vehicle, we had gone just a short distance when Adrian announced a hawfinch sitting up close to the van. The bird was elusive but the stop yielded more good birding, with a pair of Moussier's redstarts and a rock sparrow flashing in and out of view.

We pulled ourselves away to check another good spot up the road, where we found a great flock of hawfinch that posed up in the tree tops for full admiration. While enjoying these finches, we were pleasantly distracted by a singing male Levallant's green woodpecker that put on a great show.

Continuing on in the Forest of Cedars, we came across a tame herd of Barbary macaque (primates) and stopped here for lunch and our first ravens of the trip. Our first green tiger beetles (*Cicindela campestris*) also entertained us with their hyperactive activities. Driving up into high elevation montane habitat we encountered some snow and stopped briefly to enjoy our only Seebom's wheatear of the tour.

On the drive to Zaida Plain, we stopped briefly at the Lac Sidi Aqueulmane where we shivered a little in the brisk breeze at this high altitude lake. Ruddy shelduck were much in evidence and our first horned lark and thekla lark put in an appearance here.

Our final stop of the day was the Zaida Plain, where we hoped to find our target Dupont's lark. We hoofed around in the desert for a good while hoping for a glimpse of the lark but only succeeded in finding our first desert wheatear, as well as greater and lesser short-toed lark. We would return in the morning for another shot at the target.

The dinner featured the predictable harira soup (different variety), chicken tagine with olives and vegetables, and more orange slices with cinnamon. Delicious, as usual!

Day 6 / March 16 Zaida, Gorge de Ziz, Erfoud and Rissani

Today was long but productive, with great birding interspersed by long drives. Before doing anything else, we roused ourselves early and headed to the Zaida Plain before dawn, in our quest to see Dupont's lark. We picked up a nice red fox in the headlights en route. The sky was colouring up nicely when we arrived, and we heard at least two nearby Dupont's larks while exiting the car. We focused on the nearest bird and with careful searching in early morning light, we eventually all got great views of this elusive bird, often at very close range.

Back at the hotel we attacked a large Moroccan breakfast and got ourselves packed and ready for departure. First stop on the drive to Erfoud was at an outlook overlooking the Ziz river. Here we watched house buntings and *bona fide* rock doves and picked up a nice new butterfly that was to become commonplace in the arid zone – greenish blacktip. West of Erfoud we stopped at a known scrub warbler site and walked carefully through the low scrubby vegetation. Here we had great views of spectacled warbler, Maghreb lark and, eventually, reasonable views of a scrub warbler. Back at the van we took some lunch before heading on.

Our next stop was on the edge of a gorge above the Ziz, which normally provides a productive leg-stretch. Not much happening here though today, our first white-crowned wheatear was well-received. Phil found a beautiful parasitic plant (*Cistanche violacea*) that we were to become very familiar with at Derkaoua.

More driving took us deeper into the desert near Rissani. Parking up below some nice tall rocky outcrops we walked round the back to look for pharaoh eagle owl. Sure enough we quickly found one in the shade of a deep crevice, preening itself ahead of a night hunting the local wildlife. It was a beautiful feline owl that we all enjoyed watching through the scope.

With time marching on, we aimed to check into our hotel, but were continually arrested by new birds! Driving the last few kilometres, our goal in sight on the horizon, we simply had to stop for our only bar-tailed lark of the tour, a small group of pin-tailed sandgrouse (!) and then three cream-coloured courser. Epic stuff. With dusk falling we arrived finally at our hotel for the next three nights (laundry at last!). This auberge is a very atmospheric spot and we all settled in happily for a peaceful desert sojourn.

After a cracking dinner of Moroccan meat cigars (appetizer) followed by a beef-raisin-and-pear tagine and lemon tart, Phil had enough energy to wander about the immediate environs of the hotel and find a number of calling green toads in pools of water. The recent rains had been big, greening up the desert, flooding low-lying areas, getting everything flowering and pulling in nomadic bird species. Weren't we lucky!

Day 7 / March 17

The desert in all it's glory

Another pre-dawn start for us this morning. This time to take a short shuttle drive to the gang of dromedaries waiting patiently at the foot of the Erg Chebi dunes in the dark. The team piled aboard the often unwilling beasts and set off. Phil elected to stay on foot and was marched off at a brisk pace by his guide and somehow beat the rest of the team to the sunrise vantage high on a steep dune. From here we watched the sun come up over nearby Algeria and even had our first desert sparrow shooting by.

Our local guides suggested we take a look at the area frequented by a houbara bustard on the way to breakfast and this sounded like a good idea to us. Sure enough on reaching the appointed spot, there was a fine but very wary houbara stalking about. It was not very approachable so in the end we left it in peace. Our guides then suggested we try a nearby spot for Egyptian nightjar, how could we say no? Arriving we hooked up with a local shepherd-type who had staked out a roosting bird for us. Seeing this cryptically coloured species was a challenge but eventually we found an angle that made finding it easy in the 'scope and enjoyed the views. A great bird to see so well. Walking back some of us bumped into a splendid little pebble mantis (*Eremiaphila* sp.) as it dashed around the desert surface looking for prey. This time it really was time for breakfast.

We enjoyed a welcome Moroccan breakfast out in the sunny courtyard of the auberge and were amazed to be interrupted by a flock of fulvous babblers that drifted through the trees above us. The garden also provided views of subalpine and Sardinian warbler and common redstart for those with the energy to wander.

After breakfast we hit the desert again, finding numerous small parties of pin-tailed sandgrouse (a rarely recorded species in this neck of the desert but one no doubt responding to the recent rains). Next stop was a fantastic displaying hoopoe lark that hung around the van, singing a short melancholy refrain before flying up into the sky and wheeling back to its favourite bush.

All too soon it was time for lunch and today we had a large sit-down meal at the Casbah Yasmina. The immediate environs were flooded this year and produced a few wildfowl species. Green toads sang from the edge of the water and vagrant emperors were everywhere.

After a lengthy three course lunch (moroccan salad/eggy kofta tagine) we staggered back to the vehicles for the short ride to one of the driver's desert bivouac. Here we chased a pair of desert sparrows around until the male surrendered and sat up nearby to be admired. A smart bird. The nearby tamarisks also produced the enigmatic *reiseri* subspecies of eastern olivaceous warbler which also showed well after a little chasing. The remainder of the afternoon was spent searching fruitlessly for desert warbler and then there was the regrettable incident of the fox in the daytime... The desert was in full bloom in some of the wadis and we enjoyed some excellent flowering desert lilies (*Hesperocallis undulata*).

Dinner tonight was another triumph of Moroccan cuisine – chicken bastilla as an appetizer, followed by mouth-watering lemon-and-olive chicken tagine, and a delectable lemon tart.

Day 8 / March 18 The desert

This morning after breakfast we wandered the grounds for a while to pick up some common migrants. This worked well with good views of subalpine and Bonelli's warbler as well as offering the challenge of finding an elusive common nightingale in dense thorn. Another bright yellow *Cistanche (tubulosa)* was common here, often growing in dense clumps, an impressive plant.

We were soon back in the vehicles and heading out across the desert in search of the last few birds that eluded us. Our targets were desert warbler and two sandgrouse species. First up was a gang of six spotted sandgrouse. Then there was a feisty pair of desert warblers that showed well before vanishing back into the sandy scrub covered wadi they had materialised from. Lastly on along the edge of a narrow wadi in a gravel plain we found the last bird we hoped-for – at least 13 crowned sandgrouse that showed no fear of us and allowed a close approach by vehicle. Here we found an incredibly well-camouflaged grasshopper, with spectacular green wings in flight (*scinam*), another smaller pebble mantis species and a delicate lilac *Orobanche ramosa*, that looked rather weedy-looking after all the robust *Cistanche* we had been seeing. All through this morning session we had been finding hoopoe and short-toed larks and a few cream-coloured coursers. A male redstart was well-received.

Heading back to the hotel we had a little time to check the grounds again before lunch. Things were moving and we enjoyed good views of six bee-eaters, another redstart, a flyby hoopoe and brief looks at a migrating female Montagu's harrier.

Lunch was light and refreshing - various tasty salads served up on big platters. Afterwards, we headed out for the lake at Merzouga. We had seen this in the distance from our lofty dune-top vantage point at dawn on the first day and were anticipating some wetland birds. We were not disappointed as the lake magnetically attracted overflying wildfowl and waders, keeping us happily occupied for an hour or so.

Perhaps the oddest thing to see was a group of three shelduck, normally a coastal species this far south, here they rubbed shoulders with their more exotic ruddy cousins. Most of the birds were at long range but our eyes eventually accustomed to the task of picking out a distant flock of marbled teal. Also here our first common teal and pintail. Ferruginous ducks were bobbing about in good numbers. Two distant flamingos were admired. A collared pratincole hawked about over the lake in the distance before landing on an equally distant spit of sand. A calling green sandpiper was new here but slipped by almost unnoticed as we sorted through the birds out on the lake. Distant little stints eventually sent us on a mission around to the other side of the lake and here we had good views of Kentish plover, little ringed plover and best of all the little stints. A great spot and a good end to another satisfying day in the field.

Dinner this evening began with Harira soup, followed by the main dish of beef and vegetable tajine served over couscous. We marveled that tagines could be prepared with endless combinations of ingredients, spices and styles!

After dinner Edie accompanied Phil and the exceptional Lahcen for a nightdrive. It was windy but clear and we had a crazy two-and-a-half hours of fun bumping around the desert in a big arc out from the camp under the stars. Our first lesser Egyptian jerboa just ran and ran with us in hot pursuit but two more later in the evening showed really well. The highlight came early on when low, fast eyeshine in the distance turned into an enchanting Saharan striped polecat. This small mustelid is the North African equivalent of a skunk and was feisty. We motored alongside it for some time getting great views as it bounced along before leaving it in peace. Superb. The only other mammal species logged was Cape hare. These guys can move fast and Phil (spotlighting from the roof rack) was howling with laughter as we bucketed across the desert behind them. A good night out.

Day 9 / March 19**The desert, Gorge du Todhra and Tagdilt track**

This morning we had to tear ourselves away from the desert after breakfast and head west towards Boulmanes Dades. We made a number of stops en route. Just outside Erfoud we stopped to sample fresh dromedary milk and inspect the livestock. Later around Jorf we looked in vain for blue-cheeked bee-eater. About half way to the Gorges du Todhra we stopped by a small rock outcrop. A quick walk revealed little apart from cantankerous camel herders and our first house martins. A little further on we checked a likely looking spot for desert lark and Adrian pulled one in for all to admire. Also here Mustapha found us a nice big yellow scorpion, and we found a great grey shrike nest.

Driving on towards the gorge it became apparent that the weather had finally turned against us. Up until now the weather had been very stable, blue skies and warm. Now we were experiencing much cooler temperatures, with wind and rain. The sky blackened as we approached the gorge. We parked under a rock overhang to add clothing layers and take some lunch. The weather made for difficult birding, the highlight being a fleeting glimpse of an adult Bonelli's eagle. After the heat of the desert this really was quite a shock! We tried the scrubby slopes above the gorge for Tristram's warbler but the whole area was quiet.

Moving ever on, we stopped briefly for a nice male blue rock thrush and to photograph the impressive palmerie at Tinehir. Just before Boulmanes Dades we headed off down the Tagdilt track to the rubbish dump. It makes an impression, spanning acres of land with colored plastic bags, glass, aluminum and smoldering tattered rags blowing in strong breezes. Red-rumped wheatear and desert wheatear showed, along with Temminck's lark and three skylark. Thick-billed lark, a primary target, eluded us.

Eventually we called it a day and headed for our nearby casbah lodgings. The excellent dinner in front of a roaring log fire went down well - Harira soup (no two are alike and all are delicious), two different tajines (lemon chicken with olive, and mixed vegetables), capped off by fruit cup desert. Nobody goes to bed hungry in Morocco!

Day 10 / March 20**Tagdilt Track, Skoura and Ourzazate**

Dawn arrived with no trace of yesterday's awful weather so after breakfast we returned to a sunny Tagdilt Track. This was the only kind part of the morning though. Two hours searching for thick-billed lark resulted only in our first black-bellied sandgrouse (4) and three cream-coloured coursers.

We drove on up to Skoura next, stopping en route for a little shopping – rosewater and some textiles. Further along the road Mustapha worked hard to show us spiny-tailed agama. The first was dangling from a string having just been dug out of its burrow by a pick-axe wielding local bloke. That beautiful male agama was sadly destined for a role in traditional medicine. A few kilometres later Mustapha spotted a luckier female sunning itself on a roadside bank. We kept our eyes peeled for Maghreb Wheatear, with no luck.

Arriving at Skoura Casbah, the group set off for a quick guided tour before lunch. Driving out Mustapha got the minibus spectacularly wedged in the wadi bed and it was some time before the van was extricated with the help of a digger and a host of local men. The nearby fields and palms did not produce any startling migrants during this period and failed to compete with the sideshow on offer.

Driving on we reached Ourzazate and replenished our wine cellar before heading for the hotel. After settling in most of us walked down to a nearby shallow arm of the reservoir and were rewarded with good birding and a bit of sun. Shorebirds stole the show with ruff, wood sandpiper, curlew sandpiper and avocet being new for us. Also here plenty of Kentish and little ringed plover, redshank and greenshank. Brightly coloured male yellow wagtails festooned the shoreline. In amongst the numerous sand martins were a few house martins and red-rumped swallows. A great end to the day.

The evening meal was a sumptuous feast, beginning with vegetable soup and mixed salad, followed by savory chicken Bastilla. Dining was pleasantly accompanied by a musician playing the traditional lutea.

Day 11 / March 21**Ait Ben Haddou to Oukaïmedan**

Today we had a fairly leisurely departure and drove up to the nearby nearby casbah of Ait Ben Haddou. We arrived at Ait Ben Haddou – the World Heritage casbah site – to find that the wadi was running from all the rain over the last few days. We crossed the wadi on sand-bag steeping stones, often with the aid of eager local helpers to admire the casbah for an

hour. Phil stalked around outlying fields but it was rather quiet for migrants. A nightingale sang and a few Western Bonelli's warblers put in an appearance. The group had a close encounter with a male kestrel.

Driving ever on we checked a site near Amergzane to look for Maghreb wheatear, but were unable to find this elusive species. The desert here was very picturesque, full of flowers and other greenery. Here we found more Temminck's larks and desert wheatears but eventually had to move on and head through the Tiz-n-Tishka en route to Oukaïmadan. We stopped for lunch climbing to the pass, in a pleasant suntrap by a rushing stream that had a nesting pair of grey wagtails. Both alpine and red-billed chough appeared interested in our scraps whilst we munched our sardines. A new butterfly flitted by briefly – rosy grizzled skipper.

Weather hit as we climbed up to Oukaïmadan. Driving rain turned to snow as we gained altitude, and the driving conditions became increasingly interesting. The locals navigate narrow winding roads by their own standards, and Mustapha never wavered. We eventually emerged in the ski-resort village, breathless, but safe.

Snow covered the ground as most of us wrapped up and headed out for some birding before dark. The weather had brought good numbers of African crimson-winged finches right into town. This much sought-after species fed on food put out by the townspeople and were splendidly approachable. A trip highlight.

The evening dinner featured some new options. After the vegetable soup course, we had a choice of tajines that included lemon chicken and olives, mouton (lamb), and berber lasagne, capped off with a delicious apple tart.

Day 12 / March 22 Oukaïmeden and the Tiz-n-Test

Blue sky greeted us this morning again. Some of us braved the chill and ice before breakfast and wandered about towards the ski-lifts checking out the shore larks, black redstarts and rock sparrows. Small flocks of alpine chough drifted out of the mountains and settled in the village, squabbling over rubbish and other titbits. After breakfast we headed up the hill behind the village and eventually succeeded in seeing a distant alpine accentor.

With the bags loaded we walked downhill from the town. This produced three superb views of alpine accentor and finally a nice pair of dippers (nest-building). A great end to our stay at Oukaïmeden.

Driving down we enjoyed all the scenery that we had missed the day before. Lunch was taken in a hail/rain shower low on the Tiz-n-Test in a stunted pine forest that yielded a few birds. Tristram's warbler was seen fleetingly. Continuing on we climbed the winding road through small villages and terraces to the top of the pass, our hearts occasionally in our mouths. We stopped briefly on the other side of the pass for a cup of tea. Thick clouds surrounded us as we huddled around the small fire. That just left the final two hours of the journey to Taroudant and the welcoming and comfortable town-house in the centre of the bustling town.

We had enjoyed spectacular meals during our trip so far, but the food at La Maison Anglaise is second to none. Little Latifa and Fatima served outstanding dishes, featuring mouth-watering flavors and artful presentations. Dinner tonight included wonderful harira, meshoui (lamb) with veggies and rice, and apple & pear dessert with a side of assorted pastries!

Day 13 / March 23 Souss Plain

After a 0730 breakfast we headed out of town and spent some time birding in the fields around Freija under a grey sky with occasional bursts of sun. En route we found hunting black-shouldered kites. At Freija Mustapha spotted our first stone curlew and John later found another bird sitting on a nest. Phil found a nice big Berber toad (*Bufo mauretanicus*), which perched for photos. A singing tchagra was lured into view and stayed put, so that we eventually walked away from it. Hoopoes perched up as did bee-eaters and woodchat shrikes. Turtle doves and laughing doves were everywhere. We were pleased to spot a new butterfly (small copper), but captivated by Chris' discovery of a copulating pair of stunning moths (*Amata alicia*). It really was a very satisfying walk.

Next we moved onto Aoulouz gorge where we lunched in a cold, light rain before taking a short walk on the other side of the river. The gorge contained a breeding pair of booted eagle – a bird we were beginning to get quite familiar with. Also here we had ruddy shelduck, little egret and a distant short-toed eagle. Birding conditions were challenging but Adrian

found a distant Barbary falcon on the cliff-face on the other side of the river. Driving back we bumped into a good number of migrating marsh harriers and booted eagles.

Back at our comfortable lodgings, many in our group opted to attend an on-site cooking class. We were overjoyed to learn some of the secrets and artistry of La Maison's Anglaise mouth-watering dishes. Latifah, who manages La Maison Anglaise, and her chef 'Little' Latifah explained ingredients, spices and simmering, while preparing the evening meal in front of us. The dishes were perhaps extra-delicious, having seen how they were created: chicken with lemons and onions, prunes and almonds, vegetable tajine, lentil dish, eggplant salad, carrot salad, and more!

After that most-memorable dinner, we took a quick van ride to a site outside Freija where we hoped to see some nightjars. It was cold and rather windy, but we quickly located a male red-necked nightjar on the track. The bird was flighty in the gusty conditions and only Phil got close to it. The recent rain created ideal conditions for amphibians, and we found green and Berber toads in the puddles along the track.

Day 14 / March 24 Souss Plain and Tiout palmerie

Today we made a leisurely start and headed back out into the agricultural fields around Taroudant. Here we heard quail again and chased a western olivaceous warbler round-and-round an olive grove trying to get views as it chuntered on and on. Edie found a nice Lang's short-tailed blue here and small white was on the wing too (both butterflies).

En route to the palmerie at Tiout we stopped at the women's co-operative and watched them cracking open argan nuts. In the nearby shop, we sampled the prized oil and made some purchases in support of the trade. A walk about in the Palmerie produced a few birds, though gusty winds kept most at bay. The best bird was a fine male Moussier's redstart that sang for us from a nearby palm tree. A pair of Sardinian warblers were feeding young here. Sheltered areas held more butterflies. Palm trees groaned with dates, and vistas of High Atlas mountains were sublime.

We took lunch in the restaurant at the far end of the palmerie and then we headed back to the van for an early return to base before our shopping expedition into the souk with Said.

Tonight we enjoyed another cooking class showcasing our dinner of beet and cabbage salad, shrimp and calamari somosas, white fish tajine, sole and merlan fish, vegetable casserole, and other goodies. Simply sensational!

Day 15 / March 25 Taroudant to the Souss estuary, Cap Rhir and Tamri

We savored our last breakfast at La Maison Anglaise, feeling sad to depart this splendid haven tucked away in the heart of Taroudant, a quintessentially Moroccan city. However, it was time to head for our last big bird – the bald ibis.

En route we scored a few thick-knees and even a Moussier's redstart before arriving at our first stop to check the Souss estuary. The tide was ebbing, the wind was brisk, and a big golf tournament meant scrutiny by security patrol. We walked along the top of the riverbank and enjoyed the birds on offer at this great little site. An osprey perched up on the far side of the river. Gulls were examined and we found more Mediterranean gulls, and a few slender-billed and Audouin's too. Waders were present in reasonable numbers and included our first dunlin, sanderling, ringed plover and bar-tailed godwit. Three spoonbills flew downriver. Eventually we moved on northwards.

Driving to Tamri we enjoyed views of the Atlantic Ocean, sights of the big sardine fishing fleet in port, and quaint surfing villages dotted along the coast. Reaching Cape Rhir, Chris spotted our first bald ibises cruising alongside the van, and we pulled over to watch some up-close, feeding unconcerned by the road. We eventually moved on for lunch in the shelter of coastal scrubby argan forest, watching the ever-shifting surf and a lone gannet flying offshore. We proceeded on to Tamri seeing a few more ibises in flight, and then drove on to meet Omar, one of the ibis guardians. He led us down a sidetrack for great views of another small flock of about ten birds. We appreciated the opportunity to observe at reasonably close range, some of the rarest birds in the world, a species threatened by loss of habitat, as so many others are.

Time marches on, and we return south, stopping for last looks at nearby ibis. At the outskirts of Agadir, a fast-growing modern city, we reach our last hotel of the trip - the delightful Atlas Kasbah. There, we were warmly welcomed by staff, and were treated to some obliging bee-eaters and a lanner falcon flying past during the orientation.

We dined on less traditional dishes, including: lettuce and goat cheese with sesame, “chaaria bedjaj” sweet chicken, angel hair pasta with raisin and chickpeas, fruit tart and lemon grass tea.

After dinner Phil headed out to check to the sewage treatments ponds and found a good number of Berber toads and heard a very distant red-necked nightjar.

Day 16 / March 26 Oued Massa estuary

Today some of us headed to the Massa estuary area under a glorious blue sky. The remainder of the group stayed back at the kasbah for a little spa treatment in the hamman. The birding group explored the river from the highway bridge south of Massa. This is a great site for plain martin and we did not have to wait long before half a dozen hove into view. Birds were scarce in some nearby pools, but bankside vegetation hosted some good insects including our first bath white of the tour (a more focused look at photographs from earlier in the trip showed that we had seen this species before today!). Also here a good contender for Saharan bluetail and a blue-eye in amongst the numerous maturing red-veined darters.

In Massa we followed a variety of small tracks down to the river’s edge and through adjacent farmland. The reedbeds were full of reed and sedge warblers singing loudly, competing with the incessant calling of ever-present zitting cisticolas - heard more often than seen. We encountered plenty of Moussier’s redstarts, laughing doves, and a few stonechats. Walking through a shady eucalypt plantation we discovered our only purple herons of the tour (2), and had a close encounter with a kingfisher. Spanish festoons appeared at last but only frustrated us, as did a single plain tiger.

Latifa’s husband had helpfully provided directions to a string of flooded fields where we enjoyed some shorebird action that included our only spotted redshank of the trip, as well as a single gull-billed tern. Dragonflies visited these little wetlands - two emperor species and our only *Crocothemis* of the tour. We lunched at the national park entrance on the edge of the coastal dune formation. The sandy and flower-rich habitat here produced a number of new butterflies, including false mallow skipper and brown argus. Edie found a nice lizard (an *Acanthodactylus*). After eating, we wandered along the road lined with interesting *Euphorbia*-heath habitat. Here we listened to a strident quail on the other side of the river and got good looks at zitting cisticola and black-eared wheatear.

Returning to the kasbah we stopped to stock-up on wine at a local supermarket for the end-of-tour celebratory dinner. We learned that the others had spent the day conditioning skin and muscles, and noticed a few birds too. We enjoyed another class of sorts - a lovely explanation of Moroccan tea preparation and etiquette. Soon it was time for the last checklist session and dinner. Our celebration featured a delicious selection of “batbot” vegetable antipasto with stuffed bread, fish conger tajine with vegetables, and a delightful fruit tulip dessert. We recounted many wonderful moments in Morocco, and will not soon forget the food, landscape and birds of this beautiful country.

Day 17 / March 27 departure

Another early breakfast saw us heading off to the airport for the 0900 flight to Casablanca. Here the US contingent peeled off for their flight to New York and Phil ran for his connection to Copenhagen. A fun tour with great group of people.