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Tour organiser: John van der Dol (Sandwich Bird Tours) and our guide Mohamed Zakir and Said (driver)

Saturday September 10

After a fairly uneventful flight from Gatwick we eventually arrived at Marrakesh airport. We checked in, changed some money at a very unfavourable rate, and met up with Mohamed who was to be our guide for the next two weeks. He led us outside the terminal building and introduced us to Said, our driver, before setting off to our hotel in the middle of the old city. Almost as soon as we arrived we sat down to a three course meal, which although welcome, eating it on the fourth floor terrace with the incredibly loud market in the street below with the shouting salesmen and at this late hour was perhaps not ideal. However it was fun and prepared us for a good night's sleep, despite the non-functioning air condition units.

Sunday September 11

Today was the true start of the holiday. We rose for breakfast to the song of HOUSE BUNTINGS and SWALLOWS fling over the hotel terrace. COMMON BULBULS were noted too but as soon as we had breakfast we packed our bags back in the bus and set off to the High Atlas. We spent the day getting there birding on the way. Some nice species were seen including a couple of BARBARY FALCONS, a pale phase BOOTED EAGLE, EURASIAN SPARROW HAWK, presumably on migration, a cracking pair of LEVAILLANT'S WOODPECKERS, some SOUTHERN GREY SHRIKES of the Elegans race. At least four Western BONELLI'S WARBLERS were noted and a similar number of TRISTRAM'S WARBLERS and SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER, FIRECREST, BLACK and MOUSSIER'S REDSTARTS were added to the list. Wheatears were represented by SEEBOHM'S and BLACK whilst BLUE ROCK THRUSH was recorded too.

ATLAS FLYCATCHER was new to all and WHITE-THROATED DIPPER was nice to see.

Possibly the best bird of the day was CRIMSON-WINGED FINCH, a party of three gave great views.

BARBARY GROUND SQUIRREL was new to all the group also.

The night was spent in a splendid accommodation called Hotel la Bergerie Ouirgane.



Monday September 12

Today we continued south towards Ouarzazate but still mostly in the mountains for more Atlas species. Some BARBARY PARTRIDGES were found along the road which was a good species to find. At least 4 LONG-LEGGED BUZZARDS were noted, another pale phase BOOTED EAGLE, yet another SPARROWHAWK and some BLACK KITES which turned out to be a rather scarce species at this time.

A forest area produced ATLAS COAL TITS, a couple of BLUE TITS and warblers were represented by an IBERIAN CHIFFCHAFF, WESTERN OLIVACEOUS, WESTERN BONELLI'S and MELODIOUS whilst in an open scrub area TRISTRAM'S, SPECTACLED and SARDINIAN WARBLERS were found as well some SUB-ALPINE WARBLERS.

A NORTHERN WHEATEAR was found today while SEEBOHM'S and WHITE-CROWNED, also now known as WHITE-TAILED WHEATEAR were added to the list. 'NORTH AFRICAN' CHAFFINCH, although only a race, was nice to see.

Some RED CROSSBILLS and SERINS were noted too while the only ROCK BUNTINGS of the tour were found here.

A RED FOX was spotted by some.

The night was spent in a rather posh and splendid hotel called Hotel Karam Palace which was enjoyed by all even if the beer was a little on the expensive side. At least they had beer, the luxury of which we were go without on a number of occasions later on in the desert when one could do with it most.

Tuesday September 13

The morning was mostly spent visiting a river and a lake. A number of more usual species were added to the list such as LITTLE and GREAT CRESTED GREBE, OSPREY, and some of the waders which one would expect such as GREEN and COMMON SANDPIPERS, RUFF, BLACK-WINGED STILT, TEMMINCK'S STINT in winter plumage which was an interesting puzzle for a while, KENTISH, COMMON and LITTLE RINGED PLOVERS.



After lunch we visited the Dades Valley in which there appeared to be at least three gorges and where we were looking for BONELLI'S EAGLE which duly appeared just before we were about to leave. There was actually a bit of a raptor migration going on and in just one half hour or so a juvenile EGYPTIAN VULTURE appeared which was only the third sighting for our guide, so obviously not a common bird in this part of the Atlas. Added to the list were another BOOTED EAGLE, WESTERN MARSH HARRIER, LANNER FALCONS, more LONG-LEGGED and COMMON BUZZARDS.

In the morning we also saw a ring-tail MONTAGU'S HARRIER being mobbed by a party of five LESSER KESTRELS which appeared to be moving through also. Altogether a brilliant raptor day.

The only MAGREB WHEATEAR of the trip was seen today and a FAT SAND RAT was identified and duly photographed.

Wednesday September 14

Today was spent on the Anved plateau and the famous Tagoudilt track. It is known for its lark species and we were not to be disappointed. The now usual buzzards and falcons were seen including a LANNER and Mohamed picked up a distant male HOUBARA BUSTARD. We all watched it for a while as it strutted in typical bustard style through the vegetation before disappearing over the ridge not to be seen again. It was a welcome start to the day.

Eight of the much sought after THICK-BILLED LARKS were seen, four of which were by some caves with were inhabited by a family of Berber nomads who at first wondered what we were doing with scopes, cameras and binoculars. They were a little suspicious but after some reassurance from Mohamed they treated us to some mint tea and bread as is their custom in welcoming strangers. A great experience and of course it helped us get close to the larks in order to get some nice photos.

TEMMINCK'S HORNED LARKS were also found today and these beauties too were 'clicked' as my Indian friends would say.

GREATER SHORT-TOED LARKS were floating around in small parties of up to twenty or so birds as is so often the case. DESERT and RED-RUMPED WHEATEARS were added to the list too making our total wheatear count now seven species.

Some distant and very brief views of TRUMPETER FINCH were obtained.

We returned to the rather nice Hotel Kasbah Tizzarouine in which we were able to watch Champion League Football. What more could one want from a desert establishment? This hotel is situated on a ribbon oasis in a rather splendid setting with nice rooms and excellent facilities despite the lack of alcohol. HOUSE BUNTING frequented the corridor and restaurant.



Thursday September 15

Today was the day I was really looking forward to as we travelled further east to a lodge called Yasmina close to Merzouga and Erfoud on the edge of the first bit of high dune sandy desert. This is how we think of the Sahara, but of course it is not all like that.

Not a huge number of birds were seen today as much of the time was spent driving but the odd stop did produce BROWN-NECKED RAVEN, HOOPOE LARK and BAR-TAILED LARK.

We eventually arrived at our accommodation and before a sumptuous dinner we walked into the dunes of the 'real' Sahara. It is a busy establishment with western visitors turning up for camel rides in the dunes and many spending the night in the desert. It is a place of great atmosphere and worth the long periods of driving to get there. Photos were taken of the dunes as the light faded with the sun picking up the last bits of exposed dune amongst the shadows of others. Truly spectacular.

The swimming pool was to be frequented by the group at every opportunity allowing adults apparently to return to their childhoods for just a short while. I think other guests wondered what had hit them when camera and binocular clad Brits turned up after a long day in the desert. Enough said chaps!

A lovely first few hours and early to bed in anticipation of tomorrow for our 'proper' desert visit.

Friday September 16

Today was what can only be described as a rather unusual day. We set off in three 4WD vehicles to explore the desert and look for specialities. Rather successfully we soon found SHORT-TOED and BOOTED EAGLES, DESERT WARBLER and at a watering hole for camels there were parties of CROWNED and SPOTTED SANDGROUSE which gave great views. FULVOUS BABBLERS and DESERT SPARROWS were located at a campsite around which there was a little vegetation.

The next target was the Eagle Owl. Mohamed climbed up to the top of the sandy ridge which has rocky outcrops along the top. He ran quite some distance through the sand while checking all the outcrops when suddenly he stood still, started shaking and eventually toppled over the top, luckily into the sand. The drivers and some of our party ran to the top to see what had happened. It did not look too good and from the bottom looked quite serious.



While being attended by those up there a rally car drove by at a huge speed followed by a helicopter, the pilot of which had seen the commotion and turned round and landed on the top of the cliff. Unbelievably they had a French female doctor on board and after some time they

took Mohamed away to the nearest hospital at Erfoud. It turned out he had an epileptic fit and cut his head during the fall.

What are the chances of a helicopter turning up within two minutes of the accident in the middle of a desert? More chance of winning the lottery, but only if you do it of course.

Fortunately Mohamed was ok and turned up at the hotel in time for dinner with just a few stitches in his scalp.

Obviously birding came to a stop as nobody was in the mood but we took advantage of the swimming pool instead.

A strange day with some good birds and rather unfortunate happenings.



Saturday September 17

Today was perhaps not one of our best days. We drove out of the lodge into the stony desert and some huge cliffs where we were looking for Pharaohs Eagle Owl, but despite having a local guide it could not be located. Egyptian Nightjars were also absent, however more BAR-TAILED and HOOPOE LARKS were located and a DESERT WARBLER was briefly seen too. It had been a rather quiet morning by recent standards. Mohamed took us to a salubrious restaurant which consisted of little more than a shack where they put three tables out on the pavement, borrowed some chairs from down the road, and served us with horrible looking omelettes and chips. I am told they tasted fine. I am amazed nobody has gone down with something after that.

After what they called lunch we went to a lake which had actually dried out and where we saw absolutely nothing. We returned to the hotel for a swim and scared off all the other guests with our noisy antics in the pool.

After dinner we went for a night drive but apart from some rats and a superb LESSER EGYPTIAN JERBOA which we had dazzled in the headlights allowing great views, nothing was seen.

Sunday September 18

After a leisurely breakfast we left Yasmina lodge and the high dunes behind. I think we were all a bit sorry to leave this wonderful place with its great swimming pool. We travelled west again stopping by the cliffs which we visited yesterday in the hope of finding the Eagle Owl but to no avail. However three LANNER FALCONS were still present and apart from three unidentified distant BUZZARDS and loads of BROWN NECKED RAVENS there was little else present.



We continued on our way through what was now just stony desert with many more scattered Acacias and the feeling of civilisation re-appearing.

We had lunch in a nice restaurant where a traditional Moroccan meal was served amongst the dozens of flies which kept Miles busy although not quiet. After lunch we had a brief walk through a date plantation accompanied by the 'Official Date Guards' who with their colourful badges kept us company throughout. I don't know what they thought we were going to do with their dates. One can only eat so many. The only birds found were a HOOPOE and a small family party of SUB-ALPINE WARBLERS.

Eventually we arrived in the Draa Valley where our next accommodation in the form of a 500 year house with incredibly thick walls was situated. Strange but lovely nevertheless with great rooms.

Monday September 19

Today was a long driving day to the coast. We left the 500 year old Chez Yacob Kasbah near Agdez at about 08.30 and arrived in a modern hotel in Agadir at about 5.30 pm. What a contrast. We stopped a couple of times but did not see a great deal and certainly nothing new apart from three possible PALLID SWIFTS in Taroudant where we stretched our legs for about 15 minutes. We did make a stop on a plateau where the wind was cold and strong enough to encourage us to dive back into the bus with some haste. We are now not used to temperatures below 30.

Peter did manage to spot a ROLLER but nobody else saw it. It was on a stony slope where Mohamed had once seen a Red-necked Nightjar but was a big area and in the middle of the afternoon and I think our guide was desperate to try and find some birds as virtually all day was spent driving and little of note was seen. Morocco is a big country and so long sometimes arduous journeys must be expected. However between dozing off in the bus the group had plenty of banter to keep it going.

Eventually we arrived in Agadir and checked in at the rather modern, noisy hotel Argana. However it is well situated for Massa and the Souss river estuary which we were to explore over the next two days.



Food was excellent despite the fact there appeared to be a serious lack of spoons and sheets in Graham and Peter's room and suspicious underwear appearing on Chris and Eugene's balcony

sometime during the morning. At least there was a bar and alcohol was duly served and deserved.

Music all afternoon to mid night was perhaps not on the menu for birders, but what then can one expect from a tourist holiday resort. This has convinced me to stick with birding holidays and leave this type of place to the large bossomed tattoo clad ladies with their large attendants and screaming kids.

Tuesday September 20

Most of the day was spent at Oued Massa, a place I had visited in 1979 when a group of us spent nine days ringing there. It has changed a little but is still great for birds.

The morning started off with a party of about 70 GLOSSY IBIS and a single SPOONBILL and a couple of MARSH SANDPIPERS. Odd warblers were represented by REED, OLIVACEOUS, MELODIOUS, SUB ALPINE and a single ZITTING CISTICOLA. A few SPANISH SPARROWS made an appearance which were duly added to the list.

A LITTLE TERN flew by and a MONTAGU'S HARRIER circled overhead. An OSPREY passed with a fish which is always nice to see.

As we approached the end of the river at the seaward end a party of Ibis flew by and settled and these turned out to be our target species, namely BALD IBIS. A total of 142 were counted which represents about 5% of the western population.



We had a great picnic lunch at the entrance to the park and then set off for the mouth of the Sous River at Agadir in the hope of seeing some gulls and terns.

We found a flock of mixed LESSER BLACK BACKS and YELLOW-LEGGED GULLS and quite a few BLACK HEADED GULLS. A solitary 1st W/2nd S AUDOUIN'S GULL was found which was new for most. LITTLE, SANDWICH and a single BLACK TERN were noted while a pair of OSPREYS caused havoc with the gull flock.

A good number of GREATER FLAMINGOS were roosting and bathing on the far bank and waders added substantially to the list with KNOT, CURLEW SANDPIPER, REDSHANK, AVOCET, BLACK and BAR-TAILED GODWITS, DUNLIN, all three Calidris species, BLACK-WINGED STILT, CURLEW, WHIMBREL, AND OYSTERCATCHER all being present.

The tide was coming in but the light was bad so another visit is planned for the morning.

Another lovely dinner accompanied by a beer or two was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

Wednesday September 21

We returned to the Souss estuary to give the place a little more time than yesterday. The tide was now on the way out but waders, gulls and terns were close and easily visible in good light. Much of yesterday's stuff was found again but on the wader front KNOT, TURNSTONE, SANDERLING, WHIMBREL and GREY PLOVER were added to the overall list.

A PEREGRINE harassed all the waders and gulls for a while and it was nice to see BLACK TERNS at just a few yards range allowing great photo opportunities.

A TAWNY PIPIT flew over and as seen by part of the group while others had SEDGE WARBLER.

A small lake on the golf course adjacent to the river held 5 MARBLED TEAL which was one of our target species and looked as if we were going to miss. A SQUACCO HERON and BARBARY PARTRIDGE sat on the wall for a while and a number of ZITTING CISTICOLAS and SARDINIAN WARBLERS frequented the brush vegetation.

GREATER FLAMINGOS and SPOONBILLS were still present and always nice to see.

We had lunch in a typical Moroccan restaurant which served pizzas and burger and chips and during the afternoon some of the group did the typical grockle thing and visited the beach while some of rested and wrote reports and checked photos.

Thursday September 22

Today we left Agadir and drove along north along the coast to the old town of Essaouira. Stopping a number of times at different beaches looking for gulls and Bald Ibis. We found a flock of 42 of the latter and got reasonable views of these nervous birds. It is great to see that they are constantly being guarded by wardens.

One of the beaches was covered in hundreds of AUDOUIN'S GULLS mostly beautiful adults. Here too we found a couple of RED-KNOBBED COOTS amongst hundreds of EURASIAN COOTS. A good opportunity to compare the species when the knobs are

missing. The usual OSPREY caused chaos amongst the gulls and MARSH HARRIER and KESTREL were noted.

A few people found a BLACK-CROWNED TCHAGRA, but unfortunately it disappeared before the rest of the group could connect.

A ROLLER was seen by some from the bus and on arrival at Mogador Island distant ELEONORA'S FALCONS could be seen but the light was bad so another trip is planned for tomorrow.

One flew over us while we were having dinner on the third floor terrace. A cold and windy experience and temperatures we are no longer used to since arriving in Morocco.

A great hotel in the old city and an interesting place to stay.

Friday September 23

The morning started with breakfast on the terrace again but fortunately it was a little warmer than last night.

We were treated to reasonable views of more ELEONORA'S FALCONS and a skein of about 15 SPOONBILLS which flew over in formation.

After breakfast we had a brief walk round part of the old town but the bit Mohamed wanted to show us was closed for renovation. A visit to the harbour was rewarded with hundreds of YELLOW-LEGGED GULLS and a few TURNSTONES and COMMON SANDPIPERS. An adult GANNET was seen by some and falcons could be seen messing around far out to sea.

We eventually set off driving further north and then eastwards towards Marrakech. We skipped lunch as we had all had a hearty breakfast but did stop for a drink. An OLIVACEOUS WARBLER seemed set to make a chandelier its territory giving everybody a great chance to study the finer details.

A BLACK-EARED WHEATEAR was seen en route and another ROLLER was noted by some.

We arrived at our destination and back at Hotel Omar amongst the hustle and bustle in the street outside. God this place is noisy but despite that we were treated to a lovely meal of chicken kebabs and some form of meat ball dish.

Most people went looking round the shops before and after dinner and odds and sods were purchased including slippers by myself and Terry. I guess we need them or may be it was just an opportunity to get rid of our last few dirhams.

Saturday September 24

As our flight home was not until the evening we decided to go back into the mountains to some waterfall which seemed to be attracting plenty of tourists. We thought we might see some birds but they appeared to be distinctly lacking today.

I seemed to be a day of driving interspersed by having lunch near the falls while watching Man United slaughtering Leicester City on a telly in the restaurant, Seemed like a good way to spend ones last day.

We returned to the hotel, some of us had a shower in Mohamed's room while others were intent on getting rid of their last dirhams. We then set off to the airport, said goodbye to our guide and driver and flew home only to arrive in the middle of the night at Gatwick from where most of us went our separate ways.

A great trip with a great group and some lovely birds and scenery.



John van der Dol

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