

Jaeger Tours, Inc.

Morocco

Birding the edge of the Sahara

3rd – 19th March 2005

Leaders:

Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow



**Text and photographs in text:
Martin Perrow**

**Line drawings:
Eleanor Skeate**

Day 1 – March 4th

Chellah and Lac du Sidi Bourhaba

Having spent a couple of days in marvellous Marrakesh, Martin and Eleanor took an internal flight to Casablanca to meet Mustapha and thence the group. After landing on time, clearing customs took over an hour. Fortunately, the journey to Rabat was relatively rapid at 1 hr 45 mins, during which time everyone derived their first impressions of Morocco. Such is the diversity of this country, these would have to be revised again and again over the next fortnight. Clearly there had been some rain as the waysides were in bright flower, especially the vibrant orange of Field Marigold *Calendula arvensis* amidst a variety of yellow crucifers and the deep purple-blue of Viper's bugloss *Echium vulgare*.



As we arrived at the remains of the ancient Roman city of Sala Colonia enclosed by the walls of the later 13th century necropolis of Chellah built by the Merenids, we suffered the ignominy of being rained upon and then told we weren't allowed to take our telescopes inside as this was too professional! Somebody obviously felt the need to be important and on this occasion we obliged. (Don't ask Adrian to do this too often!). Inside, the ruins of the Chellah – once a complex of fine mosques and gardens – were crawling with flowering vegetation and innumerable small passerines including our first encounters with Blackcaps, Sardinian Warblers, Robins and Black Redstarts. The languid exotic calls of Common Bulbul seemed to issue from every tree. White storks nest in numbers on the ruins and these largely ignored us as they ran through their repertoire of courtship displays including the fabulous bill-clapping routine as a bird returns to its partner on the nest. Suddenly the cry went up to the surprise of our guide, as a flight of around 50 Night Herons skimmed overhead, presumably having been disturbed from their roost in the river valley below us.

Dragging ourselves away by about 1 pm, we set off to our next destination, the shallow lagoon of Lac du Sidi Bourhaba. Further evidence of the recent rainfall was the flooded nature of the southern section of this ribbon of a lake sitting in a depression a couple of kms from the coast. Dabbling ducks abounded, including Shoveler, Mallard, Pintail and one of the world's rarest ducks, Marbled Teal. Greater Flamingo and Spoonbill wandered amongst the floating waterfowl, dwarfing the smaller waders including a few Black-tailed Godwits. Overhead our first Black Kites and Ravens soared. The landscape was a white fuzzy blaze of *Lygos raetan* (a Broom-like bush) with occasional clumps of the thorny Sodom's apple (yes, really) *Solanum sodomaceum* and the strange flower-in-a-flower-in-a-flower Honeywort *Cerinthe major*. At the causeway over the northern end of the lake, we were treated to truly fantastic views of Red-knobbed Coots amidst a few European Coots. Both species were just a few metres away and all features of Red-knobbed Coot were readily visible including the smoky blue-grey bill tip, the lack of a cut-way from the face-feathering to the bill, the high rear end and even the little twin red berry-like knobs on top of the head above the bill plate, which are notoriously difficult to see. If the Coots weren't enough, Eleanor pointed out a Purple Gallinule lumbering away on the other side of the bus. Lunch was served under the lakeside *Eucalyptus* to shelter us from the wind and rain and Mustapha proudly produced a real table and table-cloth before laying out a super spread.

After lunch, staunchly undeterred by the weather, we drove along the lake edge, occasionally standing out in little clearings in the trees. The lake was alive with 100's of Pochard, a number of beautiful Red-crested Pochard and rather more elusive Black-necked Grebes in a range of transition plumage types, but including at least one in full summer garb. Adrian pointed out a Tufted Duck. Or was it? No, a full adult male Ring-necked Duck! We think only the 12th record for Morocco. We could do little wrong now as amongst the plethora of Lesser Black-backed gulls were around 17 Audouin's Gulls, one of the world's rarer gulls.

As the rain was starting to seep in, we decided to head off for a coffee in a restaurant a few kilometres away on the coast. Unfortunately, this was closed, but the sardine seller wasn't. Always keen to make a few dirham, we were quickly invited in to the strange world of the 'fish café', which was something very like a British seaside fish-and-chip shop. Attempting to show off one of Morocco's finest inventions we, the guides, ordered mint tea. Unfortunately we received something called 'shabi', an infusion of an *Artemisia* like grey-green herb, which tasted as its name suggested. At least the coffee was OK and there was a toilet, behind a curious roll-up door, which Denis controlled admirably. John pointed out the last Moroccan dik-dik which stared down at us; looking like it had one tea too many.

Leaving the café, we tried five minutes birding on the coast and managed a bunch of gulls including the Yellow-legged and Black-headed varieties, but it really was too windy and wet. Adrian took a big decision of not waiting to try for Marsh Owl at the marshy head of the lake under the circumstances and we turned inland for Rabat. At the hotel, we were treated to a tremendous roost of 100's of White Wagtails in the citrus trees immediately below our bedroom windows.

Day 2-March 5th

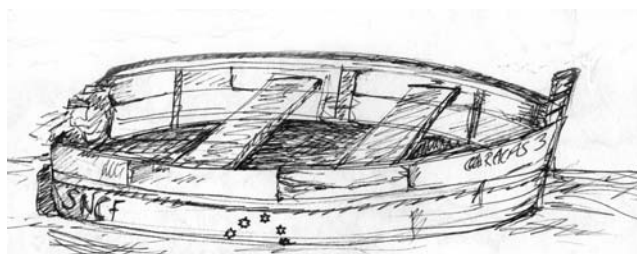
Foret de Zaers and Merja Zerga

We left in the dark at 5.30 am on the hour long journey to the King's forest, which mostly consists of remarkable stunted oaks, Cork Oak *Quercus suber* and Mastic Tree *Pistachio lentiscus* with red berries (not nuts) which can be used to make a liqueur. The resin can be used as chewing gum, but needless to say we didn't have time to try it as this forest is the haunt of a gamebird, Double-spurred Francolin. The name and call of the bird was quickly etched on the memory as Adrian's tape and its Swedish author ground out the details again and again. Although this triggered a response by around three distant birds, nothing was close enough to view and we pottered through the undergrowth with its abundant Blue Woodruff *Asperula arvensis*, *Astralegus* spp., bright yellow buttercup *Ranunculus paludosus* and a delicate purple toadflax *Linaria* spp. Here and along the road, we picked up a range of small passerines – Stonechat, Song Thrush, the North African race of Chaffinch and Cirl Bunting. Woodpigeons proved to be particularly numerous and a fine Black-shouldered Kite perched atop one of the tallest trees. After boarding the bus, we were out again all of a minute later, to peer through roadside trees for a glimpse of a private lake.

We then inspected the Cork Oaks themselves, with the brick red cambium showing up to around 2m off the ground where the bark had been removed, akin to the effect created by the shaved parts on a fancy poodle. Just as Martin got close to one of the trees, two Francolin erupted and flew noisily uttering their impression of our tape, just over the fence where we couldn't follow. A few choice words came to the mind and lips. Looking on the bright side, the Southern Grey Shrike of the *algeriensis* form we spotted just along the road was very nice. Moreover, as we entered the arable lands, we were treated to the sight of a young Long-legged Buzzard in a marshy area on the ground apparently testing his skills on easy prey – perhaps frogs(?). Corn Buntings seemed to be singing from every bush and wire supported by abundant Greenfinches, Goldfinches and Linnets. This is apparently what the bird life used to be like in the UK before intensive agriculture took its toll. Corn Bunting is a rare bird indeed these days.

Returning a little later than intended for breakfast, after the right road eluded Mustapha, we were on our way again by 11.15 am consuming the 100 km or so to Merja Zerga. The weather was now more promising and we were soon enjoying a dark phase Booted Eagle perched on a stump in a field. A Black Kite attempting to scavenge a dead cat narrowly missed being squashed itself by a passing truck. A further incredible sight was the stretches of dead Eucalyptus killed by the unprecedented frosts in this area over the previous winter. Again the rain showed its worth as the fields were painted orange and white by the marigolds and daisies, and Cattle Egrets stood in flooded sections.

After around 1 hr 45 mins or so we arrived on the west side of the vast lake that is the Merja Zerga translated as 'blue lagoon', near the beach at Moullay Bousselham. Said beach contained patches of Sea rocket *Cakile maritime* and Southern Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus cretica*. As we were watching Sandwich and Caspian Terns fishing the surf we were approached by Hassan and Hassan II. Fortunately, Hassan I was *the* Hassan mentioned in at least one birding guide and the promise of a boat ride on the lagoon itself to allow close views of the birds was to become a reality.

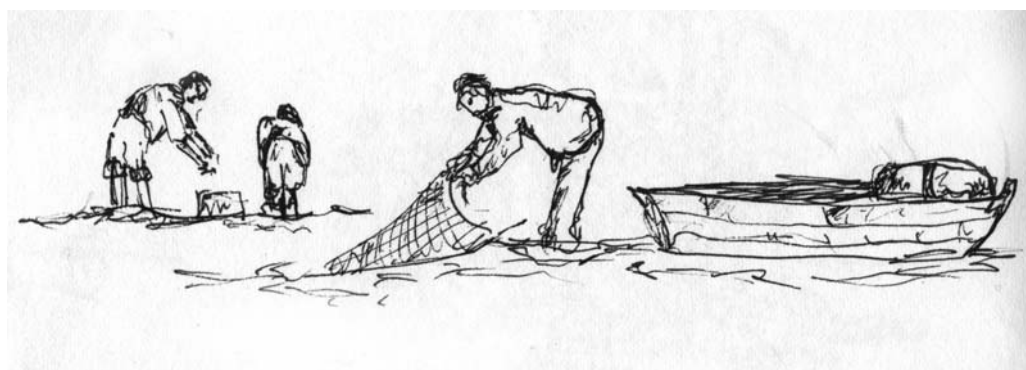


After boarding Caracas III (who knows what had happened to the other two?) and the 'boat with no name' with Ann as its figurehead, we soon found ourselves within about 75 m of a terrific roost of Audouin's Gulls with some Slender-billed Gulls and lots of Sandwich Terns.

Waders then followed thick and fast with Redshank, Whimbrel, and Grey, Ringed and Kentish Plovers. A swathe of flamingos marched past, "just like on Animal Planet" Ann recalled.

Eventually, after weaving through the channels, we reached some islands seemingly comprised of nothing but the empty shells of Cockles. From here we could mount the telescopes and enjoy fantastic views of Caspian, Sandwich and Whiskered Terns, the latter in winter plumage, with some fabulous bright pink Slender-billed Gulls. Then, the vast numbers of waders including an estimated 2000 Avocets and 100's of Dunlin and Greenshank as well as a leucistic Oystercatcher amongst its more typical brethren, hit the air as a Peregrine stooped in to land on a pole in the centre of the lagoon. The 100's of Coot and Flamingos were more relaxed.

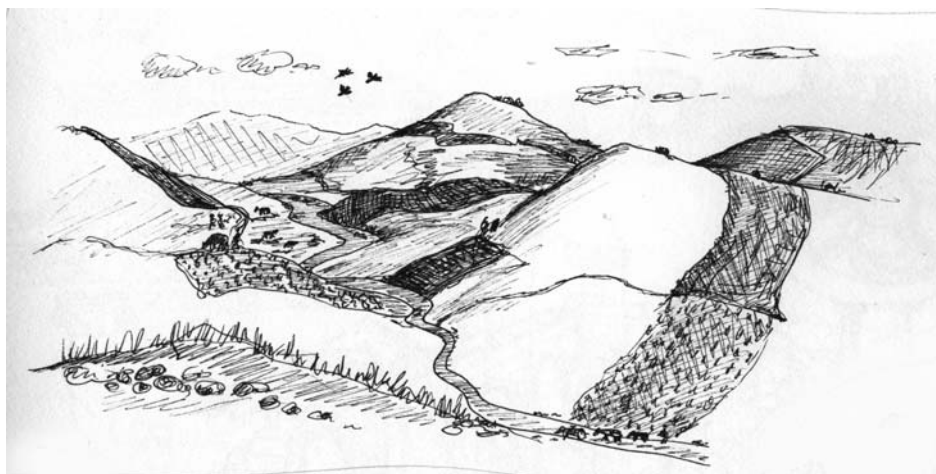
Nearby, a multi-species feeding aggregation set up, centred on a collective of Spoonbills. Little Egrets, Grey Herons and gulls including Slender-billed, clustered around looking to grab small fish disturbed by the Spoonbills. The birds were not the only ones harvesting food and we watched local men harvesting cockles and marvelled at the web of eel nets criss-crossing the channels.



After a marvellous three-hour trip, we found ourselves back on land, but our guides were not through yet. After a ride of around 20 mins we reached the other side of the lagoon at the back of the village crossing the agricultural hinterland to reach the wet meadows backed on the lakeside by great stands of tall rushes *Juncus* spp. Lapwing, Starlings, Redshank, Snipe and around 550 Black-tailed Godwits decorated the sodden pasture. The Hassans raced ahead and within a few minutes were beckoning us to catch up, as they were sure they had seen an owl. This turned out to be a plastic bag and perhaps with their pride a little stung, they charged off again, this time flushing a real Marsh Owl into the sunlight, where it provided good views until it went down again after a couple of hundred metres. As we returned over the marsh we were bathed in the light of the sunset hoping we'd have just enough light to look for more owls near the campsite. As we got there, Hassan I thought he saw another Marsh Owl which quickly disappeared, but there was no doubting the Little Owls, one each on adjacent buildings, which came together in a noisy mating. A third on a pole in the marsh seemed above that sort of behaviour. As the dusk became night, we thanked our terrific guides for the afternoon and set off on the hour-long journey to Kenitra and the three-star Hotel Marmora.

Day 3 – March 6th Volubilis

The day dawned clear and bright and Pallid and Little Swifts were abroad in the crisp air as we left at 07.20am. We passed a small wetland on the edge of town that looked promising, with Coot, Moorhen and Grey Heron all obvious. After an industrial area, which is a relatively uncommon sight in Morocco, we emerged into arable, rolling foothills. Large larks were suddenly everywhere and we stopped to watch the Calandra Larks in display flight, looking strangely like small waders as they parachuted to earth. Crested Larks and Corn Buntings were also abundant.



We didn't get much further before Mustapha screeched to a halt in front of a large falcon on a pylon eating a breakfast bird. This had a bold moustache giving a hooded appearance, but was relatively light on the head. As it flew, the body seemed very compact and Peregrine-like suggesting Barbary Falcon, which to some is a North African race of Peregrine and to others is a different species. Morocco is a bit of a melting pot of large falcon genetics, with *brookei* the small dark race of Peregrine with a pinkish breast flush, occurring sympatrically and perhaps even interbreeding. Anyone used to falconer's birds in captivity, will have seen that Peregrine x Lanner crosses have all the qualities of wild Barbary Falcon, perhaps suggesting a hybrid origin. Thus, it is difficult at times to be sure which falcon is which in the field and so it was on this occasion with separate 'Lanner' and 'Barbary' schools of thought. On balance,

although the top of the head was light, the heavy moustache (showing well in Denis' digital shots) and most importantly, compact heavy build, pointed to the latter.

As the landscape changed, the orange of the Field Marigolds became more intense until it formed a blazing haze under the Olives, with a supporting cast of pink *Fedia cornucopiae* and blue *Salvia schelera*, a large coarse Sage. We just had to stop for a few pictures. Within a few minutes of driving we were stopping again as Volubilis itself was in stunning sight across the fields.

Anyone used to sad ruins in temperate climes, where the access is restricted, may be re-educated at Volubilis, as everything is openly accessible and beautifully preserved. You really can imagine the streets as a bustling throng with associated sights and smells. Our guide Rachid took us on a journey back in time, concentrating on those who paid full



attention. Others were distracted by the other delights, which included plentiful flowers and their attendant butterflies, including Moroccan Orange-tip, Green-striped White and many tiny Moroccan Hairstreaks. The males of this species were on territories, chasing and battling with intruding rivals. A Scarce Swallowtail posed gracefully atop one of the many Asphodels to complete the scene.

Birds were used to the movements of the people through the site and Adrian got incredibly close to a party of Goldfinches feeding on seed-heads. This is not to mention the placid White Storks on nests on the columns. One such nest had its own suburb filled by chirping House Sparrows. Unfortunately, wildlife was not the only distraction as the group unwittingly strayed in the line of camera fire of an American woman who was trying to take a picture of one of the mosaics. As the others moved on, Martin became the target of the woman's frustration. Pity that she hadn't realised that everyone else had just as much right as she did to appreciate the landscape in their own way, and that it was untenable to claim exclusive access to a patch of ground in somebody else's country. Such poor attitude does no visitor any favours. And all she'd had to do was tell us what she was doing and politely ask us to move!

Lunch saw us get into the Moroccan spirit by consuming potfuls of mint tea at the café. Quite a delight to sip the national drink amidst the flowers whilst enjoying super views of Black Redstart and the North African race of Chaffinch. A couple of Hoopoes also put in a brief appearance. Then it was off to Fez for more cultural treats. After dropping our bags at our modern and stylish hotel, we met with Ali, guide extraordinaire and well known to Jaeger Tour groups. Today, the learning curve was steep as Ali taught us the basics of the layout of the city of Fez on the short journey, and then suddenly we were amongst the narrow streets and souks of one of the most complete medieval cities of the world. In each of the three cities, there are 187 sectors, each of which has representatives of five elements – hamman (bath), mosque, medersa (religious school associated with the mosque), a bakery and a fountain. All of life seizes all of the senses inside this place and it is quite simply an unforgettable

experience. And then there is the tannery! Where men tread skins in an interlacing honeycomb of stone vats filled with a range of colours that inevitably stain the bare flesh of the workers, which must sting with the ammonia from the pigeon droppings. It doesn't seem to be a career one could follow for long, and the owner of the shop on whose terrace we were standing revealed that he too used to dye the leathers before he went up in the world. He certainly had a long way to go before he could afford the \$4 million price tag of a large historic house we'd visited earlier where there were three baths and courtyards of Citrus trees. This was especially true after Adrian had subjected him to his honed bartering skills to help Lauren buy two pairs (his and hers) of beautiful orange slippers. Outside the tannery Adrian was bewitched by a young girl, or was it the trays of cornes de gazelle (pastries filled with honey and almonds) she appeared with? Both probably.

Overwhelmed by now, we were guided through parts of the souks with abundant and exotic clothes-making equipment including cloths and threads until we emerged to find Mustapha waiting for us. At dinner, Lauren was a vision in orange with matching slippers, although this didn't prevent our waiter from getting a little shirty after several bottles of the wine he produced were corked. He tried the strange line that we'd watered it down! But like the Lesser Kestrels and abundant Alpine Swifts we'd seen in the city, we could soar above anything by that point.

Day 4 – March 7th Middle Atlas – lakes and cedars

After leaving at 7.30am we didn't have to travel far before a Black-shouldered Kite hunting the fields took our attention. Even better that the Kite then caught a mouse/young rat, which it ate with gory relish whilst sitting on top of a pylon. As someone said, running in the grass one minute, a snack the next...

We stopped for bread in Immouzer, Here, the deciduous trees were leafless giving a very 'temperate' look and feel. Just outside the town dense stands of Evergreen Oak, probably *Quercus ilex*, took over. We turned left at 'tourist pour lacs' as that's what we were and within minutes we were on the shores of Dayet Aoua. Birds were abundant in the crisp morning sunshine. Mistle Thrushes, Great and Coal Tits were hopping around on the ground, Short-toed Treecreepers were doing just that and Firecrests were busy amongst the branches. A female Crossbill dropped in to drink and a male Cirl Bunting sang from a tree. This is before we'd even looked at the water, which was covered with 100's of Little Grebes, a couple of Great Crested Grebes and around 10 Black-necked Grebes. Ducks were also abundant, especially along the edge of the lake supporting wet grassland, with Gadwall, Shoveler and 17 Marbled Teal. A Kestrel mobbed a Long-legged Buzzard as it sat on the rocky bluff rising behind the lake.

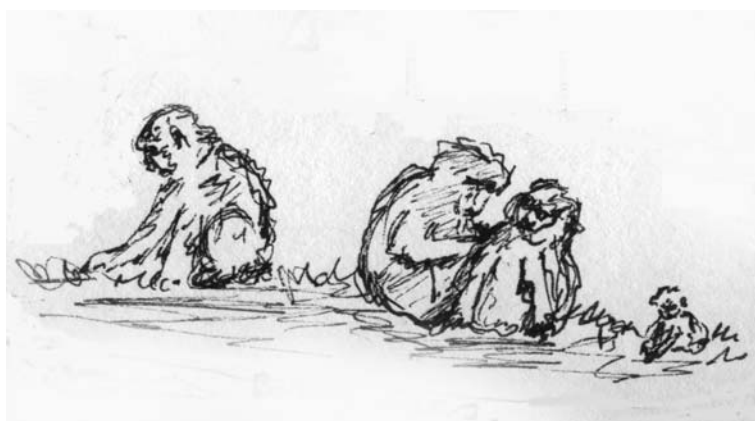
As we walked along the track into drier habitats, we enjoyed views of a scolding Jay, both North African and European races of Chaffinch, and then, in response to Adrian's tape a female Levaillant's Green Woodpecker landed in a poplar and began tapping! A few minutes later the male sailed over our heads and landed in an adjacent tree. Over the next fifteen minutes we got closer and closer getting fantastic



views of every detail of this stunning bird as he froze to the tree. As we backed off, he finally flew off in typical bounding flight. Just as we were about to leave, a Woodlark landed on top of a small juniper on the hill. Getting close to it we suddenly realised there were tiny, pretty crocus-like flowers all around our feet. These were *Romulea bulbocodium*.

Next stop was Ifrane, a clean bright town that wouldn't look out of place in Switzerland, with its chalet-style balconied houses. The mistletoe in the trees and the snow lying in great patches amongst the coniferous trees was also rather European (or North American). Driving across a large plateau, we encountered Lesser Kestrels sitting on rocks in the open. Only after we stopped did we see the others nearby, obviously nesting in a building. Considering these birds are more often encountered in sunny Spain and Portugal where they nest in rural towns, seeing them in the snow in what seemed like the middle of nowhere was all a bit odd. Not quite as odd as the Barbary Macaque called 'Linda' though. She was with her mate and baby amongst a small cluster of 'shops' and clearly quite an asset in getting travellers to stop. Linda took a particular liking to Sue, and enveloped her legs below the knee. Meanwhile, Mustapha struck up a friendship with the male, until he got a little pushy (the monkey that is).

After a few more miles and a great patch of Cedars, we encountered the real macaque, although these were also on the side of the road, albeit some of them were in trees. Although wild, this particular troop clearly made a living from the human traffic through the area. Barbary Macaques in Morocco



along with Japanese Macaque (Snow monkey) are the toughest monkeys in the World in terms of dealing with low temperatures and poor food supply. In winter, they glean mosses from the bark of the cedars. This lot scattered around us, looked more likely to glean the bread from our mouths and rifle through the back of the van for chocolate biscuits.

Talking of lunch, we took ours amongst the bushes adorned with Red-berried Mistletoe *Viscum cruciatum*. Amidst the goats, Denis and Adrian spied some large rodents. These were Shaw's Jird, which was far more endearing than its name suggests, with relatively large ears, a long bushy black-tipped tail and a cute habit of sitting up on its haunches. The ground was littered with their burrows and we pondered over whether they were only active now in bright sunlight, only because they'd been restricted by the clearly heavy recent snow-fall in the area. Whilst there was not much to fear from the circling Sparrowhawk, the two Long-legged Buzzards were definitely something to be avoided.

On our way again, Ravens became numerous both on the ground and in the air, but it was even larger birds that caused us to stop. Two Red Kites! Perhaps these were on passage to Spain or further north or maybe they were part of the desperately small Moroccan population. Whatever the case, any sighting of this majestic raptor is unusual and very welcome.

The habitat had now thinned into open plateau, with odd patches of Cedars and some incredibly gnarled and presumably aged Junipers. The complete lack of young trees, and indeed any other woody vegetation to speak of, was a clear sign of overgrazing. In the region of Lac Aguelmane, the wet meadows were partly covered with snow and the pairs of White Storks wandering around looked rather out of place. The large number of Ruddy Shelducks

looked much more at home, as did the Horned Larks scurrying across the ground amongst the impressive floral display of Crocuses, Romuleas and a few of a delicate yellow *Gagea* sp. Other small birds here were the *iberiae* race of Yellow Wagtail and John drew our attention to a wheatear. Strangely, this proved to be a straight Northern Wheatear, probably on passage, and not the *seebohmi* (Seebohm's Wheatear) race of the species that breeds in the area.

As we began the descent from the plateau the snow disappeared and the landscape dried although in the distance the High Atlas were dusted like cakes with icing sugar. Taking the opportunity for a visit to the Zeida plain before checking into the hotel, we found ourselves in a similar but different landscape to the one we had encountered earlier in the day. The ground was parched and dusty and vegetation was largely limited to the strange little (10-15 cm) bushes of Wormwood *Artemisia herba-alba*, which do not appear likely to be able to shield a large bug let alone a bird the size of a lark. Yet this is the habitat *par excellence* of Dupont's Lark, which has been described as elusive as Lord Lucan and as fast as Linford Christie (or Ben Johnson on drugs for the Canadians or Carl Lewis high on self-belief for the Americans). On this occasion the bird was so elusive as to be invisible. Remarkably though Sue did find an egg, which started a debate of whether this was from a nomadic or a nomad's chicken.

Strangely enthused that at least some life had once wandered across here in the last millennium, Denis demonstrated that we should 'read' the land, as on a small rise, with thicker grass, a down-drift lee had been created for any windblown seeds and consequently their bird predators. In this case, this was around 25 Short-toed Larks, our first Red-rumped Wheatears and an elusive pair of Tawny Pipits. A demonstration of a semi-desert food chain then played out with the arrival of a juvenile Lanner onto a pylon.

Driving back down the track to the road, Adrian suddenly yelled out 'Hoopoe Lark' as three heads sporting decurved-bills popped up, but changed his call equally quickly to Cream-coloured Coursers! These bizarre, beautiful waders including a gorgeous bright male bird tripped around us for several minutes, but were pretty wary of the photographers and eventually took flight, showing their contrasting black wings.

Just before Midelt, we were slowed to a stop by a demonstration in the road. Rather than some expression of revolt over a world event, this was an outpouring linked to local injustice as one village had been granted electricity whilst another stayed in the dark. One gets the impression at the Hotel Aaychi that no guests means no lights and very little activity, but with us in town, the place was buzzing. Well, there were a couple of people on the desk and at least one waiter.

Day 5 – March 8th Zeida Plain (again) to Erfoud

It's not warm at this time of year in Midelt at 04.45am, even with cloud cover, but this is what's required to get to grips with Dupont's Lark. Still, it's always full of promise at this time of morning and the 25 minute journey to Zeida Plain produced a nice but unknown species of Jerboa (hopping mouse with over-sized back legs and a long tail) as it bounced across the road.

We cruised along the track across the Plain, stopping frequently and playing a tape with the simple song of Dupont's Lark. After the 6th or 7th stop hope was starting to fade as the light was beginning to build, and everyone knows Dupont's tend to sing before dawn. Then suddenly, as the pylons loomed into view to our left, there was a definite reply to the tape, and then another, and another and maybe even a fourth. Birds continued to sing for 20 minutes from 06.00 until 06.20 with only a few calls after 6.30am. As the singing faded, we walked forward to where we thought our closest bird had been singing. Martin watched as part of the bush a few metres ahead broke off and ran. Only when the bush craned up and then flew did

the words form. But this couldn't be a Dupont's as they never fly. As if in confirmation of this fact, another bird to our left became a Short-toed Lark. But there was the first bird again, issuing a strange 'drrrp drppp' call. As Adrian hit the tape, the bird became excited and over the next fifteen minutes circled us to within a few metres, providing fantastic views as it scurried between the tiny bushes more like a disturbed rodent than a bird, first popping out from behind the bushes and then even sitting on top of them as if it wanted to show off its down-curved bill and generally streaky appearance, as if we were in any doubt as to its identity as a Dupont's Lark.

Back at the hotel we related what had been a remarkable experience to Eleanor, John and Sue, who'd declined the early start. Unfortunately the intention to enjoy a leisurely breakfast had not paid off as nobody had appeared until we all trooped to the table. Eggs seemed to be the order of the day, but unfortunately the omelette guy wasn't in and his stand in's first attempt for Ann seemed a little runny. Mind you the dish was so hot it was still clearly cooking! A little discussion followed and the rest of us had the honour of what seemed to be a tribal elder intervening on our behalf. One clearly can't tell Grandpa how to stir eggs.

Replete, by 08.30 am we were back on the road again, passing a family of nomads striding across the stony desert as we climbed into the mid-Atlas again. We stopped briefly for some Black Wheatears on a building rather than on rocks and an animal park, which seems to be the beginnings of re-introducing some of Morocco's lost ungulates such as Gazelle and Addax Antelope as well as Ostrich. Sue found us a nice Bibron's Agama although it was a little short in the tail department and plants included the introduced California Pepper Tree (actually from Brazil and Paraguay) *Schinus molle* at a petrol station and the native *Euphorbia rigida*.



We were now following the Oued Ziz and the views were becoming increasingly stunning with kasbahs commanding the views over the river. Strange then, that we stopped at a particularly unassuming wadi. Perhaps this was simply fate as the wheatear in the centre of it immediately attracted attention. This had a striking upright posture as well as appearing curiously pot-bellied. The dark line of the folded wing feathers contrasted with the rest of the wing. The tail was noticeably broad and the black tail tip did not extend very far into the white, forming a blunt apexed triangle when it was closed. The bird wagged its tail routinely in a very loose fashion, although it was clear that even with the bird's upright posture its tail did not reach the ground. The bird had a long, almost drooping bill and whilst there some white leading back to the eye, it was the black marking that stood out. The verdict? Isabelline Wheatear, another rare bird, with only 20 records according to the *Birds of Morocco*, although recent records in the African Bird Club bulletin suggest it occurs more frequently on spring passage than previously thought.

Another part of the Oued Ziz produced a blizzard of hirundines with 100's of birds comprised of Swallows, House Martins Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows. Here, we bought imported, and not locally made bread. At home, this would either suggest something exotic or conversely something very manufactured. Here, it simply meant a lot of people had handled it! We stopped for lunch at the reservoir Barrage Hassan Addakhil. As Mustapha picked down the rocky track in the van, we walked amongst the goats expertly driven by two girls and sharply thrown stones and shouts. This didn't put off the birds too much and we were

fortunate enough to spot a pair of Desert Larks, a bunch of Trumpeter Finches and a White-crowned Black Wheatear. As we neared the van, so did the goats and with lunch threatened. Martin tried a gibbon-like approach to goat scaring. After initially staring in disbelief the goats obliged. But it really took a bribe of lunch packets for the girls to intervene on our behalf and keep them away for good. The reservoir itself was home to further flocks of 100's of Swallows and Martins as well as Cormorants, including at least one white-chested *maroccanus*, and waterfowl in the shape of Pochard and Ruddy Shelduck.

The journey ever eastwards saw us enjoying a variety of views of the Oued Ziz and its splendid date palms. In contrast, birding was rather quiet, that is until we hit 'miracle mile' near Aoufouss. Denis started it off for a bird we had to reverse for, which turned out to be a male Desert Wheatear. In the next bush along sat a beautiful male Black-eared Wheatear, which allowed study of the similarities and differences (extent of black across the scapulars and wings) of the two species. A gorgeous *deserti* race of Southern Grey Shrike was next and then just 1km out of town we encountered the grail of wheatears, a Mourning Wheatear. It appeared to be taking insects stunned/killed by the passing traffic. As if that wasn't enough, a Spectacled Warbler chattered in on the action too!

At Erfoud, we said goodbye to Mustapha temporarily and climbed aboard two Land Rovers for the rough stuff to Chez Michel in the heart of the stony desert. After a little glitch with a lack of water in one vehicle duly corrected by our driver Ja-Ja (we think that's what he said), we arrived safely to the splendours of our residence for the next couple of days. Make no bones about it, this is a fantastic place and with a cluster of vegetation around the buildings, the birds think so too. At dusk, we sat out for the Egyptian Nightjar known to frequent the area, but sadly it didn't show. But in a place such as this, who were we to complain?

Day 6 – March 9th Erg Chebbi

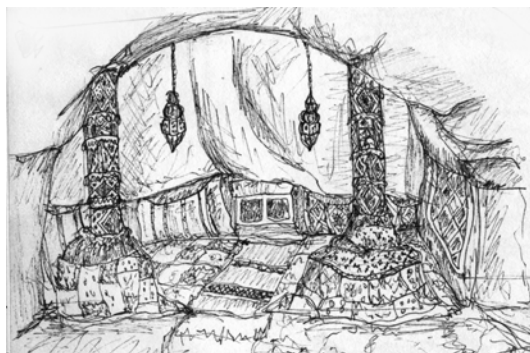
The 4WD's arrived for us at 06.00am for the supposed 15 minute drive to Merzouga, where a more ancient form of transport awaited us. Everybody knows the Berber and Tuareg can navigate with unerring accuracy across the sandy wastes. It was somewhat ironic that with a casual point at the growing colours of dawn from John, our driver shot off for Algeria! After a long detour and the "Oh...Merzouga! Why didn't you say?" conversation, we arrived at 06.50am having missed the sunrise at 06.40am. Never mind, at least you could see the camels



now. As we pondered the great beasts, Alice demonstrated what a trooper she is and was first on. (Nobody had the heart to tell her we weren't supposed to get *on* the camels....Just kidding). After all but our leader was aloft, the camels parted and Adrian and his camel eyeballed each other for the first time. Was it the imagination or was Adrian as big as his steed? The camel clearly thought so and as Adrian lent back into his best 'yee-hah ride 'em cowboy' pose the camel let out a curdling, intestine-twisting cry - part Walt Whitman and part Wookiee. And nothing could stop it. It's a wonder the rest of us didn't fall off.

We padded to the edge of the great dunes of the Erg Chebbi, stretching into the vastness of the Sahara. Leaving the camels, our guides helped us up to the knife-edge of a dune about 75 m high and we marvelled at the colours and light and pondered how long it would take to reach Timbuktoo (actually 52 days) and when we should start. Then we were amazed by 'Berber ski', which was initiated in all innocence by Lauren, shuffling a few metres on her bottom. This prompted each guide to drag his charge down the dune by the feet. Martin tried

rolling, which successfully shook all sensibility loose and he succumbed to buying fossils from the guide before getting back on the camel. Each of us was lost in individual thought as we moved back towards civilisation and breakfast in a very ornate tent. Even Adrian's camel was subdued.



Remembering that we were also here to watch birds, we toured along the strip of cafés towards the most famous of all the Café Yasmina. Parties of Short-toed Larks initially created confusion as we were expecting their desert cousins, of which Bar-tailed Desert Lark obliged soon after. A lot of Brown-necked Ravens and a pair of surprise Laughing Doves followed, the presence of the latter providing evidence of their recent south and eastwards expansion through the country. We resorted to checking out all groups of camels and their dung for small passerines, although this wasn't too successful apart from the lovely white-throated form of Black-eared Wheatear. Even at the Café Yasmina and its scrub, small birds were hard to come by and a single female Desert Sparrow became a fly-past we couldn't re-locate. Fortunately, the male Tristram's Warbler was much more obliging. After lunch taken with mint tea, and just as we were leaving, a final check through the House Sparrows produced a pair of Desert Sparrows on the terrace. Incredibly, these beautiful delicate birds have gone into steep decline in the last few years and only a handful can now be reliably seen in Morocco. We were lucky indeed.

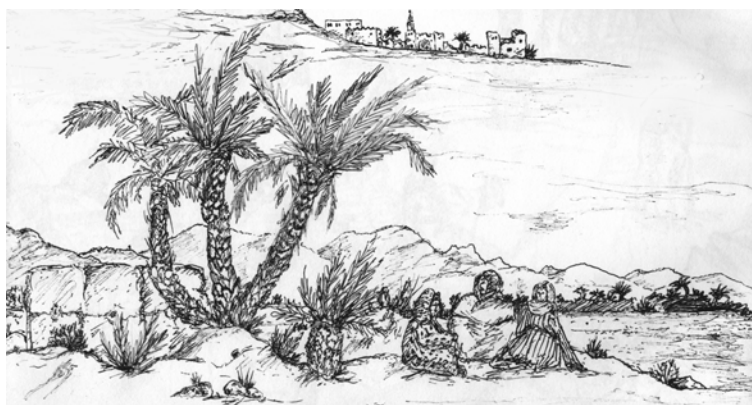
After a 20 minute drive we were in the dried lake-bed of Merzouga. It's hard to believe but in exceptional years this can be full of water and thus birds such as flamingos, waders and ducks. Our host at the Yasmina had shown us some astonishing photos of him in a canoe at the back of the café. Unfortunately, the dream of seeing a lake in the desert, fuelled by the exceptional weather we had encountered will have to wait as the 'lake' was bone dry. Not only that but the tamarisk was largely dead. It didn't look good. Fortunately, nobody had told the wildlife, as Fat Sand Rats scurried hither and thither. A Lanner patrolling overhead then went into a steep dive after what we presumed was one of said rodents. Racing forward to see, Eleanor came across a beautiful sandy gold *Acanthodactylus* lizard. This wasn't given the attention it deserved as the *Reptiles et Amphibiens du Maroc* showed this was *A. dumerili* something previous trips had not recorded. Martin then glimpsed a sandy warbler (everything is camouflaged according to the dominant colours here) as it flitted from one bush to another.



This was one of our target birds, the Desert Warbler. Martin tried to get ahead of it to hold it up for the group and the bird duly obliged with stunning views and demonstrating that it could also run like a rodent (remember Dupont's Lark?). Cream-coloured Coursers and Trumpeter Finches then followed. We'd largely forgotten the Lanner until it flew in front of us as if seeking attention.

No time for that now as we set off on the 40 minute drive to Rissani. After remembering the left turn at the petrol station, after about 8 km we found ourselves at a line of cliffs projecting from the sand like the backbone of a giant dinosaur from the far side of the wadi of the Oued Haniche. A number of gulleys bisect the plain here and after getting stuck on the wrong side of one we doubled back and drove through the wadi itself. Ja-Ja and friend handled the Land Rovers with style and after 3 km we drew up at a fault line in the last cliff. This had created a hole as the horizontal strata had been forced skywards and in the entrance of the hole sat an *Bubo (bubo) ascapalus* or Pharoah's Eagle Owl! This was worth the entrance money on it's own as far as some were concerned. Ignoring us far below it and the fact that it was only four in the afternoon, the owl edged forward providing a terrific view of its blazing orange eyes, heavily blotched neck line and pale orange to cream stripes across it's chest, and (yes, you've guessed it) otherwise sandy background colour. A Raven flew past and the owl backed off, its ears raised vertically, reinforcing the impression of a snarling feline.

Back at Chez Michel by 5pm, we didn't know what to do with ourselves and were all out again by 6.30pm looking for Nightjars. Still no joy, so we contented ourselves with thoughts of the owl, another excellent meal and a terrific slide show from Adrian on his laptop, ladelling out a wealth of unforgettable memories already.



Day 7 – March 10th Todra Gorge to the Vallee du Dades

At 7am there was no sign of our Land Rovers or drivers, but before we could get perturbed, two immaculate Land Cruisers with rather smart chauffeurs

appeared. We didn't ask how or why and just got in. After a few minutes we stopped near the roadworks at the fossil digging area on the main road. Our driver looked a bit bemused as we told him 'ten minutes'. But you could *buy* the fossils for a few dirham he must have thought. It must have been even more confusing for him, when after less than a minute we started gesticulating as Adrian had found our prize, a Hoopoe Lark. We were enjoying terrific views even before Adrian hit the tape, after it the bird promptly went into overdrive; calling loudly it climbed into the air before parachuting downwards in butterfly display flight, its eye-catching wing bars showing the world that here was a Hoopoe Lark that meant business. The Bar-tailed Desert Larks and Desert Wheatear were tame in comparison.

We arrived in Erfoud at about 8.30 am after a scenic detour through the rubbish dump, where Mustapha was waiting for us. Reunited and unified, we set off, stopping at Jorf where the domes of the wells dot the surface of the badlands. The real test of 'how long does it take a guy on a bike with a tray of fossils to reach you' then began and the winner must have taken a full 30 seconds, after not being visible at all when we stopped. Ten more guys reached us within a few minutes and lucky for them there were some interested in their wares.

By 10 am we'd reached the 'bus stop', where rather than wait for or catch the bus, we turned rocks. A specimen of the pretty lizard *Mesalina guttata* fired enthusiasm and another quickly followed, and then our first scorpion, an impressive broad-bodied beast that ran amongst the tiny *Asphodelus tenuifolius* before regaining sanctuary under the next rock. A boy, girl and donkey combo approached us and a few paid pictures were taken.

'Starbucks' time was upon us and the bread we bought in Tinejdad was quickly engulfed. A nice Long-legged Buzzard on a pylon followed before we were again turning rocks. Suitable prey for the buzzard were found in the form of *Agama bibroni*, the gecko, *Stenodactylus sthenodactylus* and then another *Agama*. A cry from Ann lifted our heads skywards and a large, stocky falcon with a heavy moustache, striped chest/belly and extensive tail-barring glided over. This was the *minor* race of Peregrine.

More raptors followed as we neared the entrance of the Todra gorge: a Short-toed Eagle looking large and clumsy against the headwind as it migrated across the top of the ridge, and then an adult Bonelli's Eagle circling overhead, the straight edge across the flight feathers at the back of the wings and the 'pinching' of the secondaries into the body, particularly obvious. After Mustapha had dropped us off we strolled through the gorge on the new road alongside the rushing waters of the stream. Brilliant yellow bellied Grey Wagtails, and Swallows decorated our way. A greyish-brown pipit emerging from the water had us stumped for a while as it was out of context and wet. That was until it called and it became a Meadow Pipit. Unfortunately, the new road has allowed access to large buses and tourists turning the area into a bit of a zoo. We were able to get away from the crowds by driving through and enjoyed a lunch with new treats: tuna with tomato, figs and dates. Here we could really appreciate the soaring pink-red walls of the gorge and enjoy it as the spectacular landscape it really is.

We were away by 3 pm leaving behind the luxurious date palm plantations around Todra for open plains with the mountains beyond. People were out in the vastness gathering brush and loading it onto donkeys. It's always a difficult issue as people need fuel, but by taking the only vegetation out of the landscape, the delicate ecological and hydrological balance is upset, favouring desertification.

After checking into our hotel on the outskirts of Boulmane, with its spectacular view of the valley of the Oued Dades, we were quickly out again, back to the Tagdilt track, which we had just crossed on our way in. This is a rolling *hamada* semi-desert, stretching for miles and home to a variety of specialist flora and fauna of which the birds are the best known. For now, we hung around one of the most productive areas – the rubbish dump! The feral dog population had clearly gone unchecked and at least 18 were present. Not that bothered the stately White Storks and the abundant Fat Sand Rats. This is not a kind name for what is a really cute rodent with its rounded face and ears, sandy coat and long black-tipped tail. After struggling to find the larks we expected, we eventually found a Temminck's Horned Lark looking particularly beautiful in the orange glow of the setting sun. As we left at 6 pm tens of kites started to wing their way to a roost on the horizon.

Day 8 – March 11th Tagdilt Track and Mansour Eddahbi Dam

Tea and coffee was provided at 6 am and by 6.30 am we were back in the rubbish dump, but this time nearer to town and the army barracks. Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears were abroad and as the sun rose, the kites we'd seen go to roost the night before started to flock in. Moving on, we crossed one of the larger wadis. The promise of water and the change in terrain are always worth a stop, confirmed by the flock of Trumpeter Finches bouncing across the sky. Then suddenly there were birds all over the place; Short-toed Larks, very plain sandy Desert Larks and Temminck's Horned Lark. Mustapha called out, having seen what he thought were Sandgrouse go to ground.

We combed the slope to no avail and then a bubbling call alerted Martin to the four Black-bellied Sandgrouse overhead. These initially landed where we'd just come from, near the wadi and the odd pools of water, but were soon off again. Fortunately, they landed again in the open and could see them shuffling like clockwork toys. Our attempt to get closer failed, as we were unable to re-locate them in what is a largely featureless landscape and we found ourselves back in the vicinity of the dump once again. Hundreds of pigeons, with 50 or more kites were now present and a female Marsh Harrier sailed over, most likely *en-route* for somewhere a little damper.



We then headed for a different part of the Track via the main road. We hadn't got far when the cry of 'Sandgrouse!' emanated from the back of the bus. Reversing smartly back, John's birds turned out not to be sandgrouse but the equally enigmatic Cream-coloured Courser. There were four in the rainwater pools alongside the road accompanied by Short-toed Larks. The next pool along the road produced a myriad (well about 50) Short-toed Larks and another Courser. This was suddenly very easy. Turning right at the next road junction we crossed the same wadi we'd crossed earlier in the day, although it was much smaller here just a few kilometres upstream. We followed the wadi on foot for a few hundred metres anticipating clouds of sandgrouse and larks, but apart from the curious sight of Fox droppings on the remains of a goat kid found by Sue and an few wheatears, there was little to see. The wadi was still damp and thus had probably had water up until a couple of days earlier. Back to the bus! Continuing the theme on the way back to the hotel, we stopped at another pool right on the edge of town. Our luck was in again with at least four Little Ringed Plovers and a female Ruff (Reeve).

Breakfast back at the hotel at 9.30 am saw an impressive display of gluttony with the delicious corn bread (who said there were no vultures left in Morocco?). Wildlife joined us in the form of House Buntings hopping about the floor and a Hummingbird Hawk Moth. Strangely enough, an hour just disappeared. Emerging into the sunlight, it was clear that spring had really sprung and the almond trees in blossom looked delightful. The same theme continued for some time as we followed the Dades, the ribbon of life. Sue was attracted by another sort of ribbons, or rather scarves billowing in the breeze outside a small shop. Within a few seconds she was dressed as a Berber lady of repute. A Laughing Dove on the roof looked on, but said nothing.

At 55 km east of Ouarzazate, we stopped at a Mourning Wheatear spot, but there was no wheatear and the exciting falcon transformed into a Kestrel. Mustapha saved it by spotting a fine *Uromastyx* or Dab Lizard: a big brightly coloured (this one was blue-green and orange) animal similar in shape and size to Gila Monster. Although the photographers failed, the spotters didn't, producing two more, one a stylish green and grey pattern. Pictures of the incredible parasitic *Cistanche purpurea* emerging from the dust and the bright yellow, sticky-leaved pea *Ononis natrix* were easier to come by.

By 1 pm we'd arrived at the Kasbah Skoura, a fantastic traditional mud and straw (*pisé*) manor house (kasbah). Our guide with blue-grey eyes greeted us at the door and immediately Ann wanted to take him home. He explained that Skoura had been used in a number of films including the classic 'Lawrence and the eleven Arabs'. Something had clearly got lost in translation somewhere. But we didn't care as we were ushered from room to room littered with artefacts from the 17th Century. This included the 'Berber telephone' (basically a chimney from one floor to another). Our guide clearly had a keen sense of humour. The house would have been home to one family of around 25 people including quite a few children and standing on the top floor gazing around at the palms it was relatively easy to transport oneself back there. After the tour, we were treated to mint tea (what else?).

After lunch in the wadi, where we shared a few treats with the local kids, and ensured the girls actually got something, we set off towards Ouzarzate. We'd made it by around 4 pm and after crossing an unsavoury creek we walked through an area of cut tamarisk on the way to the Mansour Eddahbi Dam, a large reservoir just out of town. As the vegetation cover increased the warblers started to appear with Subalpine, female Sardinian and Dartford all spotted. A Wryneck was a welcome find, although unfortunately it couldn't be re-located after it landed in a tree. Lizards were numerous and *Acanthodactylus boskianus* was recorded. Two quail erupted from our feet at less than 2 m away and a large flock of around 125 Spanish Sparrows gave us great views of this handsome species.

After what seemed like some time on foot, we were still miles away from the reservoir. However, we could see a lot of birds including Flamingos, Cormorants and an Osprey and most importantly, some 4WD's at the water's edge. The possibility of getting close was an exciting one and we decided to attempt it. A nice Stone Curlew spotted by Mustapha just a few metres away was a brief distraction as the bus picked it's way back to the road. After going through town and over the Dades, which was now a large river, we turned left at the beginning of the hills at the end of a village. Left again then right for 'D....3 km'. Left at the fork brought us alongside yellow triangular markers and on to the high road to the side of the reservoir. After stopping for more Coursers (we were really getting lucky on these), we reached the lake shore.

The Greater Flamingos numbered 22 adults and 12 juveniles (from the previous year). Fish eating birds were much in evidence with lots of Cormorants, a Great White Egret and several Grey Herons. One of the latter wasn't eating a fish though – it had got hold of quite a large mammal instead. Marsh Harriers (3) patrolled the *Typha* swamp and the lake edge and Ruddy Shelduck (12) were standing on small islands. Kentish Plovers, Dunlin and a few Little Stint cruised the muddy shores along with a million wagtails. As the sun started to set, we dragged ourselves away and within a short time were checking in to our hotel, La Gazelle.

Day 9 – March 12th Ait Ben Haddou and the High Atlas

After a bread and jam breakfast at 6.30 am, we'd packed and left by 7.15 am. After just 45 minutes Ait Ben Haddou was in view. This UNESCO world heritage site is reputed to be the best preserved, or rather restored, Kasbah in the Atlas. It certainly is spectacular and absolutely dwarfs the Kasbah Skoura we'd seen the previous day, being more of an entire village than a one family house. Ait Ben Haddou is also very commercial, use to taking large coach trips, but fortunately at this time in the morning we were spared the normal tourist hustle. In fact, many of the potential traders were positively lethargic.

After crossing the brimful stream on the carefully positioned sandbags, we could wander at our leisure along the medieval streets and browse in the shops, containing a typical cornucopial range of Moroccan leather and metal goods and of course, jewellery. However, a number of artists also work from this restored 'village' and their wares rightly proved very popular, with Lauren in particular securing a couple of fine watercolours.



Rain threatened in the strengthening wind as we journeyed westwards. A pale phase Booted Eagle on migration was clearly finding it tough going, but at least this provided us with a good view. In Agouim, notable for its irrigated fields awash with Apricots in bloom, bread was purchased, delightfully still warm from the ovens. Fortunately, there was still enough left for lunch. Unfortunately, the bread has cooled somewhat along with the weather at the lunch stop near the Tiz-n-Tichka pass. Patchy snow lay on the ground and the Corn Buntings, which looked a little out of place at this altitude, seemed to be shivering.

Despite the cold, the Tiz-n-Tichka pass was at its stunning best with the tortuous road winding in the distance below us. The contrast between the dry slopes and the ribbon of green in the valley floor associated with the river was particularly striking. Within a few miles of the descent we were travelling alongside the *Oleander* clad river with Walnut trees and broom-like *Lygos* a particular feature of the vegetation. Around 4-5 km from Taddert, a dead Algerian Hedgehog prompted a stop, which then led to the discovery of two small colonies of the beautiful short-stemmed Hoop Petticoat Daffodil *Narcissus albidus* on the slopes just above the road. However, this was nothing compared to the tens if not hundreds of plants underneath the trees – Juniper, Pine and the beginning of the Holm Oak – on the western slopes near Toufliat.

By 2.15 pm we'd reached the 'Marrakech 41 km' turn. The change in temperature was noticeable and it was now positively sunny and warm. This area has a distinctly Spanish quality with its lush green fields. After turning left up the small road after the 'Afriquia' petrol station and then left again after passing through Caid Ouriki, a small market town amidst abundant olive groves, we began to climb. The spectacular scenery of soaring peaks and plunging valleys prompted stunned silence. Arriving in a snow-clad Oukaïmeden prompted a few gasps though, not just because of the nature of the scenery but also because it was cold!

Oukaïmeden is essentially a ski resort with a couple of hotels, an army barracks and a few houses and shepherd's huts in what would be called a glen in Scotland – a lower lying valley between the higher peaks. A small stream has been dammed to create a small lake and the short turf immediately above it is covered with snow-melt rivulets. This makes for an interesting football pitch, which at the current time was only apparent at all as a result of one set of goal posts poking up through the snow.

The Dipper was not at home on the river but flushed from the side of the lake. After initially being elusive, it settled and we all managed a good view of this chunky brown bird with a white breast, taken to foraging underwater – by walking and swimming – for insect larvae. It was around then that the Atlas Horned Larks became obvious. These were in groups foraging for seeds on the edge of the snow-field which conveniently stopped at the side of the road. Atlas Larks are similar to the Temminck's Horned Lark of the desert but with smart yellow amidst the black face markings continuous with the 'horns'. The birds were clearly intent on feeding and approached to within a few feet of those willing to squat and wait a while. As usual, Martin was last to leave the birds and passing the rubbish dump, another small group of passerines fluttered at the disturbance. These were Crimson-winged Finches, to within a few feet! This solidly-built finch with pink-red wing bars is a notoriously difficult bird to locate throughout its range as it favours high altitude and often inaccessible places, and Oukaimeden is probably the best place in the Western Palearctic to find them. Even so, many birders having made the trek leave disappointed. We'd clearly been lucky and it seemed likely that the snow had worked in our favour, causing the birds to aggregate around the village and seek out foraging opportunities amongst humans and their leftovers. After rushing to the hotel to pass on the news, Martin was treated to the sight of more Crimson-winged Finches in the yard and along the guttering of 'Chez Ju Ju' and the immediate sense that they had already been enjoyed and were now 'old hat'. However, even old hats can have new tricks and on an individual walk after sorting out the rooms, Martin and Eleanor did watch a CW Finch fight off a Atlas Horned Lark just a couple of metres away. This really was the stuff of fantasy, and seeing Kong and Godzilla doing their stuff would have been no more surprising.



Dinner is always interesting at Chez Ju Ju, with the cosy wooden chalet feel to the dining room. However, it was unusually spectacular on this occasion as the lights went down half way through the meal. The waiters went into immediate action running hither and thither and manfully tackled the problem with a combination of candles and a generator, running cables across the dining room. Only in Morocco!

Day 10 – March 13th High Atlas to Taroudannt

Only the boys emerged at dawn to enjoy the sunrise over the snowy peaks and the subsequent brilliant sunshine. It was clearly going to be one of those mornings when you are acutely grateful for life. And just where were the women? A walk, or ice-skate for some of us carrying 'scopes, to the lake and back provided us with excellent views of Rock Sparrows, Black Redstarts, Great Tit, Meadow Pipit and Wren, and then both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs as they hit town like troublesome teenagers, after spending the night on a cold peak somewhere. The birds were soon exploring and socialising, the Alpines emitting their curious 'zizzing' call, with its strange electrical quality. An hour and a quarter passed all too quickly,

particularly as the queue for the eggs back at Chez Ju Ju was a long one. Now we knew what the women had been doing! One by one said eggs arrived and with each the pained expressions on the men's faces grew. A chatty American woman, who lived in Morocco and was here for the skiing, provided a welcome distraction for some. That is until she picked at Eleanor's scratched head, claiming that she thought there had been a piece of bread in it! What she'd intended to do with the bread even if it had been remained a mystery.



After packing and loading the van, most of us walked the short distance up the road to what seemed to be the edge of the world, with the high peaks stretching to the distance. Here, we were to look for Alpine Accentor. Unfortunately, the Accentor was not playing and despite the Barbary Ground Squirrels, abundant Black Redstarts and flushed Barbary Partridges, there was a slight tinge of disappointment. Still, we cheered ourselves with a group photo in what is a truly stunning landscape. Clearly, this is also a shared view as people were now arriving in their droves, presumably mostly from Marrakesh. All across the slopes happy people were sampling the snowy delights of skiing and sledging. Judging from their city attire most had not had the opportunity to try this sort of thing before.

Not only had the Accentor been missing, but we were also Ouzel-less, a bird Denis had been keen to see. This now became a bit of a joke on the bus, with every thrush-sized dark passerine we passed becoming an Ouzel. Denis assured us he'd keep a few birds to himself to which John uttered 'Thank God'. Now we couldn't see the Ouzels for laughing.

The journey now took on the nature of a vegetation survey as we progressed from the deciduous belt with Walnut, through Holm Oak with an understorey of *Pistachio lenticus* (not the nut-bearing one) to Pine. Near the 188 km marker to Taroudannt, we stopped for lunch alongside the Réserve d'Amassine for Cuvier's (Edmi) Gazelle *Gazella cuvieri* and Barbary Sheep *Ammotragus lervia*. Both species have become rare, if not even extinct in the wild as a result of hunting and habitat destruction. Here, since 1996, both species had been re-introduced into large enclosures in an apparent precursor to their attempted restoration. Although the surrounding slopes were scanned no animals were on view. Plenty of animal had found its way into the packed lunch from Chez Ju Ju though, with a veritable flock of chickens in a field of salad vegetables.

After passing through Asni, the road began to ascend and become more tortuous with breathtaking views around every corner. The colours of the rocks ranged from brick red to green-grey, offset by the bright green of the lush valley floor associated with the river. Every now and then, small villages that had been carved into the hillsides were evident. These small

pieces of habitation did not prepare us for astonishing power and enormous form of the 12th Century Tin Mal mosque built by the Almohads in honour of Mohammed Ibn Tumart, the dynasty's founding father and spiritual inspiration (so it says in the *Rough Guide*).

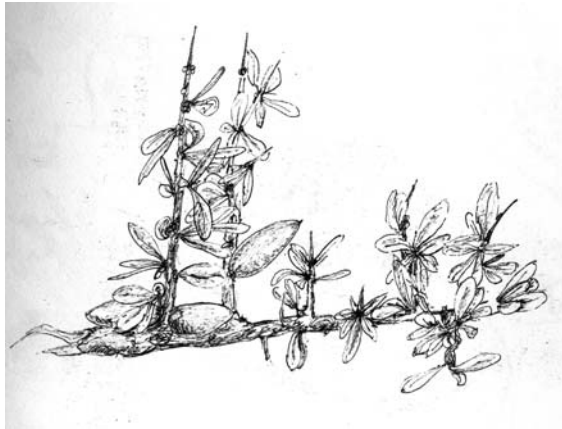
We stopped awhile at our old friend of Idni and Adrian's tape quickly brought forth a pair of Levillant's Green Woodpeckers. A Great Spotted Woodpecker was also where it always seems to be in the small belt of large deciduous trees on the roadside overlooking the small terraces. This is not surprising as these trees are at their altitude limit here, with Holm Oak and Juniper dominating the vegetation thereafter. Close to the summit of the pass itself the road narrows considerably with frequent blind corners. Inevitably, one of these hid a large truck although Mustapha was always in control Lauren and Sue screamed at the prospect of a collision. In truth, the reputation of the Tizi-n-Test pass road as the most dangerous in Africa is seated in the past as recent extensive road widening making it two-way over most of its length accompanied by crash barriers on virtually all bends, has effectively tamed the beast. Screaming over, Adrian and Martin took delight in recounting stories of when the road really was worth the title.

In further remembrance of past glories Martin led a brief trip up the red slopes under the oaks at the souvenir shop at the pass itself in search of the delicate *Narcissus waiteri*; but without success. A couple of kms later another souvenir shop beckoned, this time the infamous axle-less truck embedded into the rock, which is stuffed full of amethyst and other rocks, raw and polished. This 'shop' overlooks the simply stupendous view to the



flat plain of the Souss valley, some 40 km away. On this occasion, purchases were limited to mint tea with some Moroccan biscuits and the use of the lovely toilets in the associated restaurant. For herp fans, the rocks and buildings here house a multitude of geckos and after stalking a few and taking some photos it was confirmed that of the two endemic Atlas Geckos at least *Quedenfeldtia moerens* was present.

The contrast between this arid southern side of the Atlas compared to the lush green northern side is marked, and once the Holm Oaks had petered out, *Lygos* spp. and Dwarf Fan Palm *Chamaerops humilis* dominated the slopes. However, after descending a few hundred metres, the first Argan *Argania spinosa*, an endemic to a limited part of North-West Africa, began to appear, and by the time we reached the plain itself, we were in the Argan forest. Well, to call it forest is a bit of a misnomer, as this is really savannah with widely spaced trees competing for the available water. In keeping with the need to preserve H₂O, only up to 40% of the tree is actually above ground and whilst generally evergreen, individual trees will shed their leaves in times of hardship. Even though the tree is the cornerstone of this ecosystem and effectively the tree of all life supporting all the native flora and fauna in one way or another and providing at least 52 services to humans, it has suffered horribly at human hands. Vast tracts of forest have been degraded with the trees reduced to so-called green boulders by goat grazing and even lost altogether. In fact, it is quite possible that no pristine Argan is left in the Souss Valley. The pristine stuff is reputed to have a spiny understorey of *Zizyphus lotus*, home to a wealth of invertebrates and lizards, the primary consumers that support the secondary consumers, the birds that we were particularly interested in.



We stopped at some large trees to gaze upon one of their main crops, the fruits containing the nuts from which oil is painstakingly gathered and ultimately used in a range of products from foodstuffs to face cream (ask Yves Rocher). In the background, the first Bee-eaters were passing through on migration. Continuing to Taroudannt, it became obvious how much more Argan had been lost in even in the last couple of years, with large French and Spanish-owned orangeries dominating the landscape either side of the road. In the

very recent past, Tawny Eagle and Dark Chanting Goshawk had been seen in the vicinity of Ouled Berhil. There seemed zero chance of that now.

As always the walled city of Taroudannt was bustling and vibrant as Mustapha navigated the narrow streets filled with all forms of transport and all age groups from women in traditional head-to-foot flowing robes to young men in Arsenal shirts. At CECU (Centre for Education and Environment), the greeting from Said, Latifa, Fatima, Latifa II, new bloke and the owner Jane, was warm, and we were shown to our rooms inside this townhouse, where we were soon to enjoy the absolute culinary delights prepared by Fatima and Latifa II.

Day 11 – March 14th The Souss Valley: Freija & Aoulouz Gorge

After a more leisurely start and a hearty varied breakfast we left at 8.45 am. However, we didn't have to go far to encounter birds. Just on the edge of town near the dry wadi of the Souss over 300 White Storks were gathered with around 20 Black Kites in what has unfortunately become a subsidiary rubbish tip. The sight of so many large birds clearly affected Martin who pointed out another flock of birds coming in, which turned out to be a single White Stork! Fortunately, the presence of two beautiful Little Owls which had initially attracted attention on a telegraph pole at the side of the road, before flying into one of the *Nicotinia* (tobacco plant) saplings, meant that everyone carried on concentrating on the birds rather than give Martin a hard time. Moreover, like Alpine Accentor and Ring Ouzel, Little Owl had been talked-up, and rather than turning into an urban myth, had now become welcome reality.

The journey continued to Freija where we were to walk through some of the agricultural landscape. It was clearly spring as a pair of noisily mating Kestrels were followed by a pair of mating Black-shouldered Kites, something probably not seen by many people. The theme was continued by a pair of Spectacled Warblers building a nest, something also being undertaken by a female Blackbird. The low hedges of cut branches of *Zizyphus*, *Launaea arborescens* and Argan are simply wonderful for warblers and several of a variety of species were popping in and out. The flowers were also abundant and varied with *Fagonia cretica*, a nice toadflax *Linaria* spp. the bright yellow daisy *Cladanthus arabicus* and the lovely *Chrysanthemum carinatum* with its ring of purple-brown around the middle of the petals. Two strange plants were also on display: Joint Pine *Ephedra fragilis*, from which the aspirin drug ephedrine is derived, was noted scrambling over the Argan, with the curious withered appearance of the parasitic Large Dodder *Cuscuta europaea* on a variety of other shrubs.

Said, who was with us for the day, then did what he does best and found a Stone Curlew. This was followed by a series of delightful Hoopoes foraging and performing beautifully on the ground, Bee-eaters in flight, a Barbary Partridge on a wall seen by Denis, a very brief view of a Tchagra in a bush followed by a gang of Fulvous Babblers or ‘burbblers’ as Alice called them continuing the joke from the previous day. A Southern Grey Shrike then appeared at close quarters. An incredible sight was what looked like the head of a male Cirl Bunting speared on a thorn in the low hedge. This was likely to be part of the larder of the territory holding shrike. It’s incredible how a relatively small bird with no gripping talons can manage to catch and overpower birds up to 2/3rds its own size as well as lizards and mammals.

A loud call then had us all looking up as a large bird with a long tail tail flew to a bush. The spangled plumage and crest then became obvious – A Great Spotted Cuckoo! Even the Hoopoes became yesterdays news as another appeared, along with the target of the Cuckoos, a pair of Magpies, the typical host



of these nest parasites. Both Cuckoos flew back to the ground and hopped about taking furry caterpillars, typically avoided by other bird species. Martin crawled close and managed a couple of pictures, as well as picking up a tick that was to appear at lunch a few minutes later.

Lunch itself was a splendid affair with the previous nights excellent pastita as well as a wealth of bread, eggs, cheese and salad stuffs. At 1.20 pm we set off for Auoulouz, on what was to become a remarkable journey. Although there had been a further depressing reduction in the Argan since Martin at least had last been in the area, the bird life, especially that of raptors was to prove exceptional.

This started with an unexpected Bonelli’s Eagle overhead in what is largely unsuitable territory; these birds preferring spectacular mountainous outcrops and gorges not flat featureless plains. Denis then yelled out and we reversed to the grey and white bird atop an Argan some way off. This proved to be a Black-shouldered Kite and not what would have been the find of the trip, if not the decade; Dark Chanting Goshawk, which must now be desperately close to extinction if not actually already extinct in Morocco. A male Montagu’s Harrier flew past swiftly followed by a lovely *erlangeri* Lanner overhead. Two female Montagu’s Harriers then floated by in what was likely to be a passage movement. After an area with no trees at all, a few scattered trees came into view as did two more male Montagu’s Harriers! One of which mobbed another Lanner perched in one of the trees. Two more larger raptors could not be identified at distance although after initial confusion, we did manage to identify the Coursers against the sky. A Long-legged Buzzard in a tree amazingly flew across in front of us and snatched up a black plastic bag partly entangled in a spiky twig. After ‘killing’ it in the top of a tree, the Buzzard became disturbed by our presence and took off. Soon after a pale Booted Eagle created palpitations as it initially looked like a Tawny Eagle, but given a run of raptors like the one we were on, anything was possible. A pair of chasing Long-legged Buzzards completed our haul as we reached the gorge at 2.45 pm, just a little late!

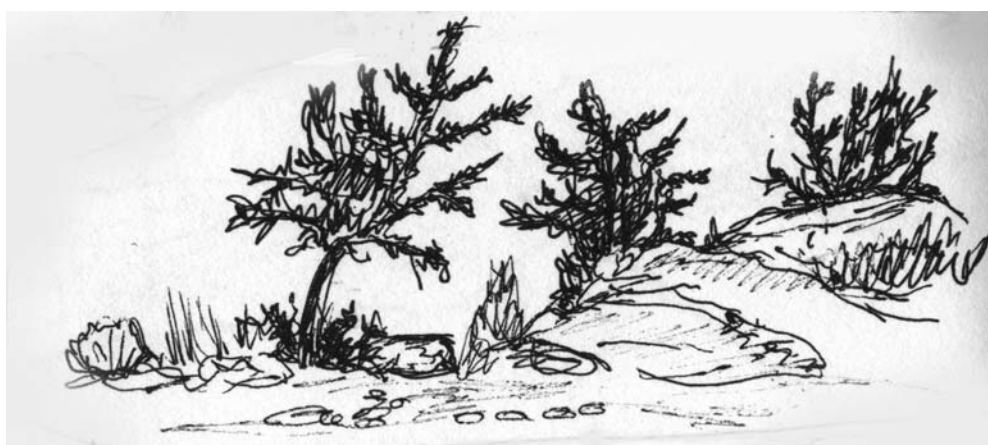
Crossing the bridge provides a fine view of the river both up and downstream and allows some of the attendant fauna and flora to be seen more easily than is possible from a flatter angle in the valley floor or even along the path on the western side of the gorge. This applies to the fish in particular and for the fish time around a dozen Pumpkinseed *Lepomis gibbosus*,

a Centrarchid sunfish from the US were identified amongst the probably native, but unidentified Cyprinid species. One of Europe and North Africa's most colourful birds, a Kingfisher was in attendance and provided a terrific view in the scopes. Lauren then saw a Crake swim across the main channel downstream of the bridge. This prompted full attention and a lovely Spotted Crake was identified. But wasn't that another? And a third, even a fourth? And what of the small bird with tan shoulder and back stripes? The books were quickly out to confirm its identity as a female Little Crake. All of these birds were turning over the algal mats in the shallow water and picking off the invertebrates that came to light. Eventually, we managed to get off the bridge and begin to walk into the gorge proper.

A Squacco Heron alongside the river was a bit of a surprise, as was the second. In flight this species looks rather white, but when it lands looks rather greenish brown, the scapulars and back having the colour, whilst it's the primaries and secondaries that are white. As we were watching the herons, a stooping raptor whistled over our heads. Whatever it was aiming at it missed, and only as it banked upward did we realise just how big it was and that it wasn't a falcon but a Booted Eagle. This landed in a tree directly above us at the top of the cliff, where it's dark phase partner was waiting near one of the old Bald Ibis nests which it looked like they'd taken over.

Said then found a *brookei* Peregrine, that of pinkish hues on the heavily marked breast and a full dark hood, on the cliff on the opposite side of the gorge. How he'd found this was a bit of a mystery as the bird was sitting away from the streaks of whitewash, which are often the clue to regular roosts of nests of all sorts of birds, but particularly raptors. A Long-legged Buzzard cruised overhead trailing a lizard in its talons. The next reptile seen, a rather large Stripe-necked Terrapin *Mauremys caspica*, was rather less vulnerable to predation, and was quite relaxed sitting on top of a rock in one of the pools on the river.

As we walked up the gorge, a large number of dots in the sky over the cliff line transformed themselves into birds: around 200 Black Kites with a single male Montagu's Harrier amongst them. The birds 'kettled', looking for a thermal before gliding off. It was now time for us to do the same, the circuit being completed by taking the trail across the valley floor, crossing the channels, and ultimately through the village. As we did this, a surprise pair of Ruddy Shelduck flew downstream. As we approached the village, we realised that one of the advance party led by Said that had penetrated a little further into the gorge, was missing. We needn't have worried about Lauren of course as there she was being led into the village on the back of a donkey, with a distinctly regal air (Lauren that is, not the donkey).



We left at 5.30pm on the 78 km journey back to Taroudannt. Argan trees were conspicuous by their absence from the 64 km marker and only at just 18 km from Taroudannt were some trees present. These became more dense, somewhat ironically, in association with agricultural

systems, as cereal crops such as barley are sown under Argan, the trees offering some shelter from sun and wind and more importantly help prevent the soil from being blown away as well as retaining soil moisture. The presence of cereal crops also ensures that the trees cannot be ravaged by grazing goats. By the next village, about 5 km away and around 10 km from Taroudannt Argan was again absent. It is really hard to believe now that only about 40 years ago could Gazelles be found <50 km from Taroudannt and that Dark Chanting Goshawks and Tawny Eagles could be readily seen. A scientific paper published in the conservation journal *Oryx* in the 1990s titled 'SOS Argan' outlined the extent of habitat loss by that time. Today, a similar paper would be more accurately titled 'Argan, RIP'.

Day 12 – March 15th The Souss Valley: Tioute & the Souk

One of the beauties of staying at CECU is the rooftop in early morning, where a range of birds may be seen. This includes the localised Little Swift with its square tail and white-rump and slower fluttering flight, amongst abundant Pallid Swifts, Swallows, House Martins and the occasional Red-rumped Swallow. A roost of Cattle Egrets in the town leads to outward traffic at dawn and White Storks and Black Kites can be seen heading to the dump on the edge of town. After all this, is the luxury of a splendid cooked breakfast.

It was bright and sunny as we set off at 08.30 am for Tioute. Two male Marsh Harriers provided early interest. We then stopped amongst the cultivated fields to try for Zitting Cisticola, so called as it 'zits' endlessly in bouncing flight, whilst appearing to be attached to a piece of elastic. In typical Moroccan fashion, the guy working the fields came over for a chat and took great delight in shaking us all by the hand in turn. As he continued to chat to Said, a ZC finally obliged and paused for more than half a second, displaying its alternative (and better) name of Fan-tailed Warbler. A large eagle in the far distance attracted some interest but was always too far to identify properly although Short-toed Eagle was the most likely candidate.

Further along the road was a fenced area, which demonstrated just what Argan could become when protected, as a million Mayweeds *Chamaemelum* spp. stretched for the sun. On the opposite side of the road a rather poor wheat crop looked uncomfortable in land suffering from gully erosion beneath a few sparse trees crop. We learned from Said that the protected land was 'owned' by a rich man who'd struck a deal with the forestry authorities to fence the land, which is a difficult concept in a system that allows common access to graziers and their animals. The man also seemed to have links with the Argan co-operative, which we then visited. Here, women work together to exploit the Argan fruits in a sustainable way, painstakingly stripping the nuts from cases, utilising each part of the nut in turn and ultimately collecting oil. This really is hard, skilled work but the women make light of it in lively chatter, although this largely stopped whilst we were present and many veils were raised as cameras were produced. Inside the shop, we sampled the various projects and quite a few purchases were made.

We finally reached Tioute palmery at 11am and began walking through what is a tremendous habitat for flora and fauna offering water and shelter, even though much of the land is comprised of small terraces subject to production of crops, especially *alfalfa*. Unusually, there was no flowing water in the concrete channels criss-crossing the area and the alfalfa was generally sparse, although the yellow crucifer *Diplotaxis* sp. was in abundant flower and the date palms and trees such as Carob *Ceratonia siliqua* looked tremendous. Insect life was on the wing in the form of many Moroccan Orange Tips and the evidence of a previous 'plague' of Locusts was everywhere in the form of dismembered bodies scattered on the ground and pinned on thorns and the spiny tips of palm leaves. Although birding started well with a confiding male Moussier's Redstart, the diversity was to prove to be unusually low and

Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs, Sardinian Warblers, Bulbuls and sparrows were almost completely dominant. It proved quite a job to find a Willow Warbler and a Subalpine Warbler.

Said picked up a large female Spur-thighed Tortoise, with its collection of ticks especially around its feet. This prompted a 'tick pick', something which Lauren seemed particularly keen on. Three small male tortoises, likely on the trail of the female, quickly followed. Hollow knocking of a male on the shell of a larger female guided Martin to numbers seven and eight of these reptiles in a few minutes. Sadly for this male, the female wasn't interested and with her longer legs, she simply walked away, leaving him trailing in her wake.



More herps were to follow in the form of a magnificent Moroccan Toad *Bufo mauritanicus* found by Adrian, a nice *Tarentola* sp. gecko (probably *mauritanicus*) on a building and a couple of North African Green Frogs *Rana saharica* in the remnants of the water in the concrete irrigation channels, as we headed back for lunch. The owner of the café on site was happy to strike a deal as we bought drinks to add to the picnic we'd brought with us.

We took the 'old' road back to Taroudannt with the excitement of driving across the dry wadi of the Souss at Freija looking back at the kasbah on the hill. We were back at the centre by 2.30pm and here we divided into two groups. The souk group planned to 'shop till they dropped', whilst Mustapha whisked Martin and John back into the wilderness. In fact, it was debatable who had the wildest time as a bit of confusion (an 'I thought that was in dirhams not dollars' moment) after some intensive bargaining in the carpet shop nearly led to the deal of the century being lost. But all's well that ends well and numerous carpets and other trinkets were to find their way back to the centre to be stashed in ever bulging suitcases.

Meanwhile out in the bush, a Moroccan, a Canadian and an Englishman were looking for Argan in the vicinity of Tafinegoult, rumoured to have some of the best Argan left. Whilst the trees were certainly old, there was still evidence of grazing despite the rocky landscape with very few thin grasses. Despite this, the birds were more numerous than in any other Argan we'd encountered and within a few minutes of leaving the bus we'd seen Great Spotted Cuckoo attending Magpies, lots of shrikes, larks and Black-eared Wheatears. A bit of rock turning led to the discovery of millipedes and an incredibly large centipede of 15 cm or more. What appeared to be the sound of an owl led to us wandering quite a way, discovering a male Orphean Warbler in the process with Mustapha eventually seeing Stone Curlews and Cream-coloured Courser, as well as pointing out a huge male Agama in a tree. After a careful stalk, Martin was able to get within a few feet of it. It was such a pleasure being at large in the Argan 'forest' that we were inevitably slightly late for dinner (7.15pm). This was a simply fantastic chicken dish amongst the usual wealth of salad stuffs.

No rest on a full belly tonight though as soon as the last spoonful of dessert was polished off, we were in the bus again heading for the far side of the wadi of the Souss a couple of kms from town. This was all except Eleanor who'd had a fast glass of wine too many and was in

no fit state! Bouncing along the small track, we were suddenly confronted by a man, who was to become Abdul, pushing a Mercedes. What he was doing there was anybody's guess (mind you he'd have got a shock if he'd asked us what we were doing!). But his prayers had clearly been answered and he stared open-mouthed at his fortune as the four guys piled from the bus and pushed the Mercedes at speed down the rocky track until the clutch engaged and the engine leapt into life. Waving wildly in gratitude our mate careered off into the night, no doubt off to tell his friends and family that Allah in his wisdom had sent a bunch of tourists in a white van to rescue him.

After parking the van, we walked along the track behind Adrian who'd produced the biggest torch known to science. Martin's foot long four D battery halogen-bulbed truncheon of a torch looked positively puny in comparison. After ten minutes, Adrian spotted eye-shine from the track.

Martin at least could see nothing, which we realised after a few minutes was because one had to be in at the right height and direct line of the torch. Once Adrian's beast was turned off, the rest of us could see and the



telescope that Martin had brought along was directed at the eye-shine, revealing a beautiful Red-necked Nightjar. In fact, there were two birds a little distance apart. Fixing one bird with a torch allowed us to approach to within three metres, every intricate plumage detail being readily visible through binoculars. Job done, there seemed no reason to continue and despite Martin's suggestions of looking for rats and other rodents, there were surprisingly no takers, so Mustapha ferried us back to the centre for a nightcap.

Day 13 – March 16th Tamri, Cape Rhir and the Souss estuary

By 08.45 am we'd said our sad farewells to Taroudannt and particularly the staff at the centre and were heading west to the Atlantic coast. Not even a large raptor on a post could distract us. For some time the Argan was almost non-existent and then as we neared the outskirts of Agadir there was a relatively good chunk although the abundance of Asphodels showed this to be overgrazed, as Asphodels are generally unpalatable and will dominate where other herbs, forbs and grasses are consumed.

A toilet stop near the beach led to an impromptu telescope session, although Lauren managed to find a McDonald's, thus missing the Gannets and Arctic Skua, or should I say Parasitic Jaeger? Moving on again, the massive sardine fleet drew a few gasps of surprise, as did the industrial hinterland of perhaps Morocco's most modern city, with its large cement works. Then suddenly we hit the impossible smoothness of the road alongside the Saudi Princes pad with its lush watered lawns, palm trees on the golf and residential complex all behind a wall protected by the latest security. Perhaps tired of the scruffy road outside his home, it was rumoured that the Prince had paid for several kms of the very best tarmac gang that Morocco could muster.

Just beyond this, a flurry of pipe-laying indicated that further development along the coast was in progress. This was threatening to displace RV land. To explain, this is a flat dune typically occupied by motor homes from all corners of Europe especially Germany and Scandinavia. Neither Adrian nor Martin has ever seen it empty, testament to the growing popularity of Morocco and the links between North Africa and mainland Europe.

A promising gull roost on one of the accessible long sandy beaches caused us to stop. The gulls proved to be Lesser Black-backed, with a few Audouin's Gulls (around ten), one with a leg ring, and two Sandwich Terns. A second roost a little further along on a different beach had a slightly different composition. Although 100's of Lesser Black-backed Gulls were again the dominant species, a large number of Yellow-legged Gulls, especially first-winter birds were also present, supported by 18 Audouin's Gulls of various stages including a few adults and a scarce bird in Morocco, a first-winter Great Black-backed Gull.

Depressingly, we were still running alongside pipe-laying activity and at the cliff alongside Tamri, this looked for all the world as though it was prepared to actually cross the lagoon. In the short term at least parts of the cactoid *Euphorbia* heath with its flowering Yellow Sea Aster *Astericus maritimus* and Sea Heath *Frankenia laevis* had been destroyed.

The lagoon itself was largely devoid of bird-life with just four Coots and one Moroccan race Cormorant obvious, so we decided to drive further along the coast in our quest for Bald Ibis. A few kms down the road opposite the spectacular cliff-side bare sand dune we stopped. Access is restricted to the sea cliffs here, although a 4x4 had made its way down a track and a number of people and a dog were messing about on the dune itself. Where were the wardens when they were needed? We carefully crossed the first part of the roadside dune, which was in spectacular flower with the Sea Stock *Matthiola sinuate*, *Ononis*, a couple of *Reseda* sp., *Linaria* sp. and *Calendula arvensis*.



Unfortunately, in our haste to get closer to a couple of Ibis that had appeared, with a further five on the dune itself, we strayed into an arable crop and a woman working the crop nearby shouted to warn us. Not wishing to trespass in the manner of the other obviously western tourists, we retreated. On the other side of the road on one of the tracks made by local people, we had lunch amongst the flowers. From here, we could see a number of Ibis flying south and so after lunch, we made our way back to Tamri, stopping for a large falcon which turned out to be a juvenile Lanner, most likely a female, as it absolutely dwarfed the kestrel that was mobbing it.

Back at Tamri at 2.15pm we were joined by a couple of young guys no doubt fascinated by our interest in the tatty looking black birds on the spit that covers the mouth of the lagoon apart from at the highest tides. The initial count of these Ibis was 53, around 25% of the world population! A further 6 and a lone individual also flew past. As there seemed little to no chance of disturbing the birds, we moved forwards using the tamarisk as cover until we had a clear view, especially through the telescopes. It is always hard to take in that you're looking at a sizeable proportion of the world's population of any species, perhaps especially one in a disturbed environment. The latter also makes it difficult to grasp how far this species has fallen in few hundred years, as it used to be widespread and common to as far north as Vienna! The question of why it has hung on here and perished elsewhere is pertinent to its future survival. Fortunately, there is now more hope than in the last fifty years with an upturn in population in Morocco through careful management (despite the lack of wardens seen earlier!), a new, albeit tiny population in Syria and plans to reintroduce the species in Spain at Barbate (a site well known to Martin).

Moving further down the coast we stopped for the spectacular floral display, tip-toeing amongst the brilliant yellow *Astericus* and purple *Frankenia*. The Brown Bluebell *Dipcadi serotinum* was also in evidence here. At the small settlement around the lighthouse at Cape Rhir, it was initially confusing as to which way to head and we seemed in danger of wandering into someone's vegetable patch, but in typical fashion the people emerging from the houses were more than welcoming and waved us onwards to the sea. We were adopted by two small girls, who had clearly not been to school, as they knew no French or even Arabic and thus only spoke Berber. However, after they'd taken great interest in us and the Gannets, Gulls (including Audouin's), a Skua sp. and 2 Whimbrel we'd encountered in our short (30 mins) sea-watch from the rocky headland; they were suitably kitted out with pens and paper as well as bread to share at the family meal.



After leaving Cape Rhir, after 50 minutes we were at the Oued Souss on the edge of Agadir. The estuary owes much of its productivity to the rather smelly legacy of the city, although this was in danger of crossing the threshold between productive and toxic. A new sewage works is now in place behind a new wall and so there is a chance that the estuary will retain its incredible diversity of birds. Unfortunately, it was high tide and with little mud exposed there were relatively few birds, although the abundance of Grey Herons, a number of Ruff (both the male Ruffs and the female Reeves) and a feeding party of Eurasian Spoonbills were notable features. Curious Stone Curlews, in the thick-knee family of waders, emerged from the tamarisk on the far side of the Oued like so many small Moroccan boys at the prospect of a conversation.

As we were due to re-visit the Souss again in a couple of days, there was little point in trying too hard now, so we retired for the evening to the French-run Hotel Pergola. Although next to the main road, the little walled garden of this small hotel offers sanctuary and the chance to enjoy a cold beer before a meal accompanied by a salad trolley unrivalled anywhere [the guides have been] in Morocco, served by very friendly staff.

Day 14 – March 17th Oued Massa

After a bit of negotiation over the eggs to supplement the breakfast of bread and jam, we were on our way by 7.15am. The sun was a huge orange orb in the misty sky as we reached the outskirts of Agadir where the busy markets were in full swing, with truck and van loads of fruit and vegetables queuing for a place. The men with the hoods of their thick jellaba's



pulled up against the cold, hurried hither and thither. As we drove the fog thickened although by the time we reached the Massa turn by 8.15am it had thinned a little and we could enjoy a pair of Little Owls and a family of four Barbary Squirrels in the walls around a small plantation. After driving through the village to its far left corner, we emerged onto the edge of the terraced fields in the floodplain of the Oued Massa. The fields, bushes, patches of wetland vegetation and the trees were simply alive with birds, especially warblers. Quail called incessantly but remained invisible although the Laughing Doves at least could at least be seen. Walking down the sandy track to the river occupied by all forms of transport, we only managed about 200 m in just over an

hour as we attempted to take in the abundant bird life. Most of this we'd seen before, apart from the Tree Pipits and Reed Warblers, but not in such quantity.

Afraid we'd miss out on other wonders, we moved on a little, stopping on the road where it overlooked a few small pools, including the local swimming pool, above which Plain Martins, another species only found in Morocco in the Western Palearctic, hawked insects. Luck was truly with us as two Egyptian Mongooses (geese?) moved along the clay edge of a small artificial pool just a few metres away. Martin and Denis moved closer in order to grab a few photos of them once everybody had got a good look, but they'd disappeared. The Squacco Heron which was also disturbed, simply made itself obvious though, as it flew no more than a few metres alongside a Snipe, which until that point had been invisible.

After negotiating the many alleys through the village in the bus, we got to the causeway across the river. Normally a terrific place to see a wealth of birds, it was strangely quiet, perhaps something to do with the high water levels. Still, the terrapins, a range of warblers, Little Grebes and Coots were of interest, although the most fascinating thing overall was a plant – an amazing little stand of the parasitic *Cynomorium coccineum*, issuing from the ground. In size, structure and texture these were like upright dog faeces, until a close look showed they had tiny flowering structures.

A couple of kilometres downstream of the village the main track runs alongside a cliff topped with splendid cactoid euphorbia heath with a terrific view of the ever broadening river and the agricultural hinterland on its far side. Unfortunately, the male Little Bittern that flew along the river became difficult and then impossible to see after it hit the reeds on the far side.

The Cetti's Warbler on the near side and just a few metres away proved just as elusive for most but did offer good, if brief, views to some. Fortunately, the insects were a little more co-operative with Greenish Black-Tip and Small Copper butterflies and Lesser Emperor Dragonflies all seen.

At the car park where the National Park proper begins, Adrian and Martin particularly were surprised at the lack of ducks on the river, again with the prospect of the abnormally high water levels having some influence. Just before lunch however, a pair of Tchagras (Black-



crowned Bush Shrikes) seemed to feel sorry for us and put on an astonishing show with both birds singing, including in slow display flight with the bird arching its head upwards, and territorial shenanigans with at least one other Tchagra. After lunch, we began the walk to the sea and were immediately touched by the floral display, with each bend in the track providing yet another variation on a theme of the half or dozen or so

species, of which *Chrysanthemum carinatum* is perhaps the most charismatic, against a canvas of the pink Stork's-bill *Erodium* spp. The sight of the *Acacia* spp. bushes adorned with their golden yellow ball-like flowers was also pretty spectacular.

Birds were conspicuous by their absence, apart from the 100 or so Glossy Ibis at rest and preening in the skeletal remains of drowned bushes as well as in the water itself. They were completely unperturbed by the large terrapins sharing both the water and lower branches. At the mouth of the Massa, which is closed from the sea at all but the highest tides by a sand bar, a roost of gulls often forms. Today, this was composed of the usual suspects of Lesser Black-backed, some Yellow-legged and a few Audouins, the latter including a leucistic individual. Unfortunately, we'd missed the Bald Ibis that frequent this part of the coast and like to perch and rest on the top of beach-front hotel in the afternoons. But at least we could see their droppings! Despite the relative lack of birds for Massa, the walk to the beach had taken us around two hours. We were determined to make better time on the way back, especially after the park ranger offered to show us the missing ducks on another part of the Massa system.



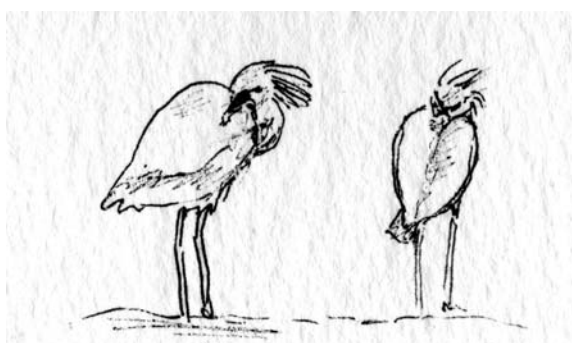
After just 45 minutes we found ourselves chasing a man on a moped, but with a growing doubt that we were chasing the right man. Certainly, nobody had noticed our man had a helmet, a green jacket or stuff in the basket on the front of the moped. With visions of following someone into the drive of a house we doggedly pursued the moped man, passing a number of Little Owls on the stone walls, one of which bolted into a hole low in a pile of boulders. Back into Massa we went, turning right past the post office, past the derelict building and the football pitch on the right. Moped man bore left for Oued Amoedi and then just as it seemed we were set for a bumpy ride across a series of ruts, he stopped and revealed we'd followed the right man after all. Just in front now was a curving lagoon of freshwater fringed with reeds and *Typha* (cattail). Walking to the left along the bank gave us a reasonable view of the lagoon and its attendant ducks and Coots. Whilst there were few individuals, a range of duck species were represented including Shovelers, our first Wigeon (pair), Gadwall (several pairs) Tufted Duck and the *piece de resistance*, two male and one female Garganey. A Squacco Heron in a bush added yet more interest.

After leaving our ranger friend, we headed back through town, taking a left turn on the main street and onto the old road. Just as we'd left town the day's birding came to a nice close just as the light began to fail at 6.15pm with at least eight coursers combing the rocky fields. Content, we settled back for the 55 minute journey back to the hotel.

Day 15 – March 18th Oued Souss

Our final full day saw us take a bit of lie-in and we didn't leave until 8.15 am, But then, it does take only 5 mins journey time from the Hotel Pergola to the Souss. Driving onto the track to the barrier, which is down and guarded when the King is in town, we had no time to wait for a good bird, as two Barbary Partridges strolled in front of the van. One panicked and cut back in the undergrowth whilst the other emerged onto a low branch on the other side of the road calling its mate, before eventually crossing back the way it had come. What a terrific view of a bird that's so often hard to see well.

After a brief chat with the young guard and views of Green Sandpipers and Woodpigeon drinking from the concrete lined channel we cut through the low scrubby saltmarsh to the sandy edge of the Souss and began to walk to the sea. The waders on the edge of the low-tide channel were being harassed by a passing Osprey and kept taking flight, but fortunately there were plenty of others to see in the number of small pools. These included Curlew Sandpiper and Knot amongst the common Dunlin. The terns were also quick to settle after being disturbed and the rosy flush on several had us thinking of Roseate, but in fact there was no mistaking the yellow tipped black bills and shaggy caps of Sandwich Terns. However, a couple with tidy, glossy caps and short, thick bills were different. These were Gull-billed Terns, another less common species. To complete the scene, the Flamingos looked simply stunning as they paraded in the shallows and if anything even more amazing in flight, their equally long necks and legs creating a push-me-pull-you impression and initial difficulty in working out which way they were flying.



The people nearby were behaving a little strangely, with one taking off his strides (trousers) to cross a short stretch of very shallow water and another shiftily hiding in the bushes on the far side of the Souss. He seemed to be in some sort of trouble with the guards and was

attempting to keep a low profile, something not helped by his radiant white cap! However, he seemed to get away with whatever he was trying to get away with and finally reassured he continued on his way seawards. We were then approached by a guy with a camel offering anyone a ride, which we declined, and then by a guy with a bike and two buckets filled with bottles of water. It turned out he was rather well educated, but hadn't been able to get a job, so supported his family by selling water. It was clear that the Evian bottles were re-filled, but it seemed to be from a safe source, so he had some takers from the group.

Rather sadly, we then began to find drowned tortoises of two sizes, possibly two age groups, in the flotsam, illustrating the tide had recently been very high and had probably flooded the saltmarsh. At the mouth of the Souss itself, which unlike Massa, is open to the sea, there was a large gull roost, comprised rather typically of mostly Lesser Black-backed Gulls, although 8 Audouin's were also present. It was now very warm and it was hazy at sea reducing our chances of any fly-past seabirds, so we began the walk back to the van.

Crossing the saltmarsh, we enjoyed close-ups of several Stone Curlews and then Denis flushed a young Hare. The leveret froze after running a few metres and allowed close approach. Every hair (pardon the pun) could be seen. Dragonflies were abundant now, hawking across the marsh and along the small channels. The latter were to prove a little bit of an obstacle and we had to re-trace our steps on occasion and do a bit of dyke (eastern English word for small, water-filled channel) jumping to get to the van where Mustapha was waiting.

Although we sampled the next couple of stops, where there are stone viewpoints, we'd seen the best already, with only the plethora of Grey Herons and a few Ruff offering something new. A boy who'd arranged himself in a makeshift shelter near one of them reminded us that this was not birding paradise for everybody, especially now that it was really hot. The old expression of only mad dogs and Englishmen being out in the midday sun came to mind as we sought the shade of some *Eucalyptus* trees to have lunch. Mustapha again produced some beautiful home-made biscuits made by his wife.

Back at the hotel again by 1 pm we split into two parties; Adrian and the bulk of the ladies went off to sample retail Agadir, whilst Mustapha took Martin, Eleanor, Denis and John on another jaunt to Massa. This time, the upstream part of the Oued itself where it is crossed by the main coast road was the target. After just over an hour we were there. Unusually, herds of sheep and goats were being ushered this way and that across the channel, which is composed of a series of pools interspersed by areas of river gravels downstream of the road bridge, the flows being held back behind the low concrete dam upstream of the bridge. Even with grazing, the poolside vegetation was lush and the reed-bed occupying half the channel upstream of the dam, was if anything, thicker than ever. So thick in fact there was no view through and the singing Reed and Great Reed Warblers remained out of sight. The Moroccan race White Wagtail *subpersonata*, which looks set to become a new species in the future, was more obliging by walking along the dam wall and there also some nice frogs, terrapins, and a super *Agama* in a low bush allowed close approach.

The pools downstream produced a number of Black-winged Stilts, a flock of Greenshank, Coots, Moorhens and several Little Ringed Plovers on the gravel islands and spits. A pair of Tchagras used the bushes surrounding the pools and a Lesser Kestrel brought in prey to a likely nest under the bridge supports. A final tour around led to us being mesmerised by the behaviour of a passing sheep and goat flock. We all understood how counting sheep to get to sleep works after that experience!

The area we'd covered is terrific for drinking sandgrouse, but we were just too early in the day for that, so we drove to an area near the Youssef Ben-Tachfine Barrage known to Mustapha and Martin, where Sandgrouse may be seen foraging/resting. The signs seemed good as we found a really unlikely Ruddy Shelduck on a small roadside pool on the way.

However, we were to be disappointed as after thoroughly scanning the open landscape adjacent to a concrete channel, we were still grouse-less. We had to settle for super views of a pair of Tawny Pipits as well as Short-toed Larks, Northern Wheatear and an amazing chocolate brown male *Agama* with a bright yellow head, on the top of a large mound.

We left at 4.30pm and after 1 hour and 15 mins we were back at the Pergola. All in all it was good to finish in the manner to which we'd become accustomed - driving with Mustapha. After another hearty meal, we discussed our experiences of east and west, of republic and monarchy. For those who had visited Morocco a number of times it was clear that the King was intent on doing his absolute best for his country, something that perhaps can't always be said of elected politicians in the western world.



The night seemed all too short, with Martin and Eleanor leaving for the airport in the dark, ferried as ever by Mustapha. Fortunately, their journey was less eventful than that experienced by those crossing the Atlantic, particularly poor Ann, whose baggage went missing somewhere *en-route*.

Fortunately, nothing can take away memories and we'd built up more than our fair share on our trip around one of the most diverse countries in the world. Incredible that we'd seen >30°C heat in the sandy Erg, freezing temperatures and snow in the high Atlas, wind and rain and balmy spring days in a couple of weeks travelling. Our time had

been punctuated by 209 species of bird, 10 of mammals (not including camels), 13 reptiles and amphibians and 12 species of butterfly amongst a range of other interesting invertebrates. All this amongst some of the most welcoming and friendliest people anywhere on the planet.