



SOUTHERN MOROCCO TRIP REPORT

March 2006

By Adrian Binns

Day 1 / Wednesday March 22 – Marrakech

The Marrakech Express arrived on time. Actually it was not a train but a plane. After checking into my room, opening the patio window which looked out onto the pool and being serenaded by House Buntings, I meet up with Josele, Steve and Nancy and we headed for lunch at a local Spanish restaurant. Following a feast of various fishes and paella, Steve, Nancy and I decided to walk on this beautiful afternoon along the palm lined streets to visit some of the local attractions. Passing by an assortment of pigeons that included Eurasian Collared Dove, Rock Pigeon and Wood Pigeon we had a small flock of circling White Storks. Upon entering the Al Menera, our first stop, we checked the olive grove for the singing Serins and came across a fair bit of activity. Spotless Starlings, Blackcaps, Chaffinches, Great Tit, Blackbirds, Greenfinch were seen well, but several Sardinian Warblers just would not show themselves, always staying a step or two ahead of us, then behind us. Frustrating, but not the end of the world, there will be more. But highly unlikely to be seen again on this trip and totally unexpected was a female Brambling feeding amongst chaffinch. Following a photo op of the pool with the pavilion and the snow covered Atlas mountains as a backdrop we worked our way back through the olive grove spotting a Magpie flying over and later once nearing the Koutoubia mosque a pair of flyover Laughing Doves and a Southern Grey Shrike, this of the inland race *elegans*.

Adjacent to the mosque is the Mamounia Hotel, which left us speechless as we caught glimpses of the stream and gardens in front of the facade of this most elite of elite hotels. The Koutoubia mosque, built in 1192 has been restored to some extent but still had both Little and Pallid Swifts flying around it, no doubt coming back to roost in the holes that dotted the walls.

Reaching the Djemaa El Fna square before last light we witnessed its entire goings-on from street level as well as from the upper balcony while having a spot of mint tea, the country's national drink. You name it, it happens here! Actually this has been going on for centuries. It is the traditional meeting place for those coming from the north and the

Mediterranean, and those traveling up from sub Sahara. Jugglers, storytellers, card readers, henna artists, vendors, snake charmers, gymnasts, musicians, colorful watersellers, snake oil salesmen....the list goes on and on...and what wonderful odors come wafting over the square from the barbeques that tempt tourists yet cater mainly to the locals.

We meet up with the rest of the group as we were finishing dinner – their flight having been delayed several hours.

Day 2 / Thursday March 23 – Marrakech to Oukaimeden

The dawn chorus consisted of House Buntings, Pallid Swifts with a few Little Swifts thrown in for good measure. Once the whole group got to grips with those three species it was onwards and upwards as we headed for the High Atlas. It was another gorgeous day as we passed by golden fields of mustard and olive groves with snow covered mountains as a backdrop. Stopping a couple of times we located a female Common Redstart which gave us an opportunity to work out the differences between her and Moussier's and Black Redstarts. A Cirl Bunting flew off the wires by the time we got out to check it out and we had several Woodchat Shrikes, Corn Buntings and the first of what would be many Crested Larks.

The long winding road to Oukaimeden is as pretty and scenic a drive as anywhere in the world and today was no exception. It has been a good year rain wise, something this country badly needed after so many years of drought and everything was lush. The poplars were leafing out bright green, the terrace plots held an assortment of crops, the almond shrubs were ablaze in white and pink blossoms and the rocks changed colors from rich reds, to ochres, greens and sepia, as we climbed higher and higher culminating in large boulders and snow covered peaks. On the way up we stopped in a small juniper grove to pick up Mistle Thrush, Great, Coal and African Blue Tit. A Crossbill was heard calling and a Hawfinch was seen flying overhead, but it never sat out in the open once it landed. On the far ridge we got our first raptors with circling pale morph Booted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard and Sparrowhawk. In a traditional spot for Levalliant's Green Woodpecker, one was heard as we drove slowly through the village and soon we had wonderful views as it perched and called in a tree and then flew onto a boulder. Even the local children were enthralled to see it through a scope, no doubt the first time some had ever seen such an instrument. Moussier's Redstart, surely Morocco's most stunning bird, Rock Bunting and Black Wheatear were added to the list. Reaching Oukaimeden we found that the snow was receding well up the slopes which did not bode to well for Crimson-winged Finch and Alpine Accentor. Basically it meant that the later had no doubt headed higher up and the former which is often found at the snow line probably followed right behind the designer sparrow. In spite a great many hours of searching all we could be rewarded with was the absolutely breathe-taking scenery on a day when shorts were definitely the order of the day at 8500 thousand feet of elevation. We did not come away completely empty handed though. There were many Black Redstarts and Rock Sparrows amongst the buildings; Alpine and Red-billed Choughs busily feeding in the meadow; Atlas Horned Larks already paired up, dotted

about the slopes; several Seebohm's Wheatears, the Moroccan race of Northern flitting about the mountain stream; two Firecrests showed well in a juniper; Thekla Lark; a likely Barbary Falcon though really too distant to call it; Blue Rock Thrushes, Eurasian Kestrel, Wren, Meadow Pipit, Barbary Partridges, Gray Wagtails and two White-throated Dippers – not bad at all as we had great views of all of these.

Taking advantage of the beautiful day we sat outside a tajine stall and enjoyed the national dish of beef and vegetable tajine with sweet oranges and mint tea. Being so warm and sunny there were a number of lizards and geckos taking advantage of the rays including Moroccan Rock Lizards and High Atlas Day Geckos.

Heading back to the plains passing numerous roadside shops selling a wide range of pottery, rugs, miniature Koutoubia Mosques, and lawn ornaments in the form of White Storks (sorry no flamingo's here) and Wild Boars, we made one final stop a short distance outside Marrakech to check the agricultural fields. All this morning's species were sighted along with Sardinian Warblers, Hoopoe and calling Quails.

Day 3 / Friday March 24 – Marrakech to Ouarzazate via Tiz n' Ticka; Amergzane; Ait Ben Haddou

It was definitely a raptor morning with an astounding 10 species seen within 3 hours. As we began our climb up the Atlas Mountains we stopped between two distant escarpments that paralleled the road and proceeded to have over a dozen Lesser Kestrels, some of which were being harassed by a Lanner and soon joined by a couple of pale morph Booted Eagles. In all we counted at least 8 Booted at one time as well as a single dark morph. Rising from the pine plantation was a Short-toed Eagle which showed well as it circled. Three Black Kites then proceeded to come down the road towards us flying over our heads and continuing on their way north. The Short-toed then followed pretty much the same path, as four Booted circled overhead. Then below the escarpment a Barbary Falcon was spotted and followed for a short while before disappearing behind the escarpment. What a show! And while all this was going on a Cirl Bunting was singing and Chaffinch, Linnets, Goldfinch, Serin and Greenfinch were all doing their best to attract mates. A short distance further up the road we stopped for mint tea, coffee and beer (for some) and had another Barbary Falcon over the valley along with a Sparrowhawk and Eurasian Kestrel. In the garden we had good looks at Blackcaps. As we were piling into the vehicles a Sparrowhawk was seen circling and then joined by a larger raptor - a Goshawk! For five minutes we watched it circle and interact with the smaller hawk which gave us ample time to study the shapes and sizes of these two accipiters. Our final raptor came a short while later with stunning looks at a Long-legged Buzzard over the road.

Leaving behind the oaks and junipers, the further we climbed the sparser the vegetation became but the shades, colorations and structure of the rocks more than made up for the lack of vegetation. Near the top of the pass a quick stop produced small numbers of Rock Sparrows, a couple of Common Redstarts, a very confident LeVaillant's Green

Woodpecker who was calling non stop, Gray Wagtail and several dozen Bee-eaters, the first of many seen today.

Either we caught the staff at a restaurant in a small village by surprise or the previous customers had cleaned out the larder as they were only able to produce one tajine and a handful of eggs and chips, and that was only after a lengthy wait.

A check of a scenic and lush spot besides the Asif Imini produced Little Egret, a Willow Warbler, Subalpine and Spectacled Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush and again a heard only Quail. Nearing the bottom of the mountain Trumpeter Finches were spotted besides the road and were seen very well feeding amongst the short grass and rocky scree. Northern Wheatears and a couple of House Buntings whose head markings more closely resemble Rock Buntings in this habitat were also added. Once we reached the foothills and the terrain leveled out, we searched an area for Mourning Wheatears and it was not long before we came across a male. He kept us on our toes as he was always a good distance away working his way around a large hill, but showed well when we were able to find him. He was then joined by a female and together they came a lot closer to us
And were seen feeding in a narrow sandy wadi. This is a tough bird to locate and we were glad to have had such wonderful looks.

Our final stop was at Ait Ben Haddou the ancient fortified ksour that is being restored to its old glory. A pleasant walk along the river bed produced several Little Ringed Plovers, Yellow and White Wagtail, Black-eared Wheatear, Wryneck, Bank Swallow and a Subalpine Warbler.

Day 4 / Saturday March 25 – Ouarzazate to Tinherir; Ourazazate Wadi and Reservoir, Boumalne Dades, Tagdilt Track

Heading east a raptor caught our attention sitting atop a pylon and it was none other than an Osprey, in the middle of the desert no less! Thekla Lark and Desert Wheatear bounced about the flat rocky landscape and once again we were drawn away as several storks flew across the road. These turned out to be Black Storks heading back to Spain, five of them in all - a good bird at any time in Morocco, as we all know how few there actually are in southern Europe.

We spent the better part of 3 hours working our way down a small stream come wadi come agricultural plot coming across a nice mix of warblers including Chiffchaffs, Willow, Bonelli's, an Olivaceous, Subalpine and a Blackcap, amongst a few Woodchat Shrikes, a couple of Hoopoe's and many Eurasian Bee-eaters. At one point we spent some time with a Meadow and Tree Pipit and a Song Thrush and caught a glimpse of a Wryneck. Relocating it, it eventually showed very well as it fed amongst a few small rocks on a low ridge in the open, often turning its head to show that snake like pattern on the back of the head. There were some happy people after that show! The reservoirs edge held a couple of Grey Herons, Great Cormorants, Green Sandpipers, Yellow Wagtails and many Eurasian Coots and Great Crested Grebes, but it was a small flock

of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters that was one of the highlights of this late morning as they perched together and flew nearby. Our last species was a Desert Lark foraging about the rocky slope that led us back to our waiting vehicles.

During the course of the next hour we stopped for two raptors, the first being a Lanner seen in flight and landing on a pylon giving us a wonderful scope view and the other, as good a look at a Bonelli's Eagle as one could ever wish for as it circling right above us for almost 5 minutes before moving on. Various agama lizards were seen along the roadside taken advantage of the heat of the day, but few allowed a close approach and Desert Wheatears seemed to be relatively common along this stretch of road.

Following a tajine lunch under the awning of a roadside restaurant in the middle of this barren landscape, we made a brief foray into the agricultural fields along the Dades river bed in Boumalne finding a plethora of wagtails that included three races, *Iberia*, *flava* and *flavissima*, many Blackbirds, Chiffchaffs, a few Willow and Bonelli's Warblers along with one singing Olivaceous and yet another heard only Nightingale. By 4 o'clock we were on the vast open stony rolling Tagdilt Track on the outskirts of town, known locally as the Valley of the Birds. Scattered somewhere throughout this Hamada are the larks, sandgrouse, coursers and possibly the mythical bustard that make this so attractive to birders. The negative side to a section of this area is that the rubbish dump has not contained all the rubbish and plastic, in particular bags of all different colors, dot this gorgeous landscape. We drove tracks keeping our eyes peeled with little success while waiting for the cooler part of the afternoon before getting out of the vehicles and walking. A Long-legged Buzzard was soon spotted followed by a second one as we headed along a wadi. A Desert Wheatear followed us for a short while until our attention was turned to a small flock of flying larks. Once they settled down and we located them, they could see that they were Greater Short-toed Larks. Circling around with our backs to the sun we came across a pair of Crowned Sandgrouse idly walking about the low sage less than 100 feet in front of us. We could not believe our luck. This was followed by another three pairs less than half an hour later in another section. We also caught up with the beautiful Temminck's Lark as well as several Red-rumped Wheatears.

Continuing eastwards towards Tinherir, the days final light on the distance hills that flanked the valley showed us why this is certainly one of the world's most scenic countries. As the sun was setting a raptor with a small snake dangling from its talons was seen flying besides the road and what else could it have been other than a Short-toed Snake Eagle.

Day 5 / Sunday March 26 – Tagdilt Track; Tinherir; Todra Gorge

We began this morning back at the Tagdilt Track with a couple of Montagu Harriers and a Long-legged Buzzard along with the first of many pairs of Red-rumped Wheatears. A scour of the dump produced nothing but three packs of roving wild dogs so it was not surprising that there was not a bird in sight. Walking in a large circumference to cover as much territory as we could in an hour or so, produced little more than a few Temminck's Lark and a Desert Wheatear or two until a Cream-coloured Courser was spotted. While

most got to see it well on the ground we all saw it fly up and away in the direction of the mountains. Regrouping we drove to another part of the track and as Josele's vehicle was checking a lark besides the dirt road, Moha saw a bustard walking towards the car less than 50 meters away. It was the mythical Houbara's. Hunted to almost extinction in this country, sightings in spite of countless hours of searching, can be counted on one hand in the last decade. The second vehicle pulled in behind and we watched it cross the track in front of us and slowly walk away in the direction of the dump. Brilliant, bloody brilliant! After all the exhilaration we paused for tea, fruit and nuts and planned our course of action to try for Thick-billed Larks. We picked another section and made another massive circular route this time coming up with Bar-tailed Desert Larks, 4 Skylarks flying by us and a pair of gorgeous Hoopoe Larks, one of which flew a short distance so that we could see the black and white wing pattern.

Having spent all morning on the Tagdilt, unfortunately failing to find Thick-billed Larks (on this try), we moved on the Todra Gorge an hour to the east. As one winds ones way up into the foothills and out of the town of Tinherir, the spectacular view of the green palm lined water course with dwellings made out of pise (straw and mud) outlining the vegetation could be seen in stark contrast to the barren ochre landscape. As we entered the gorge a lone Grey Heron was perch on the rock face some three or four hundred feet above the narrow stream that is only seen where the gorge is at its narrowest. Beginning here for about a 1 km stretch, the walls of the gorge rise to a thousand feet shading this alley, which at its narrowest point is only twenty meters wide, giving us a welcome relief from the heat. On this weekend day a great number of locals were taking advantage of the beauty and cooler temperatures of the gorge, using it as a family gathering spot and relaxing by playing their musical instruments, namely tambourines, singing and chanting. Along the stream Gray Wagtails flitted about and House Buntings, Blue Rock Thrushes, and Crag Martins could be seen on the rock face or flying across the gorge. We took a bit of a break and had lunch in one of the restaurants before heading up the gorge and away from the crowds.

As the gorge opens up, the landscape changes as the sides of the hills vary in extent of steepness but with the river bed remaining narrow. Our first stop was to look for possible African Rock Martin's but there were only three martins that showed for a very brief time and all were Crag. Desert Larks and Black Wheatears could be seen as we continued our way further up. The higher we climbed away from the gorge one could see that the vegetation was increasing, though it is still very sparse and mostly low with the exception of a few oleander shrubs. In these steep slopes we found an astonishing five Tristram's Warblers most of whom gave us incredible looks. This is another stunning *sylvia* warbler and an endemic to this part of North Africa as well as being a short altitudinal migrant descending to the desert in winter. Mourning Wheatear, Desert Lark and a couple of Trumpeter Finches were added where we decided to turn around and head back down. A stop at the gorge to look for swifts produced a couple dozen House Martins, Pallid's with no doubt a few Common's mixed in but no Alpines. We finished up with a pair of Laughing Doves besides the road as we drove through the palmery.

Day 6 / Monday March 27 – Tinherir to Merzouga via Rissani

A Barbary Falcon perched on a pylon shortly after we left Tinherir was viewed well by those in the lead vehicle but took off as the second vehicle pulled up behind. We passed a few Desert Wheatears and many more White-crowned Wheatears and along one particular stretch there was at least one Southern Grey Shrike (*elegans*) in each wadi including one *algeriensis*. An hour's walk around a sandy wadi flanked by the sparsely vegetated stony desert produced Bar-tailed Desert Lark, about 18 Short-toed Larks and a displaying Hoopoe Lark meters away from us much to the delight of the group.

As we neared Erfoud and the landscape became far sandier with small dunes, we encountered pockets of blowing sand as the wind became stronger in the heat of the day. Following lunch we headed west of Rissani to an escarpment to look for Pharaoh Eagle Owl. It was not the best time of day but there was always a chance. We looked and looked but to no avail. While resting in the shade, out of nowhere appeared a young boy on a bike carrying a box of fossils. Putting his bike down he casually opened the box to display a small cache of trilobites and nautilodea. Steve tried to strike a hard bargain but caved in and paid twice what he should have done – all of \$2 a rock! It was not long before somehow another salesman on his bike got wind that we were in the area and showed up, followed by the original fossil man who basically lost out on a few sales because he took Josele to show him another spot for the owl.

From here we headed back towards the desert and spent the remainder of the late afternoon walking a wadi, where we came across Trumpeter Finch, Wryneck, Common Redstart, a Purple Heron (obviously on its way north) having a hard time flying against the wind and eventually everyone got to see Fulvous Babbler which spent most of its time going away from us. At dusk we waited for Egyptian Nightjar but unfortunately it never showed. One never knows why, but it certainly does not seem to be very reliable.

Day 7 / Tuesday March 28 – Merzouga; Rissani

With a backdrop of shapely dunes and palm trees we were treated to one of the best desert dawns I have ever witnessed with colors of purple and red streaks changing as the sky brightened. Our Kasbah was situated several hundred meters away from the golden orange sand dunes known as the Erg Chebbi. This is the western edge of the Sahara and these dunes are the most accessible in Morocco and for about a 15 km stretch they rise as high as 800 feet.

Following breakfast we headed along the line of Kasbahs that stretch along the dunes stopping at a group of three palm trees to find a pair of Desert Sparrows returning to one of them to feed its begging young. Along with a number of Eurasian Collared Doves in the trees a couple of Laughing Doves flew by us and disappeared over the dunes. From here we cut across the hamada, a flat expansive area of small dark rocks that cover the sand, stopping for a brief look at a Brown-necked Raven before it took off with a small rodent in its beak, and ending up at Dayet Sjiri, the dry lake bed outside of

Merzouga. What this must be like full of water and birds, can only be left to the imagination, but we got a slight inkling with around two dozen Ruddy Shelducks loafing about and occasionally flying around a small wet area while two Western Marsh Harriers quartered overhead. Short-toed Lark, Skylarks, Black-eared Wheatear and Crested Lark were also seen here.

It was a bit of a blessing this morning as the sky was blanketed by clouds keeping the temperatures at least reasonable throughout most of the morning. Our next jaunt was around the back of the Erg Chebbi and through the stunning rolling rocky landscape interspersed with sand, small dunes, high peaks and narrow stripes of vegetation with the remains of desert wildflowers in shallow depressions that must have had recent water. Reaching one of the larger swathes of sandy vegetation that cumulated in a small patch of agricultural crops, an astonishing sight in the desert, we scoured the area for sandgrouse, spotted in particular, but only came up with Northern Wheatears and good number of Yellow Wagtails. A second stop produced a Subalpine and Bonelli's Warbler in small trees along with 11 Crowned Sandgrouse that initially were found amongst the low vegetation before ambling off and over the hamada.

By early afternoon we were back at our Kasbah for lunch and found a Desert Sparrow on the wall to go with a number of House Sparrows, a House Bunting and a family of White-crowned Wheatears.

Our next target was the African Desert Warbler, a gorgeous sand colored *sylvia* with a yellow eye and very white tail. Once we located suitable habitat, a wadi with low vegetation, we lucked out with one singing minutes after arriving. Characteristic to its behavior it would move from shrub to shrub, disappear behind the shrub and work its way up the branches to the top where we got some cracking views.

It was back to Rissani for the remainder of the afternoon, stopping in town to check out the produce market; people watch while having tea; swap the land rovers for our mini van and head to the look for the Eagle Owl. By this time the searing heat of the desert had cooled considerable, but the wind had picked up. In any case we passed Brown-necked Ravens and a Lanner was seen cruising along the escarpment but it was the owl we wanted to see. Perched in a narrow crevice facing eastwards, one had to get in the right spot to see him and we certainly got a wonderful look at the species that I think is far more common than we are lead to believe.

Dinner was a lively and festive occasion with Nancy and Steve celebrating their anniversary and Wilf his birthday. All stops were pulled out with lamb, wine, cakes and a group of very talented local musicians providing the entertainment well into the night.

Day 8 / Wednesday March 29 – Merzouga to Ouarzazate via Tragdilt Track and Ouarzazate Reservoir

A pre and post breakfast walk around the Kasbah and along the dunes, checking the palms and tamerisks produced some new species including Pied Flycatcher, Rock

Thrush, Wood Warbler and Turtle Dove, as well as the looks we had been hoping for of Laughing Doves which were common in the palmery; more Subalpines and a pair of the beautiful Desert Sparrows. A pair of mating Mauritanian Toads was found in the irrigation channel of the palmery and the local kids had caught a couple of White-bellied Sandfish, a rather common lizard of the dunes, to show us.

Our destination today was to make it to Ouarzazate, a long journey of some 350 kms that was broken up with several stops. We watched a cooperative flock of eight Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters flying sorties from the tops of tamerisks and passed a few roadside Northern and Black-eared Wheatears along with the more numerous White-crowned, and the closer we got to Boumalne a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes. An odd looking perched raptor caused some identification confusion until it took off and the underwing pattern clearly showed it was a Long-legged Buzzard. A check of an escarpment produced a Lanner on a nest which was seen standing up, stretching its wings and taking off at a good clip.

By mid afternoon we had reached the Tagdilt Track and the search for Thick-billed Lark was on. Much as our previous tries, birds were rather sparse and flying ones even rarer. Tawny Pipit was a new find. 7 Short-toed Larks were picked up in front of the van feeding in the tires tracks and a pair of Temminck's Larks rounded out a poor showing of numbers in spite of us covering some ground. With about 15 minutes of sunlight to spare before it dropped behind the Atlas Mountains we got to scan the Ouarzazate Reservoir, where there were many White Storks and Great Cormorants, a handful of Grey Herons, Black-winged Stilts, Northern Shovelers and Black-headed Gulls, a couple of Mallards and Tufted Ducks, and a single Osprey and Western Marsh Harrier.

Day 9 / Thursday March 30 – Ouarzazate to Agadir; via Tiz n' Bachkoun, Barrage Taghdoute, Taliouine, Aoulouz Gorge, Souss Valley and Oued Souss

From our balconies we could see groups of Cattle Egrets leave their roosts and head out across town while Black-crowned Night Herons opted for a later start and as many as two dozen could be seen perched on the tops of eucalyptus trees as a female Common Kestrel called non stop from her roost on the top of a tiled bedroom balcony roof.

It was to be another long drive as we headed for the coast via the Tiz n' Bachkoun. In the valley below the pass a short break produced Tawny Pipits many Short-toed Larks, Northern Wheatear, Thekla Lark and a couple of Trumpeter Finches. Near the top of the pass a climb up the hill was worth while as we watched displaying Desert Larks, Woodchat Shrikes, Barbary Partridges including the 'el cojo' of the avian world (those on the trip will know what I mean) and a Barbary Ground Squirrel. The Barrage Taghdoute is a small reservoir set in narrow valley surrounded by green vegetation and a band of tamarisks, in which we found a Chiffchaff, Melodious, many singing Olivaceous and a Willow Warbler. On the water there was a pair of Little Grebes, a few Eurasian Coots and several dozen Ruddy Shelducks.

We took a short break in the market town of Tazenakht to pick up fruit and a cuppa before settling into a restaurant in Taliouine, the center of Morocco's Saffron producing area, an hour later. So fine is the product that a small scale was bought out to weight this valuable commodity which is sold by the gram. Heaven help us as we try and get the small bag of herb through customs.

The setting of the Aoulouz gorge is absolutely gorgeous, but today the local boys were bathing in the narrow shallow water close to the bridge which no doubt limited our species seen. A Common Sandpiper, Moorhens and a Lesser Kestrel harassing a pale morph Booted Eagle were the highlights here. With time not on our side we cut through the Aragana forest, most of which had now been decimated, and orchards of the Souss Valley with a few Black Kites gliding overhead and onto Agadir.

At the mouth of the Souss, high tide had moved some of the birds into the shallow pools and mudflats for close viewing. Many Grey Herons and 9 juvenile Greater Flamingo's stood out because of their size while the most common waders were Redshanks and Black-winged Stilts. Stone Curlews were calling on the far side of the oued and one was located walking slowly. Flying in front of us was a couple of Gull-billed Terns and a Curlew flew past while two Black-tailed Godwits that had been feeding flew in front of us and landed near a feeding Curlew Sandpiper. Individual species seen here included Dunlin, Little Stint, a sleeping Avocet, Greenshank and a white Ruff. At the barrier the little bit of water than was in the concrete outflow channel attracted Moorhen, Moroccan Magpies, Woodpigeon, Serin, Sardinian Warbler, and a pair of beautiful Turtle Doves

Day 10 / Friday March 31 – Tamri; Souss-Massa National Park

Heading north along the beautiful rugged coastline, through swathes of argana forest and euphorbia heaths, where the High Atlas drops into the Atlantic we encountered many swifts most of which seemed to be Commons gathering as they make their journey into Europe. Gulls accompanied us most of the way with the two common ones being Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed, which we got to study once we stopped near Tamri. It was here that we found two adults and 2 juvenile Audouin's amongst a small mixed group of gulls. With the help of a keen local boy who had just walked over the ridge we were pointed in the right direction to look for the Bald Ibis. The sandy steppe habitat that they require to feed in is disappearing at an alarming rate and in this area there is a narrow stripe remaining close to the ledges on the steep cliffs that they require to nest. In very sandy soil, most of which is being farmed, we located a couple dozen ibis marching through the fields continually probing their long curved deep red bills into the sandy soil as they feed, seemingly happy to be in the presence of the women and donkeys working in the fields. On a couple of occasions they were startled by the women and all took off, flying a short distance before settling in again to sweep an area. There were many more than we originally could see, and an estimated count of almost 60 was settled upon – over a tenth of the population in one view. Pterodactyl looking in flight, the whole group flew past us and landed near the road before going out of view. Common Ravens, a major predator of the ibis' eggs, were also seen here.

Having seen the main target species of the trip very well it was onto Massa, south of Agadir and the Souss-Massa National Park. A bathroom break at a petrol station produced some of the most god awful coffee one could ever imagine, even the drivers took one sip and left the rest, and to boot it was expensive. I think if they had produced a cup of drained oil from the garage bay it would have gone over better.

At Massa we took a very walk along the lagoon where Eurasian Coots and a couple of Little Grebes were on the water and Squacco Herons and a single Purple Heron were seen well along the reeds. The tamarisk lined edge was full of birds with Moussier's Redstarts, Serins, Sardinian Warblers, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Great Tits, Linnets, Blackcaps, Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers and Zitting Cisticolas making their presence well felt. A Cirl Bunting alighted on a telegraph wire and proceeded to sing for us, while Olivaceous, Cetti's and Reed Warblers could be heard. Overhead bee-eaters were on the move and a several raptors floated by including a juvenile Bonelli's and Western Marsh Harrier.

Following lunch we continued in the direction of the ocean finding Tufted Duck, Northern Shoveler, many Pochards, a sleeping Common Shelduck and on the far side tucked into the reeds three Marbled Ducks played hide and seek, but with a little patience we all got to see their features. A Great (White) Egret, a rare sighting for this area, was seen flying over the reeds along the edge and Sandwich Terns were flying up and down the lagoon, while a large group of Glossy Ibis rested in shallow water. In with a group of 3 swallows we caught a brief look at a Plain Martin, other of the areas specialties. Our last target was the Tchagra (Black-crowned Bush Shrike) and after having difficulties with a first one that we came across, on the return walk we heard and located a very cooperative bird, which even came right into a tree besides the path and momentarily preened for us – a fitting end to a wonderful trip.