



## MOROCCO - December 1-12, 2012

Trip Report by Debbie Beer; Photos by Adrian Binns

### December 1 - Marrakesh to Oukaïmeden

Our journey to the edge of the sahara began yesterday with a late-afternoon flight from JFK Airport in NYC, arriving in Casablanca today, December 1, around 6 am local time. After several hours layover in a near-empty terminal, we completed the 40-minute domestic flight to Marrakesh, where we moved quickly through customs, collected our bags, and met our driver, Mustapha.

At the edge of the airport car park, we saw a pair of White Wagtails amidst the manicured landscape of grass and rose bushes. Soon we were driving out of the city, taking in culture and landscape, as well as common, urban birds. Children walked home from half-day school on Saturday, clustered in separate groups of girls and boys, respectively. Elderly men in long, blue *jalabas* (robes) tended grazing flocks of sheep along the roadside. Spotless Starlings perched on many building tops and poles, and several large White Storks circled overhead. We saw a Maghreb Magpie pecking on the ground beside us, a Common Bulbul jumping from one shrub to another, and a Desert Grey Shrike perched characteristically on a wire over a scrubby field. Maghreb Blackbirds flew across the road.

We were traveling through the Haouz Plain, an arid area spattered with *ziziphus* trees amongst patches of bare space nibbled to the ground by goats and sheep. Orchards of olive trees separated stretches of retail shops, hotels and ochre-walled residences, which thinned out as we got farther from the city. We stopped in a bustling village to buy water and flavorful mechoui - lamb kebabs cooked in front of us on a small, smoky firepit. We welcomed the fire's warmth on this chilly, drizzling afternoon, as we waited for our sizzling lunch.



Soon we began the ascent up to Oukaïmeden, a ski resort within the High Atlas mountain range. The Ourika Valley spread out below us, anchored by the fast-running namesake river that served as an important water resource and focal point around which our road was carved. Amidst apple and cherry trees, local people planted subsistence crops terrace-style, in steep steps up the mountain side. Village dwellings and walls were made of red clay bricks, forming neat, square buildings. Homes appeared to be cut right into the mountainside, perched precariously among rocky outcroppings. We passed red slate slabs stacked against buildings, pulled laboriously out of the riverbed to sell. Roadside retail also included pottery, tin lanterns, carvings and plenty of cafes offering coke and *tajine*

dishes! *Tajines* are named after the clay pot in which cooks a delicious slow stew!

Men huddled in building corners smoking, while children offered berries for sale on roadside pullouts, attractively presented in small, cone-shaped baskets made of bamboo. The berries are called “argouse” in french, and look a bit like over-sized round strawberries, but taste not as sweet. Small kids also waved bunches of rosemary herbs for sale to passing cars.

Eurasian Crag Martins swooped at eye level as we climbed the sharp curves and hairpin switchbacks in low gear. What looked to be a light dusting of snow at low elevation became deeper as we ascended. Snow flurries and fog whirled around us, reducing visibility to only the nearby conifers, silent and still.



We reached our destination shortly after 2 pm, pushing through 30 cms of fresh snow, which had fallen the night before. This attracted a good crowd of day-trippers who were all too eager to take advantage of the unusually early snowfall with skis, snowboards and family fun. Oukaïmeden is the oldest ski resort in the country, and one of only two in operation! Situated at approximately 2,600 meters, it is a short distance away from Morocco’s highest peak, Jbel Toubkal, at 4,167 meters.

After checking into our room at Chez Juju, we added a few more layers and headed out on foot to see what birds we could find. Mixed flocks of Red-billed and Alpine Choughs called noisily from their building-top perches, with small groups congregating on the ground, to forage on rubbish poking out of the snow. We walked down the road to scan the snow-rimmed reservoir, and were delighted to find a White-throated Dipper (*right*) swimming and feeding along its edges. A Green Sandpiper was bobbing it’s way along the incoming creek, along with another Dipper. White and Grey Wagtails flew into the area, sporting their long, namesake tails.



Tall conifers lined the roadside, covered in picturesque white snow crystals. We spotted an Atlas Chaffinch darting out of one to land atop a leafless tree. It began to snow, so we headed back to our cozy room to relax a bit. Dinner was a delicious treat, served by super-friendly staff. We enjoyed hearty vegetable soup, freshly baked bread, beef and chicken *tajines*, and hot mint tea before retiring for the night.

## December 2 - Oukaimeden and Tizi-n-Test

We awoke before dawn, in time to see the sky lighten in lovely shades of purple, orange around the jagged mountain peaks. The sun rose above the reservoir, highlighting a brilliant blue sky and sparkling, snow-covered landscape. We bundled-up and stepped outside into crisp air, silent except for our boots crunching on the snow.



The temperature was 22-degrees F as we walked down the road, catching the first calls of Red-billed and Alpine Choughs (*above*) as they came out of the mountains and landed noisily on rooftops. Soon a White Wagtail zipped across our path and dropped down to drink from a half-frozen creek. We found two Atlas Chaffinches in the boughs of a dense conifer tree; one hopped onto a wire to check us out. A pair of Mistle Thrushes sang melodiously from atop a bare tree, and a Black Redstart darted across some shrubs to land on a ledge.



Heading back inside to warm numb fingers and toes, we noticed individuals striding across the mountain, breaking paths in the snow, carrying ski equipment. These enterprising young men spent freezing nights in brick huts to make a living selling ski lessons and renting equipment to hordes of locals visiting on this sunny Sunday. We never saw smoke from the abandoned-looking buildings, and there wasn't much supply of wood fuel around, so they must use plenty of blankets to keep warm!

After a breakfast of toast, apricot jam, sweet cakes and omelette, we ventured back out, this time driving to the highest point possible from this spot - the radar tower above our heads. As Mustapha negotiated the poorly-plowed track, we searched for birds amongst the snow-covered boulders. We glimpsed a Levallant's Green Woodpecker flying across the road, but could not relocate him. We enjoyed gorgeous views of the valley



below, and decided to walk most of the way back down. The resort bustled with activity, as cars unloaded eager day-visitors, men set-up their ski equipment, dogs ranged around, and lodge workers swept snow from their patios. We saw several mules laden with parcels and riders lumbering across the ridge. A Grey Wagtail darted across our path, drawing our attention to nearby Rock Buntings and a Maghreb Blackbird. A Common Kestrel flapped high overhead, contrasting beautifully against the piercing blue skies.

It was after 11:15 am when we finally left Chez Juju, and began the long journey to Taroudannt. The views were stunning as we descended the mountain down the same road we'd come up the day before. We saw a lone North African Raven perched on a tree top, cawing away. Further down the road we stopped briefly to scan a shrubby lot and found an African Blue Tit. Our drive was slow, as the road was icy, especially in areas yet-untouched by the sun. One vehicular debacle cost us time, but fortunately nothing worse, when we encountered a long line of cars stopped at a steep, icy curve. The upbound cars were unable to drive up the slope, and were sliding down dangerously. Groups of men were out of their cars and helping push each car up the icy part. Fortunately we were the only downward-bound car and managed to drive down the slope and squeeze past the line-up!



Finally we reached the snow-free Ourika Plains and stopped at the same bustling village to buy bread for our lunch. At the town roundabout we took the road headed southwest. Soon the landscape changed to arid, rocky, agricultural fields which attracted several species. We stopped to admire a colorful male Moussier's Redstart (*left*), and heard larks singing all around. A Thekla's Lark came up close, pecking on the rocks and boulders. Several White Wagtails bounced across the road, and a Common Kestrel was perched on a wire.

In Asni, we photographed a pair of White Storks on their large stick nest, and Mustapha spotted an Atlas Long-legged Buzzard perched a long distance away. Fortunately, it flew in our direction, giving us better looks.

At 2:00 pm we began the long ride through the Tizi-n-Test pass in the High Atlas mountains. The road winded continuously through switchbacks, on the climb up and the descent down. We enjoyed a roadside picnic lunch amidst juniper shrubs which hosted African Chaffinch, Black Redstart and Great Tit.

Bright sun illuminated hamlets clinging to the mountainside, seemingly carved out of stone, where Berbers build their houses from earthen bricks known as "pise," and toil through the seasons to survive. On neat, square plots, they grow vegetables that survive in high altitudes, including barley, corn, turnips and potatoes. They cultivate orchards of fruit and olive trees on terraced plots. River water is channeled to irrigate crops and keep herds of goats and sheep.

Deb kept a white-knuckle grip on the car handles for some of the drive, gasping through clenched teeth each time the car edged close to the edge of the sheer cliff dropoff. Actually, the road has been widened, and improved with metal barriers and rock walls in recent years!

A little after the half-way point - and still not at the top of the pass - we spotted a Levaillant's Green Woodpecker (*right*) flying close to the road, and stopped to get closer looks. A Sardinian Warbler flitted nearby in low scrub.



The top of the Tizi-n-Test pass, at 2100 meters, was marked by a larger pullout and small cafe, which we passed at 5:00 pm. This point in the mountains was about 600 meters lower than Oukaimeden, and, thankfully, we traversed only a few icy stretches, and saw snow only on the distant high peaks.



Junipers dominated the habitat, along with scattered holm oaks. At a tight corner next to Hotel Bellevue, we pulled over and found Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and African Blue Tit. Farther down, we stopped again when a pair of Barbary Partridge flushed from a scrub patch and disappeared against the rocky cliffside. A pair of Crag Martins swooped in and roosted in a rock outcropping over our heads. In fading light, Adrian spotted a Black Wheatear perched on a roadside boulder, giving us good looks.

We were finally over the pass at 6:15 pm, and drove into Taroudannt in darkness. After a long day on the road, looking for birds amongst arid rocks, and watching traditionally-dressed villagers trudge along steep paths carrying large bundles, it was surprising to enter the bustle of the city. As the former capitol of the south, Taroudannt was alive with small shops, people and commerce. Donkey carts, bicycles, taxis and pedestrians navigated the narrow streets, heading to their destinations.

The staff at “La Maison Anglaise” welcomed us warmly, like old friends. Soon we were checked into our room, and sitting down to a delicious, home-cooked meal of chicken *tajine*, a variety of side dishes, dessert, cookies and sweetened “moroccan whiskey” (mint tea!)





### December 3 - Atlantic Coast North of Agadir and Souss Estuary

Today we birded the picturesque beaches and rocky cliffs of Morocco's scenic Atlantic Coast, north of Agadir. We arose early and after a full, delicious breakfast, we jumped into our vehicle and headed due west along the main highway to the coast from Taroudannt. Monday morning activity included cheerful students walking, biking or waiting for a bus to get to school, men riding donkeys or driving pick-up trucks, and a few women sweeping porches or store fronts. We noticed that boys and girls rarely mixed, and there were far more men seen than women.



We passed many agricultural patches in this fertile Souss valley, and expansive stretches of *argana* trees. Though many birds zipped across the road and jumped amongst shrubs, we stopped only once to scope a Black-shouldered Kite sitting atop an electric pole. We reached the coastal city of Agadir in time to join the morning rush hour of this fast-growing city. New buildings and construction sites were much in evidence as we turned north and hugged the coast. We stopped at beaches in Taghazout and Arhoud to admire Audouin's (above), Yellow-legged, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls congregating in their respective flocks at water's edge. White wagtails and Chiffchaffs darted around close to the road, and a flock of nervous Spanish Sparrows paused in a shrub long enough to get good views.

We enjoyed the sun's heat shining on a bright blue sky and sparkling ocean waves. It is here that the High Atlas Mountain range, which runs northeast to southwest, bumps the Atlantic Ocean with picturesque, rust-colored cliff-sides, separated by occasional villages, surfing shops, and a winding road with many scenic pull-outs.

North of Tamri we stopped to scan a wide swath of sand dunes and scrub, between our road and the ocean. We looked hard for our target Bald Ibis, and nearly moved on, when Mustapha spotted a flock of them in the distance. Through the scope we watched over a dozen Bald Ibis move steadily through scrub, foraging as they went. Keeping an eye on their location, we walked down into the sandy scrub, following a donkey trail. We stopped several times to see Moussier's Redstarts, Common Stonechat, Crested Larks and Sardinian



Warblers which were singing merrily or perched atop shrubs. Deb flushed a pair of Barbary Partridges, while Adrian photographed a close Maghreb Grey Shrike. A Common Kestrel hunted grasshoppers over the dunes. We tracked the Bald Ibis (*right*) to the other side of a ridge where we saw more Bald Ibis foraging below. A number of them moved along the sand dunes, probing deep into the sand with long, pink bills. We felt fortunate to have seen over 35 birds, representing about 7% of the world's population of this critically-endangered species. They nest only along the coastal cliffs in this region, adjacent to the same beach habitat that people are consuming for resorts, recreation, tourism and commerce. The Moroccan government has preserved some of their nesting territory in the coastal cliffs, but the future remains uncertain, as Morocco's coastal community is growing exponentially.



We stopped for a picnic lunch at Cape Rhir, sharing a roadside pullout with several tethered donkeys. Their owners were women hard at work at the bottom of the cliff, gathering mussels from rocky pools to sell at market. As we scanned the ocean watching Northern Gannets and gulls, the women toted their heavy sacks up the rocky trail and loaded them into panniers on the backs of the beasts. They glanced at us quickly then rode off without a word as we ate our sandwiches.

Heading back south, we pulled over to scope a pair of Osprey on towers, and found a variety of activity near a trash heap, including singing Gull Bunting, Chiffchaff, and a Barbary Ground-Squirrel eyeing us curiously. An Atlas Long-legged Buzzard soared over the nearby ridge.

We spent the last hours of the day at the Souss Estuary National Park, adjacent to one of the king's well-groomed and closely guarded palace properties. We stopped near the entrance to watch over a dozen Maghreb Magpies (*right*) flocking together in a tall hedgerow, and found a Serin singing from the fence. The park was apparently undergoing some construction with mounds of gravel being pushed by earth-moving machines, but that didn't deter visitors from driving around the giant vehicles on poorly-graded dirt roads to get close to the estuary. We parked and walked through patchy shrub land dominated by tamarisks. The trail weaved its way through the marsh and we stepped carefully on slick mud covered in debris and rubbish, to approach a small ephemeral pool. Along the open water we found a variety of shorebirds, including Little Ringed Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, Redshank, and Green Sandpiper. A pair of Common Teal floated along, and Adrian got a brief look at a Jack Snipe as it darted behind a shrub. A Marsh Harrier hunted low over the vegetation. A Moroccan Wagtail accompanied the more common White Wagtail in foraging on the ground, and Zitting Cisticolas perched long enough to admire their lovely earth tone patterning.





We looped back to the main estuary to observe large numbers of Great Cormorant and Moroccan White-breasted Cormorant standing along the beach. Numerous Black-headed Gulls moved about, along with Sandwich Terns, Gray Herons, Little Egrets and a lone Pied Avocet. Several Eurasian Spoonbills moved up the channel, feeding by swinging their long, spoon-shaped bills rapidly through the water. A small flock of Greater Flamingos danced in the shallows, flashing amazing pink bills.



Latifah welcomed us warmly back to “La Maison Anglaise”, delighted to hear of our successful day of birding along the coast. The staff prepared another delicious dinner, artfully presented in beautiful pottery serving dishes. A large pot of steaming mint tea was the perfect ending to another wonderful day in Morocco!

#### **December 4 - The Souss Valley**

Today we focused on birding locally in the Souss Valley, fertile lands bordered by the High Atlas Mountains to the north, Anti Atlas Mountains to the south and east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. We spent a few minutes before breakfast on the building’s rooftop, counting an amazing number of satellite dishes on adjacent roofs around the city, along with pigeons, Eurasian Collared Doves and House Buntings. In the distance, we saw a long stream of hundreds of egrets, mostly Cattle, flying east.



It was another warm, sunny day as we drove out of Taroudannt. The city center is encompassed by thick, ochre-colored walls with imposing ramparts, dating back centuries ago to when Taroudannt was the capital of southern Morocco. Narrow, winding streets bustled with morning activity, as people opened shops, set-up fruit stands, and hurried to various destinations.

We exited via the Bab El Kasbah gate heading south. Soon we turned east to follow the Souss River. It would’ve been a massive river, if it had any water; alas, it was an expansive, rock wadi, with eroding sand banks. We wondered about the potentially fatal impact of modern irrigation and damning practices on this naturally arid country and it’s increasingly westernized population. What happens when there is no more water?





We took a dirt track through scrub habitat dotted with agricultural plots and occasional dwellings. Within a few minutes we found our target birds, a pair of Fulvous Babblers (*left*) posing atop a thorny *acacia*, highlighting their long tails and warm caramel coloring. There was plenty more avian activity to hold our interest, including Common Bulbuls, Crested Larks, Moussier's Redstart, Sardinian Warblers, Spectacled Warbler, Serin and Spanish Sparrows. A Greenfinch flashed into view and disappeared before we could get better looks. We saw several Maghreb Grey Shrikes perched conspicuously, along with a few wagtails.

Our second stop was at Freija where we spent about an hour exploring a slightly different rural habitat. Adrian spotted a motionless Stone Curlew (*right*) blended in perfectly against the rocks. Looking through binoculars, we realized there were more of them close by, out in the open, but well camouflaged. Only their yellow eyes contrasted with the surrounding earth-tones. Suddenly, 14 Stone Curlews flushed up out of the rocks and dirt clods and flew across the field!



We walked down the dirt road, birding the edges of thickets dotted with *argana* trees. A jeans-clad teenager herded a flock of slow-grazing sheep with help from his 2 dogs; we noticed many children working hard in agricultural society. Ubiquitous larks, Sardinian Warblers and Zitting Cisticolas sang their melodies, while Atlas Chaffinches, Spanish and House Sparrows darted around. A lone Laughing Dove perched atop a pole. Deb spotted a European Hoopoe flashing its patterned black-and-white wings and tail in flight, as we followed it down the road until it stopped and posed for a few minutes. Adrian heard a Black-crowned Tchagra call, and we located a pair of them moving around a shrub, occasionally perching in the open. A handsome Black-shouldered Kite bid us farewell from his perch on a snag as we drove out.



Continuing west, we stopped next in the village of Tiout, to explore the palmery - a large grove of palm trees interspersed with neatly-irrigated agricultural plots. Villagers were friendly and smiling, accustomed to many foreign visitors who tour the town's culture and dine in the commanding kasbah on the hill. We declined a donkey ride, and appreciated the smiles of women working in their fields. Mid-day bird activity was light, but we found several Blackcaps foraging in the crowns of palm trees, along with many Common Bulbuls singing merrily. We joined other tourists in taking lunch in the kasbah, with lovely vistas of the valley below and snow-covered peaks of the High Atlas Mountains in the distance. Amongst the rocky slope leading to the kasbah we got our best look to date of a Black Wheatear.

The vegetation of the Souss Valley features olive and orange groves, as well as date palms, nuts and *Argana* trees. The Argan forests, endemic to this region of the world, are reminiscent of open savannah in East Africa, but here the grasses and land below has been cleared for agricultural uses. The Argan fruit is prized for the high-quality oil pressed mostly by women, and used commercially for cosmetics as well as cooking. The hard

wood of the twisted Argan tree is made into charcoal, and camels and goats eagerly nibble good-tasting leaves. Some goats have been trained to climb the trees, to the delight of tourists, but the detriment of the endemic forests.



We decided to head on to Aoulouz Gorge, though it was nearly 2:00 pm, and it would take over an hour to get there. We saw an Atlas Long-legged Buzzard (*left*) during the drive, but no other raptors, though the valley is usually a good place to see some. We arrived around 3:00 pm, and stopped a few minutes on the bridge to scan the river. At this point, the Souss River emerges from its source in the mountains and flows steadily downstream, but the dry, stone riverbed was far wider than the actual water that flowed through it, and any aquatic vegetation that lined the water course had vanished.

We walked a circuit route around the gorge, scanning for raptors in the tall cliffs around us, and looking for passerines in the lush vegetation at the river's edge. We passed a few men on donkeys, and women working in terraced plots of corn, alfalfa and vegetables. Two friendly young women were kneeling at a stream washing turnips. They had amassed large, shining piles of the root vegetables, and would walk through the mountains carrying these heavy loads. We found several large piles of olives on the ground near a tethered mule under some olive trees. Nobody seemed to be around, but surely the olives would be carted off to market.

Birds were active in riverine greenery, with Chiffchaff, Black and Moussier's Redstarts, and a flock of Goldfinches feeding in shrubs. On the river, we saw Great and Little Egrets, Common and Green Sandpipers, Moroccan and Great Cormorants, Gray Heron, and a hunting Common Kestrel. A pair of Barbary Squirrels (*right*) scampered up the cliffs, and a Changeable Agama sunned itself on a rock. Numerous butterflies, including Desert Orange Tips and Bath Whites, flitted along the sunny dirt trails.

Our adventure at the Aoulouz Gorge was complete when we crossed the riverbed via a fast-flowing concrete ford, requiring us to step carefully through 2-inches of water, not to fall on the slippery, moss-covered wall!



On the drive back to Taroudannt, we scanned the fields as the sun set before us. Adrian spotted a Little Owl (*left*) sitting atop a large man-made rock cairn, requiring a quick slam of brakes and turnaround. Fortunately the owl was unfazed and only turned its head to look at us. It was a great bird to end our day list!

As before, we were greeted like old friends at our accommodations, and presented with another amazing dinner featuring a variety of side dishes, chicken bastilla entree, tiramisu dessert and hot mint tea. Our stay at "La Maison Anglaise" will not be forgotten, with its amazing food and incredible hospitality!





## December 5 - Taroudannt to Zagora

Today, our journey around southern Morocco approached the edge of the Sahara. We departed early, from our lovely abode in Taroudannt, to make the long drive eastwards, destination Zagora, in the Draa Valley.



Passing groves of olive and *argana*, we spotted now-familiar species of Moussier's Redstart, Maghreb Shrike, Common Kestrel, Common Bulbul, and White Wagtails. In Talouine, the saffron capital of the world, we saw the first sidewalks with curbs since leaving Marrakech - tourism is expanding rapidly in southern Morocco, and local people were eager to attract visitors with amenities. We detoured into the old kasbah on the edge of town, where we walked a loop around the walled compound. Square, brick-and-mud dwellings ringed the outside, seemingly dark and abandoned, but evidently occupied based on electric wires strung into them, and numbers painted on simple wooden doors. Shirts, pants and blankets were draped on walls - laundry, not rubbish, out to dry. Children's voices rang out from a nearby school, and workers with shovels were repairing a wall. After a bit of searching, we found our target Rock Sparrow, a lone bird perched on a rocky ledge, along with Great Tit, Blue Rock Thrush, Moussier's Redstart, Chiffchaff and House Buntings.



By 9:30 a.m. we left the Talouine Kasbah and began ascending the foothills of the Anti Atlas Mountain range, via switchbacks. Agricultural plots were neatly terraced along each bend, hosting vegetables as well as olive trees. Square field blocks continued along a stretch of plains. As the earth became increasingly arid and rocky, plots gave way to herds of goats and sheep. These hardy livestock nibbled what they could find of low scrub vegetation, and were tended by nomadic tribespeople whose large round tents were standing against a hillside in the middle of nowhere.

Along this Tizi-n-Taghatine pass, Thekla Larks darted across the road frequently, and we pulled over when one looked different. It turned out to be several Temminck's Horned Larks foraging amongst dirt clods. A Northern Wheatear popped into sight while we were scanning. A little farther on, about 20 miles west of Tazenakht, we stopped again for a perched Red-rumped Wheatear which flew away quickly, but a flock of 8 Trumpeter Finches bounced into view foraging for seeds around some rocks. A pair of Hoopoe Larks stayed close by, pecking for food just yards away from us.



We stopped at a relatively green wadi near Tizi-n-Timlaine, when the first of many White-crowned Wheatears caught our eye. Several Desert Larks (*left*) also moved around the small rocks that littered the terrain. A possible Scrub Warbler flitted about some bushes, but we could not see it well enough to confirm I.D., and could not relocate it after it flew across the road, despite much effort. We ate our picnic lunch here at a roadside pullout. It was amazingly quiet in the dry, rocky area, and sound travelled far. We heard the murmurs of 2 nomadic herdsman conversing a long way off, from the top of a distant ridge.

The landscape featured a hundred shades of brown, as layers of rock pitched at 45-degree angle formed the mountains around us. Electric wires strung between towers and a snaking iron water pipe shadowed our route as we wound through rock and sand. A gravel river bed beside us was mostly dry, though we knew there was water when green vegetation clustered in clumps.



Beyond the town of Agdz, our route stayed in the lush Draa Valley, nourished by the wide flowing Draa River. The banks were lined with tall date palms, with olive trees interspersed amongst them. We stopped at the Tansikhte Barrage, not far beyond the center of Agdz. Crag Martins circled high above the rocky cliffs, and a pair of Black Redstarts flitted amongst the tamarisk shrubs.

About 19km west of Zagora, we turned down a dirt track leading into a village, and through a palmery, ending at the river. Under the pleasant shade of the palms, local people cultivated their crops, cut bamboo poles, loaded dates into sacks, and urged tired donkeys to further toil. At the water's edge, we found a variety of birds, including Gray Heron, Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Blackbirds, Serin, Goldfinches and many Common Bulbuls singing merrily while eating date fruits.

After the long day's drive, we reached the bustling tourist town of Zagora around 4:30 p.m. Before turning into our kasbah, we proceeded beyond the town for a sundown stop at the nearest sand dune (*right*), about 20 km beyond town. We declined a camel ride, took orange-tinted photos, then turned back to Zagora to check into our hotel. There would be more impressive ones to come! The Kasbah Sirocco featured friendly staff, interesting decor, and a wonderfully warm room, shower and dinner. We looked forward to exploring more of the desert tomorrow!





## Day 6 - Zagora to M'Hamid

After a traditional, carb-heavy breakfast of bread, crepes, corncake and jam, we checked out of the Kasbah Sirocco and got on the road a little after 8 am. We stopped at the main town circle for quick photos of the sign pointing the way to Timbuktu, “52 jours” away. Centuries ago, Zagora was an important stop for traders making the long journey (52 days by camel) south to the bottom of the Sahara and visa versa.

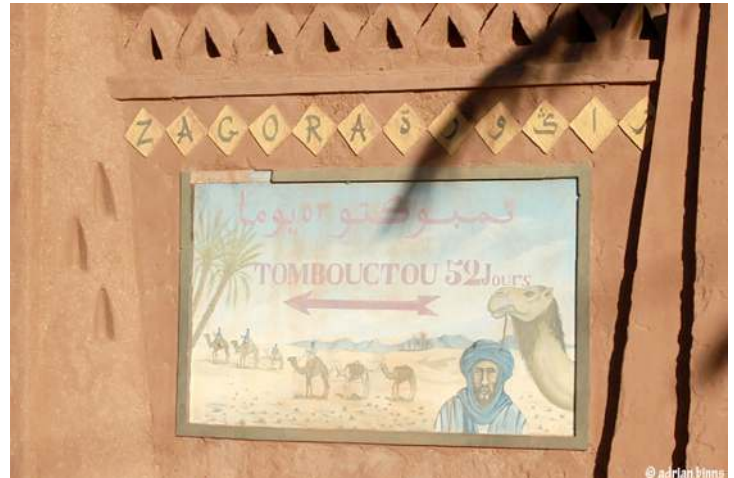
As expected, morning was chilly in the desert, but warmed up quickly as the sun rose. On the outskirts of Tamegrout village, we stopped for birds pecking along the roadside, and were delighted to find a pair of Long-billed Larks, along with White-crowned

Wheatear and Blue Rock Thrush. We parked a few minutes to explore the banks of the Draa River where it passed under our road, at the bottom of a lush valley. It was scenic but quiet, with only a White Wagtail drinking from a pool, and Common Bulbuls singing from the tops of date palms. An unusually friendly dog followed us most of the way, playfully jumping up for attention. We found most of the domestic animals to be respectfully aloof of all people except their masters; this behavior ensures they won't be killed for aggression, nor stolen to toil for someone else.

Continuing south to M'Hamid, the landscape flattened to small rocks set in rust-red sand, framed by distant flat-top plateaus. In this *hamada* terrain we found Desert Grey Shrike and a flock of 8 Bar-tailed Larks. About 18 km before M'Hamid, we turned off the paved road onto a sand track into the desert. Multiple vehicle tracks spread-out in all directions, seemingly leading to nowhere, but Mustapha knew the route to follow, and soon we reached the Erg Lihoudi sand dunes (*left*). Clusters of large square tents were set-up around the dunes, catering to tourists interested in sleeping in traditional, nomadic bedouin tents, known as bivouacs. We saw a few men and 2 tethered camels, but no visitors. We decided to climb some of the dunes to experience it for ourselves. We saw the tracks of small desert rodents, lizards and beetles, as well as those of people and round-footed camels. From the top of a tall, steep dune, Deb rolled down in the sand lengthwise, while Adrian took photos for posterity.



After our fun in the sand, we were drawn to one of few scraggly Apple of Sodom (*Caloptropis procera*) trees near the bivouac camp, on which over a dozen Desert Sparrows (*right*) were chirping and moving around. Upon further inspection, we realized there were over 30 birds, flying back and forth between that tree and the area where the 2 camels were tethered. We moved closer to the poor beasts and spent ample time photographing the sparrows, as well as several Temminck's Larks, and Bar-tailed Larks. Hearing soft, bubbling calls, we looked up in time to see two separate flocks of sandgrouse flying overhead. Their long pintails and black underbelly line confirmed their I.D. as Spotted Sandgrouse, a nice find in the desert. Returning back along the track, we saw several large locusts jumping around the rocks, and a Kestrel perched nearby, in the right spot to catch a meal!



At 12:45 pm we were back on the paved road to M'Hamid, driving through flat, rocky terrain dotted with Acacia trees and foot-high *jujube* thorn bushes. Tamarisk trees grew atop medium-size sand dunes undulating near and far. Low fences made of palm fronds zig-zagged along the roadside, catching sand to form new sand dunes, and stop the advancement across the road. We saw workers moving stacks of palm fronds in a pick-up truck. On the outskirts of town, concrete irrigation channels funneled water to squared-off plots in palmeries, in which people grew fruits and vegetables.



After a roadside picnic lunch, we checked into “Chez Le Pacha,” a very comfortable and picturesque accommodation in the desert. We set-out shortly to try another off-road track at the end of town, where the pavement stopped, and the road simply ended in sand. A large flock of Brown-necked Ravens welcomed us to the desert, alighting on the ground nearby, then flying high in the sky to form a large kettle of over 30 birds. Alas, the deep sand on our intended route proved too difficult to navigate, and we detoured back towards the Erg Lihoudi dunes. We stopped at several promising-looking spots to search for birds, and were rewarded with great looks at an adult Tristram’s Warbler (*above left*) popping around a good-sized tamarisk. We explored a small part of an expansive wadi that stretched for many kilometers, providing resources for many creatures, even though it was dry. Scrub foliage provided shade for travelers like the camel herder we saw crossing in the distance, as well as a variety of small animals whose tracks we saw in the sand. A handsome Desert Wheatear (*above right*) posed for us on top of a shrub, changing perches while giving us great looks. Another Tristram’s Warbler, an immature, flitted into sight and followed us several yards down the wadi.

We left the area around 4:30 pm, with less than an hour’s daylight remaining. We used some of this time pushing our vehicle out of a deep sand dune, with help from a local man who was bringing 2 tourists on their camels back to the nearby bivouac camp. He quickly scooped long armfuls of sand away from the back tires, and helped push us out of the sand so we could proceed without further trouble. Adventure abounds in the desert!



The setting sun spread beautiful shades of orange, pink and purple across the vast desert sky. Temperatures dropped as shadows lengthened, making it harder to distinguish peaks and valleys on the bumpy, trackless terrain. We finally reached the paved road and made our way back to “Chez Le Pacha” in the last rays of light.



We relaxed at the bar with cold “Speciale” beer, and chatted with the friendly bartender, Brahim. He marveled that we were touring southern Morocco to look for birds, and showed interest in our checklists. We were amazed when he pointed out a local White-crowned Wheatear roosting in the palm-wood rafters above our barstools. Brahim says it comes nearly every night to sleep in that spot!

We dined on another delicious chicken tajine and retired in bliss after a wonderful day at the edge of the Sahara Desert.



## Day 7 - M'Hamid to Zagora, a day in the desert

A thousand shades of earth tones sparkled from the desert as we explored the Erg (sand dunes) around M'Hamid. The region attracts tourists with 4x4 rides through the sands, camel trekking, and a chance to spend the night in a bivouac like the nomads. After a brief morning tour of the close dunes and camp - the same one as yesterday - we headed deeper into the vast desert wilderness accompanied by an experienced guide. 22-year old Omar negotiated the dunes with expert ease, willing to stop whenever we yelled "arret!" when spotting larks or a perched shrike. There are not many bird species to be found in the desert, but some were relatively common, including numerous White-crowned Wheatears, and Bar-tailed Larks moving around the dry "wadis." We saw several striking Hoopoe Larks (*right*), a few Desert Sparrows and a lone Trumpeter Finch pecking in the dirt.



Heading southwest, we passed through the "Valley of the Ostrich" named long ago by the local people who hunted them to extirpation. A flock of sheep appeared seemingly out of nowhere, tended by a lone herdsman. We marveled that they had probably walked over 10 kilometers for the animals to nibble on a few bits of scraggly vegetation, barely visible above the surface. Similar herds of goats were also around. Camels also dotted the distant landscape, often without an apparent master, though surely one was nearby. Actually, they are domestic dromedaries, with one hump, and prized for their ability to walk long distances across the sand with little food or water. They plod slowly on soft, oversized round hooves, carrying people and heavy loads. Desert people rely upon these animals for meat, milk, transportation, toil and tourism. It seems that a donkey's life is worst of all, as these small beasts carried heavier loads everywhere through city streets and rural areas, toiling non-stop for their owners.



The desert landscape undulated in sweeping vistas of ever-changing colors, depending on the light. Wisps of clouds floated high above, adding nothing more than a painter's brushstroke to the piercing blue sky. It rains only 3 or 4 times a year, in bursts that last about 15 minutes. Enough water to temporarily fill the dry wadis and stony riverbeds. If it rained any more, dwellings would disintegrate, as they are made of earthen clay - pise. Structures stand for decades, even a hundred or more years, before dissolving under the force of natural winds and rains.

The plateau ridge-lines ran in distinctive peaks, dips and straight lines, no doubt serving as landmarks for nomads who crossed vast distances without aid of maps or compass. Shimmering mirages appeared and vanished just as quickly beneath the blinding sun. Silhouettes of palm trees emerged as we approached a lone oasis in the middle of the desert. Water was harnessed from a well and channeled into narrowed canals

to support bright green vegetation. Unbelievably, we found several dozen African Green Frogs chirping in a moss-lined channel shaded by palm trees. We wondered how the first frogs managed to find this remote place where they could thrive and reproduce?



Reaching Erg Chgaga (*above*), a vast region of large sand dunes, we were greeted by several men working at Le Pacha's bivouac site. The area featured a ring of sleeping tents and a large dining tent to accommodate guests eager to experience a bit of nomadic lifestyle. We enjoyed our picnic lunch under a tent canopy of woven camel-hair, sheltered from the wind-blown sand, accompanied by hot tea and two young men who were very keen to see Adrian's photos.



During the return journey, Omar turned on a bit of traditional Mali music, and we were lulled by desert magic - wind blowing sand across dunes, ridges layered in multiple colors, rocks scattered about in hundred shades of tan. Suddenly, Adrian yelled to stop, and there was much excitement that he spotted a pair of Houbara Bustards (*left*) flying low over a rocky hillside. One landed and walked quickly into the wadi scrub. We kept an eye on it while driving closer. It flew off, and we gave chase in an exciting, bouncy ride off the tracks and across the rocky slopes. Unfortunately, it flew out of sight over a ridge, but we had gotten solid views of this elusive desert species that has learned to hide from hungry human hunters.

Farther down the track, Omar stopped when we saw a pair of Cream-colored Coursers (*right*) directly in front of the vehicle. Visibility was low as sand was blowing across the wadi, but we got great looks at close range. A Desert Wheatear perched in view close by. Our luck continued when we came across 9 Spotted Sandgrouse crouched on the ground several yards away from our vehicle. We saw them for a few moments before they decided to fly off in a chattering flock.

Our wonderful desert excursion ended late afternoon, when we said goodbye to Omar and jumped back in with Mustapha for the one-hour drive north back to Zagora. We checked into the Fibule du Dra and relaxed over another delicious tajine dinner followed by creme caramel.





## Dec 8 - Zagora to Merzouga



Our adventures in southern Morocco continued this morning with an early departure from Zagora, driving north then east to eventually reach another part of the Sahara Desert.

Within a half-hour of driving, Mustapha spotted a perched raptor on a distant electric tower - our first Barbary Falcon (*left*)! A few minutes later we spotted another one perched closer. We watched as it soared off its perch towards some village buildings, scaring up a flock of sparrows and pigeons. It took aim at something, as we saw a poof of feathers, but returned back to its same perch with empty talons.

Tall palms and green vegetation clustered along the *Oued Draa* (Draa River) in the Vallee du Draa, hosting a small variety of arid loving species as well as village farm plots. At the edge of a small village we stopped to observe a family group of 5 Hoopoes landing on ledges and chasing each other through palms. We noted the now-familiar Common Bulbul, White Wagtail, Blue Rock Thrush and Maghreb Blackbirds. During the 70 km drive from Zagora to the main turn east, we counted 23 White-crowned Wheatears and 8 Desert Grey Shrikes perched on acacia trees.

After the eastward turn towards Tizourine, we left the Draa River behind, and travelled through slightly different desert habitat. Hemmed in by mountain plateaus to the north and south, we crossed several dry wadis and rocky plains colored olive brown and rust. Bar-tailed Larks flew low across the road. Beyond the medium-size town of N'Kob, a Common Stonechat perched on a roadside shrub, and our count of White-crowned Wheatears was slowing a bit. Bright green squares of several well-irrigated agricultural plots contrasted sharply with the arid rocky landscape.



We spotted our first of several Lanner Falcons perched on a high tower, markedly paler than the Barbary Falcon. A Common Kestrel flew low over our vehicle a little while later. Desert raptors feed on small birds, rodents, grasshoppers and lizards, and we marveled that there were enough resources to sustain these creatures amidst this harsh, dry habitat.

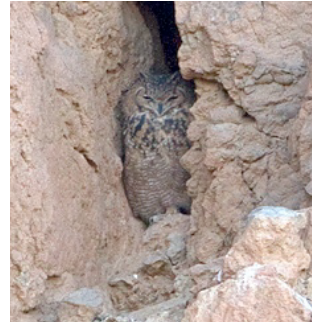
We pulled over to get closer looks at 2 or 3 Trumpeter Finches (*right*) pecking on small shrubs in a wadi. A Tristram's Warbler appeared in a nearby acacia tree, along with a ubiquitous White-crowned Wheatear. We stepped carefully to avoid squashing a fuzzy, yellow caterpillar inching along the stony ground near our parked vehicle. With tall two-toned spines on his back and head, it would likely turn into a moth.



Watching over a dozen martins circling around a steep cliffside, we concluded that most of them were Rock Martins with a few Crag Martins. In a nearby acacia tree we spotted a pair of Chiffchaffs darting around. We observed a second pair of Lanner Falcons (*left*), these ones dive-bombing a Long-legged Buzzard perched on an electric tower; the buzzard didn't budge from his post.

As a change from our daily tailgate lunch of bread, olives, cheese and tomatoes, we stopped at a colorfully signed hotel/restaurant in Rissani. The concept of restaurants is broadly defined in Morocco, and we had concerns about the availability of food and speed of service. Any worries disappeared when the smiling waiter quickly brought bread and drinks to us on the outdoor front patio. Soon we were devouring a savory tajine of eggs and vegetables, and a delicious cold salad platter of fresh, sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots and red onions in vinegar.

After such a delicious lunch we were ready to continue birding. First, we detoured a few kilometers north of town to meet-up with Brahim, a young, local birder who agreed to guide us in this region. He left his bike with a friend and jumped in our vehicle to take us to a known spot where Pharoah's Eagle Owl (*right*) roosts. Adrian remembered the location from previous trips, and put a scope on the bird almost immediately. Tucked in a long vertical crevice in the shadow of a sheer rock cliff, the Eagle Owl gazed at us with one eye closed. It looked small against such a huge, looming background, but we knew it stood majestically over 2 feet tall.



Brahim then led us to a new place, a wide stoney bowl with a large sandy island of scraggly low plains foliage, framed by jagged rock walls. A Maghreb Wheatear perched close by, as we got out of the vehicle and walked along the sandy terrain. A flock of Spotted Sandgrouse (*right*) flushed and flew across the bowl, calling distinctively before settling down on the other side. Brahim assured us we could approach closer by car than foot, so we drove the distance to find them. Indeed, we got remarkably close, allowing for great photos of these striking ground-foragers.



We spent this night and the next at Auberge Derkaoua, located 20 km east of Rissani, about 7 km down a well-worn dirt track. This lovely hotel features attractive landscaping, comfortable rooms, and delicious meals. Friendly staff arrange any services desired, including camel rides, and 4x4 excursions into the desert. It attracts some famous patrons, and served as part of the movie set for Highlander II.

## December 9 - Merzouga

This morning's highlight was a sunrise camel ride along the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi. We awoke before 5 am and dressed warmly to journey via 4x4 vehicle down a long sand track. It was still dark when we arrived at the staging area where camels and their attendants awaited tourists. The large, placid animals were already saddled and resting on their knees for us to straddle atop them. They stood up first on back legs, then front legs, and after that swift rocking motion, we were seated relatively comfortably about 7 feet off the ground. The back camel was short-rope to the front camel, whose rope was held by a 15-year old boy wrapped in purple robe. His 23-year old friend, wearing a bright orange turban, walked beside him; we never learned their names.





The air was crisp and still beneath a star-studded sky. We felt no need to speak as our camels plodded softly along the trail into the sand dunes. With the first hints of light in the sky, we could see other camels and riders around us. We ascended a bit, then disembarked from our mounts. We followed our 2 young guides up to the peak of the highest, nearby sand dune. It was tough walking through deep powder sand, and we were breathing hard when we reached the ridge top. We sat on a thick-woven blanket carried up by the guides, and watched as the sun rose above the dunes and flooded the sky with gorgeous hues of orange, yellow and pink. The experience was nearly perfect, save for a large group of 100 tourists who arrived all together, hiked to the top of nearby dunes, and talked loudly during the whole sunrise. Sound travels far across the vast, empty desert.

When we'd had our fill, the guides wrapped Deb in the blanket and pulled her down the dune in a sandy sled ride! As the camels plodded back to their resting place, we counted the first birds of the day - a pair of Desert Sparrows, a White-crowned Wheatear, and flocks of House Sparrows pecking amongst the camel dung.

Back at the Auberge Derkaoua, we enjoyed a delicious breakfast, then met-up with Mustapha and Brahim for another full day of birding in the desert. We first explored a patch of agricultural plots near the town center of Rissani. We did not find any target Fulvous Babblers, but flushed many Long-billed Larks (*below left*) while walking the edges of wheat plots. Common Kestrel and Long-Legged Buzzard soared overhead.



We continued on towards Kasbah Said and spent time walking through a green-vegetated wadi, the best habitat to find elusive Desert Warblers. Besides Greater Hoopoe and Bar-tailed Desert Larks, it was fairly quiet. Luck was with us at the next wadi, where it took about 45 minutes of walking through sand and low shrubs to locate our target African Desert Warbler (*above right*), along with a nice Desert Wheatear.



We enjoyed a leisurely lunch at Cafe Yasmina, a refreshing oasis in the desert. After hot mint tea and delicious meatball & egg tajine, we strolled the perimeter of what remained of the large temporary lake, finding Ruddy Shelduck, Northern Shovelers, Marbled and Common Teal, Little Grebe, Black-winged Stilt, Green Sandpiper, wagtails and doves. It was amazing to think that birds manage to find this life-sustaining lake in the middle of the desert; how many miles had they flown, and why does their journey take them over such a perilous climate? We didn't know the answers, but enjoyed the spectacle before us.

From there we drove south into Merzouga, to check out the village palmerie. Underground water is pumped up and used to irrigate an otherwise harsh, arid land. We learned that the local government manages the system, whereby villagers rent plots, and receive an allocation of water to nurture crops of their choosing. Water runs through a grid of ground-level, cement channels, demarcating large squares which are further subdivided by dirt channels. Plots contained a variety of date palms, corn, wheat, edible greens and vegetables. Mostly women and children worked the crops, accompanied by tired-looking donkeys and carts. Bird activity was low, though we got good looks at a Long-legged Buzzard (*right*) perched in a palm tree, several Laughing Doves, Maghreb Blackbirds and a couple of Chiffchaffs bathing in the water canal.



We left the village and followed a dirt track towards Lake Merzouga, a vast, ever-changing depression that was mostly dry at the moment. We paused briefly at a ridge top, to admire and photograph the terrain around us, glowing with long shadows and brilliant sunset colors as Brown-necked Ravens headed to roost. What remained of the lake was actually very little, only 3 or 4 shallow ponds, bisected by a hard-packed dirt track. We got out to scan and saw a Common Ringed Plover and White Wagtail at the water's edge. A pair of Ruddy Shelducks flew in, silhouetted by the setting sun.

As the sky turned to pink and purple, we saw several bats hawking insects overhead, another sign of the mysteries of the desert that supports a seemingly impossible variety of animal life.

## December 10 – Merzouga to Boumalne

Today we departed early from the deep desert of Morocco and traveled northwest towards Boumalne. Multiple stops provided plenty to see and experience along the way.



We pulled over to inspect a long-abandoned well dug deep into the ground. It looked like a mini volcano protruding up from the sandy landscape, just a few yards from the road. It was one of hundreds of such structures situated close together, covering a vast area in a fascinating, alien-looking landscape. We wondered how people dug these wells without use of machinery, many decades ago. And why were so many of them dug so close together? Our driver, Mustapha, told us these wells have been dry for at least a century.

Further on, we stopped to inspect a more modern well. This one was made of concrete and featured the recognizable bucket hanging from a bar, suspended over the opening. Deb tried it for herself, and with some reasonable effort, was able to haul up a dripping bucket of cold water and pour it into the adjacent trough. Such wells are dotted around the countryside, providing critical water sources for herders and livestock. Birds benefit too; a flock of Trumpeter Finches flew in immediately for a drink.



At our next stop, we focused on finding small, non-avian creatures. Mustapha chose a seemingly random place along the rocky plains to pull over, get out, and begin flipping over small boulders to peer underneath. We were delighted when he called us over to see 2 large black beetles entangled in their web nest, along with 2 Tripoli Pygmy Geckos squirming in the light. Soon all 3 of us were flipping rocks in search of interesting insects and reptiles. We found a bright orange 'tiger' centipede, and one small Yellow Scorpion (*right*). Mustapha explained that scorpions are quite common in the warmer months, but most are hibernating now, being December.



East of Goulmina, we stopped in a likely-looking wadi to search for our target Scrub Warbler (*left*). We quickly found 4 of them in this birdy spot, and spent ample time enjoying their lively activity. We followed a large flock of 200 Lesser Short-toed Larks, which sporadically leaped up off the ground, flew low and fast over scrubby shrubs, then settled back down again out of sight. Good numbers of Thekla's, Temminck's and Hoopoe Larks were seen foraging.

In the town of Goulmina we stopped to buy a large box of dates from a roadside stand. Adrian enjoyed haggling with the vendor who explained that different quality dates cost different prices. His cart displayed an enticing assortment of the sweet fruits, ranging in color from golden yellow to deep brown caramel. We ended up with a 3-kilo box of medium-quality dates, which we preferred in taste over the fanciest ones! We would hardly make a dent in eating this large box, as we had only a few days left of our trip.



Continuing west towards Tinejdad, we stopped briefly for a flock of 9 Fulvous Babbblers perched on a shrub close to the road. Unfortunately they didn't stay long enough flying from shrub to shrub further away. We moved on to the highlight of the day – exploring the Todra Gorge (*left*). The winding road through the steep gorge attracts myriad visitors, featuring spectacular scenery, quaint villages tucked against the mountains, and a lush, green riverbed. The narrowest part of the gorge is just 100 feet wide - a shadowed mountain pass, where the rolling river rushes right next to the road. Like other tourists, we stopped at this juncture to admire the majestic landscape, feeling small beneath the towering cliff sides and noisy river rapids. We ate our picnic lunch on the far side of the narrow pass, in a sunny pullover, sitting on boulders. We watched European rock climbers scale the sheer cliffs with ropes and harnesses. Suddenly, two Bonelli's Eagles soared into view overhead, lazily circling together. We watched breathlessly as they honed in on a Cattle Egret that had come out of the pass, and chased it around. Rock Pigeons, (real ones!) flushed off their ledge perches and flew around nervously. A most exciting lunch stop for us!

Back out of the gorge, we continued west towards Boumalne, stopping briefly to get a view of a Little Owl perched on a rock pile. It was a while before we noticed it's mate standing a hundred yards away. We scanned roadside escarpments for falcons and eagle-owls without luck, though we found several Atlas Long-legged Buzzards sitting atop electric poles and standing on the ground. One buzzard stood fairly close to a Fat Sand Rat that was munching contentedly on a mouth full of vegetation. These gerbil-sized rodents serve as ample food sources for desert raptors.

We spent the final hours of daylight traversing dirt tracks that criss-cross an expansive, low-scrub rocky plain, outside the town of Boumalne. A variety of larks, sandgrouse and other animals inhabit this area, known as the Tadgilt Track. Feral dogs also roamed around, staying close to the town's open garbage pit, which litters the plains with unsightly plastic and other debris. We tried to avoid the dump, but ended up following many birds including Red-rumped Wheatear (*right*) to the site, which apparently provides plenty to eat for hungry scavengers willing to forage amidst broken glass and low-burning fires.



We veered away from the dump to take a track towards the hills, unexpectedly flushing a flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. We followed them to their landing spot and saw they had joined an even larger flock, which included some Spotted Sandgrouse in the mix!

We had seen a wonderful variety of birds and animals today, and traveled through some beautiful, scenic landscapes. What would tomorrow bring?

### December 11 – Vallee du Dades

We spent this morning in further exploration of the Tagdilt Tract, outside the town of Boumalne. We had spent some time here last night, and were eager to follow new "pistes" (off-road tracks) to see where they might lead us.



One of our first sightings was of a Red Fox, pausing to gaze at us from a ridge top. We watched in awe as it trotted out of sight; mammals of such size are rarely encountered in these arid, desert climes. They, like other creatures, might be attracted to the open-pit town dump, which unfortunately litters the grounds with unsightly plastic trash. We traveled away from it, following a large flock of Lesser Short-toed Larks mixed with a few Temminck's Larks. We spotted Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Red-rumped Wheatears amidst the low scrub foliage.

After searching a while, we returned back to the trash heap, thinking it might host some activity. Indeed, the dump was hopping with life, including about a dozen of our target Thick-billed Larks (*right*), along with Hoopoe Lark, White Wagtails, and two Long-legged Buzzards hunting for rats. Feral dogs circled the heap, wary of our presence, but not willing to leave this scavenger's paradise.



We left the tract and headed towards Dades Gorge. The road ascended through picturesque scenery and quaint villages, hugging steep cliffs carved by the winding Dades river below us. At one scenic pull-off, we saw a pair of Barbary Partridges foraging on some boulders across the gorge. Common Bulbuls sang musically from lush riverine forests dotted with neatly-tended agricultural plots. We stopped when Adrian spotted a Rock Bunting jumping from a wall, and spent the next 20 minutes enjoying an active mixed flock that included African Blue Tit, Chiffchaff, Goldfinch, Black Wheatear and Gray Wagtail.





The walls seemed to grow steeper, the road windier, as we climbed higher, occasionally passing some slow-moving cargo trucks. Adrian chuckled each time Deb cringed at the sharp hairpin curves and vehicles passing nearly blindly! If you want a idea what this scenic drive feels like, check out the Cadillac ATS Challenges the World commercial, that was filmed on this road. We lunched near the top, then turned around and descended without incident to continue on to our next destination.

We reached the reservoir at Ouarzazate around mid-afternoon. Numerous access points meant we could survey this vast water expanse from multiple vantage points, the first being near the southwestern end of the reservoir. We drove a short ways down a dirt road, scattering a large herd of grazing goats, and stopped just yards from the water's edge to scan. An Osprey flew overhead, drawing our attention to a group of distant waders including Little Egret, Gray Heron, Great Cormorant and Moroccan Cormorant. Black-headed Gulls congregated on an island, while Eurasian Coot and Great-crested Grebe paddled fairly close.

We drove through the bustling city of Ouarzazate, into the a suburban village, to reach the other end of the reservoir. We stopped briefly to follow a Little Owl (*right*) that perched on a rock pile, then flew uncharacteristically to a medium-size shrub. We took our time scanning the marshy edges this side, finding plenty to hold our interest. Several juvenile Greater Flamingos mixed with a large flock of White Storks. Shorebirds foraged at water's edge, including Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Common Ringed Plover and Little Stint. Familiar waterfowl - Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard and Common Teal - dabbled in shallows. A Marsh Harrier swooped close over the reeds.



With little light left in the day, we checked into "Dar Daif" for the evening. An unassuming doorway along the village's main street hid a delightful gem of a riad, a traditional moroccan house with an interior courtyard garden. Decades ago, a Frenchman fell in love with the country's only female adventure-guide. Together, the couple restored the property for guests, maintaining Morocco's cultural charm and offering incredibly delicious meals. After settling into our colorfully-tiled room and washing up, we sat down to one of the most memorable dinners of the trip, featuring freshly-prepared vegetables, delectable pigeon "pastila" (flaky-pastry pie) and a Berber musician serenading us with a banjo!

We were sorry that our stay would be so short, after such great birding at the reservoir, and delicious hospitality at Dar Daif!

## December 12 – Tiz n' Tichka, High Atlas

Our last full day in Morocco was no less memorable than all the others, filled with exciting experiences and memories to last a lifetime.

After a delicious breakfast, we departed from the wonderful Dar Daif in Ouarzazate and headed northwest to Marrakesh. We stopped briefly to admire an ancient Kasbah, Ait Ben Haddou, in the process of being restored, which attracts local artisans and supports the important tourist trade. Another detour led us in search of a Maghreb Wheatear. We were lucky to find the bird close by, characteristically perched on scrub vegetation or a rock as it paused to survey potential food sources.



Back on the main road, we unanimously decided to return to the peak of Oukaimeden, for another chance at finding alpine species that we missed our first day in the country, when the mountain was covered in 30 cms of snow. But first we needed to get over the Tiz n' Tichka pass (2260 meters), a winding road that went up and down in elevation as it traversed the High Atlas Mountains.



As we ascended to higher points, Deb felt ill with altitude sickness, and missed some spectacular scenery. As we began our descent we encountered a gregarious feeding flock of Red-billed Choughs along a lush green slope, as North African Ravens circled around. We watched, fascinated, as two ravens honed in on one chough and chased it relentlessly. The chough flew for its life, swerving away from the ravens' claws countless times. The smaller bird grew visibly more fatigued, escaping by tiny margins, as the ravens took turns diving at it. The chough eventually flew into a roadside culvert, safe for the moment. The ravens settled patiently to wait, knowing it would fly out soon enough, and they would snag it for a meal.

Continuing on our descent, we stopped several times including for our picnic lunch, and found a nice assortment of birds including Wood Pigeon, Great Tit, Atlas Blue Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Firecrest, Cirl Bunting and Cetti's Warbler.

For the second time in our trip, we drove across the plains Haouz Plain, passing by Thekla Larks, Moussier's Redstarts, Desert Wheatears and Common Kestrel, along with ubiquitous goats and olive trees. Ascending up to Oukaimeden, one of the highest reachable peaks by road in Morocco, we noted most of the snow was melted, and hoped for ample avian activity at the top!

Snow lingered on the summit, and a handful of skiers were enjoying the resort on this weekday. Adrian's persistence had paid off, as we soon had good looks at Rock Sparrows, and the birds we really wanted to see, Atlas Horned Larks and African Crimson-winged Finches. The larks, a dozen or more, were oblivious to any human activity and happily foraged amongst the plowed parking areas. We located a small group of finches moving about exposed boulders on a snow covered slope. These required viewing through the scope which gave us very satisfying looks of this shy alpine species.



We descended the mountain and headed back to Marrakesh for our last night in Morocco. It felt a little strange to drive into the bustling, rush-hour city, after so many days of rocky plains, arid scrub habitat and desert sand dunes. We parked along the 12th century city ramparts next to the Bab Doukkala (arched gateway), unable to drive inside it, unloaded our bags, and said a hasty, heartfelt good-bye to our faithful driver, Mustapha. A porter greeted us warmly, loaded our luggage into a large wooden wheelbarrow, and beckoned us to follow him through narrow, winding alleyways. We could barely keep up with him, distracted by crowded streets, colorful



shops, noisy motorcycles, and dodging donkeys pulling carts. After about 10 minutes walk, we reached a large wooden door tucked in a shadowy corner of bland, stucco walls. Was this our lodging?

When the door opened, we were shocked and delighted to see an immaculate, gorgeous, designer-decorated "riad." With just 6 guest rooms, the Riad Magellan (*right*) was one of several small properties owned or managed by a charming French couple, all located within a few minutes walk of the internationally-famous Djemma el Fna square. Like many European tourists (and very few Americans), the attraction of the square was the main reason for booking this particular accommodation.

After settling in to a charming, double-story bedroom, we were eager to head out to the streets to explore the square and a little of the city. Marrakesh is famed for its tourist hospitality, and the Riad Magellan manager assured us we were safe to walk around at night. He gave us a tiny map with directions to negotiate the maze of alleyways from the Riad to the square, and sent us on our way.



It was nearly 8pm by the time we reached the square, but it was buzzing with activity. Food sellers hawked their open-air stands loudly, urging hungry tourists to try their exotic dishes. We were quickly drawn to a set of tables covered in white plastic table covers, given menus, and encouraged to order tajines, vegetables or kebabs. We decided on mixed seafood platter, which was selected from mounds of fresh raw ingredients displayed on a cart, and cooked quickly before our eyes. We relaxed over our savory meal, enjoying exotic sights of blood-dripping meats, heaps of snails, rows of fresh oranges, boxes of dates, and dessert carts stopping at every food stall, to sell enticing- looking confections by the box-full.

Behind the belly-busting food, were dancers, story-tellers, henna-artists and magicians. Crowds gathered around the most talented, whooping and clapping in approval. We walked a little ways away from the square, towards the statuesque Koutoubia Mosque. Like any big city, the night-life crowds never waned, with people of all ages, sizes and backgrounds walking and talking in the streets. Horse-drawn carriages lined a straightaway, their drivers ceaselessly beckoning us to take a ride. Tourist were few and far between at this time of year. Vendors lined another side of the square, selling everything from pottery and baskets, to shoes, scarves, spices and herbs. Adrian haggled with several shop-owners for great bargains on painted bowls and woven baskets.

There was much to see, but the day was already long. We left Morocco early the next morning, departing with thousands of photos and as many wonderful memories of a fascinating country, filled with friendly people and some great birds!

