

## Morocco

### *Birding the edge of the Sahara*

25 March 25<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017

Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow

#### **Day 1 March 26<sup>th</sup>**

##### **Arrival – Casablanca to Rabat and Kenitra**

After their arrival the previous evening, Martin linked up with Louis and Anne and headed out from the Atlas Sky Hotel with Mustapha to Casablanca airport in bright sunshine. Pallid Swifts formed screaming parties around the terminal buildings as we waited for the rest of the group on their flight from JFK. Martin and Mustapha joined the rest of the human sardines restlessly cruising back and forth outside the two exits from the terminal building as they waited for friends, family and colleagues to emerge. After around an hour and a half, we spotted Adrian and donning hoods we moved in to hassle and tug at his clothes and luggage. Completely fooled by our disguise, Adrian cried out displeasure in a mixture of French and Arabic and was on the verge of lashing out before we revealed ourselves. What a hoot! A clear sign of things to come. After introductions, we piled into our comfortable minibus and were on the road to Rabat, some 65 km away.

Along the way, everyone familiarised themselves with the common birds on wires - Collared Dove, Blackbird, Spotless Starling and the like - and the sight of huge White Stork nests on communication towers, minarets and other buildings. The birds themselves were numerous, including some spiralling 'kettles' in the warm air.

At Chellah, we disembarked and instantly enjoyed views of a female Common Kestrel through the 'scope (including the black claws) and a number of Western Jackdaws. Unfortunately, the use of a scope attracted the attention of local non-uniform 'police', who had to be convinced that we were not taking pictures of the palace opposite. The fortified walls of Chellah are in the process of extensive restoration work and were looking particularly striking perched on the sides of the expansive river valley skirting Rabat. The grounds inside have a calm relaxed floral atmosphere and numerous passerines called and sang from the undergrowth and trees, but only the Blackbirds and Serins were particularly obliging, with only brief views of African Blue Tit and 'African' Chaffinch. In all honesty, these could not compare with the bill-clapping display, courtship and mating attempts of the numerous White Stork pairs nesting on the buildings and minaret. Some of these were only 3 m or so above the heads of the people walking underneath.

A few butterflies were on the wing including Large White, Speckled Wood, Red Admiral and a lone Small Copper around our lunch spot just outside the grounds. Mustapha had put together a great mixture of salads, cheese and tinned fish with a range of fruits and of course, fresh Moroccan bread, which was much appreciated.

Following lunch, after a short trip in the bus we disembarked again at the Tour Hassan, the site of a renovated mosque in a splendid square containing numerous ancient pillars. The centrepiece of the square is the mausoleum of the previous king with its fantastically ornate interior. Outside, one member of an unassuming gaggle of middle-aged Moroccan women in *djbellahs* succeeded in

climbing into a dry fountain on the wall to be photographed by the others! Kate also succeeded in grabbing a couple of photos of the unexpected and unlikely event. Probably a good job that the guards in traditional attire on horseback outside the gates remained unaware. Back in the bus, we began what is always a slow ride along the straight road to Kenitra, punctuated by stands of truffles for sale and a stretch of pepinieres or tiny garden centres selling ornamental house and patio plants; a sign of increasing wealth in Morocco.

The puddles and flushes of standing water alongside the road and in the fields and the generally green hinterland with splashes of blue, yellow and orange of wildflowers including swathes of wild *Calendula* marigold evidenced recent rainfall, and we were looking forward to Kenitra marsh being full of water and associated birds. Disappointing then to find that the body of water at the layby and turnaround that has produced a wealth of waterbirds on previous trips had been overgrown by *Typha* (cattail) and little water was visible. As a result, Martin suggested we head down the road to the right just before the hotel to the Cattle Egret colony in a series of low bushes that can be seen at distance from the main road, in the hope that we could find some open water. The colony turned out to be a thronging spectacle of hundreds of nesting egrets, supplemented by many Glossy Ibis and a few Black-crowned Night Herons just a few metres from the road. Many egrets were coming in with nesting material but had to adjust flight height to evade any trucks and vans as they crossed the surprisingly busy road. Scanning the open water produced a number of Ferruginous Duck, Pochard and sleeping male Red-crested Pochard. Adrian saw a crake crash land in the swamp, but it ran straight out of view before it could be identified.

Away from the main open water Martin found a Western Swamphen and called over the rest of the group to look, but to no avail. Fortunately, Adrian found a pair of Marbled Teal swimming through the channels in the *Typha*, which everyone got onto before they flew, reappeared and then flew again to the open water where they joined another two that had previously gone unnoticed. Seeing this globally endangered duck at close range is always high on the trips hit list.

By now it was time to check-in to the hotel with the idea that we could pop out again later. However, the staff hotel seemed to have other ideas as confusion reigned over the number of rooms, where they might be and how many people and the size and number of beds each might require. Some 30 mins later we were still not all in our rooms as the receptionist (which he claimed was not his normal job) had managed to lose two off the list. In a Fawlty Towers kind of way, we moved luggage up and down stairs and swapped rooms according to who needed two beds or could tolerate or would prefer one large bed. Eventually it became clear that we actually had the right number of rooms as the missing two were over the page. Enough said.

Later than planned we popped back to the marsh and briefly explored the pools on the other side of the road. This added the first Black-winged Stilts and Green Sandpipers to our list that we filled in for the first time just before dinner. The latter introduced the first tajine of many; a classic lemon chicken with green olives.

## **Day 2 March 27<sup>th</sup>**

### **Foret du Zaers and Lac du Sidi Bourhaba**

An early start this morning with a 5.00 am breakfast saw us leave the Hotel Assam by 5.30 am in order to be on site by dawn in our quest for Double-spurred Francolin. The journey was unexpectedly quick as a result of connecting with the new highway and just after an hour and a quarter we were hopping out of the van for a toilet break and listening to the dawn chorus of Nightingale, Song Thrush, Blackbird and Robin – a bit like a traditional English woodland. However, the forest itself is very Mediterranean with short Cork and Holm Oaks with a scrubby understorey of *Cistus* and *Lavendula* amongst other herbs. We picked up Labidi our Francolin guide and began to tour the tracks within the forest looking for the bird. After a short time, there was much excitement as a partridge-sized bird exploded out of the undergrowth and landed a short distance down the track.

Crest raised, it ran roadrunner-like down the track in full view; but this was Barbary Partridge and not the Francolin. At least everyone knew what to look for now and Martin's pronunciation of 'Barrbarry Parrtridge' to the series of questions on the identity of the bird in front of us, was something that would also amuse us later at dinner.

After exploring all Labidi's best places for Francolin in the van, we tried walking down another narrow track, but this was difficult terrain to see a bird that we could surprise with the possibility of only a brief glimpse before it melted into the undergrowth. As we headed back, Kate, Martin and Adrian stopped to take a few floral pictures of Field Gladiolus, French Lavender and a beautiful blue *Iris*. Suddenly, Labidi was rushing back for us as Mustapha had seen one or perhaps two Francolins cross the main track. Some calling could be heard from the undergrowth. As the group waited, Labidi disappeared into the vegetation to try and get ahead of the bird(s) and perhaps guide them back to the track. However, the only fauna that emerged back onto the track to the line of binoculars was a slightly dishevelled Labidi.

And so the quest continued for the next two and a half hours, punctuated by only a brief sojourn into a couple of open grassy areas where we enjoyed good views of a pair of Stone Curlews, singing Corn Bunting within 3 m of the open door and windows of the van, a rusty-rumped Thekla Lark and a splendid Woodchat Shrike.

Eventually, it was time to give up this area and as a final throw of the dice we headed over the road to an area of *Eucalyptus* with a good view over the valley. A Cuckoo called in the distance and we moved towards it. Suddenly, Adrian called to not move any further as there was the Cuckoo in song at the top of a Cork Oak. It was simply stunning as it pumped its chest to issue its name to all who cared to hear. A male Redstart called and showed briefly to Martin at a distance of just a few metres away before disappearing; sadly, not to be seen again. Back at the van, Mustapha described seeing a woodpecker and Martin headed for the drumming. The bird was two-thirds up a tall, bare spindly Eucalypt and provided really good views to the appreciative crowd gathered below.

Heading away from the forest, we went through a series of raptor experiences with the first two being somewhat frustrating as firstly, a large distant eagle glided rapidly away followed by a Common Buzzard that flew alongside and then away from us. At least the large raptor atop a pylon was not going anywhere and we were pleased to get great views of a Short-toed Eagle scanning for prey. The large, 'blocky' head is always a useful ID feature, but we could even see a yellow eye and the short, powerful toes and claws. A pair of Kestrels were on the same pylon at a lower level.

After dropping Labidi in the local town, the journey continued back through Rabat to Lac du Sidi Bourhaba, stopping off for *hobs* (circular, flattened Moroccan bread) on the way. This became a bit of a photo stop for those interested in the piles of peanuts as well as the bread. We stopped briefly above the ribbon of a lake behind the series of dunes to the seaward side that make up the National Park. Tens of Red-crested Pochards decorated the shallows with a large Yellow-legged Gull on a rock. At the causeway over the northern end of the lake, we alighted from the van to enjoy a Red-knobbed Coot diving and then feeding five chicks at very close range. A photographer's dream at the right angle of the light. At slightly greater distance, a number of White-headed ducks were putting on a show for a single female. One male crabbed sideways, thrashing the water with his feet and seemingly blowing bubbles through his lowered bright blue bill to create an overall impression akin to a mini hot tub. It was not clear however if it was this male that succeeded in mating with the female but one certainly did, virtually submerging her in the process.

Three Snipe probing the shallows, more Red-crested Pochard and then a pair of Marbled Duck in the open provided further interest in and around the water as Black Kite, Marsh Harrier and a Sparrowhawk cruised overhead. It was now after 13.30 and we were grateful for the picnic that Mustapha had carefully prepared on the lakeside under the bordering *Eucalyptus*. Both before and after lunch we were again approached by both the park rangers and then local militia regarding

permits to use our telescopes and relatively large cameras; again, there seemed to be confusion that we were some sort of professional documentary film crew.

A slow walk through the *Eucalyptus* grove ultimately to the car park produced a number of passerines including Blue and Great Tits, Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff, Wren and what proved to be a long search/wait for one of what is surely one of the Western Palearctic's most elusive species; Cetti's Warbler. Intermittent explosive song and then a brief glimpse of a red-brown relatively long-tailed form as the bird made a short flight before diving into cover was to frustrate us for half an hour or more. The birds on the water were much easier including close pairs of Ferruginous Ducks and Great Crested Grebes in courtship display which then engaged in a territorial dispute with another pair. A Grey Heron posed a threat to a brood of seven or more Red-crested Pochard ducklings attended by mum and dad, although there was no risk from the typically immobile Black-Crowned Night Herons at roost in the bushes below the guano-stained trees occupied by numbers of Great Cormorants.

Just before we got back in the van, a group of non-breeding adult and immature Greater Flamingos flew past and then alighted on the water to the delight of the group, particularly Nancy, who had struggled to connect with flamingos back in the US. By now it was after 17.30 and our planned trip to the local estuary for gulls seemed a step too far and after promising Sandy that we would attempt a gull fest over the next couple of days, we headed back to the hotel.

Dinner was enlivened by a joint birthday celebration for Sandy and a post-birthday one (by a couple of days) for Bob, complete with two ice-cream cakes covered in chocolate and candles to blow out. A good end to a good day.

### **Day 3 March 28<sup>th</sup>**

#### **Merdja Zerga lagoon and marshes**

In order to give ourselves time for a full day at one of Morocco's great wetlands, we had left the hotel by 7.00 am and enjoyed a sunrise through early morning mist on our journey. We stopped briefly on the motorway (highway) and to demonstrate classic Moroccan-style, Mustapha reversed back up the highway for a raptor on a post that flew just as we reached it. A harrier was the most likely candidate.

We reached Moulay Bousellem in bright sunshine and enjoyed close views of Pallid Swifts flying in to prospect for nest sites under eaves. At sea, a few Sandwich Terns and Northern Gannets were foraging. Leaving the sea-watching behind, we had a bathroom break in a local restaurant, which offered a photo opportunity for those who had not experienced a traditional 'squat' toilet and the associated tap and bucket flush system before. After meeting Hassan, who was to be our guide, we boarded two boats for our trip on the lagoon. After a fishing Great Cormorant, there was an opportunity to look at a range of Audouin's, Lesser Black-backed and a few Yellow-legged Gulls loafing on the first large sandbar near the harbour. A group of Sandwich Terns in various stages of moult into summer plumage rested nearby.

Moving through what is a wide main channel we started to encounter wading birds (shorebirds) on the exposed mud at what was virtually low water in this tidal estuarine lagoon. Grey Plover and Greenshank were the commonest species with a few Ringed Plover and then both Whimbrel and the giant-billed Eurasian Curlew. Of these, probably only Whimbrel can catch the smaller individuals of the myriad crabs that coated the mud and scuttled away *en-masse* as the boat got close to the shoreline. Crabs are also not the target of the local fishermen and women, who focus on eels, small silver fish and cockles (clams) all taken with specific methods. Eels are caught in traps, whereas cast nets are used for the other fish, whereas cockles are harvested by hand with a short rake and picked into a bucket. The latter task is often undertaken by women although the men appear to lug the collected catch in net bags back to the shore. The cast netters were abroad in small boats generally with two men, one rowing and the other casting the net by swinging it out into a circle to enclose a

small piece of water. The leads sink rapidly and fish caught in the folds of the collapsed net as it is hauled back by the cast line.

At about this time, those in Martin's boat noticed that Hassan, in Adrian's boat, had begun to tug furiously on the ripcord for what had become a lifeless engine. After a few minutes of senseless pulling and random engine fiddling, Hassan's boat was attached to the other and we proceeded in a towing convoy on our way upstream. Patchy resources would partly explain the patchy distribution of birds in the lagoon and after spending more than a few minutes passing through an area virtually devoid of all birds, we again began to encounter some waders (shorebirds) as well as a lone Slender-billed Gull actively feeding by swimming and duck-diving in a narrow channel. A roost of terns composed of Sandwich and Caspian followed.

After more fiddling, Hassan's boat was now running again and we moved towards some higher ground partly composed of empty cockle shells. Just before we got there, 7-8 foraging Whiskered Terns flew past, only one of which was still in winter plumage with the others in dapper summer finery of dark grey underparts and a white moustachial stripe; hence the name. On the bank, the 'scopes came out to provide views of the rather distant waders that were restless on account of the patrolling Osprey. A Bar-tailed Godwit, probably a female judging by the length of her bill, probed amongst the Greenshank, Grey Plover and a few Dunlin. A Great White Egret stood in the middle distance with a group of Flamingos and another of Spoonbills corrupted by the haze in the far distance. After snatching and moving Martin's scope once too often, Hassan was chastised and got the hint. John offered a calming influence and smiles were regained.

The journey back was relatively uneventful with no further boat breakdowns although we did manage a nice view of the Audouin's Gulls although three close adults were bullied away by a brutish Yellow-legged Gull. Back on shore, the fishermen were displaying and trying to sell their various catches of various fish and some large crustaceans not dissimilar to freshwater crayfish (crawfish). We said our goodbyes to Hassan, who was now offering a second trip for Marsh Owl after lunch with possible Stone Curlews and Pratincoles; but we had already made arrangements with Mohammed, who really knows the whereabouts of the owls in the marshes along the east bank.

After a late lunch, nearer to 14.00 than 13.00, in a shady *Eucalyptus* wood that also unfortunately also doubles as the town dump, we headed off to meet our guide. The rich fertile hinterland of the drained marshes is loaded with arable produce, particularly strawberries under plastic polytunnels. We passed the Driscoll's factory, which is a big provider of soft fruit in the USA and used by quite a few people on the trip, who all vowed to check on the origin of their potential purchase the next time they were looking to buy any. The roads are busy with people in this area, but nevertheless the man jumping up and down and waving a bunch of what looked like yellow, wild-type lupins was an obvious curiosity. But it was only under Nancy's questioning, that the penny dropped with Mustapha that the 'lupin man' might be our guide, that we were supposed to be picking up. In typical fashion, we starting reversing hundreds of metres back up the road with the prospect of running over said guide before he had done his job! Fortunately, he had hopped in a taxi to chase us and pulled up alongside before any damage was done.

After taking a small track we bumped along it through the fields, tended by workers, including young women who may start work at just fourteen years of age. On the edge of the fields, but before the marsh dominated by stands of tall *Juncus* (rush), there are areas of wildflowers and grasses grazed by livestock, and here we alighted from the van. Mohammed lined us up and began to quarter the vegetation near a man tending his three or four cattle. Suddenly, a brown owl with long wings with large orange patches was in flight for a few seconds before it dived into an isolated stand of *Juncus*. After taking off his shoes and socks, Mohammed was off again to repeat the process another four times before we called for him to stop. Each time the Marsh Owl was only in flight for a few seconds, but in that brief time still managed to be buzzed by a male Montagu's Harrier and a Yellow Wagtail on different occasions. There were several Montagu's Harriers at various distances, including a

particularly close female that circled over our heads. Perhaps more surprising were the patrolling Gull-billed Terns and a couple of fly-overs of small groups of Collared Pratincoles.

Mohammed collected a bag full of large luscious-looking strawberries for us that would prove to offer sustenance as a supplementary dessert and a welcome addition to the next day's breakfast after being washed, courtesy of Nancy. After dropping off Mohammed at the side of the highway where he disappeared over the fence, we continued the journey back to the hotel. Unfortunately, Nancy's flooding room had not been changed for a less aquatic one, and Adrian became embroiled in the discussions with the staff. This ultimately involved calling a plumber whose sub-standard work had to be revised after he had left. Although the problem was not completely resolved, there was only one more night and Nancy's feet were already beginning to web as an adaptation.

With Adrian missing, Martin took the hardcore of Sandy, Agnes, John and Kate to Mehdiya Plage, at the estuary mouth for gulls. With the factories now closed and not releasing fish waste, the several hundred gulls present, which is a small number for this area, was attending any fishing vessels coming in or loafing on distant sandbars. This was still a spectacle though and the nice light offered some photo opportunities of Jackdaws on the walls of the old fort for Kate. A surprise was a pair of Marbled Duck flying up the river. Arriving back at after 19.30, we went straight to join the rest of the group at dinner.

#### **Day 4 March 29<sup>th</sup> Volubilis and Fez**

Another early start today with breakfast at 05.30 to pack the van and be on our way by 06.30. The fog was quite dense however and by the time we reached our toilet stop (bathroom break) at a gas station, we were close to an hour behind schedule. The unlikely looking locality of an urban street alongside the gas station offered terrific views of Blackcaps and Bulbuls taking nectar from the Australian bottle-brush trees, with the former becoming dusted with pollen. Pallid Swifts, an Alpine Swift and a few House Martins all cruised overhead. In the garage, a gentleman entering the kiosk confused Martin with the similarly red-fleeced attendants. After realising his mistake, he confirmed in English that "No-one is around?" and followed this with "Apart from God, who is everywhere". All in all, the gas station and surrounds had achieved a 'Total Experience' in accordance with the aspiration on the sign within the kiosk that was accompanied by a logo with a specific hand gesture; something akin to the "live long and prosper" sign made by Spock in Star Trek.

Moving on, within a few minutes we were in the rolling hills with a patchwork mosaic of crops centred on wheat but also including broad beans (flava beans), alfalfa and probably some barley, as well as some fallow fields with stubble. Several people commented on how beautiful this landscape was. At the defined moment, Mustapha turned left almost back on ourselves to take a tiny track that was barely wide enough for the vehicle. After a few hundred metres, we descended from the bus leaving Mustapha to turn around as we looked for our target, Calandra Lark. After a Corn Bunting provided temporary distraction, our bird was suddenly there in song flight just under the sun. Walking at it to change the angle, led to great views of this distinctive heavy lark with a large bill, black underwings and a white trailing edge. A few more song flights and chasing involving several other birds followed before we were done and on our way again.

After climbing a little in altitude and spotting our first Ravens on a telephone pylon, within about half an hour we got our first view of Volubilis nestling in the landscape. Even at distance, the arches and columns are quite stunning. Entering Volubilis itself, we collected our guide, Hassan, a Moroccan version of Antonio Banderas. This proved to be a good choice as Hassan spoke good English and had a good sense of humour. This showed through when partway through the tour he got Lou and Anne to sit either side of a stone plinth. As one person shuffled backwards, it became clear that Lou was sporting a giant stone phallus. Lou said he had not been that hard for years!

Although the main features of Volubilis including the amazing open air mosaics remain unchanged, a lot of work has been undertaken on the museum which is now highly educational. The landscape of Volubilis also changes with the seasons and annually according to climatic factors and this year, in keeping with the rest of the country we had experienced thus far, Volubilis was at its flowery best, with splashes and drifts of yellows, blues, pinks and oranges from the native wild flowers. As the temperature rose in warm sunshine, more and more butterflies came on the wing, not particularly in great numbers but in considerable diversity. First came Small Copper and Small and Bath Whites and then a fantastic Provence Hairstreak with its iridescent green under hindwing, and Moroccan Hairstreak, a subtle beauty of brown and grey patterning. Kate and Martin inevitably became separated from the rest of the group as a result of photographic distraction, a condition common on Moroccan Wildside trips it seems. Unfortunately, perhaps the three most colourful and/or spectacular species – Moroccan Orange-Tip, Scarce Swallowtail and Spanish Festoon – were very mobile and in the case of the latter two species limited to one or two individuals which no-one could connect with. At least we all got superb views of a very obliging male Sardinian Warbler and a soaring pale phase Booted Eagle. A sign of the more advanced season experienced by this later than usual trip was the Stonechats feeding several fledged young.

Sadly, it was time to go and we drove a couple of miles to a stand of *Eucalyptus* where there were endless Chaffinches amongst the trees. Several male Greenfinches were also singing, but it took us a while to finally find one in the canopy of similarly coloured leaves. The Moroccan race *vanmarli* is very bright green with sulphur yellow wing patches. Over lunch, Mustapha then surprised us by talking of scorpion burrows and then just to demonstrate started to poke a stick down a small hole. The 40 cm stick had just about disappeared when he asked Lou to step back and flicked a wriggling scorpion out to where he had been standing! We were all aghast. The scorpion had relatively large claws and so we assumed that it was perhaps not extremely venomous. Certainly, it was neither particularly aggressive, nor did it attempt to sting. After a few photographs, it was gently guided back to its hole with another stick and once within a few centimetres walked in none the worse for wear. John joked about how the scorpion would describe its experience to family and friends and we thought that alien abduction offered the most appropriate explanation.

Following lunch, we continued to Fez where we were to meet our guide, Ali, at around 15.00. Ali gave us an instant course in the basics of Fez, beginning with its real meaning; linked to an axe and not a tassled red hat. We then marvelled at the King's Palace and its giant ornate doors made of cedar wood covered with brass, which are polished to a shine with lemon juice. Moving through the Jewish quarter we took the ring road past the new entrance gate built in a traditional style. Here the road is built over a river. We climbed to the top of a high point where we got a real sense of the city 'built in a bowl' which means it is super-hot in summer and cold in winter. At this point, there is no real sense of the medina itself, the oldest standing medieval city in the World and its narrow 9,600 streets and 450,000 residents within 187 neighbourhoods all with the five essential elements: a mosque, a Koranic school (medersa), a bakery, a fountain and a Hamman (bath). But after a few minutes in the van and a walk of a few metres, there we were in the cool narrow streets amidst the bustle of all human life. Fez medina is simply an assault on the senses with its panoply of goods for sale, delicious and unsavoury smells and constant hum and strife of human voices. At first, we were simply getting in the way...

We visited a medersa where Ali gave us a lesson in mathematical geometry and holy numbers. We then toured a range of food producers and sellers, sampling the goods from fine pastry to dates, almonds and other fruits to bread at a bakery. A family run weaving business followed where the main central area was open to the sky although the loom and the prepared garments were tucked in under the surrounding recesses. The guys illustrated the different ways scarves could be prepared and selected different colours for skin and hair colour working on Elsie, Nancy, Kate and Barbara in

particular. Scarves, tablecloths and curtains were invariably bought. Other purchases as we toured included a Fez for Agnes' brother and fridge magnets for Nancy.

Towards the end of our tour we were guided through a nondescript door and climbed several levels of stairs after being given sprigs of mint to hold under noses to help overcome the pungent smells from the tannery area below us with its white stone circular cells reminiscent of the honeycomb in a bee's nest. Ali explained the process of stripping hair from hides with large knives and the use of pigeon droppings as part of the chemical cocktail to strip fat and grease at an early stage of the process before the various dyes are applied. It is incredible that the dyes are worked into the hides by men treading them in a knee-deep solution contained within the caustic (and probably carcinogenic) chemicals that makes this one of the toughest jobs in the world.

It was nearing dusk as we left the medina and hundreds of Alpine Swifts were attending the walls with its multitude human-made holes that are used by the birds as nest sites. We stopped at a Carrefour to buy beer and wine as we would be in 'dry' accommodation for a while. After a further short drive, we parked on the main road next to an entrance in the wall with no vehicular access. Here, we were collected by one of the hotel staff and escorted to our accommodation in the narrow streets. The Dar Fez Medina, is a beautifully ornate *dar* (rather than a *riad* which has an internal garden) over three storeys and a new rooftop terrace. By this time, we were running late (again) with dinner further delayed from 20.30 with two days of check list. Dinner itself was a rich affair with multiple delicious salad dishes as a starter before a chicken and lemon dish that was a league ahead of anything similar we had had previously. A pallet cleansing fruit soup followed.

## **Day 5 March 30<sup>th</sup>**

### **Dayet Auoua to the Zeida Plain**

A later breakfast at 07.00 today was a welcome treat. Outside, we were fortunate to catch the Alpine Swifts still around their nest holes and engaging in aerial acrobatics before they were to disappear off for the day in the surrounding skies. Unfortunately, we had forgotten the beer that had been 'foraged' the night before and had to go back. At least Martin got another couple of minutes with the swifts.

On the road again, after about an hour we began to climb into the Middle Atlas seeing our first Holm Oaks and pines and frequent Walnut trees near the houses and any water. There were any orchards of pink-blossomed cherry trees whilst the later flowering Apple trees were still bare. We stopped for *hobs* at Immouzer, which marks the beginning of chalet-style buildings also typical of the European alpine countries such as Switzerland. This is especially typical in the more affluent surroundings of Ifrane that we would see later in the journey.

At this point in proceedings we were truly in the land of Holm Oak, before we turned left to Dayet Auoua (the former meaning 'lake' and the latter 'gull' in Arabic). The water was at least 2 m down that meant the lake was a fraction of its normal size (perhaps <20%). Nevertheless, there was lots of Red-knobbed Coots feeding on the vegetation and three species of grebe - Black-necked, Little and Great-crested – in that order of abundance feeding on invertebrates and fish in the case of the larger species. Just to illustrate there was fish in the lake, a Cormorant emerged with a large cyprinid of at least 750 g that took some swallowing. Attracted by movement in the top of tree just coming into leaf, Adrian spotted a Hawfinch in brilliant sunshine. There was in fact, at least three of these chunky finches each sporting a massive bill reputedly able to crack a cherry stone. In this case, this formidable tool was being used to pinch out new growth, perhaps the pollen and nectar-rich reproductive parts. Whatever they were eating, this was a spectacular view of these normally cryptic and elusive birds.

A calling Firecrest drew us into the pine forest and using the song on a mobile phone brought the bird in just above our heads where it carried on singing. This was a simply exquisite view of what is a tiny bird the weight of a quarter dollar. Moving back to the lakeshore, after we traced a tapping

Great Spotted Woodpecker in the dead wood at the crown of one tree, a calling Levillant's Green Woodpecker flew into a nearby large Poplar. A second bird then became obvious as, incredibly, it hopped backwards down the tree to continue excavation of a new hole. The shutters were whirring at this point as the bird, only 25 m or so away, stopped to look back at us occasionally.

With one of our key target birds 'in the bag' we started looking for a Short-toed Treecreeper that had been calling. But, perhaps inevitably, we were distracted by a calling Jay in the pines over the road. After a couple of glimpses in flight the birds moved further back in the trees. Martin headed after them with Anne and Nancy and it soon became clear that we were dealing with at least two pairs interacting with each other, but by call only as they remained hidden in the canopy. After what seemed like a frustrating age, one of the pairs broke cover and flew over our heads. With these gone, we continued to wait patiently until, amidst more calling, the second pair also flew, with one bird briefly alighting on an open cross branch, where we got a nice view. To further add to our celebration, we then heard and saw Coal Tit working amongst the pine cones. The splinter group re-joined the main group who had seen the 'creeper and Nuthatch well. Both birds started calling again and both were readily re-found for all, alongside a migrant Willow Warbler. A number of ducks including a pair of Ferruginous Ducks decorated this end of the lake. With time pressing, Adrian decided to skip the next section where the road climbs to an open area and thence to a stand of large pines that has been good for us in the past when we have not collected all species near the lake.

Back on the road we climbed further into the middle Atlas and into what looked like deciduous Canary Oaks amongst a few large Atlas Cedars *Cedrus atlantica* where a shy troupe of Barbary Macaques melted into the forest as soon as we settled onto the verge for a moment. A couple of rather bolder macaques were taking hand-outs despite the "do not feed the monkeys" (singe) sign, at the point we left the road down to our lunch spot into the cool shade of the Cedars. A Firecrest came to see us, whereas the Mistle Thrushes flew a short distance away. A young traveller, carrying what looked like his entire world in a plastic bag was more than grateful for the sequence of handouts composed of bread from Mustapha and sandwiches and coke for now and later (plus a little money for tomorrow) from Martin. Not to be outdone Mustapha then gave him Lou's open bottle of coke that he'd started but just put down for a minute! We wished the young man good luck as he strode away with a full belly.

We were supposed to take a short walk back to the main road but got delayed by an Iberian Wall Lizard and then a terrific large Ocellated Lizard that stayed very calm and our first male Moussier's Redstart that drew appreciative 'oohs' and 'aahs' from the gathered crowd. A whiffy smell then stopped us in our tracks and we soon worked out that it was coming from Bob. Mustapha had a look of 'you're not coming near my van with that dog shit on your shoes' and 'perhaps you'd better walk if you insist', but without saying more than a couple of words in Arabic. Bob roped in Kate to help clean him up.

Back on the road and just before we were out of the trees, a couple of Macaques on the side of the road attracted our attention. Mustapha produced some bananas and offered one each to the young macaque and the adult, which they took politely. With this, there was suddenly lots of monkeys within two metres of us. There was an edge from one in particular that it would be in the van if there was an opportunity. The tension of the standoff was eased by the dominant animal exerting authority with simulated copulation. Fortunately, this was on another monkey and not one of us! After this each individual monkey then seemed to adopt a different posture in the hope of triggering a further handout. But with nothing doing and as though a switch had been thrown the adults gave up and shinned up the trees with forelimbs wide and back legs thrusting upwards. A lesson in climbing for all.

At around 15.15 we found ourselves crossing the open boulder fields decorated by isolated patches of snow. A group of around 20 Atlas Chaffinches with one male European Chaffinch was seen in the rocks alongside the road. This prompted Adrian to tell us to look out for wheatears as this is breeding territory for Seebohm's Wheatear, a recent split from Northern Wheatear. Within a couple

of minutes Anne cried out. Mustapha reversed the van back in time-honoured fashion and there next to the road was a beautiful male Seebohm's with striking black throat. How this was ever thought to be a subspecies of Northern is really unclear. As we watched after getting out of the van a female appeared, which is very pale and thus resembling Isabelline Wheatear. Another pair was spotted on the other side of the road as we climbed back in the van.

Just over an hour later at around 16.30 we stopped on the high alpine floodplain at the head of the track to the reservoir of Lac de Sidi Aquelmane. The short turf expansive meadowlands were quite dry but there were still Ruddy Shelduck dotted here and there. A cry went up about a passerine in the rocks next to the meadow: a smart male Ring Ouzel with white crescent gorget and lemon yellow bill. And another, and then more, including a first winter male with a dark bill. The birds moved out onto the short turf to forage for invertebrates. This is a bird that we encounter infrequently on the trip as it overwinters in these Moroccan highlands where it associates with Juniper and its berries, before it migrates back to mountains from the European Alps northwards.

After another hour we found ourselves on Zeida Plain amongst *Artemisia* (Wormwood) steppe that is the home of Dupont's Lark. In a good area on the left side of the track we aligned ourselves at about 20 m intervals before walking forward through the vegetation in a broad line to see what we could encounter. The answer was relatively little with only a pair of Desert Wheatears some Thekla Larks and three Cream-coloured coursers that showed how rapidly they can 'course' across the landscape moving from one side of the line to well past the outside of the other end within a few seconds. After a kilometre or so with no sign of Dupont's, and running into relatively dense *Halfa* grass, we changed to the other side of the track to repeat the exercise. With the sun threatening to set, we called it a day and headed into Midelt.

As the centre of Morocco's apple production, Midelt has a giant model apple as a centrepiece in the road, which always promotes comments about Midelt being Morocco's 'Big Apple'. After winding through the backstreets, we pulled up to the Villa Midelt, where there was an instant welcoming party. The inside of this *riad* is a revelation of all things Moroccan as well as having a large TV with CNN! After settling in, we enjoyed a super four-course dinner in great surroundings and a convivial atmosphere, but in the knowledge that after having failed to connect with Dupont's Lark in the afternoon, we would have to attempt a pre-dawn quest on an cold, high-altitude plain.....

## **Day 6 March 31<sup>st</sup>**

### **Zeida Plain, Er-Rachidia and Rissani**

Tea at 5.30 am for a new 'hardcore' that included Anne, flushed with her wheatear success the previous day. In the dark, the guides had become a little disorientated, but Mustapha was fixed on the prize; although we did go up the same track twice before we were happy that we were on the right track, so to speak. We descended from the van and could immediately hear the simple squeaky whistle of several singing males (as well as the rustling of Gortex and a water bottle hitting the floor!) on the right side of the track. We moved on foot about 200 m to the break of the slope where there was some *Halfa* grass in the *Artemesia* steppe. Whilst Martin stayed put, Adrian moved the group further into the habitat. We waited until the light had come up (around 06.45), by which time the birds had fallen silent. But after another half an hour or so, birds were again. Whilst Martin had found a bird singing from the top of a bush, Adrian and the group were being circled at close range by a pair that were carrying food and thus feeding young chicks. These provided some of the best views we had ever had of this bird, provided you could keep up with the lightning fast running between tiny bushes, after which it stopped and craned its neck to better see the human intruders. In effect, we had completed our task by 07.45 and happy, we were on our way back to breakfast.

We left our comfortable Riad by 09.00 and soon found ourselves heading southeast out of Midelt. After quick stops for a Black Wheatear pair near the former reintroduction centre for large mammals to Morocco (now closed for unknown reasons) and a photo opportunity with some nomads,

the leader of which gratefully received a chicken sandwich and some money; we picked up the Ziz valley.

In a second gorge after the tunnel, we made a quick stop at just after 11.00. 'Real' Rock Doves were on the ledges with one male displaying in earnest. Little Swifts cruised the skies along with at least one Crag Martin and a number of what appeared to be Lesser Kestrels hawking insects. Several others were sitting atop the crags and at least one flew into a hole. A male bird that had been bathing flew onto another ledge where after a brief greeting with a female that was already present, they sealed the deal with a mating unaware they were being watched through a telescope. Just to create confusion, these proved to be Common Kestrels. Seems most likely this was a mixed colony of Kestrels, perhaps with just this one pair of Commons.

We stopped on the outskirts of Er-Rachidia to use the toilets in a large restaurant with postcards and a TV showing football. As we drove through the town, we realised we were behind the same truck carrying what looked like an unstable pile of metal shelving with a Moroccan flag at the rear, for the fourth time. As we stopped for bread there was speculation that we would be behind the truck again, but fortunately we headed back the other way on our quest for Scrub Warbler.

At the palm tree marker, some 40 km from Er-Rachidia, Mustapha carefully picked over the gully to drive on the desert. A fine red and black *Uromastix* stayed out of his burrow as the bus approached, allowing an excellent photo opportunity albeit through the windows of the bus for many. We moved to the edge of the 150 m wide strip of vegetation that was far from the usual wadi without any obvious sides. Nevertheless, this was clearly the area that accumulated all the water and vegetation in the form of leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds that would support insects and thus the birds, reptiles and mammals. Everyone automatically fell into a line to walk through the vegetation and tried, albeit not always successfully, to ignore the male Seebohm's Wheatear, female Northern and Desert Wheatears, Long-billed Larks and a richly-coloured male Northern Wheatear with a white supercilium and area above the bill reminiscent of a Redstart. After just a few minutes, a tiny long-tailed bird flying a few centimetres above the ground bisected Barbara and Anne in the direction we were travelling: a Scrub Warbler. After a succession of "There it is" and "It flew into the bush" and "I see it moving", the bird hopped into the base of a 'bush island' where the largest bushes had accumulated sand and the ground was riddled with rodent burrows. A debate followed about how the bird could have vanished. Some left for lunch, whilst those who had not yet had a good view or a photo stayed on. The aforementioned other species of birds provided some distraction for a few minutes before we turned and headed back. Martin, for one, was confident the bird had gone to ground after being surrounded as well as possibly being at the edge of territory and would have now returned to more or less its original location. Soon enough, Adrian cried out again and there it was bouncing across an open area dotted with yellow and white Compositae (daisies) before it squeezed under another purple-flowered bush. Sandy came back from the lunch bus to get a better view of what is a special bird, but hunger gradually called everyone away until only Kate and Martin remained, until they too needed sustenance before Mustapha packed away.

At the end of lunch, Adrian got the group onto a couple of Bar-tailed Larks as Olivier's Desert Racers *Mesalina olivieri* scuttled from bush to bush. At nearly 15.00, it was now time to press on if we were to achieve our next target. Our next stop was at the viewpoint above the Ziz Valley with its lush green palms, Carob trees and patchwork of tiny agricultural plots. Bee-eaters, presumably on migration, were cruising back and forth hawking insects taking a break from the rigours of direct flight. Bob was delighted to see a couple of dogs that he hoped would take the chicken sandwich he had carefully prepared the day before. Unfortunately, the dogs disappeared before they could be approached. Even less obliging was the teenage guy who was trying to restrict access to the toilet for the ladies; but as it was one against six with attitude he was simply brushed aside. There was clearly something about this area that breeds unpleasantness, as even the couple of boys trying to sell grass-woven camel offered a barrage of four-letter English words as a result of no sale.

Just down the road Adrian spotted bee-eaters on the wire. These proved to be six Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters offering fantastic views. Every now and again one bird flew out to forage and prompted a chain of interaction between the birds as it came back in. One bird even discarded a pellet. Our attention was then drawn to the tamarisks where a number of male Western Subalpine Warblers and a Western Olivaceous or Isabelline Warbler with its pale lores. Both of these species have recently been split from closely related congeners.

After passing through Rissani, we passed over the roundabout to take a route through a smaller village. After about 5 km we realised we had taken the wrong road and u-turned in one village and then another where dozens of children gathered around to watch us manoeuvre. Our transgressions were all down to not bearing right at the first junction. After getting it 'right' we headed to some formidable rock formations. As we climbed the track through the gap between the rocks Nancy spotted a Red Fox down a roadside gully right next to the bus. Soon after we parked and took a short walk. Martin got to a point where he could check a hole in the cliff opposite. This proved to be empty. Fortunately, Adrian had glanced upwards to the cliff face closest to us and noticed some whitewash. Just above it on a small ledge next to an expansion of the cleft running vertically up the cliff face was a stunning Pharaoh Eagle Owl. Martin went back for Mustapha to show him and to get a digiscope attachment. Two small boys on bikes turned up and Agnes neatly distracted them from the owl by showing them Adrian's scope, which was pointed elsewhere. Meanwhile, Martin struggled get a good picture through the 'scope as a result of the wind that had just sprung up. Even using John and Adrian as windbreaks could not buffer against the shake. At least a record shot was recorded and we headed back to the bus.

After passing through Erfoud, we reached the new road to the desert proper. The signs to our Auberge were missing, and seeing our desert hotel oasis in the distance Mustapha left the road to take a track. We spent the next 15 minutes or so criss-crossing the area in what had now become a 4WD minibus avoiding gulleys and soft sand before Mustapha admitted defeat and finally emerged back onto the road behind where we had started! At least we had seen a terrific sunset. Further down the road we took another track that led us directly to the Auberge Derkoua, but only after crossing a surprising new road that had not been there the previous year, right outside the entrance gates. Once inside, we were welcomed onto a maze of paths in a fairyland of lights, flowers and tented areas for relaxing and eating. Tonight, we would eat outside....

## **Day 7 April 1<sup>st</sup>**

### **Erg Chebbi**

After some black tea, mint tea or coffee depending on persuasion, we were collected by three land rovers driven by Lahcen and his team. This would be our transport for next few days as Mustapha was now in Erfoud with the minibus. Leaving at 6.15 am we fairly whizzed down the new road before taking a track off into the desert. Our camels were waiting at the end. Quite a few of the 'camel-ride virgins' had been nervous of the idea, but Anne and Elsie showed the way tilting first backwards and then forwards as the camel unfolded its legs. Elsie in particular looked like she had done this before and all without a hair out of place. Nancy simply couldn't stop grinning.

As we walked along ridge line of dunes there were lots of other people dotted on dune crests. We descended from the camels down and Barbara was keen to race up the dune with Bob, but Martin just couldn't help but get involved. Our guides put down a series of blankets as we sat down to enjoy a super 'clean' sunrise with no clouds or haze and no wind. It was just stunningly beautiful. There is always a little 'edge' however as the sun rises over what is the closed Algerian border. After the sun had climbed rapidly into the sky, we took part as singles or pairs in the inimitable 'Berber ski' which involves being pulled on a rug down the dune. Great fun was had by all participants. Back at base station, our guides completed the trip by showing us a variety of wares wrapped in newspaper and produced from various bags. This is always a little uncomfortable, especially when no-one really

buys anything and the convivial mood is then tinged with a little disappointment on the part of the guides.

After a welcome breakfast back at Derkoua, we were soon out again in the vehicles, with a walkie-talkie in each. The task of honorary leader in the third vehicle fell to Bob with the thinking that as a former navy man, he may be familiar with radio etiquette. But as his first communication was an understated "Hi" we started to think he had perhaps not spent much time on the radio! It mattered not as we were soon amongst the birds and out of the vehicles. A Hoopoe Lark displayed and Spotted Sandgrouse called overhead somewhere. The Desert Warbler eluded us, but Martin recovered with a lone Fulvous Babbler on a bush at some distance away. We walked much closer and got a great view of it and then a smart male Desert Wheatear. Small Fringe-toed Lizard *Acanthodactylus dumerilli* scuttled away as we walked.

Passing through a small village in the 4WDs we encountered migrant Woodchat Shrikes where there should have been Desert race *elegans* Great Grey Shrikes. We searched the wadis for roosting Eagle Owl and Houbara Bustard to no avail before heading to a small dwelling for an altogether easier sighting: a pair of White-Crowned Wheatears. A larger stone built house with date palm trunks holding up verandah followed. The house owned by one of Lahcen's friends had a collection of ornamental pigeons, chickens, a pair of ducks, a turkey and a German Shepherd amongst the selection of carefully planted small trees. A pair of Desert Sparrows flew off from one of these and we waited for them to return. Bob, now dubbed 'Dangerous' Bob after his outing from the bus in Er-Rachidia, was on the other side of the building and appeared to be looking at the sparrows, but was not answering his radio, which was clearly still in the bus! It mattered not as the sparrows that we were told were nesting in the house were soon in view again, visiting the white bowl containing food for the livestock. This was a good sighting indeed as Desert Sparrow has been in steep decline in what was formerly a stronghold in this part of Morocco, seemingly as a result of competition with encroaching House Sparrows with the rise in human habitation and traffic through tourism.

A group of Coursers ran past in the mid-distance and as we moved towards a displaying Hoopoe Lark, we passed by some amazing plants (sadly unidentified) and groups of 'buttonweed'. Kate noticed a bird running around in vegetation. From a quick glance by eye Martin called pipit, but the 'scope revealed a large, thick bill and Adrian called Lark. But what Lark was this? Its general colouration was buffy including on the underparts accompanied by some black markings on the chest, and it had an obvious broad whitish supercilium setting off the stonking bill. The foraging action involved blundering through or even 'bulldozing' the vegetation whilst seemingly pulling off tasty vegetative parts, all in a rather upright fashion. It was only after extensive internet searches that evening that we decided it had to be very strange Short-toed Lark 'on steroids', that had been suggested by the tertials virtually cloaking the primaries and a relatively typical call note uttered as some Short-toed Larks had passed overhead. Eight races are recognised in the Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and The Western *Palaearctic* (Beaman & Madge), with *dukhunensis* of Central Asia being larger, stubbier-billed and with buffy underparts. However, this only appears to have occurred in the Middle East as a vagrant...

Back in the 4WDs we encountered lots of groups of Spotted Sandgrouse at very close range before getting to the Auberge for lunch by 13.00. Here, we met up with Barbara and Elsie who had spent the morning relaxing. As we enjoyed lunch both Black and Common Redstart were seen on chairs around the bar and a pair of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters issued to and from the large tree in the centre of the grounds. Who needed to go anywhere for birding? But go out we did at 15.30.

First task was to catch up with a shepherd that normally knows the whereabouts of roosting Egyptian Nightjar. He was not home, but who we assumed to be his wife talked to him on the phone, who then became our first lady guide ever! After a short walk into the wadi and a bit of communication, Lahcen pointed out a mottled blob at the base of a grass tussock, looking for all the

world like a random rock. The scope revealed otherwise showing eyes closed into slits in a massive head also sporting a tiny bill surrounded by bristles. What an incredible bird!

In the irrigated vegetation surrounding the residence we saw Long-tailed Blue butterflies cruising the alfalfa, glimpsed Nightingale on the ground and got an amazing view of a pair of Trumpeter finches coming to a dripping tap. A male Subalpine Warbler did likewise and then we had two in a tree together to compare: clearly both Western and Eastern recently split species.

On the trail again, we turned up yet more Spotted Sandgrouse and a Black-eared Wheatear, before passing by the camp used by bustard hunters from Qatar. We stopped at a viewpoint with the line of Merzouga dunes as a backdrop and a clear sense of the strip of auberges/cafés that partly makes up Merzouga. We were back at Derkaoua by 18.30, which is incredibly early for us! Here, we had two days of checklists to catch up with. It was now hard to remember what day it was let alone what had been seen. It was not however hard to remember how to eat, as we tucked into another excellent meal.

## **Day 8 April 2<sup>nd</sup> Erg Chebbi**

After a leisurely breakfast the guys picked us up at 08.00 in order to attempt to find Crowned Sandgrouse. On the way to a known spot we were fortunate enough to find a Brown-necked Raven on the top of a lone tree and what appeared to be a female Montagu's Harrier on northward migration. We were to see a few Marsh Harriers with the same intention over the morning.

Some 4WDs were parked several hundred metres from a village and as we got close we could see why as whorls of sandgrouse were issuing from and flying around a small pool of water. This turned out to be deliberate transfer of water from a well on the outside of the village for the birds as there had been no rain over the winter to sustain them through the breeding season. After a stop for a small party of our target of Crowned Sandgrouse, we clustered the vehicles near the water. After a minute or two, both Sandgrouse species, but with Spotted far more numerous, were landing, drinking rapidly and then flying off quickly, perhaps always wary of the possibility of attack from a Lanner Falcon. We sat with the Sandgrouse entranced by the continuously unfolding spectacle as one group was replaced by another, although we had no idea if some flocks or individuals were coming in once or multiple times.

In Martin's vehicle, Nancy had asked what looked like three women sitting on the ground some distance away were doing with backpacks. After we had stopped a few hundred metres from the sandgrouse to take pictures of camels with sand dunes in the background, the answer to Nancy's question became clear as what turned out to be three young girls strode up, sat down and began unwrapping numerous trinkets, scarves and stone and cloth camels. A separation between the men and (most of) the women in the group came into force until the men were also drawn over either by their wives, or simply to watch the negotiations unfold. Martin made the point that any purchase would be empowering the next generation of women in Morocco, which may have led to another couple or three items being secured for the girls.

Next was Lahcen's tented bivouac and its planted trees and livestock, much like the house we had encountered the day before. This time however the Desert Sparrows were far more accessible especially after Big Mohammed (Lahcen's brother) who had replaced Ali (aka 'tall boy') today, sprinkled some chunky seed on flat piece of cardboard. Initially, we were probably too close, but after we moved away a few metres, at least five sparrows came down. This local population or sub-population is clearly increasing thanks to Lahcen's protection, food and water; bucking the general trend of decline.

Houbara Bustard is an even rarer bird in these parts and in fact there is much uncertainty over the status of those that do remain as to whether these are truly wild or have been captive-bred from unknown provenance and released into the wild. Whatever the case, any birds encountered are free-

living and incredibly wary of people. As on previous trips we began to scour the wadis and strips of vegetation where water had once run, skirting the Algerian border to our east. Just before getting into the main area, we finally encountered the desert race *elegans* of Great Grey Shrike, that was almost certainly nesting in the single significant tree in the area. How this can really be a Great Grey *Lanius excubitor* shrike is unclear when relatively recent splits have seen Iberian Grey Shrike *L. meridionalis* established between supposed *excubitor* populations. Surely, birds in Morocco are more closely related to Iberian Grey Shrike rather than those in northern Europe?

We also succeeded in good views of a Subalpine Warbler pretending to be a Spectacled Warbler. A group of Short-toed Larks were also found by Martin's 4WD that simply seemed to be resting whilst on migration. Unfortunately, Martin's instructions that mostly referred to "look at my finger" to try and get Bob's vehicle to look backwards, apparently had Adrian's group in stitches as they mimicked the instruction with 'the finger' gesture. In the end the birds flew off and we were unable to re-locate them.

As we moved deeper into the vegetated areas pitted with areas of soft sand, the skill and fortitude of our drivers and their vehicles was really obvious as we seemed to be able to clamber through anything and everything. An hour or more of intense searching followed, which yielded a number of Desert Warblers, Bar-tailed and Hoopoe Larks and a small group of incredibly close Spotted Sandgrouse; but not a hint of 'big bird' as Nancy had dubbed it. It was now really hot and the bleached bones of something large, in the light perhaps the "last camel [that] died at noon" according to Frederick Forsythe. Time to leave and we whizzed back at speed to enjoy another marvellous lunch in the tent.

A couple of hours passes quickly in this relaxed atmosphere and soon it was time to head out again, although a couple decided to skip the afternoon session in favour of going out on the night drive we were to undertake later that evening. The aim was to search the other side of the dunes near Merzouga ending in an irrigated palmery. More of the same was the initial theme of our search of the patches of vegetation, until we realised that we were only two vehicles and not three. There was no answer on the walkie-talkie from Dangerous Bob and his crew (which was actually only Kate) and so the rest of us climbed a nearby hill to scan for the vehicle. There was a 'tumbleweed moment' as we scanned the empty landscape. Resorting to technology, Lahcen phoned his brother to reveal that after being behind left behind at another unusual lark (which still remains to be identified from Kate's picture), Mohammed had decided to take a short cut to our destination and was actually ahead of us.

It was a good job that he had caught up with us as whilst crossing a patch of vegetation, Martin's vehicle spotted a sandgrouse very close by. A quick glance showed this to be a male Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, which was excitedly broadcast over the walkie-talkie. The colours and patterns in this species are simply amazing, with the burnished patterns across the coverts recalling the lemon-juice polished brass doors of the King's Palace in Fez. It seemed plausible, if not probable, that the bird had a mate on eggs in the vegetation somewhere, as after walking up the slope with the vehicles close behind, he doubled back and began walking back to where he had first seen him

After a stop for fuel at a garage we pushed onto the Merzouga palmery where a main stone channel distributes water to a series of earth-lined channels banked by berms that take water to individual plots. The system is apparently timed so everyone gets equal water as a result of the flow off the main channel being stopped with a plug of the wet clay-like earth. The palmery proved to be full of Laughing and Collared Doves, with the former providing excellent views through the 'scope, illustrating the mixture of purples, browns and lilacs in the plumage. Quite a few Tree Pipits were foraging beneath the palms especially in the redundant plots. As was typical for the trip, a male Common Redstart again proved elusive. Willow Warblers were the dominant warbler, foraging both in the trees and on the ground amongst the crops.

We had split into two groups with Martin's smaller group proving to be the elite crew as a result of Agnes and John drew attention to a striated bird on the ground, which Martin confirmed to be a

Wryneck foraging for ants at the base of a palm. The view in the scope was simply stunning and for Anne in particular this was quite a moment as she was able to see one of her 'life birds' well for the first time. Fortunately, Bob still had his radio on and he brought over the rest of the excited group. The bird dug holes and inserted its thick sticky tongue, also pulling out a juicy grub at one point. Seemingly replete, it then dozed for a while and we showed it to an interested group of teenage girls. After ten minutes or more it started foraging again as the shutters on the attendant cameras whirred as it changed angle. Incredibly, a second Wryneck, with bristling dark feathering on the upper back, displaced it, before it too flew silently away. We assumed another Wryneck coming to bathe in the channel was one of these too, although yet seen low in a palm was almost certainly yet another individual. It seems that Wrynecks are like buses; wait all day (or all year) for one and then they all come at once.

On our way back to the Auberge we stopped for the inevitable photographic opportunity with the dunes lit up by the sunset as a backdrop. Individuals, pairs and the whole group shouting 'cous-cous' and 'tajine' all went through the process. We were inevitably late by now and arrived at the hotel right at the time we should have been eating dinner at 19.30. Dinner was truly excellent with chicken pastille (courgette soup for Sandy) to start followed by the best lemon chicken dish yet. This was all our waiter Mohammed's own work. That guy does everything around the place it seems.

A Green Toad was abroad again around the tables and a pipistrelle-sized bat, probably a Kuhl's Pipistrelle, hawked insects above them: a sign of the mammal experience to come. This began with the loading of the 4WDs at 21.00. As we were missing Bob as well as Barbara and Sandy, Lou was drafted in as a radio operator and immediately promoted to lead 4WD with Lahcen with Adrian doubling with Big Mohammed and Martin continuing with Small Mohammed. Leaving the Auberge to the right for the first time we drifted off-road (off-piste) almost immediately and it became clear to all that we would operate in a phalanx around Lahcen's 4WD with additional illumination of the surrounding darkness with torches from whoever had one.

After about 15 minutes Lou illustrated that he had taken to his task by calling "We have a mouse" over the radio. All the vehicles converged and the animal saltated (hopped) rapidly away in front of Martin's vehicle like a tiny kangaroo with a tail perhaps three-times its body length with a fluffy white and black tip like a thick paintbrush. After a brief chase, it stopped at a bush and Martin jumped out to try and get a picture, but the jerboa sought refuge under the 4WD before then shooting off with Martin giving chase illuminating it with a torch and carrying camera and binoculars. Apparently, this was "worth the trip money alone" according to Nancy as jerboa and human pursuer dodged through the vegetation. Eventually, the jerboa stopped at a bush and attempted to dig in, shifting sand rapidly with its back feet, although it could not manufacture a hole in the soft sand whilst jammed under a spiky bush. With Big Mohammed parting the vegetation, the jerboa turned and after a few pictures was left alone to recover.

All vehicles then encountered several more, before Adrian uttered the cry that Martin in particular wanted to hear "I have a polecat". A silky black and white bustling sausage of an animal was running in front of Adrian's vehicle and at some point, Martin was out again in pursuit. The animal went to ground in a bush and after encircling it, Mohammed separated the vegetation. The animal came out, ran along the edge of the bush before deciding that it would dig its way out of trouble. We stood watching this incredible animal dig down and periodically emerge backwards to move the sand, readjust and then poke out head first before turning again. Eventually, whilst facing out it pulled in the sides to more or less seal itself in. At this point we left it. A few more Jerboas were seen before Lou warned that Lahcen's 4WD had seen a fox of the desert variety. It had run quickly over a sand dune to be seen well, albeit briefly, by Anne and Nancy. They would later describe this as of reasonable size; perhaps indicating Rüppel's Sand Fox rather than Fennec. Martin's 4WD saw eye-shine a couple of times before Adrian's 4WD saw the fox again which then seemed to become a hare. A two-animal theory was mooted.

By now, the folk in Lou's 4WD had reached the limit of endurance and began to head back only to call "mouse" after only a minute or two. We all joined to get a brief view of a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil before it disappeared into a bus. Mohammed again did his bush parting trick to find a neat burrow and no gerbil. Good that we were close to the auberge now and after only a few minutes we were back and thanking our drivers for their service and hoping to see them again... *insh'allah*.

### Day 9 April 3<sup>rd</sup>

#### Todra Gorge and Boulmane

We were ready at 07.00 to be picked up but there was no sign of Mustapha. After an embarrassing phone call, it became clear he'd got his days mixed up but was now on his way. So, we birded around the garden. We got excellent views of Blue-cheeked Bee-eater around the school and gardens, including a pair cuddled together in a *Nicotinia*. Surely, they must be breeding around the Auberge? Perched Barn Swallows and several Bonelli's Warblers followed. By 08.00 Mustapha had arrived and we were on way on one of the longer drives of the trip.

We drove through Jorf and the myriad of protruding wells decorating the landscape. This has developed into something of a tourist attraction in the last few years. We stopped briefly at an active well where a nomad woman was pulling water up on a bucket to water her camels. Her two small boys shyly waved at us and were absolutely delighted when Mustapha took over a large packet of fancy biscuits for them. They say calmly working out how to open it. Who knows if they had ever experienced such a foodstuff before? An everyday item for some of us and untold luxury for others.

At our usual stop on the large right bend, Mustapha was straight out of the van and the first flat rock he turned produced a more or less complete but empty nest. As we speculated who the owner might have been, a *payni* race Desert Lark flew in with nesting material. A second one joined it. Attempts were made to put the stone back exactly as it had been. After we had moved away a little, the birds did not seem thrilled with the changes, which later prompted further readjustments before we got back in the bus. Hopefully this would prove acceptable.

After Agnes had spotted a Raven, calling Spotted Sandgrouse alerted us to the birds landing near a well. Another had stayed undetected within a few metres of us until it flushed. More rock-turning produced a young black *Uromastyx* and then some spiders and a yellow scorpion sharing the same rock. The narrow-clawed and likely venomous scorpion threatened and walked quickly to another rock where it quickly dug itself in under the base.

We stopped at Tingedad for bread and other produce and a quick food market tour (as usual). A series of brief stops followed all initiated by eagle-eye Mustapha including a male Desert Wheatear, four Cream-coloured Coursers and a Changeable Agama. The latter atop a rock pile generated particular comment on "how did he see that whilst driving?". Perhaps the best brief stop was a Short-toed Eagle on a pylon that soared gracefully to the next one providing both sitting and flying views. A bunch of migrant European Bee-eaters also flew over. We began to pick up the verdant Todra river valley with its patchwork of irrigated plots and palm trees, and climb towards the Gorges du Todra (Todra Gorge).

We alighted from the bus below the gorge into a veritable zoo of humanity amongst a troupe of motorcyclists, a mixture of walking tourists, people in the river and the range of 'tat' sellars from children to old men, and a music-playing procession from a children's association walking behind a banner. The plan was to walk through the gorge where Mustapha would have set up the lunch. We were fortunate enough to see Grey Wagtail and especially a male Blue Rock Thrush beautifully through the 'scope, as well as House Buntings, Crag Martins and Pallid Swifts. A few North African Green Frogs were calling and fighting along the edges of the river. Anne found an obliging (finally) male Common Redstart on an unfinished building.

During lunch we were again challenged, very politely of course, by the local 'Sheriff', as Mustapha described him. He was in fact a most unlikely older gentleman with a jacket, glasses and a

shiny new blue moped. It was the usual stuff about licenses for telescopes which Mustapha brushed off easily. Moving up the gorge, we stopped where the road widens slightly and allows another vehicle to get past the parked minibus. Here, we got out and Adrian played the song of Tristram's Warbler. Almost immediately a male responded and came to a sizeable Fig tree above our heads. The tiny bird then sailed down in a bat-like manner over our heads to a bush on the far side of the dry river before working back to our side into an *Oleander* and thence to bushes on the other side of the road, sometimes very close. A loud crash drew attention to Bob looking horrified at Martin's scope lying prone in the road. The side next to the objective lens was dented and the internal vacuum had been corrupted. The key hope was that it would last to the end of the tour.

On the way to Boulmane, we were all keenly searching for our next target: Maghreb Wheatear, the rarest of the Moroccan breeding wheatears. A wheatear on a sign created much excitement, but this turned out to be a male Desert Wheatear. Surely, we couldn't be that lucky? However, near the road to a silver mine, a wheatear perched on a pile of rocks on the side of the road in an arid rocky area drew immediate attention. Before the bus had stopped we knew we had Maghreb Wheatear. Even after we had all got out of the bus the bird stayed put. The bird then flew back into what looked like a worked area, although nothing was being grown. After stopping a few hundred metres down the road we could still see it, and Martin took Kate and Barbara on a brief photographic expedition, which succeeded in getting very close with no obvious disturbance, before gently retreating. The rest of the group were looking at a large nest in a cleft along the cliff line which proved to be actively occupied by breeding Long-legged Buzzards. Further down the road, another soaring raptor proved to be a dark phase Booted Eagle complete with 'headlights' on the shoulders. Not to be outdone, a pale phase bird drifted close by on our side of the road, possibly the mate of the first one.

Taking a track on the left, we found ourselves at the start of the huge area of stony plain known as the Tagdilt Track. The track we had taken passed through the rubbish dump, which was much better than in previous years with a large proportion of the rubbish having been burned or buried under large rockpiles. There was also a distinct and welcome lack of feral dogs (we had counted up to 90 or so on previous trips). Nevertheless, this was still by far the worst area of rubbish the group had seen on the trip. Although unsavoury, the dump is a good area for birds and we had soon seen Red-rumped Wheatear and then a party of Short-toed Larks amongst the Fat Sand Rats; a particularly unkind name for what is a beautiful golden animal with large eyes, laidback ears and a long tail with a fluffy black-tip. A predator of Fat Sand Rats, a Long-legged Buzzard, stooped in to land in view, displaying his long legs or rather unfeathered tibia giving the same general impression as a human wearing pedal-pushers.

Temminck's Larks had been briefly visible, but otherwise were rather elusive and so we moved on hoping for Thick-billed Lark. Invariably, one was perched on side of the track and having been seen only by Martin and Anne, flew off showing the dark wings and white trailing edge. Adrian tracked it until it landed a couple of hundred of metres away. We pursued on foot in the general direction, and unexpectedly found a pair of Stone Curlews. Searching in a different direction to everyone else, Nancy called out and there was a pair of Thick-billed Larks calmly walking around. The parrot-bill and the black face markings, especially on the male always draw admiration.

We were in the Kasbah Tarrouine before 19.00, with Kate and Bob, Lou and Anne and Adrian and Martin drawing the long straws and getting the cave rooms with the overlook into the green ribbon of a valley below.

For the first time on the trip, dinner was a buffet-style affair with a range of hot options followed by a choice of sweets. It took a little while for our beers that had parked in a fridge somewhere to be found, but other than that the change was welcome. Another novelty was the entertainment in terms of the troupe of drummers interweaving complex rhythms.

## Day 10 April 4<sup>th</sup>

### Boulmane

After an early breakfast, we headed back out again to Tagdilt going past the track to the dump and instead turning right and heading for a well-known green area that tends to accumulate any water and thus other resources. Unfortunately, this was already occupied by a birding group that proved to be a Sunbird group of Brits led by our good friend James Lidster. We stopped a little way away and enjoyed views of the Temminck's Larks and Red-rumped Wheatears of both sexes. Adrian had a chat with James to pass on the 'gen' we had accumulated. His group then walked through the habitat flushing the birds. It was time to move on anyway.

Driving on, after a few kilometres on a bend we stopped alongside habitation with a mixture of large Fig trees and smaller Olives with a series of cultivated terraces beneath with a variety of crops and animal fodder. This is a migrant trap if ever there was one. Although it was hardly 'jumping' with birds, we managed Nightingale including on the ground in the 'scope for a lucky few, some Isabelline Warblers, a Woodchat Shrike and an elusive Hoopoe. A large Jird, probably Moroccan Jird rather than the smaller Shaw's, was seen near a small channel amongst the trees, with Fat Sand Rats in the more open areas. It was now time to get back to the hotel to collect our bags and check out by 10.00.

What followed was a series of stops for various wildlife including a European Bee-eater on a wire, an Agama lizard on a rock and a Hoopoe on a slope. The latter also produced a mating pair of Moroccan *personata* race of White Wagtail, but at some distance. We found the Kasbah just beyond Skoura, where we had planned to have lunch had been commandeered by a Chinese film crew filming something called *Desert Storm*. What we had thought was an Arab extra in the film turned out to be Abdul, the tour guide for the Kasbah. He was more than willing to have a tour despite the fact that filming was underway. We tiptoed around the 18<sup>th</sup> Century building made of *piste* (mud and straw) held up by date palm timbers. The floor vibrated as we walked around upstairs. Abdul explained that the house would have been occupied by four families at one time, each with its own kitchen and sleeping quarters, all with the same patriarch. He joked that all was different now with one house (and man) controlled by one woman and that two, three or four wives would generate the equivalent number of 'problems'. There was quite an incongruity being guided around the old house with cables and light rigs everywhere and peeking through the windows we could see the Chinese equivalent of Ryan Reynolds lying wounded against a door frame amongst the fake gunshot. As we finished our tour the crew were breaking for lunch. It takes a lot of resources to run a shoot and we were told these guys had been filming for 50 days around Morocco and had already spent two days here in the Kasbah.

The journey to Ouzarzate was uneventful. As we entered what is a modern town Lou and Anne were on the lookout for the colour of the *petit taxis*, which varies from town to town. Here, we decided they were a subdued vomit yellow, so Anne would not be moving here! We stopped to stock up on alcohol as we would be in dry territory for the next night and then again for three further nights in a couple of days. Finding the riad Dar Daif is a bit of an art as there is small sign off the main road that virtually doubles back on itself and the rough road then continues alongside the valley floor alongside the irrigated crops beneath the palm trees.

Behind every door in Morocco lies a mystery and this is nowhere more so than the Dar Daif, as an unobtrusive door in a wall leads to a fabulous courtyard with a tinkling fountain and a seating area leading upstairs to three floors with beautiful terraces overlooking the lush green valley to the reservoir beyond. After mint tea and a range of delicious Moroccan biscuits, a third version of the hardcore team (Kate, Nancy, Sandy and John) headed out with Adrian and Martin to the reservoir. Nearing the edge a Tawny Pipit was spotted before it flew and then eluded further inspection, although the long-billed race of Crested Lark *reigenbacchi* and a group of Short-toed Larks were

more obliging. The reservoir contained as little water as the leaders had ever seen, although the exposed muds were of clear interest to what proved to range of birds. Over 80 Ruddy Shelduck were mewing in the shallow channel, with numbers of Yellow Wagtails of the Spanish and Blue-headed flavour walking around a small pool. Kentish Plovers and some Little Stints were initially too distant to be viewed comfortably but both flew closer for our benefit. Ducks included Mallard, Northern Shoveler and at least 25 Marbled Teal, something we did not remember seeing here before. Resting birds included a group of around a dozen Gull-billed Terns on a spit and a number of Greater Flamingos, Spoonbills and both Continental and Moroccan race Cormorants. There was some confusion regarding a rather richly-coloured pipit that can only have been a Tree Pipit, with some of the confusion created by some the eastern Yellow Wagtails calling with a frothy 'dreeet' rather than the usual 'shreep'. After an excellent short session of only about 1.5 hours we needed to get back for dinner, although we were intent on finding a Little Owl. Martin obliged, although the bird flew almost immediately towards us to land on a ledge on the building next to the road, before then flying over our heads and away. Those that got back on the bus had to get out again as we had parked outside our own hotel!

Dinner was in a back room on the third floor, demanding guests took off their own footwear and used Moroccan slippers of various kinds. Entertainment was in the form of the same guy we always have (who must be around 92 by now!) playing his four-stringed *lotar*. He had not expanded his repertoire any. The meal itself was a resplendent four, or was it five-course affair with soup followed by salad with olive oil dressing, a main meal of pear, fennel and beef on the bone as well as vegetables, a palette cleansing orange, banana and strawberry smoothie and date ice cream with date sauce. We had to ask what the tea was after the meal and we surprised that it was vervain.

## **Day 11 April 5<sup>th</sup>**

### **Ait Ben Haddou, Tizi-n-Tichka & Oukaimeden**

The breakfast this morning was the most bountiful yet with goat milk yoghurt, a porridge strongly reminiscent of cous-cous and a range of *mellui*, pancakes, a thicker 'corn-bread' and a bun flavoured with aniseed. We had reached Ait Ben Haddou, a World Heritage Site that has been carefully restored as a working village, by 11.30 on what was a truly beautiful day. At the viewpoint, there were snake charmers for the first time. One sported a plastic recorder which was of no attraction to the large Montpellier snake, which was more interested in getting away. The Chamaeleon and *Uromastyx* produced from a bag were also not interested.

After crossing the river on the sandbags, the group divided into a birding group and a cultural group intent on reaching the top of the village. The birding around the trees and plots alongside the river proved to be great with singing Nightingales, and Isabelline, Bonelli's and Willow Warblers. Goldfinches were seen well in the scope. In and around the river, waterbirds included Green Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plovers including a displaying male in butterfly song flight and a Redshank. Crag Martins were building under the bridge with mud collected on the side of the river. Two Black-bellied Sandgrouse called overhead.

We were now *en-route* to the Tizi-n-Tichka pass. We stopped at a favourite spot of ours alongside the river with some small fields along the roadside. More of the same range of migrant warblers were noted. At the Col du Tichka, we paused briefly at the sign displaying the height of the pass at 2,260 m (7420'). A range of people were taking pictures and Nancy joined them carrying a travel section from a local New Jersey newspaper; part of a fun interactive theme adopted by the paper concerned.

We got to our usual lunch stop, but the café had been developed and we could not take our usual path. So, we took the track on the other side of the stream and parked next to a Moroccan family having a picnic. You can be just out for the day minding your own business when the tourists

turn up and take over! We quickly found some good birds including a number of Rock Sparrows, Black Redstart and a pair of Whinchats, likely to be on breeding territory. A calling Atlas Crossbill flew in for a very quick drink but could then not be relocated again once it was in the trees. Other animals of interest included an Iberian Wall Lizard, Clouded Yellow and many Tiger Beetles interacting on a gravel area alongside the stream.

During lunch, it became clear that there was little snow on the mountain suggesting there wouldn't be much at Oukaimeden. As we left at just after 14.00 there was a 'thunking' sound at the back of the bus which we thought might be a flat tyre. Fortunately, it proved to be a rock jammed between the double wheels at the back on the nearside. By 15.30 we were almost in the Marrakesh Plain where the advanced season coupled with this being the wet side of the Atlas was manifested as abundant 'green' both in the native flora and the variety of crops, some of which were punctuated with sprays of lilac Field Gladiolus. Elsewhere, there were splashes of yellows, whites and reds from a range of other flowers including *Chrysanthemums* and poppies. It was now quite hot and promises of ice-cream from the bathroom-break gas station had us all excited. Unfortunately, hopes melted away as the entire freezer in the so-called shop proved to be empty. A Booted Eagle (second of the day) spotted by Agnes as we started the climb to Oukaimeden after the village of *Eureka* (poetic license on the spelling) barely generated a second glance. This was after Adrian's time-killing quizzes. Who will remember the US state with the most registered boats?

We turned off before entering the outskirts of Marrakesh itself and after a short while took the single in/out road to Oukaimeden and began to climb. The road in stunning scenery is further decorated by a multitude of stalls with carpets, pottery and the like. We passed through deciduous trees and then at higher elevation, stands of pine trees, before finally reaching the summit at Oukaimeden and its short turf alpine meadows and slopes. We checked into Chez Juju and were out again in a few minutes. Some Brits that were just leaving informed us that Crimson-winged Finch had been seen about an hour previously near ski lift. On the way over there, we picked up Rock Sparrow and Red-billed Chough and a stunning male Kestrel in beautiful light on a building. We were being hassled by the salesmen with fossils and plates although one of them kept talking of *beaucoup de oiseaux* at the end of the road. Martin then heard our target bird calling and found a small group across the stream in the rocks, with these, especially the one preening, looking like rocks. They then flew across to our side and landed amongst the cars in the human zoo. The guy trying to sell a range of good quality bars of peanut, sesame and the like suddenly hit on the idea of throwing a few morsels for the birds and rather than hanging around the bins, there were suddenly 25 or so of them right in front of us within three metres. To celebrate, Adrian bought 200 dirhams worth of the bars which the group devoured with gusto. The leaders don't recall dealing with someone who had his price list set out on a piece of painted wood before. Either the birds or the bars or both had clearly affected our judgment as a number of us got embroiled in buying plates with enlaid fossils. John seemed to have been the most seriously affected and trudged back to the hotel weighed down by his purchases. Agnes got the benefit of the deals in her backpack the following day.

Dinner was an unusual choice of options, with most of the group going for wild boar in red wine. It seemed to meet general approval. This was after a starter of soup and was followed by a vegetable tart and a choice of desserts. Of the latter, there was however only one choice for the aprico-philés. You know who you are...

## **Day 12 April 6<sup>th</sup>**

### **Oukaimeden & Tizi-n-Test to Taroudannt**

We were out by 07.15, just after first light had illuminated the snow-clad peaks. Singing Black Redstarts and chirruping Sparrows greeted us. A short minibus ride took us to the top of the road where we began searching for Atlas Horned Lark. Some calling birds alerted Martin and soon we had scope views of these stunning little birds foraging in the short turf.

It was then up to the radio station to look for Alpine Accentors, which we suspected had already left these winter quarters. Instead, there were a multitude of Moussier's Redstarts looking even more exquisite than usual in the early morning light. Two males were fighting over a female who seemed detached from the raging testosterone she had unleashed. A Barbary Falcon haloed against the light perched on a crag overlooking the most marvellous view. Whilst taking photos of the Redstarts, Martin the delightful tiny white daffodil *Narcissus waitei*. On the way back down, we stopped for our first Alpine Choughs on a wall. One, presumably the male, fed another, presumably the female in a gesture of love. We were now running late at 08.15 and it was time to join those who had not come out for breakfast at the hotel.

By 09.00 we were out again as a group back to the top of the road. Some chose to walk and others who had started to walk were collected and transported to the viewpoint where there is now a sign describing the mountains in front including the mighty Jbel Toubkal, the highest peak in Morocco at 4167 m (13,675'). The last of our fossil salesmen were still with us and altogether more desperate now and so prices were dropping. Martin got yet another fossil plate, partly as the guy needed the money. The

other salesman got a tip for taking pictures of us all on a variety of phones with the spectacular mountains behind. We were particularly pleased to get Mustapha in his *grand hibou* (eagle owl) *djellaba*. A couple of Red-rumped Swallows floated by; a bird that looks lazy and untroubled even when on active migration. A couple of Atlas Horned Larks flew in and just before we got them in scopes, they disappeared and so we had to settle for a beautiful singing male Seebohm's Wheatear and many *Romulea* (Sand Crocus) dotted like jewels across the landscape.

After popping back to the hotel again to check out and thence walking or driving down the road to the lake created by damming the stream. The multitude of North African Green Frogs were in full chorus amongst the white-flowering *Ranunculus* (Water Crowfoot). In the stream itself, a pair of Dippers were quickly located. They appeared to have young in a nest under a large boulder as the birds were flying in and out. The difficulty was finding a place they were foraging and could be seen more readily. We eventually managed it and even had a chance for a few pictures, with Lou showing the way in approaching the bird.

Adrian was pleased to leave at 11.22, some three minutes ahead of schedule compared to the previous year. On the way down the mountain, we stopped in a area of deciduous trees to look for Atlas Flycatcher, which was a huge longshot especially as this is a late migrant. We at least heard lots of common forest-dwelling birds if nothing else.

After stopping for petrol, we had begun to climb at 13.20 on our journey across the Atlas via the Tizi-n-Test pass. A learner driver stalled in the road and everyone over and undertook them, temporarily creating three lane traffic and leaving the car with its arguing occupants behind. The lunch stop was in our usual place amongst the *Lentisc* (pistachio) and pines with a rather small yet beautiful *Linaria* (toadflax) under our feet. Mustapha had secured some strawberries to add to our lunch supplies, which were gratefully received.

The new reservoir created by damming the river was completely full, in stark contrast to when Martin had last seen it three years previously and earlier in the year. There must have been extensive rain and/or snowmelt this year. Suddenly, Mustapha hit the anchors and as we stopped we thought he had been looking at a Woodchat Shrike, that promptly took off after a Goldfinch. But no, he was looking further than that, and there above the A-frame of a partly submerged telegraph pole on the wire, was a European Roller. An incredible piece of spotting whilst driving. We managed to get out of the van to see this block-coloured vivid blue and chestnut bird through the telescope. It flew to our right and rolling down the road we managed to find it on the wire; this time closer. A male Blackbird shot up to 'have a go', which the Roller tried to repel with threatening open-billed gesturing, before it flew again to the far side of an olive. We are traditionally too early for this late breeding migrant and it has been nearly 20 years since Martin last saw one in Morocco.

Perhaps inevitably, we were now running at least an hour late and we called Latifa in Taroudannt to say so. Nearing the pass, we stopped to enjoy views of reintroduced Barbary Sheep that have been in the mountain pastures behind a fence-line that tracks across the mountain. After a quick photo at the Tizi-n-Test pass itself 2100 m (6900') we began the descent to stop for mint tea at the café with the ex-minibus on the edge of the precipice forming a unique trading post. On the surrounding rocks and trees, we recorded Rock Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush, Linnet, African Blue Tits and Coat Tit, but alas not either of the endemic Atlas Day Geckos.

Our descent into the Souss Valley was marked by our first endemic Argan *Argana spinosa* trees which were looking healthy, presumably as there had been some rain. Many specimens were carrying large crops of fruit (nuts). In the Souss Valley itself, we saw a Booted Eagle before passing through the orangeries and other crops punctuated by ever-expanding and developing settlements, before reaching the old city of Taroudannt with its spectacular fortress walls. The evening promenade was still in progress along the pavements next to the city walls and we experienced the traffic mayhem amongst the narrow streets populated by cars, mopeds, donkeys and pedestrians. A few turns later and we found ourselves parked in a short drive amongst the three and four-storey buildings. Our hosts spilled out of the door at ground level and we were whisked into the cool, beautifully tiled interior. The first of a series of excellent meals soon followed, which included our first lamb dish surrounded by a multitude of dishes. A sign of things to come.

### **Day 13 April 7<sup>th</sup> Freija & Aoulouz Gorge**

A late start today with breakfast at 08.00. With some time to kill, the early risers went to the rooftop terrace for a view of the city and a glimpse of the passing Pallid and Little Swifts. We left at 09.00 and within a half hour or so we arrived at Freija, a favourite spot of ours that is simply a track amongst some low intensity cultivation on the stony ground under patchy Argan and some bananas under plastic. Cut hedges of spiky *Zizyphus* on either side of the track house small birds and are bordered by wildflowers attracting insects.

We had only been out of the van for a few minutes when a melodious song alerted us to a nearby Black-crowned Tchagra foraging on the ground amongst some concrete pipes. After hide-and-seek for a few minutes, Martin played Tchagra song, which initially had no effect. The bird then seemed to switch on and landed on a fence within a few metres of us before gliding over our heads to perch in a low Argan: an excellent view of what can be a cryptic species. Next was a Fulvous Babbler that flew past before landing in a tree, where it climbed up and started to call. A second one appeared very close to the main part of the group, before flying to join its family member. A Great Grey Shrike appeared behind us at the top of a tree and started calling with a repetitive frog-like tone as if wanting to attract attention, but there was so much going on, we barely glanced at it or the Crested Larks continuously singing from trees and running along the track in front of us.

Multiple passerines followed including some close-by Greenfinches foraging in the grasses, a male Spanish Sparrow amongst the House Sparrows, Sardinian Warblers and then a pair of Spectacled Warblers that surely had a nest in the aforementioned spiky hedge. A male Cirl Bunting was most obliging, thereby completing our trio of stripy-headed male Buntings alongside House and Rock. Cirl must surely be the most attractive of the three. In usual fashion, Mustapha found a pair of Stone Curlews on the ground. One bird in particular, was loathe to move very far or simply watched us out of one eye as it stood in profile. Lou, Kate and Martin were then distracted by a Crested Lark carrying food that came within a couple of metres. What a photo opportunity, but after a few pictures we retired not wanting to disturb the bird and its nest any further.

The sun started to come out and with it, lots of butterflies emerged. The lark had delayed and separated Kate and Lou from the rest of the group and seizing his opportunity Martin converted them into the cult world of tiny blue butterflies, that disappear as if by magic as they land. Many

descriptions of “Follow the shadow of my finger” and “My finger is within two centimetres of it” and “It’s there on that flower” (substitute rock or leaf as required) followed. We did manage to also look at some birds including a male Whinchat and a female Orphean Warbler. The minibus came back our way and just after we got on, a male Orphean Warbler was spotted low in a bushy Argan. Another neat sighting.

We then drove on to Aoulouz. Whilst Mustapha prepared lunch, we looked for roosting or nesting Falcons on the gorge walls but to no avail. Several of the channels of the braided gravel bed river had been encased in plastic bags presumably to maintain the water on the valley sides to create a head to transfer it to irrigated croplands. A Grey Wagtail and an indeterminate fly-over White Wagtail was pretty much all we could manage. Quite a few dragonflies and damselflies on wing but these were also difficult to connect with and identify.

After lunch, we walked over bridge. There was relatively little water contained mostly in larger pools with some vegetation. Alongside one pool there were two Squacco Herons and 31 Common Sandpipers resting on the stones. Further down river there was Little Egret and lots of Moorhens, but no exciting crakes. Typical sightings included Stripe-necked Terrapins and elusive Reed and Sedge Warblers. It was now quite hot and a couple of people stayed in the vehicle with Mustapha. The rest of the group walked up the track on the right side of the gorge. A large black *Eugaster* cricket was followed by one of the Day Geckos we had missed at the Tizi-n-Test pass: Moroccan Day Gecko *Quedenfeldtia moerens*. A juvenile Bibron’s Agama and Ruddy Shelduck followed.

More small butterflies were on the wing, but Lou, one of the members of the butterfly cult had gone back to van along with Elsie. Common Tiger Blue and African Babul Blue were settling on what looked like a *Frankenia*. With little else to be seen, we were back in the van by 16.00. The 1.5 hour journey back to La Maison Anglaise was uneventful perhaps linked to the fact that both leaders spent some, if not virtually all, of the time asleep on the way back. They would of course argue that they weren’t beginning to fade but simply taking the opportunity to prepare for the upcoming expedition for Red-necked Nightjar!

At dinner, Barbara (or is that ‘Berbera’) was quizzed how she had got on today on her tour into the mountains with a guide, Abdel, that had been recommended by some friends. We had watched her leave before us that morning with the guide and a driver of one of the local taxis. Bob had been out on the street and chatted to the guy in a vetting kind of way and seemed to deliberately make a note of the car registration plate; but whether he had remembered it by the time he had got back into the hotel we weren’t sure. The fact that Barbara had been returned safely, meant that it didn’t matter.

With two days of check-list to catch up on meant that we were behind schedule by the time we had finished another excellent dinner based around fish including some delicious fish samosas, a hake tajine and two whole cooked species, including small sole. A range of salads ensured that no plate could possibly be remotely empty. An exquisite *kenouffa*, layers of incredibly fine crispy pastry with a scattering of dark chocolate and topped with raspberries was a finishing treat.

Yet another variant of the hardcore crew composed of Agnes and John, Anne, Kate and Sandy hit the bus at 21.00 for the trip back to Freija. Taroudannt was positively jumping with activity with people on the street, in the cafes and shopping amongst the multitude of market traders. Leaving the town Martin, on the left side of the bus, shouted ‘owl’, but only Agnes got onto it, if she hadn’t been on it already. The Tawny Owl was sitting on a wire next to a pole and partly illuminated by the street lights above the noisy traffic and people coming and going. Mustapha hit the brakes but then realised we were less than a hundred metres from what appears to be semipermanent police check-point, so he picked up the gears and kept going only to be hauled over anyway. A slightly tense exchange in which Mustapha apparently said that we were “tourists on the way out for the evening”, was of course exactly true even if not explicit in its details. We were duly illuminated before being allowed to continue with a friendly wave.

At Freija, we hit the track running at speed. Mustapha was clearly on a mission. Much of what was natural stony habitat had been planted with wild-type, relatively sparse barley, which is nowhere near as valuable for native wildlife and completely useless for Red-necked Nightjar. Adrian and Martin searched the habitat on either side of the track for eye-shine with mag-lites from open windows whilst Mustapha used the headlights on the track. A couple of spiders which show surprisingly good eye-shine considering their size, were all we had for the first few hundred metres where he had walked in the morning. That is, before Mustapha spotted a large owl (*hibou* as opposed to *mokka*, the Little Owl) and set off after it, passing the track to the left we normally take. The owl could not be relocated and so we turned around and took the track. After a short stretch of cultivation where there had been none before, we started to pass native vegetation including *Launea* bushes. Martin shouted "got one" from a couple of brief flashes some 40 m up the shallow slope. We stopped and Adrian came round and took both torches as everyone descended from the bus. Martin's scope was used to get an initial view of the bird sitting more or less head-on to us. With continual light illumination on the bird, we carefully tiptoed forward and got a closer view, before going forward yet again. Eventually we were within 6 m or so of the bird with fantastic views of every detail including the russet-orange neck collar. After more pictures using cameras with high ISO capability, we backed away leaving the bird still sitting on the ground.

On the way back, it became clear that Mustapha had taken the back road without saying anything as he had no intention of going anywhere near the police or the owl again. We ribbed him over it of course, but only in a light-hearted way as we were all more than pleased with the night's events.

#### **Day 14 April 8<sup>th</sup>** **Tioute & Taroudannt**

Another excellent breakfast at 07.30 as a beginning to another jam-packed day. After leaving at 08.30 we found ourselves at Tioute palmery by about 09.15 on a particularly beautiful sunny calm day. Here, there is a lot of active cultivation under the palms with crops of barley, alfalfa and beans that prove particularly attractive to small birds seeking invertebrate and seed resources. There was a lot of activity in what was still relatively early morning and we had soon seen Willow Warbler, Sardinian Warbler then Nightingale out in the open a few times. An unusual rich fluty song then drew our attention, which was instantly unrecognisable! The bird was located high in a palm tree. It was russet-brown with a more reddish-tail, a bold supercilium and relatively long bill. As it turned around black and white markings on the undertail were revealed. This was our first Rufous Scrub Robin on our spring trip simply because we were generally too early for this rather late migrant (although Martin had seen some after staying for a couple of extra days in Morocco in one year). The bird went into song flight display and then landed in a close palm affording an excellent view.

More passerines followed including a Garden Warbler and then a Fan-tailed Warbler or Zitting Cisticola in its inimitable zitting flight; a tiny, generally invisible bird shouting incredibly loudly from somewhere on high. Unusually, it landed at the top of a very tall palm. A Turtle Dove purred from somewhere, but as soon as we got close it flew before we could get a scope on it. This became a bit of a chase as the group was quite dispersed and before all could connect, the bird would move to challenge a rival. Eventually, we got an excellent view. The subtle pink shading, chestnut marked back, necklace and red eye make this the most beautiful of all Western Palearctic doves.

The butterflies were now up although few were settling apart from the Long-tailed Blues on alfalfa. Perhaps inevitably, the group became separated in the maze of tracks, although the key is to find the main water-bearing stone channel that ultimately leads back to the main buildings including the restaurant. A number of North African Green Frogs were present in a few puddles associated with the channel. The latter led back to a small building with old timber frames that Martin recognised.

Searching the frame, he found a gecko tucked away under the apex of the frame inches above his head. A mobile phone is excellent in such circumstances and using flash, a couple of excellent pictures were soon secured. These ultimately allowed the gecko to be identified as *Tarentrola boehmii*, a new species for our trips.

The group reunited around the table of one of the carving guys, who had been pretty successful selling a variety of his work. Some of the ladies then became interested in a jewellery stand. It was only when Barbara got to the toilet that she realised the jewellery she had been trying on was still on her arm! A hasty return to the stand was in order!

Outside the village, we stopped at the women's Argan cooperative where we undertook a whistle-stop tour. In the inner sanctum, the women were skillfully cracking the Argan nuts with a stone against a stone anvil at high speed. Although we were more than welcome, some women raised their veils at our entrance. We were then shown around all the processes from drying, to the filtration units where the oil was squeezed from the paste and then finally the packaging stage. Invariably, we found ourselves in the cooperative shop where a number of items in the impressive range of Argan products were purchased.

We then started a search for a suitable lunch stop. There had been a lot of goat grazing in the area so we turned right and headed towards the hills. Mustapha coaxed the minibus into its '4WD mode' and traversed across the stony plain to a small stand of Argan offering some shade. At lunch, a Bonelli's Warbler singing in a nearby Argan provided the first good view for Nancy.

We were back in Taroudannt for around 14.15, where Said, the long-standing guide from Chez Anglaise and Latifa's husband was waiting to take us out to the Souk. Spices proved to be particularly popular, although the packets of breast enlargement cream on the same stand were a little unexpected to say the least. A number of purchases including slippers, shirts, bags earrings and other jewellery for Linda followed before we ended in the carpet shop. We have been visiting this emporium for many years and Adrian is always treated like a long-lost friend, which of course he is! Anne had a specific idea of the carpet she wanted: *aka* like the one in her room at Chez Anglaise. However, despite intensive searching of the piles of hundreds perhaps even thousands of carpets, nothing similar could be found. Carpets are definitely an object of desire and even those with no initial intention of buying one were drawn in. This included Barbara, and although one particular carpet was of real interest it was probably too long. This is no obstacle to the sellars who promptly produced a large pair of scissors and cut off around a third. With no cash, Barbara headed off to the local 'hole-in-the-wall' with one of the sellars and Lou. Unfortunately, she returned without her card as it was consumed by the machine. Fortunately, to cope with such moments there is always the bank of Adrian!

After shopping, we returned to an amazing cooking lesson with 'Little' Latifa assisted by Fatima, with every move narrated by Latifa. The main subject was a shredded chicken bastille, and we watched amazed by the manipulation of multiple layers of wafer thin pastry. John in particular, recorded every moment of what was a personal master class in Moroccan cookery on his phone. Better still, we were to later enjoy what we had seen produced.

## **Day 15 April 9<sup>th</sup>**

### **Oued Massa**

We said our fond farewells to the staff at Chez Anglais. Everyone agreed what gracious people they are and what an excellent stay they had provided. The people here are one of the reasons Adrian and Martin have kept returning to Morocco.

Within one and a half hours we were on the approach road to the village of Massa. A large kettle of Black Kites greeted us, along with some more Red-rumped Swallows in migration. This is a great area for Little Owl and it didn't disappoint, although on this occasion one was perched atop a post rather than on one of the rock pile field boundaries.

We stopped for bread at the usual place. An almost unbelievable sighting was a man with a dog on a leash; the first ever seen on a trip. Also new was the huge roundabout on the edge of town to fit with the wide tarmac road. This quickly ran out into the dirt track we were used to on the edge of the river estuary. We stopped at the viewpoint where the cactoid Euphorbia heath creeps into the river valley. The water level was as low as ever seen on a trip. In truth, there were very few birds with only Common Sandpiper and Greenshank patrolling the exposed banks. A Cetti's Warbler offered a brief view before we moved on, although we were quickly stopped by a male Black-eared Wheatear close to the bus on a post, with a female in the background. Nancy spotted a bird on a mound in the middle of a small fallow field, which turned out to be a Wryneck.

We stopped at the car park at the end of the track, which offers an excellent picnic spot under the trees. But, we were not going to use it on this occasion as we planned to walk the length of the path on the right bank of the river estuary to the beach, where Mustapha would meet us with the lunch.

Although there were some flowers in the form of cranesbills, various Compositae (daisies) and the beautiful *Chrysanthemum carinatum*, it was clear that many had gone over or there had been little rain to trigger germination in the first place, or perhaps a combination of both. Nevertheless, there were many butterflies on the wing including Large White, Long-tailed Blue and Common Blue. A female Brown Argus started wafting pheromone that led to a male dancing in front of her. Something was not quite right as one flew away before the liaison was consummated. With all the action, the butterfly cult, with a new member in the form of Barbara, started to fall behind the main group.

An unfortunate incident followed with a woman herding some sheep. She thought Kate had taken a picture of her, when she had not, and when Kate tried to show her the images on her camera, the woman made a grab for the camera shouting loudly all the time. She could not be calmed and without the words to reassure her, we retreated quickly to diffuse the situation.

Despite the attractions of the micro insect world, Martin was trying to maintain multiple active search images for insects, reptiles and birds in bushes, in and around the water and overhead. Fortunately, at least the latter were relatively easy to spot and included a group of Glossy Ibis with a lone Spoonbill, a nice group of Audouin's Gulls and a few Sandwich Terns, all on the far bank behind the posts. An Osprey landed on a post to consume a large fish it had captured. The waders (shorebirds) included a number of Ringed Plovers with a Kentish Plover, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit, Dunlin and Little Stint. The tide was coming in, which drew attention to the fact that the estuary was now open to the sea, when it used to be completely isolated by the wellformed bar, apart from perhaps on storm surges. This started to move around the Sandwich Terns and the assortment of gulls, which included a pair of Slender-billed Gulls; often a difficult species to connect with. Our luck continued with the sight of a group of Northern Bald Ibis, still one of the World's rarest birds, loafing on the bar. Different counts produced between 42-46 individuals, some 7-8% of the entire Moroccan population, which in turn represents virtually all of the World's truly wild population.

A number of passerines were actively breeding and/or feeding young including Moussier's Redstart, Serin and Stonechat. Distracted by all this activity, the 'butterfly' sub-group suddenly realised they were some distance and probably more than half an hour or more behind the rest of the group, and it was now well after lunch time. Lou initially pushed on before realising that the tracks across the sand were rather confusing. Having travelled this area before, Martin automatically headed across the soft sand in the direction of the Ksar Massa hotel, passing to the left of it before emerging into the car park on the top of the cliff above the beach and a stunning sea view. We were most surprised to reach the van to find Mustapha was alone, putting the finishing touches to his lunch preparation. Then Mustapha's phone rang. After an initial conversation in Arabic the phone was handed to Martin and after a brief conversation with a French guy, the phone was handed to Adrian. The "Where are you?" and "How did you get there?" conversation followed. The answer to the first question was that the group was only a few hundred metres away at most, but behind the Ksar

Massa hotel on the top of the cliff, having climbed a large dune that led them through the village. To say the group was hungry when they got to the minibus was an understatement as it was now near 14.00.

As we prepared to leave, a European Swallowtail was spotted by Agnes cruising low over the short vegetation. It appeared to be looking for oviposition sites as it circled back and forth as some tried to take pictures. As we climbed away, and there was a spectacular band of thyme-like *Frankenia* bushes interspersed with what appeared to be Yellow Sea Aster *Asteriscus maritimus*. If Allard's Silver-Line, an intricately patterned unusual little butterfly high on the hit list of the Lepidopterists, was going to be anywhere, it was here. Unfortunately, there was no time to look, although we did briefly stop for a large herd of many hundred camels driven by nomads. The pressure they would exert on the low-growing bushes is probably something the landscape did not need.

On the way back through Massa, something that used to be a series of hamlets along the river valley, but is now more of a sprawling town with its new large tarmac roads, we planned to stop to check out the river for any waterbirds. After an unplanned sortie down a track that did not allow a view over anything resembling a river, we worked back through the village to locate the bakery we always use and then took a left turn. After a few twists and turns, we found ourselves on the sizeable bridge.

Being Sunday, the local youth were swimming and hanging out, with one lad fishing with a bamboo pole. The incoming tide was creating an obvious upstream current of what is probably quite brackish water even some distance from the sea now that the barrier bar across the river mouth has been breached. A Purple Heron was spotted in flight, which fortunately landed on a low bare branch amongst the reeds providing a view through the scope. A number of Hirundines descended from on high, but we could not generate a Brown-throated Martin from the mixture of Barn and Red-rumped Swallows and Sand Martins. A Rufous Scrub Robin sang from a tamarisk as we returned to the bus. It looked like this late summer migrant had now returned to breed in some numbers.

Our last stop of the day was the series of pools and dammed part of the upper Massa river some distance to the south of Massa village down the main road. After crossing the main road bridge, we turned right to take the track before alighting from the bus. The gang were wilting in the strong afternoon sun now and only the strong pull of the last chance for Brown-throated Martin could overcome the reluctance of another, even short, walk for some. A family party of four or five Moussier's Redstarts with chicks greeted us, although the Kingfisher was less obliging as it called and shot upstream under the road bridge and out of view. The pools were much smaller and sparser than usual and there was little to see until eighty plus Bee-eaters descended from on high to adorn the *Nicotinia* bushes at an inconvenient distance downstream. A similar number passed overhead as most of the group trudged back to the minibus. Sadly, only Martin and Kate saw the fly-by of two Brown-throated Martins working their way upstream to the pool behind the dam upstream.

As we passed through busy Agadir we stopped at a giant supermarket to buy alcohol. After some confusion, a local 'fixer' got us through security and the mesh dropdown barrier into the 'Cave', an annex to the main store where the alcohol was stored. This proved to have a separate entrance into the car park that we had missed. There was an unusual system of being given the till receipt with your purchase, only to have it taken away by another couple of guys at the door. Sometimes it is best to not question why. The same could be said of Bob's quest to purchase a pack of small, spicy sausages as advertised on TV and apparently available in the US, which required access to the main store all over again.

After a journey time of around 1.5 hours, we finally reached the Atlas Kasbah, a spectacular castle-like residence in the foothills of the High Atlas as they fall to the sea. There was a bit of an issue getting in through the fancy electronic gate especially as three cars were trying to drive down the sinuous one-lane entrance-exit path. The first car was being driven by a young woman who had little clue how to reverse and had to be helped by the woman in the second car. Slight irritation quickly

evaporated as we were settled into the hotel run by Hassan and his wife. This is an eco-friendly hotel with solar hot water and lighting, a salt-treated swimming pool and an organic garden that seems to provide some of the foodstuffs served in the hotel. To demonstrate the latter, we sipped a delicate Basil tea as we waited for the administration to be completed.

Dinner was a slightly unusual affair with a lentil starter held together with a ribbon of cucumber and topped with a poached egg. This was followed by a duck tajine with raisins and apricots. The size of the legs generated some comment about the goose-like size of the ducks. At some point, one of our two very friendly waiters produced the small sausages, duly cooked, that Bob had purchased, for us share. Just as we were finishing what we assumed was the main meal, a slightly runny and unfortunately rather tasteless mashed potato dish arrived in individual portions. Bob's small sausages suddenly had a home. Adrian and Martin could not remember mashed potato in twenty years of coming to Morocco.

## **Day 16 April 10<sup>th</sup>**

### **Oued Souss**

Breakfast was another interesting affair, beginning with something the waiter called "soup", but was really a thin gruel pretending to be porridge. To make this more palatable, different members of the group tried introducing various other substances that were provided separately including oats, linseed (flax seed) and dried dates. Some even tried a splash of what proved to be a beetroot-puree masquerading as a sweet jam alongside the ever-so slightly bitter orange compote and honey. The aprico-philes were going to be disappointed, especially as a course of various breads that followed could have used apricot. There was also confusion over a yellowish substance that looked for all the world like coarse-shaved parmesan that inevitably led to the dialogue lifted from *Borat* that had become a firm favourite with the group: "What is this? This is cheese. And what is this? This is also cheese. And what is this? This is not cheese" The substance was in fact, butter, as confirmed by the waiter.

Following our bread course, we were plied with orange juice and then a small natural yoghurt in a glass and finally a course of egg. The choice was fried, scrambled or an omelette. In truth, the omelette was a single fried egg that had been whisked and the scrambled egg was an omelette that had been sliced and mussed around after being cooked. We debated if this labour-saving system had been employed because our terribly nice waiter was actually doing everything himself. We joked that he was even changing uniforms just before he tucked behind or emerged from the kitchen doors.

We were out by 08.30 heading for the Souss estuary minus Barbara who intended to relax around the pool. The traffic was busy as we hit rush hour on the ring road around Agadir, although it all calmed down dramatically as we neared the Souss estuary, where a number of ladies appeared to be taking their morning constitutional. The development of the road system has continued over the last few years and there was another new roundabout and spur road from the last time Martin had been. We started at the bottom of the car park simply walking along the path along the top of the giant gabion baskets stabilising the banks after the destructive flood a few years earlier. We had hit the tide just right as it was low water and the exposed mud banks were covered in waders. Most of these were Ringed Plovers, but dotted amongst them were Grey Plover, Greenshank, Dunlin, Little Stint and Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits. A group of Avocets provided a new bird species for the trip. We then realised a closer bar held a number of Curlew Sandpipers in a variety of plumages from winter pale to (virtually) the stunning brick-red of summer. A nearby Black-tailed Godwit was also in its orange-red summer finery. Pity the lone Red Knot was not red, but grey and white. Redshank, Ruff, Curlew and Whimbrel were all added as we strolled the path towards the sea, whilst Maghreb Magpies, Woodpigeon and Thekla Larks all provided close views on the landward edge of the path.

We decided to simply follow the track heading towards the beach rather than attempt to cut closer to the palace and the pools within the saltmarsh. What used to be the main track to the beach

now appears to be mostly unused, as it is heavily guarded. A policeman on a quad bike stopped to chat with Adrian after seemingly recognising him from previous years. He confirmed that sticking to the edge of the estuary which was his jurisdiction was a good thing and to be encouraged. Walking further up we got a good view of some more second-year Slender-billed Gulls in direct comparison with Black-headed Gulls. We then found a full adult with a rosy flush on the end of a bar. The tide had now turned and was flooding, which was pushing the terns, gulls and waders past us as they headed further up the estuary.

After we had walked back to the car park, as we waited for Mustapha who had gone off for lunch supplies, we shared a moment with the fellow tourists on their camel tour, which rekindled memories of our own experiences in the desert. After Mustapha had returned, we tried to take the road further up the estuary to find it had been blocked with rubble and a no-entry sign. Undeterred, Mustapha took the van up a new stretch of road before working across to the track leading to a bridge where earthmoving equipment was active. We took a track across the hinterland to the river to find the reason that the tarmac road had been blocked was that it had been washed away in places, presumably by a flood.

After parking alongside some trees, we walked to the river. Here we counted an extraordinary 700 or so Ringed Plovers as well as the range of the waders we had seen earlier in the day. A group of Flamingos flew in and landed further down the estuary near the main car park. Back at the van, Mustapha found a hitchhiking Silver-striped Hawk Moth, in the back of the van. We released this truly spectacular insect in the undergrowth. Our last picnic together was tinged with a little sadness, although the humour quickly followed as we watched a young trendy guy with a football shirt apparently taking his goat for a walk. It looked like they did this together all the time.

On the way back to the hotel, we stopped briefly at the main car park again to get a good view of the Flamingos before continuing our journey back to the hotel. The afternoon was to be taken up with Hamman and massage, catching up on photos or just generally relaxing in our luxurious surroundings.

## **Day 17 April 11<sup>th</sup>**

### **Departure**

As always, Mustapha was there to collect the bags and ferry us to the airport for our first flight from Agadir to Casablanca. It was emotional saying goodbye to our trusted friend. Further goodbyes followed in Casablanca as Martin headed off to London just before the main group took their return flight to JFK. It had been a privilege for the leaders travelling with this group and showing them the riches of Morocco, of which the birds are only a part.