

Morocco

Birding the edge of the Sahara

Adrian Binns & Martin Perrow

26th March to 11th April 2019

Day 1 March 26th

Chellah and Lac du Sidi Bourhaba

The group had arrived independently over the previous couple of days, with Martin last to arrive from London after a delayed flight. After a 07.00 breakfast at the Atlas Sky Hotel near the airport, the group demonstrated their familiarity with the local birds by ticking off a kettling group of migrating Black Kites as the recently moustached packed the van. There was a choice of seats for the seven of us aboard our 14-seater minibus. After a few kms on the way to Rabat, we stopped at a small roadside pool packed with Black-winged Stilts and some Green Sandpipers, before marvelling at the incredible spectacle of thousands of gulls (Barbara did say she counted them!) above a rubbish tip. A group of adult and second calendar year Black-headed Gulls was another nice find before we got up to cruising speed on the motorway.

Having reached Rabat, Mustapha skilfully navigated the traffic before reaching Chellah. Major roadworks to create an extensive road entrance and car parking were underway and we had to leave the van and tiptoe through the jackhammers to the entrance. Fortunately, the grounds inside were as calm and floral as ever (well, until the parties of colour-coordinated school children arrived!). We collected Ahmed as a guide, warning him that we would inevitably be distracted by the birds. Serins and Blackbirds were particularly obliging, with a Hoopoe giving good flight views before a bit of foraging on the ground. The White Storks nesting on the buildings and minorette demand attention with bill-clapping display, courtship and mating attempts, especially when some are only 3 m or so above the heads of the people walking underneath. A Spotless Starling demonstrated its vocal repertoire from a pepper tree.



View of Chellah

We also stopped at the small pool with its enormous European Eel tempted from the shadows by the bread thrown by the attendant. In terms of butterflies, there were a few Large Whites amongst the multitude Speckled Woods, and then, more surprisingly, a Monarch floated by. Ahmed was kicking the ground by now at our ability to focus on anything with wings or legs, although we were doing our best to concentrate on him too. However, even the toilet stop turned into a bird quest as a Western Olivaceous Warbler sang from the olives. What appeared to be its mate was also in close attendance. After a bit of effort all had good views of a bird that is widespread but not always easy to catch up with.

Time had lost meaning in our pleasant surroundings and at after 12.30 we really had to push on. A quick distribution of delectable biscuits saw the immediate hunger pangs assuaged and we set off for Lac du Sidi Bourhaba; stopping for our first *hobs* (circular, flattened Moroccan bread) on the way. At the lake, Mustapha set up a fine lunch as always, as the rest of us enjoyed the wildlife from the causeway. Large numbers of Red-crested Pochard pairs were dabbling in the sunshine amongst a couple of families of Red-knobbed Coots with both young and large independent chicks. Peter was the first to get onto 'whinnying' Little Grebe. Emperor, Lesser Emperor, Ruddy Darter and Scarlet Darter dragonflies were all on the wing, with Stripe-necked Terrapins both in the water and hauled onto tussocky vegetation. By this time, a pair of White-headed Ducks had come within about 30 m to provide stunning views. As Barbara said, the male really has 'quite a snozz'.



Male White-headed Duck

At lunch, numerous African Blue Tits, a Great Tit, fly-by Black Kites and calling Cetti's Warblers kept us further entertained. After lunch, we walked along the lake amongst the shady Eucalypts and discussed the true purpose of the newly-installed log barriers at various points along the shore: erosion control or people control or both? Ann was attracted by calling Black Kites on the far shore, which we then realised were on a nest. Nearby, both races of Great Cormorant, including the white-breasted Moroccan race and a fine adult *sinensis* in breeding plumage decorated the overhanging trees. Martin found a football (yes really) flanked by a pair of Marbled Ducks, which we also shared with our German compatriots, who were also on 'bird tour'. We further assisted with a female Ferruginous Duck (we would later see a bunch more). A male African Chaffinch gave great views on the ground, although the singing Wren mostly eluded us, and of course the Cetti's Warbler escaped with no more than brief flight

views. A dozen or so Blackcaps in close attendance, presumably passing through on migration, crossed the track and a large (50 or so) group of European Spoonbills powered down the lake. Reaching the ever expanding, now gravel laid, car park we boarded the bus and set off for Kenitra; alighting again briefly on the road out to check out a flock of Greater Flamingoes in the inaccessible part of the lake. A pair of Northern Shoveler, a drake European Teal and our sixth or seventh Marbled Duck completed a really nice haul of *canards* (ducks), dominated by getting on for 100 White-Headed Ducks. Morocco is really a great place to see these.



Lesser Emperor

Going through Kenitra, we were amazed to see a building extending out of what had been a layby and also into what had been a few years ago, a prime area of quite deep water fringed by emergent vegetation. Just astonishing. Amidst the change, the staff at the Hotel Assam were also new. Key handover was also more organised than usual, although Adrian needed a replacement room after the door didn't close. The manager affirmed that he'd spent the last three days practising on this door with no hitch until now! All in good humour.

After a brief wash and brush up we did our first check list and finally settled on the pronunciation of Cetti's (with a 'ch'), before a slightly unusual meal in which the soup was described by management as 'green', and the tasty little meatballs remained unaccompanied by anything else in their individual bowls with not a *tajine* in sight.

Day 2 March 27th

Foret du Zaers and Lac du Sidi Bourhaba

Many were a bit bleary at the 05.00 breakfast, partly as a result of chasing mosquitoes around rooms during the early hours. Tea proved to be a step too far for the overnight staff, but to be fair there was a mixture of various foodstuffs including very hot boiled eggs. We were away by 05.45 on our quest for Double-spurred Francolin. After a smooth journey on the highway, we found ourselves in the King's forest of short Cork and Holm Oaks with a scrubby understorey of *Cistus* and *Lavendula* amongst other herbs. A couple of road casualty Algerian Hedgehogs attracted attention before we picked up Labidi, our Francolin guide, who may have spent the night under a bush. With sullen skies, we began to tour the tracks in the dark. At the bottom of one of the main tracks near a grassy area, we stopped with the door open. A rasping call from the

undergrowth warned of the presence of our quarry and then up the hill a dark gamebird burst across the track in the early morning gloom: Francolin! In fact, there was another, quietly standing on the right side of the track and then other rushing out into flight and away. The standing bird unfortunately melted away without a good view for everyone.



Double-spurred Francolin

So, after a while we drove on. With no further joy we doubled back to the same area to see a Francolin again out on the edge of the track. Moments before Labidi had closed the door and now we needed it open again as the bird was now moving towards us in response to calls being played via the Collins guide app. With Martin squished down and able to poke a camera out of the door to the front, there was space for everyone behind to rotate in turn and get a decent view. The bird then cut down a small track, but darted away as Mustapha rolled the van into position. But no matter, this was sweet success within an hour!

After a further short drive, we stopped again at one of the open grassy clearings (reminiscent of a mini version of a *bye* in the Congo rainforest minus the elephants and lowland gorillas) with water frosted with a covering of white water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus* sp.). A Woodlark posed on a log right next to the minibus before our attention was drawn to the Spoonbills, Little Egrets and Grey Herons hunting the marsh. Two pairs of Stone Curlews were on the drier areas. In the Holm Oaks, a number of Bonelli's Warblers sang and called before we were distracted by a Woodchat Shrike.

Driving back down the tracks, we stopped for a gorgeous male Redstart found by Peter. A Tchagra flew in to the same area, but was not nearly so obliging and quickly disappeared. A little further on, right out of the blue a further Francolin ran right across the track, so fast that a number of us never even saw it. Moving to the entrance track, we got out of the van for a singing Corn Bunting. Martin became determined to find the singing 'wet-my-lips' Quail and with Peter and Barbara was drawn down the track leading across the field. At the point where the bird was close enough to mean that the gulping start-up note could be heard, Martin found it in the 'scope. Actually seeing a Quail doing its thing on the ground was a first for all concerned. Ironically, the rest of the group were watching a group of around 50 Spanish Sparrows in the bushes behind Martin *et al.* which the latter didn't see.

It then sunk in that the lake we normally stop at the road on the way of the forest was actually readily visible from where we stood. The 'chivik' calls of Spotted Redshank were a bit of a surprise to add to the more usual suspects of Snipe and a plethora of ducks including Mallard, Northern Shoveler and Ferruginous Ducks as well as a pair of delicate Garganey. A Marsh Harrier created consternation amongst the ducks before a Black-shouldered Kite powered low across the field. We followed suit, emerging from the track on the main road.

After dropping Labidi in the local town, we collected both *hobs* and a delicious buttery-baked flatbread secured by Mustapha from somewhere. Quite a lot of this warm treat was quickly devoured. Passing the turn for the motorway we drew into an area of Cork Oaks to set up lunch. Adrian took everyone on a short walk as Mustapha and Martin set up. A Sparrowhawk attacking some Spotless Starlings, a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers and a totally surprising Levaillant's Green Woodpecker in this sort of habitat and at this low altitude, were real highlights. Butterflies included a Lang's Short-tailed Blue and a Small Copper.



Walk on the Wildside

Back in Rabat, the plan to go and see the Tour Hassan looked to have been foiled by people putting out what seemed like endless chairs and what looked like shut gates. Mustapha asked some policemen who seemed to assure that entrance was still possible and didn't react as Mustapha promptly drove down the one-way street. The police at the other end were less than enthusiastic at the mistake, but we were through now anyway. After double parking on the street, Adrian took everyone in, whilst Martin stayed with the van. It turned out that a papal visit (i.e. from the Pope) was the cause of all the fuss. This explained the apparent rush by multiple teams of people installing the road and car park at Chellah, and perhaps the litter pickers we had seen for the first time ever, going along the highway verges on the first day.

On the general way back to Kenitra we turned off back towards Lac du Sidi Bourhaba, passing the lake and its Greater Flamingos, but not before stopping for a Maghreb Magpie on the side of the road. Reaching the sea at Medhiya Plage, we did a spot of seawatching and were immediately rewarded with a foraging Sandwich Tern and then two groups of three and then 10 Gull-billed Terns, followed by an Osprey.

Even better were the three Balearic Shearwaters that were initially rather distant and then came much closer. 'Pot-bellied' and 'smudgy' are two adjectives that come to mind with this species. Into the estuary mouth proper, we were disappointed to find that the fish factory appeared to have closed down, thereby losing many of the thousands of gulls that used to winter here. There were however still hundreds around the fish market and the fishing boats. Initially we found some in a car park, including a dead-ringer second calendar year Caspian Gull with its curious high-chested, sagging bellied and flat-headed structure. Unfortunately, before Martin could get everyone on it, all the birds were flushed by a group of youths walking past. We are unclear of the status of Caspian Gull in Morocco, but with no pictures, this record was going no further. Some gulls close on the rocks provided a chance to hone ID skills of immature Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls for the group and we found our first Audouin's Gulls in the group on the water. A migrating group of Barn Swallows, Sand Martins and the odd House Martin followed.

Back in Kenitra, Adrian guided us past the large breeding colony of Cattle Egrets and Glossy Ibis to a further causeway across the marsh. A Western Swamphen standing in the open with a large chick was an initial great find. Turning around and parking on the other side of the road, we alighted from the van to savour the 'delights' of a Moroccan version of 'Love Canal', reputedly one of the most polluted waterways in the World in the 1970s. Rank though the locality was, it was alive with Black-winged Stilts, a pristinely spotted Wood Sandpiper and a Grey Heron with the reddest legs one could hope to see.



Kenitra marsh

On the way back to the hotel we did stop for a few minutes at the egret/ibis colony to add Black-crowned Night Heron (a few pairs breed with the egrets/ibis), a terrific Purple Heron as well as more Ferruginous Ducks, and a surprise pair of White-headed Duck. At least three further Swamphens with large chicks were also noted. Ann suddenly called 'snip' (Dutch for Snipe courtesy of Peter and Barbara) for a small bird clattering through the *Typha* to disappear from view. However, this was probably no 'snip' but most likely a crane, although which species we would never know in a strange repeat of what had happened to Adrian two years previously.

Dinner was the groups' first experience of a Moroccan staple - lemon chicken with green olives - although the starter of a mixed potato salad on an iceberg lettuce leaf is less than typical. No matter, hopefully the successful contact with Double-spurred Francolin would be a sign of further good things to come.

Day 3 March 28th

Merdja Zerga lagoon and marshes

On another quest today; this time for African Marsh Owl, another range-restricted species with just a remnant enclave in the Western Palearctic within Morocco. We cruised down the highway, passing an expanse of plastic greenhouses and running alongside the main train line. After a time, the expanse of Merdja Zerga came into view; one of Morocco's, and indeed the Western Palearctic's, great wetlands, although much has now been drained and is under intense cultivation, particularly for export of berries (Driscoll's in relation to the USA) and a variety of greenstuffs. (Possibly some of this 'stuff' was the fuel behind the hotel's 'green' soup? Little did we know it at the time but we would get a second helping later that evening!).

In the small market conurbation on the edge of the marsh, we picked up (Mo)Hammed, wearing a natty line in pinstripe jacket on time at 0800. Turning from the road we took a small farm track heading through the plastic polytunnels containing blueberries. Out of the van, Hammed collected several large luscious-looking strawberries from the lines of plants and began to hand them out. In the soft morning light, small birds were everywhere, including migrant Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Yellow Wagtails (Iberian race) and a Northern Wheatear or two from Europe, amongst the resident Corn Buntings and Greenfinches.



Marsh Owl

We followed Hameed across the fields, flushing some Quail in the process. Right on the edge of the marsh with its stands of a large spiky rush, we came across a cowherd and his small group of cows. This guy was suddenly part of the team and after we aligned ourselves on a small hummock created by one of the rush stands, Hammed and

new colleague were suddenly walking through a small field of barley from left to right. Both reached the other side and as Hameed turned back for a second pass, a large brown bird suddenly emerged into lazy flight a few metres from him; the owl! Right against the sun, the bird drifted across us to a volley of camera shutters, calmly voided itself of bowel contents and then, unbelievably, as though in slow motion, it landed on a post on the side of the field and started looking around. With scopes secured on the prize, offering frame-filling views and to the hushed cry of "We've never had it like this before", Martin plunged into the tall wet barley, seeking to get behind the light and taking pictures as he went. Peter, Ann and Adrian immediately followed and magically we were able to get around and within about twenty metres of the bird, who was now being mobbed by a male Blackbird. Seemingly more in response to the Blackbird than us, the owl turned away and flew away towards the marsh. Time to breathe.

After congratulatory pictures of ourselves, we treated Hammed to the Vulcan 'live long and prosper' sign, which he couldn't really get his fingers to do. 'Rock, paper, scissors' would become 'rock, paper, handshake' in Hammed's house. After admiring numbers of the newly christened 'Apricot Slug', a large *Arion*-like critter, we took a different route back to our starting point. Not really expecting the unexpected; we were then surprised by the emergence of a second owl from a rush stand a few metres from us. This flew away at an angle before banking to reveal beautiful golden primary coverts before dropping back into thicker rushes.

Within a few more minutes, a Quail emerged a few metres from behind Martin, to be seen by the group (apart from Martin) and then a Wryneck popped up providing great views in the scope. Talking up the lack of harriers thus far, we then found both male and female Montagu's Harriers five posts apart after another male had passed by at distance. Near the van, Ann had a practise picking strawberries with a few ladies (and one young chap) with open bread baskets strapped to their backs, which became more or less horizontal when bent over picking fruit. What back-breaking work that is.

After dropping off Hammed back near the market, we headed off to Moulay Bousellem in bright sunshine. As Mustapha sought out bread, what appeared to be a sound check for a concert started up and we enjoyed the funky sounds of the new Morocco. In the car park, we met up with Hassan, who was to be our guide pretty much bang on time at 11.00. After presenting our details to the police, we lined up to board a boat for our trip on the lagoon. As we did so, we marvelled at a stranded Sea Hare, large numbers of which apparently get washed into the lagoon at this time of year. Hassan offered a confusing story of the Sea Hare seeking to sunbathe on the beach, which is obviously suicidal for a marine invertebrate. As the boat was launched another Sea Hare was seen pulsing through the shallows.



Moulay Bousellem

In the lagoon proper, we stopped to look at the assembled flock of gulls - mainly Lesser Black-backed of a range of ages, immature Yellow-legged Gulls, some Mediterranean Gulls (including a fine black-hooded adult), and a second calendar year Slender-billed Gull with pale orange bill and yellowish legs - and Sandwich Terns in various stages of moult into summer plumage.

Moving through what is the wide main channel we started to encounter wading birds (shorebirds) on the exposed muds on the falling tide of this giant estuarine lagoon. First was a nice male Kentish Plover and then hundreds of Grey Plover, Dunlin Redshank and Greenshank with a few Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, and Eurasian Curlew. In places, crabs in myriad coated the mud and scuttled away *en-masse* as the boat got close to the shoreline. Over in the distance to the east, a couple of large groups of Spoonbills coupled with an even larger group of Greater Flamingos could be seen. Too shallow to continue, we turned back to the spit with resting Audouin's Gulls that marked the point of the two channels in this part of the lagoon and took the other to get a better angle and light on the birds. Here, we passed a number of set nets targeting eels, before getting great views of Little Egrets attending some feeding Spoonbills hoping to grab any small fish disturbed by them. Turning back again, we retraced our steps some distance to take the other main channel on the very western edge of the lagoon to head south. As we did so, some young women heading out to harvest clams as the tide dropped beckoned us to ferry them across the channel to the newly exposed mud as a number of youths had already done. But, we were too full to do so. We passed a couple of said youths rowing a large heavy boat against the falling tide and shared a joke about the muscle power required to do the work.



Little Egret attending Spoonbills

Our first target was a line of posts upon which a number of Whiskered Terns in various stages of plumage from winter to patchy dark-bellied summer were sitting. A Little Tern also flew past. Second target was a further cockle shell sandbank upon which there were a number of Caspian Terns and a range of Slender-billed Gulls including some rosy-flushed adults that started to pose to each other stretching their long necks

in the process. Very cool. After a large fishing party of egrets and spoonbills, we turned back to the bank, where there were now four species of tern: Caspian, Sandwich, Whiskered and Little, effectively covering the World's size range of terns from largest to getting on for the smallest. A 16-strong party of Gull-billed Terns called from overhead before landing nearby, making it five species of tern; about as good as it gets.

At some point, everyone had eaten their sandwiches prepared after Mustapha had set out the table and produce before we had got on the boat. By now, it was after 1400 and time to head back, but not before we encountered an amazing fishing group of Great Cormorants trapping fish in the shallows, with Sandwich Terns diving amongst them. In a final twist, Hassan then took us to the spit at the mouth of the lagoon, somewhere we have never been before. This was in the hope of seeing the small number of Lesser Crested Terns that Hassan says turn up every spring. This was however a bit early and no other tern species were amongst the Sandwich variety. Pity as LCT's would have been great to see and also assess if these are not actually the small number of Elegant Terns that have recently been found breeding in Spain and occasionally in France in Sandwich Tern colonies, with records also now from the UK. These Elegants, a Pacific (west) coast breeder in the USA, have somehow become ensconced in the Atlantic, perhaps after an El Niño event.



Slender-billed Gulls

In the last few hundred metres of shoreline, we passed a couple of Laughing Doves, another species shifting range, albeit more rapidly than Elegant Terns, that has recently colonised Moulay Bousellhem. Back on land, we stopped in the restaurant for mint tea and to reflect on our success, possibly the best boat trip we've ever had on the lagoon. We said our goodbyes to Hassan, before Mustapha whisked us off back down the highway to our last night at Hotel Assam.

Day 4 March 29th Volubilis and Fez

Another early breakfast at 05.45 in order to pack the van and be on our way by 06.30. There was a little deviation from our normal bathroom break, with the use of an Afriquia station rather than the 'Total experience' (the 2017 trip report needs to be consulted to really understand what this is...).

After about 10 minutes we were in the rolling hills with a patchwork mosaic of crops centred on wheat and barley, but also including broad beans (fava beans) and alfalfa. Crested Larks and Corn Buntings adorned the roadsides and fields. We were thrown somewhat by the presence of a new road slicing through the landscape, which fortunately came back to the old road just at the point where we take a track cutting back across the fields on the left. A flock of Spanish Sparrows landed in front of the van just as we turned, but there was no sign of our target Calandra Larks to begin with. Consequently, after a few hundred metres we got out the van. Within a few seconds two Calandra's were up singing in front of us; a distinctive heavy lark with a large bill, black underwings and a white trailing edge to the upper wing. And from there they put on a show chasing each other, perching on the ground showing off their black epaulettes and singing throughout.

After about another half an hour we got our first view of Volubilis nestling in the landscape. We stopped for a photo opportunity with Ann starting a trend of walking to the end of the track to remove the line of derelict street lamps from, as these are really not very Roman! We had not made it to Volubilis just after it opens at 09.00 before and there was hardly anyone around.



Volubilis

We selected our guide, Rashid, who we have had before and speaks very good English. Although the weather was warm and sunny and the flowers were generally good, apart from in the sections where some previous cutting and clearance had been undertaken, there were rather few butterflies on the wing. These were mostly Esper's Heath (split from Small Heath where it was formerly classed as the *lyllus* form) in the open grassier parts and Speckled Wood in the more overgrown parts, a few Large Whites and Moroccan Orange-tips. Adrian added just one Bath White and Martin found a Hummingbird Hawk Moth. Reptiles were also few and far between with only a Mauritanian Gecko or two, and a Changeable Agama without a tail.



Esper's Heath

The birds were both more numerous and obliging and soon everyone had seen Sardinian Warblers, Corn Bunting and a pair of European Stonechats. Adrian's possible Subalpine Warbler turned into a male Spectacled Warbler for Martin and Peter, unless there were actually two birds. Four Booted Eagles were spotted thermalling, a much more obvious species than the two big groups of Great Cormorant that we saw doing the same several hundred metres up. A most unusual sight.

Rashid was doing his best to retain the interest of the group with information about the amazing open air mosaics, arches and pillars, water troughs and the streets with cobbles smoothed by Romans (and their slaves) and now endless tourists. By now, the place was mobbed with school groups and coach parties and it was time for us to go. Most however popped into the museum for a few minutes. This has seen a lot of work in the last few years and is highly educational.

We left in a total zoo of bus tours and French camper vans and sought sanctuary a couple of miles away in a stand of *Eucalyptus*, where we had lunch. Here, we got out the Moroccan equivalent of Nutella for the first time, putting it together with the buttery flatbread Mustapha had bought. This was the sort of addictive treat Willy Wonka would have been proud of, Nevertheless, Doris took it a step further by putting the spread on a fig. (We would later joke that the spread would have to be in a triangular shape and topped by whipped cream. The business would begin slowly by Doris doing roadside sales before expanding rapidly into more commercial scale production...).

Following lunch, we continued to Fez where we were to first check in to The Dar Fez Medina, a beautifully ornate *dar* (rather than a *riad* which has an internal garden) over three storeys and a rooftop terrace. The DFM cannot be reached by bus and we parked on the main road next to an entrance in the wall. One of the hotel staff arrived to escort us to our accommodation a couple of blocks away in the narrow streets.



Bedroom at Dar Fez Medina

After delicious mint tea and small biscuits, Adeil, our guide for the afternoon arrived (at 14.45). His job was to show us the oldest living medieval city in the World with 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). To start the tour, Mustapha took us all to a drop-off point where a small girl (maybe four years old) tried to sell us a packet of tissues. Adrian finally agreed, by which time she was no longer sure she wanted to sell. But the money was more attractive and she relented. All she had to do now was to avoid relinquishing it to her two older brothers....

Walking through part of the food market with its both delicious and unsavoury smells combined, we emerged and headed to the 'Blue Gate', painted blue on the outside, the colour of Judasim, and green on the inside, the colour of Islam. Already, endless photos had been taken. However, this was going to be far less chaotic compared to previous trips, as it was a Friday and many shops were closed. Nonetheless, Adeil dutifully took us to a medersa and gave us a brief history of Fez from the 9th Century to the present day. Howard and Doris quickly got into the idea of purchasing souvenirs with some nice coasters. Ann secured pretty much the only Moroccan national football team shirt we saw (amongst the more popular Barcelona, Real Madrid and Juventus equivalents). An original 14th century caravan-sali was next, where the animals would have been housed downstairs of the living quarters. Today, it was a chaotic bookstore with everything in piles and quite a lot of it in English. A mosque and what was reputed to be the oldest university in the World which was established by a woman, quickly followed, before we returned to the El Haj family-run weaving business where the main central area was open to the sky. Here Martin bought yet more curtains and Ann and Doris both bought fine scarves made from *Agave* 'silk'.

Last stop on the tour was the tannery, accessed through a nondescript door up a couple of flights of stairs and then through a panoply of leather goods before emergence onto a balcony overlooking the most famous tannery in the World, with its white stone circular cells reminiscent of the honeycomb in a bee's nest. One of the salesman gave us a quick speil of the tanning process, which starts with stripping hair from hides with large knives before using the ammoniacal content of pigeon droppings to strip fat and grease and make the leather soft over about a week before the various dyes are applied.

It is incredible that the dyes are worked into the hides by men treading them in in knee-deep solution contained within the caustic (and probably carcinogenic) chemicals.

After leaving the medina and dropping off Adeil, we were treated to the sight of hundreds of Alpine Swifts attending the walls where they use the former scaffold holes as nest sites. Back at DFM, dinner was sumptuous, with multiple delicious delicately spiced salad dishes (cauliflower, courgette and tomato, lentil, aubergine) 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, which Barbara smartly asked the staff to save as breakfast for her the following day.

Day 5 March 30th

Dayet Aoua to the Zeida Plain

Breakfast at 06.45 meant a welcome lie-in, and although the food and especially the juice were really good, there was no apricot jam for the apricophiles. Instead, there was a mandarin jam that nobody guessed. At the van, the photographers accepted the challenge of Alpine Swifts whizzing around the skies with odd ones entering nest holes. Spotless Starlings were also engaged in display and flying to and from the same sort of holes in the walls.



Spotless Starling

After about an hour we began to climb into the Middle Atlas with its Holm Oaks and orchards of Cherry trees, although these were overlapping with some of the first flowering Apple trees that are often still bare at this time of year. Perhaps a sign of the unusual weather with little rain and no winter snow. We stopped at Immouzer for *hobs* and watched a variety of flatbreads (including one with onion and harissa) prepared for us. Our purchase granted the use of the toilet in the associated restaurant. An African Blue Tit and a male Chaffinch clearly used to people provided terrific photo opportunities in the trees next to the van. Who knows what the locals thought of a cluster of westerners pointing cameras at who knows what.

Twenty minutes later we turned left to Dayet (lake) Auoua (gull), although we don't recall ever seeing any gulls on the lake. In fact, today, there was barely any water,

continuing the downward trend we noted a couple of years ago, when it was about 20% of its former typical size. Now, the lake was less than 5%, perhaps even 1-2% of its bankfull state. And with that there was not a single grebe of any sort, with Black-necked (Eared) particularly sorely missed.

Before this had really sunk in, Adrian spotted a Hawfinch in sunshine at the top of a pine. Ann got to say 'Appelvink' in the presence of a native Dutch (Peter) and honorary (Barbara) Dutch speaker. The Hawfinch briefly alighted in the deciduous trees alongside the road and then was gone with its mate. Cutting into the pines, we quickly found a singing Firecrest (think Golden-crowned Kinglet) that came close enough for us to see its humbug stripy face and hot orange crown. Peter found a Mistle Thrush on the ground, which began to collect nesting material before flying up into the nearby trees. A Great Spotted Woodpecker also flew in to check us out. Moving through the forest, we heard Coal Tit and although everyone saw it, it remained more elusive than we would have liked. Same for the Short-toed Treecreeper that was foraging on horizontal branches amongst the pine cones; most unusual. A grating call drew us to at least two Eurasian Jays that intermittently provided good views on the ground and amongst the branches. As usual, sightings of these restless birds were fleeting.

Back on the road, a calling Nuthatch flew in to the top of a bare tree. Next was the a male Levaillant's Green Woodpecker drawn in by Adrian's iphone. The woodpecker landed in a nearby large Poplar and provided an excellent view of all features from the intense red crown (with a yellow tinge to the trailing edge) to the black moustache and the pale iris. The weather had clouded over now, but with all the target birds in the bag (minus the waterbirds) it was time to move on.

Next stop on the journey was the expanding and rather affluent town of Ifrane, with its chalet-style buildings that seem most at home in the European alpine countries like Switzerland. The building style is simply adaptation to the climatic conditions as this part of Morocco sees much snow in the winter, to which the barriers on the sides of the



Barbary Macaque

road testify. A short way down the road we encountered the first of the Atlas Cedars *Cedrus atlantica* and a sign warning of *singe* (monkeys in the form of Barbary Macaque). Said *singe* were sitting on the road with a group of Moroccan tourists who were feeding a large male and female with strawberries by hand. One woman had a baby in the other arm. A risky business indeed.

What was impressive is that the young man who was selling bananas to feed to the monkeys was collecting all roadside rubbish into a plastic bag. He was suitably congratulated and rewarded with some dirhams (and the last of our 'Megachok' biscuits).

Rain threatened us at lunch in a grove of magnificent cedars. Ann also got to fulfil a dream with a ride on an Arab stallion bedecked with fancy saddle and who was clearly 'pleased' to see someone judging from his undercarriage. We suspected Adrian. Upon leaving, our first Moussier's Redstart was spotted, albeit briefly,

and a Long-legged Buzzard sat miserable in the rain at a top of a small pine. Although it was now falling, there had clearly been little rain across much of the Middle Atlas in recent times as the wet alpine floodplain meadow that normally houses dozens of Ruddy Shelduck, was anything but. We had a quick look at the reservoir of Lac de Sidi Aquelmane (which we haven't done for years) to look for missing grebes, but only got around 10 Great-crested Grebes, with some distant coots of one type or another. A couple of Linnets posed on some rocks. At least we did manage some Ruddy Shelduck close to the road.

With the rain subsiding, the search was back on for Seebohm's Wheatear, a relatively recent split from Northern Wheatear. The male has a striking black throat, that contrasts with pale grey back and white chest and belly. The female is very pale resembling Isabelline Wheatear, but less sandy-colored. Right on cue after getting out of the van, a female was spotted, with the pair in the same scope view at times. A second male was also seen a short distance away, suggesting our pair was close to a territorial boundary. A Thekla's Lark identified itself with rusty upper tail coverts as it preened.



Thekla's Lark

We reached Zeida Plain at around 16.00 and went through the procedure of how we would hopefully see Dupont's Lark on this extensive *Artemisia* (Wormwood) steppe. On the right side of the track in an area we'd seen the bird on the last trip we aligned ourselves at about 15-20 m intervals. But just before we were to commence, Adrian and Martin at opposite ends of the line realised they could hear Dupont's Lark singing, something it wasn't really supposed to do in the afternoon. Martin found the bird in his scope, but whilst Adrian was trying to align under instruction about "in line with the black and red shepherd (who was about 2.5 km away!)", the bird dropped off the 'bush' it was singing from before Ann could properly focus on it. A few minutes later Martin found it again, but it was Peter that was to be foiled from seeing it this time. With no response to recorded calls, we resorted to Plan A and walked across the area in line into a stiff breeze. Some Lesser Short-toed Larks were using this to hold station aloft in song flight, with small groups of Short-toed Larks on the ground. After a kilometre or so,

Mustapha came over to say he'd seen five sandgrouse another few hundred metres ahead. We switched to these and soon found ourselves admiring Black-bellied Sandgrouse, although they always walking away from us amongst the sandgrouse-height vegetation. After these flew, we turned back to the lark quest.

By now, a shepherd and his large flock of sheep had come across the area we had covered, so our plan was to retrace our steps and hope the lark would be 'trapped' between them and us. As we got up to the sheep, Ann saw a movement, but whatever it was could not be located. Song behind us reinforced that the bird had broken our line and was now up on a bush singing as 'bold as brass'. Martin saw it for a third time, but frustratingly, no-one else did. After some 2.5 hours, time had really run out, so now we had to resume our quest before dawn tomorrow morning.

Half an hour later, we found ourselves in Midelt, the centre of Morocco's apple production, with corresponding giant model apple – aka the 'Big Apple' – as a roundabout centrepiece. After winding through the backstreets we pulled up to the Villa Midelt, a classic Moroccan *riad*. After a mint tea and biscuit welcome, our bags were distributed to our rooms. At dinner, the salads were possibly even better than at DFM (especially the sweet pumpkin with cinnamon). Our first real tajine, compete with couscous followed: suitable fuel for our dawn 'larkabout' the following day

Day 6 March 31st

Zeida Plain, Er-Rachidia and Rissani

Tea and coffee were supplied at 05.30 for all except Barbara, who was sensibly pacing herself after the previous day's fall. Mustapha's phone had somehow reverted to an hour ahead, so he'd already been waiting for us for an hour; not a lot of fun for him when he was suffering with a chesty cough. The Zeida Plain was a very different place this morning as it was still and clear. We could immediately hear the simple squeaky whistling of between 2-4 several singing male Dupont's Larks, as well as the song flight of Lesser Short-toed Larks complete with mimicry of Yellow Wagtail. All we had to do now was wait for enough light to see.



Dawn on Zeida Plain

Courtesy of Ann Oliver

But when that happened, the birds had fallen silent. Moving forward, a Short-toed Lark popped up about 3 m away. Then another was seen at distance singing from the top of a bush, that initially set our hearts racing, before the resumption of singing from a Dupont's Lark to the left gave us an initial view in the scopes. Moving forward, these initial views became frame-filling, including head-on with all details of the face and gape

visible on the singing bird. As a final touch, the light was behind us and the sight and sound of this extraordinary bird singing from the *Artemisia* on this high-altitude steppe with the backdrop of the snow covered high Atlas mountains in the background will be etched in the memory for a long time. High fives all round and a group 'hands in the middle' celebration may be something the bird doesn't forget either.



Dupont's Lark singing

Back for a welcome breakfast, with the additional reward of the first apricot jam for the apricophiles. We left the Riad by 09.00 heading south-east out of Midelt. As we got to the Ziz valley it began to rain, stopping enough for us to get out of the van in the gorge after the tunnel. Here, we saw real' Rock Doves on the slopes behind the road and many Crag Martins and some House Martins hawking insects low over the water. As we continued the rain really started to pour, so much so that we stopped just before entering to try and sort out the windscreen wipers which did not have a continuous wipe. As we stopped in view, the police then pulled us over and went through Mustapha's papers.

With lunch likely to be put back by the rain, we decided to take a break at the petrol station and large Moroccan café with toilets and a shop on the outskirts of Er-Rachidia. Buying McVities chocolate digestives (a firm favourite in the UK) as well as what proved to be an initially less popular fruity alternative in the shop (something that would prove its worth later in the trip), we sat down to welcome mint tea and coffee. A singing male House Bunting in the restaurant continued the birding. In a separate annex, two guys were preparing a line of tajines and beckoned us in to see. The infectious Moroccan music they were playing, led to Martin taking Ann back into the shop to buy a CD to play in the van.

The drive through Er-Rachidia was just extraordinary, as torrents of water covered the streets, with many cars broken down and the oncoming vehicles on our side of the road where the water was shallowest. Adrian and Martin had heard of flash floods and seen evidence of them, but had never actually witnessed them. With rain still falling when we reached the viewpoint above the lush green Ziz Valley with its mass of palms, Carob trees and patchwork of tiny agricultural plots, Mustapha asked the shop/café

owner if we could construct our picnic inside if we bought drinks. The owner welcomed the opportunity for any sort of sale. As a treat, a Long-billed Lark walked across the plot between shop and toilet just as the rain stopped and the sun came out. A Booted Eagle put down by the rain flew up the valley towards us and then spiralled upwards close by to catch a thermal before gliding away on its northward migration.

On the outskirts of Rissani, we turned right back towards a well-known location for Pharaoh Eagle Owl although this site is no longer used, perhaps as a result of human disturbance. In fact, there used to be an arrow of stones pointing to the former roost site. However, a pair of *erlangeri* Lanners are nesting here and what we presumed to be the female, another 'queen' of birds, was sitting on nest with her head and occasionally her back or wings visible. Breeding was clearly in the air as nearby, a Brown-necked Raven was gathering nesting material and flying to a nest under construction a few hundred metres down the cliff.

Fortunately, the leaders knew that the other site for Pharaoh Eagle Owl was being used. Avoiding a previous mistake of taking the first right turn and not the second that ultimately leads out of the village, we soon found ourselves amongst some formidable rock formations. The best birds tend to be in the most impressive habitat. As we walked along the base of the cliffs, Adrian thought he saw a bird shuffle back from a ledge but couldn't find it again. By now we were being buzzed by small boys that had seen us pass by from their viewpoint on a slope and had chased after us on bikes. They seemed to know where the owl was, but Adrian quickly found it anyway out in the open at the entrance of a hole associated with a cleft in the rock face. What a stunning bird.



Pharaoh Eagle Owl

With the boys reaching a crescendo of excitement linked to some money from Ann, Adrian led then away to leave the group in peace to spend some time in the presence of beauty. Martin fiddled with a digiscope attachment to try and get that close-up picture. Back at the van, Adrian's attempt to split the shared money into change had been foiled by the largest boy stealing the money and 'legging it'. Unfortunately, this encapsulates much of human society across the world.

After passing through Erfoud, we reached a road into the desert proper. Turning off onto a dirt track across the stony desert, we were initially confused by the white large building complex in the distance where Auberge Derkoua (Chez Michel) should be in an oasis of trees. The new complex turned out to be a garrison that is not yet occupied: a surprising development all around, but in keeping with the completed new road that passes right outside the entrance gates to the Auberge. The original owner of Chez Michel would probably not recognise the place.

Inside, it seemed quiet, but at least it still looked much as it ever has and Mohad was still here. He seems to do everything from waiting to cooking and more, and was soon called into action trying to fix Doris and Howards leaking toilet. However, as the flood waters began to rise, it was time to leave for a new room. A Green Toad was spotted on the move, seemingly not heading for the water that was also present in a couple of the other rooms as a result of additional plumbing problems.

Day 7 April 1st Erg Chebbi

After some hot beverages, we emerged into the dark at 06.15 to be greeted by Big Mohammed (brother of Lahcen the brains of the 4WD operation) and Little Mohammed. The smart Toyota Land Cruiser Prado and Mitsubishi L200 would be our transport for next few days as Mustapha was now in Erfoud with the minibus. Knowing his cars, Howard was straight in the Prado with Big Mohammed, Martin and Doris. We whizzed down the new road before taking a track off into the desert where our camels were waiting at the end with their two berber handlers. Only two guys were required with such a small group. With the risk assessment undertaken - that is, hang on, lean back when the camel goes forward and forward when it goes back - we were up and away. It is a quite marvellous experience to head to the growing light across the dunes on a camel, which, especially when you've dreamed of doing it for years can become emotional, even spiritual, as Ann demonstrated with earbuds plugged in and tears streaming down her face. Welcome to Morocco, Ann.



Erg Chebbi dawn

The plan that we would go back to Derkoua for breakfast at around 08.00 was now completely out of the window, as news came through from Lahcen to his brother (or Little Mohammed who had better signal on an old 'brick' Nokia) that we should go to the sandgrouse spot where they come to drink from a pool created by water piped from a local settlement primarily for the birds. A group of Spotted Sandgrouse were marching towards the water, but another phone call pulled us away as a guide was waiting to take us to the phantom of the desert – a Houbara Bustard. This would be

sensational. We collected Ahmed from Lahcen, who had suddenly appeared in his vehicle and we were off. After only a few minutes we crossed a small vegetated wadi and suddenly there was the bird out in the open towering above two coursers. (just like in the film *Happy Feet* when the Emperor Penguin chick hooks up with Ramon, played by Robin Williams, and his other Adèle Penguin buddies and is immediately dubbed 'tall boy'). As a guide to its whereabouts, everyone was told to line up on the radio mast on the hillside (on the Algerian border). The bird walked back at astonishing speed to the wadi and then out the other side incongruously passing some donkeys that had been left feral for a while to be reclaimed at some later point. The bird was apparently nesting in the wadi and not wishing to disturb it any further we left. The status of the very few Houbara Bustards in Morocco is uncertain in the sense of whether these are truly wild or have been captive-bred and released. Whatever the case, any birds encountered are free-living and incredibly wary of people and are an absolute privilege to see.

After dropping off our guide, we returned to the sandgrouse; now a mixed group of Spotted and Crowned, which quickly reduced to a dozen Crowned relaxing in pairs on a stony ridge. This was good, as Crowned is the more difficult species to see by far. On the way back, we passed by Lahcen's bivouac, which is a great site for Desert Sparrow, but this treat was to be saved for later. The lead 4WD then flushed a Lanner from the ground that the occupants didn't see, but those in the second vehicle had a great view of as it circled into the sky.



Egyptian Nightjar

Breakfast at Derkoua was outside under a bamboo gazebo. A simply delightful experience, especially after the morning we'd just had. After our fill, we were back in the 4WD's by 11.30. Now we were getting familiar with the habitat and its birds, Doris casually identified her own Hoopoe Lark at about 50 km per hr. A short while later we stopped on the edge of a large vegetated wadi where another group was clearly looking at something. The group turned out to be on a British *Limosa* tour - a company based about 30 km from Martin at home - led by Arnoud van der Berg, well-known European birder and a fellow countryman and friend of Peter. Peter went off to say hi as they left

and we moved in to see the Egyptian Nightjar at roost at the base of a bush, found and guarded by Mobarak who lives locally with his family and has found these birds for us many times. Our Mohammeds then found a Trumpeter Finch nest tucked just inside the base of a bush near the vehicles. The nest was more exposed than you might think.

A singing and displaying Hoopoe Lark then grabbed our attention, although we were temporarily distracted by a couple of Small Fringe-toed Lizards *Acanthodactylus dumerili* scuttling about as we walked over. Quite a few Desert Whites were on the wing, a new species for us that was only identified later from photographs. The display flight of the lark is an amazing affair as after launching high into the air the bird loops over and then plummets earthwards with wings closed whilst still singing, and only breaks out of the dive at the last micro-second and swoop upwards on black-and-white floppy wings. Hence the Hoopoe name. The process is then repeated time after time.



Hoopoe Lark

Mohammed then took us to another area to search for Desert Warbler to no avail, although we did see one going back and forth to a small bush, although not everyone got on it. Then rather bizarrely, a small bird flew straight at the lead vehicle and hopped about in front and then around it, before switching to the second vehicle. This turned out to be a male Desert Sparrow, clearly used to people and potential hand-outs. We obliged with an old date Big Mohammed found from somewhere. Adaptive behaviour such as this may be required to reverse the dramatic decline of Desert Sparrow in the area which seems to have occurred partly as a result of competition with encroaching House Sparrows in conjunction with the rise in human habitation and traffic through tourism. Our friend showed just how bold he could be by flying to within a metre of us into a small bush as we scoped what looked to a female Greenland race Northern Wheatear and some Bar-tailed Desert Larks.

As it was now after 14.30, we headed over to Café Yasmina, which is totally unrecognisable from the days of old as it is now a large hotel complex. Here we enjoyed an excellent Moroccan salad and seven berber omelettes. There were groans at the quantity of food as more and more individual tajines came out; but there was not scrap

of omelette left after a few minutes! After eating at nearly 1600, it seemed impossible we would manage more food at dinner in a few hours.

Time for at least a bit of walking at Lascen's place, with its planted trees and livestock. Here a young guy with a puppy walked around with us showing a Desert Sparrow nesting behind the plastic covering of a newly planted palm. The male brought in a large hawk moth caterpillar to feed squeaking nestlings. There were warblers in the tamarisks, which were also flying to low vegetation on the dune to feed. Remarkably we managed male Western Subalpine and what appeared to be male Moltoni's Warbler in the same scope view, as well as a number of Willow Warblers. A male Common Redstart hunted from a post nearby.



Male Western Subalpine Warbler

We then set off *neeschen* (straight-on) for Derkoua, but had to add *unless* to this phrase as we stopped for some really close Cream-colored Coursers, which always draw gasps of admiration both at their beauty and their running ability. Another Lanner was flushed off the ground by the lead vehicle, which was this time seen by its occupants this time as it circled into the sky before heading away.

Back at Derkoua we laughed as Mohad produced an egg omelette for Ann as a vegetarian option! We had already consumed at least six months' allowance of eggs on this trip. Nevertheless, we all helped out in a 'swapsies' deal for some of the very good chicken and potatoes.

Day 8 April 2nd Erg Chebbi

After a leisurely breakfast the guys picked us up at 08.00 in order to attempt to find Desert Warbler. We headed north over the new bridge and then off towards the same area we had visited yesterday, that Mohammed thinks is the best area for the Warbler. Before we got there, we stopped for an excellent sighting of a male Common Cuckoo on top of a small bush. The bird then dropped off the bush to rest in the shade.

In a bizarre repeat of the previous day, what must be the same male Desert Sparrow then flew over to hassle both 4WDs again.

At the area near a remote homestead, we used a recording to see if there were any territorial birds in occupation. A response came in from several hundred metres away in the area with *Halfa* grass. Suddenly the bird was close by, staring at us with bright yellow eyes, unusually stopping long enough to get a terrific view in the scope. Back at the 4WD Martin cleaned up Adrian's camera which had detached from the lens and Ann had found face up after she'd gone back to the vehicle for her phone. An incredible combination of misfortune and fortune all in one go. Barbara then called us over to some investigate some tracks she'd found that looked like a barefoot child that seemed to disappear in the vegetation. The variable number of toes gave it away for the leaders and Big Mohammed came forward to show how he's done it with the curved side of his hand. Big laughs all round!

We moved on to Mezane, a small agricultural village on the edge of a wadi looking for Fulvous Babbler. We walked through a new palm plantation and associated plots as the Mohammeds went in to see the owner and have some tea. There were lots of Subalpine Warblers and a Common Redstart, before a Long-billed Lark sang briefly on a wire before joining its mate on the ground. A fresh Greenish Black-tip butterfly, the only one we would see on the trip, was another great find.



Greenish Black-tip

A Nightingale gave some fleeting, but good views to those who managed to get on it. Climbing a wall, Martin took a different route back to the vehicles to look in some tamarisks. Here, some harsh calls led to (Eastern) Oliveaceous Warbler, a mainly eastern Mediterranean species replaced by Isabelline Warbler in the west, which has some disjunct breeding outposts across North Africa, including the Merzouga area. With his skulking behaviour, Martin was attracting the local youth before managing to attract the attention of the group. By the time the latter had been achieved, the two birds present had moved to different bushes. Fortunately, they are quite tolerant and after a while, we had all got to see dark lores and habit of down-dipping its tail.

After stopping for a bathroom break back at Derkoua, we set off down the road again. We were quickly onto a Black-eared Wheatear that we decided was likely to be a

first summer male that had not yet attained a black throat. A male Spectacled Warbler then popped up, which led to a female and then several fledged young. Whilst this was going on for the first vehicle, the second vehicle had found a group of 12 or more Spotted Sandgrouse. We each showed each other our finds, before moving on, almost running over a male Spotted Sandgrouse that simply stayed put on the ground providing incredible photo opportunities. A bird on the ground on the edge of the wadi and then on a small bush proved to be a Tawny Pipit in fine summer plumage. This is often a difficult species to find on this trip, so the leaders were especially pleased to see it so well.

After travelling down the highway to Merzouga, we reached the truly incredible sight of a lake in the desert. In truth, the water table is generally only a few metres below the surface and after a lot of rain in the previous months, this can reach the surface. This only occurs at a maximum frequency of one year in five so we were especially lucky to see it and its birds. There were hundreds of Greater Flamingos in one great flock, lots of Ruddy Shelducks and Eurasian Coots and a few Eurasian Teal and a single Northern Shoveler. Surprisingly few waders were present; limited to Black-winged Stilts and a few Kentish Plovers. In contrast, there were countless dragonflies, especially Vagrant Emperors flying in tandem and ovipositing from emergent vegetation, as the male lowered the female to the water surface to lay a few eggs before flying on to another spot. A Red-veined Darter *Sympetrum fonscolombii* and Saharan Blueit *Ishnura saharensis*

A bunch of Spanish guys alongside us were making an awful lot of noise and were clearly not watching the birds. Suddenly, one idiot hared off in a 4WD and a couple of minutes later suddenly appeared racing along the sand spit projecting into the lake in the middle of the lake sending the Ruddy Shelduck flying and then flushing all 500 or so Greater Flamingos. The driver then climbed out of his cab and stood on top of the vehicle posing and shouting “photo” at us. All he got was cries of “arsehole” and so he climbed back in and just about got his sinking vehicle away by over-revving and spraying sand metres into the air. We learnt from Little Mohammed a lot of such people are now coming to Merzouga to burn rubber over the dunes; something that’s restricted at home. These people shame themselves and their country. Lunch was taken at Café Itran in Merzouga where another set of idiots were limping in on their dune buggy minus a wheel and with broken wheel forks. We sat outside in the sunshine enjoying our chicken bouchette (kebabs on skewers) and actual chips (French fries), unbelievably with tomato ketchup, as well as Moroccan salad.



Vagrant Emperors ovipositing

After lunch, we went to the palmery, where the 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 by diverting the flow off the main channel into the different sections with a plug of wet clay-like earth. The Mohammeds came in for a few minutes, finding a Laughing Dove on a nest in the crown of a palm. Otherwise, there were lots of Collared Doves, Blackbirds and more House Sparrows that you could shake a stick at. These residents are joined by a wealth of spring migrants, although on this occasion diversity was low and largely limited to large numbers of Willow and Subalpine Warblers, foraging both in the trees and on the ground amongst the crops, with only a single Garden Warbler spotted. After an earlier find of a small Moroccan Green Toad in a dry channel, we were hopeful that some loud croaking would lead us to some more amphibians. And indeed it did. This time it was two large Mauritanian Toads in an alfalfa plot, which proved a challenge to photograph.

On our way back to the Auberge we aimed to stop for the inevitable photographic opportunity with the dunes lit up by the sunset as a backdrop. Just before getting to the small hillock that provides the best view, we finally found the desert race *elegans* of Great Grey Shrike in the only significant tree in the area. This proved to have at least one fledged young likely to be have born in the tree, which was through the branches to hassle the parent at the top. As Doris said “You can try hiding at the top of the tree but you can’t escape the kids”. We got Big Mohammed to use Martin’s phone to take a pano of the group with Adrian running from left to right to appear twice. Whilst Adrian’s twin was the right size the original looked rather thinner. Looking in detail later we realised that he’d moved a fraction too soon and was a little squished!



Common Kestrel eating a caterpillar

The desert was in bloom as we drove back. A Kestrel, hunting over the vegetation suddenly stooped to catch something. The pictures showed this was a similar hawk moth caterpillar to the one we’d seen the Desert Sparrow present to its chicks. The Kestrel landed in a small tree to consume its catch, much to the consternation of both a Desert Grey Shrike and a Woodchat Shrike that had already struck an uneasy truce over sharing.

Unbelievably, we were back at Derkoua at just after 17.00. Martin and Adrian enjoyed the time with tea outside and a catch up on the species we'd seen. All too soon, dinner was ready, starting with an excellent *harira* with beef, prunes and aubergine to follow. Around half an hour after full darkness (20.30), we loaded the 4WDs for our night drive with Lahcen now lead driver with Adrian, and Martin continuing with Big Mohammed. With Doris and Barbara deciding to stay behind, we were a little depleted in number, but with the benefit of lots of room. Leaving to the right of the Auberge for the first time we drifted off-piste (off the road) almost immediately and it became clear that we would operate behind and to the side of Laschen's 4WD, frequently turning to illuminate the surrounding darkness via the headlights, handheld torches and Laschen's large light block which we held out of the window with one hand whilst driving with the other. (Don't ask!).

After about 15 minutes of so, Mohammed's vehicle picked up the first animal, a rapidly saltating (hopping) Lesser Egyptian Jerboa something akin to a tiny kangaroo with a tail perhaps three-times its body length with a white and black fluffy paintbrush of a tail. After a brief chase, it stopped at a bush and we were all out of the vehicles taking pictures at high ISO in the torchlight. The animal shot off with Martin in hot pursuit but without a colleague with a torch it was quickly lost. Grinning at Lahcen, Martin raised a finger at the number of animals; *wahed* (one). *Jouge* was a Lesser Egyptian Gerbil, a sandy-coloured mouse-like rodent. Counting back later we think we saw six Jerboa's and four Gerbils.



Lesser Egyptian Jerboa

Interspersed with these, Martin's group of Ann and Howard spotted an altogether greyer animal that suddenly came into view in what seems to be the best habitat of thicker vegetation and small dunes with some *Halfa* grass. With short legs, lustrous grey fur, relatively rounded ears, a pointed mouse-like muzzle and a short thick tail, we immediately knew this was something we had never seen before. In fact, incredibly, the drivers hadn't either. This was later identified as Fat-tailed Gerbil *Pachyuromys duprasi*, another rather uninspiring name for a super attractive animal.



Fat-tailed Gerbil

Another astonishing find was a giant bird in flight just over Lahcen's vehicle that was lit up for a fraction before disappearing into the night. There was no doubt in Lahcen's mind or indeed Adrian and Peter's that this had been Houbara Bustard, just a km or two from the area that is known to support a bird at the moment. In a further twist of continuing fate, we also found two Cream-coloured Coursers, the species that had been alongside the Houbara we had seen the previous day. In contrast to the Houbaras both in the light and dark, the Courser's allowed really close approach, which meant we could obtain stunning pictures by torchlight before moving away and leaving the birds where they stood.

Lahcen then took us to an area he knew, where he regularly sees 'Desert Fox' which we assume is Fennec rather than Rüppel's Sand Fox. Out of the vehicles, we walked through the grassy dunes to view a few relatively small holes with the surrounding sand absolutely covered with fox footprints. This was a great privilege to see even if we didn't see the actual denizen of the burrows.

The final mammal of the night to add to our haul of jerboas, gerbils, the sign of foxes and a domestic cat (of all things), was a hare, probably a Cape Hare, the species we had seen on previous trips. This flashed in front of Mohammed's vehicle before haring off over a dune in a symbolic refection of the end of a Loony Tunes cartoon aka "That's All Folks".

We were back at the Auberge by 11.30 at the limit of our endurance but happy. Sadly, it was time to say goodbye to Big Mohammed, in whose company we had spent an incredible couple of days, as well as Lahcen who had been the mastermind even though he had only been with us for the last few hours. Here's hoping we see them and Little Mohammed in the awe-inspiring desert again... *insh'allah*.



Cream-coloured Courser

Day 9 April 3rd

Todra Gorge and Boulmane

After breakfast at 06.30, we were packing the van by 07.30. Howard and Doris had done well to sort themselves out as they had spent most of their time since the previous evening in the dark with no lights. At least Mohad was able to sort out this problem for them before they left. This was after providing us with breakfast. Mohad really tries hard and seems to do pretty much everything around the place. Sadly, as soon as Mustapha had arrived it was clear he was still suffering with the persistent cough and was quite feverish. We were still unsure if this had contributed to Ann's sinus infection, with Peter also showing signs of a cold-like virus.

On the way back to Erfoud, we tried for Fulvous Babbler again in Mezane but without success. Even more worrying was that our usual sites for Blue-cheeked Bee-eater around Erfoud were also birdless. This is not a species we can expect anywhere else on the trip and so we were relieved that Mustapha spotted some bee-eaters on wires just before Fezna. Jumping out of the van, we were a bit disappointed these were European, if you can be disappointed at this beautiful species. All the birds flew into a big tamarisk. Martin continued scanning the line of trees and suddenly proclaimed he had a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater around 700-800 m away. After walking up, we got great views of a pair in a small tamarisk, which became two pairs in the air, which were also joined by a European Bee-eater. In this area, the wadi had been excavated and a line of square concrete wells had been installed. The excavations had been piled into cliffs on either side of the wadi producing what looked like eminently suitable nesting habitat for bee-eaters. A potential breeding area for the Blue-cheeks indeed.

The area near Jorf has a myriad of protruding wells decorating the landscape. We stopped at the active stone well on the left side where we have often seen Trumpeter Finches. One flew in, but was immediately chased by a White-crowned Wheatear. Nearby, one Long-billed Lark was being chased by another which led to a fight and then more chasing. The wadi flushed with new green vegetation produced an Eastern

Subalpine Warbler that was replaced by one and then two Subalpine Warblers. At least two confiding Spectacled Warblers swiftly followed after Adrian spotted a Shaw's Jird crossing an open area.

Out of nowhere, a small donkey then turned up at the van door, looking as though it had decided to join us on the trip. We were even more popular when Mustapha produced some bread and Barbara donated some apple. As usual, Mustapha then found a stray canine to feed with bread, which in typical dog fashion left this to try and steal whatever the donkey was eating, until it realised this was also bread...

Moving on, we stopped past the next small wadi on a tip off of Scrub Warbler. No sooner than we had crossed the road, Martin spotted a long-tailed sprite dive off the top of a bush. We quickly realised we were in the midst of a veritable pack of Scrub Warblers or more accurately a family party of as many as five fledged youngsters with their parents. In the manner of Scrub Warblers, birds kept popping up left right and centre, albeit only fleetingly. Not wanting to push the birds away, Martin went ahead and walked back to the group with the effect of more or less keeping the birds in a patch of vegetation where they were still going about their business of feeding and being fed. These are really not easy birds to see even at the distance of a few metres, but everyone eventually managed. An interesting observation from later photos showed that whilst the adults have a yellowish iris, this is blue in the youngsters.



Juvenile Scrub Warbler

A kilometre or two further down the road, at our usual stop on the large right bend, we got out to try and find *payni* race Desert Lark on the broken ground at the foot of the slope. After hearing the bird somewhere ahead, we stumbled upon one gathering nest material only about 10 m away. Fledgling Trumpeter Finches and White-crowned Wheatears completed the spring breeding scene. Back at the van, Mustapha had a large spider and a yellow, highly venomous scorpion to show us from his rock-turning exploits. It was now that time again and we stopped at the café on the other side of the road to use the toilets and refreshments in the form of mint tea or milky coffee depending on your persuasion.

After stopping at Tingedad for bread and other produce, and the usual quick food market tour (as usual), we were now running several hours late, and so we stopped for lunch on the edge of town just after a large road bridge where Mustapha could pull the van of the road onto the banks of a large wadi and the shade of a large tamarisk, which was occupied by an Isabelline Warbler. This and the European Bee-eaters foraging in the wadi provided lunch time entertainment.

Lunch over, we began to pick up the verdant Todra river valley with its patchwork of irrigated plots and palm trees, and climb towards the spectacular Gorges du Todra (Todra Gorge). We alighted from the bus below the gorge into the usual zoo of humanity, which today was mostly several bus loads of tourists from China attended by the range of merchants selling jewellery and fabrics, although admittedly, the level of organisation of parking has improved greatly in recent years. Overhead, hundreds of Pallid Swifts wheeled along with a few Crag Martins. We were also treated to really good views of a male Blue Rock Thrush.

After walking through the gorge, scanning for Bonelli's Eagle all the time, we got back into the van to drive several kms up the gorge to our regular spot for Tristram's Warbler. Almost immediately after playing song, a male responded and came to a bush on our side of the wadi. It quickly lost interest in us and returned to the far slope where it attended and displayed to a female. The pair seemed to be assessing potential nest sites in the various small bushes.



Male Tristram's Warbler

After further fruitless stops on either side of the gorge to scan for Bonelli's Eagle, we had a couple of photo stops, where Adrian takes the same pictures every time! Perhaps the only difference over the years is the quality of the camera used, especially in relation to smartphones.

On the way to Boulmane, we searched for our next target: Maghreb Wheatear, the rarest of the Moroccan breeding wheatears and a relatively recent split from Mourning Wheatear. How this took so long is a surprise being as Maghreb is strongly sexually dimorphic and Mourning is not. We were relying on seeing the bird from the

side of the road as in the past, partly as Mustapha was struggling with *malade*. He was however more than capable of avoiding a head-on collision with a complete moron attempting to overtake a construction vehicle with no space at all. Expletives filled the air as we were forced to take evasive action.

With no further incident, we passed through the edge of the huge area of stony plain known as the Tagdilt Track. Exploring this would have to wait until tomorrow as we headed straight for Kasbah Tarroutine. The best things about this are the cave rooms and the panoramic spectacular view over the lush green ribbon of a river valley. Only Mustapha got a cave room however as the rest of us had rooms in the more modern block with one of the more stupid key systems possible, involving a padlock and slide bolt. Even more irritating for some of the group was the ban on alcohol in the dining room (although this was allowed in another room elsewhere in the hotel complex); so those with their own wine were not allowed to drink it. Dinner was also a western buffet-style affair with the better hot option being a vegetable tajine. The salads were very good nevertheless.



Singing House Bunting

Day 10 April 4th

Boulmane and the Tagdilt track

As we attended breakfast around 07.00, Black Kites spiralled up from the valley in the fresh wind to continue their migration. As the sun came up, House Buntings were singing all over the complex. After leaving at 08.00, we were soon back on the Tagdilt Track. We tried the track through the rubbish dump, which may have got slightly worse again with a few areas of piled rubbish and stinking run-off. One area turned out to be a 'house' where a Stig-of-the-dump character was busy harvesting or recycling amongst the feral dogs. By this time, we had seen a beautiful male Red-rumped Wheatear that was feeding a youngster, as well as a russet crowned female. A male Seebohm's Wheatear was close by and a small flock of Yellow Wagtails of different flavours including an all-yellow male *flavissima* possibly bound for the UK, a yellow-throated *flava* (Blue-headed Wagtail) that Peter and Barbara were familiar with in the Netherlands, and

some white-throated *iberiae*. Some duller females were also present. On the way out, Adrian called attention to Temminck's Larks a few metres from the van, a delightful sandy-brown bird with white and black face and curling black horns on males in particular.



Temminck's Horned Lark

Emerging back on the track we continued down the road a little before taking a track to the left. A Long-legged Buzzard flew low over the road, landing on a rock pile showing his unfeathered tibia giving the impression of long legs. Passing a small gorge with a cluster of holes and stone folds used by shepherds and their sheep, we stopped after about another kilometre where we had been tipped off by a Spanish colleague that a Maghreb Wheatear was potentially breeding. First bird was a close *payni* Desert Lark. This defies potential confusion with Bar-tailed Lark that is commonly mooted in ID guides both in terms of behaviour and plumage, although some of the other races are at least the same basic colour. After initial confusion with the failure of GPS to connect and give an accurate location, we were soon on an extremely pretty female Maghreb Wheatear that was unhappy about the presence of an immature White-crowned Wheatear. She posed for us next to an *Agama* lizard. There was no sign of a male and we wondered if he was taking a stint at incubation if they were nesting.

Another male Seehorn's Wheatear created a bit of confusion after more Temminck's Larks had passed close to the van. Near the road, Mustapha picked out the unfortunately named Fat Sand Rat, which has the habit of sitting up like a 'skwirrl' as Mustapha says, or like Prairie Dog for the US contingent. In fact, apart from a long, rather than short tail and lighter-coloured pelage, Fat Sand Rat is not dissimilar. Martin then spotted four Black-bellied Sandgrouse and we were able to get out and use the van as a blind to scope these stunning birds.

We then headed for a well-known green area that tends to accumulate any water and thus supports greener vegetation. In fact, there was a pool of standing water, from which a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse emerged. Temminck's Larks abounded with numerous sand and white coloured fledged juveniles that were still being attended. On

top of the Thekla's Larks that we'd seen feeding juveniles a little while earlier, it was becoming clear that this would be a terrific breeding season for many species.

We stopped for a Wheatear that turned out to be a Desert Wheatear alongside yet another male Seeborn's Wheatear before reaching Skoura and the turn off for Kasbah Amridil, that is mostly now restored and a pisé (mud and straw) sensation. Our guide was Meke, who corrected with a smile that this was not like 'Meke Mouse' as offered by Barbara. The tour was really interesting with demonstrations of the various museum pieces. Our guide from a previous trip, Abdul, remembered Adrian and popped by to see us and give a brief rendition of a percussive tune and accompanying song (more like a rap with its off-the-cuff content) using a grinding giant pestle and mortar equivalent. Cool is the word that springs to mind.

Less cool was the fact that Howard dived head first down a slope at lunch on the side of the wadi. This started with Martin going up to look at the aquaduct distributing water around the palmery, and its North African Marsh Frogs. Howard scored a solid 8 out of 10 for the dive, and was only marked down for the damage to his finger and arm. Adrian at least got to use up his medical supplies and Ann got to use her nursing skills to clean him up, as otherwise there is no doubt that Howard would simply have used duck tape and maybe a bit of Kleenex; but then again, maybe not.

In the commotion of cleaning up Howard, Adrian managed to get harissa in his binocular eyepiece and under suggestion from Howard,

Adrian filled up his water bottle for Martin to squirt water upwards into the upturned eyepiece. It exploded all over Adrian, which prompted Adrian to spray Martin by shooting water upwards which Martin stepped back into. Howard fell about at the Laurel and Hardy-esque antics. Laughter really is the best medicine. Some fine Bee-eaters lined the wires as an audience. With only twenty minutes to hit our deadline for arrival at 15.00 we realised we were going to be behind schedule. Who said 'again'?

The rest of the journey to Ouzarzate was only punctuated by more laughter at the sight of a guy on a moped towing a small cart with what looked like giant pram wheels. He had his head down to keep his cap on his head and was thus barely looking at the road ahead. As we carefully passed him, he turned to wave at us in recognition and his cap flew off in a graceful arc! A Simpson 'doh' moment.

In Ouzarzate, 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 at Taroudannt in a couple of



Skoura rap

days. Our accommodation for the night, the riad Dar Diouf is on a rough road on the right side of the valley floor loaded with palm trees and an understorey of irrigated crops, that heads towards El Mansour reservoir. It is two houses fused together on slightly different levels. It begins with an enchanting courtyard with a tinkling fountain complete with stone frogs and a seating area leading upstairs to three main floors with beautiful terraces linked by a maze of ornate stairs. Apart from Peter and Barbara on the first floor, the rest of us were on floor three with Adrian in the attic on floor four.

After mint tea and a range of delicious Moroccan biscuits, all apart from Howard and Doris headed out with Adrian and Martin to the reservoir. We'd debated about how much water would be in the reservoir. There was indeed more than usual with part of the tamarisk flooded, but with just enough muddy edge in places. This proved to be a near perfect combination as birds were present on the multitude of rocky islands, swimming amongst the flooded tamarisk and feeding on the margin. There were a number of Yellow Wagtails of various types flying around, including a very interesting 'grey and white' bird resembling the Asian race (full species to some) *tschutschensis*, with its 'cold' contrasting colours, bright white wing bars and supercilium 'flaring' behind the eye. This is rather like a juvenile Citrine Wagtail without the pale surround to the ear coverts. The only indication that this might be a 'normal' Yellow Wagtail was the slight olive tint to the flanks and vent area.



'Yellow' Wagtail

There were lots of Ruddy Shelducks as well as Cormorants, Grey Herons and a few Spoonbills and Little Egrets on one island. A group of sleeping ducks produced two pairs of Northern Pintail and some Eurasian Teal amongst the ubiquitous Mallard. Several pairs of Great Crested Grebes and a few Little Grebes and a lone Black-headed Gull were in open water. There were 22 Kentish Plovers, some Black-winged Stilts and a lone Greenshank although we seemed to have little else in the way of waders. Then as happens sometimes, some birds started to fly in. First a Little Ringed Plover and a Wood Sandpiper and then much closer to us, a Temminck's Stint in early breeding plumage characteristically creeping amongst the vegetation. We changed position which then

produced a more or less winter plumage Little Stint, foraging busily like a clockwork toy. Our haul for about 1.5 hours birding, was really about as good as it gets, but a final treat as we parked the van back at Dar Diouf, was at least 50 Black Kites floating down amongst the palms to roost. In effect, we were starting our birding day as we had begun.

We had already been versed in the tradition of wearing Moroccan slippers of various kinds on the carpeted third floor, where dinner was to be served. To describe the meal as sumptuous, does not really do it justice, with the courses melding together in a gastronomic experience. It started with excellent green olives and goat's cheese flavoured with garlic as an aperitif, merging into a fine spiced *harira* (which one was your favourite so far?), a bowl of refreshing salad based on tomato and onion and numerous spices, followed by a main of chicken and vermicelli with endless plates of salad including an amazing pumpkin and honey combo amongst the more typical courgette (zucchini) and aubergine blends. A palette cleansing mostly banana smoothie preceded the apple and date tart. The only downer is that the *lotar* player who had entertained us on previous trips had sadly passed away. May he continue to entertain *allah* with the skill and humour with which he was blessed.

Day 11 April 5th

Ait Ben Haddou, Tizi-n-Tichka & Oukaimeden

After the previous night's meal, it was tough to focus on the breakfast with its range of goat milk yoghurt (Adrian added dates to his), a range of *mellui*, pancakes, aniseed flavoured buns and then a cumin-flavoured rolled omelette cooked to order and requested by virtually all. After leaving at 08.00 Adrian and Martin stopped to see Santi(ago) Villa, a Spanish guide that both have known for some time and who helps run Adrian's Spanish trips. He had kindly been sharing information on birds with us from his back-to-back trips.

The day had dawned bright and beautiful and we enjoyed the scenery on the 40-minute journey to Ait Ben Haddou, a Unesco World Heritage Site that has been carefully restored as a working village. This has also been a film set for such classics as Samson and Delilah, Lawrence of Arabia, Gladiator and right up to Game of Thrones (Series Three) over the years from 1950s to the modern era.



Ait Ben Haddou

After crossing the river on sandbags placed over a wooden framework as a makeshift bridge, we met up with Ibrahim who was operating as a guide. As he talked, a few Red-rumped Swallows floated by. Martin was then distracted by a photographable Isabelline Wabler and an African Blue Tit. Ibrahim showed us a fold within a house for sheep and goats, before progressing through winding steep pathways with small shops

tucked behind small doorways. It was fascinating to hear that the river was salty with minerals drained from the rocks, and fresh water has to be brought in. Some of the early Jewish inhabitants of the area used to trade in salt. We stopped to see a man making paintings of green tea and sugar, indigo and saffron and then demonstrating how they were heated underneath with a gas burner in order to caramelize the sugar and tea which then emerged as the dark areas in the atmospheric *kasbah* and camel scenes. He did a brisk trade amongst the group. Final purchases were then made in the little shop at the base of the first cobbled street where the young salesman had shown us an old brass compass (sundial) on the way in. The purchases were a *mezouzah* (silver container for scripture) and small *menorah* for Doris and Howard and an antique decorated leather bag for Ann. The camel bag on the wall proved to be large enough to hold a small camel and too big to purchase even the price dropped to less than 50% by the time we left.



African Blue Tit

En-route to the Tizi-n-Tichka pass, there was a photo stop for azure blue sky, white snow-clad mountains and a pink minorette. Next stop, at about 11.30, was supposed to be for birds at a favourite spot of ours above the river with some small terraced fields and some larger trees including Walnut and some large almonds. However, the area was now also part of the huge extent of road development across the mountains. After a few minutes, we'd only noted a few common passerines as well as another migrating group of Bee-eaters. So, Martin headed over the road to a sunny secluded spot. This proved to be jumping with butterflies including Painted Lady, Bath White, Small Copper, False Baton Blue and Clouded Yellow; close to as many species as we had seen on the trip so far. The winding climb continued through spectacular scenery with flowery slopes of purple crucifers and yellow umbellifers in places, testament to recent rainfall.

We passed the Col du Tichka at 2,260 m (Howard had 2,230 m on his altimeter). Almost immediately, we picked a three-lane highway, with two lanes coming up. As a result of this, we got to our usual lunch stop in about ten minutes. The café and

surrounds were almost unrecognisable as a result of the giant road bisecting the landscape. We took the track on the other side of the stream and parked at the stand of fir trees surrounding the derelict building. In the stream, a female Grey Wagtail was foraging, with a male calling from just upstream. As Martin helped Mustapha with lunch, a cry came up as Peter and Ann had found a female flycatcher. She (the bird) was foraging in the trees and on the building, showing a large amount of white across the coverts into the primaries with a broad white line extending across the coverts almost to the edge of the wing. This placed the bird as Collared or Atlas (rather than Pied), with the greyish rump contrasting with the black uppertail coverts strongly suggesting the latter. Distribution also helps as this is the Atlas after all, even though birds would breed at lower altitude in deciduous forest. In contrast, Collared Flycatcher tends to pass through to the west of Morocco.



Female Atlas Flycatcher

The wind was biting cold and even with all available clothes on, some headed into the van to eat. It then became clear that the windy, cold conditions, most likely with overnight snow had brought down a number of migrating birds (as well as the Flycatcher) in a 'fall', as more and more fluffed-up Garden Warblers came into view. These were clumsily foraging or just sitting in the firs alongside with more active Chiffchaffs and at least one Bonelli's Warbler. Rock Sparrows and Chaffinches were amongst the local birds seen, along with a couple of Red-billed Choughs passing through.

After lunch, we continued on the super highway until Taddart where we were back to the narrow road through what is a dishevelled village. The highway began again after the village and we speculated about what would happen to such villages with the programme of road development. Knocking at least part of them down seems likely at some point. We were still in the area of road building around an hour later with whole sections of hillside blown apart and the rock broken up to use elsewhere to bed in the new road. Some sections of old road were now isolated as a new straighter line had been cut. After the arid uplands, the lower altitudes are veritably cloaked in green with

olives and agricultural plots and fencelines of *Opuntia* (Prickly Pear). In some places, there were quite dense stands of purple Field Gladiolus. Ironic that in these lower sections the old slow bumpy road is still present, which will ultimately prove to be the bottleneck for transport over the Atlas to and from Marrakesh, that is unless the plan is to develop the highway all the way to this rapidly expanding city, which would affect a lot of villages.

The sun had turned to cloud somewhere along the way and by about 15.00 we were back into rain. On the Marrakesh plain, we stopped at a café for toilets and a coffee/mint tea. Great hilarity ensued as the young barista offered to take a group photo using pano on Martin's phone. This was clearly new to him as after demonstration, he kept forgetting to end the pan and wavered back the other way. There were lots of pics of Martin alone until he got it right. But the result was good and there were high fives all round including with the other waiter.



Coffee break during the rain

After turning left and passing through a village, we began to climb slightly, hitting 1,050 m as we turned off on the single in/out road to Oukaimeden. The scenery here was stunning with further decoration provided by a multitude of stalls selling pottery and animal figurines including Wild Boar and Storks. However, as we climbed the scenery was lost in fog and more rain with torrents of brown run-off on the edge of the road, previously eroded by water. We passed through deciduous trees and then stands of pine trees at a higher elevation of about 1,900 m, before losing most of the trees at about 2,500 m. At around this point there was some standing snow and the rain had turned to sleet.

In Oukaimeden, the conditions were rather poor with standing snow and sleet and a dearth of birds, apart from the multitude of Atlas Horned Larks in the car park. We tempted a couple of birds closer with some crumbs just outside the open van door, but these were flushed by a guy trying to sell us honey. We tried further down the road at the small turnaround near the ski lift and Barbara gets the award for the most adventurous wee at the back of the van in driving sleet. No-one is going to match that!

We finally checked in Chez Juju about 18.00. This is apparently the auberge at the highest altitude in Africa at 2,675 m, perhaps because similar accommodation are called inns or hotels). The hotel staff ran around getting the heating on through the radiators, building fires in the wood burners in the rooms downstairs and providing electric heaters for both Ann and Doris and Howard. Doris wrapped herself up in a blanket until the heat kicked in. Before the checklist in the comfortable back room we were plied with popcorn before we ordered from a novel list of dinner options that included beef lasagne and what turned out to be a pork sausage. In the end, the orange vegetable soup and the quiche were more than enough before the mains even appeared. If that wasn't enough dessert was a choice of apple tart or crème caramel, both with the further novelty of plastic spray cream and a strawberry.

Day 12 April 6th

Oukaimeden & Tizi-n-Test to Taroudannt

The snow had stopped at some time in the early hours and the snow plough was out at 06.15 clearing some of the way at least. We were out by 07.00, just after first light had illuminated the snowy landscape which was incredibly clear and stunningly beautiful. The van was frozen solid and the guy from the hotel ran back and forth with warm water to try and defrost it. Mustapha was very ill and had to be put back to bed in his *grand hibou* (eagle owl) *djellaba*. As a result of the delay, Martin took Peter and Ann for a walk and we found ourselves followed by two mules. The owner had to run after them to catch up and take them back in the right direction. Before we'd reached the ski lift, the van, with Adrian driving, had caught us up. Apart from a few Rock Sparrows, there were just no birds at large and so we abandoned and went back for breakfast, but not before clearing a patch of snow and putting some bread down to bring in some birds. Martin had already done the same with one of the tables outside the hotel.



Snow at Oukaimeden

After breakfast, we tried again with Adrian continuing to drive. This time we headed down to the reservoir in the hope of more birds. And indeed, there they were, more than 25 Atlas Horned Larks foraging in the snow on the edge of what was an ice-free lake. This must have resisted as a result of the flow from the sponge-like wet meadow above it. There were also several Seeborn's Wheatears, both male and female. Martin then found a Dipper foraging on the far side of the lake swimming like a murrelet, before it dived leaving a ripple and a trail of bubbles before it emerged onto a rock to eat its prey. A pipit passed close by in the scope view, which with its bold

supercilium and buffy chest was a Water Pipit, the first we had ever seen on our Moroccan trips. Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrush were also foraging on the sill of the lake before water drops into the stream. Another male and female Blue Rock Thrush were then seen on the wires and building on the other side of the road.



Atlas Horned Lark

Pleased with our sightings, we went back to the turnaround at the ski lift and planned to walk on to the stand of deciduous trees partly as one of the ski guys assured us that *beaucoup de l'oiseaux* typically went back and forth between the car park and the trees. As we neared the ski lift twittering above caused Martin to yell and an incredible male African Crimson-winged Finch landed on the No. 2 Ski lift pylon. It was there just long enough for Adrian to get a scope on it and some to see it in binoculars before it was gone over the trees and away. Despite extensive scanning further down the road which led to sightings of a Little Owl on a shepherd's hut, numerous Black Redstarts and a male Moussier's Redstart, we didn't see another Crimson-winged Finch. Undeterred, we tried again for a third time after we had checked out, but with no success. A more extensive view of the finch was simply not to be.

We did however finally manage Alpine (Yellow-billed) Choughs in number as they came down from the buildings and onto some rubbish dumped in the snow. These were joined by a smaller number of the larger Red-billed variety. As we rejoined the van, the road was now a zoo of humanity with many people having come up from Marrakesh to enjoy the snow and skiing and sledging. With no snow over the winter and only snow over the last couple of days this had been an incredibly short season. Snow had fallen down to around 2,200 m creating a winter wonderland amongst the firs, especially as it was shrouded in quite thick fog. Just below the snowline the fog cleared and especially after the sun came out, we could see the Marrakesh Plain below.

After stopping for bread and then fuel at the station we often use, just before the left-hand turn, we started to climb again. At after 14.00, lunch was really late now and we stopped on the side of the road at a viewpoint. Martin had a new assistant on the washing up in the form of Ann, and in the process, we cleared the old bread and any

aged produce from the van. As we started to leave, two old gentlemen respectfully came over to try and sell fossils. Martin immediately gave them some bread, apples and figs and a couple of litres of water. They were very grateful and as we started to leave one guy rushed over calling for Martin in order to give him a present of a geode. The second guy then came over to do the same. Touched and not wanting to take away their means of making some money, Martin supplied a few dirhams as a further thank you. Everyone waved gleefully at each other.

We passed our old lunch stop in the lentisc (pistachio) and pines about 20 minutes later in bright sunshine. A brief stop for what looked like a male Black Wheater on a dead tree led to a brown female carrying prey. As Martin was trying to get the group on a male Moussier's Redstart, Peter shouted "raptor" and then "there are two" as a Barbary Falcon pair rocketed across the hillside and then into the sky above our heads. The female looked huge relative to the male and was in heavy wing and tail moult. What a productive short stop! Mustapha popped out of the van to relieve himself and it was good to see him at least moving around.

With the endless switchbacks and the fact that Adrian was not as quick as Mustapha would have been driving, we were gradually falling further behind time and by 17.15 we had not even made it to the pass, although Peter had added a pale phase Booted Eagle to the list and the scenery was spectacular and very green presumably as a result of at least some recent rain. Nearing the Tizi-n-Test pass at 2,100 m, we stopped to enjoy the Barbary Sheep that have been reintroduced in the Atlas in a massive area enclosed by a fenceline that tracks across the mountain. After the pass itself, we stopped for a quick mint tea at the café with an exceptional view of the Souss Valley on a clear day. Fortunately, this was just such a day. Martin explained about the endemic Atlas Geckos and Peter and Ann joined him in a rapid search of rocks around the café. It was Peter that came up with the goods with a fine, as-large-as-it-gets Atlas Day Gecko *Quendenfeldtia moerens* on the wall of the café itself.



Tizi-n-Test to the Souss Valley

Our descent into the Souss Valley was marked by our first endemic Argan *Argana spinosa* trees which were looking green and healthy, with many carrying large crops of 'fruit' which is actually a drupe with a soft exterior carrying the nut from which the increasingly desirable (and expensive) oil is derived. In the Souss Valley itself, we passed through around 25 km of orangeries punctuated by ever-expanding settlements. The sign for some said "ecologically yours" suggesting that it was organic. Unfortunately, it seems likely that the crops are using fossil water from the aquifer,

which is rapidly being depleted. Not so 'ecological' if this term incorporates some measure of sustainability.

The suburbs of Taroudannt continue to expand with the settlements merging into one other. A recent expanding theme mirroring the trend the world over is fast food outlets of one sort or another. The undoubted king of these was "Snack O'Tacos", without a taco in sight. After what seems like an epic journey of close to 200 km, we turned into the old city of Taroudannt with its spectacular fortress walls. Adrian and Martin struggled to exactly remember the correct way and after a few turns we found ourselves going back out through another gate and officially lost. Mustapha woke up and provided a few directions, which led to us emerging out of town again through another gate! With this, he took over the driving and summoning all of his strength he was suddenly highly animated and as though captured within Super Mario cart or some such video game, we dodged the people, bikes, and carts at high speed before until stopping again to ask some young guys for directions. Different wavy hand motions from two of the guys seemed to satisfy and after a few minutes we found ourselves parked at La Maison Anglais at around 20.15. Very late.

As we drew up, our hosts spilled out and it was great to see old friends again for Adrian and Martin. Inside the cool, beautifully tiled interior, everyone was shown to their named rooms (Fig, Date, Carob etc). The first of a series of incredible meals soon followed, which included numerous tasty salads, wonderful chicken kebabs and beef on the bone with prunes and almonds. The sweet was a delight of rolled date and strawberry arranged artistically on the plate, followed by mint tea and a variety of sweet nibbles for the *jouge* (two) leaders; the others having retired more than satiated.

Day 13 April 7th

Freija & Aoulouz Gorge

A late start today with a choice of fruit, delicately spiced omelette and *mellui*. A new taste was the *amlou beldi*, a butter-like paste of almond and a little honey and argan oil. A superfood indeed and highly recommended, at least to try.

Just before getting into the van, the group encountered a new bird for the trip or indeed any previous trip: a Budgerigar on the rooftop. Within a half hour or so after we'd left at 09.00, we arrived at Freija, a favourite spot of ours that is simply a track framed by cut hedges of spiky *Zizyphus* on the stony ground under patchy Argan and some bananas under plastic. The latter operation has expanded considerably in recent years and the habitat on the right-hand side of the track has effectively been destroyed over the last two years. The bee hive operation on the slope had also expanded although this was proving popular with the 30 or so European Bee-eaters, which were hunting over our heads and at one point festooned a small Argan as living jewels.

A debate ensued about the singing larks. These seemed to be Crested with long bills, the lower mandible of which was clearly straight; but with Thekla's-like song and behaviour by singing and perching in trees. An *algeriensis* Great Grey Shrike perched close by to one of several Woodchat Shrikes we were to see on our short walk. After getting in the van with the intent of heading to another area, we were soon out again after Mustapha has pointed out at least four Maghreb Magpies. Ann then spotted a Tchagra (Black-crowned Bush Shrike). As we waited for the Tchagra to emerge, we were distracted by a House Bunting and then a brief Rufous Scrub Robin, which eluded us. Some minutes after Adrian had played Tchagra song, said bird then popped up on top of a low Argan a little way from us, giving stunning views for what can be a tough-

to-see species. It then went into song flight, which was preceded by an unusual crackling sound.



Tchraga

Some 5 km from Aoulouz, we passed the disturbing site of a new dump at the base of the line of hills, where we have observed all sorts of raptors in the past. Today, there was only a couple of Black Kites circling over the rubbish.

In Aoulouz, we stopped at our usual lunch spot after travelling through the village to the edge of the braided gravel bed river channel. As Martin prepared lunch, Adrain and the group found a beautiful Copper Demoiselle and some North African Marsh Frogs in a tiny ditch, whilst a number of Red-rumped Swallows swooped overhead. At lunch, Ann spotted a warbler in the vegetation at the base of the gorge walls. This was quickly identified as an Orphean Warbler that was amazingly obliging as it sat more or less still long enough for us all to get a scope view. A Black Wheatear then also popped up, providing an excellent view.

In the river bed, several of the channels had been encased in plastic presumably to maintain the water on the valley sides to create a head to transfer it more easily to irrigated croplands. One of these channels provided the best view of Moroccan White Wagtail *subpersonata* yet, coupled with some Grey Wagtails that were carrying food to a nest nearby. Some pools hosted a number of singing North African Frogs and a few Broad Scarlet *Crocothemis erythraea* dragonflies. The latter are about as red as you could imagine. Martin found a Stripeless Tree Frog, the first we had ever found, initially on the open gravels before it took refuge in some rushes, where it proved tricky to see for some. In the gorge, we also looked for roosting or nesting Falcons on the walls, but no-one was at home above the various splashes of whitewash. A circling Booted Eagle provided a little raptor interest alongside the Common Kestrels.

A short ride in the van brought us to the bridge, which we then walked across. A bird singing in the olives sounded like a strange cross between Isabelline Warbler and European Reed warbler; surely African Reed Warbler? Unfortunately, this didn't show properly and we were left wondering about its identity. A Kestrel caught one of the large grasshoppers we'd been seeing in the vegetation and ate it with relish a small

piece at a time in full view of us. Looking down on the river from the bridge, there was relatively little water, with this mostly contained in larger pools with some vegetation. A European Reed Warbler was spotted, and then Adrian pointed out a Spotted Crake, which was just disappearing after crossing an open area of margin. We had attracted the attention of the local youth by now and one of these was proving to be particularly irritating, by climbing over the bridge parapet and dangling dangerously over the side. Ann dealt with him particularly well by talking to him about birds and what we were doing.



Stripeless Tree Frog

After crossing the bridge, we walked along the path cut into the gorge wall, and quickly found another couple of Atlas Day Geckos *Q. moerens*, at an outpost outside the High Atlas. Other good finds were a couple of *Eugaster* crickets, one of which was within touching distance on a low shrub and a beautiful Desert Orange-tip butterfly. A further touching sight was a small group of teenagers that settled down for a picnic in the shade of tree, some of which waved shyly at us as we waved back. It was now time to head back to Taroudannt in time for the cooking lesson with (Little) Latifa hosted in English by Dounia. This proved to be extremely popular. Whilst this was going on, Said and Latifa went on Skype to talk to Martin's family.

After catching up on two days of check-list we then sat down to yet another excellent dinner of pigeon pastille, the first time that Martin had experienced the traditional form of this incredibly fine flaky filo-type pastry in 20 years! It was simply delicious. Cous-cous chicken and a range of salads quickly lead to satiation. In preparation for the upcoming night expedition all had left the table, and going downstairs to intercept coffee, Martin found that a non-dairy, fruit only ice-cream had been prepared. Desperate not to waste it, the group was duly intercepted as they came down and we all sat and ate on the table near the kitchen before heading out. Destination was Freija again, with Mustapha taking a quicker route to get there. Well, it was quicker until Mustapha took a wrong turn and we ended up on a virtually impassable track at the back of some houses, where some women were sitting chatting on their doorsteps. This was rudely interrupted by Mustapha attempting a 13-point turn in front of them, dazzling them in the process. Luckily, they saw the funny side of the experience with the crazy tourists and even gestured for us to go and eat and drink

with them. All much appreciated, but we had to decline as we had a Red-necked Nightjar to see.

After doubling back and emerging back on the main road to catch the right track, we were now running at speed down the same track we had walked that morning. Adrian and Martin searched the habitat on either side of the track for eyeshine with torches from open windows whilst Mustapha used the headlights on the track. On the first section, we saw little apart from a couple of dogs and a lark in the headlights and heard a calling Stone Curlew, in the less than natural habitat. Turning left we turned into the more natural bushy habitat where we have been previously successful. Martin borrowed Howard's super torch as his had started to dim. This produced a couple of spiders which show surprisingly good eyeshine considering their size, that Adrian ended up getting out of the van for. We ended up going further than we had ever been before in a rubbish dump with a number of dead cows (to add to the couple of hides and bones we had seen earlier in the morning) as well as a whole dump of nappies (dipers). All pretty unsavoury stuff.

Feeling somewhat dejected, we turned back and after a short distance Mustapha stopped for something in a disturbed area. We couldn't see what he was gesticulating at initially and Adrian was forced to get out and walk to what looked like a clod of earth. This proved to be rather more exciting after all as it was a Spur-thighed Tortoise. What a great spot from Mustapha. Inexplicably, no-one else was interested enough to leave the van to see it at close range.



Red-necked Nightjars

Moving on, we retraced our route back down the track from whence we had come, and from what was now a different side of the bus, Martin suddenly, shouted "got one" from bright eyeshine flash some 50 m up the shallow slope in obviously good habitat. Howards' borrowed super torch had done its stuff. Getting out of the van we went into stealth mode, scoping and then moving forward, until everyone had great views of all the features. It is interesting to note that by this point none of us had noticed that the sitting bird had some odd feathers issuing forward from under the wing we could see. (This was later obvious in pictures). At some point, when we were just about to walk away, the bird flew and became three birds, one of which landed very quickly and the

other came to the light above our heads before landing in front of us. As we tried to back away, it fluttered again a few metres. We got away quickly now, hoping that the parent would quickly come back, call to its two virtually fledged juveniles take back control.

On the way back, Mustapha translated a berber expression about the “donkey in the dark”, which stumbles about clumsily unable to find its way. This described rather well how the evening had started. Nevertheless, the ‘donkeys’ had come good by the end of it.

Day 14 April 8th

Tioute & Taroudannt

After another excellent breakfast at 08.00, we were out the door by 09.00. Mustapha was missing for some reason and so we switched plan with Adrian setting off with Said to go to the bank. Once Mustapha had arrived, Martin and the rest of the group headed to the city walls at the main gate, where Adrian was to catch up with us. This was to be a swift stop for swifts, particularly Little Swift. With several hundred Pallids to just one Little, it was proving hard to get the group onto our target, so Martin scanned to find a better spot. This proved to be at the end of the wall beyond the gate where there virtually no Pallids and maybe 8-10 Little Swifts looping around and occasionally going into some low holes in the walls (former scaffold holes). With the birds coming just above our heads and occasionally going into display flight with upraised wings and trilling calls, the views were outstanding. However, for the photographers trying to get a decent shot became a further engagement of the equivalent of a super speed Super Mario video game.



Little Swift

In the village of Tioute, there was an initial kerfuffle with Mustapha stalling the van in the street and then missing an old guy by inches, who had seemingly come to offer directions as he thought we were lost. Mustapha offered the poor guy a veritable verbal volley. It was probably best this was all lost in translation. At the entrance to the palmery, a need for the bathroom was raised and a young guy overhearing the

conservation stepped forward to offer access to bathrooms in a nearby restaurant. But nothing is really free as he was clearly hoping for later trade and was a bit disgruntled that this was not happening. Cue Mustapha and further altercation. (Adrian did go back later to settle up and smooth the situation).

In the palmery, it all seemed rather dry and quite low on birds apart from the ubiquitous and abundant Sardinian Warblers, Blackbirds and Bubuls. Martin and Ann were drawn to a Blackbird carrying food that had gone into mobbing meltdown, which was then joined by Sardinian Warblers. Martin suspected snake or cat. It proved to be the latter, with an olive-brown serpent of a metre or more in length suddenly shooting up over the base of the palm to disappear into a hidey hole. This was most likely Montpellier Snake.

A Turtle Dove sang from somewhere and after a bit of working across the dry plots to get to a suitable spot, we all got great views of it purring from a palm frond. Surely this is most beautiful of all Western Palearctic doves with subtle pink shading, chestnut marked back, necklace and red eye. A male Moussier's Redstart followed. A further splash of colour was provided by a clear male Cleopatra with intense orange on yellow background that floated by. Otherwise, butterflies were largely only present in the few plots of alfafa, with these including both Long-tailed and Lang's Short-tailed Blues.



North African Green Frog

We navigated through the maze of tracks to a stone aquaduct, which was surprisingly full of running water. We first encountered the channel at a new restaurant that we had not seen before, likely competition with the old one at the head of the channel associated with the main buildings. Quite a few North African Green Frogs were present in and around the channel as well as our first looks at Epaulette Skimmer, including a male with unusual greenish patches on otherwise blue abdomen. Ann then spotted a pair of mating Heady Maidens, a striking Arctiid moth with partly transparent wings and warning red and yellow colours on a black background. Whilst the rest of the group headed onward, Adrian went back to the entrance to collect Mustapha and get

him to drive onto the main restaurant, where we were now heading. (Unbeknownst to us at the time, Adrian had got to the entrance to find Mustapha had already gone on. So Adrian had doubled-back to sort out the earlier bathroom issue before then walking on to the main restaurant to be picked up just before he got there by Mustapha, who had been wondering where we were!).



Male Epaulette Skimmer

Unfortunately, there were lots of kids messing about in the water where the channel heads under a small building. They had used the doorway with the old timber frames as a changing room, which meant no Boehm's Gecko for us on this trip (we often find one around the door). The track then petered out and we were forced to divert around the edge of number of plots before picking up the main track to meet up with Adrian and Mustapha at the main restaurant. Here, we had lunch in the shade of a dome of *Wisteria* created by a series of *Wisterias* in a ~15 m circle trained on a framework to the central pole. Here we had fun with a family who initially had no chairs around the other spare table, until we gave them some. The polite giving of chairs back and forth reached a zenith when Adrian took over a further chair, which they insisted they didn't need, so Adrian put it down and then sat down amongst them. Uproarious laughter and handshakes all round followed.

Outside the village, we stopped at the women's Argan cooperative where the group had a quick guided tour. In the work area, the women were skillfully cracking the Argan nuts with a stone against a stone anvil at high speed. Ann was the guinea-pig to have a go with the women. The first attempt made no impression, with the second in a tissue crushed to pieces with too much force. Some moderation led to the third nut shooting out of the door. (All fun and games until someone loses a nut!). Ann won't be running away to join the cooperative any time soon; at least not as a nut-cracker. 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, the group found themselves in the shop where everyone bought something from the impressive range of Argan products.

We were back in Taroudannt at 15.15, where we met Said, the long-standing guide from La Maison Anglais (and Latifa's husband) who was waiting to take us out to the Souk. Said continually provided information in the fashion of a Lonely Planet guide as we went. Martin and Ann stopped for a couple of pairs of slippers each. Doris bought some cool amber jewelry including a couple of rings, one of which was fixed then and there by the stall holder. Martin also found himself in a jewelry shop at Said's behest to choose a present for his wife (There is always an exchange of presents between England and Morocco for children and wives). Interspersed between these purchases was the visit to the rug emporium where Adrian is always treated like a long-lost friend, which of course he is. Both Doris and Barbara had specific ideas of the carpets they wanted. Sadly, despite intensive searching of the piles of hundreds perhaps even thousands of carpets, nothing of the right combination of size, colour and pattern could be found. The threat of a large pair of scissors to make a carpet suitably shorter was fortunately avoided as Ann started a rush on the berber-style pillow cases with a zip on one side for stuffing.

Our final meal in the house was the fish spectacular, with the incredible hake tajine, the flatfishes (sole) and the third type of fish cooked whole and biting its own tail, accompanied by the usual range of incredible salads. A truly fitting end to our culinary spectacular.

Day 15 April 9th **Oued Massa**

We said our fond farewells to the gracious staff of Chez Anglais, who had provided an excellent stay. The people here are one of the reasons Adrian and Martin have kept returning to Morocco. On a tip-off from Said, our first stop was on the edge of town in an agricultural area. After combing one side of the road, with no success apart from good views of some Stone Curlews, Martin suddenly shouted that our target bird was on top of an Argan on the other side of the road and right next to the van: a Fulvous Babbler. After we got back to the van and crossed the road, at least one babbler was close foraging amongst what looked like it had been a barley field. We then realised that it was feeding a fledged chick. A Great Grey Shrike then popped up and we watched it fly to a nest where it fed what looked to be a incubating female. It was clearly all happening in this little spot, which you wouldn't give a second glance if driving down the road. Many thanks to Said.

After about one and a half hours on the road, our next 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 pools were small and sparse as a result of the lack of rain. Nevertheless, there were some of our target species - Brown-throated Martin - in the air. With these seemingly focussed on the standing water behind the dam upstream of the bridge, we walked under the channel across the gravels and headed to the slope to get a view. At least we could see four or five of these little birds better now although they were pretty active and always more distant than we would have liked.

Back in the bus, we headed back to the approach road to the village of Massa. Massa 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. After locating the bakery we have often used, we took a left turn. After a few twists and turns, we found ourselves on the sizeable bridge. The river was incredibly low with much of the gravel around the bridge

exposed. In truth, there were also very few birds although the Common Sandpiper and Moroccan race White Wagtail were very close. We also had a chat with the British-led group present (led by Adrian's friend, Peter Jones) who had just started their trip, in contrast to the experienced 'old hands' in our group.

After trying one of the other tracks that used to lead to a series of pools, that were bone dry, where we again bumped in Peter's group, we headed for our usual lunch stop in a Eucalypt grove. A pool here, probably a former arm of the river, can be very good for ducks, but again it was very low and almost completely devoid of life. There was even a dearth of dragonflies. At least a Spotted Flycatcher provided good views over lunch and it was pleasant in the shade.

After navigating the incongruously huge roundabout on the edge of town at the end of the tarmac road, we got onto into the dirt track that follows the edge of the river estuary. We stopped at the viewpoint where the cactoid Euphorbia heath creeps into the river valley. On our trip in 2017, the water level here had been as low as we'd ever ever seen it; but this simply didn't compare with what we were looking at now, with large exposed mud banks on either side of the river. But apart from a sleeping Spoonbill there were no birds using these banks and nothing in the river. Usually, we don't get more than a few yards down this track before seeing something else from the van. This was not the case today; although we did manage a pair of Little Owls on a wall. The larger of the two, presumably the female, was more relaxed, with the smaller male adopting a more alert repose.



Little Owls

We stopped at the car park at the end of the track, which offers an excellent picnic spot under the trees. Today however, we were only here for a walk along the right bank of the river estuary. Sadly, with the desert conditions following the lack of rain since the previous November, there no flowers in the form of cranesbills, various daisies and the beautiful *Chrysanthemum carinatum*, and thus no butterflies and precious few insects or birds. At least a fine male Black-eared Wheatear provided a

good view along with several Linnets. On the far side of the river, there was another lone Spoonbill next to some terns of varying sizes. With difficult viewing as a result of the distance and heat-haze we assumed the bulk of the terns were Sandwich, partly as these tend to be a common sight in the lagoon. This suggested the two very large birds were Caspian. However, Martin thought one of these was smaller with a less heavy bill, which was reinforced when another obvious group of Sandwich Terns flew in. These disturbed the first group, which made it immediately clear that these had been Gull-billed Terns all along. Suddenly, the smaller of the two large terns didn't look that big - but sadly it was too far to confirm ID even for attempted photos.

Enthusiasm for more walking when it seemed there was little prospect of anything more, wilted in the heat and we headed back to the bus. Ann and Martin lagging behind the rest, got a fantastic view of a male Moussier's Redstart, confirming the prophecy early in trip that this bird, arguably *the* bird of Morocco, always provides one great photographic opportunity on every trip. Unfortunately, this never seems to fall to Adrian - but we don't dare mention that anymore!



Male Moussier's Redstart

After about ten minutes on the journey to the hotel just on the outskirts of Massa, all power in the van failed and we drifted gently to a stop. Mustapha immediately jumped out and flagged someone down and before we knew it, he was gone! We assumed he had gone for help. Within another few seconds, Adrian had flagged down a guy in a cab and quickly arranged to have him come back for us all with a second cab to take us to our destination, just in case the van was going nowhere. Another car then stopped and the passenger that got out joined us in peering into the engine compartment. After a brief discussion it became clear he wasn't a mechanic and was just being nosey! Even though the rest of us are not mechanics either, it was clear, especially after Martin found the manual, that we were missing a battery! Where it should have been, there was a battery-shaped gap on the seating and some bypassing wires that must lead to a second battery somewhere in the cab under the driver's seat. This was confirmed by the mechanic that Mustapha came back, after a bit of a struggle

with the seat. With the cabs now back, we jumped into those to continue our journey but not before our van drove away with the mechanic in hot pursuit in his own tatty little car. It was all getting a little surreal to say the least.

After a journey time of just over an hour, we reached the Atlas Kasbah, a spectacular castle-like residence in the foothills of the High Atlas as they fall to the sea. 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 proved to be goat tajine, that also appeared to be reared on the premises. Ann did rather well with the vegetarian option in terms of quantity and this was gratefully shared by the rest of the group. Howard was on top form with his laser pen, creating a palette of colours and shapes on the ceiling, much to the appreciation of the children amongst the other guests.

Day 16 April 10th

Tamri

Breakfast was orange juice and a range of breads, jams (sadly no apricot) and a small natural yoghurt in a glass. This became much more palatable after honey, dates and/or flax (linseed) had been added. Also unusual was the butter, that looked for all the world like coarse-shaved parmesan. And just as we were tying up, a course of fried egg arrived, with this sliced into pieces and delivered on three plates.

We were ready in the lobby by 08.00 to head out for Tamri. The good news was that our van and Mustapha were there, but the bad news on two counts was that Mustapha was still very ill and that although the van now had a new battery, the mechanics had managed to cut the feed from the engine coolant. They had been unable to source the right size pipe in time, but had seemingly not even attempted a bodge with a 'stint' made from smaller bore pipe and duck tape (they should have got Howard on it!). This meant the van would need water, although we didn't expect this would be 10 litres at a time after every few kms!

The journey showed that tourism has really taken off in this part of Morocco with new attractions advertised on the side of the road including no less than 300 crocodiles in Crocopark and the sorry development of a dolphinarium. Sign of the day (well, actually the decade) over a shop was "Frigo bitch" (I have the pictures!). There seemed to be fridges but something is clearly lost in translation.

We then got completely lost in the massive development at Tagazoute Bay that has literally sprung up in the couple of years since Adrian and Martin were last here. The ecologically unique habitats of this Atlantic coast had gone under a variety of posh apartments and hotels and planted rock gardens and the beautifully smooth road was a sinuous affair with numerous traffic calming humps. We quickly got lost and had to ask some guards at one of the gated developments how to get out. After navigating back to a roundabout it became clear that we'd simply missed the massive new bypass that was now cutting through the hillside.

At Tamri, we searched the various habitats along the beach and on the dry hinterland beyond. There were lots of gulls of various flavours, endless coots and a Ruddy Shelduck, but no Northern Bald Ibis, our target bird. Moving on, we got Northern Gannet from the van as we passed Cape Rhir and a Long-legged Buzzard on a pylon. Going as slowly as we could, we painstakingly searched both sides of the road in the dry dunes and heath habitat interspersed by some cultivated areas.

Martin suddenly shouted as a prehistoric-looking scarecrow of a bird crossed the busy road in low flight. Others followed and as we stopped, the birds were suddenly around us on both sides of the road. Unfortunately, the close photo opportunity disappeared as some emerged from the and the birds walked away a little; although these were more wary than disturbed as the birds are very used to the people in the nearby settlements who both farm and graze flocks of sheep and goats. With more birds flying to the sea it flocks it then became clear that we actually near one of the main colonies on the sea cliffs (that cannot be seen from the road).



Northern Bald Ibis

After seeing a good proportion (maybe 10%?) of one of the World's rarer birds over the next 30 minutes or so, it was time to move on. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped briefly at "Berbere Surf" to get a T-shirt for Ann. The shirt had a print of a guy wearing a *djellaba* carrying a surf board. We then stopped at the giant supermarket on the edge of Agadir to get a few beers and a bottle or two of wine for our last dinner together. For some reason, Mustapha got lost, partly over through confusion over the name of the supermarket, which at one point became 'Avocado' (it was actually Attacad) and only after asking directions from two separate sets of people, did we arrive at the giant store, which has an annex containing alcohol which has to be accessed around the back. Once back at the hotel, the afternoon was taken up with the delights of the swimming pool, catching up on photos or just generally relaxing in our luxurious surroundings.

Day 17 April 11th

Departure

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 rest of the group took their return flights to JFK and Schipol (Amsterdam).

From the perspective of the leaders, this had been a great trip, in which we'd dipped on only one of our target birds (Thick-billed Lark), but managed a few best ever views of some others (Marsh Owl and Dupont's Lark spring immediately to mind) and had a wealth of experiences and more than a few laughs. It had certainly a privilege for the leaders to show the group the riches of Morocco, of which the birds are only a part.



Anyone for Timbuktu?