

Morocco, 24th June – 1st July 2012



Participants: Josh Jones, Dan Pointon and Will Soar

Introduction

Having visited Morocco previously in April 2009 and July 2010, 2012's trip was to be my third to the country. Dan, having accompanied me in 2010, was making his second visit while Will had also visited once previously. Each of us thus had a list of specific targets that concentrated on the species/forms that we had not encountered on our previous visits, allowing us to plan a relatively tight schedule that had some leeway were we to dip on anything in particular.

The seven species I had targeted prior to our visit were Marsh Owl, Double-spurred Francolin, Egyptian Nightjar, African Dunn's Lark, African Desert Warbler, Fulvous Babbler and [Western] Mourning Wheatear, while two extra 'forms' that may warrant full specific status – Pharaoh Eagle Owl and Saharan Olivaceous Warbler – were also high on the priority list. In addition to this, both Dan and Will were keen to search for Andalusian Hemipode among several more familiar species that they had not seen on their previous trips.

Logistics

We flew from London Stansted to Fes with Ryanair; the flight was typically miserable although rather cheap – despite shafting us for £70 each for the hold bag, the flights totalled a very reasonable £142 each. A rather unprofessional attitude towards booking a car prior to the trip led to us paying for

two cars; as a result the total cost came to around £130 each for the car (a Dacia Logan *without* air conditioning)!

As with my past Moroccan trips, we found accommodation on an as-and-when basis each evening, although, paying around £15-20 per night for dinner, bed and breakfast – a little more expensive than on my past trips, but my two fellow participants valued comfort higher than economics!

Petrol was reasonably cheap; we were able to fill up our diesel for about £40. The car proved pretty economical, which helped considerably. Note that much of the driving in coastal northern Morocco nowadays is based on tolled motorways; make sure you put aside a kitty with change handy for the many toll booths – particularly around Rabat and Casablanca!

Resources & Acknowledgements

As on previous trips, Gosney's publications came in handy for locating sites such as Oued Souss, where our knowledge was a little hazy. As ever, Patrick Bergier's excellent Go-South website provided useful for further gen.

We would like to say a big thanks to Paul French, James Lidster and Pierre-Andre Crochet for their help with gen for several of our target species following trips earlier this year. Richard Bonser was a life-saver, providing us with a GPS, a map and a torch – all crucial items for a trip to the deserts!

Itinerary

A brief day-by-day account of our week-long trip can be found below. In that time, we drove over 4,500km. We are aware that many birdwatchers prefer to carry out their trips at a less frenetic pace, and thus using this trip as an example of what can be achieved in seven days may be excessive for some.

Sunday 24th June late afternoon flight from Stansted to Fes, arriving at dusk and driving west to the coast, arriving in the early hours. Overnight in the car.

Monday 25th June birding along the north Moroccan coast from dawn until dusk, finishing at the Marsh Owl site at Merja Zerga. Overnight in Kenitra.

Tuesday 26th June dawn at Ben Slimane, before travelling east to Dayet Aoua via Fes Airport (in an attempt to secure a car with air conditioning). Early afternoon birding at Dayet Aoua and the forests in the Ifrane/Azrou area before travelling south to Zeida for early evening. Evening birding at Zeida Plain; overnight near Zeida.

Wednesday 27th June early morning birding at Zeida Plain, before heading south throughout the Tizi-n-Tairhemt pass towards Errachidia. Birded the wadis west of Errachidia during the afternoon before heading south to Rissani. Early evening spent searching Pharaoh Eagle-owl sites west of Rissani before exploring Egyptian Nightjar sites east of the town until dusk. Overnight in Adrouine.

Thursday 28th June pre-dawn start for Egyptian Nightjars at Derkaoua, before birding the track to Café Yasmina at sunrise. After returning to the hotel for breakfast, mid-late morning spent at Café Yasmina and along the approach track. Another daytime search for Egyptian Nightjars before sacking it off after getting car stuck in the sand. Drove west from Rissani towards Tinghir during the afternoon; birding sites between Tinghir and Boumalne-Dades throughout the late afternoon and evening. Overnight in Ouarzazate.

Friday 29th June early morning birding at Barrage El-Mansour, before taking a leisurely drive west through the Souss Valley to Agadir. Afternoon birding at Oued Massa, before spending the evening at Oued Souss. Overnight in Agadir.

Saturday 30th June leaving Agadir pre-dawn, we eventually arrived at Imlil (via Marrakesh) mid-morning. Morning at Imlil before spending the afternoon at Oukaimeden. Drive throughout the evening north to Rabat, eventually finding suitable accommodation in Kenitra late evening. Overnight in Kenitra.

Sunday 1st July dawn at the francolin site at Sidi Yahya, leaving there mid-morning and driving west to Dayet Aoua via some woodland birding near Ifrane. Relaxing afternoon at Dayet Aoua before returning to Fes for our evening flight back to London.

DAILY DIARY

24th June

Arriving at Fes airport late evening following a generally uneventful flight from London Stansted, we were greeted by a wall of hot air as we exited the plane. Nevertheless, several species were quickly added to our trip list: **Marsh Harrier**, **Pallid Swifts** and **Laughing Doves** were among the more familiar **Cattle Egrets**, **Turtle Doves**, hirundines and **House Sparrows**. We managed to pass through customs with surprising ease, and were soon heading west along the motorway towards Casablanca. Eventually arriving on the coast at El Jadida in the early hours, we were quick to settle down for a few precious hours' sleep.

25th June

First light saw us at a coastal site south of El Jadida and, to my surprise, it took very little time at all for me to hone in on the distinctive (yet subtle) song of an **Andalusian Hemipode**. Calling over Dan and Will, we were eventually rewarded with brief views of one bird as it scuttled between rides in a crop field – much easier than in 2009! As with three years ago, the area was also plagued with singing **Quail** and **Turtle Doves**, with a few **Stone Curlews** noted flying over early morning.

A search of some nearby saltpans revealed a couple of **Marbled Ducks** as the highlight, although **Caspian Tern**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Spoonbill**, 35+ **Audouin's** and 3+ **Mediterranean Gulls** were also seen, with several **Collared Pratincoles** hawking over the site being the best of the waders present.

Happy with one of the main trip targets seen so early on day one, we began to head north back towards Casablanca.

While perusing the useful observado.org website during the week prior to our visit, I had stumbled across a site just south of Casablanca at which Brown-throated Sand Martin had been recorded with some regularity during the spring and early summer of 2012. As Dan still needed the species, it made sense to try the site so that if we were successful, a trip south to Oued Massa could potentially be scrubbed off our itinerary later in the week. The pools just north of Dar Bouazza at N33°33'24", W7°44'22" were easy enough to find, but we couldn't locate any martins – just plenty of Swallows and Pallid Swifts with singles of both **Alpine** and **Little Swifts** among them. The pools themselves were alive with waterbirds: over 200 **Glossy Ibises** included a number of white-ringed birds – presumably from the Coto Doñana – while other birds included a male **Little Bittern**, several **Spoonbills**, **Night** and **Squacco Herons**, a **Purple Swamphen** and a couple of **Green Sandpipers**. A family of **Little Owls** occupied the adjacent farm buildings.

With the afternoon at our disposal, we decided to head inland to Ben Slimane in an attempt to recce the Double-spurred Francolin sites in the forests to the north of the town. A half-hearted attempt at using the tape in the heat of the day unsurprisingly drew a blank, although our first **Short-toed Eagles** and **Southern Grey Shrikes** of the trip were seen. With GPS stored and a layout of the land obtained, we headed back north towards the coast and Kenitra, scoring another **Short-toed Eagle** along the way.

Having heard that Marsh Owls were becoming increasingly difficult at Merja Zerga prior to our trip, we had originally planned to visit Lac de Sidi Boughaba, south of Kenitra, in an attempt to see the species. However, with at least five hours of daylight still remaining, we made the executive decision to head north to Merja Zerga for some general birding. On arrival, at the southwest end of the lake, we quickly scored at least four **Montagu's Harriers** among the commoner **Marsh Harriers**, as well as singing **Reed** and **Sedge Warblers** in the channels and both **Collared Pratincoles** and **Bee-eaters** hawking overhead. After discussing our schedule, we decided to stay on at Merja Zerga in the hope of connecting, with the backup plan being to try Sidi Boughaba the following Saturday if we failed. As it turned out, we were fortunate enough to see three **Marsh Owls** (two adults and a fledged juvenile) on the west side of the lake as the evening encroached. Feeling rather exhausted, we sought accommodation in Kenitra and quickly crashed out, knowing that an early start was in order.



Adult **Marsh Owl** at Merja Zerga

26th June

Leaving Kenitra shortly after 05:00, it soon became apparent that we had misjudged first light quite spectacularly, and thus by the time we arrived at Ben Slimane it was already pretty light. Not to be put off, we found a useful track on the west side of the road, which overlooked the valley towards the rocky outcrop to the southwest. As it transpired, the brief flight views that I had of three **Double-spurred Francolins** explode from the top of a small tree, calling as they flew, turned out to be most fortunate – both Dan and Will missed the birds as they dropped in to the undergrowth, and we were unable to locate any further birds by 08:00. Small consolation was provided by the fluty songs of several **Black-crowned Tchagras**, at least six **Barbary Partridges** (including one sat up high in a tree), as well as **African Blue Tits**, **Sardinian Warblers**, **Woodchat** and **Southern Grey Shrikes** and a **Black Kite**.

Knowing that we would now have to return to the area later in the trip for another attempt at seeing the francolins, we decided to recce the traditional Gosney site at Sidi Yahya, a short (but rather offensive) drive away. It didn't take long for us to work out the site, although the ever-increasing heat ensured that bird activity was limited to a single **Spotted Flycatcher**, as well as the ubiquitous **Black-winged Stilts** poking around on a nearby pool. With little else to hang around for on the coast, we began the long drive back inland towards Ifrane, pausing only for a singing **Western Olivaceous Warbler** in roadside scrub in Temara.

With Will already struggling in the relatively 'tame' heat of the coast (low thirties), we decided to call back in at Fes airport in an attempt to secure a car that did have air conditioning – knowing that things would get much worse in the southeast. Unfortunately, no such car was forthcoming and so we gritted our teeth and headed back off south towards Dayet Aoua, arriving there during the early afternoon. Initial impressions were that there seemed to be far more **Crested Coots** than in July 2010, with comparatively fewer **Common Coots**. **Black-necked Grebes** clogged up just about every available space on the lake, while the moulting mess of **Mallards** contained small numbers of **Garganey**, **Gadwall** and **Shoveler** in addition to half-a-dozen **Ferruginous Ducks** among the **Pochards**. The woodland around the lake contained a typical selection of species, with **Jay**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Firecrest** and several **Rollers** and **Golden Orioles** all seen. The highlight, however, was a pair of **Atlas Flycatchers** feeding young in one of the trees along the road on the south side of the lake, 100 metres before the entrance to the King's palace. As usual with this site, we were soon approached by security guards asking us to stop photographing things, although they were quickly repelled by allowing them a peek through our optics. They apologized and moved on, but if you wish to keep hassle to a premium, it is best to keep any photographic gear hidden – at least until they look the other way!

Leaving Dayet Aoua, we continued southwards towards Ifrane. Several **Rollers** provided a colourful distraction on the drive, while numbers of **Lesser Kestrels** steadily increased as the town grew near. Over the town itself, dozens of Lesser Kestrels could be seen hawking insects (perhaps as many as 200+ were estimated!), while there were also numerous **Black Kites**, a **Raven** and a further **Golden Oriole**.

Given that both Dan and Will still needed **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, we decided to make a stop in the oak woodland by the 'Marrakesh 411km' marker along the road to Azrou. Back in 2007, Richard Bonser et al. had noted the species here, and we were not to be disappointed: while I sat in the car tackling a tin of tuna as the rain began to fall, the other two had good views of a family party of woodpeckers. I had to make do with crippling views of **Atlas Flycatcher** by the car, as well as a **Roller** visiting a nest site in the oak trees. To celebrate his tick, Dan set about attempting to enter one of his tins of tuna – unfortunately he had forgotten to buy ring-pull cans and thus made something of a mess of the front of the car (as well as managing to spill sunflower oil all down his side of the exterior).

The rest of the afternoon was spent driving south towards Zeida, stopping only for any interesting roadside birds. Pick of the bunch were several **Seebohm's Wheatears** seen in the subalpine habitat of the Middle Atlas, while we were surprised to hear at least one singing **Skylark** here. Further roadside birds typical of the area included **Thekla Larks**, and **White-crowned Black**, **Black-eared** and **Desert Wheatears** in addition to the ever-present **White Storks** and **Cattle Egrets**.

Arriving on the plains south of Zeida mid-evening, we quickly set about searching for our primary target in the changeable weather. Despite clocking up several miles walking the general area in which I had seen a bird in July 2010, it was only Dan who managed to see a single **Dupont's Lark** – found just as darkness was beginning to creep in and the showers had stopped. By the time Will and I had joined him, the bird had typically scuttled off, never to be seen again. Nevertheless, a decent supporting cast included several new birds for the trip list: notably a male **Red-rumped Wheatear**, three flyover **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and a dozen or more **Cream-coloured Coursers** in addition to **Short-toed**, **Lesser Short-toed** and **Thekla Larks**, and a distant **Short-toed Eagle**. Tired and hungry, we made for the nearby Tinmay Camping hotel, which provided us with an excellent three-course meal and a comfy bed for the night.



Will contemplates life under moody skies at Zeida Plain

27th June

A dawn raid on Zeida Plains quickly revealed a singing **Dupont's Lark** in the distance, although it soon shut up and our attempts to track it down proved unsuccessful. It was otherwise a case of 'as you

were', with the species list for our morning's work identical to that the evening previous – notable sightings included a flyover **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and several **Cream-coloured Coursers**.

After an excellent breakfast at Tinmay Camping, we paid up and headed off south once more. Reaching Midelt in surprisingly quick time, it was not long before we had begun our ascent towards the Tizi-n-Tairhemt pass. Parking by the hairpin bend not far from the highest point of the pass, it did not take long for Dan to locate a juvenile **Tristram's Warbler** in the surrounding junipers, while there were also several **Moussier's Redstarts** and **Coal Tits** in the area. Recalling that we had seen **Rock Bunting** here in 2010, a male appeared on rocks by the hairpin right on cue – judging by its mouthful of grubs, it must have been feeding young.

Heading south towards Er-Rich, we found a juvenile falcon on roadside wires some 11 kilometres north of the town. To our relatively untrained eyes, it appeared to be a **Barbary**, although I will hold my hands up and admit raptors are not my forte. A couple of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** – the first of the trip – were also seen in the area. It was between Er-Rich and Errachidia that we had our first contact with the confusing Olivaceous Warblers of the region, on a speculative babbler stop where the road runs alongside the richly-vegetated Oued Ziz. Two birds noted in date palms by the roadside seemed both small and very pale indeed, although were not singing. However, a third bird, a short drive down the valley, was singing. It responded well to the song of **Western Olivaceous** and, to me, the song seemed about right for that species. It also seemed larger and more robust than the two previous birds, with a considerably heavier bill – are Saharan and Western Olivaceous co-existing in the foothills of the Atlas? Thankfully less troublesome were a couple of **Rufous Bush Chats**, a **Nightingale** and the odd **House Bunting**.

On reaching Errachidia we were pleasantly surprised to find that the heat was actually bearable, being somewhat cooler than the oven I remembered it to be in July 2010 – no doubt the hazy cloud was helping to suppress temperatures. With that, we began to explore some of the wadis west of the town. In the small wadi extending northwards from the road c.29km past Errachidia, Dan soon located a pair of *saharae* **Scrub Warblers**, which went on to show extremely well. A few **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** and a **Bar-tailed Lark** also showed well here, although we found no babblers. The wadi to the south of the road, c.20km west of Errachidia, was impressively lush although again contained no babblers. Several **Saharan Olivaceous Warblers** were found here, as were numerous **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**, **Crag Martins**, **Rufous Bush Chat** and a **Hoopoe**. With the sun breaking through and the temperature quickly rising, our final stop before heading south towards Erfoud was a likely-looking patch of scrub on the north side of the road, on the western outskirts of Errachidia. A play of the tape brought an immediate response from a family party of **Fulvous Babblers**, which would otherwise have remain hidden in the heat of the day. Six birds – adults and juveniles – were counted as they hopped around on the ground below the tamarisks before disappearing once more – it was a great relief to have finally seen a species which has managed to elude me so effectively on previous visits!

The late afternoon and early evening were spent searching the sites west of Rissani for Pharaoh Eagle-owl. Although plenty of faecal stains on the various cliffs in the area kept us occupied, we failed to locate any owls – perhaps the lack of irritating locals at the 'traditional' site was a bad sign that no birds were present. Instead, a couple of juvenile **Lanners** kept us entertained as they whizzed around the cliff face, while both **Bar-tailed** and **Desert Larks** and a [Desert] Red Fox kept us

entertained. The final couple of hours of daylight were spent in the wadis north of Auberge le Tresor, although we couldn't find any Egyptian Nightjars before a particularly violent sandstorm engulfed us. Slightly disappointed with the evening's work, we headed towards Auberge Derkaoua, in the hope of some reasonable accommodation and an early night. To our great surprise and disappointment, we found the resort closed as of the week prior to our visit (no reason stated), so back to the main road we headed. By complete chance, we soon found some very quaint accommodation and enjoyed an excellent tajine in the town of Adrouine – we actually thought we were in Merzouga, such are the disorientation powers of a night sandstorm!

28th June

As if our starts hadn't been early enough on the trip already, we were out of bed at the offensive hour of 03:30 and heading back north for Auberge Derkaoua for a pre-dawn raid on Egyptian Nightjars. Not holding much hope of connecting with no access to the famous swimming pool, we predictably dipped on the nightjars despite searching blasting torches and car lights as extensively as we could. A group of noisy dogs and a feral cat were the only life-forms noted.

As first light came, we decided to head south to the track to Café Yasmina, where we hoped to see two of our target species. Locating **African Desert Warblers** was easy enough, with at least five birds found in the wadi north of the track explored. A **Spotted Sandgrouse** flew over calling and at least three of both **Bar-tailed** and **Hoopoe Larks** were also found with relative ease, but we could not locate our other quarry – African Dunn's Lark. Further consolation was provided by a magnificent **Saharan Stiped Polecat** showing well for at least five minutes as it fed on lizards, and a **Fennec Fox** was also seen well (if briefly) as it slinked away along the wadi.



Saharan Striped Polecat, 9km west of Café Yasmina

After heading back to Adrouine for a spot of breakfast, we returned to the Dunn's Lark site mid-morning. No sign, so we headed eastwards to Café Yasmina, by which time it had become exceedingly hot. Will retreated to the relative safety of the café while Dan and I searched unsuccessfully for Desert Sparrows – a **Saharan Olivaceous Warbler** provided some compensation, as did several **Brown-necked Ravens** and good views of the sand dunes. Shortly after a well-

deserved coke, we tried the Dunn's Lark site for the third and final time, but the birds had evidently cleared out post-breeding for we couldn't find them anywhere.

Despite the crippling heat, we decided to try further wadis towards Kasbah Said in the hope of stumbling across an Egyptian Nightjar. Perhaps it was just fate that we were meant to dip the species, as I managed to get the car stuck deep in sand to the north of Derkaoua and, by the time we had dug it out (with the help of a friendly arab), we were burnt, sweaty and exhausted. Will had begun to cramp up and hyperventilate, and thus we quickly sacked off any attempt at the nightjars and drove as rapidly as possible back to Rissani to buy cold water for him. A rather hairy half-hour passed as Will narrowly avoided death, although he gradually recovered enough for us to drive back to Auberge le Tresor early afternoon. Delirious from the heat and exhaustion, Dan and I began to walk the wadis but yet again we were unsuccessful with the nightjars – it was clearly not meant to be, and so the executive decision was made to sack it off and head for cooler climes to the west.

The road from Rissani west to Tinghir was largely uneventful and, save the odd roadside **White-crowned Black Wheatear**, birdless. This didn't bother us, as we had specific sites and target species to try and see before the day was out. First stop was a track that leading north off the main road around 14km west of Tinghir, where Paul French et al. had found a Pharaoh Eagle-owl roost site. Although there was again plenty of detritus splattered below obvious perches, we could not locate any owls but did chance upon our other target species: **Western Mourning Wheatear**. The bird – a first-summer male – was found by the side of the track a few hundred yards before the cliff face, although soon flew off down the valley and could not be relocated.



First-summer male **Western Mourning Wheatear** *Oenanthe (lugens) halophila*
in the hills west of Tinghir

Although we felt a great weight had been lifted off our shoulders in scoring the wheatear early (we all agreed it was likely to be one of the hardest species of the trip to see), our success rate with the Eagle-owls was still a big, fat zilch. Heading further west towards Boumalne, we had one last site to try. Parking by the slight bend in the road 2km west of Imiter, we walked south to view the large

gorge which runs parallel to the road. Although we could only locate further faecal stains in an initial scan, it was to our great relief when Will eventually located an adult **Pharaoh Eagle-owl** at the edge of a small cave at the western end of the large rocky escarpment. He also picked up a distant male **Western Mourning Wheatear**, although it quickly flew and all I could muster were brief flight views of a wheatear dropping behind a distant cliff.



Josh overlooking the **Pharaoh Eagle-owl** site 2km west of Imiter

Pressure off, we decided to continue west towards Boumalne and spend the remaining daylight at the famous 'Tagdilt Track' just southwest of the town. On arrival, it was evident that it had been a good year for **Temminck's Larks**: the species was remarkably common across the plains, with several pairs also having fledged juveniles in tow. We also scored several **Red-rumped Wheatears** and **Bar-tailed Larks** as well as a single **Hoopoe Lark** but, in contrast to our visit in 2010 when they were everywhere, we could not find any Thick-billed Larks. I was particularly surprised to see the legendary 'Wheatear Wall' (a glorified name for what is essentially rubble) had been fenced off with plenty of 'no entry' signs – evidently someone doesn't want visitors here! It was nice to reflect one an amusing memory from our 2010 trip, when at this site Dan and Oliver Metcalf had been given a severe fright by a couple of large dogs. The rest of the evening was spent locating suitable accommodation in Ouarzazate – something achieved without any great issue, although Will was a bit late for dinner and went without a proper meal yet again.

29th June

Given that our first port of call was just a few kilometres away, we were afforded something of a lie-in, rising only at 06:15 to head to Barrage El-Mansour. For some reason, Will's stomach had been playing havoc overnight, and he was feeling rather weak after a colourful night in our hotel latrine. While Dan and Will struggled out of the car to check the cultivated areas for their target, I headed further east towards the reservoir itself (the water levels was surprisingly low). Both parties were soon enjoying admirable views of **Long-billed Crested Larks**, while the concentration of **House**

Buntings in the area was nothing short of incredible! I made my way down to the reservoir via a showy **Little Owl**, and a scan of the lake produced an impressive variety of species: a dozen **Ruddy Shelducks**, 15 **Spoonbills**, a **Flamingo**, **Night** and **Squacco Herons**, **Gull-billed**, **Common** and **Little Terns**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Stone Curlew**, **Osprey**, three **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** over and our first **Moroccan Wagtails** (*subpersonata*) of the trip. We also found **Saharan Olivaceous Warblers** to be surprisingly common in the lakeside tamarisks here, and it was interesting to hear their subtly-different song as well as enjoy point-blank views. By this point Will was beginning to struggle again, so we made a quick getaway back to the hotel for breakfast.

Following a decent meal, we checked out of the hotel and loaded the car for our long drive west to Agadir. Will, having downed some Imodium, was soon asleep in the back of the car and I managed to get some serious kilometres covered throughout the late morning and early afternoon. Our only stops were along the road to Amerzgane (**Rufous Bush Chat** and **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** but no Mourning Wheatears) and on the occasional wheatears, shrikes and larks along the roadside further west.

Having noticed on Patrick Bergier's Go-South website that a probable Dark Chanting Goshawk had been reported southwest of Ouled Berhil – a stone's throw from the traditional site at Igoudar – back in early May, we decided to have a short stop to scout out the area. In short, it looked absolutely rubbish for the species. A complete lack of Argan forest and rather too much in the way of settlement and orange plantations led us to believe that the likelihood of the species persisting in the area was microscopic at best. Having said that, huge swathes of unspoilt tracts of Argan forest persist further east in the Souss Valley (and north towards Marrakesh), and there must be a realistic chance that goshawks still hang on somewhere in Morocco (just not in the traditional areas!). Perhaps a concentrated search of the remaining habitat might just bring some rewarding results for those with the time available?

After we stopped fantasising, we got back on the road to Agadir, before turning south towards Oued Massa, where we arrived mid-afternoon. Our primary target here was one of Morocco's most boring specialities – Brown-throated Martin. A tired search of several of the bridges in the valley produced little more than **Red-rumped** and **Barn Swallows**, but eventually we found a larger flock of hirundines feeding over fields adjacent to the river to the northeast of Massa village. Much to the delight of Dan, I soon picked up a rather grotty adult **Brown-throated Martin** in heavy wing moult, although this was soon followed by a much fresher first-year bird. In the vicinity were 30+ **Glossy Ibises**, several **Western Olivaceous Warblers** and a **Black-eared Wheatear**, while our only **Purple Heron** of the trip flew over, as did a **Caspian Tern**.

With time to spare, we drove round to the Wassay Camping complex on the coast just to the south of the estuary mouth, where we had a scan on the coastal slopes for Bald Ibis. No ibises there, just a man who claimed to be one of reserve wardens. He offered to take us to a private site to see the birds for 100 dirhams. Reluctantly agreeing, we were somewhat disappointed to find his 'private site' was a few hundred yards inland of our position and perfectly viewable from the road! Dan quickly located three **Bald Ibises** as they scotted around in roadside fields – what awful-looking birds. Our new friend then managed to talk us in to giving him a lift back to Massa village – Moroccans can be remarkably opportunistic! Given his rather poor quality of service and us acting as

a taxi, we gave him 20 dirhams and sped off, leaving him gesticulating by the roadside. Don't be conned by these boys!

Final stop of the day was back up near Agadir, at the Oued Souss estuary. A typically uninspiring selection of waders, **Spoonbills** and **Flamingos** greeted us near the viewing platforms, so we headed out towards the estuary mouth. A few hundred gulls were split evenly between **Lesser Black-backed**, **Yellow-legged** and **Audouin's**, although the reason for our long walk – the tern flock – was flushed and flew off inland. A couple of **Gannets** passed offshore among the **Cory's Shearwaters** but the seawatching was otherwise uninspiring, so we trudged back to the car. On arrival back at the viewing platforms, we were pleased to find good numbers of terns – mainly **Sandwich**, **Common** and **Gull-billed** – resting on the sandbanks. Among them, I was surprised to locate three **Royal Terns**, while Dan picked up an adult **Whiskered** as well as a few **Little Terns** – a great selection! As dusk fell, at least three **Red-necked Nightjars** could be heard singing from the edge of the royal palace, and we managed some half-decent views in the street lights that line the road here. Will, who had recovered considerably, was particularly pleased for the species was new for him. It didn't take us long to find some reasonable accommodation on the south side of town and Dan, whose stomach was beginning to cause problems, retired to the lavatory while Will and I tucked in to a tajine.



Three **Royal Terns** on the Oued Souss at dusk

30th June

It was back to normal following the previous day's slight 'lie-in': we were back on the road towards Marrakesh pre-dawn in an attempt to reach Imlil at a reasonable hour. With Will exhausted and Dan complaining that his bowels were becoming increasingly problematic, I left them sleep for a couple of hours as our Dacia ate up the kilometres. Following a slight struggle navigating through Marrakesh, we were soon on our way south towards the High Atlas, and arrived at Imlil during the mid-morning.

Despite having improved gen following our speculative attempts two years previous, we again failed to locate any White-rumped Swifts above the village – in fact, swift numbers in general were very poor here. Some consolation was provided by great views of several noisy **Levaillant's**

Woodpeckers, and flyover **Long-legged Buzzard** and **Booted Eagles**. Higher up we came across single **Black Wheatear** and **Blue Rock Thrushes**, while a couple of high-flying chough flocks were not identified specifically. By this point, Dan was complaining that the altitude was causing him some issues, so he stayed in the car and ate biscuits in an attempt to calm his insides.

We made the executive decision to drive to Oukaimeden via the ‘short’ route on the map, as our petrol was running low. This turned out to be a slow and windy track, although the scenery was spectacular and we did see a few **Moussier’s Redstarts**. Eventually reaching Oukaimeden during the early afternoon, we decided to drive along the gravel track beyond the ski lift car park. This proved to be a fine idea, as we found **Crimson-winged Finches** to be commonplace with a bit of extra altitude. Over twenty of this attractive species were seen along with plenty of **Seebohm’s Wheatears** and **Rock Sparrows**, although Alpine Accentor eluded us – Gosney seems to think they are easy here; perhaps we didn’t head high enough. Back down at the ski lifts, Dan made friends with a particularly slight local berber, although we all resisted the temptation to purchase any of his necklaces and precious rocks. A couple of surprises here came in the form of a juvenile **Cuckoo** and a pair of **Whitethroats** (in hindsight perhaps the two were linked), while the odd **Black Redstart** was noted around the plateau. Further down the valley, we encountered **Dipper** (not looking particularly black-bellied), **Blue Rock Thrush** and both **Chough** and **Alpine Chough** in cascading flocks overhead.



Dan with friend at Oukaimeden

The rest of the afternoon and evening was spent heading north towards Casablanca and thus very few birds were seen aside our first **Black-winged Kite** of the trip on the outskirts of the city. Finding accommodation proved to be difficult that night; Rabat was stuffed with locals and thus we actually ended up in Kenitra again, meaning an hour-long drive in the morning and thus another early start.

1st July

The day dawned with us ‘in position’ overlooking the forests at Sidi Yahya, surrounded by several churring and wing-clapping Nightjars. **Black-crowned Tchagras** appeared to be singing everywhere, although proved as elusive as always. Over the next few hours, we had **Golden Oriole**, **Barbary Partridge**, **Green Sandpiper**(!), two **Booted Eagles** and several **Black Kites**, though **Double-spurred Francolins** remained extremely elusive – we were treated occasional calls in at least two locations, although we failed to see them.

By this point, exhaustion had started to kick in among the team and thus we stopped for a civilized breakfast in a rubbish-strewn truck stop by the side of the main Rabat – Fes road. A couple of delicious pancakes and cups of mint tea later, we were heading back east towards Fes although, with much of the day to spare, we decided to divert off south towards Ifrane at Meknes, and give the forests another bash.

One thing that really surprised us on our trip was just how common and easy Atlas Flycatchers can be. A few kilometres before Ifrane, we took a track leading north off the main road at a small clearing in the oak woodland, and began to explore on foot here. Although seemingly a popular place for Ifrane's drug-using/dogging population to use (foil wraps and condoms littered the floor; watch where you tread!), we found at least five **Atlas Flycatchers** – including a family – without walking more than a couple of hundred metres. A typical range of other species here included **Hawfinch, Booted Eagle, Black Kite, Golden Oriole, Roller, Nuthatch** and **Short-toed Treecreeper**, with the dense woodland providing some pleasant shade from the heat of the day. Presumably the flycatchers are similarly easy in any tract of woodland within the area, and thus anywhere suitable should theoretically produce sightings.

With a few hours left to kill, we decide to head to Dayet Aoua and chill out in the sunshine. On arrival, a couple of shifty locals wearing false police uniforms tried to shaft us of a few dirhams to drive round the lake. Politely declining their offer to pay, I drove on past them – make sure you don't be lured in to a similar trap! Arriving by the lake, Dan sat down to enjoy a pack of custard creams, and occasionally shared one with a ravenous bunch of **Crested Coots** that had gathered on the shoreline where we sat. Otherwise, the bird life on the lake was very similar to that of our first visit – scores of **Black-necked Grebes** and dabbling ducks, as well as few **Ferruginous Ducks** and **Pochards**. However, our musings that the lake looked good enough for a swim were quickly banished, for Will had spotted a couple of locals defecating in to the water along the far bank. Appalled by such a sight, we sounded the horn and gesticulated at them; with children playing in the water no more than a couple of hundred metres away, it was easy to envisage an Arabic version of the 'floater' scene in Kevin and Perry playing out – no doubt with rather more dire consequences.

On that note, it was our time to leave Morocco. Driving back to Fes airport, we later enjoyed a relatively stress-free transfer back to London and onwards to our respective places of residence. It had been a typically strenuous Moroccan trip: there had been highs and there had been lows, and each one of us felt exhausted!

SELECTED SPECIES NOTES

Ruddy Shelduck – c.12 were at Barrage El-Mansour, Ouarzazate on 29th.

Marbled Duck – two on saltpans south of El Jadida on 25th were the only birds of the trip.

Ferruginous Duck – up to ten were at Dayet Aoua on 26th and 1st.

Double-spurred Francolin – three were seen in flight north of Ben Slimane early morning on 25th (JJ only); we found the best place to view was from the track leading west off the road at N33°37'58.1", W7°5'54.8". From here, extensive views could be had over the valley looking southwest towards a series of large rocky outcrops. A second attempt at the species at the more traditional location at Sidi Yahya early morning on 1st produced at least two calling males from the track at N33°42'38.6", W6°55'48.5", but none were seen.

Barbary Partridge – at least six were seen at the francolin site to the north of Ben Slimane on 25th, with the species also heard at Sidi Yahya on 1st.

Andalusian Hemipode – one was heard and seen at a coastal site south of El Jadida early morning on 25th. Given how easy it was to locate this individual, one must suspect that the species is not too difficult to encounter in suitable habitat in coastal Morocco.

Bald Ibis – three individuals were seen in coastal fields south of Oued Massa on 29th.

Black-winged Kite – one hunting by the Marrakech-Casablanca motorway, just southeast of the latter city on 30th was the only sighting of the trip.

Barbary Falcon – a juvenile was seen on roadside pylons 11km north of Er-Rich on 27th.

Lanner – two fledged juveniles were observed around the nest site at the traditional Pharaoh Eagle-owl site in Gosney on 27th (see that species for details).

Red-knobbed Coot – we found the species to be abundant on both our visits to Dayet Aoua, much more so than in 2010. Perhaps they have enjoyed a couple of excellent breeding seasons (?).

Purple Swamphen – one was seen on the saltpans south of El Jadida during the morning of 25th, with another individual seen later that day on the freshwater pools just north of Dar Bouazza (N33°33'24", W7°44'22").

Cream-coloured Courser – as with our trip in 2010, we found this species with relative ease. At least a dozen were seen on Zeida Plain on 26th-27th, with smaller numbers in the Rissani area and a the odd sighting from the roadside between Boumalne and Ouarzazate.

Royal Tern – three individuals were noted in the tern roost at Oued Souss at dusk on 29th, where they could be observed from either of the two new viewing platforms situated on the edge of the river c.200m before the main palace entrance.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse – small groups of up to three individuals were noted flying over Zeida Plain on 26th-27th.

Spotted Sandgrouse – a single bird was seen and heard flying over the African Desert Warbler site, 9km west of Café Yasmina on 28th (see that species for details).

Pharaoh Eagle-owl – we had mixed fortunes with this species. The ‘traditional’ site in Gosney (viewed from the slag heaps at N31°16'47.36", W4°21'22.19") revealed just a Lanner nest and no owls. Note that a long walk is not necessary at this site – we accessed it from the western edge of the ridge, where a perfectly drivable track diverts north off the road at approximately N31°16'17", W4°22'18", and continues to the slag heaps. We also tried another site just northwest of here (within the walls of an old hill fort in the mountains at N31°17'58", W4°24'4"), but again failed. Our third site was in the hills c.14km west of Tinghir (see Western Mourning Wheatear for details on how to access), although again we couldn't find any owls. Our fourth and final site was in a gorge south of the road, c.2km west of the town of Imiter. Parking off the road near the slight bend at N31°22'35", W5°49'3.2", walk south to the edge of the gorge to view the north-facing escarpment opposite. We found a single owl roosting in a small cave towards the right-hand (west) end of the escarpment during the late afternoon of 28th, although a multitude of detritus stains led us to believe that the owls could be anywhere along the face.

Marsh Owl – deciding against a visit to Lac de Sidi Bourghaba, we were fortunate enough to ‘luck out’ on three individuals (including a recently-fledged juvenile) over juncus along the west side of Merja Zerga during the evening of 25th, viewed from the road at N34°50'18.1", W6°18'5.3". Please avoid accepting the offers of locals to help you find the birds; their methods are utterly offensive and no doubt have a negative impact on the continued presence of the species at this site.

Red-necked Nightjar – it was surprisingly easy to find this species at Oued Souss, with at least three birds heard singing along the road bordering the palace walls at dusk on 29th. Two were seen without too much difficulty along the road, although they quickly flew off when our torch was strategically aimed in their direction.

Blue-cheeked Bee-eater – reasonably common in the southeast of the country, our first were seen 11km north of Er-Rich. The species was easy to find in the wadis around Errachidia, while occasional birds were also noted around Rissani and west to Ouarzazate, where small groups were seen at Barrage El-Mansour.

Levaillant's Green Woodpecker – a family party were noted in oak woodland by the ‘Marrakech 411km’ marker between Ifrane and Azrou on 26th, while at least six were seen around the village of Imlil in the High Atlas on 30th. The species responds very well to a tape.

Skylark – we were surprised to hear at least one singing in the Middle Atlas south of Azrou on 26th June.

Bar-tailed Lark – seen in small numbers in the deserts of the southeast of the country on 27th-28th, as well as at the Tagdilt Track on 28th.

Desert Lark – small numbers were seen in the deserts west of Rissani, with at least two also noted at the Pharaoh Eagle-owl site 14km west of Tinghir.

Temminck's Lark – common at the Tagdilt Track on 28th, with several parties of adults and juveniles noted.

Dupont's Lark – one was seen on Zeida Plain during the evening of 26th (DP only), with a male heard singing there at dawn the following morning.

Hoopoe Lark – up to three were seen in the wadi 9km west of Café Yasmina on 28th, with one in flight near the Tagdilt Track later that day.

Brown-throated Martin – although not seen at the pools north of Dar Bouazza, two (a worn adult and fresh juvenile) were eventually located with other hirundines over fields near at Oued Massa, just northwest of the village, on 29th.

Moussier's Redstart – a localized species which we found to be common over the Tizi-n-Tairhemt pass, particularly at the Tristram's Warbler site (see that species for details).

Seebohm's Wheatear – as well as being a reasonably common roadside bird in the Middle Atlas south of Azrou, this striking subspecies was one of the commonest birds in the High Atlas at Oukaimeden on 30th.

Western Mourning Wheatear – a first-summer male was seen in the hills 14km west of Tinghir on 28th. From the main Tinghir-Boumalne road, take the track north at N31°26'21.7", W5°38'58.1" and continued until it opens up in a small valley. The wheatear was found next to the track at N31°26'44.4", W5°39'35.5". Another male was seen at the Pharaoh Eagle-owl site 2km west of Imiter.

Scrub Warbler – a pair of the subspecies *saharae* were seen and heard in the wadi 29km west of Errachidia on 27th; take the track north off the road at N31°48'7.7", W4°41'52.8" and explore the scrub on the right.

African Desert Warbler – at least three birds were seen in the wadi 9km west of Café Yasmina during the morning of 28th at N31°14'29.7", W4°4'34.9".

Tristram's Warbler – a juvenile showed well in juniper scrub near the hairpin bend on the Tizi-n-Tairhemt pass at N32°36'29.6", W4°31'36.4". This site is reliable for the species in summer – we had three there in July 2010.

Saharan Olivaceous Warbler – although separation from Western Olivaceous Warbler can be at times tricky, we encountered this distinctive (sub)species of Eastern Olivaceous Warbler at several sites in the southeast of the country. At least five were seen in tamarisks approaching the lush wadi 20km west of Errachidia on 27th; to reach the area, turn south off the main road west of Errachidia at N31°49'48", W4°31'36.4". A single bird was seen at Café Yasmina on 28th, with birds (presumably of this ssp.) noted flying across the road from a moving car just west of Rissani on 27th-28th. A particularly high density of birds (including singing individuals) were noted at the west end of Barrage El-Mansour, Ouarzazate, early on 29th, while three 'Olivaceous Warblers' seen in the Ziz Valley between Errachidia and Er-Rich might have been this taxon (although more likely Western Olivaceous).

Atlas Flycatcher – a common species in the oak woodlands of the Middle Atlas. A pair attending at nest site c.100m before the palace entrance at Dayet Aoua on 26th gave us our best views of a male, while at least two were noted in oak woodland by the 'Marrakech 411km' marker between Ifrane

and Azrou later that day. To illustrate the notion that this species can be found anywhere in suitable habitat, we made a speculative stop on a track leading off the main road in to the oak woods northwest of Ifrane (N33°33'09", W5°10'52.7") and immediately found a female feeding at least one youngster.

Black-crowned Tchagra – although not seen at Oued Massa on this trip (we didn't try), singing birds were seemingly everywhere at the francolin stake-outs near Ben Slimane and Sidi Yahya; for details on these sites see Double-spurred Francolin.

Fulvous Babbler – a family part of at least six birds were found during the heat of the day in an area of scrub just west of Errachidia (N31°54'45.98", W4°28'56.81"), although could be very elusive.

Crimson-winged Finch – although not present around the ski lift car park, we found at least twenty birds further up the valley by driving along the track beyond this area; we first encountered the finches after a kilometre or so and they soon became relatively common at N31°10'19.5", W7°51'6.7".

House Bunting – common in towns and cultivated areas throughout the country, we found the highest density this species in and around Ouarzazate, where it may be described as abundant.

TRIP LIST

1. Ruddy Shelduck
2. Mallard
3. Gadwall
4. Shoveler
5. Marbled Teal
6. Garganey
7. Pochard
8. Ferruginous Duck
9. Double-spurred Francolin
10. Barbary Partridge
11. Quail
12. Andalusian Hemipode
13. Little Grebe
14. Black-necked Grebe
15. Great Crested Grebe
16. Cory's Shearwater
17. Gannet
18. Cormorant
19. Little Bittern
20. Night Heron
21. Cattle Egret
22. Little Egret
23. Grey Heron
24. Purple Heron
25. White Stork
26. Glossy Ibis
27. Bald Ibis

28. Greater Flamingo
29. Spoonbill
30. Osprey
31. Short-toed Eagle
32. Booted Eagle
33. Black Kite
34. Marsh Harrier
35. Montagu's Harrier
36. Long-legged Buzzard
37. Sparrowhawk
38. Black-winged Kite
39. Kestrel
40. Lesser Kestrel
41. Hobby
42. Peregrine
43. Barbary Falcon
44. Lanner
45. Peregrine
46. Moorhen
47. Coot
48. Crested Coot
49. Purple Swamphen
50. Oystercatcher
51. Avocet
52. Black-winged Stilt
53. Stone Curlew
54. Cream-coloured Courser
55. Little Ringed Plover
56. Collared Pratincole
57. Ringed Plover
58. Kentish Plover
59. Grey Plover
60. Knot
61. Sanderling
62. Turnstone
63. Dunlin
64. Little Stint
65. Green Sandpiper
66. Common Sandpiper
67. Redshank
68. Greenshank
69. Black-tailed Godwit
70. Bar-tailed Godwit
71. Curlew
72. Snipe
73. Ruff
74. Black-headed Gull
75. Slender-billed Gull
76. Yellow-legged Gull
77. Lesser Black-backed Gull
78. Audouin's Gull

79. Mediterranean Gull
80. Little Tern
81. Sandwich Tern
82. Gull-billed Tern
83. Common Tern
84. Caspian Tern
85. African Royal Tern
86. Whiskered Tern
87. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
88. Spotted Sandgrouse
89. Rock Dove
90. Stock Dove
91. Woodpigeon
92. Collared Dove
93. Turtle Dove
94. Laughing Dove
95. Cuckoo
96. Pharoah Eagle Owl
97. Marsh Owl
98. Little Owl
99. Nightjar
100. Red-necked Nightjar
101. Swift
102. Pallid Swift
103. Alpine Swift
104. Little Swift
105. Hoopoe
106. Kingfisher
107. Bee-eater
108. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater
109. Roller
110. Levillant's Green Woodpecker
111. Great Spotted Woodpecker
112. Skylark
113. Crested Lark
114. Thekla Lark
115. Short-toed Lark
116. Lesser Short-toed Lark
117. Desert Lark
118. Bar-tailed Desert Lark
119. Calandra Lark
120. Temminck's Horned Lark
121. Dupont's Lark
122. Hoopoe Lark
123. Sand Martin
124. Brown-throated Martin
125. Crag Martin
126. Swallow
127. Red-rumped Swallow
128. House Martin
129. White Wagtail

130. Yellow Wagtail
131. Grey Wagtail
132. Dipper
133. Dunnock
134. Robin
135. Nightingale
136. Rufous Bush Chat
137. Black Redstart
138. Moussier's Redstart
139. Seebohm's Wheatear
140. Black-eared Wheatear
141. Western Mourning Wheatear
142. White-crowned Black Wheatear
143. Black Wheatear
144. Desert Wheatear
145. Red-rumped Wheatear
146. Stonechat
147. Mistle Thrush
148. Blackbird
149. Blue Rock Thrush
150. Scrub Warbler
151. Blackcap
152. Whitethroat
153. Sardinian Warbler
154. African Desert Warbler
155. Tristram's Warbler
156. Sedge Warbler
157. Fan-tailed Warbler
158. Cetti's Warbler
159. Reed Warbler
160. Western Olivaceous Warbler
161. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler
162. Firecrest
163. Wren
164. Spotted Flycatcher
165. Atlas Flycatcher
166. Great Tit
167. Blue Tit
168. Coal Tit
169. Nuthatch
170. Short-toed Treecreeper
171. Southern Grey Shrike
172. Woodchat Shrike
173. Black-crowned Tchagra
174. Common Bulbul
175. Fulvous Babbler
176. Magpie
177. Jay
178. Jackdaw
179. Chough
180. Alpine Chough

181. Raven
182. Brown-necked Raven
183. Spotless Starling
184. Golden Oriole
185. House Sparrow
186. Spanish Sparrow
187. Rock Sparrow
188. Chaffinch
189. Linnet
190. Goldfinch
191. Greenfinch
192. Serin
193. Hawfinch
194. Crimson-winged Finch
195. Rock Bunting
196. House Bunting