

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



Tour Report

Morocco – High Atlas, Sahara & Atlantic

9 - 19 March 2018

Levaillant's woodpecker



Spurge hawkmoth



Barbary nut iris



Desert wheatear



Compiled by: John Muddeman

Tour Leaders: John Muddeman and Boubker Boutkhom with 9 participants

Day 1: Arrival at Marrakech

Friday 9 March 2018

Arriving at Marrakech airport in fine weather meant we could all appreciate the vast expanses of remarkably green fields on the broad coastal plain and the impressive cap of snow along the entire spine of the Atlas rearing up to the south from the plane! There were clear signs of the heavy rainfall the region had experienced for the week or so before we arrived, despite it being nearly 28 degrees as we stepped outside the terminal!

Weather: Fine, 28 degrees.

Day 2: Oukämeden ski resort & Ourika Valley

Saturday 10 March 2018

Our next day was taken up with a trip climbing up to and looking around the highest ski station in Africa, at Oukämeden. Leaving our hotel in still beautiful but much cooler conditions in the morning, we commenced the quite long and slow drive up, punctuating the drive with a couple of quick birdwatching stops. A couple of smart male African common chaffinches and singing common bulbuls were the first for most beside a small rushing river, heavily stained brown by soil run-off in the snow-melt waters, while higher up adjacent to an area of replanted Atlas cedar, the first of several mistle thrushes were seen, and singing coal tit and calling rock bunting were noted. A flock of red-billed choughs spiralled up and drifted off ahead, so we followed.

The whole ski area was unfortunately packed with people by the time we arrived, and despite some hard searching, during a gentle walk downhill, most of the high altitude birds were noticeable by their (understandable) absence. That said, between 700 and 1000 choughs, both red-billed and Alpine, were constantly present, feeding or wheeling around nearby, with over 110 wild-type rock doves (and only three obvious feral pigeons) making an interesting addition on some partially shallowly flooded and snow-covered meadows. The choughs also rose like an animated wisp of smoke to noisily mob a circling long-legged buzzard, providing a superb sight!

At least a few small birds were finally found, including black redstarts and the local race of mistle thrush, plus several wintering European common chaffinches amongst a few of their resident African cousins. The differences in both calls were surprisingly obvious. A small colony of hoop-petticoat narcissus (of some sort), brightened up the steep banks of one stream and it was worth a stomp through the snow to get some pictures!

We sat down for lunch shortly before 1300, noting a sudden increase in cloud, and by the time we'd finished it was coats back on and some low thick cloud was being pushed through on a chill breeze. A short walk into the village above proved fruitless (though a variety of small birds had been moving around while we were eating!), but a flock of a dozen chunky finches shot past and pitched into a tall poplar. The scope went up as cloud obscured them, then as it cleared moments later, they'd gone! Pah! We went off closer to check, but finally admitted defeat and got back on the bus again, to start back down. We didn't get far mind, since thanks to a tip by Boubker, we stopped again by a small lake and took a short walk over to a quiet valley with plenty of snow. And there, albeit at long distance on the slopes opposite, a small flock of African crimson-winged finches was feeding on a small patch of exposed grass and rocks. A few of the group got views before they suddenly spooked and rose high up, plenty of other small birds swirling around in the vicinity as well, as a fine peregrine cruised through and past. Looking back to the finches, one or two were noted landing very distantly on some electricity pylons alongside some rock sparrows, but it was hard to see more than the basic ID features even in the scope. And it was only a lucky few who could make out the black face and throat markings on some even more distant Atlas horned larks on a different path of grass, too, even though we all tried hard.

Cold set in a little, so when the cloud suddenly thickened just as we got back to the vehicle, and had clearly been perfect timing to leave, and it even rained a bit on the way down to our new hotel. We checked in, had a mint tea, and then went off again down a local track in milder and somewhat oppressive conditions

under a dense layer of cloud. Indeed, hardly a bird was to be seen, but persisting, we at least all heard common bulbul, African common chaffinch, Sardinian warbler and great tit, with the big prize, and bird of the day, a superb pair of Levaillant's woodpeckers which sat silently in a tall eucalyptus (!) for a couple of minutes, giving excellent views.

Weather: Cooler, some low, thick cloud in the afternoon with a little rain.

Day 3: Boumalne Dades via Tizi n'Tichka Pass, Amerzgane & Ouarzazate Sunday 11 March 2018

The long transfer today took us through a broad suite of habitats and landscapes and also gave us a few fine sightings of birds and other wildlife. A couple of southern grey shrikes on wires and a single Maghreb magpie seen by Toni were noted while on the move, though our first stops in forested habitats were not particularly good at first. Heavy logging along the road to the Tizi n'Tichka Pass, in preparation for the much bigger future road, had disturbed a lot of habitat and sites, though patience turned out to be a real virtue. A male northern goshawk displayed as it circled repeatedly around high over one site, with a couple of Eurasian sparrowhawks passing much lower underneath for comparison.

After a slight scramble to access another site, a longer walk turned up trumps on several occasions. Two stunning male Moussiers redstarts chased through the bushes countless times, in the presence of a lone female, their bold pattern dazzling in the bright sunlight. A hidden hawfinch 'sang' from the depths of a juniper, but flew out and past us, its white wing and tail patches flashing as it went. A scratching song emanating from low scrub finally turned into a lovely male Tristram's warbler, which eventually crept up through a prominent bush to sing from the top and give decent views, despite heat haze. Some odd calls on our return then revealed a small flock of ring ouzels in some taller junipers, with several males coming out and sitting in the sun to show off their white chest blazes! With the calls or songs of rock and cirl buntings, firecrest and Eurasian wren to boot, it was a fascinating cross-section of the local birds.

A late lunch turned into a very late one as we were last in line to be served. The food was good (as usual), but an increasingly strong and cool wind bearing down from the mountains helped move us along at the end. This made our last stop a little tricky, in a rocky valley in the high stone desert, but several pairs of black wheatears, some close crested larks and a superb male spectacled warbler, that thankfully stayed low and allowed a close approach in the windy conditions and particularly delighted those wanting a few pictures. The rest of the journey was slow given the abundant evening traffic, but passing the movie studios of Ouarzazate and then going through 'Rose Valley' just emphasised how diverse Morocco is. The stunning red landscapes as the sun dipped and then set were a treat too, and it was no surprise that our hotel was packed out, given the luxurious feel and huge rooms we gladly decanted into on arrival after dark!

Weather: An increasingly strong and cool wind in the afternoon.

Day 4: Tagdilt Track & Dades Gorge

Monday 12 March 2018

Waking up to look out over the vast hamada (stony desert) adjacent to Boumalne Dades in the early morning sunshine was a treat, and set the scene for the morning. Working our way out along local roads, we stopped 'in the middle of nowhere' and went for a walk across the very gently undulating plain. Again, patience paid off, with a superb pair of red-rumped wheatears in the bottom of a shallow gully, and just 50 metres further along an equally impressive pair of desert wheatears. Indeed, when the former moved in front of us and met the latter, a clash broke out, with the females in particular posturing to one another and trying to show who was really boss!

A small flocks of much larger birds further on rose and then moved round a little corner. We continued, eventually seeing several black-bellied sandgrouse in flight, and a different flock of four, trundling through the bushes on the sandy bed of the wadi. The other passing birds were cream-coloured coursers, their distinctive black underwings showing so well, though we saw a much larger group of these stunning birds on a different patch of sandy desert later. Indeed, they weren't alone, with a sizeable flock of quaint thick-billed larks working their way discretely between the scattered shrubs too nearby, giving us wonderful views! Was it the passing flock of almost 100 migrating black kites which went over, or a Eurasian

sparrowhawk which had dashed into some nearby trees, or even perhaps an unseen passing falcon of some sort, which suddenly spooked them and sent them fleeing? We'll never know, but we'd had great observations.

Other birds were rather thinner on the ground than hoped, and with the wind dropping to nothing and the temperature rocketing under an increasingly abrasive sun, it seemed like harder work than usual. More crested and some fine greater short-toed larks kept us busy, along with yet more scattered red-rumped and especially desert wheatears, a Southern grey shrike sat high in a small olive to give us our first proper views, and a couple of lovely Temminck's larks put in their first appearance. Not bad for seemingly empty desert!

We finally called it quits and took a short-cut right across the stony plain, barely seeing a bird en route, but had time for a quick shop and bank visit on our way through town before going off of lunch in the lower Dades Gorge. Very few birds were present, though the balcony overlooking the very lush valley bottom with its abundant white poplars, almonds and numerous tiny irrigated green fields was a welcome relief from the harshness of the adjacent Hamada. A few Eurasian crag and European house martins feeding here were noted by some of the group, while others sheltered from the sun indoors while waiting for food.

The impressive narrow canyon, complete with rushing, brown, silt-laden river in the bottom thanks to the continuing snowmelt, was visited higher up afterwards, and while we marvelled at the towering rock walls, just a few rock doves and a couple of crag martins were slim pickings.

After a very welcome short break back at the hotel, we were off again, this time in the rapidly cooling late afternoon, and as the sun dropped, we made a special drive then walked to a small wadi. A superb, albeit distant, adult lanner was hunting some of the migrant vagrant emperor dragonflies which had suddenly appeared over the desert, then four gorgeous Temminck's lark chased around on the ground just beside the bus, with the low light behind us setting off their smart head patterns to perfection. The walk saw a number of small birds flitting along the edges of the channel, but when we crossed to look down into it, there, just below us, and as hoped, was a stunning male Mourning wheatear. With a dapper white-crowned wheatear having been spotted just moments before by some, this was our fifth wheatear species of the day. The icing on the cake was to also see the female in close attendance, as they slowly but surely worked their way down the gully before suddenly turning back and dashing past after the sun had gone down. What a treat! We still added yet another bird, with a couple of very mobile desert larks putting on something of a show, rounding off a superb late afternoon stroll.

Weather: Sunny start with the temperature rising under an increasingly abrasive sun.

Day 5: Via Todhra Gorge, Goulmima & Errachidia to near Merzouga

Tuesday 13 March 2018

The high altitude deserts we traversed today were certainly surprising to most, not least given the impressive number of intricate variations they exhibited as we headed further east and down to the very edge of the Sahara. Black pebble desert, hard mud desert, absolutely bare desert, densely scrub or tuft grass desert, etc., etc.! The low crags and mountains that reared up on both sides as we went remained fiercely harsh and unwelcoming to the outside observer, yet somehow supported a scattering of nomadic shepherds eking out a living throughout.

We started though by visiting the towering Todhra Gorge. With cold clear permanent water running through it and down into the valley below, it was no surprise to learn that some 80,000 people carve out a living here, either from agriculture or tourism. Stopping just before the narrowest part of the canyon, the birdlife was impressive, with European serins, a laughing dove, large numbers of rock doves, singing Cetti's warbler and Eurasian wren hidden by the river, and a Eurasian blackcap amongst others. Territorial turmoil was underway amongst the local grey wagtails, with five or six in squabbles in the sunlit entrance. Just upstream in the much cooler conditions in the shade, very few birds were evident, though abundant small fish in the river provided a curious distraction.

The walk up was lovely, a meadow pipit on a shady shingle bank catching our eye and flitting Eurasian crag martins overhead and a couple of willow warblers in bushes of note. The local Saharan frogs in some calmer water started calling for a short while to our delight. Way overhead an adult Bonelli's eagle sped round a corner above a couple of intrepid rock climbers, though at least the Barbary ground squirrels in a couple of little colonies gave us far more protracted views!

We moved off east again, taking an early lunch in an extensive area of date palm grove and afterwards included a short walk, where we found a couple of delightful North African toads in a small damp irrigation channel.

However, the biggest surprise of the day was when we stopped at a small sparsely vegetated shallow wadi in the middle of the desert and went for a short walk. To our delight, some cloud passed over, greatly diffusing the sun and keeping the temperature very comfortable. Larks started appearing in quantity almost immediately, rising up at each step before skittering off over the bushes and then suddenly dropping down again. Mostly greater short-toed, several crested and a couple of lesser short-toed were eventually teased out, but almost immediately, two other birds caught our attention. First, a couple of fulvous babblers whirred off before disappearing under a bare-trunked bush, and a couple of very furtive scrub warblers whizzed off between the little bushes, their tails cocked and waving as they bounced across the sand before diving into cover! Following the latter we finally got good views, with the former in addition as we returned, plus, as a bonus, both a few stunning thick-billed larks and a fantastic 'squeaky see-saw' bar-tailed lark to round off. OK, so we didn't ignore the desert or Northern wheatears either, but they were somewhat outshone on this walk.

Despite the long distance, the rest of the journey was made with little interruption, and we arrived at our desert hotel in good time to smarten up before dinner.

Weather: Warm with some cloud.

Day 6: Erg Chebbi dunes & surroundings

Wednesday 14 March 2018

Our desert day dawned clear and cool. It soon warmed up, but an afternoon breeze and thin cloud meant it was only very warm, rather than truly hot. Excellent for birding! After an early breakfast and 0700 exit we were 'owed' a few nice things, and sure enough, bumped into the first of several stunning greater hoopoe larks quite quickly. With a couple of cream-coloured coursers and three Temminck's larks to boot, this was great and we spent some time watching them, including the wonderful short climb and then plummet to the ground of the hoopoe lark as it sang!

Another stop for a small warbler flitting started a debate about raven versus wheatear on a dune, highlighting the scale / perspective problem, and delayed us, and we needed to get on. On arrival at our next spot, we saw a large flock of sandgrouse take off and disappear as we arrived, which was somewhat disappointing. However, we waited for almost an hour, and in the end we were treated to excellent views of plenty of crowned sandgrouse both sitting out on the desert before they finally shuffled in over the pebbles to a tiny strip of water draining out over the desert from a watering hole, before then finally speeding off in a flurry of wings. And it was still only just after 0900!

Next, we headed down towards a few nomad camps close to the base of the dunes. Indeed, after failing completely at one spot where 13 months ago I'd been successful, we pushed on and on to spot where our guide, who leads treks over the dunes on occasions too, had seen what I was searching for. We finally got out in a rather more bushy area than I was expecting, where several western subalpine warblers, western black-eared wheatears and a couple of woodchat shrikes were present, these all being migrants which had dropped in after crossing the Sahara. The first of a couple of male desert sparrows then whizzed over calling in flight and two were subsequently seen perched on tall bush tops, but distantly. A short snatch of song also attracted my attention and we quickly headed off on foot, soon finding, to our delight, a pair of African desert warblers, clearly attending a nest in a small thorn bush. The male came in repeatedly, singing prominently during his excursions while out and giving excellent views. Wow! A couple of dapper southern

grey shrikes and a passing (and calling) tree pipit were good additions, as was a booted eagle circling overhead.

We continued our desert sparrow search, seeing another perched well, then finally three more males near a desert camp, rounding off a remarkable morning's haul.

After a drive in one of the jeeps, we ended up at the Cafe Nora for a drinks and early lunch, including a fine 'Berber pizza', before returning sedately to the hotel in the microbus for a few hours R&R. And well received it was too!

The end of the day was taken up with a stroll in the local wadi, and while birds were almost absent, apart from a common chiffchaff beside the hotel entrance, and woodchat shrike and spectacled warbler in the wadi's bushes, a fascinating variety of desert flowers and even a few insects in the form of diminutive greenish black-tip butterfly, a small group of spurge hawkmoth caterpillars and a couple of beetles, including a beautiful (and fast!), large, white-marked, black predatory ground beetle kept us occupied. The abundance of tracks in the sand shows that much more life is present, but presumably, so much is nocturnal.

Weather: Clear and cool to start, becoming very warm with a cool, afternoon breeze and some cloud.

Day 7: Rissani & west to Draa Valley

Thursday 15 March 2018

We left again at 0800, driving through Erfoud and on to Rissani as we started our drive west. An unplanned stop was made in the date palm groves as a pale lark flew across and landed on a soil heap. Maghreb lark! Indeed, at least two pairs were seen and one behaved beautifully for the photographers! Numerous common bulbuls were also coming down to a little patch of water spilling over from an irrigation system, that was until a Eurasian sparrowhawk sent them fleeing into hiding, the latter only being seen as a blue flash by Toni and myself as it sneaked off afterwards.

Another drive ensued, though before we reached a large rock outcrop, a couple of birds on some bare rocks caught my eye. Trumpeter finches! By the time we'd all managed to get out though, they had 'gone to ground' in a flowery, weedy field, but alongside a number of migrants. A flock of greater short-toed larks were the most obvious, but we enjoyed excellent views of these, four white wagtails, a fine woodchat shrike, a brief spectacled warbler and three tawny pipits as well. There were more trumpeter finches too, and we saw a couple of small flocks in flight, plus several pairs perched on rocks, and the ground, or feeding on the fresh flower buds and seeds. The rock outcrop was good too, and despite one face being devoid of birds, another sheltered a stunning Pharaoh eagle-owl, which merely looked towards us once, and as we kept a discrete distance, then went back to 'sleep'.

A few brown-necked ravens were present here and at a few other spots along the road as we continued, and we were even lucky enough to see some of the reintroduced addax antelopes in a vast enclosure where they'd been reintroduced, since despite the heat haze, they were feeding within sight of the road. White-crowned wheatears were scattered along the roadsides throughout the day, while another large bird noted by David was a stunning Bonelli's eagle. One of a magnificent pair of adults we enjoyed here for some time as they slowly drifted, gaining height in the afternoon wind before finally dropping over the horizon.

The rains from around ten days before had clearly had an impact and we noted more and more greenery and flowers as we progressed. Well, green in desert terms at least! A few were looked at closely just after lunch, while the overall changes, some of them remarkable, in the landscapes as we progressed were simply fantastic to enjoy on the journey. The impressive Draa Valley was enjoyed during the last part of the journey, and we got into our hotel shortly after 1700 for a bit of a break before dinner. Indeed, a chance observation from the reception window for some was of an Algerian hedgehog walking along the bank of the adjacent field in broad daylight.

Weather: Hot.

Day 8: Agdz, Taroudant

Friday 16 March 2018

Today dawned clear, bright and with a powerful cold westerly wind. Indeed, this persisted throughout the day and so we were fortunate in having organised something of a different experience on a mainly travel day. We stopped first at a cooperative project for Berber women who hand-make carpets. Here we learned about the differences between the sheep's and goat's wool and camel hair and how they could be dyed or not (and what with, in the case of sheep's wool). We were then also introduced to the different production methods, with one or double-sided carpets and also 3-D patterns (or not). With the largest taking over ten months to make, it was also remarkable to consider how much work had gone into producing the literally hundreds present, many of which we subsequently saw being displayed before us...! With the cold conditions persisting (and several of us mistakenly in shorts after the warmth of the previous days), we moved quickly on to a tiny cafe, where in addition to the hot local tea, many of us bought saffron, a speciality of the area. It was actually even colder here, high in the Anti-Atlas though, with vapour clearly visible as we breathed out!

With a hot lunch taken indoors not far ahead, and slightly warmer conditions as we started to drop down a little, it was looking much better as we entered the famous argan tree forest. A stroll up a hillside revealed almost no birds at all in the still chilly wind, but a couple of small scorpions under rocks, plus a young Moorish gecko kept us busy searching. We soon reached a riverine area in plenty of time, and took a short look over an open stretch of water. Two glossy ibis close to a few great cormorants were a good start, with several common moorhens to also add to our lists, plus Sardinian and western subalpine warblers in nearby scrub and a fine male African common chaffinch to boot. A short walk down a much more sheltered valley nearby really turned up trumps, with a distant short-toed snake eagle far outshone by a close male rock bunting, two pairs of Barbary partridge, and even a surprise with three common crossbills perched in an argan tree! Large numbers of a small white lily flower just poking up proud of the closely cropped turf were a delight too. Another stop for a couple of roadside Maghreb magpies also gave us the bonus of a few Eurasian stone-curlews roosting in the same young orchard.

We certainly couldn't count the peacocks parading round the grounds of the impressively decorated fortified palace we reached shortly afterwards, but most of us did hear the pair of Maghreb tawny owls present in the heavily vegetated gardens outside as we went to dinner.

Weather: Clear and bright with a powerful cold westerly wind.

Day 9: Tayouit Oasis, Taroudant & Agadir via Oued Massa

Saturday 17 March 2018

A much milder and also windless start today was a very welcome change, and we took full advantage, stopping en route through argan forest for a perched long-legged buzzard, with great tit, Thekla's larks and a white-throated form of black-eared wheatear also enjoyed as a result.

A lovely walk through the Tayouit oasis later revealed a lovely range of wildlife, from gorgeous Moussier's redstarts, a fly-by Eurasian hoopoe and 'trilling' circl bunting, plus an elusive migrant common nightingale for some, through several gorgeous Spanish festoon and non-stop Moroccan orange-tip butterflies, and an abundance of spring weeds in the little fields, including a large pink convolvulus, made it a good all-round experience.

Lunch was taken in the ancient walled town of Taroudant, while the later afternoon was enjoyed down by the coast near the Oued Massa reserve. Having good information certainly helps, and almost as we stepped out of the bus, one of our principal targets flew past at close range, a gorgeous black-crowned tchagra. Indeed, it reappeared very close beside us just after everyone was finally mustered and gave excellent views. With male common stonechat and Moussier's redstarts perched atop adjacent sticks, a remarkable white immature Bonelli's eagle drifting back and forth overhead at length, a flock of Spanish sparrows in the bushes nearby below a bouncing, and Zitting cisticola, plus a white-necked maroccanus great

cormorant flying by, it was non-stop! Even when back on the bus we had to wait until all could enjoy a super pair of cirl buntings feeding in a tiny nearby field, from our bus seats.

And it just continued to get better! Following more instructions we continued on, heading towards the coast across sand-covered cliff tops, when some large birds feeding to one side caught my eye: northern bald ibis. Not just a couple, nor even ten, but at least 59 of these remarkably prehistoric-looking creatures flew and walked their way across the grass, probing and feeding as they went. Watching two of them catch and finally eat, after some manipulation, some quite large very pale silvery skinks, and another dismembering a large black beetle, was really something. With a flock of cream-coloured coursers scurrying across the slopes behind them and a southern grey shrike on the wires behind us, it was a terrific spot.

We finally pulled ourselves away and continued on, finding a pair of gorgeous little owls en route and, while we were watching these, a pair of Eurasian stone-curlews flew past, pitched down and then started calling!. Wonderful! We then stopped for a hovering black-winged kite, and knew our fortunes were really in; after enjoying this, plus the abundant carpet of flowers at our feet, including some exquisite small iris, instead of going to the reserve 'proper', we headed instead for the hotel in order to get back in time for at least some dinner!

Weather: A much milder and windless start.

Day 10: Oued Souss to Tamri

Sunday 18 March 2018

A slightly later breakfast today was welcomed by most, and indeed entertainment was provided free, at least for us, by the Maghreb magpies and yellow-legged gulls trying to steal food from the omelette and crepe cooks on the patio! The subsequent walk at Oued Souss under a thin layer of cloud and almost still conditions was accompanied by an abundance of birds, especially along the river and on its tidal mudflats. By far the most abundant were the large flocks of gulls, both up and downstream from our starting position, and we additionally enjoyed a wide variety of waders from the beginning, plus a superb osprey sat on a pylon opposite. Common and spotted redshanks, common sandpiper and black-winged stilts fed along the water's edge, several grey plovers stood tall amongst a large flock of common ringed plovers, Eurasian curlews called and stalked the flats, good numbers of smart Eurasian oystercatchers provided a bit more colour as they probed for food and our first ducks appeared too. At least three male and a female mallard were outshone by a fine group of a dozen common shelducks. Plenty of Eurasian spoonbills and two small groups of immature young greater flamingos added further variety, along with a small group of great cormorants, but it was the large mixed flock of resting gulls and terns that were present in greatest number and so required more time to dwell on. Amongst the smaller species were plentiful black-headed, a smattering of immature Mediterranean and several immature and smart adult slender-billed gulls. Several fine Audouin's gulls graced the impressive flock of lesser black-backed on the sandbank, with a few hulking yellow-legged for good measure. All of the fine group of roosting terns were Sandwich, though two 'kewicking' gull-billed patrolled the river periodically. A Moroccan (white) wagtail flew past briefly at one point, while numerous Sardinian warblers appeared in the saltbush scrub, and single male blackcap and a Western subalpine warbler appeared briefly too, with a backdrop of seemingly countless common bulbul calls.

After picking up provisions, including water, we transferred up the coast and took our picnic at Cap Rhir. At first, northern gannets were passing by the point almost constantly in small numbers, while the air around was filled with Thekla's lark song. The abundance of flowers was also enjoyed, at all levels, including a couple of euphorbia species, one cactus-like and spiny, and the other a small bush, just like on the Canary Islands, plus sea heath bushes starting to flower and a few iris and beautiful wild 'marigolds'.

Finishing nearby to the north at the Tamri river mouth, with its abundant gulls and terns, was a fine end, especially when we noticed a few ruddy shelduck, including a fine pair that came and landed close, and another flock of Northern bald ibis on the opposite slopes, this time numbering at least 37. Lots more Audouin's gulls were present here and plenty of fringe-toed lizards in the saltmarsh gave great views.

Even back at hotel, as the afternoon onshore wind picked up strongly again, the tameness of the Maghreb magpies in the garden meant they again took centre stage for those venturing out for a walk.

Weather: A thin layer of cloud and almost still conditions in the morning, followed by strong onshore winds in the afternoon.

Day 11: Oued Souss, transfer to Marrakech & fly home

Monday 19 March 2018

We ended our tour with another pre-breakfast visit to Oued Souss on the final morning, though visited a different area to the day before. The dead still, misty and cool conditions were perfect, and while a heavy dew had formed, soaking some birds, perhaps this helped us to see them as they sat out to dry off. A Barbary partridge 'sang' from up a (not pear) tree, and two different pairs of great spotted cuckoos sat hunched in tamarisks, clearly drying off. Some waders feeding in a saltmarsh channel were mainly ruff, while two little ringed plover flew over calling and a green sandpiper flew past in the opposite direction to be added to the burgeoning list. A zitting cisticola sat out for a few seconds, a couple of common quail 'blipped' from the little wheat fields (including one very close), stone-curlews wailed from between the bushes somewhere, while we finished by finding a few brown-throated martins quietly skimming the river. What a finale!

Back at the hotel with just an hour before planned departure time, we managed to pack, shower, breakfast and/or check out by 1000. The three hour drive back along the motorway to Marrakech went like a breeze, the vast swathes of countryside still turning green with grass, and now with yellow (varying from gold to pale lemon) and white (plus a touch of pink in patches) after the heavy rains of Storm Emma which had 'hit' just before had arrived, were a wonderful sight. A few birds were still noted from the minibus as we progressed, with white storks, a couple of booted eagles and a Eurasian hoopoe good, but a pair of red-rumped swallows and a small flock of little swifts on the outskirts of Marrakech at some traffic lights, better still.

We ended with a superb tagine lunch on a rooftop in Marrakech, running over the numerous memories of the tour (some of which seemed like a long time ago), and thanked our local guide and driver – Boubker and Hussein - presenting them with a customary tip. They had both worked hard.

I sincerely hope that you all enjoyed the tour as much as I did! Not only for the birds and other wildlife encountered, but the cultural and historical attributes, culinary aspects and the remarkable landscapes, too! I look forward to seeing you again on another The Travelling Naturalist tour soon!

Weather: Dead still, misty and cool conditions.

Checklist

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	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11
	Birds	Aves											
1	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>										12+	
2	Ruddy shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>										4	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>										6	
4	Barbary partridge	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>								4		4	H
5	Common quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>									(H)	3+ H	2
6	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>										20	
7	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
8	Northern bald ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>									59	37	
9	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>								2			
10	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>									1	20+	
11	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			21+	15+	30+			1	✓		
12	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	1							✓	
13	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>										✓	
14	Northern gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>										40+	
15	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					(1)			5		7	
16	White-breasted cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax maroccanus</i>									1		

17	Western osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>										1	
18	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>									1	1	
19	Short-toed snake eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			1 H					1			
20	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			1 H	1**	1	1*		1			2
21	Bonelli's eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>					1			2	1	1	
22	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		3, (1)		1	1		1				
23	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		1									
24	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>									3	2	2
25	Montagu's harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			1 F								
26	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			20+	95							
27	Long-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>		2	2	1							
28	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>								6			
29	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>											5
30	Eurasian stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicanus</i>								3	2	H	H
31	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>										30+	
32	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				1						✓	
33	Pied avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>										4	
34	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>										6+, H	
35	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>										100+	
36	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>										2	2
37	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>										10	
38	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>										15+	✓
39	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>										3+	

40	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>										1	
41	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>										3+	
42	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>								2		2	
43	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>										2, H	
44	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>										1	1
45	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>										42+	
46	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>										2	
47	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>										7+	
48	Cream-colored courser	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>			3	15+		3			12		
49	Slender-billed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>										6+	
50	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>										100s	
51	Audouin's gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>										66+	
52	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>										6+	
53	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>										✓	
54	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>									✓	✓	
55	Gull-billed tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>									3	5	
56	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>										c.200	
57	Spotted sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles senegallus</i>						3					
58	Black-bellied sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				8+							
59	Crowned sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles coronatus</i>				H		30+					
60	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		124		15+	✓					✓	
61	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2		15+		✓				✓	✓	

62	European turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				(3)					1	1	
63	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	4+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Laughing dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>			(1)	(1)	2				✓	H, 1	
65	Great spotted cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>										(4+)	4
66	Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>										H	
67	Pharaoh eagle-owl	<i>Bubo ascalaphus</i>							1				
68	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>								H			
69	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>									2		
70	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		2	12	✓						10+	
71	Pallid swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	25+		10+							3+	
72	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	5+		2								✓
73	European bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>										25	
74	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			1		1				1		1
75	Levaillant's woodpecker	<i>Picus vaillantii</i>		2									
76	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3		1		1	✓	4	✓	✓	
77	Lanner falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>			1	1	2						
78	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1									
79	Barbary falcon	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>			1								
80	Black-crowned tchagra	<i>Tchagra senegalus</i>									1		
81	Southern grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			2+	2+		3		1+			
82	Woodchat shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>			2+			4+	✓			2+	
83	Maghreb magpie	<i>Pica mauritanica</i>	1	✓	4+		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
84	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		250+	10								

85	Alpine chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>		450+	10								
86	Brown-necked raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>						(2)	✓	✓			
87	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2	7							
88	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		H, 2									
89	African blue tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae</i>		✓			H						
90	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1						H	1	H, 1	
91	Greater hoopoe-lark	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>						5+			5+		
92	Thick-billed lark	<i>Ramphocoris clotbey</i>				23	4						
93	Desert lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	3			3							
94	Bar-tailed lark	<i>Ammomanes cinctura</i>				3+	2	3					
95	Thekla's lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			✓			✓				✓	
96	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		(1)	3	6+	6+		✓		✓		
97	Maghreb lark	<i>Galerida macrorhyncha</i>							4+			✓	
98	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>		6+									
99	Temminck's lark	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>				10+		3					
100	Greater short-toed lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>				6+	50+		15		✓		
101	Lesser short-toed lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>					2						
102	Common bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>	2+	3+					✓				
103	Brown-throated martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>										6+	✓
104	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		9		✓		2		3+	✓		
105	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				2							
106	Rock martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>				1							
107	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	(1)			25+							
108	Red-rumped swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	(2)	4	2			2					2

109	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				H				H	H	H	
110	Streaked scrub warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>					2						
111	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					2+			1	1+		
112	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		(H)			1, (2)						
113	Iberian chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>										1	
114	Zitting cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>									2+	2+	1
115	Fulvous babbler	<i>Turdoides fulva</i>				1	2						
116	Eurasian blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		(H)		1 F	1		1			1 M	
117	Western Orphean warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>									H		
118	African desert warbler	<i>Sylvia deserti</i>						2					
119	Tristram's warbler	<i>Sylvia deserticola</i>		1 M									
120	Spectacled warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>			1		1		1				
121	Western subalpine warbler	<i>Sylvia c. inornata</i>					5	10+		1		2	
122	Sardinian warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1, H		1 M					✓	✓	
123	Common firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		2 H									
124	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					H						
125	Spotless starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	(6+)	H		5+					✓	✓	
126	Ring ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		4 M, 1 F									
127	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		1+	✓				✓	✓	
128	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		8+									
129	Common nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>									1	H	
130	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		5, 1 F			(H)						
131	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus</i>											

		<i>phoenicurus</i>											
132	Moussier's redstart	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>								(1)	6		
133	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	2 M			1					1		
134	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		(1)							✓		
135	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				1 M	1 M						
136	Desert wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>				25	2			(2)			
137	Black-eared wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>				(2)		4					
138	Red-rumped wheatear	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>				15							
139	Black wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>		(1)	6	(2)						1	
140	White-crowned wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>				4		✓		20		2+	
141	Mourning wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>				2							
142	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
143	Spanish sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>									25+		
144	Desert sparrow	<i>Passer simplex</i>		60				7+					
145	Rock sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>											
146	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>									1	1	
147	Iberian yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>										1 M	
148	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1			10+			1			
149	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		(1)		(1)			4	(1)		H	
150	Moroccan Wagtail	<i>Motacilla a. subpersonata</i>					1		1			1	
151	Tawny pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>							3				
152	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				H	2					7+	
153	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>						1					

154	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1, H		✓				✓		
155	African Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs africana</i>		✓						✓		
156	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		1								
157	African crimson-winged finch	<i>Rhodopechys alienus</i>		5								
158	Trumpeter finch	<i>Bucanetes githagineus</i>					2		✓			
159	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		H	1	H	6+					8+, H
160	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		3		(H)	H				2+	
161	Red crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		(1+), H								
162	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>								4+	✓	
163	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1			4+		2	H		H
164	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				H				6+		
165	Rock bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		H, (H)								
166	Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		(H)							1 M, 2	
167	House bunting	<i>Emberiza sahari</i>	1	5+			✓			✓		

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11
	MAMMALS												
1	Barbary ground squirrel	<i>Atlantoxerus getulus</i>		(1)			20+						
2	Fat sand rat	<i>Psammomys obesus</i>				2+							
3	North African hedgehog	<i>Atelerix algirus</i>											
4	Addax gazelle	<i>Addax nasomaculatus</i>		7						1			
	AMPHIBIANS												
1	African green toad	<i>Bufo boulengeri</i>					2						
2	Saharan frog	<i>Pelophylax saharicus</i>					8+				H		
	REPTILES												
1	Spur-thighed tortoise	<i>Testudo graeca</i>		1									
2	Spanish terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>								✓	✓		
3	Bibron's agama	<i>Agama impalearis</i>										1	
4	Moorish wall gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>			1								
5	Fringe-fingered lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus erythrurus</i>										✓	
6	Leopard fringe-fingered lizard?	<i>Acanthodactylus pardalis</i>										✓	
	BUTTERFLIES												
1	Spanish festoon	<i>Zerynthia rumina africana</i>		1							✓		
2	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		1	✓	✓			2+		✓		
4	Greenish black-tip	<i>Euchloe charlonia</i>			✓	1	2				✓		
5	Moroccan orange-tip	<i>Anthocharis belia</i>									✓		

6	Bath white	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>				3+	1		1	1	✓		
7	Clouded yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>							(1)				1
8	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx c. cleopatra</i>		1									
9	Black-eyed blue	<i>Glaucopsyche melanops algerica</i>									1 M		
10	Blue sp.	<i>Lycaenidae</i>											
	MOTHS												
1	Spurge hawkmoth	<i>Hyles euphorbiae</i>					6 Caterpillars						
2	Hummingbird hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>									1		
	DRAGONFLIES												
1	Vagrant emperor	<i>Anax ephippiger</i>				✓	✓		✓				
	OTHER INSECTS												
1	White-edged black ground beetle	<i>Carabidae sp.</i>					4+						

Most sites are represented by abbreviations: H = Heard; Records within () are JLM only, but only for species recorded at least once by a member of the party.

* Dark Morph, ** Pale Morph; M - Male; F - Female.