

Naturalist Journeys Birding Tour in Morocco

Stone and Sand Desert and Coastal area Oued Massa

(Organized by: Spanish Nature and Tarifa Birding)

Guide: Victor Porras

Dates: 9th to 23rd of April 2023



Day 1 – April 9



Once all the tour members were comfortably settled into our accommodation in Marrakech, we had a good chance to get to know each other doing what we most like: birding! The Menara gardens in the historic centre is our chosen setting to discover our first Maghreb Magpies, Little and Pallid Swifts, and Booted Eagles.

Day 2 – April 10

After checking out, we have a fantastic guided tour around the main highlights of Marrakech's old quarter. The Koutoubia Mosque would offer us the most amazing Pallid and Little Swift collection, as well as several Booted Eagles and White Storks.

A hearty lunch in the heart of Marrakech, we departed on our minibus drive us to the High Atlas, where we settle down in our new accommodation and start taking in the mountain sights. Common Cuckoos obliged as they constantly perched around the hotel garden. Spotted Flycatchers, Western Olivaceous and Bonelli's Warblers, Hawfinches, Willow Warblers, and some very active Common Bulbuls came to add to our experience.

Day 3 – April 11



The group gather for an early morning birding session around the hotel gardens, getting beautiful sightings of Atlas Crossbills, Common Cuckoos, an Atlas Pied Flycatcher as well as dozens of Little and Pallid Swifts and Red-rumped Swallows. We devoted the rest of the day to exploring the High Atlas Oukaimeden Ski Resort area with a fantastic list of birds: Red-billed and Alpine Chough, Rock Sparrow, Atlas Shore Lark, Atlas Wheatear, Moussier's Redstart, Mistle Thrush, Goshawk, Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, to name but a few..

Day 4 – April 12

A transfer day where we focus on birding along the way with plenty of surprises in the form of Turtle Doves, Woodchat and Great Grey Shrikes, our first Thekla's Larks, Corn Buntings, etc. After a coffee stop with stunning views of the High Atlas and a few very obliging African Blue and Great Tits, we enjoy a distant view of two adult Bonelli's Eagles flying together! After the Tizi n Tichka pass and the most amazing views, in company of several Booted Eagles and Choughs, we have a nice lunch and explore the high arid steppe on our way down to Ouarzazate, and get our first Trumpeter Finches, White-crowned Wheatears and marvel at the great display of hundreds of European Bee-eaters gliding over the fields.

Day 5 – April 13



We leave Ouarzazate town and immediately come up against plenty of action: A slow flow of North-bound migration with several Short-toed Eagles, Black Kites and a Montagu's Harrier keep the group well entertained as Ibrahim skilfully drove down to El Mansour reservoir's bank. A couple of hour's birding produced Tristram's Warbler, Western Subalpine Warbler, Isabel-line Warbler as well as Gull-billed and Caspian Tern, Ruddy Shelduck, White-crowned, Black-eared and Desert Wheatear. Topped off with a close sighting of Bonelli's Eagle. After a tasty lunch in the Valley of the Roses, we bird the Tagdilt track among Red-rumped, Desert and Maghreb Wheatears, Temminck's and Thekla's Lark ending at sundown with a few flitting Fat Sand Rats.

Day 6 – April 14

Early in the morning we focused on the Tagdilt track and soon got a good number of Desert, Red-rumped and one Maghreb Wheatear! A little patience was soon rewarded by a very obliging Atlas Long-legged Buzzard that kept perching very close to our bus. Then it was Black-bellied Sandgrouse's time, with over 15 individuals that put our spotting abilities to the test. Then it was Temminck's Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks and even Tawny Pipits parading alongside the vehicle, topped off with stunning view of several Greater Hoopoe Larks and Thick-billed Larks. A relaxing lunch at Riad Dades Birds and some time off at the hotel before tackling our late afternoon session close to Imiter, and what an outing it was, with the group enjoying the amazing geology of the area and a breeding Pharaoh Eagle Owl and 2 Lanner Falcons as they mobbed an Atlas Long legged Buzzard.

Day 7 – April 15



Today is a transfer day mainly, with a long and entertaining drive that takes us to the Sahara Desert. Firstly, we visit the magnificent Todra gorges, marvelling at its geology and seeing a large number of Pallid and Little Swifts, as well as Blue Rock Thrush, several Pied Flycatchers and Black Redstarts and Nightingales. An absolute immersion into a Berber women Rug Cooperative was thoroughly enjoyed by all and after a good lunch in Tinghir we drive on South, stopping here and there for Short-toed Eagles, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, the most amazing number of White-crowned Wheatear, and our first few, Brown-necked Ravens.

Day 8–April 16

Early breakfast and off we go to tackle the dunes in our 4*4 vehicles, quickly enjoying Brown-necked Ravens and Desert Larks, finally reaching a great spot for sandgrouse. Soon enough, there they were ... hundreds of Crowned Sandgrouses and a few Spotted Sandgrouses, some perfectly blended into the terrain and then showing up right next to our cars, allowing fantastic viewing and amazing pictures. A male and a female Desert Sparrow came about while we visited a Bedouin woman that lives out among the dunes and up to 6 Greater Hoopoe Larks obliged and displayed all sorts of behaviour



in front of the group. African Desert Warblers, more Desert Larks, and Wheatears as well as Several beautifully plumaged Whinchats and it was time for a tasty lunch back at our hotel. The afternoon session was to be a total highlight. An adventurous 4x4-ride, and a local Sheppard that escorted us a long way over dunes in the middle of nowhere and there is was ...yes ... it really looked like a rock ... but it then briefly opened its eyes ... an Egyptian Nightjar! Sheer satisfaction and time for a well-deserved break from the scorching heat and a great dinner over Lemon Chicken Tajin.

Day 9 – April 17

Our second day exploring the desert wonders in 4x4 vehicles, and we target the area of Rissani, make several stops with gentle walks around cultivated fields and Palm tree orchards with the most amazing diversity of birds. Soon enough we had beautiful sightings of Rufous-tailed Bushchat Robins, Maghreb Larks, Fulvous Babblers, and hundreds of Barn Swallows and House Martins coming really close to the group as we negotiated our way



around the network of water canals. A good number of Pied Flycatchers, Willow Warblers, and we move to a different orchard where the group marvelled at several Easter Olivaceous Warblers, close-range views of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters and many more. Then suddenly a Black Kite and a Booted Eagle turned the attention onto the bigger birds ... and only then a stunning Barbary Falcon came into play and wheeled around right above us for nearly one minute.

A scrumptious lunch and a fossil store visit with brilliant Moroccan hospitality that made everybody feel at home and then part of the group headed to Has-silabied's gardens. And what a place! Water available and shade in the middle of the desert.... a magnet for birds: big numbers of Willow Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Whinchat, Meadow Pipit, Rufous-tailed Buschat Rob-

in, and several Wood Warblers to name just a few!!

Day 10 – April 18

Today was mainly a travel day with a lot of driving that would bring the group from the Sahara Desert all the way to the UNESCO World Heritage Site Aït Bennhadou.



With some good birds such as Trumpeter Finch, and a Common Kestrel diving for prey right next to the car, we all marvel at the magnificent geological formations along the way.

A tasty lunch in Knob with amazing views over the Palmerie and we tackle the final stretch as we talk about the Draa Valley habitats, the Anti Atlas and stop to take in the stunning views at the viewpoint in Agdz. After a long day of driving ... the impressive Aït Bennhadou ksar looms in front of us.

Time for perhaps the most beautifully cooked dinner so far in our tour.



Day 11 – April 19

Our stay at Ksar Ljanoub has been most delightful. What a place with great staff and unforgettable food. Time for an early pre-breakfast birding session strolling down into the nearby orchards and along bluffs, water runs through irrigation canals and life is abundant. House Buntings, European Bee eaters, Thekla's Larks, Corn Buntings, several Trumpeter Finches and a Common Quail keep us all busy until we reach an area of boulders, and it is time for the Wheatears: Atlas, Northern, Desert and, of course, White-crowned are all present. A family of Barbary squirrels basked in the early morning sun and time for our breakfast. The group gather again, and we carry on visiting the amazing surroundings of Aït Benhaddou and then driving

up Ounila Valley and over Tizi n Tichka back to Marrakech. Possibly the most geologically impressive stretch of our journey so far, yielding good birds along the way: Black Kites and a most cooperative European Roller being the highlights.

Day 12 – April 20

Another transfer day will finally get us all down to the Atlantic coast in Agadir. We chose to follow the most scenic route and bird our way off the tourist track, with Argan trees all along and constant presence of Thekla's and Laughing Doves. It is just at lunch time that we get our first sights of the "big city" and see our first Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The afternoon is entirely devoted to exploring Oued Souss around its delta, with lots of new birds coming our way: Sandwich Tern, big groups of Eurasian Oystercatchers, Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, 2 Marbled Ducks, Audouin's and Med Gulls, Greater Flamingo, Zitting Cisticola. Time to check in to our new hotel and have another good dinner... nice fish on the menu!!

Day 13 – April 21

Oued Massa awaits today. A little over an hour watching life unfold in Morocco and we are out in the Souss Massa National Park, spotting Laughing Dove, Thekla's Lark, Maghreb Magpie and before parking the bus, our first Northern Bald Ibis crosses the sky with most of the group getting to see it. Soon, with plenty of gear and water, we head off for a long walk and great birds around the Massa delta. And right then, a group of 5 Northern Bald Ibises, and then several more, fly in front of us, first pics of this target bird achieved. We carry on with Moussier's Redstart, Stonechat, Linnet, Serin, Goldfinch, Greenfinch and Atlas Chaffinch moving all around us. At the official entrance to the Reserve, the park ranger greeted us and right then our first Black-crowned Tchagra shows up,



a flitting image, with everybody gathered and the spotting scope ready. A minute later, a second bird perches on top of a shrub and obliged for all to have great views!! A good stroll here would bring us Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Ruddy Shelduck, Kentish Plover, Greater Flamingo, and to top it all off, two Eurasian Thick-knees!

A special Berber lunch followed, in a beautiful garden setting with birds in every corner, and time to explore the bridges and pools further up. A fantastic chance to enjoy the Black-winged Stilt, Common and Green Sandpiper, Common Green and Common Redshank, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Eurasian Spoonbill,



Glossy Ibis and plenty of Brown-throated Martins (Plain Martins).

What a great day of birding!

Day 14 – April 22

The time has come to go back to where everything started 2 weeks ago, Marrakech. It is 8 am when the group get together after breakfast, and Ibrahim, as professionally as ever, drive our luxurious minibus to Oued Souss. More birds await! It is low tide, and the mudflats quickly reveal many surprises. Hundreds of Dunlins, Common Ringed and Black-bellied Plover keep flying up and down the river, Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Common Redshank and Common Greenshank, Pied Avocets, Eurasian Oystercatcher are abundant. Then 1000's of Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls of different subspecies scatter all across the sky, 3 Ospreys perch,

and take a morning bath in the shallow waters, 100's of Sandwich Terns and 10 Gull-billed Terns show up, 2 Marbled Ducks cooperate and swim in front of us seemingly undisturbed, a great morning session with some of the group having a glimpse of a Purple Heron and Barbary Partridge.

A comfortable drive takes us all back to the Zalagh Kasbah Hotel. Time to recall the highlights of the tour, anecdotes and final species tally over dinner.

During this trip we have a total number of 167 birds record.

