

Morocco

17–28 February 2011

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Levillant's Woodpecker

Led by Peter Lansdown, and Vaughan and Svetlana Ashby

We all know that Morocco can offer some of the very best birding in the Western Palearctic so the group met filled with anticipation as we took the flight from Gatwick. Just five hours later, there was the first new bird for most of us as a **House Bunting** sung by the tills inside a modern supermarket just outside Marrakech. We were stocking up for our 3000km journey across this wonderful country, where we would travel through sand and stony deserts, snow-capped mountain passes and rich agricultural land and past glorious beaches and dramatic lakes and rivers, each with its own very specific birds. We were to encounter nesting **Desert Sparrows** and **Plain Martins**, to have brilliant views of 12 of the possible 14 species of larks (missing out on **Wood** and **Sky Larks**!) and to see significant flocks of **White-headed** and **Marbled Ducks**, **Crowned Sandgrouse** waddling across the desert like tortoises and a mountain-top **Levillant's Woodpecker** calling within 10 metres of us as **Crimson-winged Finches** and **Alpine Accentors** flew around. There were the African specialties too, with nest building **Red-knobbed Coots**, **Black-crowned Tchagra** and **Double-spurred Francolin** in trees not 15 metres away and, the best of all, three **Marsh Owls** flying around in daylight with one nonchalantly perched up asking all of us to just look and admire this very special bird. Add in the **Bald Ibis** and other treats like **Tristram's Warbler**, **Moussier's Redstart** and seven species of wheatear and you can begin to see why our anticipation was well founded.

Day 1: We drove north from Marrakech, by-passing Casablanca and heading for the coast at Temara Plage, and picking up a good selection of birds on the journey including **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, **Lesser Kestrels**, **Hen Harrier**, **Southern Grey Shrikes**, **Spanish Sparrows** and our first larks with a flock of over 200 **Calandra Larks** obligingly by the roadside. It was a long drive but, after a good meal and sleep.

Day 2: We were out at dawn into the Zaers – an area of maquis and cork-oak forest and our first introduction to a host of new species. **African Blue Tits**, **Sardinian Warblers** and **Serins** abounded; we had both **Thekla** and **Crested Larks** giving good comparative views and pairs of **Barbary Partridges** both flew and ran from us. Frustratingly we kept on hearing the calls of our primary target: **Double-spurred Francolin**. This African species is much less shy south of the Sahara but we were in a hunting reserve and they clearly knew to keep their heads down, but, with persistence and some patience, a calling bird moved closer and closer and we had superb views of it calling in a tree. This Moroccan speciality was the first of many birds we knew were going to be difficult to see; many birders had come here and heard but not seen it, so it was with a real sense of satisfaction that we headed north to the famous Lac de Sidi Bourhaba. After seeing our first handsome **Eurasian (Moroccan) Magpies**, surely a species-split in the offing, we scanned the lake and found 23 **White-headed Ducks** along with **Ferruginous Ducks** and many **Red-knobbed Coots**. The **White-headed Ducks** seem to be a recent returnee to Morocco, which is very encouraging news for this protected

site where breeding must surely be a possibility. **Western Marsh Harriers** quartered the reedy fringes; our first **Audouin's Gull** sat on the water and a pair of **Long-legged Buzzards** wheeled overhead. Back on the road we made the longish drive to Merdja Zerga. It was motorway for the most part and then there were many twists and turns through villages and along muddy tracks to reach the banks of the canal overlooking this world-famous reserve. We had seen our first **Black-shouldered Kite** on the journey but it was the owl that we had come for. The very helpful warden pointed us in the direction of a juncus marsh and, still in broad daylight, first one, then two and then a third **Marsh Owl** flew around our heads with the final bird perching up for us all to admire. The warden later told us that around 25 owls were in the area which is most encouraging for this remnant African species; if they were ever to go they would never return as the next population is thousands of miles away! Clearly there is people-pressure but the locals seemed to realise the importance of this wonderful bird and along with the warden they were keeping a protective eye. There was a good scattering of waders and gulls around, including **Slender-billed Gull**, but we had little more time as darkness fell, though enough time for Vaughan to tell us of when he was here in the mid 1990s and was one of the very last people to see another Slender-billed, but that time it was the Curlew! We spent the night in Moulay Bousselham.

Day 3: Before breakfast we lagoon-watched from the hotel balcony, picking up further **Slender-billed** and **Audouin's Gulls** and our only **Caspian Tern** of the trip. Two hours later the group found itself on a busy road and rail bridge over the Oued (river) Sebou looking skywards and, after some waiting, a pair of **Plain Martins** flashed through. This had been a regular breeding site but the river was very high and there were no exposed banks, so we were lucky. It took some little time for everyone to get onto the birds; little did we know then that we were to discover a very close breeding pair later in the trip. There was a steady passage of **Black Kites**, with over 80 birds in the short time we were there. Some time later, after crossing into the Middle Atlas, we arrived at Dayet (lake) Aaoua where we found over 200 **Little Grebes** and over 100 **Black-necked Grebes** mostly in summer plumage along with a good selection of other water-birds including **Red-knobbed Coots**, **Ferruginous Ducks** and three fly-over **Ruddy Shelducks**. The surrounding wet scrub and woodlands held many birds including **Firecrests**, **Cirl Buntings**, **Crossbills**, the very attractive '**African**' **Chaffinch**, **Coal Tit** of the endemic Atlas race and an **Iberian Chiffchaff**. We drove on across the Middle Atlas through the delightful holiday town of Ifrane and some quite significant snow before dropping down at dusk into the scrubby desert to stay at Midelt in a hotel modelled on the traditional Moroccan Kasbah.

Day 4: Up and out by dawn we found ourselves cold and in a line walking slowly across the Zeida plain; this sparsely vegetated desert is the best site in Morocco for **Dupont's Lark**, traditionally one of the most difficult birds to see in the Western Palearctic. We heard some calls and trudged on, getting even colder, but we did see a fine male **Red-rumped Wheatear** and a flock of **Lesser Short-toed Larks** to cheer us up. Then the sun came out, we warmed up and so did the larks with a superb calling **Dupont's Lark** on a tiny bush just 20 metres in front of us. We watched two birds well and then saw one scamper for some 100 metres across the desert realising that none of us would ever have been able to keep up with it! After a fine breakfast we moved on, picking up our first **Black Wheatears** outside the hotel, driving south and taking a break at the Legionnaire's tunnel. In the rocky gorge we had **Crag Martins**, **Little Swifts**, **Blue Rock-thrush**, **Rock Bunting**, **Desert Larks** and some pretty good candidates for pure **Rock Doves**. We were all feeling pretty tired but were soon wide-awake after a sudden worthwhile U-turn for a first-winter male **Mourning Wheatear** of the western race, the trickiest of the wheatears to find in Morocco. **White-tailed Wheatears** were common by the roadside as we drove on through Erfoud and Rissani; we then left the road and took the desert track for 5km to Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua for our two desert nights. A couple of quick stops gave us **Trumpeter Finches**, **Bar-tailed Larks**, **Desert Wheatear** and **Brown-necked Ravens**.

Day 5: This morning we were met by our drivers and we decamped into three 4x4s for our journey into the desert. The first stop gave us brief views of an **African Desert Warbler** and then a **Spectacled Warbler** in a dry wadi. Driving out over the stones and sand the dust flew up but, by keeping our distance and keeping in touch, we were able to stop for superb displaying **Greater Hoopoe-larks**, migrant **Greater Short-toed Larks**, a glorious close party of **Cream-coloured Coursers** and then, with some little effort, great views of the much more difficult **Thick-billed Lark**. At Merzouga there were at least 30 **Brown-necked Ravens** but the hoped-for **Desert Sparrow** was proving tougher. Stopping for a drink in Cafe Yasmina was a good move as two **Desert Sparrows** were seen in some nearby trees; we had terrific views of this special bird with a male and female nest-building. The slow walk back to finish the drinks produced three skulking but welcome **Tristram's Warblers**. Leaving the desert, we passed a stream with our first Iberian race **Yellow Wagtails** and a very pale desert sub-species of **Little Owl** looked on. Just south of Rissani in some abandoned fields there didn't seem much at all until 11 **Fulvous Babbler**s were found flitting about the palms. On we went to the **Pharaoh Eagle-owl** stake out, but we were not to be lucky: plenty of signs but no bird. There was some compensation though in a pair of perched **Lanner Falcons** on the 'Eagle-owl' cliff. It had been quite a day and there were a few celebrations in the delightful Auberge that evening!

Day 6: We took a pre-breakfast trip out into the nearby desert and wadis the following morning and had more **Fulvous Babblers**, an **Isabelline Wheatear** and **African Desert, Subalpine, Spectacled** and **Dartford Warblers**, then breakfasted and headed onwards, for Boumalne and the Tagdilt track. A stunning pair of adult **Bonelli's Eagles** had us out of the bus and they gave brilliant views along with our only **Alpine Swifts** of the trip. At Oued Rheris we once again walked the desert and had **Desert, Bar-tailed and Greater Hoopoe-larks** with **Desert, Mourning and Red-rumped Wheatears**. As we approached the Tagdilt track a **Barbary Falcon** swooped in at astonishing speed and performed spectacularly, a great start to our next desert walk. We'd come here for **Temminck's Lark** and were not disappointed with a very close group but we were instantly distracted as a party of 12 **Crowned Sandgrouse** waddled over the hill in front of us. This was a real bonus as our telescopes picked up the tell-tale black facial mark on the three or four males in the party. We also saw more **Red-rumped Wheatears** and reached our hotel in Boumalne du Dades at dusk.

Day 7: We readied ourselves for the really long haul to Agadir with just a few stops, one at Tizi-n-Taghatine, where we saw **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** on the ground, and then at Taliouine for the distinctive Moroccan race of **White Wagtail**. We entered the Sous valley; although the Dark Chanting Goshawks seem to be long gone, I promise we did keep looking all the way to Agadir. We had time to make a quick stop at the Sous estuary, to be greeted by a flyover of 46 **Eurasian Spoonbills**, a good selection of waders and four **Eurasian Thick-knees**, before getting to the hotel.

Day 8: Today we drove north, heading for Cap Rhir, stopping at a beach to check out the literally thousands of gulls. They were mostly **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, both *graellsii* and *intermedius* with the **Yellow-legged Gulls** seeming to stick closer to the tourist hotels. There was also a good smattering of **Audouin's Gulls**, a gull which is clearly doing well and not anything like as rare as it once was. A sea-watch gave us around a 150 **Northern Gannets**, two **European Storm-petrels**, a **Pomarine Skua** and four **Balearic Shearwaters**, whilst beach-side pools held many **Sandwich Terns** along with more **White Wagtails**. Scanning the roadside scrub revealed our first **Moussier's Redstart**: a truly beautiful bird singing in the bright morning sunshine. Arriving at the Cap Rhir lighthouse we immediately found a close group of the critically endangered **Bald Ibis**. These prehistoric-looking birds, now truly wild only in Morocco and Syria, seemed oblivious to us as they picked their way through the cliff-top scrub and rubbish. It was a privilege to see them as they hang on in their three Moroccan colonies; so much is being done to conserve them and again the locals seemed really proud of their presence, such an encouraging sign. Now it was time to explore the Sous estuary more thoroughly. It was hot and we got wet feet but the effort paid off with a flock of 40 of the globally-threatened **Marbled Duck** along with a good range of other waterfowl, gulls and waders. **Greater Flamingos** performed well with flying birds looking stunning in the bright afternoon sunshine. As dusk approached we were treated to a fishing **Osprey** and a hunting **Black-shouldered Kite** but we had stayed for **Red-necked Nightjar**. First came the calls and then the wing claps and three birds flew by us; it was over in a flash and we vowed to come back for another go the following night.

Day 9: The morning was spent south of Agadir at the Oued Massa, a drive of some 60km which was eventful for a **Lanner Falcon** perched on a radio mast and the sudden abundance of **Moussier's Redstarts**, **Laughing Doves** and **Little Owls** as we moved into an area of intensively farmed small holdings. Stopping at a bridge over the river we immediately found a pair of nesting **Plain Martins** and had the unique experience of **Sand, House and Plain Martins** along with **Barn and Red-rumped Swallows** all in the same binocular view. I wonder if there is anywhere else that that can be achieved? Walking the fields gave us a calling and then flying **Common Quail**, fantastic views of the surprisingly large Egyptian Mongoose and then the bird we had come for: around six **Black-crowned Tchagras** coming to within 10 metres. The reserve itself is not what it was, with the sea having broken through defences rendering the water pretty brackish, so there was nothing like the numbers of wildfowl and waders there had been in the past. The **Common Cranes** had earlier walked over the hill from their roosting sites in the reeds so we just sat in the shade for our lunch and admired the glorious scenery. We returned to the Sous estuary and managed brief but better views of two **Red-necked Nightjars**.

Day 10: This morning it was time to leave Agadir and head for Oukaïmeden in the High Atlas. The air became fresher, forests edged the roads and we could see the snow-capped mountains looming. As we climbed higher the trees thinned and it became much rockier, ideal habitat for our next target, a calling **Levaillant's Woodpecker** which, however hard we tried, we couldn't see, so we pressed on to the top. There wasn't a lot of snow and the ski-lifts were taking hikers rather than skiers but it was getting pretty cold. A steady walk produced **Black Redstarts**, **Rock Petronias** and the very distinctive race of **Horned Lark**. We were getting more breathless and giving up hope of anything more but then the ski-lifts stopped and a flock of **Crimson-winged Finches** flew in and landed right by our feet looking for the scraps from a day of tourist's lunches. This Atlas speciality is of a race endemic to Morocco and could well be split from its

nearest relatives far away in Turkey. We dropped down the mountain but shuddered to a halt for a wonderful perched **Levaillant's Woodpecker** holding its pose for what seemed an eternity for all to see and enjoy. We spent the night near Ourika.

Day 11: Our last full day meant a very early start and back up the mountain dressed for the cold. We were at nearly 2700 metres in brilliant sunshine and saw more **Crimson-winged Finches**, four **Alpine Accentors** and then, perched on a rock not 15 metres away, another **Levaillant's Woodpecker**. Its call echoed around the mountains and once again we had had another special moment with the birds of Morocco. We had not seen any choughs the previous day, as they had left to roost in another valley by the time we had arrived, but in they came now and we were not disappointed with over 250 **Alpine** and some 10 **Red-billed Choughs** calling and swirling around us. A **White-throated Dipper** swimming in the mountain top lake seemed a little odd but was a fitting bird to end our time in the Atlas Mountains. We slowly left and made our way back to Marrakech for a visit to the famous Souk where, just as we had started, the last birds we saw were the **House Buntings** living cheek-by-jowl with every stall holder. Morocco lived up to all expectations: we had seen everything that we had hoped for really well with every member of the party getting the views they had wanted. All credit to Peter Lansdown for his understated but firm leadership, his knowledge of the country and his expert birding skills. I can't recommend Morocco and the Birdfinders trip highly enough.

Day 12: The only 'lie-in' of the tour with us not having to leave the hotel until 09.30 for the return flight to the UK. As with the outward flights, it arrived early back at Gatwick airport at the end of the tour.

Species List

1. **Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*: Good numbers at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba with over 200 at Dayet Aaoua and scattered individuals on most other lakes, ponds and rivers.
2. **Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus*: Not numerous with just 3 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and 6 at Dayet Aaoua.
3. **Black-necked Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis*: Over 100, most in fine breeding plumage, at Dayet Aaoua.
4. **Balearic Shearwater** *Puffinus mauritanicus*: 4 flying north, on a sea-watch from Cap Rhir.
5. **European Storm-petrel** *Hydrobates pelagicus*: 1 near Tarhazout and 1 around fishing boats off Cap Rhir.
6. **Northern Gannet** *Morus bassanus*: A good passage of over 150 from Cap Rhir.
7. **Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo maroccanus*: All sightings appeared to be of the Moroccan subspecies with good numbers of birds on the coast and up to 30 at the Sous estuary and Oued Massa.
8. **Little Bittern** *Ixobrychus minutus*: A newly-arrived migrant female showed well at Oued Massa.
9. **Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides*: A pair in a small reed-fringed pool near Oued Massa.
10. **Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*: 15 at Merdja Zerga with 15 more at the Sous estuary and 20 at Oued Massa
11. **Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*: Small numbers in suitable habitat throughout the trip with a maximum of 40 at Merdja Zerga
12. **Cattle Egret** *Bubulcus ibis*: Extremely common and widespread with up to 1000 around Merdja Zerga; they seem to have taken on the role of crows, being particularly attracted to rubbish dumps.
13. **Great Egret** *Ardea alba*: Just one of this fairly uncommon bird for Morocco, at the Sous estuary.
14. **Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia*: 46 flying over the Sous estuary and a party of 6 at the Oued Massa
15. **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus*: 8 of the much larger wintering flock in a reed fringed pool with the Squacco Herons near Oued Massa.
16. **Bald Ibis** *Geronticus eremita*: A feeding party of 9 on the cliff top at Cap Rhir seemingly unconcerned at our presence.
17. **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia*: A really common bird in Morocco with nests in most towns and villages and flocks of up to 100 birds at Marrakesh and in the Middle Atlas.
18. **Greater Flamingo** *Phoenicopterus roseus*: 50 birds at the Sous Estuary, some giving a magnificent fly-past.
19. **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tadorna ferruginea*: 3 birds flew past at Dayet Aaoua and then a further 3 in the twilight on a lake just before Midelt.
20. **Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*: Just 2 at the Sous estuary.
21. **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*: Occasional birds, large numbers only at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba with about 150
22. **Gadwall** *Anas strepera*: A couple of pairs at Merdja Zerga and a dozen or so at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.
23. **Common Teal** *Anas crecca*: 50 on Sous estuary pools and half a dozen at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba our only encounters.
24. **Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*: Just one male on a Sous estuary pool.
25. **Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata*: The commonest duck on the trip with 200 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, 150 at Merdja Zerga and 30 on the Sous estuary pools.
26. **Marbled Duck** *Marmoretta angustirostris*: A wonderful encounter with a flying flock of 40 at the Sous estuary which wheeled over us to land in adjacent pools giving great views for the many in the party who were seeing this increasingly threatened bird for the first time.
27. **Red-crested Pochard** *Netta rufinus*: Just 8 birds on Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.
28. **Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*: Just 6 birds on Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and 2 at Dayet Aaoua.
29. **Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina*: 12 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and around 30 at Merdja Zerga.
30. **Ferruginous Duck** *Aythya nyroca*: Great to see so many of this scarce species with 12 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and 65 at Dayet Aaoua.

- 31. White-headed Duck** *Oxyura leucocephala*: 23 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba was really encouraging. The birds have recently returned to this site (from Spain?). Conditions do look right, so hopefully a breeding colony will re-establish in this important reserve.
- 32. Osprey** *Pandion Haliaeetus*: A fishing female on the Sous estuary, with another at Oued Massa.
- 33. Black-shouldered Kite** *Elanus caeruleus*: From the bus at Merdja Zerga and then better views of a hovering and perched bird at the Sous estuary with 3 others from the bus in the Middle Atlas.
- 34. Black Kite** *Milvus migrans*: Occasional birds from the bus, with 80 moving north as we searched for Plain Martins at Oued Sebou.
- 35. Short-toed Eagle** *Circaetus gallicus*: A perched bird, probably newly-arrived, on the way up to Oukaimeden in the High Atlas mountains.
- 36. Bonelli's Eagle** *Hieraetus fasciatus*: A superb pair of adults north-west of Erfoud with a sub-adult at Oued Massa.
- 37. Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*: A roadside bird north-west of Marrakech.
- 38. Long-legged Buzzard** *Buteo rufinus*: Widespread sightings, especially east of Boulmalne; the birds in Morocco are of the distinctive subspecies *cirtensis*.
- 39. Western Marsh-harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*: Twenty at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and individuals north-west of Marrakech and at Merdja Zerga and the Sous estuary.
- 40. Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*: Individual males from the bus near Temara Plage and Moulay Bouselham.
- 41. Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*: 2 at Oued Sebou, 1 near Casablanca and a lovely female looking splendid in the sunshine at a roadside stop on the way down from Oukaimeden.
- 42. Lanner Falcon** *Falco biarmicus*: A pair on the Pharaoh Eagle Owl cliff north of Rissani, some compensation for missing the owl. Another perched up on a radio mast south of Agadir.
- 43. Barbary Falcon** *Falco pelegrinoides*: One of the sights of the trip with a bird swooping out of the sky at the Tagdilt track giving wonderful views and appreciation of its power, speed and grace. Another some 20kms to the east was presumed to be a different bird.
- 44. Lesser Kestrel** *Falco naumanni*: A frequent bird in most habitats.
- 45. Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*: A very common and widespread species.
- 46. Barbary Partridge** *Alectoris barbara*: A pair flushed and another pair seen running along a track in the Zaers with 3 flushed, 2 of which were then seen well on the ground, at the Sous estuary.
- 47. Common Quail** *Coturnix coturnix*: A calling bird flushed in the Oued Massa smallholdings and then another in the Massa desert.
- 48. Double-spurred Francolin** *Francolinus bicalcaratus*: Six calling birds in the Zaers with one eventually seen brilliantly, perched and calling in a tree; this African bird is of the endemic Moroccan subspecies *ayesha*.
- 49. Water Rail** *Rallus aquaticus*: One heard at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.
- 50. Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus*: Frequent on the larger lakes.
- 51. Common Coot** *Fulica atra*: Less common than its red-knobbed cousin at Lac de Sid Bourhaba and Dayet Aaoua but the only coot on the Oued Massa with up to 50 birds.
- 52. Red-knobbed Coot** *Fulica cristata*: 20 on Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and over 100, many already nesting, on Dayet Aaoua. Morocco is the Western Palearctic stronghold of this sub-saharan species with the few birds in Spain being strengthened following the reintroduction programme.
- 53. Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*: Mostly coastal birds with 20 at Temara Plage and 40 at Moulay Bouselham, with the odd one or two at Oued Sous and Oued Massa.
- 54. Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus*: Widespread, with up to 30 at both Sidi-Kacem and Dayet Aaoua.
- 55. Pied Avocet** *Recurvisrostra avosetta*: Three at Merdja Zerga and up to 40 on the Sous estuary pools.
- 56. Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*: Up to 20 at Oued Sous estuary and its pools.
- 57. Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius*: Occasional birds on rivers and then 4 on the Sous estuary pools.
- 58. Kentish Plover** *Charadrius alexandrinus*: The commonest and most handsome of the small plovers with up to 25 on the Sous estuary beaches.
- 59. European Golden-plover** *Pluvialis apicaria*: A surprising flock of 30 in flight over the Zaers.
- 60. Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*: The commonest large wader with 50 at Merdja Zerga and 60 at the Sous estuary, some birds just breaking into the much more attractive summer plumage.
- 61. Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus*: 35 seen at Merdja Zerga were the only birds of the trip.
- 62. Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea*: Two winter-plumage birds on the Sous estuary pools.
- 63. Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*: A flock of three hundred at Merdja Zerga and then just a single bird at the Sous estuary.
- 64. Red Knot** *Calidris canutus*: A single winter-plumage bird at the Sous estuary pools.
- 65. Sanderling** *Calidris alba*: 30 birds on the Sous estuary beaches.
- 66. Common Redshank** *Tringa tetanus*: Only at the Sous estuary where there were 30 birds scattered around the various pools and beaches.
- 67. Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia*: Six birds on the Merdja Zerga and then singles on the Sous estuary and Oued Massa.
- 68. Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*: A small number of scattered sightings, maximum 3 at Oued Sous.
- 69. Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*: Again a small number of scattered sightings but a bird on the lake at 2600 metres at Oukaimaden was a bit of a surprise.
- 70. Ruff** *Philomachus pugnax*: A single at Merdja Zerga and then five birds at the Sous estuary pools.
- 71. Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*: A calling bird at Temara Plage and then two at the Sous estuary.

- 72. Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata*: 50 birds on the beach at Moulay Bouselham and then scattered sightings with up to 12 at the Sous estuary.
- 73. Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa*: 8 in the Sous estuary pools
- 74. Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica*: Up to 100 with Curlews at Moulay Bouselham and then 12 in the Sous estuary pools.
- 75. Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*: 2 flying with the Marsh Owls at Merdja Zerga were the most memorable, with a maximum of 10 at Dayet Aaoua and other scattered sightings.
- 76. Eurasian Thick-knee** *Burhinus oedicnemus*: 4 on the Sous estuary, a single bird at Oued Massa, then three more in the Massa desert and 2 from the bus south of Agadir.
- 77. Cream-coloured Courser** *Cursorius cursor*: 4 wonderfully close birds in the desert north of Merzouga.
- 78. Pomarine Skua** *Stercorarius pomarinus*: A single bird from the sea-watch at Cap Rhir.
- 79. Audouin's Gull** *Larus audouinii*: A single bird at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, 3 at Merdja Zerga and over 25 on the beaches up to Cap Rhir.
- 80. Slender-billed Gull** *Larus genei*: Singles of this handsome gull at Moulay Bouselham, Merdja Zerga and the Sous estuary.
- 81. Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*: Several at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and then up to 50 at the Sous estuary
- 82. Mediterranean Gull** *Larus melanocephalus*: 3 birds in first-winter plumage at the Sous estuary.
- 83. Yellow-legged Gull** *Larus michahellis*: Common around and on the Agadir hotels with up to 50 in our hotel pool! Small numbers at Merdja Zerga and Oued Massa.
- 84. Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*: Abundant with over 5000 along the coast from Oued Massa up to Cap Rhir of both the *graellsii* and *intermedius* forms; not recorded inland.
- 85. Caspian Tern** *Sterna caspia*: A single bird at Moulay Bouselham.
- 86. Sandwich Tern** *Sterna sandvicensis*: Maximum of 25 on pools and beaches up to Cap Rhir with 30 more on the Sous estuary and 2 at Merdja Zerga.
- 87. Crowned Sandgrouse** *Pterocles coronatus*: Amazing, prolonged views of 12 waddling in the scrub desert at the Tagdilt track.
- 88. Black-bellied Sandgrouse** *Pterocles orientalis*: Great views of four feeding in the desert at Tizi-n-Taghatine.
- 89. Rock Dove** *Columba livia*: Many feral birds in the towns but the birds at the Legionnaire's tunnel looked good for the nominate subspecies.
- 90. Common Wood-pigeon** *Columba palumbus*: Widespread with up to 150 in the Zaers and up to 100 at Oued Sous.
- 91. Eurasian Collared-dove** *Streptopelia decaocto*: Widespread in all habitats.
- 92. Laughing Dove** *Streptopelia senegalensis*: Occasional birds from the bus as we moved south but then common around the Oued Massa.
- 93. Great Spotted Cuckoo** *Clamator grandarius*: A roadside stop for a close perched bird north-west of Marrakech.
- 94. Tawny Owl** *Strix aluco*: A bird was heard and then seen at the Sous estuary. The Moroccan subspecies is *mauritanica* with the bird known by some as the Mahgreb Tawny Owl.
- 95. Marsh Owl** *Asio capensis*: This wonderful bird is the prized species in Morocco, where it is just hanging on. Numbers are low at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and it is clearly prone to human disturbance. The endemic subspecies is *tingitanus* with the next of the species wholly south of the Sahara. We had three flying birds in good light before dusk at Merdja Zerga with one perching up for all to admire. It was voted the 'bird of the trip'.
- 96. Little Owl** *Athene noctua*: Widespread and seen frequently particularly at Oued Massa where they were sitting out in the midday sun; the subspecies is *glauca*. A very pale sandy bird south of Rissani was of the desert race *saharae*.
- 97. Red-necked Nightjar** *Caprimulgus ruficollis*: Success at Oued Sous with three birds on the first night and then two seen much more clearly on the second night.
- 98. Pallid Swift** *Apus pallidus*: Common over the cities and larger towns some giving excellent close views.
- 99. Alpine Swift** *Apus melba*: Just a couple seemingly mobbing the Bonellis Eagles north-west of Erfoud.
- 100. Little Swift** *Apus affinis*: Widespread with some good numbers on the road to the Oued Massa and up to 70 between Oukaïmeden and Marrakech.
- 101. Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis*: Just one bird on the Oued Massa.
- 102. Levillant's Woodpecker** *Picus vaillantii*: This North African endemic is named after the 18th century collector, writer and traveller Francois Le Vaillant who collected specimens for Temminck. We had a calling bird on the way up to Oukaïmeden and then presumably the same bird perched up on our return. The following morning another performed spectacularly on the mountain top at Oukaïmeden and ran Marsh Owl a close second for bird of the trip.
- 103. Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*: A couple of very bright birds at Dayet Aaoua of the subspecies *mauritanus* known by some as the Mahgreb Greater Spotted Woodpecker; 1 at Oued Sous.
- 104. Eurasian Hoopoe** *Upupa epops*: A few roadside birds, with 4 to the north of Agadir.
- 105. Horned Lark** *Eremophila alpestris*: A flock of 30 at Oukaïmeden of the very distinctive subspecies *atlas*, endemic to the high plateaux of Morocco.
- 106. Temminck's Lark** *Eremophila biopha*: Some very close views of around 40 birds on the Tagdilt track.
- 107. Greater Hoopoe-lark** *Alaemon alaudipes*: A real pleaser especially when they perform their spectacular display flight. Reasonably common with 6 north of Mergouza and a total of 8 at Oued Rheris and the Tagdilt track.
- 108. Greater Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella brachydactyla*: A flock of 50 north of Mergouza and other small parties in the desert areas.
- 109. Lesser Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella rufescens*: Common on the Zeida plain and the Tagdilt track, with small numbers elsewhere.
- 110. Desert Lark** *Ammomanes deserti*: Generally found in rockier areas with 2 at the Legionnaire's tunnel then more at Oued Rheris and the Tagdilt track; there were 9 on the journey west from Boumalne du Dades.

- 111. Bar-tailed Lark** *Ammomanes cincturus*: Fairly common in the desert areas with 25 north of Mergouza and 9 at Oued Rheris.
- 112. Dupont's Lark** *Chersophilus duponti*: Great views of what purports to be one of the toughest Western Palearctic birds to see well. After hearing up to 4 calling birds on the Zeida plain two perched up several times; one of these then ran just 10 metres in front of us.
- 113. Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha calandra*: A flock of 200 north east of Casablanca had us out of the bus for some great views.
- 114. Thick-billed Lark** *Rhamphocoris clotbey*: This enigmatic species, perhaps the second-toughest lark to see well, was found north of Mergouza; with some effort great views of three birds were had by all. A flying flock of ten was then picked up at Tizi-n-Taghatine.
- 115. Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata*: The common roadside lark in agriculture and scrubby and sandy habitats.
- 116. Thekla Lark** *Galerida theklae*: Seemed to prefer more rocky habitats but was very widely distributed giving many opportunities for comparisons with Crested Lark. The species is named after Thekla Brehm, daughter of the 19th century German ornithologist Christian Brehm.
- 117. Eurasian Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*: A couple at the Legionnaire's tunnel and then many at the Eagle Owl cliff north of Rissani, with small numbers in the Anti Atlas and at Oued Massa.
- 118. Sand Martin** *Riparia riparia*: Just a couple of sightings: a single from the bus going through Marrakech and then 6 on the Oued Massa.
- 119. Plain Martin** *Riparia poludicula*: Another sub Saharan African and Asian species only found in the Western Palearctic in Morocco. We had two fly-by birds at Oued Sebou and then were delighted to come upon a nesting pair feeding young, plus two others, at Oued Massa.
- 120. Red-rumped Swallow** *Hirundo daurica*: Just a couple of birds at Oued Massa and 3 at Chichaoua.
- 121. Eurasian Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*: Very many seen every day in every habitat.
- 122. House Martin** *Delichon urbica*: Seen with the Bonelli's Eagles north of Erfoud and then in bigger numbers at the Oued Massa and in the High Atlas, with ones and twos elsewhere.
- 123. Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis*: A scattering of views with 3 at Oukaïmeden.
- 124. White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*: Very common, seen in numbers every day with 50 on the Royal Palace golf course at the Sous estuary.
- 125. White (Moroccan) Wagtail** *Motacilla alba subpersonata*: Some good views of this very distinctive form including two by McDonalds in Marrakech!
- 126. Grey Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea*: Singles at several localities.
- 127. Yellow (Spanish) Wagtail** *Motacilla flava iberiae*: The only yellow wagtail form seen with our first near Rissani and then others at the Sous estuary, Oued Massa and Oukaïmeden.
- 128. Common Bulbul** *Pycnonotus barbatus*: Common and widespread.
- 129. Black-crowned Tchagra** *Tchagra senegala*: Three heard in the Zaers and then 6 seen really well at Oued Massa, another of Morocco's, 'African' birds.
- 130. Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis*: Frequent in all habitats, apparently with *algeriensis* near the coasts and the marginally paler *elegans* in the inland drier areas, although they were not easy to distinguish.
- 131. Woodchat Shrike** *Lanius senator*: Some early migrants with a couple at the Sous estuary and another at Oued Massa.
- 132. Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris*: There were 4 close glorious birds at Oukaïmeden, 2 singing with the sun on their backs.
- 133. Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti*: Heard frequently at many sites but seen well only at Oued Massa.
- 134. Sedge Warbler** *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*: A couple at Oued Massa.
- 135. Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla*: Common in the Zaers and occasional birds elsewhere in suitable habitat.
- 136. African Desert Warbler** *Sylvia deserti*: 2 birds seen briefly near Kasbah Said then another brief view near Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua. This North African endemic and recent split can really be seen only in Morocco.
- 137. Sardinian Warbler** *Sylvia melanocephala*: By far the commonest warbler, its scratching song heard everywhere there was vegetation.
- 138. Subalpine Warbler** *Sylvia cantillans*: 1 close to our desert hotel and then 5 well seen at Oued Massa.
- 139. Tristram's Warbler** *Sylvia deserticola*: Another North African endemic only found in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. We had 3 in the garden of Cafe Yasmina at Merzouga and 1 at Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua. Tristram was canon of Durham cathedral and despite being a churchman was an early supporter of Darwin. He travelled widely in the Sahara in the mid 1800's.
- 140. Spectacled Warbler** *Sylvia conspicillata*: Not uncommon in scrubby desert areas.
- 141. Dartford Warbler** *Sylvia undata*: 3 on an early morning walk from our desert hotel.
- 142. Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita*: Seen most days with up to 25 both north of Merzouga and at Oued Massa.
- 143. Iberian Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus ibericus*: Just one at Dayet Aaoua in the company of Common Chiffchaffs, allowing a good comparison.
- 144. Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapillus*: 3 at Dayet Aaoua performed well; there was 1 in the High Atlas.
- 145. Zitting Cisticola** *Cisticola juncidis*: Common, particularly at Oued Massa where they were everywhere.
- 146. Common Stonechat** *Saxicola torquata*: Seen frequently, particularly in the north, with 10 around Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.
- 147. Blue Rock-thrush** *Monticola solitarius*: Mostly a perched roadside bird, with 5 in the Middle Atlas, but a nice male watched at Midelt and a female well seen on the road to Oukaïmeden.
- 148. Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe*: A migrant male in the desert at Merzouga and then 3 at Tizi-n-Taghatine.
- 149. Desert Wheatear** *Oenanthe deserti*: Fairly frequent in the desert areas with 6 in the Merzouga area.
- 150. Mourning (Mahgreb) Wheatear** *Oenanthe lugens halophila*: A first-winter male north of Erfoud and then a male at Oued Rheris and 2 males on the journey west from Boumalne du Dades. The race *halophila* is endemic to north-west Africa and is

regarded by some as a separate species, Mahgreb Wheatear. *Halophila* differs primarily in that the female lacks the pied plumage of the male (the sexes are alike in the Middle East). Undoubtedly the toughest of the wheatears to find in Morocco.

151. Red-rumped Wheatear *Oenanthe moesta*: A close, very striking male on the Zeida plain and then 4 on the Tagdilt track.

152. White-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*: Common in the desert regions with up to 30 in a day.

153. Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*: A single bird at our desert hotel was a surprise.

154. Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura*: Frequent in rockier habitats with 4 outside our hotel in Midelt.

155. Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: Common in the Middle Atlas and at Oukaimeden; the European subspecies *gibraltariensis*

156. Moussier's Wheatear *Phoenicurus moussieri*: One of the best North African endemics seen well at the Sous estuary and particularly on the Oued Massa with up to 9 birds. Jean Moussier was a surgeon in the French army during the Napoleonic wars.

157. European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*: 3 in the Zaers and at Oued Massa and 1 in the High Atlas.

158. Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula*: Common throughout the trip.

159. Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*: A couple in the Zaers.

160. Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*: 3 at Dayet Aaoua and then 2 at Oukaimeden.

161. Fulvous Babbler *Turdoides fulvus*: 11 of this Moroccan speciality in palms in abandoned agriculture south of Rissani and then a further 6 close to our desert hotel. Known as Fulvous Chatterer by some it can be difficult to find but we had some excellent views of this enigmatic species.

162. Coal Tit *Parus ater*: 2 at Dayet Aaoua and another 2 on the road up to Oukaimeden; the distinctive Moroccan endemic subspecies *atlas*.

163. Great Tit *Parus major*: Occasional birds.

164. African Blue Tit *Parus teneiffae ultramarinus*: Much admired with 10 in the Zaers and then more at the Oued Massa and Oukaimeden.

165. Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*: Just one calling bird at Dayet Aaoua.

166. Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: A bird of the mountains in Morocco with one surprisingly at Dayet Aaoua and then a couple at Oukaimeden.

167. White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*: Great views of a single bird on the lake at Oukaimeden.

168. Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: Very common in the right habitat with 30 north-west of Marrakech and 30 in the Zaers.

169. House Bunting *Emberiza striolata sahari*: Widespread in the towns and villages; also seen indoors!

170. Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*: A pair at the Legionnaire's tunnel and 3, including a nice singing male, at Oukaimeden.

171. Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*: A pair at Dayet Aaoua and a female on the road to Oukaimeden.

172. Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs coelebs*: Common in the Zaers and at Oued Massa and Oukaimeden.

173. (African) Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs africana*: 3 of this handsome subspecies at Dayet Aaoua and then pairs at the Sous estuary, Oued Massa and Oukaimeden.

174. European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Small numbers at various localities with 12 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.

175. European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*: Occasional birds with 6 at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba.

176. European Siskin *Carduelis spinus*: A single bird in the Zaers.

177. Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus*: Seen really well with 40 north of Merzouga, up to 50 on the journey to Tagdilt track and small numbers elsewhere.

178. Crimson-winged Finch *Rhodopechys sanguinea*: 18 at Oukaimeden of this distinctive and endemic subspecies *alienas*. Another of the Moroccan specialities that took some finding but as the ski lift stopped for the evening the birds came down to feed on discarded walnut shells. A potential split for some.

179. Eurasian Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*: 6 on the Sous estuary and ones and twos elsewhere.

180. European Serin *Serinus serinus*: Common and widespread with their jingling song accompanying us throughout the trip.

181. Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*: A pair flew over at Dayet Aaoua.

182. Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*: Some classic birds at a stop north-west of Marrakech and then several singles and a number of Spanish x House Sparrow hybrids.

183. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Abundant throughout.

184. Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex*: After some sustained searching in the desert a pair was found nest- building close to Cafe Yasmina giving brilliant views. This is one of the birds of Morocco, often missed.

185. Rock Petronia *Petronia petronia*: Some great views of up to 30 birds at Oukaimeden.

186. Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Just a couple of birds at Dayet Aaoua.

187. Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*: Fairly widespread in the towns and villages.

188. Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Common around Lac de Sidi Bourhaba and in the Sous valley and Oued Massa. The form in Morocco is the distinctive subspecies *mauritanica* which is smaller than the nominate form with an area of blue skin behind the eye. Another potential split for some.

189. Western Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*: Several in the towns and cities in the north; 1 near Marrakech.

190. Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*: 3 at Midelt and towards Erfoud with 10 seen very well at Oukaimeden.

191. Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*: 250 at Oukaimeden of this high mountain species.

192. Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Small numbers in the Middle and High Atlas.

193. Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*: A total of 80 of this handsome bird between the Erg Chebbi and Rissani.