

Morocco

Small Buttonquail and Atlas Flycatcher

2–6 June 2014

Participants

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Atlas Flycatcher

Day 1 The tour began well enough when our multinational group assembled beneath a singing House Bunting inside the airport at Marrakech. It was nearly four hours later, however, when our pre-ordered minibus arrived at the hire company's offices in a side-street in the city where we and our luggage had been transported. During our wait in downtown Marrakech we had seen Booted Eagle, Long-legged Buzzard, Pallid and Little Swifts, Common Bulbul, House Bunting and Spotless Starling. We finally set off in the vehicle, travelling via Casablanca, Rabat and Meknes, to our hotel in Ifrane, seeing White Stork, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, Black Kite, Pallid Swift, Southern Grey Shrike, Calandra and Crested Larks, Common Bulbul and Spotless Starling on the way. The minibus delay, however, had robbed us of the opportunity to look for Northern (Seebohm's) Wheatear, one of the tour's target birds, in the Ifrane area. White Stork, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, Pallid Swift, Crested Lark, Spotless Starling and Common Bulbul were all seen on at least four of the five days and will not be mentioned again during this account.

Day 2 After making the short drive to some oak-rich woodland we soon located a fine pair of Atlas Flycatchers that we watched for some time. African Blue Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Cirl Bunting and Common (African) Chaffinch were all recorded in the same area while another male Atlas Flycatcher was found during the walk back to the minibus. Next we visited a nearby stony plateau where we soon found the first of seven Northern (Seebohm's) Wheatears; Black Kite, Eurasian Hoopoe and Horned Lark were also seen there. The journey back to the hotel for breakfast, including a brief stop on the way, produced African Blue Tit, two more Northern (Seebohm's) Wheatears, Common (African) Chaffinch, European Serin and Rock Petronia. Much of the rest of the day was spent travelling to our next hotel, in Safi, via Meknes, Rabat and Casablanca. Two stops were made: one shortly after we started, to enjoy watching Lesser Kestrels at a breeding colony, and one on the coast north of Safi where we saw Laughing Dove, European Bee-eater and Zitting Cisticola, a species which would also be seen on the following three days and so will not be featured further in this report. The drive itself gave us Black Kite, European Bee-eater and Southern Grey Shrike.

Day 3 Following breakfast and Little Swift at the hotel we returned to the coast north of Safi and more specifically to the geographical subdivision of Doukkala, which extends roughly from El Jadida in the north to Cap Bedouzza in the south, to begin in earnest our search for the main target species of the tour: Small

Buttonquail. Apart from a couple of short stops to scan lagoons and salt-pans, we spent the whole day walking along the edges of cultivated fields, with the farmers' permission, in two separate areas. We drew a blank at the first of these but, at the second spot, it was not long before we heard a single Small Buttonquail call-note. A long while later, having heard nothing more, we continued our search on foot assuming that the bird had left the field. Our further efforts, including returning to the same field, produced no evidence of the species' presence. During the day we recorded Greater Flamingo, Common Quail, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole, Laughing Dove, European Bee-eater, Red-rumped Swallow, Sardinian Warbler and European Serin. Reed-warblers were also seen and heard, though whether the breeding birds in this part of Morocco are Eurasian or African Reed-warblers has yet to be determined. We again spent the night in Safi.

Day 4 Our Small Buttonquail quest naturally resumed where we had heard one briefly the day before. After a while, as no call was heard either in or from the field, we spread out to cover numerous surrounding fields. Suddenly, a Common Quail, one of several we saw and/or heard during the day, flew up, followed almost immediately by a Small Buttonquail. Both birds very quickly disappeared over an adjacent hedge, leaving most of the group confused and dissatisfied. Some saw only the Common Quail while some of those who did see two birds identified neither for themselves. We clearly needed to relocate the second bird; sadly, despite widening our search, we failed to do so. Having made a clean break and moved to a new area, amazingly we were soon listening to the advertising-call of a female Small Buttonquail. Her multi-note calls, which were interspersed with long silences, were delivered a number of times over a two-hour period from different parts of the same field. We remained patiently along the edges of the field and were finally rewarded when, for no apparent reason, she changed her position by means of a low flight instead of creeping unseen through the crop. On this occasion, Small Buttonquail was seen satisfactorily by everyone! After lunch at the minibus we returned to the field to find that the bird was still calling from time to time and eventually we were treated to another, albeit quite brief, view of the bird in flight. We reported our success to the apparently delighted farmer. Other birds seen during our walks around the cultivated areas included reed-warblers, Sardinian Warbler and European Serin. What was left of the day was spent scanning various lagoons and salt-pans from the road. These stops produced Marbled and Ferruginous Ducks, Black-necked Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole, Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls, Gull-billed Tern and, most surprisingly, a Long-tailed Duck, which may even prove to be a first for Africa!

Day 5 We began our last day with a closer inspection of some of the salt-pans scanned from distance the previous day. Record photos of the Long-tailed Duck were obtained, Common Quail was heard and we saw Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole, Audouin's Gull, reed-warblers and Sardinian Warbler before returning to the hotel for breakfast. During our drive to the airport at Marrakech we saw Southern Grey Shrikes and a stunning male Black-eared Wheatear, while House Buntings were seen again at the airport.

We drove a total of 1760km and recorded 99 species. Birdfinders will be repeating this specialist tour in June 2015.