

Morocco

Small Buttonquail

2–7 June 2016

Participants:

Bob Duckhouse
John Holtham
Dennis O’Sullivan
Eileen O’Sullivan
John Sands
Ryn Sullinge
David Woodhouse



House Bunting

Leader: Peter Lansdown

Day 1 Most of the party flew from Gatwick Airport and, having arrived more than two hours late because of a strike by air traffic controllers in France, met the remaining participants in the airport at Marrakech. After introductions, exchanging currency, viewing House Buntings inside the terminal building and obtaining our minibus we finally loaded up and set off on the long journey to Ifrane via Casablanca, Rabat and Meknes, stopping during the drive for lunch. Species seen from the minibus included Black-crowned Night-heron, Glossy Ibis and Black Kite. We arrived at our hotel in Ifrane in time for a late dinner. Cattle Egret, White Stork, Pallid Swift, Crested Lark, Common Bulbul, Spotless Starling and European Serin were all seen on at least four of the six days and so are not included in this report.

Day 2 After an early start and a short drive to some oak-rich woodland we began our search for the tour’s first target species. A reasonably obliging pair of Atlas Flycatchers was soon located and a couple more individuals were heard and seen during our stay. The area also produced Common Quail and Levaillant’s Woodpecker both heard only, African Blue Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Rock and Cirl Buntings. Next we visited a nearby stony plateau where we immediately found our second target species: Northern (Seebohm’s) Wheatear. A total of seven was logged and we also saw Black Kite, Booted Eagle, European Roller and Rock Petronia in the same area. We returned to our hotel for a late breakfast then set off on the long drive to our next hotel, in Oualidia, via Meknes, Rabat, Casablanca and El-Jadida. The journey was punctuated by a short birding stop and a lunch stop and gave us Glossy Ibis, Black Kite, Lesser Kestrel and Levaillant’s Woodpecker. We ate dinner at our excellent hotel in Oualidia, where we were to be based for three nights.

Day 3 Following breakfast at the hotel we began in earnest our search for the tour’s main target species: Small Buttonquail. We concentrated on mixed farmland in the geographical subdivision of Doukkala, which extends roughly from El Jadida in the north to Cap Bedouzza in the south. After obtaining permission, we spent the morning walking along the edges of cultivated fields on the farm where we had seen a Small Buttonquail on the 2014 and 2015 tours; most of the crops had been rotated since 2015. We had no success. After a picnic lunch we moved on to two further areas. Unfortunately it was extremely windy all day, which was probably why Small Buttonquail was heard by only one person, and then both very briefly and somewhat distantly.

During our search we were treated to two flight views of undoubtedly the same Small Buttonquail which had been heard earlier. On both occasions it rather bizarrely broke cover at some distance, when we were not even approaching, and flew into a different field. Views varied between those present and were clearly inadequate for the group as a whole. During the day, in addition to Small Buttonquail for some, we saw Great White Egret, Common Quail, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole, Audouin's Gull, Laughing Dove, Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticola. Only one reed-warbler was seen and heard briefly, again probably because of the wind. Whether the breeding birds in this part of Morocco are Eurasian or African Reed-warblers has yet to be determined. We returned to our hotel for dinner knowing we would be repeating the exercise next day.

Day 4 We met early and visited some local pools. These were very productive, giving us Glossy Ibis, Marbled Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Golden Oriole, Plain Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, a reed-warbler and Zitting Cisticola. After breakfast at the hotel we headed for the scene of yesterday's heard-and-seen Small Buttonquail. The wind was a little less blustery today and it did not take us too long to locate by call what was presumably the same female; good flight views were obtained by all during the next hour or so as the bird relocated in its efforts to find another mate. Once, having lost the bird's whereabouts, we flushed it at extremely close range from a weedy path! Other birds seen while in the fields included Common Quail, Collared Pratincole, Laughing Dove, Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticola. A brief stop on our drive to some salt-pans produced Gull-billed Tern. After a picnic lunch we walked around the salt-pans seeing Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Collared Pratincole, Audouin's Gull and Sardinian Warbler. With all of the tour's target species now seen, we certainly enjoyed our final dinner at the hotel.

Day 5 After an early breakfast we set off on our circuitous journey to Marrakech. Our first planned stop was at Cap Beddouza, where we saw Cory's Shearwater and Audouin's Gull, while our second birding stop was in Essouira, overlooking Ile de Mogador, where we had to put up with exceptionally strong wind and blown sand in order to obtain distant views of a number of Eleonora's Falcons. There were other stops, both for a picnic lunch and for birds seen unexpectedly; during these stops and also from the moving minibus we saw Booted Eagle, Laughing Dove, European Bee-eater, Plain Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticola. From our hotel near the airport in Marrakech we recorded Alpine and Little Swifts and House Bunting.

Day 6 Little Swift and House Bunting were seen from the hotel before we had breakfast and left for the airport and our flight back to Gatwick Airport.

We recorded a total of 109 species, which are listed here with the number of days recorded (out of six, one of which was extremely short) in brackets: Mallard (2), Northern Shoveler (1), Marbled Duck (1), Red-crested Pochard (1), Ferruginous Duck (1), Common Quail (3), Little Grebe (1), Greater Flamingo (1), Cory's Shearwater (1), White Stork (5), Northern Gannet (1), Great Cormorant (3), Grey Heron (1), Great White Egret (1), Little Egret (6), Cattle Egret (6), Black-crowned Night-heron (1), Glossy Ibis (3), Eurasian Spoonbill (1), Booted Eagle (2), Western Marsh-harrier (1), Black Kite (2), Eurasian Moorhen (1), Common Coot (1), Black-winged Stilt (2), Eurasian Oystercatcher (2), Grey Plover (1), Kentish Plover (2), Common Ringed Plover (1), Common Greenshank (1), Common Redshank (1), Whimbrel (2), Black-tailed Godwit (1), Ruddy Turnstone (1), Curlew Sandpiper (1), Sanderling (1), Dunlin (1), Small Buttonquail (2), Collared Pratincole (2), Black-headed Gull (2), Audouin's Gull (3), Yellow-legged Gull (4), Lesser Black-backed Gull (3), Little Tern (3), Gull-billed Tern (1), Black Tern (1), Sandwich Tern (1), Rock Dove (6), Common Wood-pigeon (2), Eurasian Turtle-dove (3), Eurasian Collared-dove (6), Laughing Dove (3), Common Cuckoo (1), Little Owl (1), Alpine Swift (1), Pallid Swift (6), Little Swift (2), European Bee-eater (1), European Roller (1), Great Spotted Woodpecker (1), Levillant's Woodpecker (1), Lesser Kestrel (1), Common Kestrel (5), Eleonora's Falcon (1), Eurasian Hobby (1), Peregrine Falcon (1), Southern Grey Shrike (1), Woodchat Shrike (1), Golden

Oriole (1), Eurasian Magpie (2), Common Raven (2), Crested Lark (6), Wood Lark (1), Plain Martin (2), Eurasian Swallow (6), Red-rumped Swallow (2), Common House-martin (3), Great Tit (2), African Blue Tit (1), Eurasian Nuthatch (1), Short-toed Treecreeper (1), Common Bulbul (5), Cetti's Warbler (1), reed-warbler sp. (2), Zitting Cisticola (3), Blackcap (1), Sardinian Warbler (3), Spotted Flycatcher (1), Atlas Flycatcher (1), European Stonechat (1), Northern (Seebohm's) Wheatear (1), Eurasian Blackbird (6), Mistle Thrush (1), Spotless Starling (6), Yellow (Spanish) Wagtail (2), White (Moroccan) Wagtail (1), Cirl Bunting (1), Rock Bunting (1), House Bunting (3), Corn Bunting (3), Common (African) Chaffinch (1), European Greenfinch (3), European Goldfinch (1), Eurasian Linnet (4), European Serin (4), Hawfinch (1), House Sparrow (6), Spanish Sparrow (1) and Rock Petronia (1).

Birdfinders will be repeating this specialist tour in June 2017.