



Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

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BIRD HIGHLIGHTS

TOUR Morocco in February	DATES 11th to 21st Feb 2009
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Party:

Cydie Loeper; Helen Patton; Nolan Pope; Tom Whitemarsh; Eric Greisen; Bill Cowart; Nancy Bohm and Cindy Bayless.

Tour Leader : Josele Saiz & Jan Hansen

Total Number of Species : 149

Weather & Sites:

Day 1 –	Sunny Casablanca – Oud Sous
Day 2 –	Nice mild and sunny Sous Massa – Oued Sous
Day 3 –	Sunny in the morning some showers in the afternoon Tamri – Paradise Valley
Day 4 –	Cold and sunny Sous River Bed – Aoulouz - Tikrit
Day 5 –	Nice mild and sunny Tagdilt Track
Day 6 –	Nice mild and Sunny Tagdilt Track – Todra Gorge - Merzouga
Day 7 –	Nice mild and sunny Merzouga Duens – Sahara – Bega – Merzouga Lake
Day 8 -	Nice mild and Sunny Merzouga Oasis – Risanni – Ainiz - Ouarzazate
Day 9 -	Nice mild and Sunny Ourzazate Reservoir – Tizi n Tichka – Arhbalou - Marrakesh
Day 10-	Cold and sunny in the morning rainy in the evening Oukaimeden

Money for conservation has gone to : Bald Ibis Project by SEO - Birdlife

MOROCCO TRIP REPORT

FEBRUARY 11-21, 2009

OTUS ASIO TOURS

Western Europe and North Africa have experienced an abnormally cold and wet winter this year and those climatic conditions had a profound impact on the birding in Morocco. There were very few sub-Saharan migrants seen during the tour; a very unexpected occurrence for late February. The unusually heavy rains in the Sahara meant beautiful displays of desert wildflowers, but the ample food supply also meant that resident birds weren't concentrated at traditional feeding sites. Our final count was quite a bit lower than we had hoped for--149 species. But there is always more to an Otus asio tour than the birds. The experience also provided an unforgettable glimpse into the religion, culture and cuisine of this fascinating part of the Islamic world.

February 11: After an all night trans-Atlantic flight we arrived in Casablanca weary but eager to begin our adventure. While waiting for our in country flight to Agadir we tallied our first Moroccan birds outside of the airport terminal: Pallid Swift; Black Kite and White Wagtail. After the short flight to Agadir on the southern Atlantic coast we checked into our hotel and did some light birding on the grounds of our hotel where we added the ever present Common Bulbuls and Chiffchaffs. Prior to dinner we hired a few taxis and drove to an estuary south of the city where a nice selection of shorebirds was present including Black-winged Stilt, Common Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit.

February 12: The entire day was spent birding the Oued Souss Valley, about 40 minutes south of Agadir (in Arabic "oued" means river, hence the Souss River Valley). Our first stop in a stony field a few kilometers from the oued was very productive as a pair of extremely cooperative Little Owls posed placidly atop a rock wall. Here we also saw our first Crested Larks, a species we would be quite familiar with by trip's end. We spent the entire morning hiking along the river where we found an excellent assortment of birds including Ferruginous Duck, Common Crane, Sardinian Warbler, House Bunting, Serin and Black-crowned Tchagra. However the star of the morning had to be the flashy Moussier's Redstart, an orange, black and white jewel that dazzled repeatedly throughout the morning. We hiked until noon and then returned to the parking area where our drivers: Jussef; Omar and Barak had prepared an incredible spread. Moroccan food is fairly simple with lots of fresh vegetables, olives and excellent bread. Our drivers/chefs paid great attention to presentation and we often felt we were eating in a fine restaurant despite the paper plates and napkins! After lunch we added a Woodchat Shrike, stopped for coffee at a seaside café then had an early evening walk along the river near Agadir. Here we saw many Greater Flamingos, a vagrant Black-legged Kittiwake and several Eurasian Curlew.

February 13: This morning we were treated to a visit with one of the world's most endangered birds, the Bald Ibis, with a population of less than 600 birds. The majority of these breed in southern Morocco in Sous Massa National Park north of Agadir. After an hour's drive along the rugged coast we arrived at a breeding site situated in a sea cliff ledge adjacent to a sandy, arid steppe. Unlike other ibis, this species does not feed in wetlands but on arid plains, and the proximity of these to seaside cliffs is a necessary habitat requirement. We saw about 30 birds on the ledge, and later, feeding within 100 feet of us on the sandy expanse. What a treat for the photographers in the group! As we admired the ibis colony a Barbary Falcon, perched on a nearby outcrop, was an added bonus. We then headed inland to the Paradise Valley where our gourmet drivers prepared a Berber omelette, a tasty mix of vegetables, lamb and eggs prepared over an open fire. Over lunch we watched Red-rumped Swallows, Crag Martins and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk coursing the swirling mountain winds and afterward, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles paid a visit. We ended the day in Taradount where we stayed in a lovely, restored Moorish castle.

February 14: Our first stop this morning was along the Oued Sous outside of Taradount. A hike through an old stone quarry produced Stone Curlew, Eurasian Hoopoe and Cirl Bunting. Then it was time for our first long drive; 300 kilometers to Bouman Dades. Before entering the dry, stony steppes we passed through a cultivated area of olive and almond groves. Stopping for a perched Corn Bunting opened the door for some of our best birding of the day: a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos; Chaffinch; Montagu's Harrier and Long-legged Buzzard. May the often scorned Corn Bunting never be disparaged again! A brief stop at a bridge over the Oued Sous near the town of Aoulouz produced a brief glimpse of a Common Kingfisher, many Common Stonechats and the usual horde of White Wagtails. The remainder of the day was spent driving to Bouman Dades with only a few short stops during

which we added Linnet, Desert Lark and Black Wheatear. As light faded we arrived at Xalaca Dades, a beautiful hotel that would be home for the next two nights.

February 15: What Josele had hoped would be a banner day turned out to be disappointingly quiet on the avian front. We began with a drive along the Taglit Track, one of Morocco's best known birding sites. Unfortunately it turned out to be one of those days that comes with the birding territory. Though the steppes seemed birdless much of the time there were many Red-rumped Wheatears, a few flocks of Lesser Short-toed Larks and several Long-legged Buzzards to break up the monotony. Another tasty lunch prepared by Jussef, Omar and Barak was well appreciated. Afterward we abandoned our morning tactic of walking through the steppe and instead, went off-road in our vehicles to cover more ground. We quickly had wonderful views of a perched Lanner Falcon but for the most part, the birding was very slow. The afternoon was finally salvaged when Helen spotted a Pharaoh Eagle-Owl sitting on the ground near a dry wadi. After a frantic call on the radios we all converged on the spot and everyone had great looks at this majestic owl. It proved to be one of the highlights of the entire tour and a great ending to a frustrating day.

February 16: We spent a few more hours on the steppe outside Bouman Dades looking for Thick-billed Lark which was our primary target in the region. Unfortunately they were not in any of the usual places this year. Even so, an excellent compensatory sighting were 50+ Black-bellied Sandgrouse including excellent scope views of several on the ground. Large numbers of Red-rumped Wheatear and a few Desert Wheatear were also seen before we departed the area and began the long drive east to Merzouga and the dunes of the Sahara. To break up the drive we stopped for lunch in the Todra Gorge, a spectacular canyon featuring sandstone cliffs and a clear mountain stream. Many Crag Martins and our first Gray Wagtails and Blue Rock-Thrush entertained us over a lunch of olives, chicken and fresh vegetables. As always it ended with mint tea, the traditional and conspicuous after meal beverage in Morocco. As we neared Merzouga the high dunes of the Sahara gradually came into view and we passed many fields of grazing camels tended by nomads. After a dinner that featured our first tagine filled with potatoes, carrots, peas and chicken we were given a drumming concert by several locals that included an spirited dance by Josele. Perhaps it was a good thing there was no alcohol available!

February 17: At the western edge of the Sahara, the landscape was a mix of high sandy dunes and flat plain covered by countless volcanic stones and rocks. Only some ancient, massively powerful geologic explosion could explain this debris littering such an expansive area. The birds were not numerous, but the ones we found were exciting. It began with a pair of Desert Sparrows at a ramshackle settlement outside Merzouga. This pale and smaller version of the House Sparrow is in serious decline and we were lucky to find them. Next we search for one of the stars of the tour finding a displaying Houbara Bustard, a spectacular sight indeed. Unfortunately, the origins of this bird are unknown. The species has been hunted by Arabian falconers to the brink of extinction in Morocco, and now, only survives through a reintroduction program funded by a Saudi crown prince. Nevertheless, it was a privilege to see one of these marvellous creatures performing an ancient courtship ritual. While the bustard danced we also saw many Hoopoe Larks, a singing Desert Warbler and a group of Cream-coloured Coursers. The latter sighting went on to win the award for the favourite trip bird. The rest of the day was anti-climactic in the birding sense but, not from a cultural perspective. After a long, bumpy drive through and around the dunes we arrived in the village of Bega, the home of Barak who was one of our drivers. In Bega we sat on an earthen floor in Barak's home and were served mint tea. The house was constructed entirely of mud taken from the desert, had no running water or refrigeration. From our western perspective it all seemed so primitive, yet Barak seemed as happy there as he did sitting in a sidewalk café in Marrakech. This was home and he longed to return when he was away regardless of our perceived lack of amenities. When we left Barak's hut we found that all of the children in the village had come to lay out a variety of homemade goods in the hope that these rare and exotic visitors would purchase something. The inventory consisted of fossils, handmade jewelry, small pieces of fabric and cloth camels that vaguely resembled the real thing. I couldn't help but wonder when the next visitors might appear to provide these hopeful children a chance to make a few dirhams. Given the location and lack of roads, my guess is that it may be quite some time. Perhaps never before have I felt so guilty and uneasy about my lot in life.

February 18: An optional early morning walk in the Merzouga Oasis reinforced the notion that the sub-Saharan migrants had yet to arrive. After breakfast we began the long drive to Ouarzazante. It was to be another day spent mostly in the vehicles with a few short birding stops. The first of these, near the town of Rissani, produced a roosting Pharaoh Eagle-Owl and a nesting Brown-necked Raven. Today also drove home the realization that every

time we stopped, local villagers suddenly appeared on rickety bikes or via foot to offer us great deals on fossils, jewelry and a variety of other trinkets. Sometimes it was eerie; where did they come from? Were they genies from a bottle? Although I wanted to support their efforts and the local economy, there are only so many trinkets you can buy and, more often than not, I had to say no. My hope is that travel will make me more sensitive to the living conditions of people around the world. In this case, I fear that this constant barrage of pushy peddlers actually had the opposite affect, and eventually, I began to simply ignore them. It was a relief to finally arrive at our hotel in Ouarzazate for a hearty meal and a restful night's sleep.

February 19: After the dearth of desert birds, a morning visit to Ouarzazate Lake seemed like the tropics. Though many of the birds were common it was great to be seeing them in large numbers. Most impressive were the White Storks which seemed to be everywhere. The lake held Great Crested Grebes and on the margins we located Little Ringed Plover, Little Stint, many Crested Larks and a Black Kite. Departing the lake we began our crossing of the High Atlas Mountains where the temperature felt more like New Hampshire than North Africa! A few strategic stops produced red Crossbill, Coal Tit, Red-billed Chough, Song Thrush, European Robin, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Common Wood Pigeon. It was an exciting plethora after several quiet days and we took our time and enjoyed it thoroughly. Lunch in the village of Taddert consisted of lamb that was purchased on the street and then cooked for us at a local restaurant. Afterwards, a few of us were invited into the kitchen for a tour. The cleanliness standards would have been a problem in the U.S. and a few people remarked that they were glad they weren't invited in before lunch! Nevertheless, the food was delicious and no one got sick. I guess all's well that ends well! By dusk we arrived in the exotic city of Marrakech for our final two nights.

February 20: Our last day of birding was spent at Oukaimden, a ski resort in the High Atlas Mountains 90 minutes from Marrakech. As we wound our way up the mountain we passed through several small Berber villages built into the steep hillsides. In one of these, a stop produced our only Levaillant's Woodpecker, a bird endemic to the Mahgreb countries of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. At the top we found several feet of snow, temperatures below freezing and the usual sellers hawking their wares. There were also some good birds: many Horned Larks; a swirling flock of Alpine Chough; a few Rock Sparrow; African Blue Tit and, on the way up, 14 Barbary Partridge. Over an outdoor tangine, we tallied our final two trip birds, a pair of Mistle Thrush and a beautiful Crimson-winged Finch that sat obligingly on a nearby wire. Then it was time to return to Marrakech for a visit to the souks to buy carpets, jewelry, jalabas and to watch the snake charmers and monkey trainers. Later, at the hotel, we tallied our final birdlist and bade farewell to our drivers. Over dinner we reminisced about our Moroccan experience and schemed about possible future adventures.

Jan Hansen

BIRDLIST FROM THE 2009 MOROCCO TOUR FEBRUARY 11-21, 2009

Column 1= number of days recorded

Column 2 = highest daily total recorded (approximations)

HO = Heard only

(H) = mostly heard but seen at least once

Little Grebe	2	4	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	1	2	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Northern Gannet	2	3	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	6	25	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Gray Heron	4	30	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Egret	5	15	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Cattle Egret	7	10	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
White Stork	3	1000	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>

Bald Ibis	1	30	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>
Glossy Ibis	1	20	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	2	12	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Greater Flamingo	2	50	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	2	45	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Northern Shoveler	2	75	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Gadwall	1	2	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Mallard	2	10	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	2	50	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Green-winged Teal	3	15	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Marbled Teal	1	6	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>
Common Pochard	1	20	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Ferruginous Duck	1	2	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>
Tufted Duck	1	4	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Osprey	2	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Black Kite	3	1	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	6	3	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	4	10	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>
Golden Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Bonelli's Eagle	1	2	<i>Aquila fasciatus</i>
Eurasian Kestrel	9	8	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Lanner Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
Barbary Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>
Peregrine Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Barbary Partridge	3	14	<i>Alectoris barbara</i>
Common Quail (HO)	2	1	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>
Common Crane	1	50	<i>Grus grus</i>
Water Rail	1	1	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Common Moorhen	1	1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	3	35	<i>Fulica atra</i>
**Houbara Bustard	1	1	<i>Chlamydotis undulata</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	1	15	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Black-winged Stilt	2	45	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Stone Curlew	1	2	<i>Burhinus oedicanus</i>
Cream-coloured Courser	1	9	<i>Cursorius cursor</i>
Black-bellied Plover	1	4	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Snowy Plover	2	3	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Common Ringed Plover	1	3	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Little Ringed Plover	1	3	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	1	6	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1	5	<i>Numenius arguata</i>
Common Redshank	2	15	<i>Tringa totanus</i>

Common Greenshank	1	1	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Common Sandpiper	2	2	<i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>
Little Stint	1	7	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Dunlin	2	20	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Audouin's Gull	2	75	<i>Larus audouinii</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	2	100+	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	3	100+	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Black-headed Gull	2	60	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Black-legged Kittiwake	5	2	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Sandwich Tern	2	2	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	1	50	<i>Pterocles orietalis</i>
Rock Pigeon	10	75	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	2	15	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared-Dove	10	35	<i>Strptopelia decaocto</i>
Laughing Dove	5	6	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Great Spotted Cuckoo	1	2	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>
Pharoah Eagle Owl	1	1	<i>Bubo bubo</i>
Little Owl	2	2	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Pallid Swift	6	75	<i>Apus pallidus</i>
Little Swift	2	10	<i>Apus affinis</i>
Common Kingfisher	1	1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	5	2	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	1	2	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>
Levaillant's Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Desert Lark	4	8	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>
Hoopoe Lark	2	15	<i>Alaemon alaudipes</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	2	25	<i>Callandrella brachydactyla</i>
Lesser Short-toed Lark	2	75	<i>Callandrella rufescens</i>
Crested Lark	6	15	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Thekla Lark	3	10	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
Skylark	3	8	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Horned Lark	1	30	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
Temminck's Lark	3	25	<i>Eremophila bilopha</i>
Bank Swallow	1	1	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	3	15	<i>Hirundo rupestris</i>
Barn Swallow	7	100	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	1	2	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
House Martin	5	10	<i>Delichon urbica</i>
# White Wagtail	10	25	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Gray Wagtail	4	1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Meadow Pipit (HO)	3	7	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Common Bulbul	7	30	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
White-throated Dipper	1	2	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
Winter Wren (HO)	2	1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>

Alpine Accentor	1	1	<i>Prunella collaris</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	2	2	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Eurasian Blackbird	9	20	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Song Thrush	3	1	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	1	2	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Zitting's Cisticola	3	4	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Cetti's Warbler (H)	3	1	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Chiffchaff	9	20	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Iberian Chiffchaff (HO)	1	1	<i>Phyloscopus ibericus</i>
Blackcap	5	3	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
African Desert Warbler	1	2	<i>Sylvia deserti</i>
Sardinian Warbler	7	10	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Spectacled Warbler	1	1	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>
Tristram's Warbler	1	1	<i>Sylvia deserticola</i>
European Robin	3	1	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Bluethroat	1	1	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Black Redstart	8	2	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Redstart	1	1	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
Moussier's Redstart	4	20	<i>Phoenicurus moussieri</i>
Common Stonechat	4	12	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
White-crowned Wheatear	6	20	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>
Black Wheatear	5	6	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
Mourning Wheatear	1	2	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>
Red-rumped Wheatear	2	25	<i>Oenanthe moesta</i>
Desert Wheatear	3	3	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
Coal Tit	1	3	<i>Parus ater</i>
Great Tit	4	1	<i>Parus major</i>
African Blue Tit	2	3	<i>Cyanistess ultramarinus</i>
Southern Gray Shrike	5	4	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Woodchat Shrike	1	1	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Black-crowned Tchagra	1	4	<i>Tchagra senegala</i>
Eurasian Magpie	6	25	<i>Pica pica</i>
Red-billed Chough	2	8	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Alpine Chough	2	200	<i>Pyrhocorax graculus</i>
Eurasian Jackdaw	1	6	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Brown-necked Raven	1	4	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>
Common Raven	2	5	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Spotless Starling	6	50	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
House Sparrow	9	150	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Spanish Sparrow	4	2	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>
Desert Sparrow	1	4	<i>Passer simplex</i>
Rock Sparrow	1	6	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Chaffinch	3	15	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Red Crossbill	1	2	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>

European Greenfinch	3	3	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Goldfinch	3	4	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Linnet	2	2	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
European Serin	8	3	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Crimson-winged Finch	1	2	<i>Rhodopechys sanguinea</i>
Cirl Bunting	3	3	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
Rock Bunting	1	1	<i>Emberiza cia</i>
House Bunting	6	25	<i>Emberiza stiolata</i>
Corn Bunting	1	6	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>

**The wild Houbara Bustard population in Morocco has been largely extirpated by widespread hunting by Saudi Arabian falconers and Berber nomads. A major reintroduction project is based near Agadir and is being funded by Saudi crown prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. This project is breeding Houbaras through artificial insemination and releasing them into the wild. The Houbara Bustard we saw near Merzouga was almost certainly a bird released through this program and is probably not countable following the normal ABA and world listing protocol.

Also seen during the tour was *Motacilla alba subpersonata*, the North African race of the White wagtail.

