



## Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

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### Heatherlea Trip Report

Morocco

Thursday 27 March – Sunday 6 April 2008



**Leaders:** Josele Saiz and Ian Ford.

**Group:** Peter Carman, David Haigh, Mary Hemming, James Hickling, Nick Jordan, Andy Page, Frank Shilling, Bill Siggins.

#### Thursday 27 March

We are all ready in plenty of time to check in at London Gatwick, though David has flown in from Manchester so is already on the other side of security. The plane leaves on time and arrives in Marrakech on time, allowing us to see northern Morocco's bare mountains and plains as we descend. The snow on the High Atlas is visible as we turn to land and welcome hot air blasts us as we disembark. We are pleased to see Josele waiting with our bus and he promises us two good birds before we even get on the bus. The first is a pair of House Bunting which have set up home inside the terminal building (not even officially opened yet!) and the second is Pallid Swift, flocks of which



are screaming around outside. Common Bulbuls greet us noisily as we reach our hotel but we don't know then just how familiar that babble will become.

Our first dinner is as tasty as the rest of our meals turn out to be and we retire to bed ready for our first full day in Morocco.

Daily species list and total: 4.

Friday 28 March

We wake to the noise of Common Bulbuls and some people have seen Little Swifts from the hotel before breakfast as well as following Josele's advice to get good views of the Pallid Swifts' colour in the strong morning sunshine. We load the minibuses, driven by Mohammed and Abdul, and we're quickly on the road to Agadir. A few more Little Swifts fly by as we leave the city.



Marrakech impresses as a bustling city marching proudly into the 21st century with massive road and house building projects but retaining the character of the old medina and local style. The traffic is chaotic by European standards with a mix of dangerously overladen lorries, cars, mopeds, bicycles, horse-drawn carts and donkeys. Some of the latter vehicles think it adds more fun to go on the wrong side of the road and we learn quickly that it is compulsory to toot at anything which is a potential hazard but equally compulsory to ignore a toot if you are the potential hazard!!

Into the countryside and we begin to appreciate just how big this country is. The roads are fine but the volume of traffic makes for quite slow progress, so we can enjoy the ever-changing colour of the scenery we pass through. The fertile areas are very green around water but away from that we pass through a whole spectrum of bare rocky areas and mountains of differing pastel shades, some of them having strata of many colours. A stop by a working gravel-pit allows us to find our own birds in the field and one of our first birds is a smart White Wagtail of the Moroccan subspecies *subpersonata*. We find a family of Grey Wagtails, a pair of Little Ringed Plover and our first raptors – a Peregrine Falcon and brief views of a pair of Short-toed Eagles. A Southern Grey Shrike sits on top of a bush and Andy finds a couple of European Bee-eaters perched on a bush. African Green Frogs provide the chorus and there is a Pond Terrapin.

We stop for lunch in a roadside restaurant and enjoy our first tagine of many, a full-flavoured stew cooked in earthenware pots, followed by juicy oranges.

We bypass Agadir to stop at the Oued Souss National Park and overlook a finger of tidal estuary with saltmarsh and scrub. Our chief targets here are Black-crowned Tchagra and Moussier's Redstart and although we can hear the former singing across the river, we can't see him. As we are scanning through the wader flocks in front of us, a Tchagra pops up 5 yards behind us on top of a bush and we have quite amazing views of this 'rather shy and elusive bird' (Collins *Bird Guide*)! Shortly its mate gives equally stunning views nearby in full view.

Ian finds a female Moussier's Redstart but it is Peter who finds a male and this pair are feeding young already in a broken stump. Another stunning bird high on the list of

Moroccan specialities and we all see another four or five males before we leave this rich seam of birds. We get good views of the local race of Magpie with the blue patch behind the eye and the ultramarine African Blue Tit.

Shorebirds are abundant and we end up with 20 wader species, including Temminck's Stint, which are hard to pick out in the more frantic flocks of Little Stints. A Spoonbill has a ring on its leg but we can't quite read it all and a large flock of Greater Flamingoes grunts away in the background. A Great White Egret is a welcome surprise and a swirling flock of White Storks flies over at dusk.



Our hotel tonight is in a seaside tourist area and we can see the potential for migrants in the garden early tomorrow.

Today's highlights have been the Black-crowned Tchagras, Moussier's Redstarts, a waving Fiddler Crab and the polychromatic scenery.

**Weather sunny all day, temp. 25+ ° C.**

Day's tally: 71 species.

Running total: 72 species (including subspecies each day).

Saturday 29 March

We're up and away before 8am to go looking for Bald Ibises at one of their favoured feeding haunts. After an hour's drive, we pull in to a lay-by and arrive at exactly the moment a flock of 46 Ibises is circling around in the sky before landing. The flock splits into two and the majority land in pasture about half a mile away from us. Even in the air we can see that the feet don't project beyond the tail as in Glossy Ibis and the body is a more compact shape. We can approach them more closely without disturbing them and get



excellent views of their red bald heads and shaggy neck feathers clearly before any heat-haze starts. They are actively feeding in a dry field and we leave them there. A flock of Gulls on the shore allows us clear views of some adult Audouin's Gulls as well as Yellow-legged and Lesser Blackbacks. Northern Gannets pass by offshore. Seeing the Bald Ibises so quickly allows us more time to find other new birds and we take up the challenge keenly.

We drive to Souss Massa NP and can't believe the close and prolonged views of a subadult and a pale phase immature Bonelli's Eagle as soon as we get out of the buses. These views are by far the best that well-travelled birders in the group have ever seen of this scarce Eagle. Raptors continue to excite with a Barbary Falcon performing over our heads which is joined by a larger Lanner Falcon. The strong breeze off the sea keeps both birds in view for a long time so we can compare and contrast these two falcons. Many migrants are passing through this area and we see Western Olivaceous and Subalpine Warblers as well as Chiffchaff and more Moussier's Redstarts, Zitting Cisticolas, Laughing Doves and a Blue Rock Thrush. James is keen on butterflies as well and is pleased to see a couple of Monarchs.

Time for our first picnic which we enjoy in the shade of some trees. From here we can see a flock of Glossy Ibis, many Black-winged Stilts and 30 Spoonbills. Then we set off for a leisurely walk through the park. A Barbary Ground Squirrel is our first mammal, followed shortly by our second mammal, Wild Boar. More than 10 of these Boar are feeding in the reeds at the water's edge and there are tiny striped babies as well as half-grown youngsters and adults. It is good to see them undisturbed by us.



We hear more Black-crowned Tchagras calling and check out the waders and ducks in this fertile river mouth. Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Pochard and Mallard are seen and Ian picks out a Marsh Sandpiper on the shoreline. This elegant bird is always a delight and new to many of the group. A Marsh Harrier flies backwards and forwards several times frightening the waders.

Josele has told us to look for Plain Martins and we have scanned through the Barn Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins hopefully. Just as we start back for the buses, Ian comments on the lack of Martins in the last wee while and we can't believe it when Josele shouts 'Plain Martin' and one of these tiny birds flies straight over our heads in the company of one Sand Martin, the species it resembles most. Everyone sees the absence of breastband and the smaller size. A real prize!

We still have a long drive to our hotel and our journey is favoured with 2 Little Owls posing as they do on walls and rocks, and a group of 7 Cream-coloured Coursers that land near the road. This is our first view of a classic 'must see' bird and they are hard to see when they stop running. We don't have time for more than a brief stop but that is plenty of time to admire the strong white, black and grey head pattern of these graceful birds. We will see them on four other days of the trip.

Our hotel is a former palace within the medieval town walls and we settle into our rooms in this unique hostelry before a buffet dinner.

Today's highlights have been several – the Bald Ibis performing well, outstanding views of 2 ages of Bonelli's Eagles together, Plain Martin, Marsh Sandpiper and James went for the Monarchs.

Weather: Sunny all day, breeze by the sea but temp. up to 27° C.

**Day's tally: 81 species.**

**Running total: 105 species.**

## Sunday 30 March

Time for a stroll around the wonderfully fresh palace gardens before breakfast and an Olivaceous Warbler is singing lustily in an open tree.

We are driving through the Anti Atlas mountains today on our way inland so we begin to leave behind the fertile ground with various crops for drier, rockier, more barren landscapes. We have a long stop at a bridge over a fast-drying riverbed and find a good selection of migrant passerines passing through – Yellow Wagtails, Tree Pipit, Blackcaps, Nightingales and Subalpine Warblers – and see our first africana Chaffinch with blue head and green back. A Long-legged Buzzard and a Peregrine remain silhouettes on the surrounding cliffs and a male Marsh Harrier flies over.



We head for the hills, seeing our first Black Wheatears of many, and stop in the middle of nowhere in a gravelly, barren area of hammada scrub. We get out for a walk and immediately find a pair of Desert Wheatears and two Cream-coloured Coursers within 100 yards of the buses. Both species are well camouflaged but we get excellent views before bumping into a wandering -flock of 30 Short-toed Larks, feeding as they go. Our first Trumpeter Finches are feeding quietly but we soon hear the trumpeting sound that will become very familiar in the next week. We are also looking for any sign or sound of Sandgrouse. A breeze is making it difficult to hold the scopes steady so we move on with some new species on our list and plan to stop lower down the hill out of the wind.



Our next stop is in similar habitat but much warmer and with no wind and Ian locates some Desert Larks before Josele finds a special target, Thick-billed Lark. This bird lives up to its name, with a massive beak and the male has black blotches all down his front. In flight the broad white trailing edge is distinctive. Josele shepherds a pair towards the group and we all enjoy superb views.

Ever onward, we stop for a handsome male *seebohmi* Northern Wheatear at the roadside and find the *riggenbachi* subspecies of Crested Lark in the same place. Their very long bills are distinctive and we add these subspecies to our growing list of local birds.

Soon, we stop at a bluff where we will check out a large expanse of suitable terrain for Mourning Wheatears. As soon as we get out, we find smart White-crowned Black Wheatears with conspicuous white crowns (we are still to learn that first year birds don't have white crowns and are very similar to Black Wheatears!) and more Trumpeter Finches are chasing around the rocks. Other black and white birds turn out to be Northern Wheatears and Woodchat Shrikes before we hit the jackpot and find a stunning male Mourning Wheatear. He is

behaving in typical Wheatear fashion, posing on rocks and hopping a few paces at a time, and this allows us all to inspect his neat pied plumage and see the not immediately obvious buff undertail coverts. Another speciality bites the dust! We check into our hotel and notice there are plenty of trees and fruit groves around.

Today's highlights have been the Mourning Wheatear (just ahead of other Wheatears) and the Thick-billed Larks.

Weather: A few spots of rain come to nothing, otherwise sunny. Temp high up down to 20° C, lower down nearer 28° C.

**Day's tally: 52 species**

**Running total: 119 species.**

### **Monday 31 March**

On the road by 7:15am to seek out desert species before it gets too hot and hazy. We soon stop to admire a pair of Montagu's Harriers migrating together and we see them again when we stop for a close perched Long-legged Buzzard. Another mammal joins the list, one we are to see regularly – the aptly named Fat Sand Rat – but, even better, we see our first view of Temminck's Lark. It isn't in full breeding plumage but it's a good start. It has little horns on its white face and it's less than 5 yards from James.



Another first, male

Another first, male and female Red-rumped Wheatear, show well for us and complete the set for Moroccan Wheatears. We see more of this species as the day progresses but these were the closest in perfect light.

Time for a walk across the scrub (we think this is barren but in fact there were lots of flowers and almost continuous ground cover) and we are pleased at the number of birds that we find. More Temminck's Larks, 2 Cream-coloured Coursers, Long-legged Buzzard and then

Andy spots a distant Hoopoe Lark which promptly disappears (Josele as ever says we will see plenty in the desert and as ever he is right). We find another pair of Thick-billed Larks and the male is trying to impress the female, firstly by picking up a leaf and then a stone in his massive beak. He is planning to build a nest. Wonderful behaviour from a special bird.

We drive on a few miles to another area which has more greenery and have another walk before lunch. More Wheatears, more Larks and a Nightingale in a bush. This is a new bird for Bill so we work hard to let him get a good view and as we walk on, Ian flushes a Quail at his feet. It's off like a bullet behind him and the only other one in the group to see it well is Andy. We think it has landed so we go back to look for it. Our Nightingale flies into the open 20 yards away and within seconds we hear a loud whoosh and a pair of Lanner Falcons shoot past our ears aiming for the poor bird. Andy sees a couple of feathers fly but the Falcons come up empty-handed and divebomb the area a few times more giving us unbelievably close views. We hope the Nightingale hasn't had a heart attack. An amazing spectacle!

Ian flushes a Trumpeter Finch from its nest but there are no eggs – a pair of shepherd children may give the answer as they approach us offering tiny white eggs for sale!



Another picnic lunch and it's time to head to look for Tristram's Warbler. Ian's bus nearly runs over 2 Stone Curlews and we see the birds from 10 yards.

We approach Morocco's answer to the Grand Canyon, and realise that every tourist in the area and a million locals are already there. Giant tour buses block the road in both directions so we abandon the buses and walk into the gorge while all the drivers toot their way towards a solution to this traffic chaos. Surprisingly there are still birds in this noisy place – a Little Egret fishes in the

river, Grey Wagtails and a *flavissima* Yellow Wagtail walk around unconcerned and Blue Rock Thrushes and Crag Martins are above us.

Will there really be a Tristram's Warbler in this mad place though? We reboard our buses and carry on until we find a quieter place with sparse bushes. Ian is at the back of the group when a Tristram's Warbler flies up from behind him and starts singing from the top of the bush nearby. He looks as if he's just had a bath and after singing a few ditties from the top of the bush, he retreats into the middle and by the time most of the group comes back, he is mumbling a subsong and falling asleep. What an obliging stationary warbler to scope!

Job done, we amble along the riverbank and there are many migrants here. Peter says 'Ring Ouzel' and before anyone sees it a Blue Rock Thrush chases it away. Is he sure it wasn't a female Blue Rock Thrush? Peter remains adamant it had a dull white crescent on

its chest and sure enough it comes out of hiding and reveals itself as a female Ring Ouzel. Well done! Hoopoe, Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Bonelli's Warbler follow.

We head back to the hotel for our second night here. The day's highlights have to be the hunting Lanners and the Thick-billed Larks' nesting behaviour and James adds the Temminck's Lark filling his binoculars.

Weather: Sunny and decidedly hot, up to 30° C.

**Day's tally: 56 species.**

**Running total: 134 species.**

## Tuesday 1 April

A leisurely start today allows some time to look around the hotel grounds before breakfast and David finds a male Moussier's Redstart, Subalpine and Bonelli's Warblers before the rest of us are up. We have a relaxing walk through the fields and groves by the river seeing close Cattle Egrets, Yellow Wagtails, Tree Pipits again, purring Turtle Doves, throaty Nightingales, Bee-eaters and Hoopoe. On the road again and we have several brief stops to explore what's around. We are becoming blasé about Desert and Black-eared Wheatears, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes, Subalpine and Bonelli's Warblers but we can't quite confirm a Spectacled Warbler that would be new.

We see that roadside children are holding something to attract tourists (and money). What is it? We realise that they have two Eagle Owlets that would have left their nest but can't fly yet. Josele teaches them how to hold them by their feet and not by their wings. Sadly we realise that there isn't anything we can do to help these poor creatures but there seems to be a healthy population in the area, probably thanks to the presence of Fat Sand Rats. One of our main targets today is to



find Desert Eagle Owls with chicks. The other target is Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters.

We pull in to a fertile green area for our picnic and before we get out, Josele has seen Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters on the wires. What cracking birds they are with their blue cheeks, red throat, green body and long tail. Three of them pose near us for as long as we want to look at them. They fly off to catch bees and then return and they are still around when we leave. Flocks of European Bee-eaters are also nearby, increasing in number until there are nearly 100 swirling around or posing in the trees. What beautiful birds both species are. And that is not all – Corn Buntings are new and there are more *riggerbachii* Crested Larks, Olivaceous, Subalpine and Bonelli's warblers and a Quail called occasionally. Peter is on form again and spots a Black-shouldered Kite soaring around.



Half the group is on the buses ready to go when Andy says 'Look at that!' and there is an immature Barbary Falcon on the nearest pylon having its lunch – a Common Swift. It eyes us up and decides lunch is a priority. Everyone piles out and we enjoy the close view of this local bird. The clean throat and upper breast stand out and the rufous nape is conspicuous. Yesterday, great views of Lanners and today Barbary Falcons. Wow!



Time to go and we carry on for half an hour until we turn off the road onto a stony track. We drive a mile down it and as usual we are in the middle of nowhere but within seconds boys are appearing to sell ammonites and other fossils. We have rarely made a stop where people haven't found us within minutes. They all know about the Eagle Owls' nest but this time we feel the Owls are safe because the boys can show tourists and hope to earn some money. Two well-grown chicks are sitting in the rocky entrance to the nest panting in the heat and an adult is sensibly in the shade below the nest.

We can see how pale the adult is compared to northern birds and also with shorter ear tufts. We let the boys look in the scopes just in case there is a future bird guide lurking there! Some of us buy fossils at a good price and keep the kids happy. As we leave we see our first Brown-necked Ravens and a Lanner comes past close with prey.

One more stop in the late afternoon and what a stop it is. We can see Erg Chebbi, Morocco's biggest sand dunes at the edge of the Sahara, and we are going to a large lake. It seems crazy but this winter has been very wet here, so there are lakes everywhere.



The unusual abundance of water this spring is a probable cause of the difficulty in locating any Sandgrouse because they aren't concentrated in areas near the few sources of water. This lake is 2 miles long and three quarters of a mile wide. It is a real haven for waterbirds and we count nearly 250 Ruddy Shelduck, over 40 Marbled Duck, Pintail, Shoveler, Little Grebes, over 500 Greater Flamingoes and a few Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns. Marbled Duck are usually hard to find but these are out in the open and Frank's jinx is over – he has finally seen them. There is a variety of waders with Spotted Redshank the only new one, and a cluster of Herons turn out to be Black-crowned Night Herons.

A grand finale to another excellent day with another set of highlights including the Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, Barbary Falcon and the lake full of birds. We drive to our hotel beside the giant dunes as the setting sun lights them up. Ian and Nick manage to get close-up views of a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush in the superb light near the hotel.

Weather: Sunny all day up to 30° C.

**Day's tally: 69 species**

**Running total: 147 species.**

### **Wednesday 2 April**

We need a very early start this morning but some tourists are already on their camels before we leave at 6:30. We are travelling in a convoy of three Landcruisers today,



going where our buses cannot take us. Our village is surrounded by sandy desert with very little vegetation, except where the underground aquifers have been tapped to grow fruit and vegetables. There are a few nomads' tents in this barren place and a few earth houses. A Lanner Falcon stoops at a flock of domestic pigeons but misses as we go past. Our first stop is by a larger house and Josele finds several Desert Sparrows among the House Sparrows. These ghostly pale sparrows are very attractive and after flying away briefly, they come back and pose nicely for us.

We move on to another seasonal lake that is drying fast but it is full of birds. Among the more familiar passerines and waders using this oasis are some quality new birds. Josele spots a Wryneck ahead of him and we all manage to get a good view of this sought-after bird; Ian spots a Bluethroat and there are several to choose from in varying plumages, but you can't ignore the ones with blue throats, can you? David and Peter are convinced that there is a Crake skulking on an island and after a lot of effort we confirm that there are not one but two Spotted Crakes. One of them even comes into the open for us to get a proper look.



We have taken longer than we should but the birds keep appearing. We now head into the middle of a massive area of desert looking for one of Morocco's most elusive birds, Houbara Bustard. With a local guide we are able to stop some way from one of these almost mythical birds and can scope it safely without disturbance. We can see it walking sedately and flouncing around in the sand like an Ostrich. Houbaras have declined drastically in recent years but they are still the prize bird for Arab royalty to fly their falcons at and some money is being spent on maintaining their population for the sake of the sport. Beats extinction we suppose.

We withdraw, feeling very pleased with ourselves, and pursue other desert birds we need. Hoopoe Lark, Desert Warbler, Bar-tailed Lark and Fulvous Babbler still present a challenge. Ian is first to see a Hoopoe Lark from the Landcruiser and we all enjoy close views of the curved beak, long legs and conspicuous wing pattern. While we are out, Josele finds a singing Desert Warbler nearby which again we get good views of. Two down with two to go!

There aren't many birds to the square mile out here although we see another 15 Hoopoe Larks and the same number of Cream-coloured Coursers from the cars. The massive increase of 4x4 driving and rally cars means that there are tracks all over this part of the desert and nests and eggs will be destroyed.

A flock of larks goes by but they are Short-toed. The second group of larks that Josele sees are nearer and he confirms that they are Bar-tailed. The group gets a good look at them scurrying around in the sand and they are very similar to Desert Larks at first (and second) sight. The various ID traits are checked off carefully and successfully. Fulvous Babbler are very local in this area and their preferred habitat of Acacia trees has been much reduced by flooding which has washed away many trees. We go to a wadi of date palms and the local children surround us as Josele plays the tape of this noisy bird. The children recognise the sound and say the bird is yellow and has a long tail. That makes us optimistic. Within two minutes, there is a distant reply and the sound comes closer and closer until we see a Fulvous Babbler in front





and we get excellent views of both and have our picnic in the company of a Grey Shrike. It's been a long morning so far. Some of the group carry on birding and feeding migrants, including another



us? Chirping noises in the distance resemble European Nightjars but are insects. Darkness has descended but no sign or sound of Egyptian Nightjars. On the drive back a bird lands beside Josele's bus and from the brief view in the lights he thinks it looks like an Egyptian Nightjar - yeah right! We stop (road too busy to try turning) and he plays the relevant tape. The noise frightens the bird and the last we see is a shape in the headlights of a speeding car. Was it struck? A quick search reveals no body. At checklist time Josele feels 90% sure it was an Egyptian Nightjar but we can't tick it.



Weather: Very hot today, probably up to 33° C.

**Today's tally: 67 species.**

**Running total: 164 species.**

#### **Thursday 3 April**

A later start time for travelling allows most of the group to walk to the nearby wadi before breakfast and it's well worth it. David, Peter, Nick and Andy have a haul of 3 Wrynecks while Josele has found another for Frank and

Ian. Plenty of more common migrants are evident too. A male Common Redstart is by the path to the dining room and isn't bothered by humans.

We leave the desert town behind and our first stop is beside a dead Egyptian Nightjar where we were last night. It's a shame to confirm what we feared had happened, but a consolation for us that Josele's ID was spot on. We drive on, stopping briefly for a Montagu's and a Marsh Harrier migrating along the road and our next stop is in good habitat for Spectacled Warbler. There are a few Wheatears, Larks and Trumpeter Finches around as we have now come to expect but almost immediately Peter spots a warbler which quickly turns into two warblers. One is a Common Whitethroat and one is our target bird, a Spectacled. They both keep diving into bushes but with time and patience we are all able to get superb views of a male and female Spectacled Warbler. The male has a small feather in his bill and looks as if he is trying to show his mate a good place for a nest. She is less enthusiastic but he keeps trying! As we leave a Long-legged Buzzard flies in and perches on a nearby bush, giving us even better views than we have already had.

We carry on and see 2 close Black Kites before a lovely lunch of omelette and chips. We stop again look at another large raptor and turns out to be an immature Tawny Eagle with the identifying wing and markings showing clearly. The bird flying low when we first stop but quickly gains height and another large raptor comes into view lower down. This time it is an adult Bonelli's Eagle, giving us a good opportunity to compare these two species. Incredibly a third raptor past and this is a Short-toed Eagle clearly on migration as it keeps going. Three Eagle species in a few minutes is not surprisingly the day's highlight for many.



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Another brief stop allows us to get very good views of Thekla Lark, a species we have seen but find very easily confused with Crested Lark. There are several races of each species in Morocco, which doesn't help, and their physical features may overlap but the voice is distinctive. We see common migrants and also two orange-coloured Spiny-tailed Lizards over 2 feet long.



We make our final stop of the day overlooking Ouarzazarte Reservoir, a huge body of water. There are Crested Larks as we get out (for comparison with last stop's Thekla) and a scan of the lake reveals Great Crested Grebes and Black-headed Gulls (both new for trip) as well as Cormorants and a pair of Ruddy Shelduck. A Gull-billed Tern flies past and a Squacco Heron flies along then changes its mind and flies back to land at the water's edge.

We are staying in the ancient city of Ouarzazarte tonight in a hotel at the top of a small hill. David and Peter have seen Egrets heading to a roost in the dusk.

Weather: Sunny all day with temp up to 30° C.

**Day's tally: 69 species.**  
**Running total: 169 species.**

### Friday 4 April

An 8am start lets the early birders wander around the hotel gardens and David and Peter have sussed the Egret roost, counting 100 Little and over 30 Cattle Egrets. They also count the returning Night Herons and have 64 of these. The latter are of course still in the trees,



mainly adults but with a few immature birds. There are also Blackcaps, Willow and Bonelli's Warblers and Chiffchaffs in the hotel trees.

We are heading through the High Atlas pass today and make a stop on rocky slopes as we search for Barbary Partridges. We find Rufous-tailed and Blue Rock Thrushes, Desert Larks, Black Wheatears and House Buntings pretending to be

Rock Buntings but no sign of Partridges.

We have a relaxing wander around Ait ben Haddou, an old kasbah, with fertile allotments. A White Stork is nesting on the top of an old castle and the bushes are full of migrants. Tree Pipits show well and African Blue Tit, Nightingale, yet another Wryneck and our first Sardinian Warbler for a while. We climb higher and higher and stop near the picturesque Tiz'n Tichka pass for a picnic. New birds are Rock Sparrows, which are unhelpfully in trees, and a female Black Redstart. Flocks of European Bee-eaters are passing over all the time and an immature Barbary Falcon causes havoc hunting. The Bee-eaters swirl around in a tight flock and then shoot through the trees and the Falcon leaves empty-handed. Two Mistle Thrushes are also new for the trip.



After lunch we explore the surrounding area and Josele flushes two Barbary Partridges which fly headlong into a steep gorge. Peter is the only other person to get a glimpse but not sufficient to tick it. We'll keep looking. We stop to listen and look for Levillant's Woodpeckers and hear one in the distance. We are high up in conifers and find some familiar birds like Coal Tit, Robin and Great Spotted Woodpecker and hear Wren and Short-toed Treecreeper. At another stop we find a family of Common Crossbills and see several Booted Eagles over a hillside.

We are staying in Marrakech tonight and tomorrow night. The Barbary Falcon and Bee-eaters as well as the dramatic scenery were today's highlights.

Weather: Sunny all day, cooler high in the mountains but over 20° C all day.

**Day's tally: 63 species. Running total: 176 species.**



### Saturday 5 April

We are going up to the snowline today looking for Crimson-winged Finches and also continuing our search for Levillant's Woodpecker Barbary Partridges. The journey isn't but we are climbing all the time. We have a couple of stops to listen for Woodpecker and there is one calling as we get out the second time. Andy is the first to find the bird the base of a tree and it moves around slowly, not always in view. It off, disturbed by a man wandering nearby.



Everyone gets a brief glimpse but are we satisfied? Andy is also the only one to see a Barbary Partridge standing on a rock by the road as we drive by. Very frustrating! We reach the ski resort and are surrounded by Red-billed and Alpine Choughs in the sky and on the grass in front of us. We take the buses as far as we can and see a beautiful Shore Lark and displaying *seebohmi* Wheatears close to the road. We're on foot from here and start climbing the stony track. Shore Larks and *seebohmi* Wheatears turn out to be widespread and quite numerous and we see Moussier's and Black Redstart and more Rock Sparrows.

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After nearly a mile we're just below some extensive patches of snow, with daffodils and crocuses around our feet, when sharp-eyed Peter spots some small birds on some rocks amid the snow. They are very distant but Josele has seen enough to say that they are our quarry – Crimson-winged Finches. There seems to be a small flock of 8 birds flitting about giving very poor views and then they fly off. Where did they go? We don't know but don't think they have gone far. Josele starts climbing up one route and Ian, Bill and Nick go another way. Josele relocates them 10 yards in front of him and all the group, except the other three climbers, get excellent views of the birds from lower down. Given time, though, the other three catch up

with the finches which are flying around and settling again every few minutes. Close views, in particular of one of the males as he sings, finally please us all.

Much cheered with our success we head down for a delicious tagine lunch. We have time for a wander after lunch and Peter is on his own when he hears a Barbary Partridge close to him. We all join him but a thorough search of the area produces nothing.



We drive down from the top of the road and stop for a walk in a likely area for Partridges. Distractions abound with Moussier's Redstarts, Blue Rock Thrushes and our first Rock and Cirl Buntings but 2 Barbary Partridges are flushed and whizz down the hill and are gone. Andy nearly treads on a third and it flies to the right, never to be seen again.

Very good so far but we still need a better view of the Levillant's Woodpecker. We stop in the same place and again immediately hear the bird laughing at us from the trees at the top of the hill. We find a tree with a freshly chipped hole so know we are very close. The Woodpecker appears in the open on a tree trunk and poses for us for more than 5 minutes. We all get unbeatable close-ups of the distinctive head pattern with the black moustache. We

did it! Another great day's birding to round off a wonderful trip through ever-changing dramatic landscapes.

Weather: Sunny all day though a few spots of rain as well. Temp in the mountains still about 20° C but very hot back in Marrakech later.

We went through the checklist for a final time and today's tally was 50 species making a grand total of 185 species. This includes 9 subspecies (of which 4 are Yellow Wagtails and 1 White Wagtail) detailed in the Checklist.





### **Sunday 6 April**

Despite needing to leave for the airport at 8am, David and Nick were out birding earlier and found a Wood Warbler amongst other warblers near the hotel, so it goes on the list. At the airport, the airline computer decided that half the group had cancelled their return flight, so Ian stayed with them until they could be confirmed on another flight the following morning. We spent most of the day trying to find a bank open on a Sunday but on our way back from yet another closed bank, we found a great public park full of birds, including at least 3 Hawfinches that were untypically not shy, a consolation prize for our extra day in Marrakech. The group went home with lots of memories of the birds and other wildlife that they had seen in this friendly country.

Everyone had an opportunity to comment on the trip and select highlights – the Bald Ibises and Houbara Bustard were popular choices, not surprisingly. Nick added that he never thought that he really had a chance of seeing one! The stunning Black-crowned Tchagras on the second day and the male Mourning Wheatear were mentioned along with Thick-billed Larks, Plain Martin and the moment with three Eagle species together. Six Wrynecks in three days can't be bad, said David, and Josele added that the falcon sightings that we had were unbelievable, both Lanner and Barbary Falcons. Seeing migration so visibly, especially the number of small passerines that had crossed the Sahara Desert, was quite awesome.

We travelled extensively across many different landscapes in a part of this very large, developing country and enjoyed the cultural delights of the trip. James particularly enjoyed the seasonal lake near Mergouza. A wide variety of mammals, butterflies and reptiles were also seen and are included in the Checklist.

*Report: Ian Ford*     **Morocco 2008**