

Magical Morocco 2016

Trip Report

By Yeray Seminario

27 March - 7 April 2016



Pharaoh Eagle-Owl, one of the most sought after birds in Morocco

Morocco is home to a wide variety of species and a huge contrast of landscapes, which has made it a popular destination for nature enthusiasts. Its ancient culture and stunning natural beauty are truly a treat for the senses. For passionate birders, it provides the opportunity to find some of the North African specialties that are hard to get anywhere else in the world.

Our Magical Morocco tour is designed to explore the most diverse array of landscapes in the country - starting at the great wetlands of the Moroccan coast, crossing the sublime mountains of the Atlas and reaching the sands of the Sahara. Adding to the fantastic birds and beautiful scenery, Morocco provides wonderful photographic opportunities and exotic and delicious food.

As always, we pay close attention to every detail, and one of the key aspects is making sure we stay in high quality hotels with a charming atmosphere using the services of <u>Special Lodgings</u> - the best selection for award-winning lodgings in Morocco and Andalusia.

Tour Leaders: Marta Curti, Yeray Seminario

Itinerary

Day 1 - 27 March

Our tour began in Rabat, the capital of Morocco. Since all the participants had arrived the day before, we had a full morning and were able to begin the tour in a relaxed way. Our first stop was a visit to one of the most interesting sightseeing spots in the city, the Kasbah of the Udayas, a walled compound from the XI Century. This beautiful Kasbah is strategically located at the mouth of the Oued (River) Bou Regreg, where shorebirds and gulls roamed the shoreline. Inside the walls, we saw **Common Bulbul**, as well as **House Bunting**. There were other passerines in the beautiful Andalusian Gardens inside the Kasbah, including **European Serin** and our first **Red-rumped Swallow** of the trip. Full list of the morning <u>here</u>.



Kasbah of the Udayas in Rabat as seen from Oued Bou Regreg

After a fantastic traditional lunch in Rabat we went to our first real birding hotspot: Sidi Boughaba. The main attraction of this nature reserve is the lake that gives it its name and which is home to a great selection of waterbirds, including good numbers of White-headed Duck, Ferruginous Duck and Marbled Duck. We also got good looks at Red-crested Pochard, Red-knobbed Coot and other interesting resident species, like the Maghreb Magpie (*Pica pica mauritanica*) and African Blue Tit. Full list of the afternoon here.

Day 2 - 28 March

Our second day in the country began with an early morning visit to the Zaër Forest in search of the **Double-spurred Francolin**. Even though we arrived at sunrise, we didn't see or hear this bird. However, we did get some great views of 4 **Black-crowned Tchagras**, one of the target species in Morocco. There were a few raptors to be seen in the area, including: **Black-winged Kite**, **Booted Eagle**, **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** and **Black Kite**. Other interesting species we saw in the morning were: **European Turtle Dove**, **European Bee-eater**, **Woodchat Shrike**, and lots of **Willow Warbler** and **African Chaffinch** (the regional subspecies of Common Chaffinch). Full list of the morning <u>here</u>.

After our early morning birding, we returned to the hotel for a fabulous breakfast before heading on to Azrou, where we would spend one night. Along the way we stopped at every opportunity - either to take scenic shots, or to observe some interesting birds. Near El-Hajeb, we stopped for a group of about 30 **Lesser Kestrel**. Once stopped, we took the opportunity to scan around for other birds:



Red-knobbed Coot can be found at Sidi Boughaba



Black-eared Wheatear, a common resident and migrant bird of open country in Morocco

Atlas Long-legged Buzzard, Crested Lark, European Stonechat, Black-eared Wheatear and Western Yellow Wagtail, were some of them. Full list here.

After a short break in our charming, comfortable, family-run hotel, we went to visit the Cedar Forest near Azrou. The first **Barbary Macaque** we saw was sitting a few feet from the road, quietly contemplating its surroundings. We stopped the bus and as we began to look around, we realized that a troop of about 20 individuals was present. After taking pictures of these endangered animals, we returned to the task at hand - birding. We were rewarded with sightings of **Atlas Great Spotted Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos major mauritanus*), **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Coal Tit**, the beautiful **Firecrest**, and **Mistle Thrush**, among others. We could hear a **Levaillant's Woodpecker** too. Full list of the walk <u>here</u>. Back at our hotel we enjoyed another delicious Moroccan dinner.



Barbary Macaque in the Cedar Forest

Day 3 - 29 March

We had an early breakfast with orange juice, coffee, rgaif (a local pancake), yogurt and more, and then we set out for Dayet Aoua, near Ifrane. We had a great morning there, with a list of 60 species of birds. Shortly after our arrival we heard and saw **Levaillant's Woodpecker**, which was one of our main targets in the area. Also present were good numbers of water birds, including more than 100 **Red-knobbed Coot** and plenty of **Ferruginous Duck**. Passerines were plentiful too, and we saw a few raptors, as well including a **Short-toed Eagle** passing overhead, and **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** flying directly towards our group. When we were having lunch by the side of the lake, the familiar call of a **Eurasian Scops-Owl** came from the nearby trees. After some searching, we found one individual, certainly a nice addition and a lifer for many in the group. See full list of the morning here.

After lunch we headed south, towards the Middle Atlas. The scenic drive took us through some of the most unique and beautiful landscapes in the country. We stopped when we had photography opportunities or saw any interesting birds. These spontaneous stops helped us add **Ruddy**



Levaillant's Woodpecker near Ifrane

Shelduck (in the hundreds!), **Moussier's Redstart** (one of the Moroccan specialties and the favorite of many in the group!), **Seebohm's Wheatear** (another regional specialty!) and **Rock Bunting** to our list. See full list <u>here</u>.

After the day's drive, we arrived to the Zaida plains, one of the best locations to look for **Dupont's Lark**, although certainly not easy to find. Throughout the day we added other interesting birds to our list, including **Greater Short-toed Lark**, **Lesser Short-toed Lark**, **Sky Lark** and **Desert Wheatear**, but we still hadn't seen our target species. When suddenly and almost unexpectedly, Marta spotted a **Dupont's Lark** foraging just next to our van! Of course we stopped immediately and enjoyed observing it while it was moving fast across the plains. It was certainly a great view and the highlight of the day!

Day 4 - 30 March

After spending the night and having breakfast in a charming hotel in Midelt, we kept moving south towards the Sahara Desert through some of the most spectacular gorges in the country. We stopped in strategic locations to look for rocky habitat species, and spotted **Little Swift**, **Desert Lark**, **Blue Rock-Thrush** and **Black Wheatear**, to name a few. At one of the gorges we had a quick look at a **Bonelli's Eagle**, before it glided out of sight. Full list <u>here</u>.

The road to the desert dunes crosses the Oued Ziz several times, so we took the opportunity to stop next to the river and look for migrants that use the Ziz as a corridor. It was truly a good idea, as we got lucky and saw 32 species from a single spot, adding some interesting species like: Laughing Dove, Western Olivaceous Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Western Orphean Warbler, and Subalpine Warbler. Here we also saw our first Moroccan Wagtail (Motacilla alba subpersonata), with the nominal subspecies of White Wagtail next to it for good comparison. However, the most exciting sighting was the gorgeous mixed flock of a few European Bee-eater



Scenic view at the Atlas Mountains

with dozens of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, feeding and perching next to the river while sounding their distinctive call. Full list here.

Our next stop was Rissani. Here, we tried to get another target for our trip, the **Pharaoh Eagle-Owl**. We scanned an area with cliffs where it's known to occur, but we weren't lucky. However, we did get to see a **Lanner Falcon** taking off from the cliff, which is not a bad consolation prize! It was late already, so we started to head to our hotel near Merzouga. Although it was fully dark, we could see **Cream-colored Courser** in the headlights of our van as well as two **Lesser Egyptian Jerboa**.



Desert Lark, subspecies Payni

Day 5 - 31 March



The views of the sand dunes from our hotel in the early morning

We woke up early and after another delicious Moroccan breakfast, our group headed out for an adventure in 4x4 vehicles into the Erg Chebbi, the largest complex of sand dunes in Morocco and the gate to the Sahara Desert. We expected to see most if not all the desert specialties of the region. And we did well! One by one we started seeing all the key species, more than 30 species in one of the best mornings of the tour. We started with large flocks of loud **Spotted Sandgrouse**, that were coming in to drink at a pond. Watching the flocks of sand sandgrouse with their unmistakable call and with the light of the sunrise bright on the tallest dunes was an unforgettable view. We also got to see a small flock of **Crowned Sandgrouse**. The **Greater Hoopoe-Lark** was in full display and came to be the favorite of many participants, same as the **Cream-colored Courser**. Other highlights included several **Desert Sparrow**, the **Egyptian Nightjar** resting in the middle of a dry wadi, and the beautiful and much sought after **African Desert Warbler**. A full list of the birding session in the morning is here.

After a very exciting morning, we went for lunch and a short break before our afternoon trip to the Rissani area. We went to try again for the **Pharaoh Eagle-Owl** in another location. However, we missed the owl again, but we added a few other species, including our only singing **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** in a known site at Oued Ziz, and enjoyed the magnificent landscape in the afternoon light as we watched more than 100 **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater** come in to roost. A full list can be found here.

Day 6 - 1 April

Today we had a few hours of driving, so we took it easy and started driving west, stopping whenever there was something interesting. In fact, it didn't take long before we heard a group of about 10 **Fulvous Chaterers**. They were on the move, and difficult to get in the scope but we got to see them and hear them well in the end. We also got to see a **Common Quail** as it was flushed by a herd of goats! Other interesting birds were **Southern Gray Shrike** (*sp elegans*), **Brownnecked Raven** (they seem to be more common than ever near Merzouga), **Bar-tailed Lark** and **Trumpeter Finch**, to name a few. Full list of birds here.



Another favorite for the group, the very well camouflaged Egyptian Nightjar



Desert Sparrow with the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi in the background



A beautiful flock of Spotted Sandgrouse against the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi



African Desert Warbler near Merzouga



Brown-necked ravens near Merzouga



Pharaoh Eagle-Owl near Boumaine

We enjoyed a packed lunch near Goulmima, and then made a stop at the best-known site for **Scrub Warbler**. It took us some time until Donna found one individual for everyone else to see, but in the process we got to see **Thick-billed Lark**, **Maghreb Lark** and several migratory passerines, including **Garden Warbler**, **Subalpine Warbler**, **Greater Whitethroat** and **Northern Wheatear**. Full list here.

Our next stop was at the Todra Gorge, more for the scenery than the birds, but it's always worth a visit. This is the list of birds we saw during the short time we spent there. Before reaching our hotel in Boumalne, we made the third and last try for the **Pharaoh Eagle-Owl**. Elcira remained hopeful and said "third time's a charm". And certainly it was! We got to see the owl as it was coming back to a ledge after chasing a **Red Fox**! We assumed that the owl chicks were nearby, and the adult went to chase the fox away. We will never know, but the truth is that we got superb views in the scope of this magnificent bird until it took off with the very last light of the afternoon. Last but not least, a **Long-legged Buzzard** nest with at least three chicks was the icing on the cake of another fantastic day.

Day 7 - 2 April

Our next morning was going to be in one of the most popular birding hotspots in Morocco, the famous Tagdilt Track. The area wasn't as active as it had been only a few weeks before, but it was good nevertheless. In fact, we got to add a few species to our list: **Black Stork**, **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, **Temminck's Lark** and **Red-rumped Wheatear**. This is another good place for **Atlas Long-legged Buzzard**, although we only saw one. Full list of the morning here.



We saw good numbers of Cream-colored Courser at the Tagdilt Track

After feasting on traditional (and excellent) Moroccan couscous at the hotel, we packed up our things and started the drive towards Ouarzazate, our next destination. Here, we would explore the edges of the extensive reservoir, which has proven to be excellent for both resident and migratory waterbirds. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by large numbers of birds, including **Ruddy**



White-tailed Wheatear, commonly seen in the region



Desert Wheatear at the famous Tagdilt Track

Shelduck, Marbled Duck, Greater Flamingo, Glossy Ibis and a flock of more than 200 Collared Pratincole, to name just a few species. A young Peregrine Falcon made its presence known by chasing shorebirds above the water. Other interesting birds were Tawny Pipit and a beautiful male Bluethroat, detected by Richard, lots of Western Yellow Wagtails, the majority of the subspecies *iberiae*, and 2 Red-throated Pipit. Full list here.

After that, we visited the impressive Kasbah of Aït Ben Haddou, where many Hollywood movies and TV shows have been filmed, including Gladiator and Game of Thrones. Our excellent hotel was located nearby, and after a fabulous dinner we rested and got ready for the next day.

Day 8 - 3 April

Today we drove through the Souss Massa-Draa Valley towards Agadir. We were hoping to see Maghreb Wheatear (also known as Western Mourning Wheatear) which had eluded us until then. After a couple of stops where we observed resident and migrant passerines, we passed near a deep wadi. Suddenly Jeanette called out that she had seen a suspicious wheatear - this could be our bird! We got out of the bus as fast as we could and started scanning. After a few minutes we were on the bird, a Maghreb Wheatear indeed! We ended up seeing one male and one female, along with Desert Lark. Not far from there, another wadi gave cover to Laughing Dove, Eurasian Crag Martin, Barbary Ground Squirrel and a beautiful Changeable Agama. Full list here.

Our next stop was at Aoulouz, where we took a short walk next to a large cliff. There we saw **Black Stork**, **Squacco Heron**, **Southern Gray Shrike** (sp *algeriensis*), **Gray Wagtail** and **Moroccan Wagtail**, to name a few. Here, we could see a pair of **Barbary Falcons** that provided a great show, soaring and diving in front of the cliff.



Barbary Falcon photographed near Tamri

We kept on the road towards Agadir, passing good areas of Argan forest, arriving to our hotel at sunset. Full list of Aoulouz <u>here</u>.

Day 9 - 4 April

Another highlight for any birding trip to Morocco is a visit to the Souss Massa National Park, near the coastal city of Agadir. On the way to the park, **Eurasian Magpie** from subspecies *mauritanica* is plentiful, as well as up to three different larks: **Crested Lark**, **Greater Short-toed Lark** and **Lesser Short-toed Lark**. We spent most of our time scanning the riverbed of the Oued Massa, where we got to see our first **Plain Martin**. The unmistakable song of the **Black-crowned Tchagra**, announced its presence, and we saw two individuals very well. Also new for the group were two **Southern Gray Shrike** from subspecies *algeriensis*, clearly darker than the *elegans* type.

However, the real jewel of Souss Massa is the **Northern Bald Ibis** - one of the most critically endangered birds in the world. And this region of Morocco is the most important stronghold of the global population, with only a couple dozen pairs in Spain, and a few other individuals in projects in Austria and Turkey. The ibises are normally seen more easily near Tamri, and we weren't holding out hope to see them here. But there they were! Up to 38 individuals came flying and landed very close to where we were, being received with great excitement by all the group. We enjoyed relatively close views of these unique birds for several minutes. After they began to move away, we started heading back to the hotel. Full list of birds seen at Souss Massa here.





Northern Bald Ibis, one of the most critically endangered birds in the world

After the Souss Massa we took the coastal road north of Agadir towards Tamri. We were planning to stop at Cape Rhir for some **seawatching** and another chance for the **Northern Bald Ibis**. When we arrived to the cape the wind was blowing strong from the north and there were high waves, but we took cover in a well-protected spot and tried nevertheless. This happened to be a good idea as we had a chance to see a large number of **Common Scoter** and **Northern Gannet** passing by.

We were surprised to not see many **Cory's Shearwaters**, but again, the conditions were difficult. However, this didn't prevent us from seeing two **Razorbills**, several **Audouin's Gulls** and a few **Cory's**. On the coastal bush we got to see **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and **Tawny Pipit**, among others. We stopped near the village of Tamri for lunch, an area with a coastal lagoon with good numbers of gulls, terns and waders. Full list here.

After lunch we continued our journey to Essaouira, our next destination. There we explored the mouth of Oued Ksab, where we had great views of **Plain Martin**, as well as some shorebirds, including **Pied Avocet**, **Red Knot** and **Ruff**. Full list here. Upon our arrival in the charming city of Essaouira we went straight to the harbor where we were lucky enough to see a **Glaucous Gull** that has been present for the last two years in the area! With this highlight we went on to explore the medina and enjoyed our dinner with local live music before going to rest in our excellent hotel.



The third-year Glaucous Gull at Essaouira

Day 11 - 6 April

We started our drive to Oukaimeden, in the High Atlas, early in the morning, arriving in time for lunch and to see our first mountain specialists: Red-billed Chough and Yellow-billed Chough, as well as brief looks at Alpine Accentor. Closer to the village we were delighted to see one of our target species for the area: African Crimson-winged Finch! Taking a walk around the ski resort and surroundings, we added little by little some of the species that we needed to see, including close views of Atlas Horned Lark (Shore lark) found by Richard, and a pair of White-throated Dippers. We had more time to stop on our way down, and were able to take pictures of the impressive landscape of the Ourika Valley. Once in Marrakech, we had the opportunity to have another fabulous dinner in one of the best restaurants in the city and explore the famous square Jemma El-Fdna, with its amazing mix of street performers, food and spice stands, traditional music, and magicians -quite a sensory experience which makes for unforgettable memories of a true magical country.

Day 12 - 7 April

Our last morning was dedicated to packing as part of the group had a relatively early flight to the Canary Islands, to take part in the Extension Tour: Canary Islands Endemics.



African Crimson-winged Finch has now been split from its Asian counterpart



Atlas Horned Lark, also known as Shore Lark, at Oukaimeden, High Atlas

Thanks!

We want to thank all the participants for their enthusiasm and great sense of team work to find some of the most difficult birds. Thanks for being a part of this tour! Also, we owe a debt of gratitude to Ahmed, our great driver, who always went beyond his obligations in order to provide our group with the best possible experience.



Atlas Long-legged Buzzard at the Tagdilt Track

Wildlife Observation List

Birds

49. Little Ringed Plover

50. Common Sandpiper

Ruddy Shelduck 51. Green Sandpiper 1. 101. Eurasian Jay 2. Gadwall 52. Common Greenshank 102. Eurasian Magpie 3. Mallard 53. Wood Sandpiper 103. Red-billed Chough 4. Northern Shoveler 54. Common Redshank 104. Yellow-billed Chough 5. Northern Pintail 55. Whimbrel 105. Eurasian Jackdaw 6. Marbled Duck 56. Ruddy Turnstone 106. Brown-necked Raven 7. **Red-crested Pochard** 57. Red Knot 107. Common Raven 8. Common Pochard 58. Ruff 108. Greater Hoopoe-Lark 59. Sanderling 9. Ferruginous Duck 109. Dupont's Lark 60. Cream-colored Courser 10. Common Scoter 110. Bar-tailed Lark 61. Collared Pratincole 11. White-headed Duck 111. Desert Lark 12. Common Quail 62. Razorbill 112. Thick-billed Lark 13. Little Grebe 63. Black-headed Gull 113. Greater Short-toed Lark 14. Great Crested Grebe 64. Mediterranean Gull 114. Lesser Short-toed Lark 15. Eared Grebe 65. Audouin's Gull 115. Crested Lark 66. Yellow-legged Gull 16. Greater Flamingo 116. Thekla Lark 17. Cory's Shearwater 67. Lesser Black-backed Gull 117. Sky Lark 18. Black Stork 68. Glaucous Gull 118. Shore Lark 19. White Stork 69. Gull-billed Tern 119. Temminck's Lark 20. Northern Gannet 70. Caspian Tern 120. Brown-throated Martin 21. Great Cormorant 71. Sandwich Tern 121. Bank Swallow 72. Spotted Sandgrouse 122. Eurasian Crag-Martin 22. Gray Heron 23. Great Egret 73. Black-bellied Sandgrouse 123. Barn Swallow 24. Little Egret 74. Crowned Sandgrouse 124. Red-rumped Swallow 25. Cattle Egret 75. Rock Pigeon 125. Common House-Martin 26. Squacco Heron 76. Stock Dove 126. Coal Tit 77. Common Wood-Pigeon 27. Black-crowned Night-Heron 127. African Blue Tit 28. Glossy Ibis 78. European Turtle-Dove 128. Great Tit 29. Northern Bald Ibis 79. Eurasian Collared-Dove 129. Eurasian Nuthatch 30. Eurasian Spoonbill 80. Laughing Dove 130. Short-toed Treecreeper 31. Osprey 81. European Scops-Owl 131. White-throated Dipper 32. Black-winged Kite 82. Pharaoh Eagle-Owl 132. Common Bulbul 33. Egyptian Vulture 83. Little Owl 133. Firecrest 34. Short-toed Eagle 84. Egyptian Nightjar 134. Scrub Warbler 135. Cetti's Warbler 35. Booted Eagle 85. Pallid Swift 36. Bonelli's Eagle 86. Little Swift 136. Willow Warbler 37. Eurasian Marsh-Harrier 87. Eurasian Hoopoe 137. Common Chiffchaff 38. Eurasian Sparrowhawk 88. Common Kingfisher 138. Western Bonelli's Warbler 39. Black Kite 89. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater 139. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler 40. Long-legged Buzzard 90. European Bee-eater 140. Western Olivaceous Warbler 41. Western Swamphen 91. Great Spotted Woodpecker 141. Melodious Warbler 42. Eurasian Moorhen 92. Levaillant's Woodpecker 142. Sedge Warbler 43. Red-knobbed Coot 93. Lesser Kestrel 143. Eurasian Reed-Warbler 44. Eurasian Coot 94. Eurasian Kestrel 144. Zitting Cisticola 45. Black-winged Stilt 95. Lanner Falcon 145. Eurasian Blackcap 46. Pied Avocet 96. Peregrine Falcon 146. African Desert Warbler 47. Kentish Plover 97. Barbary Falcon 147. Western Orphean Warbler 48. Common Ringed Plover 98. Black-crowned Tchagra 148. Subalpine Warbler

149. Sardinian Warbler

150. Fulvous Chatterer

99. Southern Gray Shrike

100. Woodchat Shrike

151. European Robin

152. Common Nightingale

153. Bluethroat

154. Moussier's Redstart

155. Common Redstart

156. Black Redstart

157. Blue Rock-Thrush

158. European Stonechat

159. White-tailed Wheatear

160. Black Wheatear

161. Northern Wheatear

162. Seebohm's Wheatear

163. Mahgreb Wheatear

164. Red-rumped Wheatear

165. Black-eared Wheatear

166. Desert Wheatear

167. Eurasian Blackbird

168. Mistle Thrush

169. Spotless Starling

170. Alpine Accentor

171. Western Yellow Wagtail

172. Gray Wagtail

173. White Wagtail

174. Tawny Pipit

175. Meadow Pipit

176.Red-throated Pipit

177. Water Pipit

178.Cirl Bunting

179.Rock Bunting

180. House Bunting

181.Corn Bunting

182. Common Chaffinch

183.Crimson-winged Finch

184. Trumpeter Finch

185. European Greenfinch

186. European Goldfinch

187. Eurasian Linnet

188. European Serin

189. House Sparrow

190.Desert Sparrow

191.Rock Sparrow

Mammals

- 1. Barbary Macaque
- 2. Red Fox
- 3. Barbary Ground Squirrel
- 4. Sand Rat
- 5. Lesser Egyptian Jerboa

Reptiles

- 1. Changeable Agama
- 2. North African Eyed Lizard
- 3. Atlantic Lizard
- 4. European Pond Terrapin
- 5. Spanish Terrapin