

## Morocco April 2007 – Rob Morris

As I'd been to Morocco twice before on a Slender-billed Curlew trip in 1988 and in 1990 in the summer, I had a limited number of specific targets – some recent splits – Atlas Flycatcher and African Desert Warbler, some sub-species such as (African) Crimson-winged Finch and *Sararae* Egyptian Nightjars, getting better view of Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and re-seeing a few things I'd not seen for nearly 20 years – e.g. Thick-billed and Dupont's Larks. I only had 5 days to do this so I 'zipped' around a lot and did a lot of (careful!) evening /night-time driving. This is a brief summary of the key birds (for me) that I saw.

**25<sup>TH</sup> APRIL** – Flew with BA Heathrow to Marrakech. Picked up hire car and drove straight to Oukaimeden. Found a room to sleep in and got some sleep at around 11pm.

**26<sup>TH</sup> APRIL** – Birded Oukaimeden from 6am to 10am. Best birds - **4 Crimson-winged Finches (*aliena*)** from the track beyond the base of last ski-lift. Superb views including one singing male. Male **Levaillant's Green woodpecker** – calling from the top of a pine at the first patch of pines on the way down (and a 2<sup>nd</sup> bird lower down in an orchard). Also 4 Shorelarks, 12 Seebom's Wheatears, 2 Black wheatears, 4 Moussier's Redstarts, c.50 Rock Sparrows, 100+Alpine and c10 Red-billed Chough, 2 Great-spotted Woodpeckers (lower down), 2 Golden Orioles. Lower down some superb Sub-alpine Warblers provided a 15 minutes break as I had a late breakfast!

I then drove south through the Tizi-n-Tichka pass. I was going to stop at the Tagdilt Track at Boumaine-du-Dades but heavy rain and hail (which temporarily turned the desert white) persuaded me other wise. I continued on to Erfoud arriving at 4.30pm, filled up with fuel and continued on to the sandy wadi 500m south of Auberge Kasbah Said. After only a few minutes I was watching my most wanted bird of the trip. First one and then 2 (a pair) of **African Desert Warblers** – quickly flitting between clumps of vegetation and then running around on the sand down to just a few metres. What a treat! I heard a number of Spotted Sandgrouse and saw my first Hoopoe Larks of the trip. I continued on to Auberge Kasbah Darkaoua for the night. Heavy rain and thunder created havoc but in between showers I got poor flight views of Egyptian Nightjar.

## **27<sup>TH</sup> APRIL**

First light I was backing watching the African Desert Warblers in the same wadi. This time I watched 5 together – 2 quite worn adults and 3 juvs with stunted rufous tails and dark irises. This was something I didn't know and the contrast between the grey brown iris of the juv and the bright yellow iris of the adult was very notable. There had been a good fall of migrants over night and in addition to resident treats of Desert Sparrow (at a breeding site by the dunes), Fulvous babblers, bar-tailed desert and hoopoe larks, trumpeter finches, numerous Spotted sandgrouse (one pair seen drinking in a puddle right beside the car) and several groups of Cream coloured coursers, the various 'oasis' abounded with warblers, chats and flycatchers (20+ Pied Flys (but no Atlas), 6 whinchats, 3 Rufous Bushchats, Redstarts, 2 Grasshopper warblers, 100s of swifts and

European bee-eaters heading north and many turtle doves. I was also surprised to see Palm Doves in this area which I don't recall from past visits.

Merzouga Lake was also full of birds – many breeding Ruddy shelduck, collared pratincoles (c.15), and large numbers of black and gull-billed terns.

It was now nearly lunchtime and I was now thinking of my next main target – Atlas Flycatcher. I took the new road to Rissani and detoured out to get spectacular views of the Pharaoh Eagle Owl, being mobbed by brown-necked ravens, about 5kms to the west. Apparently, the wadis I crossed, which were about 30cm deep in sand coloured water, were impassable a day or two later.

After this brief but fruitful diversion, it was back to the road and a drive north along the Ziz valley. I stopped briefly to watch a mixed group of European and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters before driving north to the Tizi-n-Tairhemt. In scrub, 2km north of the pass, I was soon watching some spectacular male Tristram's Warblers (2 pairs). I reached the plains south of Zeida at around 5pm and it was bright, still and sunny. Lesser-short-toed and Thekla Larks were common and I also noted several Red-rumped and Desert Wheatears. I was listening out for Dupont's Larks and soon I heard 1 then 2 and then several possibly 5 or 6. It wasn't long before I found one sitting on a 6 inch bush – superb views in the scope as it sang. This was a 'rufous' bird. I used an MP3 player to call in 2 further birds that ran very close to me to allow prolonged observations. The 3 birds were all very similar in plumage but none looked like the NW African form 'described' (which has none of these warm tones) – they were all a spangled rufous and brown colour.

As it began to get dark I drove north to Azrou for some much earned rest.

## **28<sup>TH</sup> APRIL**

Pre-dawn I was 11km north of Azrou on the road to Ifrane watching the local form of Tawny Owl which seems to be common here. As dawn broke I was soon watching a male Atlas Flycatcher. Over the next 3 hours this was the focus of my attention and they were common here with at least 6 singing males recorded. I also saw 2 Levaillant's Green and 2 Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Great, Coal and North-African Blue Tits, Nuthatch, ST Treecreeper, Stock Doves, Rollers, Raven, 'African' Chaffinches and many Rock Sparrows – in Oak woodland!

With mission 'Atlas Fly' accomplished I decided to head south and west – back to Er Rachidia and on to Tagdilt for the evening. I stopped en route numerous times to watch Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Desert, (Western) Black-eared and Seebohm's Wheatears, Thekla Larks and yet another Levaillant's Green Woodpecker.

A post lunch stop 47km W of Er Rachidia produced a very wanted 'year tick'. A family group of Thick-billed Larks. I first found 2 immature birds which looked like heavy billed Dunn's Larks! After temporary confusion they were joined by their parents – confusion over!

I then headed for Tagdilt for an evening's birding. The area was more disturbed than the last time I'd been here (20 years ago) and I thought the chances of Houbara were slim (and I was right!). I took heart in the knowledge I'd soon be watching them at leisure in Fuerteventura (and I was right again as I saw them every time I went to the desert areas at Costa Calma later in May!)

Birding was still reasonably productive with 6 more Thick-billed Larks, 10+ Temminck's Horned, Desert, Lesser-short toed, short-toed and Hoopoe Larks, Desert, Northern and Red-rumped Wheatears, many Trumpeter Finches, 2 Lanner Falcons, at least 10 Cream-coloured Coursers and a couple of Long-legged Buzzards.

It was then decision time. I still wanted to see Egyptian Nightjar (I thought I'd check out a site near Taroudannt mentioned on [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com)) and I still wanted to 're-see' the NW African forms of Magpie and 'White' Wagtail – *subpersonata*. I thus decided to carry on west that evening. I drove on to Ouarzazate and then to Tazenakht. Another well deserved rest from 11pm to 4am – and I was back on the road heading for the SW of Morocco.

## 29<sup>TH</sup> APRIL

As day dawned I was still east of Taroudannt – I soon found my first '**NW African**' **Magpies** with their distinctive blue / violet skin behind the eye. I really like this distinctive form and I spent a while watching my first few groups of these. I headed further west and headed for O. Massa. I soon found a breeding pair of '**Moroccan Wagtails**' on the weir on the Massa River upstream of where the P30 crosses the river. I then spent the morning birding O. Massa and then O. Sous Estuary with their abundance of shorebirds, herons, spoonbills, flamingos etc. Nothing unexpected – but excellent birding.

I then headed north to Tamri and spent a while watching **Bald Ibis** (c20), Audouin's Gulls, another 'Moroccan Wagtail' and a good selection of waterbirds. Offshore there was a huge movement of Black Terns heading north and I also saw a couple of Balearic Shearwaters (but no Cory's!).

It was time to head back to Agadir and then on to Taroudannt. I took the road along the south side of the Sous valley (not the normal main road) and then found the location described on the Birdguides website. A Black-shoulder Kite en route was a nice distraction. As dusk approach I was soon watching a singing **Egyptian Nightjar**, then another. Several were calling around me, and it was still quiet light. This species has clearly been over-looked in this area and their response to MP3 play back was immediate – they flew across the sand covered wadi and landed within a few metres of me. A superb end to the day. A short drive to Aoulouz and a long night's rest was well deserved.

## 30<sup>TH</sup> APRIL

Predawn I was watching **Red-necked Nightjar** in the Aragana Forest (near Tafingoult) – this site is only a few miles from where the previous night I'd been watching Egyptians (although the scattered woodland habitat was very different). Other birds in this area included Stone Curlews, Little owl, Western Olivaceous, Melodious and Western Orphean Warblers, Rufous Bushchat and some excellent views of Barbary Partridges.

I then headed back towards Marrakech stopping before the Tizi-n-Test Pass in the village of Chafarni to see my last sub-species target – '**Moroccan**' **Crossbills** (*poliogyne*). Several singing males in the pine woodland around the village gave excellent views including one that sang from a telegraph wire! I spent the rest of the day birding my way back to Marrakech seeing several Black Wheatears, Rufous Bushchats, Moussier's Redstarts, Sub-alpine Warblers, several groups of Barbary Partridges, Blue Rock Thrushes and House Buntings.

Having reached Marrakech in time to catch the evening flight BA Flight to London I did this instead of getting the early morning flight as I'd had brilliant views of all my targets.