

# SOUTHERN MOROCCO 24 March 2008 – 4 April 2008

## A Birdwatching Trip Report by Owain Gabb<sup>1</sup> & Stuart Thomas<sup>2</sup>

### Purpose of this report

This is a summary of 10 days of birding in Southern Morocco. We travelled fairly extensively during the course of the trip, initially visiting the High Atlas, then heading east to Erfoud before ending the trip on the Atlantic coast. We saw many of the species that we had hoped to, stayed in some excellent hotels and auberges and enjoyed some fantastic scenery. We hope that the following account, which includes detailed information on both the birds and the accommodation, allows other birders planning a Moroccan trip a good basis from which to develop an itinerary.

### Getting Around

We arrived in Marrakesh Airport around midday on 24 March. Despite having made some provisional arrangements with Europcar, their desk was not occupied. Instead, we were immediately confronted with Mohammed from Sublime Cars (*apparently* acting as an agent for Europcar), who in the space of 20 minutes had managed to convince us that his 'beautiful' silver Hyundai was the best option. He eventually accepted the same fee as Europcar had quoted (after trying to charge us considerably more) - £320 for ten days. Hire cars are not cheap in Morocco. Mohammed proudly showed us the spare wheel (which was in good nick) and the jack, but did not tell us about the whining fan belt or several irritating minor electrical problems. In fairness, the car performed well over the 10 days, successfully negotiating various types of stony and sandy desert around Merzouga, kilometres of rough stony tracks around Tagdilt and the uneven tracks around the Oued Massa and on the way to Ksar Massa. We drove approximately 2,750 kilometres during the trip. The road surfaces were excellent and the sign-posting very good. There were no problems returning the car, and there was no attempt to charge us for minor scrapes or to make spurious charges for any pre-existing damage<sup>3</sup>. Unleaded petrol averaged approximately 75p per litre and the fuel consumption of the Hyundai was very good.

### Sources of Information

We took the following texts with us:

- Bergier, P. & Bergier, F. (2003). A birdwatchers' guide to Morocco. Prion Ltd. Cley.
- Gosney, D. (1996). Finding birds in Southern Morocco. A Gostours Guide.
- Combridge, P. & Snook, A. (1997). A birdwatching guide to Morocco. Arlequin Press, Chelmsford.
- Thevenot, M., Vernon, R. & Bergier, P. (2003). The birds of Morocco. British Ornithologists Union.

Gosney's guide, despite being somewhat dated, and the more recent guide by Bergier & Bergier, were particularly useful. We also packed the Collins Bird Guide and standard field guides to Odonata and butterflies covering all European and some North African species. In addition we had a useful pre-trip chat with James Lidster and visited various websites such as Go South (Patrick Bergier's site which has numerous trip reports) and [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com). Of particular use were trip reports by Chris Batty and Richard Bonser, as these gave good site descriptions, but there are numerous reports available on line which can be used to inform a trip.

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3 We were stopped by the police in Marrakesh and ordered to pay a spurious fine for 'exceeding the speed limit' (we were in a long line of slow moving traffic at the time). When Stuart queried this, the police reduced their fine to half the previous amount (the final amount that we were forced to pay was about £13). Unfortunately the combination of having a hire car and obviously not being Moroccan means the police can see you coming a mile off...literally!

## **Maps**

We also took a variety of maps. The most useful, being the most contemporary, was the Michelin 1:1,000,000 map of Morocco. We also took the Institut Geographique National 'Carte Touristique Maroc', which is at a slightly better scale (1:800,000). The two maps complemented each other reasonably well, although only one of the two is really necessary. There are additional maps available at 1:500,000 scale published by the Societe de Cartographie et d'Imprimerie du Maroc, but despite the scale these add very little detail, and we did not use the two I had purchased. All maps are available through Stanfords, London.

## **The Itinerary**

We had 9 full days and 2 half days. We knew that we would spend considerable time in the car irrespective of our itinerary, as Southern Morocco is a fairly vast area. Nevertheless, we wanted to spend as much time birding as opposed to driving as possible. On this basis we decided upon a route giving us the opportunity to see High Atlas, desert, argan forest and coastal species, but did not go to Zeida to search for Dupont's lark or to the well known sites in the north for species such as marsh owl, double-spurred francolin, red-knobbed coot and purple gallinule.

### **Day 1. Marrakesh Airport to Oukaimeden.**

A relatively leisurely afternoon. We took about 4 hours getting up to Oukaimeden in the High Atlas, stopping to bird on the way in what appeared to be interesting areas. We then spent a few hours birding around the car parks and ski lift and walked a little way up the valley past the ski lift into a quite upland area before dark.

### **Day 2. Oukaimeden to Ouarzazate via Tizni-n-Tichka pass.**

We started birding at dawn around the radar station, leaving Oukaimeden after breakfast but making very regular stops for the first 20km to look for Levaillant's green woodpecker. We avoided having to go to Ouarzazate via Marrakesh by taking a minor road to Ait-Ourir. The road surface was ok, but it was quite narrow and rather busy, and we were frequently forced onto the gravel to allow cars, trucks and laden donkeys to pass. We then headed on through the Tizni-n-Tichka pass, stopping to bird more occasionally, before eventually reaching Ouarzazate at dusk. The drive probably took around 4.5 hours (excluding the stops).

### **Day 3. Ouarzazate to Boumalne Dades.**

Prior to breakfast we took a short drive back out the way we had come (north-west) the previous day. A few minutes outside Ouarzazate there is a road bearing left towards Agdz and Zagora. We took this road along to the first wadi (on the left), and had about an hour and a half of really excellent birding. After breakfast we headed towards Boumalne, stopping for a long, hot and uneventful trip into some stony desert mid morning and at the water body formed by the Mansour Eddhabi Dam for lunch. We then pressed on to Boumalne in order to spend some time in the Tagdilt area before dark. The latter half of the drive is made considerably longer by the large number of villages that you drive through, and it took us far longer than expected to reach Auberge le Soleil Bleu.

### **Day 4. Boumalne to Erfoud**

Prior to breakfast we spent a few hours near Boumalne birding the various tracks running south of the road towards Tagdilt. We then pressed on towards Erfoud. We made a few stops, but the majority of these were uneventful. The best by far was an area of desert to the south of the road at the Ouarzazate 243km marker (the number of kilometres to Rissani on the near side of the marker has worn off), where thick-billed and bar-tailed desert lark were both common. We then pushed on to Erfoud, where we birded the dry wadi behind Kasbah Tizimi, some wet areas alongside the road to the south of the town and some muddy desert towards Rissani. None of these areas proved particularly interesting.

#### **Day 5. Erfoud / Merzouga / Rissani**

We, along with our Berber guide, Ali 'Fox', who we had met over a beer the previous evening at the Kasbah Tizimi, left at 6am and headed immediately into the desert. Ali is an eccentric but likeable man, obviously well respected and well known to many local people. He has a superb knowledge of the desert tracks, the limits of road vehicles such as the Hyundai and how to get from place to place quickly. He is his own man, keeps his cigarettes in his turban and drinks lager with all meals. He knows very little about birds, although proclaims himself an ornithologist. Should you wish to seek Houbara he is probably not the man for you - unless you can clearly identify your sites and get him to take you to them. Ali took us out of Erfoud along dirt tracks to Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua and on to the Cafe Yamina (and the lake) and the Dunes D'Or for breakfast. The fact that we saw desert sparrow was down to his persistence in taking us to different desert sites with sparrow populations (we visited all of those covered in Gosney). He also took us to a good desert wadi, dispersing the children that attempted to follow us, and across the desert to the Dayet Srji (Merzouga Lake). Until we returned from the lake after lunch, we did not put a tyre on a tarmac road, and both of us (and we both have off-road driving experience) were amazed by what he could get the car to go over (at considerable speed) without causing damage. Ali took his leave near the Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua and we paid him around £40 (DH 600) for his services, which seemed a fair price to us (we had negotiated a reduced rate if we failed to see the desert sparrow). We signed in at the auberge, briefly looked around outside and then headed off to the desert eagle owl site near Rissani, returning after dark.

#### **Day 6. Merzouga to Taliouine**

We made a pre-dawn start at Dayet Srji to look for sandgrouse coming in to drink. After 2 hours on site we returned to Dekkaoua, had breakfast, then birded the garden and wadi for an hour and a half. We re-visited the eagle owl site near Rissani en route, leaving the area around midday. We then drove pretty much flat out for six hours, stopping at one wadi (which was disappointing) before reaching Taliouine just after dark. Note that there is a new stretch of road between Agdz and Tazenakht that is not shown on the IGN Carte Touristique, but is shown on the Michelin map. This road undoubtedly shortened the time it took us to reach Taliouine as most of it is very good (but it is nevertheless dispiritingly slow going as it winds around near Tazenakht).

#### **Day 7. Taliouine to Inezgane**

We did not stay to bird the river valley at Taliouine, preferring to head for the Argan forest at Aoulouz. Unfortunately the mist was down on the higher ground and there was persistent light rain, so after an hour we paid a visit to some nearby farmland on lower ground. After this we drove on to Inezgane, located somewhere to stay and then moved on to the Oued Souss. Locating the northern bank of the river was difficult, as the road network became confusing near Ait-Melloul and we lost our sense of direction. Having eventually worked our way to the Souss however, we birded the area for a few hours, staying until late afternoon. We paid a short visit to the area in front of the Royal Palace in the evening to look for red-necked nightjar, but were told to leave by the guards.

#### **Day 8. Inezgane to Tiznit**

Prior to breakfast we worked the lower reaches of the Oued Souss for a couple of hours. After breakfast we drove the coast road and looked around Massa and Sidi Rabat for accommodation for the night. As none was available / affordable, we drove down to Tiznit, approximately half an hour to the south, where there were numerous hotels. By midday we were back at Massa searching out the tracks across the river shown in Gosney and between mid afternoon and dusk we visited the reserve, which covers a strip of land near the 'mouth' of the river (the river ended in a deep open channel which did not extend to the sea when we visited it, being blocked by a considerable expanse of sand dune).

During our c.2km walk between the car park and the mouth, guides working for the national park approached us no fewer than 5 times. They offered to provide tours of the park focussing on

species such as little owl, tchagra and cream-coloured courser, with the option to go outside the park to see bald ibis at extra cost. They were very insistent and quoted various fees of DH 600, DH 700 and 40 Euros per head for seeing ibis, which they maintained were very difficult / almost impossible to see at this time of year at or near Tamri. We knew this was not the case, and when we told one of them that we had seen all four species already (in order to get rid of him as he was being pushy), he immediately lost interest in us. One of the guides maintained that the money they raised was going to the national park, but he was not interested in a more formal arrangement e.g. a commuted sum. Nevertheless, within the reserve you must stick to the main path due to fragile plant communities and breeding birds, and there may be some merit in paying a guide to take you on a path along the waters' edge (which is where the guides appear to take visitors to show them water birds) as long as you can negotiate a reasonable fee.

#### **Day 9. Tiznit to Sidi Rabat**

It was a half hour drive from the hotel at Tiznit back to the reserve at the Oued Massa. We got there for first light, and had 2 hours before the first guide appeared. Tchagra were particularly vocal during this time. We then left the reserve and birded a number of the bridges and channels across the Massa, heading gradually inland. In the heat of the afternoon we visited the water body behind the dam on the Massa that is visible from the road on the way to Tiznit (Bergier & Bergier pp 87), heading to the Ksar Massa in late afternoon to do a little seawatching and to visit the gull and tern roost on the beach.

#### **Day 10. Sidi Rabat to Essaouira**

We made a dawn visit to a couple of good areas on the Massa, spending 2 hours birding before returning for breakfast. We then travelled north, briefly sea-watching from Cape Rhir (the heat haze made seawatching difficult), before visiting the coastal pool to the west of Tamri village and travelling on to Essaouira. We finished the day by spending a couple of hours at the Oued Ksob waiting for the tern and gull roost to build – which didn't really happen – although the waders became gradually more interesting.

#### **Day 11. Essaouira to Marrakesh**

An uninspiring drive across pretty birdless rolling farmland. We made several stops and drove a number of farm tracks, but did not record much of interest. A short visit to the N'Fiss Reservoir (Lalla Takerkoust Barrage [Bergier & Bergier page 52]) was very disappointing, and we spent the late afternoon and evening in Marrakesh.

## The Birds<sup>4</sup>

### DAY 1

House buntings are present at Marrakesh Airport: they occur in the airport foyer, the car park, and on our return at the end of the trip had also found their way into the departure lounge<sup>5</sup>. As we left Marrakesh we also saw the first of many white storks, circling over the edge of town.

As you approach the Atlas Mountains and start to gain altitude, the road to Oukaimeden initially follows the course of a river (which was dry at the time of our visit). There are numerous vantage-points overlooking it, and during a couple of stops we rapidly picked up common species such as serin, Cetti's warbler, common bulbul, cattle egret and woodchat shrike. We also found a pair of grey wagtail, which has a localised distribution in Morocco.

We stopped again near Ait-Lekak, where we saw the attractive *ultramarinus* race of blue tit and the *africana* race of chaffinch. We also heard, and then saw our first Barbary partridge. Slightly further on we saw Levaillant's green woodpecker as it flew over the road on the outskirts of a village, and over the course of a couple of stops a few kilometres before Oukaimeden (where there was a great deal of open rock and some areas of pine) saw blue rock thrush, black wheatear, Moussier's redstart, coal tit and several firecrest. We heard a second Levaillant's calling, but could not locate it. A few hundred metres before the reserve entrance a short stop resulted in little owl, dipper and further Moussier's redstarts, while black redstart was common in this area.



Birding the High Atlas on Day 1



Crimson-winged finch near the car park

After checking in to Chez Ju Ju, we visited Car Park 2 (Gosney page 16). A flock of 7 crimson-winged finch, small numbers of shore lark, numerous rock sparrows<sup>6</sup>, some *africana* race chaffinches (plus a more familiar bird of the *coelebs* race) and a winter plumaged male brambling were present around the car park. We then headed up past the ski lifts onto a mountain track. We followed this about 300m past the last building on the left before turning off right and walking about 150m up a gentle stony slope. We sat on the top of a stone shack for about 45 minutes, and were rewarded with a reasonably close (if not ideally lit) view of two golden eagles, some distant (calling) red-billed chough, a few crimson-winged finch and a Seebohm's wheatear, as well as some more familiar species such as black redstart and the local race of mistle thrush.

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4 The systematic list is found in **Appendix 1**.

5 They were present in numerous towns and villages in Morocco including the centre of Ouarzazate, where they sing from balconies and roofs near the Hotel Amlal in the morning and in Marrakesh, where they perched on the roof and in the courtyard of our hotel in the old town.

6 Based on numbers we observed, over 200 pairs may occur in Oukaimeden.



Seebohm's wheatear on day one

## DAY 2

We went up to the radar station at dawn to look for alpine accentor, and duly found at least 3 birds by slowly working the area. Shore lark was also present, and on the way back down to the hotel birding round the upper part of the village produced small numbers of crimson-winged finch and a male rock bunting (singing from overhead lines). In early morning large numbers of chough converge on the short grassy plateau at Oukaimeden. We had seen regular movements of small numbers of red-billed chough past the radar station throughout the early morning, but on our return 150-200 alpine chough and about 100 red-billed chough were gathered in loose flocks in view of the Chez Ju Ju, with further birds towards the ski lift car park.

A second visit to Car Park 2 produced a peak flock count of 9 crimson-winged finch plus several other singletons and small groups. Over 20 crimson-winged finch<sup>7</sup> were also present near the ski lift car park when we went to look again for golden eagle. A scan of the crags revealed a few Barbary partridge but little else.

After breakfast, on the way out of Oukaimeden, there were 2 ruddy shelduck on the 'lake' near the entrance to the park. Over the first 20km we stopped frequently, seeing Levaillant's green woodpecker once and hearing it on several other occasions, but not tracking it down for a close view. In addition we got good views of goshawk on two occasions, a peregrine drifted through, we saw several rock buntings and heard crossbill calling. A few crag martins were hawking around the cliff faces and in the valleys. Moussier's redstart was common, and we saw the first female birds, which provided a little more of an identification challenge initially than the showy males (some of which were singing from the tops of the pines).

Once out of the mountains and into arable farmland we stopped again to look at the bird assemblage. Fringing trees and scattered scrub held stonechat, Sardinian warbler, Moussier's redstart, woodchat and southern grey shrikes, while the arable fields had corn bunting, zitting cisticola, large numbers of passage yellow wagtails (of at least two races) and quail. As we approached Ait-Ourir a Montagu's harrier was seen to the north of the road, the only one of the trip.

We had no specific planned stops in the Tizni-n-Tichka Pass. We stopped for half an hour or so on several occasions: to work some scrub and riparian vegetation during the ascent; to walk around some grassland approximately 5 minutes after the summit of the road and; finally, to have a walk around a well irrigated area of farmland near a mountain village about 1 hour before Ouarzazate. As a result of these excursions we saw our first long-legged buzzard, the Moroccan race of magpie, and a green sandpiper as well as common migrant passerines including melodious warbler and nightingale. On the approach to Ouarzazate two hoopoes flew over the road and we saw the first of numerous European bee-eaters.

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<sup>7</sup> We estimated that we saw over 50 crimson-winged finches at Oukaimeden on the morning of day 2. These were widely scattered around the area, typically in groups of 2 or 3 to 10 or 12.

### DAY 3

We made a dawn trip to the first wadi on the Agdz/Zagora road. The vegetation structure of the wadi is ideal for birding<sup>8</sup>, and some areas were damp at the time of our visit. In just over an hour we recorded numerous subalpine warblers, common redstarts, yellow wagtails, tree pipits, willow warblers and chiffchaffs as well as smaller numbers of western Bonelli's warbler, black-eared wheatear and a couple of orphean warblers. A few red-rumped swallow were among the more common Hirundines and small numbers of trumpeter finch were present in the nearby desert.

After breakfast we stopped on the edge of the desert just east of Ouarzazate to identify some distant soaring raptors. These turned out to be black kites. Well over 100 white storks were also circling distantly. We saw the first of many white-crowned black wheatear, as well as small flocks of trumpeter finch and short-toed lark. A further stop about 15 minutes further on was less fruitful; we wandered into some dry open desert between the road and the Barrage el Mansour, spending about an hour walking around. During this time the only species that we saw was desert wheatear; one bird was singing and displaying. We were to see many more at Tagdilt.

We had lunch at the lake formed by the Barrage el Mansour where we got very good views of desert lark and Moroccan white wagtail and saw some common waterfowl such as little egret and great crested grebe. Small numbers of ruddy shelduck were also present. A desert wadi further towards Boumalne sheltered more subalpine and western Bonelli's warblers, while the adjacent desert had short-toed larks and trumpeter finches and our first cream-coloured courser. White-crowned black wheatear was regularly seen during the drive.

After arriving in Boumalne and booking into the auberge, we took a track towards Tagdilt at the Tahir 48 marker (see the map in Gosney page 22). Within a few hundred metres of the road we started to see red-rumped wheatears and flocks of short-toed lark, and a little further on small numbers of Temminck's horned lark became apparent. The sprawling rubbish is not pleasant, but it does attract small mammals and thus supports hunting and scavenging raptors (and dogs): we saw a long-legged buzzard sitting among the debris. Further down the track towards the main wadi we stumbled upon two species that we had particularly wanted to see, mourning wheatear and thick-billed lark. The wheatear was elusive, and after flushing a seemingly short distance we could not locate it. The male thick-billed lark was far more confident however, running around actively in close proximity to the car for several minutes.

### DAY 4

We started at Tagdilt at about 06:30am, again taking the track at the Tahir 48 marker. The dogs that root amongst the rubbish are far more active at this time of day, and a couple of them chased after the car for some distance. As we moved further down the track we saw at least two lanner falcons and a long-legged buzzard moving off, and saw more red-rumped and, desert wheatears, Temminck's horned, desert and short-toed larks. After the rubbish had given way to sparsely vegetated desert we saw a party of 5 or 6 cream-coloured courser. Unfortunately, upon reaching the main 'wadi' we realised the Hyundai was incapable of crossing it as the track was made up of large stones, so we birded a little in the scattered scrub and then took a 20 minute walk along the track at the other side. Migrants in the wadi were limited to whitethroat, redstart and subalpine warbler. The track was initially very quiet with only desert lark and trumpeter finch obvious. We then picked up a female thick-billed lark in flight, and this bird subsequently dropped down to the ground to join two others (including a male). These birds showed well for several minutes.

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<sup>8</sup> There was some good open scrub comprising woody species which did not have particularly dense foliage. In many areas of Morocco wadi vegetation consists of dense tamarisk (which are quite hard to obtain good views of small active species e.g. Sylvia warblers in) and palms (which tend to support common bulbul and colonies of house sparrows but not so many migrants as shrubbier vegetation).



Tagdilt track at dusk on Day 3

Thinking the original Tagdilt track might offer a better chance of crossing the wadi and getting to the orchard we went back to the barracks and drove very close to its eastern edge on a partially made track until we reached a more obvious vehicle route. Unfortunately we had no joy with crossing the 'main' wadi using this route either, but we did get good views of thekla lark and numerous trumpeter finches. We then returned for breakfast, after which we headed on towards Erfoud.

We made a couple of stops en route before recording anything of particular note, one in response to seeing a thick-billed lark fly across the road. We tracked the bird down and got good views, but the surrounding desert seemed devoid of bird life. The best desert stop by far was in an area to the south of the road at the Ouarzazate 243km marker. We took a 5 minute walk into an open expanse of sparsely vegetated hard sand where we found both thick-billed (20<sup>+</sup>) and bar-tailed desert lark to be common. Tawny pipits were also present, while there were shrikes and Sylvia warblers in the fringing scrub. Shortly after we left, a cream-coloured courser flew over the car.

Just after the turning to Erfoud on the Ar-Rachidia road we visited a wadi where olivaceous warbler and hoopoe were among the migrants present. Other species seen en route to Erfoud were a pale morph booted eagle moving through high and direct, and a male spectacled warbler in an area of arid scrub. On our arrival, we tried birding a few areas: the wadi behind the Hotel Tizimi; some irrigated areas alongside the road; and an area of desert to the east of the road to Rissani. None were particularly productive in terms of new species (we added little ringed plover and reed warbler to what we had seen already) and saw a lot of subalpine warblers and cattle egrets.



The impressive Erg Chebbi dunes

#### DAY 5

We left the Kasbah Tizimi at dawn and headed off along rough tracks with our guide for the day driving. Just south of the Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua we found an area of sparsely vegetated desert that supported hoopoe lark and bar-tailed desert lark. We were able to watch the hoopoe larks displaying and Stuart got a couple of record shots with his camera. We then moved on to the Cafe Yasmina, where a large pool was present and some ruined buildings indicated the amount of rain that had fallen and the large area of land that must relatively recently have been underwater.

The pool had an interesting variety of wildfowl and waders including greater flamingo, ruddy shelduck, moorhen, avocet, black-winged stilt, plovers, stints, sandpipers, greenshank and ruff. A brown-necked raven flew over calling. The fringing scrub held a fairly standard selection of migrants of which olivaceous warbler was the most notable, but despite birding the edge of the building and the area where the camels are stabled there was no sign of desert sparrow. We subsequently looked for desert sparrow among house sparrow flocks at several other locations (a few cafes including Dunes d'Or and camel stabling areas) before finally catching up with two males and a female at the lone palm in the sand dunes (see Gosney page 27).

We had an excellent and inexpensive breakfast at the Dunes d'Or before moving on to a wadi near Merzouga where we had our first really good views of laughing dove. Scores of chiffchaff were sheltering in the arable crops, while other migrants included redstart, tawny pipit, tree pipit, yellow wagtail and wryneck. Our final stop with Ali was Dayet Srji. A considerable area of water was present – the lake was probably about 1.5km long by 500m wide at the time of our visit. Despite heat haze we recorded a number of new species including marbled duck, pochard, little grebe and marsh harrier. Ruddy shelduck was the commonest duck species present. A peregrine / Barbary falcon was seen overhead, but we did not get enough on it to make a confident identification to species level.

After leaving Ali (our guide for the day), we signed in at the Auberge Derkaoua; a small party of blue-cheeked bee-eaters were perched in a line of scrub immediately south of the auberge. We pushed on to the road east from Rissani to visit the well known eagle owl site (see the trip report by Chris Batty *et al* for good directions). The owls were not visible in their normal breeding site, and after studying the few other potential sites on the face we settled down to watch the cliff for half an hour or so before dusk. We were rewarded by great views of two Barbary falcons: one sat on the edge of the cliff where it was eventually joined by a second bird, but there were no owls. Scores of brown-necked raven and smaller numbers of black kite were visible to the south of the road near the Rissani rubbish dump when we returned to the car. We then made for Derkaoua, which we reached after dark.

#### DAY 6

We set out to Dayet Srji at about 04:30, arriving before first light. Visiting the lake the previous day meant that we knew its approximate location. In the darkness we could hear the flamingos and ruddy shelduck calling from just off the main road to Merzouga. The best tracks were on the north side, and we drove along to a raised mound which provided a good vantage-point. Just before reaching it we picked up a nightjar in the headlights. The bird was dazzled, and stayed long enough

for us to appreciate it as Egyptian.

As dawn broke we were able to sort through the birds on the open water without the hindrance of heat haze. Ruddy shelduck was the commonest duck species, closely followed by marbled duck (up to 60 birds were present). Other wildfowl that we had failed to record the previous day were shoveler and teal, while a large flock of hirundines included a few red-rumped swallow. There was no hint of a sandgrouse in two hours of watching, so we returned to Auberge Derkauoua for breakfast.

After breakfast we worked the wadi and garden. A range of common migrants were present, but there was no sign of fulvous babbler. The highlight was a red-spotted bluethroat which we both eventually got good views of. Olivaceous warbler was also present. We also got really good views (down to a few feet) of several bar-tailed desert lark in a nearby area of desert, and noted all of the key identification features.

We then re-visited the eagle owl site near Rissani. Having endured a particularly hot and windless walk to the site (we took a route that was further into the desert than the previous day as we were concerned about disturbing the birds on approach), we initially failed to see the owls. Just as we were leaving, however, some young arab fossil sellers indicated to us that the birds were actually under a rock pile on a scree slope nearby. An adult and a young bird were present. We got excellent views through the telescopes<sup>9</sup>.

We then set out on the long drive to Taliouine, which took us about 6 hours. A mourning wheatear, a few cream-coloured courser and some spectacular views *en route* helped soften the pain of the travelling, but did not completely compensate for it. We arrived at the Auberge Souktana after dark.



The scenery was some consolation for the mammoth drive to Taliouine

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<sup>9</sup> We later learned that on the previous day an arab youth / child had climbed up to the nest and taken one of the young down to show a tour group, no doubt hoping to earn some money from photographs etc (much to the group's horror). Clearly the site is now well known enough that there are people looking to earn money from exploiting it, and this is likely to be to the detriment of the owls. There were apparently two young the previous day, but we could only see one. Assumedly this might also be the reason for the move by the owls away from the high cliff to a far more accessible location amongst the scree (where the young would be at greater risk of predation and persecution).

## **DAY 7**

Our first stop was in the Argan forest near Aoulouz. Unfortunately, however, it was raining steadily and the hills were shrouded in low cloud. In about an hour and a half we saw great-spotted woodpecker, a male sparrowhawk and a good number of common migrants and resident species. On a better day the area might have proved more productive. We moved down into some arable farmland where we recorded a group of collared pratincoles flying over and a few migrants including spectacled warbler and tawny pipit. As we travelled on towards the coastal strip, both spotless starling and collared dove became a common site on the overhead lines.

After finding a hotel in Inezgane, we moved on to the Oued Souss. Greater flamingo was present in large numbers. As we walked towards the river mouth we recorded a range of waders including curlew sandpiper, dunlin and little stint. Loose flocks of bar-tailed godwit, sanderling and oystercatcher were also present, and there were more occasional curlew, knot, redshank and turnstone. A few gull-billed tern and single whiskered and little terns were among a loafing flock of Sandwich terns on a sand bar, while Audouin's gull was quite common. We also saw a couple of ospreys, including one coming in off the sea. Sixteen collared pratincoles flew over. A short spell of seawatching proved relatively unproductive.

Having had dinner we returned to the Royal Palace to look for red-necked nightjar, but were turned away by the guards. The guards also told us that the Souss was not a safe place to be at night, which put us off wandering around too much in the wider area. We heard a flock of stone-curlew fly over, but discretion and tiredness overtook valour and we headed off to the Maison d'Hotes, leaving red-necked nightjar for another trip. If you were to arrive early and talk to the guards it is possible that you could build up a relationship with them and that they might relax (particularly if there is no-one of particular importance in residence) and give you a bit of leeway. A couple of birders that we met told us that the guards do not like cameras and telescopes, so it is probably best to leave these behind if you visit the palace and have hopes of getting in.

## **DAY 8**

We set off at dawn for the Oued Souss, having woken up to the sound of stone-curlews. Subsequently we saw several stone-curlews on the edge of the saltmarsh, but the gull and tern roost was smaller and more diffuse than the previous evening and contained fewer species. The number and diversity of waders was consistent with the day before.

Having left the Souss and checked in to a hotel at Tiznit, we moved to the Oued Massa. We initially investigated an area to the east of Massa village where there was a bridge over a dry area of river bed and extensive patches of reed and fringing tamarisk scrub. A black-crowned tchagra was singing close by, and we got brief views. Brown-throated sand martin was relatively common here while other species present included laughing and turtle doves and numerous yellow wagtails.

We tried further up river beyond Massa Village, initially on a wide reed fringed channel, then in some cultivated land nearby. Familiar species such as common sandpiper, turtle dove and reed warbler were present around the river, and whinchat, corn bunting, Sardinian warbler and zitting cisticola were amongst the crops and fringing scrub.

We then tried a track towards the river on the coastal side of Massa Village (probably Site 4 on the map in Gosney [pp11]). This proved a good decision, as we reached an area of river with exposed mud along the banks and good vantage-points on the northern side. Amongst the moorhens were a snipe and a spotted crake. We got excellent views of the crake, which did not seem particularly shy, and was actively foraging. Slightly further upstream a few shoveler and a couple of marbled duck were present and a male cirl bunting was sitting on an irrigation pipe.

We then headed to the reserve entrance. Having parked up, we gradually made our way to the sea,

being held up along the way by a series of fairly persistent wardens bent on selling us views of bald ibis. Despite this (and it did result in quite a considerable amount of time being lost while we politely declined their offers) we eventually reached a wide shallow area of water close to the sea. A night heron roost was present in a reedy corner and a few squacco heron and glossy ibis were scattered around the edges and on the sand bars. Wild boar, including a large male, were on the southern shore. Waders present were dunlin, ringed and Kentish plover, avocet, black-winged stilt, curlew, green and common sandpipers. There were also numerous flamingo and a few spoonbill. The tern and gull roosts featured no new species (many of the Audouin's gulls had Spanish rings). Small numbers of linnet were present in the scrub nearby. We left the area as it got dark.

#### **DAY 9**

We returned to the coastal section of the Oued Massa at first light to check the tern and gull roosts. These were largely absent. We did, however, get extended views of a black-crowned tchagra on the northern side of the path, and a number of others were singing between the reserve entrance and the small guard hut near the beach. After about two hours we returned to the car, flushing a few Barbary partridge and passing the first of the guides *en route*.

We then tried birding various crossing points on the Massa. These included one of the bridges mentioned in Gosney's guide (Site 8 on the Map on Page 11). This site was in the process of being transformed into a new and relatively major bridge, and there was little bird activity in the reedbed or in the cultivated areas close by. A couple of birders that we met told us that the Souss catchment had had no rain for months, and this (combined with widespread abstraction) seemed to have led to much of the river floodplain, and many sections of the river, drying out. We tried numerous tracks towards the river, but these were very hit and miss and some were difficult to drive on due to heavy rutting and deep sand. We eventually came to a promising looking section of river near to Point 4 (Gosney Page 11) which we decided to revisit in the morning to look for moustached warbler and other wetland birds. The day was extremely hot, however, and due to a lack of bird activity we decided to leave the lower reaches of the Massa and head for a dam further up river (accessible from the Agadir to Tiznit road [Bergier & Bergier pp 87]).

We accessed a suitable vantage-point by walking towards the dam from the north. The walk was hot and the climb up from the road onto the desert plateau was not the easiest. The pool was at first glance to all intents and purposes birdless, but we were then rewarded by perhaps the least expected bird of the trip<sup>10</sup>, a female little crane. The bird showed for 5-10 minutes, during which time it walked across the pool on top of some thick submerged weed. In retrospect this bird could have been on territory. Nothing else was present except yellow wagtails and numerous terrapins.

We left the area and headed to Ksar Massa. Following a short break from birding we did a little sea-watching and walked about a kilometre and a half south along the beach to visit a gull and tern roost. An Arctic skua was seen during the seawatch, but Audouin's gull was the only species of note at the roost site.

#### **DAY 10**

We revisited the promising section of the Oued Massa that we had located the previous day. During the first few hours of daylight the area was alive, and reedbed warblers were active and vocal. We saw large numbers of sedge and reed warbler, but were unable to find moustached warbler. A water rail was 'sharming' in the reeds, and we also saw both purple heron and kingfisher. The area also proved to be good for little bittern: initially we saw a female bird drop in to the reeds (where it was joined by a male); we then got excellent views of a second pair; finally we watched a female bird standing motionless at the waters edge. Squacco heron was also present. We then turned our

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10 Little crane is a scarce spring passage migrant in Morocco, and we did not necessarily envisage seeing one let alone two crane species on the trip.

attention to nearby cultivated fields, and got a brief view of a black-shouldered kite, which stopped to hover before moving on. The final new bird we recorded in the area was a wood warbler that we saw during the walk back to the car.

We left the Ksar Massa after breakfast and headed for Essaouira (via Tamri). We stopped at Cape Rhir for a short spell of seawatching, and duly picked up Cory's shearwater. The heat haze limited the effective visibility offshore, however, and we moved on. As we approached Tamri we stopped at the coastal pool. A flock of 60 bald ibis were present, and we were able to get good views through the telescopes. We watched the birds for about 10 minutes. Some were gathered along the waters edge, with others loafing and further ibises walking around on the adjacent rocky slope. A plain tiger (butterfly) was floating around the tamarisks and a group of common scoter were offshore. After 15 minutes we were being followed by a large group of children, so we decided to move on to Essaouira.

After arriving at Essaouira, we located the mouth of the Oued Ksob. Some scattered flocks of gulls were on a sandbank in the river and on the upper shore, and Sandwich terns were foraging in the inshore waters. We found a vantage-point on the southern side of the river and sat down to watch what we hoped was a developing gull and tern roost for the remaining couple of hours of daylight. The roost was fairly dynamic, both in terms of the numbers of birds it supported and where it was located during this period (the area was frequently disturbed by walkers, horses and quad-bikes). Apart from the ever present yellow-legged, lesser black-backed and Audouin's gulls, a few black-headed and a single first winter Mediterranean gull were intermittently present. The terns proved more sensitive to disturbance than the gulls, and following the disturbance of a developing Sandwich tern roost, terns did not return to the area before dusk.

The wader (and other waterfowl) interest steadily increased as dusk approached. Two collared pratincole, greenshank, little stint, curlew sandpiper and a maximum count of 16 common sandpiper were noted. Small numbers of little egrets moved in to join the gulls, while 16 purple heron circled overhead, but did not drop in. A black-eared wheatear and numerous yellow wagtails were foraging among the detritus on the upper shore. The area is listed as supporting red-necked nightjar. We made a half-hearted attempt to walk some suitable habitat after dark, but in truth were too tired and hungry to give it a decent go and headed for the hotel.

#### **DAY 11**

After 10 days of fairly intensive birding and a lot of travelling, we were fairly bushed, and did not make a dawn start. We had a coffee and left the hotel around 08:30, heading for Marrakesh. The journey was uneventful, apart from some suicidal overtaking manoeuvres by a number of Moroccans with death wishes. We made a few stops in some relatively unpromising looking open farmland, which duly lived up to this lack of promise with a complete lack of birds.

We made a final birding excursion to the N'Fiss Reservoir (or Lalla Takerkoust Barrage) to the south of Marrakesh (Bergier & Bergier, page 52). Despite a massive area of water, no birds at all were visible, and in the heat of the day we were not inclined to flog a dead horse by walking the margins. Instead we birded around the nearby village recording relatively common migrant and resident species such as melodious warbler, nightingale, bulbuls and shrikes before returning to Marrakesh.



Hotel Chez Ju Ju, Oukaimeden

## The Hotels

We took a twin room in all of the hotels/auberges visited. At the time of the trip 15 Moroccan Dirhams were roughly equivalent to £1. All costs given below are for 2 people. None of the rooms we stayed required air conditioning (although most had it) at the time of our trip, as at night the temperature dropped markedly.

### Night 1. Hotel Chez Ju Ju, Oukaimeden ([www.hotelchezjuju.com](http://www.hotelchezjuju.com))

We booked in advance, although in retrospect this was unnecessary as the hotel was not busy.

**Directions:** You pay a small fee at the gate / barrier for entry to the National Park. After this, you follow the road for a few hundred metres until you see Chez Ju Ju on the right hand side. There is parking available immediately outside, on both sides of the road.

**Atmosphere:** The staff are friendly. The fossil sellers can be persistent in the local area.

**Location:** The hotel is ideally situated for the car parks (being c 200m from the best car park for crimson-winged finch), the radar station and ski lift areas. There is a bird log.

**Room & Shower:** The twin room was basic, but clean and comfortable. The shower was warm (rather than hot), but otherwise excellent. You will have to arrange to get out first thing in the morning with the predominantly French speaking staff as the doors are locked.

**Evening Meal:** The hotel serves excellent potage, kefte & tajines and some (less exceptional) desserts as part of a set evening meal. The hotel is licensed, and serves wine, lagers and spirits.

**Breakfast:** The breakfast is standard French / Moroccan fare: fresh bread, butter, marmalade & jam, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee.

**Cost:** We paid DH 1,078 for the room, breakfast and the evening meal (including 1 bottle of wine and a couple of beers each).

**Value for Money:** Not the best value in Moroccan terms, but the history of tourism to the area has probably pushed up prices. In comparison to a night in the Russ Hill Hotel we stayed the night in near Gatwick prior to flying out, Ju Ju is an absolute bargain (considering dinner, drinks, breakfast, atmosphere, spectacular views and politeness were thrown in).

### Night 2. Hotel Amlal, Ouarzazate ([www.hotel-amlal.com](http://www.hotel-amlal.com))

Again, we booked a twin room in advance, although the hotel did not appear to be full.

**Directions:** We came into Ouarzazate from the direction of the Tizni-n-Tichka pass. Where the road branches just before the town we went straight on (taking the southern of the two roads) into the centre of town. After following this road for a few of kilometres, we saw a sign for the Hotel Amlal on the left. The hotel has a car park outside it.

**Atmosphere:** All staff were friendly, and the girl working on the reception desk spoke very good English which made things easier. The reception is manned 24 hours and getting out is straightforward first thing in the morning.

**Location:** The hotel is in the centre of Ouarzazate, and as such the surrounding streets are a bit grimy and there is a lot of litter. It is ideally situated for cash points, supermarkets and other shops, and it is about a 15 minute drive to some really good wadis. House buntings occur on the roof and on adjacent buildings.

**Room & Shower:** The room was very basic and relatively clean. The toilet did not fill, but the shower was adequate.

**Evening Meal:** Excellent Moroccan starters and main courses on the set menu – potage, tajines and keftas - and reasonable desserts. The hotel is not licenced. If you want beer you have to walk to the supermarket on the high street and drink it in your room!

**Breakfast:** Very nice. Fresh bread, butter, marmalade & jam, pain chocolate, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee.

**Cost:** DH 420 (inc room, breakfast and evening meal).

**Value for Money:** Good (the food is far better than the room).

### **Night 3. Auberge le Soleil Bleu, Boumalne du Dades (no website, phone 00212 24830163)**

We booked in advance, but the Auberge was not busy.

**Directions:** The Auberge is on the eastern edge of Boumalne. If coming from Ouarzazate, stay on the Ar-Rachidia road rather than taking the road through the Gorge du Dades. The Auberge is sign-posted prior to this – approximately 6km out (on the right hand side of the road) and again just prior to the petrol station as you leave Boumalne. Take a left just before the petrol station and the auberge is a 2-3 minute drive over tarmac road and rough stone track. The location is also shown in Gosney page 22 and in the Lonely Planet guide.

**Atmosphere:** Very relaxed and friendly. You will need to arrange with reception if you want an early morning start, as both the front door and the car park are locked.

**Location:** The location is exceptional for Tagdilt – you literally step out of the door into hugely productive areas of desert, while the 'track' itself is only a couple of minutes drive away. There is a bird log.

**Room & Shower:** The room was very nice, beautifully decorated with a good en suite featuring a powerful shower. Hot water is intermittent, although it appears reception will turn it on for you.

**Evening Meal:** The evening meal was basic but excellent Moroccan food (potage, tajines and fruit salad). The hotel does not stock beer (which is difficult to obtain in Boumalne and further east – you may want to stock up in Ouarzazate), but does serve wine.

**Breakfast:** Very nice. Fresh bread, butter, marmalade & jam, omelette, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee.

**Cost:** Very reasonable (we forgot to record it – I believe it was considerably less than DH 500)

**Value for Money:** Excellent from all perspectives

### **Night 4. Kasbah Tizimi, Erfoud ([www.kasbahtizimi.com](http://www.kasbahtizimi.com))**

We booked in advance (this was the only place that required a booking fee). It was relatively busy.

**Directions:** Travelling from Boumalne into Erfoud, you will see the Hotel Tizimi on your left hand side on the way into town. It is also sign posted as you approach it.



Kasbah Tizimi, Erfoud

**Atmosphere:** Very relaxed. Both the reception and the car park are manned 24 hours a day – the guardian of the car park will expect a small tip.

**Location:** There is a wadi out the back of the Kasbah, but we found this fairly dry and there were few migrants present in comparison to the large flocks of house sparrows and the ever-present bulbuls. The Kasbah provides a good base for exploring the desert, and visits to Merzouga and Rissani. There is a swimming pool and a bar. The guide employed by the Kasbah is Ali 'Fox' (see Photo in **Appendix 2**).

**Room & Shower:** The room was very pleasant and had a TV on which you could get CNN. The shower was excellent.

**Evening Meal:** A typical set meal of potage, tajine/kefte and mousse/fruit salad. Unexceptional, given the fairly luxurious feel of the Kasbah and, while perfectly good food, not up to the standard we had got used to elsewhere and a bit lacking in quantity. Wine, lager and spirits are available with your meal. All are expensive.

**Breakfast:** We took a packed lunch of bread, cheese, jam and fruit.

**Cost:** I paid a deposit of DH 220 and then paid an additional DH 280 at reception for the room, the meal and a bottle of wine.

**Value for Money:** Pretty good.

#### **Night 5. Auberge Kasbah Derkaoua, Erfoud / Merzouga ([www.aubergederkaoua.com](http://www.aubergederkaoua.com))**

We booked in advance. The auberge was busy, with a birdwatching tour group and a sight-seeing group also booked in.

**Directions.** Take the main tarmac road between Erfoud and Merzouga. You will see various auberges signposted along this road. The sign for Derkaoua is on the left, with the auberge a further 5km east along a desert track. We would strongly recommend that you do not try to get to Derkaoua (on your first visit there) after dark, as the tracks can be a little confusing.

**Atmosphere.** Very calm and relaxed. We had no problem getting out for a dawn trip to Dayet Srji. The staff were polite and friendly.

**Location:** Superb desert setting. The location is within 20 minutes of Dayet Srji, Cafe Yasmina and other good birding sites. It is possible to secure the services of a guide to take you into the desert in a 4x4, but you will need to arrange this in advance. The swimming pool is hawked over by Egyptian nightjar. The surrounding desert supports species such as hoopoe and bar-tailed desert lark, while the nearby wadi supports good numbers of migrants.

**Room & Shower:** The room was very pleasantly decorated, with a good en suite featuring a powerful shower.

**Evening Meal:** The evening meal was excellent Moroccan food (potage, tajines etc), with wine and lager also available.

**Breakfast:** Very good.

**Cost:** Expensive - DH 1320

**Value for Money:** Certainly an experience, but it may be worth checking prices at other local auberges such as Cafe Yasmina and Dunes D'Or to see if something more reasonable is available. Both look to be very pleasant places to stay.

#### **Night 6. Auberge Souktana, Taliouine (email: [souktana@menara.ma](mailto:souktana@menara.ma))**

We booked in advance, but the auberge did not seem busy and there were a number of others close by.

**Directions.** The auberge is signposted as you approach Taliouine, and is on the right a couple of hundred metres before the bridge. The sign out the front can be hidden by parked cars.

**Atmosphere.** Has the atmosphere of a back packers hostel. The staff and the owners seemed friendly.

**Location:** The auberge is approximately 5 hours leisurely drive from Dekaoua (using the 'new' road from Agdz to Tazenakht). We did not do any birding locally, we selected Souktana as it was a good strategic stop on our way to the coast, arriving late and setting off early.

**Room & Shower:** The room was basic but comfortable. The shower was OK.

**Evening Meal:** We ate in Taliouine at the first place we came to. The food was ok and very cheap. There was no wine or beer available in Taliouine, but we were able to get a drink at the large hotel on the eastern side of the village (there is a spur track off to the left a few hundred metres before Souktana).

**Breakfast:** Very good – the usual bread, coffee, jam, honey etc.

**Cost:** DH 280

**Value for Money:** Very good.

### **Night 7. Maison d'Hotes, Oued Souss, Inezgane.**

We failed to find anywhere that was recommended in Inezgane prior to visiting and had a website. In retrospect the Hotel / Restaurant La Pergola, where we had dinner, might have been a good alternative option to Maison d'Hotes. Inezgane is not a touristy place and has few hotels. We found the Maison d'Hotes after some time driving through Inezgane looking for a place to stay.

**Directions.** Drive through Inezgane until you reach the road running along the northern edge of the Oued Souss. There should be a golfing retreat on your right hand side (the north side of the road), and the Maison d'Hotes is on your right hand side shortly after this (before you reach the turning for the main reserve area and the Royal Palace).

**Atmosphere.** Very quiet and pleasant, you will wake up to stone-curlews calling.

**Location:** Very convenient for an early morning visit to the Oued Souss or a late visit to the Royal Palace area for red-necked nightjar. A 2 minute drive or 10 minute walk.

**Room & Shower:** The large room had a fridge (with complimentary beer and water). There was one bed and a large couch (which was very comfortable to sleep on). The shower was very good.

**Evening Meal:** There was no evening meal available. We went to La Pergola, which we found by accident after about 20 minutes of random driving around. The food was excellent.

**Breakfast:** Very good. Served on the veranda. Bread, honey, jam, coffee and juice etc.

**Cost:** Expensive - DH 1,320

**Value for Money:** We would probably not have stayed here if other accommodation was easy to find, and would recommend looking at the Rough Guide or Lonely Planet Guide for alternatives.

### **Night 8. Hotel de Paris, Tiznit ([www.hoteldeparis.com](http://www.hoteldeparis.com))**

We did not book in advance. The hotel appeared quiet.

**Directions.** Follow the main road south from Agadir until you reach Tiznit. Go straight over the roundabout on the edge of town, and the Hotel de Paris is in front of you on the left hand side of the road. You will see a flashing Eiffel Tower!

**Atmosphere.** Quiet.

**Location:** About 30-40 minutes away from the Oued Massa

**Room & Shower:** A budget option: the room was basic, but clean and the shower was ok.

**Evening Meal:** We ate at the restaurant below the hotel. There was no alcohol available here or in the supermarket, but the Hotel Tiznit over the road may be more productive in this respect.

**Breakfast:** Not included in the price. We got some bread and cheese from the supermarket the previous day.

**Cost:** OK – DH 280

**Value for Money:** Not exceptional.

### **Night 9. Ksar Massa, Sidi Rabat ([www.ksarmassa.com](http://www.ksarmassa.com))**

We booked in advance. The auberge was fully booked, as apart from ourselves there was a birdwatching tour group and a number of families staying.

**Directions.** Turn off the main road between Tiznit and Agadir at the turns sign-posted either Sid Rabat or Massa. Follow either road down to a T junction and turn right, following this road until you reach a sign for Ksar Massa. You then have to negotiate several kilometres of stone and sand track before arriving at Ksar Massa.

**Atmosphere.** Very calm and relaxed. We had no problem getting out for a dawn trip to Oued Massa. The staff were polite and friendly.

**Location:** Superb coastal setting. Ksar Massa overlooks the Atlantic, and you eat breakfast on a veranda which provides superb views up and down the shore. It is set a little too far back to make it a really good seawatching location, although you get reasonable views over the inshore waters. The nearby desert is good for courser and sometimes sandgrouse. The sandy beach is easily accessible from the hotel, with roosting gulls and terns present to the south during our brief stay. You can reach



The excellent but pricey Ksar Massa, Sidi Rabat

some of the better sites on the Oued Massa in approximately 15 minutes.

**Room & Shower:** The 'room' was excellent, being split into two large bedrooms served by an en-suite bathroom. It was very well decorated and clean. The bathroom featured a superb shower.

**Evening Meal:** The evening meal was very very good. Apart from the Moroccan salad / potage starter, there was an excellent tajine, superb couscous and a fruit salad dessert. There was wine and beer available.

**Breakfast:** Also excellent. Apart from the usual bread, coffee, freshly squeezed juice etc, we were provided with pancakes, dates, jams and honey, soft cheese and pecan biscuits.

**Cost:** Extremely expensive – DH 2,992.

**Value for Money:** If we had thought about exchange rates properly before hand, there is no question that we would not have stayed at Ksar Massa. However, in retrospect, neither of us regretted it – it was the right time in the trip to recharge our batteries with a bit of luxury. Absolutely superb if very pricey.

#### **Night 10. Hotel Bahja de Mogador, Essaouira ([www.bajademogador.com](http://www.bajademogador.com))**

We did not book in advance. The hotel appeared quiet.

**Directions.** Essaouira has a coast road running parallel to the beach and a several others running parallel to it. The Mogador is on the second or third of these parallel roads.

**Atmosphere.** Quiet and a little tired. The staff are pleasant.

**Location:** Approximately 5 minutes drive from the river mouth.

**Room & Shower:** A budget option: the room was basic, but the shower was pretty poor and the head kept falling to pieces.

**Evening Meal:** We ate in town where there are numerous street vendors and a few restaurants. No alcohol is available on the premises, but there is a coffee shop downstairs.

**Breakfast:** Not included in the price. We ended up buying some rubbish from the petrol station as we did not want to search around town and there was nothing obvious open.

**Cost:** Cheap – DH 250

**Value for Money:** You get what you pay for.

#### **Night 11. Hotel Central Palace (email [hotelcentralpalace@hotmail.com](mailto:hotelcentralpalace@hotmail.com))**

Very centrally placed in the old town for the Djemaa el-Fna and for the airport. House buntings are present. There is no parking immediately outside. Breakfast and evening meal not included in price – DH 280.

## SUMMARY

We found Morocco an excellent destination for a birding holiday due to the diversity and quality of the birds, the range of habitats, the excellent road infrastructure, the quality of the auberges and the food and the open friendly nature of the Moroccan people. Booking most of the accommodation in advance proved a highly worthwhile exercise, as it gave us the opportunity to relax in the knowledge that we could bird all day without having to search for somewhere to stay.

In retrospect we might have tried to get advice on sites for species such as fulvous babbler, scrub and Tristram's warbler: but conversely we did not want to make the trip too formulaic (accepting that we took a relatively well trodden route) and wanted to spend at least some of the time finding our own birds, as ultimately it is more satisfying. A trip towards Ar-Rachidia or into the Valley of the Dades might have been worthwhile additions to the itinerary, but having plenty of time at the Oued Massa proved valuable, as the area around it is extensive and takes some exploring (some of the wet areas being excellent and many of the drier areas less inspiring). The final tally of 187 species probably exceeded our expectations, and while we missed a few species, we were very happy with what we did see and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

**APPENDIX 1: SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Status in Morocco (Thevenot, Vernon &amp; Bergier, 2003)</b>
1	Little grebe	Locally common resident
2	Great crested grebe	Uncommon resident and winter visitor
3	Cory's shearwater	Abundant passage migrant
4	Gannet	Common to abundant passage migrant and winter visitor
5	Cormorant	Uncommon resident and winter visitor
6	Little bittern	Common passage migrant and rare breeder
7	Night heron	Common passage migrant and uncommon breeder
8	Squacco heron	Scarce local breeder and uncommon migrant
9	Cattle egret	Abundant resident
10	Little egret	Locally common resident and common migrant
11	Grey heron	Common passage migrant and rare resident
12	Purple heron	Common passage migrant and local breeder
13	White stork	Common passage and breeding migrant
14	Glossy ibis	Rare passage migrant and occasional resident
15	Bald ibis	Very rare resident
16	Spoonbill	Uncommon passage migrant and occasional breeder
17	Greater flamingo	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
18	Ruddy shelduck	Scarce to locally common resident
19	Gadwall	Scarce to uncommon winter visitor and rare resident
20	Teal	Common winter visitor
21	Mallard	Local resident and common winter visitor
22	Shoveler	Common to abundant winter visitor and occasional breeder
23	Marbled duck	Local resident, locally common winter visitor and passage migrant
24	Pochard	Common winter visitor and recent breeder
25	Tufted duck	Uncommon winter visitor and rare passage migrant
26	Common scoter	Common to locally abundant winter visitor and passage migrant
27	Black-shouldered kite	Uncommon local resident
28	Black kite	Abundant passage migrant and common breeder
29	Marsh harrier	Uncommon to locally common resident, winter visitor and passage migrant
30	Montagu's harrier	Common passage migrant and uncommon breeder
31	Goshawk	Rare resident and winter visitor
32	Sparrowhawk	Uncommon resident
33	Long-legged Buzzard	Common resident
34	Golden eagle	Uncommon to scarce resident
35	Booted eagle	Common passage migrant and uncommon breeder
36	Osprey	Uncommon passage migrant and scarce local resident
37	Kestrel	Common resident
38	Lanner	Uncommon resident
39	Peregrine	Uncommon resident

<b>Number</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Status in Morocco (Thevenot, Vernon &amp; Bergier, 2003)</b>
40	Barbary falcon	Uncommon resident
41	Barbary partridge	Common resident
42	Quail	Common breeding and passage migrant
43	Water rail	Uncommon winter visitor and scarce resident
44	Spotted crane	Uncommon to locally common passage migrant
45	Little crane	Scarce spring passage migrant
46	Moorhen	Common resident and winter visitor
47	Coot	Abundant winter visitor and uncommon resident
48	Oystercatcher	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
49	Black-winged stilt	Common resident and passage migrant
50	Avocet	Common passage migrant and winter visitor and occasional breeder
51	Stone-curlew	Uncommon to locally common resident, winter visitor and passage migrant
52	Cream-coloured courser	Common resident and breeding migrant
53	Collared pratincole	Local breeding and common spring passage migrant (scarce in autumn)
54	Little ringed plover	Common resident, passage migrant and winter visitor
55	Ringed plover	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
56	Kentish plover	Common resident, passage migrant and winter visitor
57	Grey plover	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
58	Knot	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
59	Sanderling	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
60	Little stint	Common to abundant passage migrant and common winter visitor
61	Temminck's stint	Uncommon passage migrant and scarce winter visitor
62	Curlew sandpiper	Common passage migrant and scarce winter visitor
63	Dunlin	Common to abundant passage migrant and common winter visitor
64	Ruff	Common passage migrant and uncommon winter visitor
65	Snipe	Common to abundant winter visitor and uncommon passage migrant
66	Bar-tailed godwit	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
67	Curlew	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
68	Redshank	Abundant passage migrant and winter visitor
69	Greenshank	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
70	Green sandpiper	Common passage migrant and uncommon winter visitor
71	Common sandpiper	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
72	Turnstone	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
73	Arctic skua	Uncommon to locally common passage migrant and winter visitor
74	Mediterranean gull	Locally common passage migrant and winter visitor
75	Black-headed gull	Common winter visitor and passage migrant
76	Audouin's gull	Uncommon to locally common passage migrant on the Atlantic coast
77	Lesser black-backed gull	Abundant passage migrant and winter visitor
78	Yellow-legged gull	Common resident
79	Gull-billed tern	Common passage migrant

<b>Number</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Status in Morocco (Thevenot, Vernon &amp; Bergier, 2003)</b>
80	Sandwich tern	Common passage migrant and winter visitor
81	Little tern	Scarce to locally common breeding migrant and common on passage
82	Whiskered tern	Uncommon but regular passage migrant
83	Rock dove / pigeon	Common
84	Woodpigeon	Common
85	Collared dove	Locally common
86	Turtle dove	Common breeder and abundant passage migrant
87	Laughing dove	Scarce local resident
88	(Desert) Eagle owl	Uncommon resident
89	Little owl	Common resident
90	Egyptian nightjar	Scarce to locally common breeding migrant
91	Swift	Abundant passage migrant and local breeder
92	Pallid swift	Common breeding migrant
93	Kingfisher	Uncommon resident
94	Blue-cheeked bee-eater	Scarce to locally uncommon breeding migrant
95	Bee-eater	Common passage migrant and breeder
96	Hoopoe	Uncommon passage migrant and breeder
97	Wryneck	Uncommon passage migrant
98	Levaillant's green woodpecker	Uncommon to locally common resident
99	Great spotted woodpecker	Common resident
100	Bar-tailed desert lark	Common resident
101	Desert lark	Common resident
102	Hoopoe lark	Common resident
103	Thick-billed lark	Uncommon to abundant resident
104	Short-toed lark	Abundant passage migrant
105	Crested lark	Common and widespread resident
106	Thekla lark	Abundant widespread resident
107	Shore lark	Locally common resident
108	Temminck's horned lark	Common resident
109	Brown-throated sand martin	Uncommon resident
110	Sand martin	Common passage migrant and occasional breeder
111	Crag martin	Uncommon winter visitor and scarce resident
112	Swallow	Abundant passage migrant and locally common breeder
113	Red-rumped swallow	Uncommon breeder and passage migrant
114	House martin	Common passage migrant and uncommon breeder
115	Tawny pipit	Scarce to locally common passage migrant and breeder
116	Tree pipit	Common passage migrant
117	Meadow pipit	Abundant passage migrant and winter visitor

<b>Number</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Status in Morocco (Thevenot, Vernon &amp; Bergier, 2003)</b>
118	Yellow wagtail	Common passage migrant and locally common breeder
119	Grey wagtail	Scarce to locally common resident and winter visitor
120	White wagtail	Abundant winter visitor and passage migrant and uncommon resident
121	Common bulbul	Common resident
122	Dipper	Scarce to uncommon resident
123	Wren	Scarce to locally common resident
124	Alpine accentor	Scarce resident and winter visitor
125	Robin	Abundant winter visitor and uncommon resident
126	Nightingale	Common breeding and passage migrant
127	Bluethroat	Uncommon passage migrant and winter visitor
128	Black redstart	Common winter visitor and local resident
129	Redstart	Common and regular passage migrant
130	Moussier's redstart	Uncommon to common resident
131	Whinchat	Uncommon passage migrant
132	Stonechat	Abundant winter visitor and locally common resident
133	Northern wheatear	Common breeder and migrant
134	Black-eared wheatear	Common breeding and passage migrant
135	Desert wheatear	Common breeding migrant and partial resident
136	Red-rumped wheatear	Uncommon to locally common resident
137	Mourning wheatear	Scarce resident
138	White-crowned black wheatear	Common resident in south
139	Black wheatear	Uncommon to locally common resident
140	Blue rock thrush	Locally common resident
141	Blackbird	Abundant resident
142	Mistle thrush	Uncommon resident
143	Cetti's warbler	Common and widespread resident
144	Zitting cisticola	Common resident
145	Sedge warbler	Common spring and uncommon autumn passage migrant
146	Reed warbler	Abundant passage migrant, locally common breeder
147	Olivaceous warbler	Common passage migrant in spring, less so in autumn
148	Melodious warbler	Uncommon breeding and passage migrant
149	Spectacled warbler	Scarce to common breeding migrant and partial resident
150	Subalpine warbler	Common spring migrant and uncommon breeder
151	Sardinian warbler	Common to abundant resident in north, less common in south
152	Orphean warbler	Scarce breeder and common spring migrant
153	Whitethroat	Common and widespread migrant and scarce breeder
154	Blackcap	Abundant passage migrant and scarce resident
155	Bonelli's warbler	Uncommon to locally common breeding migrant and common on passage
156	Wood warbler	Uncommon to common passage migrant

<b>Number</b>	<b>Species</b>	<b>Status in Morocco (Thevenot, Vernon &amp; Bergier, 2003)</b>
157	Chiffchaff	Abundant winter visitor and common passage migrant
158	Willow warbler	Abundant to scarce passage migrant
159	Firecrest	Uncommon resident
160	Coal tit	Locally common resident
161	Blue tit	Abundant resident
162	Great tit	Common resident
163	Black-crowned tchagra	Uncommon resident
164	Southern grey shrike	Common resident
165	Woodchat shrike	Common breeding migrant
166	Magpie	Uncommon to common resident
167	Alpine chough	Scarce to locally common resident
168	Chough	Uncommon to locally common resident
169	Brown-necked raven	Uncommon to locally common resident
170	Raven	Common to locally abundant resident
171	Spotless starling	Uncommon to locally common resident
172	House sparrow	Abundant resident
173	Desert sparrow	Scarce resident
174	Rock sparrow	Abundant to uncommon resident
175	Chaffinch	Common to abundant resident and winter visitor
176	Brambling	Scarce winter visitor
177	Serin	Common resident and winter visitor
178	Greenfinch	Uncommon to locally common resident
179	Goldfinch	Abundant resident
180	Linnet	Common resident
181	Crossbill	Uncommon resident
182	Crimson-winged finch	Uncommon resident
183	Trumpeter finch	Common resident in south
184	Cirl bunting	Uncommon resident
185	Rock bunting	Uncommon resident and scarce winter visitor
186	House bunting	Common resident
187	Corn bunting	Common resident

**APPENDIX 2: ADDITIONAL PHOTOS**



Stuart with Ali Fox



The palm where we finally found the desert sparrows



The Atlas Mountains at Oukaimeden.



The Auberge Soleil Bleu (possibly the best place value for money of all the accommodation we stayed in), and the resilient Hyundai.