

Trip report: Southern Morocco, 25 February – 10 March 2011

Paulo Paixão¹, a birdwatcher from Portugal and his wife Marika Sandell from Finland, living together in Belgium



Introduction

This is an overview of 14 days of travel in Southern Morocco for tourism and birding. We rented a car and visited many bird sites and several habitat types. We gave preference to staying in small guesthouses, tasted local food, enjoyed scenic landscapes, historical cities and lively souks and took many pictures. We saw many of the bird species (and subspecies) we had hoped to see, but missed quite a few, too. Marika's highlight birds were the Northern Bald Ibis and the Pharaoh Eagle Owl. Only occasionally did we meet other birdwatchers: a multi-national group of five on the road near Tata, led by a Sicilian birder who gave us the tip for the Pharaoh Eagle Owl; a Frenchman and his family at the hotel in Boumalne du Dadès; and, at the end of our trip, a Belgian photographer in Marrakesh airport about to start a birding journey to the Western Sahara. We met many friendly people and did not experience any health or safety problems, robbery, road accident, breakdown, or flat tyre. Whether you want it or not, you will always be approached by people offering to show you around, in particular in touristic places.

Acknowledgments

- Patrick Bergier for useful advice provided for planning the trip
- A Sicilian birder met on the road near Tata
- Brahim Mezzane from Rissani, who guided in the Merzouga and Rissani area
- Hmad Aït Bahaddou (Chez Tonton), Pascal Laurent (Maison d'Hôtes Lokfel) and Peter Dyer (Maison Mnabha) for being such friendly hosts and making our stay so pleasant.

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Getting there

Flights with TAP Air Portugal: Brussels-Lisbon-Marrakesh and return, staying a few days in Lisbon each way, for 335 € each.

Car hire

Given that several trip reports recommended Dacia Logan for birding in Morocco, we had booked a “Dacia Logan or similar” through the Autoeurope website for 364 €² and received a voucher to pick it up from the Avis counter in Marrakesh airport. However, to our surprise and disappointment, we did not get this car because Avis said that it is not part of their fleet anymore. Instead, they gave us a Peugeot 206+, which is less convenient for occasional track driving. Moreover the boot was too small for our luggage. We complained to no avail. The tank was full but the car was not washed when we returned it at the end of the trip. Avis did not claim any extra payment. We travelled 3400 km, at an average of 5,4 litres of unleaded petrol per 100 km, petrol price being around 10,4 dirhams / litre.

Taxi

Bargaining is common practice, even for taxi rides. One taxi driver requested 200 dirhams to take us back from Menara airport to Marrakesh centre, but accepted a quite reasonable fare of 80 dirhams.

Police

Checkpoints were frequent, in particular on the way in or out of towns. However, only a couple of times did the police order us to stop. It happened once at a checkpoint on the way into Tan-Tan to query about our itinerary and professions and twice near Foug El Hisn (between Guelmim and Tata) to reprimand us for traffic offences³.

Money

Currency exchange rate around 11 dirhams per euro, slightly worse (10,7) in the baggage claim area of the airport.

Communications

We bought a Maroc Telecom mobile phone number from the shop at the airport. It cost 50 dirhams to get a number and we chose a 200 dirhams prepaid card that converted into 400 dirhams call credit. This is a good option for both local and international calls, as it becomes much cheaper than using a European mobile in roaming mode.

² Including unlimited mileage, second driver, fire insurance, liability insurance, collision damage coverage and theft protection with an excess of 12,000 dirhams, with fully refundable excess (with some exclusions) from Autoeurope.

³ There was very little road traffic. We stopped on the hard shoulder on the left hand side of the road and were sitting in the car looking at birds. A policeman not in uniform stopped his car, showed a badge and introduced himself as “agent de la gendarmerie royale”. He said that we had committed an offence by having parked on the left side and requested the car documents. Then he simply warned us not to do it again. Later on, having stopped that time on the right hand side, we saw his car coming again. He waved at us but did not stop. Further ahead we found him again with a police patrol that stopped and reprimand us for having parked on a bridge. Actually the place did not look like a bridge as most rivers are completely dry and only occasionally the water flows over these lowered stretches of the road. New warning, but no fine.

Accommodation

Although we had only booked accommodation for the first and last nights, we never experienced any difficulty in finding suitable accommodation during the trip in the places we had chosen. Sometimes there were no other guests apart from us. However, during peak periods such as Easter, some places may be fully booked months in advance.

Date	Town	Name	Price (dirhams)	Room	Breakfast	Dinner
25-26.2	Essaouira	Residence Vent des Dunes ⁴	440 ^a	Good	Excellent	-
26-27.2	Paradise Valley	Auberge Bab Imouzzar ⁵	425 ^b	Good	Good	Good
27-28.2	Taroudant	Hotel Tiout ⁶	350 ^a	OK	OK	-
28.2-1.3	Guelmin	Hotel Adil Moussafir ⁷	370 ^c	Excellent	Good	Good
1-2.3			370 ^c		Good	-
2-3.3	Tata	Le Relais des Sables ⁸	488 ^b	OK	Good	Good
3-4.3	Agdz	Auberge d'Ouriz ⁹	360 ^b	Good	Excellent	Excellent
4-5.3	Merzouga	Chez Tonton ¹⁰	400 ^b	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
5-6.3			400 ^b		Excellent	Excellent
6-7.3	Boumalne du Dadès	Le Soleil Bleu ¹¹	400 ^b	OK	Excellent	Excellent
7-8.3	Aït Ben Haddou	Maison d'Hôtes Lokfel ¹²	470 ^a	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
8-9.3	Marrakesh	Maison Mnabha ¹³	885 ^a	Excellent	Excellent	-
9-10.3			885 ^a		Excellent	-

^a Double room and breakfast for two.

^b Double room, breakfast and dinner (drinks not included) for two.

^c Double room only.

⁴ <http://www.essaouiranet.com/ventdesdunes> - simple but very nice room, big breakfast with plenty of choice on the sunny terrace, good service

⁵ <http://aubergeimouzzar.unblog.fr/> - new guesthouse in a splendid location, good service, meals served next to our room because we complained of a strong smell of wet paint from freshly painted dining room

⁶ <http://www.hoteltiout.com/> - very basic room in need of renovation, simple breakfast with little choice

⁷ <http://hoteladilmoussafir.com/> - modern international style, like a 3 or 4-star hotel, breakfast à la carte available at the hotel café

⁸ we could not find a website for this hotel - the cheap room was a spartan diminute cell, difficult to close the door, no hot water, good service by the waiters in an otherwise sad dining room atmosphere

⁹ <http://www.ouriz.com> - family-run, dedicated to fair and ecotourism, traditional local style architecture, home-made food

¹⁰ <http://www.cheztonton-merzouga.com> - family-run, sociable and helpful owner, traditional local style architecture, home-made food

¹¹ <http://www.hotelsoleilbleu.com/> - the cheap room needed renovation, intermittent water temperature from very hot to cold

¹² <http://www.lokfel.com/> - charming place, with nice details, sociable owner, great food

¹³ <http://www.maisonmnabha.com> - charming riad with nice details, helpful and knowledgeable owner, varied and plentiful breakfast

Books, maps, websites

- Svensson, L., Mullarney, K., Zetterström, D. & Grant, P. 2009. Collins Bird Guide. 2nd edition. ISBN 978-0-00-726814-6.
- Bergier, P. & Bergier, F. 2003. A Birdwatcher's Guide to Morocco. Bird Watchers' Guides. Prion Ltd, Cley. ISBN 1 871104 09 2.
- Bergier, P. & Bergier, F. Go-South. Birds and Nature in Morocco. <http://www.go-south.org/> and several trip reports uploaded on this website
- Clammer, P., Bing, A., Sattin, A. & Stiles, P. 2009. Morocco. Lonely Planet. 9th edition. ISBN 978-1-74104-971-8.
- Maroc. 2009. Michelin map 742 National 1/1 000 000. 5th edition. ISBN 978-2-06-714648-8.

Equipment

- Binoculars: Swarovski SLC 10x42 HD
- Spotting scope: Kite KSP HD80 + 25-50x WA eyepiece
- Tripod: Kite Ardea CF + Manfrotto 128 RC head
- DSLR camera and lenses: Canon EOS 550D + Canon EF-S 18-55 mm 1:3.5-5.6 IS + Canon EF 100-400 mm 1:4.5-5.6 IS
- Point & shoot camera: Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ6

Itinerary

From Marrakesh, westwards to Essaouira, southwards to Tan-Tan, eastwards to Merzouga, westwards to Marrakesh.

Weather

Fine sunny weather, blue sky and temperature (°C) in mid-20s most of the days, above 30 in Souss, less than 10 in Boumalne, 15 and rain in Marrakesh.

Species

84 bird species observed, of which Paulo recorded 22 lifers and a few new subspecies¹⁴. Most of these were resident birds, some wintering and very few passage migrants. It was still too early in the season for most migrant breeders. Some identification issues may not have been totally resolved. Uncertain about Crag or Rock Martin, we always opted for Crag Martin. We might have overlooked Iberian Chiffchaff or Willow Warbler among the Chiffchaffs. Because little time was spent scanning the gulls, we did not look for rings and might have overlooked other species among the Yellow-legged Gulls.

Species that we would have liked to see, but failed to find were: Bonelli's Eagle, Black-crowned Tchagra, Brown-throated Sand Martin, Sandgrouse (Black-bellied, Pin-tailed, Spotted, Crowned and Lichtenstein's), Cream-coloured Courser, Thick-billed Lark, Maghreb Wheatear, Scrub Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, African Desert Warbler and Fulvous Babbler, as well as the local *subpersonata* subspecies Moroccan White Wagtail. These are species that should have been present at this time of the year in the

¹⁴ Bird records kept at <http://birdstack.com/people/pdpaixao/trips/4084>

regions and habitat types that we visited. Reasons for failure to see them might have been a wrong strategy, wrong time of the day, climate (drier conditions), lack of persistence, lack of time, or just bad luck. Although having managed to visit so many sites and habitat types is highly satisfactory, had we paid a little bit more attention to planning details, birding quality could have improved. We wish we could have also spent more time in certain areas to fully explore the touristic potential of the region. To be taken into account in future trips to the region ... insha'Allah!

Apart from Dromedaries, Goats and Sheep flocks minded by shepherds, we found apparently free roaming Donkeys and more Dromedaries, too. Wild mammals included the ubiquitous Barbary Ground Squirrels and one Golden Jackal near Tata. Herps included Desert Agama in Paradise Valley and Spanish Terrapin in Oued Assaka.

Diary

25 February: Lisboa, Marrakesh, Essaouira

We landed on time in Marrakesh Menara airport. Still in the airport, we exchanged money, bought a local mobile phone number and sorted out the car hire with Avis. It was already dark when we proceeded to Essaouira, where we arrived at 10.30 pm and slept at "Hotel Vent des Dunes".

26 February: Essaouira, Oued Tamri, Paradise Valley

We woke up with the early calls of Common Bulbul. A great breakfast at the hotel's roof terrace in the sun gave us a nice start to our holiday. Great views of Yellow-legged Gull walking on the balcony and House Sparrow, Common Bulbul and Spotless Starling (in summer plumage) perched on aerials and Pallid Swift flying above in the sky.



We visited the city of Essaouira inside the walls, where House Bunting is widespread. We bought fresh fish on the market and had it grilled in a restaurant. We also went for a walk in the fishing harbour. Outside the walls, there were many Yellow-legged Gulls on the sandy beach, at the rocky seaside and fishing harbour. The rocks also produced Little Egret, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Greater Black-backed Gull and Great Cormorant of the *maroccanus* subspecies. Due to our ambitious itinerary we decided not to visit the mouth of the Oued Ksob to the south of Essaouira¹⁵.

¹⁵ After the trip, at the time of writing this report, we became aware that the waste treatment plant to the north of Essaouira is another interesting site for ducks, waders and passerines, to be considered in birding visits to this area.



The road from Essaouira towards Agadir went through Argan forests. We paid a visit to a women's agro-business co-operative and got acquainted with the processing of the argan fruit for the production of edible oil, cosmetics and soap. Another stop on the road provided close looks of Greenfinch, small flocks of Chaffinch of the *africana* subspecies and Crested Lark.



In the late afternoon, we stopped at the beachfront on the southern side (left bank) of Oued Tamri in search of Northern Bald Ibis. We did not find it, but could see 1 Spoonbill, 4 Grey Heron, 1 Cattle Egret and 2 Great Cormorant of the *sinensis* subspecies in the estuary. Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticola visited the bushes.

We decided to come back the day after at lunchtime to search for Bald Ibis. In the meantime we headed to Paradise Valley without stopping at Cap Rhir. We arrived late at the new "Auberge Bab Imouzzer", where we had dinner and a good night's rest.

27 February: Paradise Valley, Oued Tamri, Taroudant (via Agadir)

We started birding at the first light in the woods around the hotel. Good views of Common Bulbul, Blackbird, Cirl Bunting, Great Tit and Serin. We then spent the early morning driving through Paradise Valley back to the coast passing by palm and banana groves surrounded by mixed woods. Groups of people were arriving for Sunday picnics. We found Moussier's Redstart, House Sparrow and Common Bulbul.



By the coast, we found a flock of Greenfinch and two Great Grey Shrike. At Oued Tamri, we parked on the same beach track as the day before. We had just spotted Northern Bald Ibis when a local showed up asking 50 dirhams to show us these birds. We refused, but offered him a coin to look after the car while we went birding the area. We walked northwards along the beach until the river mouth, where we had a closer look at 16 Bald Ibis. They were feeding by scratching on the ground and 3 of them walked down to drink water. We also saw 10 Kentish Plovers on the flat river shore and some hiding almost invisible on the pebbles. There were 92 Audouin's Gulls among the many Yellow-legged Gulls. The estuary had 1 Spoonbill, 6 Grey Heron, 5 Little Egret and 3 Great Cormorant. The bushes had Zitting Cisticola and Stonechat.



We drove around the estuary towards the right bank, past the town of Tamri in the direction of Essaouira. We aimed at finding more Bald Ibis and managed to see 5 more individuals that took flight when someone walked nearby. Some of the other 16 also moved down to the estuary. A Common Kestrel was perched on a wall.

Because it was windy and getting late, we did not stop at the Cap Rhir area and decided to skip all seawatching attempts. We stopped at the seashore by the small coastal town of Aghroud and found 3 Sandwich Terns and 5 Audouin's Gulls amid the very common Yellow-legged Gulls. A White Wagtail walked along the shore. Surfers were riding the waves near the surfing resort of Taghazout and Sunday afternoon strollers dotted the beaches north of Agadir.

We drove through Agadir turning eastwards to Taroudant, seeing European Magpies and Collared Doves on the way. We arrived at this walled city in late afternoon and followed the signs to the well-indicated "Hotel Tiout" inside the medina. From the hotel car park, we scoped Common Kestrel perched on a big palm tree and spotted Little Swifts flying up in the sky. We paid a visit to the local souk, walked around the busy streets and had dinner at "Chez Nada".

28 February: Taroudant, Oued Souss, Oued Massa, Guelmim

Before leaving, a quick look from the hotel car park and another from the gates of the city produced 2 Common Kestrels, Little Swift, Pallid Swift, House Sparrow, House Bunting, Spotless Starling, Common Pigeon and Collared Dove.

At Oued Souss, we parked the car near the military control at the track that gives access to the coast besides the wall of the royal palace. We walked a little over 1 km to the sea front, looking at the wetland bushes to the left of the track. There we watched the European Magpies of the *mauritanica* subspecies, exhibiting the typical blue skin behind the eye. At the end of the road we came into a rubbish tip where demolished building materials had been dumped. Despite the nature of this trash habitat, we were happy to come across several Stone Curlews, one after the other, up to 35 in total. Some were just standing, others walking fast over short distances or taking short low flights when approached. The wetland was full of other bird species: Greater Flamingo, Marbled Duck, Northern Shoveler, Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt, Curlew, Pied Avocet, Common Redshank, Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Common Kestrel, Crested Lark and Zitting Cisticola. By then, the views through the field scope were getting blurred because of the heat. As it was getting late for us, we decided to skip the seafront and move on.



Back at the car, we stopped to look at an upstream stretch of the Souss river, where we found White Stork, Great Cormorant and Yellow-legged Gull. More than 30 White Storks were circling over a rubbish tip in the southern outskirts of Agadir. Passing through Aït Melloul, we were hungry and stopped for an excellent goat tagine at a popular restaurant.

Arriving to the Oued Massa site, the local official guides proposed to show us the area for 150 dirhams. They said that the river and estuary did not have many birds because of recent changes in the water regime due to the opening of the river mouth, but promised to try to show us Little Owl, Black-crowned Tchagra and Brown-throated Sand Martin. We did not take them up on their offer and tried birding alone. The bushes by the river

near the guides' house had Stonechat, Common Bulbul and Serin. In the village at the end of the track there were Laughing Dove, Barn Swallow, House Bunting and 1 Little Owl. The track from the car park to the estuary had *africana* Chaffinch and Moussier's Redstart. Although this should have been a good habitat for Black-crowned Tchagra, it did not show up. Because it was getting late there was no time to fully explore the site. Leaving the area, we found 2 Little Owls in the land neighbouring the guides' house.



Further upstream, at the bridge over Oued Massa, we found Barn Swallow, Black-headed Gull, Moorhen, Coot, Little Egret, Grey Heron (breeding adult with reddish bill standing on a tree nest), Common Sandpiper and Laughing Dove. Unfortunately, we could not find Brown-throated Sand Martin and, for a while, we regretted having dismissed the guide.

After this, we drove southwards to Guelmim, where we had dinner and slept at the modern international style "Hotel Adil Moussif".

1 March: Guelmim, Tan-Tan, Tilemsen road, Guelmim

We planned to explore the wadis (or oueds) found along the road south of Guelmim towards the Western Sahara, at least until Tan-Tan. From there we would decide whether to visit the harbour at Tan-Tan Plage, or to make an incursion inland into more remote territory. We chose the second option and found beautiful open landscapes with low scrub or bare arid ground and dust blown by the wind. Though still early in the season, we found some 4x4 vehicles and many European mobile homes, mostly from France and a few from other countries.

The first stop was 5 km south of Guelmim at Oued Sayed. A short look around and we stalked Hoopoe, Common Kestrel, House Sparrow, Woodchat Shrike and Laughing Dove. Driving along the Sandy Plains we briefly scanned the fields a couple of times but did not see any birds at all. The picture was totally different further south (km 40) at Oued Bou Issafène, where we easily found small numbers of Trumpeter Finch, Moussier's Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and a few singing Corn Bunting.

After lunch at a petrol station restaurant, we headed towards the southeast to explore the Tilemsen road until M'Sied for desert species and to enjoy this majestic wilderness of stone desert and desolate mountains with rare Argan woods, Acacia forests and Barbary Fig. However, we found less birds than we had hoped for, or perhaps we just lacked experience to find them in such an arid stony vastness. Still we managed to spot Desert

Wheatear, Red-rumped Wheatear, Desert Lark, Thekla Lark, Great Grey Shrike and Hoopoe. At the end of the day we drove back to our hotel in Guelmim.

2 March: Guelmim, Oueds to the west of Guelmim, Bouizakarne, Tata

We had an early morning start to explore the wadis that cross the area to the west of Guelmim. This would be the last visit to Atlantic Morocco before moving further inland and travelling eastwards for three days parallel to the Moroccan-Algerian border until Merzouga.

We stopped at the first site, which was the bridge over the guelta of the Oued Assaka (as Oued Noun is called in that place). While birding around, workers were extracting stone and loading it onto a truck. It was nice to see so much water flowing through the canyon in a generally dry environment. We saw Thekla Lark, Barn Swallow, House Bunting, Chiffchaff, Zitting Cisticola, White Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail of the *iberiae* subspecies, House Sparrow, Little Ringed Plover and 3 Curlew Sandpiper. We still continued driving towards Plage Blanche through fields of Barbary Fig, but soon realised that it would take so much time that it would ruin our plans for the day. Therefore we turned back to Guelmim, not without trying another side turn towards a further downstream stretch of Oued Noun. We stopped at a place to observe the Euphorbia shrubs with leaking milky sap. The Oued Noun was reached again where the road overhangs the river and crosses it at a village before continuing to Fort Bou Jérif. This was the last attempt of the trip for Black-crowned Tchagra, but this bird remained illusive and escaped all attempts to be found. Instead we saw Grey Heron, Common Bulbul, Laughing Dove, Zitting Cisticola and Thekla Lark.

The road from Bouizakarne to the east follows large extensions of stone desert, mountain ranges and bare rock cliffs. There we saw Thekla Lark and 1 flying Long-legged Buzzard. Along this road there are several oases with dense palm groves, as well as desolate areas with sparse Acacia trees. Although Taghjicht oasis was a pretty place, we did not try birding there. However, on the way we found White-crowned Wheatear, Moussier's Redstart, Trumpeter Finch and House Sparrow. This was the place where we had the closest encounters with the local police force. The weather changed and for the first time in the trip the blue sky turned whitish with lower visibility and a taste of dust in the air. By chance, when looking for birds in the stone desert we spotted a Golden Jackal. We explored without success the cliff area 30 km before Tata to look for Pharaoh Eagle Owl, but only found holes and bird droppings. We had planned to try to find Sandgrouse by a water point closer to Tata where there was a chance that they could go drinking, but it was already too late when we passed by that place. We found basic accommodation and dinner at the "Hotel Relais des Sables" in Tata.

3 March: Tata, Tissint, Agdz

Having planned to give it a try for the Sandgrouse and the Pharaoh Eagle Owl, we headed back to an oasis 18 km southwest of Tata and to the cliffs 30 km from Tata on the same road. Again no signs of Sandgrouse at the oasis, instead Little Ringed Plover, White Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail and White-crowned Wheatear. At the cliffs, while looking for the Owl we met another group of birdwatchers that had just found it further back. We thanked them for the tip and followed their indications back to Tata. The place is a dark cliff 15 km before Tata, turning right into a track when you see a sign for

Tazoulte. We parked the car a few hundred meters from the main road, by the trees and walked northwards close to the palm trees along the cliff base. We found some crevices and three ledges with white droppings but these places seemed empty. Walking back to the car we double checked these places and finally found a roosting Pharaoh Eagle Owl not far from one of those spots. Whilst looking at this bird, we were joined by some Bar-tailed Larks that rested for a while under the shade of the palm trees.



The next remarkable place was Tissint, in particular the top of the cliff overhanging the river. The birds present were Grey Heron, Little Egret, Laughing Dove, Crag Martin and 10 House Martins. Further away, at Oued El Maleh, we found Grey Heron and a colony of 40 Little Egrets. We had dinner and spent the night at the lovely family-run traditional style "Auberge d'Ourize", located just 2 km to the south of Agdz, where we were the only guests.

4 March: Agdz, Vallée du Drâa, Nekob road, Rissani, Merzouga

A stop in the Drâa valley where the road winds very close to at a river bend allowed us to enjoy superb sightings of cliffs, cultivated green fields, blue river, palm orchards and reddish-brown kasbahs. Amidst this outstanding scenery we saw Kingfisher, House Bunting, House Sparrow, House Martin, Crag Martin, Blackbird, White Wagtail, Collared Dove, Chiffchaff and White-crowned Wheatear. On the road to Nekob we found Trumpeter Finch and more White-crowned Wheatear.

At a petrol station in Rissani, we met Brahim Mezzane¹⁶, who, for 200 dirhams, would be our guide for the following day. He invited us for tea at his home and then we drove to his friend's guesthouse "Chez Tonton" in Merzouga where we had a warm welcome and a wonderful stay. At sunset we went to the lake area, which was completely dry, found no birds, but fortunately found the way back on desert tracks to the auberge in the darkness without getting lost. After that, I was pretty confident that Brahim really knew how to navigate in that region.

5 March: Merzouga and Rissani

Paulo birded the whole morning with Brahim at the edge of the sand desert. Near Auberge Erg Chebbi we found Hoopoe Lark, Desert Lark, Desert Wheatear, White-crowned Wheatear, Great Grey Shrike, House Sparrow, 2 Barn Swallow and a flock of

¹⁶ <http://www.desertbirds.jigsy.com/>

50 Trumpeter Finch. A group of 8 Brown-necked Raven took flight when we got closer to Auberge Yasmina. The lakes were dry at this place. The ringing station was operational and we met two Spanish researchers checking the nets for migratory passerines. They draw our attention to a nest box hanging from a tree, where a pair of Desert Sparrow could be seen going in and out. Tristram's Warbler and Chiffchaff were active in the shrubs. Collared Dove and White Wagtail were also seen in this area.



From Merzouga we drove to Rissani and checked some farmland and villages along the Circuit Touristique de Rissani. We saw a flock of 30 Goldfinch¹⁷, Crested Lark, Great Grey Shrike, Tristram's Warbler, Common Bulbul and White Wagtail.



We tried to see Pharaoh Eagle Owl in two sites off the road from Rissani to Ouarzazate. The first site was reached from a track that started to the left of the road 7 km away from Rissani. This track leads to a quarry from where fossil-containing stone blocks are

¹⁷ Goldfinch is also regularly found as a cage bird in the Moroccan cities that we visited.

extracted and continues to the base of a huge cliff. For the second site we took another track that went right from the road 8.5 km away from Rissani. This track goes around the cliff ridge and gives access to the north face. The search for the Owl was fruitless, but we saw Lanner Falcon and Crag Martin.

6 March: Merzouga, Rissani, Boumalne du Dadès

In the morning we visited the Rissani souk with Brahim and then he showed us his family's fossil processing works and shop. We bought some fossils, left town and after a brief stop in Erfoud for lunch, we took the road westwards to Boumalne du Dadès.

On the way to Boumalne we made a well worth detour to see the outstanding Gorges du Todra. On the road to this impressive narrow and deep canyon, we found Cattle Egret, and Blackbird, while near the canyon there was Pallid Swift, Crag Martin and Black Redstart.

It was dark when we arrived at the "Hotel Soleil Bleu" in Boumalne du Dadès, where we had dinner, browsed the birding log books, some of them dated from the 1980s and exchanged views with another birdwatcher about local birding sites and species.

7 March: Boumalne du Dadès, Tagdilt Track, Gorges du Dadès, Aït Ben Haddou

Arriving before 7 am at the Boumalne rubbish tip on the Tagdilt track we soon realised how cold this place was despite sunshine. This is not a nice area, with a lot of rubbish, poultry feathers and barking stray dogs. We easily spotted a Long-legged Buzzard standing on top of a raised garbage heap. Soon after, we found two more. In the same area we also saw many Temminck's Horned Lark, Red-rumped Wheatear, Trumpeter Finch, Lesser Short-toed Lark and a few solitary Barn Swallow. Arriving to the village of Tagdilt, we found House Sparrow, Serin and Collared Dove.



During the incursion to the Gorges du Dadès, we made a pause for lunch in the "Les 5 Lunes"¹⁸ guesthouse in Aït Oudinar, where we had an excellent Berber Omelette. The birds of this valley included nesting White Stork, Crag Martin, Black Wheatear, Serin and Common Kestrel.

Arriving at the "Maison d'Hôtes Lokfel" in Aït Ben Haddou we had a great dinner, a chat with the owner and enjoyed this charming guesthouse.

¹⁸ <http://les5lunes.com/>

8 March: Aït Ben Haddou, Tizi-n-Tichka, Marrakesh

We had a relaxing start visiting the ksar of Aït Ben Haddou a short walk across the river from our hotel. We saw Hoopoe, House Sparrow, House Bunting, White-crowned Wheatear, Common Kestrel and Collared Dove.

The objective for the day was to arrive in Marrakesh in early afternoon. Therefore we hit the road and crossed the Atlas in less than four hours, without paying too much attention to the birds. We stopped a few times to take an occasional photo, but decided to leave mountain habitats for a future trip. Before crossing the Tizi-n-Tichka mountain pass, we noticed a flock of corvids landing on cultivated fields of the village of Aguelmous. A closer look revealed a mixed flock of Red-billed Chough and Alpine Chough. Crested Lark was also present in this area.

Driving through Marrakesh proved to be a challenge but we managed to find our way into the Kasbah. The main street was even more congested with incoming traffic of all sorts: trucks, cars, motorbikes, horse-drawn carriages, donkeys and pedestrians. We finally reversed into a narrow alley and parked before walking a dead end to our last hotel, the riad “Maison Mnabha”, where we had a warm welcome.

Then we went to the airport to bring the car back to Avis and took a taxi back to the city centre. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the souks and did not see any birds other than House Bunting, Pallid Swift and White Stork.

9 March: Marrakesh

We visited several monuments and walked through many streets and souks, starting at the Kasbah, followed by the Mellah quarter and the souks to the north of the Djamaa El Fna square. White Stork could be seen everywhere in the Kasbah, while Chiffchaff was found in the gardens of the Saadian Tombs. Atop the ramparts of the El-Badi Palace we could see 52 occupied nests of White Stork and, at the same time, there were 25 individuals soaring higher up. The courtyard of this monument was good for House Bunting, Spotless Starling and Barn Swallow. Pallid Swift and Little Swift could be seen flying over. The gardens of the Bahia Palace sheltered Common Bulbul, Collared Dove, Blackbird and House Sparrow.



The open space of the Djamaa El Fna square was a good spot to follow Pallid Swift and Barn Swallow in flight. House Bunting was easier to see in smaller squares in particular close to open-air food stalls selling spices, grain or beans in bulk. The nice surprise of the day was the discovery of a breeding colony of Little Swift that had built nests under the wooden porch over the Mouassine fountain in the souk district.



10 March: Marrakesh, Lisboa

Time for the last visit to the city, packing and getting to the airport, where we found House Bunting inside the airport building next to a cafeteria. We met another birdwatcher that was about to start his journey and told him about the highlights of our trip. The flight to Lisbon took only 1.10 hour and we arrived well ahead of schedule.