

MOROCCO & WESTERN SAHARA

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2011

**EXTENSIVE TOUR:
27 FEBRUARY TO 9 MARCH 2011**



Lee G R Evans

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African Pied Crow, Western Sahara (Stuart Piner)

This was my 11th tour of Morocco and third of the Western Sahara and was partly successful - with a grand total of **200** species of bird being recorded. This 2011 tour consisted of six participants - LGRE, Robert Fuge, Darrel Bryant, Ian Barnard, Chris Glanfield and Robert Carr - and other than a few unfortunate mishaps, went very much to schedule and was extremely enjoyable and productive. We flew with RyanAir from London Stansted to Agadir Airport, from where I hired a Hyundai H-1 Van (9-seater) for the entire trip. A total of **5,288 kilometres** were driven in 10 days. Overnight accommodation was generally basic and cheap, ranging from £4 to £30 per night. The 2011 tour was priced at **£606 per person**.

INTRODUCTION

This report covers a ten-day tour of Morocco and the Western Sahara and is in two parts - a detailed daily account of sightings and happenings and locations visited followed by a fully detailed Systematic List of all of the species recorded.



Bird of the trip for me - the continuing pair of AFRICAN PIED CROWS in the Western Sahara; both birds successfully bred on site last year producing a single offspring.

SUNDAY 27 FEBRUARY 2011

Robert Fuge, Darrel Bryant, Ian Barnard, Chris Glanfield, Robert Carr and I all assembled at Gatwick Airport North Terminal at 0630 hours and after check-in, passport control and baggage checks, boarded our *RyanAir* flight to Agadir, in southern Morocco. Three hours and nine minutes later, and at 1039 hours local time, we arrived at Agadir. The local temperature was 26°C (79°F) and it was clear, fine and dry. My pre-arranged car hire – a 9-seater Hyundai H-1 diesel van – was efficiently provided by CarHire3000 and at 1130 hours I drove away from the airport. Local currency was the dirham and at the time of our visit the exchange rate was [12.89 dirhams](#) to the British pound. The van had 21,665 kilometres on the clock as I drove it away from the airport and 144 euros had to be spent locally on additional insurances.

AGADIR AIRPORT

Our first tasters of Moroccan birding were from within the airport car park where Spotless Starlings, Eurasian Collared Dove, House Sparrows, Red-rumped Swallow, Goldfinch, Barn Swallow, Pallid Swift and [COMMON BULBULS](#) were all recorded and whilst driving along the new road between the airport and the Agadir bypass, the first of many [NORTH AFRICAN BLUE-EARED MAGPIES](#) were seen at the roadside, along with numerous Common Blackbirds and Common Kestrels.



[North African Blue-eared Magpie, Marrakech, Morocco, 14 January 2007 \(Ray Scally\)](#)
Although closely related to the Common Magpie commonly occurring in Europe, this North African species is slightly smaller, wholly dark-tailed and characterised by the presence of bare blue skin just behind the eye. Its vocabulary is also fairly distinct.

Since 2004, the *UK400 Club* has considered *mauretania* as a separate species from Common Magpie.

SIDI BIBI

Before we reached the Agadir bypass, we came across a small colony of **LITTLE SWIFTS** at the roadside – about 5 individuals mixed in with Pallid Swifts flying down to investigate holes in buildings. Several European Barn Swallows were also seen.

TIA MONSOUR

AFRICAN HOUSE BUNTINGS are a speciality of Morocco and other North African countries and in the Agadir region, this species is particularly abundant. Its loud, short and piercing song can be heard reverberating all around the buildings as you drive south from Ait Melloul towards the turn off for Massa. They are very much the sparrow of the region and associate with urbanised areas. Well over 40 birds were recorded on this stretch of the P30.

African House Bunting (Ray Scally)



Other roadside birds included Southern Grey Shrike, European Serin, Fan-tailed Warbler, Eurasian Collared Dove, Common Blackbird and some 30 or more **NORTH AFRICAN BLUE-EARED MAGPIES**.

OUED MASSA

Between the turn-off from the main road and Massa town, the road runs through some interesting habitat and it was here that we obtained some great looks at Crested Lark, the *algeriensis* form of Southern Grey Shrike, Spotless Starling and White Wagtail.



There are two species of Crested Lark to be found in Morocco – the **LONG-BILLED** (*riggenbachi*) and the nominate **CRESTED** (*cristata*) – although perhaps as many as five different forms occur or clinal variations of both. Both are equally as common and can be frequently encountered at the roadside. **THEKLA LARK** is also a very abundant species in Morocco, although tends to favour the more rocky and hilly terrain. The Crested Larks at Massa are of the paler, browner form like this one photographed by Sue Bryan on our 2009 tour.

In Massa town, **AFRICAN HOUSE BUNTINGS** were abundant and a few Laughing Doves were seen. Cattle Egrets also scavenged the rubbish.





Oued Massa and its surrounding areas were once rich in habitat and birds but over the last ten years, intensive farming and drainage of the river has affected its attractiveness and the breaching of the river mouth by a tidal surge has meant that salt water has largely killed off much of the former habitat and as a consequence is no longer that attractive to waders and other marshland species.

The site is situated 63kms south of Agadir and is accessed by taking the first right turning off of the main road to Sidi Rabat. After 5kms the road arrives in Massa town, where one turns right. The road eventually peters out as it drops down towards the river valley and becomes a rough track and continues for several kilometres through a few shanty establishments before entering the reserve proper and its entrance and car park.

Taking a steady, slow drive along the very bumpy and sandy access track, a variety of bird species was encountered, including Common Stonechat, numerous Cattle Egrets, 5+ Great Tits, Sardinian Warblers, Stone Curlew and of course, our first **MOUSSIER'S REDSTARTS** of the trip. This species is very common in this area and we were able to savour some fantastic views as they flitted about the roadside vegetation and buildings - 8 birds were logged even before we entered the reserve proper. Moussier's Redstarts really are gorgeous birds and are always one of the high priority and targeted birds of the trip.

A pair of Black-winged Stilts fed on a roadside pool.

As we approached the entrance, the sandy cliffs to our right harboured a number of Rock Doves, with Sardinian Warblers seemingly in every bush and Fan-tailed Warblers 'zubbing' all around. The sound of European Serins was everywhere and cracking views were obtained of 6 or more, especially around the plantation at the parking location.

One particular speciality of this area is the **BLACK-CROWNED TCHAGRA**, and despite arriving in the heat of the afternoon, we were thrilled to locate one just to the left of the main track. This individual was particularly showy and Chris (the official photographer on the 2011 tour) did his duty and obtained a fabulous selection of outstanding images of it as it displayed on top of some rough vegetation right in front of the van. This was a brilliant start to the trip - this species often being very difficult to locate and get good views of. Hearing them is not a problem and this afternoon, I heard at least eight different birds uttering their weird but very musical song.



Two specialities of the Massa area – BLACK-HEADED TCHAGRA and MOUSSIER'S REDSTART. Chris Glanfield obtained these fabulous images of both species even before we entered the reserve proper



A pair of DESERT LITTLE OWLS was present and photographed on one of the outbuildings that bordered the access track to Oued Massa and was one of at least 6 individuals we eventually recorded in and around Massa. This very sandy version of the Little Owl we see in Britain is actually related to the Lilith's Little Owl of the Middle East and is considered a separate species by the *UK400 Club* and *British Birding Association*.



Male MOUSSIER'S REDSTART at Oued Massa (Sue Bryan) – a beautiful and very common species locally

We explored the area half a mile west of the car park, checking the plantation around the parking area, the main lagoon and river to our left and then the plains and hilly desert terrain to the right of the main footpath.

The river was surprisingly quiet and largely devoid of birds, with just Grey Heron, 4 Eurasian Spoonbills, 5 roosting MOROCCAN CORMORANTS, 1 Oystercatcher and Black-headed Gulls noted, and a mass of roosting *intermedius* Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Sandwich Terns much further up on the mud close to the river mouth.

BLACK-CROWNED TCHAGRAS are of course the special attraction here and we were not disappointed – a further 4 birds being encountered, with at least two affording some excellent viewing opportunities; they were in the scrub to the right of the main track and nearly always announced their presence by their eerie song.

Whilst walking across the dune scrub back towards the car park, we flushed two Common Quail and a pair of **BARBARY PARTRIDGES**, as well as seeing Linnet, 3 Corn Buntings, several more North African Blue-eared Magpies, 4 algeriensis Southern Grey Shrikes, numerous Common Chiffchaffs, 2 male Western Subalpine Warblers, a Pallid Swift, 2 Woodpigeons, several more **MOUSSIER'S REDSTARTS** and a host of colourful butterflies including Small Copper, Plain Tiger and Moroccan Orange-Tip.

Back in the car park, I was very pleased to see Andrea Corso of Sicily, also leading a tour.....

Driving back along the rough track towards Massa town, a female Blue Rock Thrush was seen, along with a male Black Redstart and a migrant Woodchat Shrike; also more Desert Little Owls on stone walls and more **MOUSSIER'S REDSTARTS**. European Barn Swallows were migrating north in good numbers (and this was to continue throughout our visit to the south). **THEKLA LARKS** were particularly common in the stony ground surrounding the village.

OUED SANTA MASSA

Another very important speciality of the Oued Massa is the **BROWN-THROATED SAND MARTIN** or **PLAIN MARTIN** as it is sometimes referred to. Now, we once always recorded this species on the cliffs as we drove down to the reserve entrance but no longer – the birds have relocated. Fortunately a young local lad knew the site and very kindly offered to take us there; we followed him on his clapped-out moped.

The 'new' site is a fabulous reed-fringed pool on the south side of the river, about 8kms drive from the centre of Massa. In no time at all we had found no fewer than eight birds with extremely good views being attained by all. The birds are very dusky-brown indeed on the underparts and lack the brown breast-band of Sand Martin; they have a paler rump and all-dark tail, paler undertail-coverts and dark brown underwing-coverts and are very small.

The pool was extremely productive for other marshland species too with 2 drake Northern Shoveler, 15 Eurasian Coot, an adult **PURPLE HERON**, several Grey Herons, a Little Egret, a **SQUACCO HERON**, 4 Sand Martins, 8 Moorhen and a superb female **LITTLE BITTERN** all recorded.

Several **NORTH AFRICAN REED WARBLERS** were singing (this sedentary Reed Warbler taxon only recently being described and documented after a number were trapped and ringed in Libya and elsewhere) as well as numerous Cetti's Warblers. A male Common Stonechat was seen and a male Eurasian Sparrowhawk drifted over.

After enjoying the views of the Plain Martins, we drove on down the road further exploring the river; at the first bridge crossing off to the left a **COMMON KINGFISHER** was seen, along with Mallard, several Cattle Egrets, more Cetti's Warblers, 2 Sedge Warblers and at least 20 Laughing Doves.

The trip navigator (Robert Fuge) managed to get us lost trying to get back to the opposite side of the river valley but we did see a **WILD MONGOOSE** in compensation.

So that was it, the end of our first day. Darkness befell at 1830 hours.

I then continued driving the short distance to TIZNIT, where we all stayed in the Hotel de Paris at 442 dirhams for two rooms (74 dirhams each). We enjoyed a reasonable meal there too in the restaurant below.

MONDAY 28 FEBRUARY (DAY 2)

Daylight dawned at 0645 hours and like the evening before, it was surprisingly cool. We departed the hotel just as it was getting daylight, Tiznit town itself producing several [AFRICAN HOUSE BUNTINGS](#), Common Kestrels and Corn Buntings.

It was then the start of a long, gruelling drive south, with the first 50kms producing large numbers of Thekla Larks and Corn Buntings in the Lekhsas area and in the mountain pass thereabouts, several passage Northern Wheatears and a nice male [ROCK BUNTING](#) at Bouisakama.

Once in more open desert terrain, large flocks of Greater Short-toed Larks were encountered, as well as another migrant Woodchat Shrike. Approaching Guelmim, 3 [DESERT LARKS](#) were seen at the roadside and Ground Squirrels became more commonplace.

OUED BOUKILA

Oued Sayad and Oued Boukila lie south of Guelmime on the P41, the former 6.5kms south and the latter 9.5kms south. On this trip, we chose to visit Boukila, as this is one of the most reliable sites in Morocco to see [AFRICAN SCRUB WARBLER](#). Park by the bridge and explore the vegetated wadi which leads away for several miles to the SE.

[AFRICAN SCRUB WARBLER](#) was our target bird and after a short spell of walking, I quickly located a small party of 3 birds – moving quickly between bushes and often running across the sand. In fact when prompted by tape, spectacular views were obtained of the male. The birds here are of the *theresae* type.

Other species encountered included 2 [CREAM-COLOURED COURSERS](#) in flight, 4+ [TRUMPETER FINCHES](#), 8 Greater Short-toed Larks, a pair of African Desert Wheatears, a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears, 3 Red-rumped Swallows, over 40 European Barn Swallows migrating north, a migrant male Western Subalpine Warbler and several Crested and Thekla Larks (the latter photographed below).





This cheeky little fellow welcomed us into the parking area at Oued Boukila (Chris Glanfield) – it was particularly common in this desert area

Continuing south along the main road from Boukila, **RED-RUMPED WHEATEARS** became more numerous and were very much roadside birds; a further 3 Trumpeter Finches were also seen.



Once south of Guelmime, Red-rumped Wheatear is a common roadside bird (Sue Bryan)



ROADSIDE DESERT SITE 100 KMS NORTH OF TAN-TAN

This is a regular staging post of ours – an area of desert to the west of the road just adjacent to the 100k from Tan-Tan post. We leave the road on a track frequently used by lorries and continue along it, crossing a deep wadi, for some 6-7 kms until we reach several farmsteads where watering has created large green areas, very attractive to birdlife.

It is larks which are our primary target here and premium numbers are always found. The North African form of **HOPOE LARK** is fairly abundant here and during our visit today, at least 8 were recorded, several males in full display flight.

Greater Short-toed Larks were extremely abundant, with several large flocks exceeding 200 birds recorded, with a few singing male Lesser Short-toed Larks also present in the grass fields not far from the road. Several **TEMMINCK'S HORNED LARKS** were seen, as well as **BAR-TAILED DESERT LARKS** but the main attraction as always was the **THICK-BILLED LARKS** – initially a pair being seen, then 4 more and then another pair – crippling views being afforded on each occasion. This site is traditionally the best for this nomadic species.

At least 4 Spectacled Warblers were seen, numerous African Desert, Northern and Red-rumped Wheatears and vast numbers of **TRUMPETER FINCHES** (a first flock of 72, then 50 or more frequently seen).

In the irrigated field surrounding the farm, Tawny Pipit, 6 Spanish Wagtails and numerous House Sparrows were present, with Southern Grey Shrikes and a Painted Lady in the desert surrounding it.



Bar-tailed Desert Lark (Sue Bryan)



Hoopoe Lark and male Thick-billed Lark, Morocco; Trumpeter Finches next page (Sue Bryan)

