



Temminck's Horned Lark and singing male Desert Lark in Morocco (Sue Bryan)

Other than the Aousswerd road in the Western Sahara, this site is the most productive for lark species in Morocco.



The Algeriensis form of Southern Grey Shrike – common in the coastal strip of Morocco (Sue Bryan)

I finally arrived in the town of Tan Tan at 1444 hours, where 300 dirhams bought me 40.25 litres of diesel. It also bought me a traffic ticket of 700 dirhams on leaving the outskirts of town as two corrupt police officers attempted to fine me for not stopping at a roundabout. I stood my ground and maintained my innocence (I had definitely stopped behind other vehicles) and after half an hour of haggling, a senior plain-clothed English-speaking officer arrived and successfully revoked my ticket. From Tan Tan southward, we were then to endure police stops at every entry and departure at every major town.

After requesting for the passport, the officers always wanted to know the profession of all occupants and where exactly we were heading for (Dahkla in our case).

As always in Tan Tan, several Cattle Egrets were noted on the outskirts. Once past the now infamous Spanish Imperial Eagle wintering site, the drop down into the desert plain was characterised by a number of large flooded pools remaining over from recent rains. At one such flood about 8kms south of Tan Tan, 8 Eurasian Spoonbills were noted, a **LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD**, 24 Kentish Plovers, 2 Ringed Plover, 4 Green Sandpipers, 5 Black-winged Stilts, several Lesser Short-toed Larks, 5 Spanish Wagtails and 2 Water Pipits.

On further south to Port Ville D'elatia, some 500 or more Lesser Black-backed Gulls were present, along with 3 Black-headed Gulls, with a further passage Green Sandpiper on a roadside pool.

At Pont Sur Oued Chbeika, 5 Moroccan Cormorants were roosting, along with an adult Caspian Tern, 100+ Yellow-legged Gulls and 9 adult **AUDOUIN'S GULLS**. A single Common Sandpiper too.



Adult Audouin's Gull, Southern Morocco, February 2011 (Chris Glanfield)

One of my favourite gull species, this species being particularly numerous in winter along this section of coastline. From previous trips reading of rings, the vast majority are from breeding grounds in eastern Spain – at the Ebro Delta.



Another **LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD** was seen at the roadside, initially perched on a pylon. This one above was photographed by Sue Bryan in the same area in May 2009.

Oued Mar Fatma

Another river crossing and another place for roosting gulls and other waterbirds. One pool held a single Black-necked Grebe whilst 72 **AUDOUIN'S GULLS** were roosting on a sandbar; 87 Greater Flamingoes were nearby on the adjacent beach where 150 Oystercatchers, a single Pied Avocet, 16 Sanderlings and a Caspian Tern were also identified.

It also became quickly apparent that offshore here were very large numbers of wintering **COMMON SCOTERS** – at least 350 counted in a brief scan – one can only ponder on the number of Surf Scoters also wintering with them.

Not that far further south than another river valley with more roosting **AUDOUIN'S GULLS** – 98 this time – and another 4 Greater Flamingoes. At the next checkpoint, 3 Pallid Swifts were flying around and more **COMMON SCOTERS** were offshore.

AFKEHNIR

We arrived in Afkehnir at 1800 hours and had a quick look at an adjacent beach where 70+ Sanderlings, a Turnstone and a Whimbrel were all noted. The wind was still blowing fiercely from the north and we had actually witnessed lorries acting as 'snowploughs', ridding the main road of the huge sand drifts that had built up during the day. Afkehnir is very much a shanty town and the hotel here leaves very much to be desired. Being so close to our next location we decided to sleep here, the hotel in the main street costing 250 dirhams for all five beds (I opted to sleep on the floor). A total of 102 species had now been recorded.



The Hotel Atlas in Afkhenir – 250 dirhams for 5 beds – but poor toilet and no shower facilities

TUESDAY 1 MARCH (Day 3)

The hotel proved to be very basic and at dawn the following day, all six members of the team were quickly gathered by the van. It was once again very windy and rather chilly.

LAGUNE DE KHENIFISS (LAC DE NAILA)

Our first port of call of the day was Khenifiss Lagoon, just 21 km south of Afkhenir. It was low tide and with a little bit of persuasion, a local boatman kindly agreed to take Rob F, Rob Carr, Chris and Jaane and Hanna Aalto from eastern Finland out to the islands at just 350 dirhams for the boat.

For several years now and certainly since I produced my last report in May 2009, **AFRICAN KELP GULLS** have been in residence at this location. On Robert Fuge and I's last visit then, we both pondered and commented as to why some of the birds had pale pinkish legs and pale irises but on return home, I claimed like others that all 10 large black-backed gulls on site were Kelp Gulls (Cape Gulls).

It transpired from images that some of the birds did in fact appear to be adult GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULLS and with this declaration, the *larid* world was sent in turmoil. Great Black-backed Gulls, apart from the odd isolated record in Spain and Portugal and a relatively new colonisation on the Brittany coast in NW France, was a species that bred in northern latitudes, particularly in Iceland and in Norway and Sweden. However, what I did not know was the true extent of the French colonisation, from just 260 breeding pairs in 1970 to 800 pairs in 1978 and 1,824 pairs in 1988.

With all this in mind, it was my intention to properly study the birds this time and see if it was possible to unravel the mystery. On this occasion and visit, some EIGHT large black-backed gulls were present in the colony – a number of individuals showing mixed characters. Some did appear to be pure pale-eyed, pink-legged adult GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULLS but two (perhaps a pair) possessed all-dark eyes and grey-green legs and were considered on my part to be undoubted adult **AFRICAN KELP (CAPE) GULLS**. Ian, Darrel and I were lucky in that one of the adults chose to fly around our heads in the car park and afford exceptional views whilst the other took turns in long-calling (displaying) from the favoured rock pillar within the breeding colony. There was no doubting that all of the birds were resident and either paired up or about to partake in another breeding season but what they all are is anybody's guess – perhaps hybridisation has been taking place over a number of years.

The colony also harboured several pairs of apparent Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls, whilst large numbers of passage Lesser Black-backed Gulls were also about. Other species noted included Eurasian Spoonbill (including a multi-ringed specimen), 80+ Greater Flamingoes, Little Egret, 55 Red Knot, Dunlin, Oystercatcher, Common Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwits, 3 Grey Plover, Turnstone, Eurasian Curlew and a Common Greenshank.

Whilst waiting for the others to return from their boat trip, we enjoyed some exceptional views of a very confiding **HOOPOE LARK** in the car park and our first **BLACK WHEATEAR** of the trip.



An apparent African Kelp Gull (right) in company with an Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull intergrade (UQ). This is one of the adult birds we saw on 01 March with its dark eye and pale green leg colour.



An apparent African Kelp Gull, Khenifiss Lagoon, March 2011 (UQ). Apart from the obvious features described earlier, these two flight images reveal the restricted nature of the white mirror on p10



Both apparent adult Kelp Gulls perched aloft the stone mound photographed in early March 2011 at Khenifiss Lagoon (Vincent Legrand). This is a very favoured perch for many of the gulls and can be easily 'scoped from the car park. It is situated on the far flat island. Intriguingly, and after some thorough research, I found out that the Brittany Great Black-backed Gull colonists had a habitat shift, changing from the preferred rocky islets to large, flat islands and human constructions (Linard 1994 in *Nouvel Atlas des Oiseaux Nicheurs de France 1985-1989*). This perhaps has a major bearing on this isolated population and goes a long way to explaining what is happening at Khenifiss. There does seem to be a number of apparent hybrids present on site.

Anyhow, by mid-morning, we were back on the road again and making miles on Laayoune – our next destination. Once again, Red-rumped Wheatears were the main species in evidence, with large numbers being seen, as well as the odd African Desert Wheatear.

LAAYOUNE

We arrived at the check point and then the main river crossing at the north side of town at 1140 hours. As is often the case, we stopped off here to check the river and pools for wintering and passage waterbirds. To the left of the bridge was a staggering flock of some 90 **LITTLE STINTS**, accompanied by a few Dunlin and 3 Kentish Plovers. At the SE end of the bridge was a nice freshwater lagoon where over 300 Eurasian Coots were feeding, a Little Grebe, 5 Black-necked Grebes and a few Moorhens.

A long way west of the bridge were 96 **RUDDY SHELDUCKS** in one group, with 300+ Black-winged Stilts, 2 Common Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Cattle Egrets and a single migrant Sand Martin noted.

At the Shell garage in central Laayoune, I filled up with 30 litres of diesel for 150 dirhams.

Not that far out of Laayoune, a nice **LANNER FALCON** flew across the road – our first of the trip – and then more **BLACK WHEATEARS** followed – another 6 in total.

Several more hours of driving were only broken up by a roosting **OSPREY** on a cliff-face some 189kms north of Dakhla.

TCHOUKAN – VILLAGE DE PECHE OUED KRAA

The roadside café at Tchoukan, some 169 kms north of Dakhla, became legendary after Andy Clifton, Chris Batty, Stuart Piner and Andrew Holden discovered 3 **AFRICAN PIED CROWS** at the site in December 2009 – a species exceptionally rare in the Western Palearctic. According to locals, they had already been around for a while back then, and when Richard Bonser, Josh Jones and Oliver Metcalfe visited in July 2010, it seemed they were a permanent fixture with the first ever Western P breeding attempt confirmed with the presence of a single youngster.

We arrived on site mid afternoon in perhaps the hottest weather of the trip so far. At first, there seemed little sign of life but as I walked around the back of the restaurant complex, I stumbled upon the pair and watched as they flew to a nearby overturned oil tanker and began scavenging on some rubbish. I beckoned the other five over and we were all able to obtain excellent views before the pair flew up and disappeared in the direction of the cliffs on the opposite side of the road. I have always had a soft spot for this species and for me this was the highlight of the trip. How on earth the birds first got there is anybody's guess but there is a tiny fishing port immediately adjacent. They certainly seem to be a permanent fixture now.





An African Pied Crow montage, all taken by Stuart Piner during their trip to the Western Sahara in December 2009. The pair bred on one of the two tall aerial masts immediately situated behind the garage.

Behind the restaurant and garage complex was a wadi with water in it which was highly attractive to migrants. Darrel found a beautiful male **WHITE-SPOTTED BLUETHROAT**, whilst other migrants included a single Hoopoe (our first of the trip), numerous Common Chiffchaffs, a very bright **IBERIAN CHIFFCHAFF**, a Willow Warbler, a gorgeous male Common Redstart, 3 Northern Wheatears, 4 Spanish Wagtails and 3 Little Ringed Plovers. A few African Desert Wheatears were also in the area, several Thekla Larks and a stunning pair of **LANNER FALCONS** flew across the valley.



Twenty litres of fuel here cost me 100 dirhams and with just 169 kms to go to Dakhla, I eventually arrived in the town at 2010 hours.

Dakhla was typically bustling and after a lengthy drive around the main town, we settled for staying at the generally basic Hotel Tafoudante, costing 290 dirhams for 5 persons (I chose to sleep in the van). I had now driven 1,210 kms since picking up the van.

WEDNESDAY 02 MARCH (Day 4)

It was very, very windy overnight and I struggled to get much sleep in the van. It was also surprisingly cold considering how far south we were

Today was reserved for exploring the 228 kilometres of the Auousswerd road, encroaching far southwest into the desert and not that far from the Mauretanian border. This continues to be one of my most enjoyable birding destinations in the Western P

DAKHLA AREA

Before we embarked on the gruelling drive to Auousswerd, we had a quick look in Dakhla Bay but the tide was well out and all that was noted were 5 roadside **AUDOUIN'S GULLS** including one juvenile.

THE AUOSSWERD ROAD

The Auousswerd Road is an exceptional birding locality, stretching 228 kms down from the main coastal road. As you drive towards the UN-hosted town, the road has mileage markers, and it is these that are used to highlight particular areas of interest.

Always ensure you have enough fuel to cover the 460 kms of driving – I topped up with 200 dirhams just before the Police checkpoint at Dakhla. The drive is long, arduous and usually very hot.



The first stop was at the Water Tower site at **GLEB JEDIANNE** – 23 kms down the road towards Aousswerd (and 79kms from Dahkla). This is a prime site for migrants and drinking sandgrouse. We were running a little late and did not get into position with the van until 0830 hours. The first sandgrouse began flying in to the neighbouring desert at 0850 hours and continued arriving over the next hour. They alight in the desert first before gradually running down to the pools to soak and drink.

SPOTTED SANDGROUSE were by far the most numerous species present here, with a total of **146** counted (first 23 at 0850, followed by 36 at 0911 and so on). **CROWNED SANDGROUSE** were less plentiful but did number **27** in all, including a flock of 6 males and females that afforded exceptional views.

A pair of Lesser Short-toed Larks visited the pools, as well as 3 migrant Little Ringed Plovers and 2 Trumpeter Finches. Southern Grey Shrikes appeared to be resident.

Carrying on further south, the first 50kms are generally fairly uneventful, with much of the scenery typified by barren desert. Northern Wheatears were occasional, as were **CREAM-COLOURED COURSERS** (although this species is abundant in some years here) and the first of several **BROWN-NECKED RAVENS** were seen.

Most incredible was this victim of last night's gale force Northerly winds – a fully laden Mitsubishi lorry had been blown off of the road and had overturned – leaving several injured Sheep still trapped under its body and a mixture of dead and live animals all surrounding it. It was sheer carnage.







Typical terrain as you drive SW along the Aousswerd road – open desert eventually broken up by scattered Acacia bushes and Marram grasses.

The **HOOPOE LARK** is a particularly common bird along this road and we had great views of two close to the road, one of which was devouring a Locust. More **CREAM COLOURED COURSERS** followed too.

At K78, we came across our first **BLACK-CROWNED FINCH LARKS** – 4 of them feeding by and on the road. This is one impressive tiny lark and a real speciality of the area.

