



Male Black-crowned Finch Lark, Aousswerd, West Sahara, May 2009 (Sue Bryan)
A speciality of the road and an abundant species

Two *flava* wagtails flew north as we wandered about the desert at K78, along with another pair of BROWN-NECKED RAVENS; a short drive further to K75 yielded a male **TRISTRAM'S WARBLER**, more **HOOPOE LARKS** and superb views of 3 **AFRICAN DESERT WARBLERS**. The latter were all on the south side of the road in the scrub and were typically mobile.

On the opposite side of the road but in the same area we came across a family party of 3 **AFRICAN DUNN'S LARKS**, with another male in full song closeby (a very cheerful, sweet song, an upslurred 'tweee' repeated several times). One of the pairs was feeding a single juvenile. Excellent views were obtained from inside the car and CG was able to get some reasonable images (see next page).

At K73, another **AFRICAN DESERT WARBLER** was encountered, and for many of us, the first **CRICKET LONGTAILS** of the trip (RC & DB had earlier found one about a kilometre from the road at K78). There were three birds in this group, and although highly mobile, good views were eventually obtained.



African Dunn's Larks and Cricket Warbler along the Auosswerd Road, 2 March 2011 (Chris Glanfield)

Although still very windy, the desert really started to warm up when we were in the vicinity of K73 – perhaps reaching 85 degrees F – with the desert scrub here producing more **BLACK-CROWNED FINCH-LARKS** and **HOOPOE LARKS**, several more **SPECTACLED WARBLERS** and some large flocks of Greater Short-toed Larks. **AFRICAN DESERT WARBLERS** breed in good numbers along this road (Paul Jeffery images below) and family parties of 5-6 birds are often encountered.





The habitat favoured by many species breeding along the Aousswerd Road, especially Cricket Longtail, African Desert Warbler and Black-crowned Finch-Lark (Paul Jeffery)

More **CRICKET WARBLERS** were located at K41 – at least 3 – and again affording excellent views – along with a further 22 BLACK-CROWNED FINCH LARKS, a pair of Bar-tailed Desert Larks, a pair of Desert Grey Shrikes and 2 Hoopoes.





CRICKET WARBLERS (Sue Bryan)
– the star attraction of the Auosswerd Road. Found to be relatively abundant and spreading west, with a population likely to number at least 50 pairs. K41-K43 are reknown stake-outs, the isolated Acacia bushes providing an ideal habitat for the males to sing and the pairs to nest and breed successfully. A minimum of 10 different birds were seen on this March 2011 visit.



As we progressed further and further towards Aousswerd, we stopped off and explored the desert every 2 or 3 kilometres. At K37, 3 Cream-coloured Coursers were seen and another 7 **BLACK-CROWNED FINCH-LARKS**, whilst at K33, the first **DESERT SPARROWS** were encountered – a beautiful pair in a roadside Acacia. A migrant male Western Subalpine Warbler also flitted around the bush.

At the Pumping Station site to the south of the road at K8, we explored fully and spent several hours exploring the desert and Acacia scrub on both sides of the road. Two **GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOOS** were very well seen here but by far most spectacular were the outstanding and exceptional numbers of **DESERT SPARROWS** resident in this area. There were at least 220 birds here, including many juveniles, one of which I picked up on the road after colliding with a car. These really are a beautiful sparrow and were visiting the pumping station at its leaking pipes to drink. Sue Bryan obtained these fabulous images on a previous visit to this area with me.



Male Desert Sparrow (Sue Bryan) – an abundant species at Oued Jenna, some 8kms before you reach the outpost of Aousswerd. At least 220 were present in March 2011.



The Pumping Station area at Oued Jenna also supported more **BLACK-CROWNED FINCH-LARKS** but of most interest was a pair of apparent **AFRICAN COLLARED DOVES** accompanying the 9 Eurasian Collared Doves roosting in the Acacia trees here. These birds were slightly smaller, much paler, gleaming white on the undertail-coverts and particularly rosy-pink flushed on the breast. One visiting birder from Europe photographed one of the pair, as well as an odd leucisitic or albinistic bird. There were also other Collared Doves present in the area which showed intermediate characters.

A pair of White-crowned Black Wheatears (and proper 'White-crowned' rather than the far more numerous 'black crowned' variants) were feeding a single juvenile at the pumping station, with the surrounding desert yielding several pairs of African Desert Wheatears, more Desert Grey Shrikes, 2 Tawny Pipits, a White Wagtail, numerous **SPECTACLED WARBLERS**, more migrant Common Chiffchaff and Western Subalpine Warblers and well over 250 Greater Short-toed Larks.

More excellent views were afforded of **CRICKET LONGTAILS** here too.

Aousswerd itself is a bizarre settlement made up mainly of army and UN residents and infields still exist after the many previous conflicts here (see image below). We searched the settlement for Sudanese Golden Sparrow but failed to find any birdlife and driving a further 10kms beyond yielded 2 migrant European Bee-eaters (very early returning migrants), a Woodchat Shrike, 3 Hoopoes, a migrant Marsh Harrier and more White-crowned Black Wheatears.



We took the opportunity to take a few 'dude shots' in Aousswerd – LGRE with Darrel Bryant; LGRE with Robert Fuge. It was scorching heat here as usual



And that was it – we had reached our furthest point south of the trip and now I had to drive all the way back north. Just take a look at the sign that greets you – 268kms to Dakhla alone and a whopping 718 to Laayoune. Great stamina is certainly required when driving in the Western Sahara.

In the drenching heat, we returned to Dakhla – highlights of the return journey being a cracking migrant male **MONTAGU'S HARRIER** that flew across the road in front of the car heading slowly north, a migrant **OSPREY** that pitched down on a cliff to roost towards dusk and a resident **LONG-LEGGED BUZZARD** flying to roost.

This far south, darkness befell at 1930 hours. I arrived back in Dakhla at 2003 hours – this time we all stayed at the **HOTEL TAFODART** in the main town centre not far from the harbour front.



Desert Grey Shrike, Aousswerd Road, Western Sahara (Paul Jeffery)

The type specimens breeding on this road are very white below, extensively white in the wing and have little in the way of white rimming around the black eye mask – possibly elegans