

Morocco  
Desert, sea & coast  
7th – 17th February 2007



**Basically a GBC trip with Celtic Bird Tours, with a handful of additional participants**

**TOUR LEADERS**

Josele Saiz ----- Spain  
Neil Donaghy ----- Celtic Bird Tours / GBC

**PARTICIPANTS**

Larry Albright ----- USA  
Chris Bamford ----- GBC  
Mike Birtwell ----- UK  
Clive Ellis ----- GBC  
Charles Geanangel ----- USA  
Fiona Grant ----- GBC  
Alison Halford ----- UK  
Christopher Hodgson --- GBC  
Martin Olive ----- UK  
Alan Rosney ----- GBC  
Lesley Tuthill ----- GBC  
John Wilson ----- GBC

## DAY ONE

The group met at London Gatwick North Terminal at midday, minus Martin who had to join us a day late and following check in, our flight took off for Agadir half an hour late, but arrived ten minutes early. Once we had got through passport control, we met with our drivers and made our way to Le Tivoli Hotel, our very pleasant base for the next two nights. A quick unpack was followed by dinner and a chat about the holiday with Josele.

## DAY TWO

A warm, and for the most part, sunny day that produced some superb birding. Following breakfast, our first birds were small parties of noisy Common Bulbuls that were flitting amongst the palm trees in the hotel grounds and large flocks of House Sparrows that were doing the same and additionally a couple of male Blackbirds were singing. A few Sardinian Warblers included singing males, whilst overhead, small numbers of Yellow-legged Gulls were passing and a few Collared Doves were perched on wires. As we drove out of Agadir and through the village of Etmrln, we picked up our first Spotless Starlings, Wood Pigeons and the local race of Magpies with the blue mark behind the eye; all birds that were to feature throughout the day as common roadside species. As we stopped for water, we found a couple of cracking male Moussier's Redstarts that were real crowd pleasers as they perched up and showed really well – stunning! Also present were the first of many groups of Barn Swallows that were heading north throughout the day – birds that would be seen in the UK from April no doubt. An area of hammada known as SidiRaban produced a couple of White Wagtails, an Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Goldfinches, Greenfinches and several larks. Most were Sky Larks or Crested Larks, but some saw a Thekla Lark and a single Lesser Short-toed Lark flew by, uttering its dry and raspy “prtt” call for positive identification. Viewing here was difficult owing to dense vegetation and lots of discarded plastic bags blown in by the wind, so we soon moved on. A stop as we drove through the village of Sidi Wassay produced a nice close Marsh Harrier, our first Common Kestrels, a female type Blue Rock Thrush, three Great Cormorant of the local white-headed race and ten or so Pallid Swift that came down very low and very close thereby allowing excellent views of the contrasting wing colouration and large white throat that are good identification features of this species. We also saw a Striped Ground Squirrel that was rather confusingly sat on top of a half built house! We arrived in good time for a walk out to the mouth of the Sous Massa National Park where the Atlantic meets the river and this produced an absolute feast of birds. The commonest species on the water were Common Pochard, Common Coot and Little Grebe, but we also found a Ferruginous Duck, and a few female Tufted Ducks amongst them. Several Cetti's Warblers were heard and what appeared to be a large fall of Common Chiffchaffs seemed to have taken place with birds everywhere we looked in the Tamarisk bushes. Some rather yellow looking birds could have been Iberian Chiffchaffs, but no-one really knew for sure and we will have to assume for now that they were this recently split species, as so few field characteristics are known... Otherwise, Sardinian Warblers were also present in good numbers, as were more Common Bulbuls, and a migrant Squacco Heron flew up the river. A couple more stunning male Moussier's Redstarts showed well and were joined at times by drabber females that seemed to skulk more in the low vegetation. Several pairs of Stonechats showed well and we all agreed that of the dozens of Zitting Cisticola seen, we all probably had the best views we'd ever seen of this notoriously restless species. A couple of singing male Cirl Buntings showed nicely, a flock of fifty Glossy Ibis flew up river, a couple of Marsh Harriers quartered the reeds and our first Little Egret and Grey Heron skulked in the reeds. Small numbers of Spanish Sparrows were present, a few pairs of Laughing Doves chased each other in courtship routines or perched openly on wires, a Little Owl and then two were sunning themselves on a large rock and a migrant Wryneck was well appreciated by all. A single Crag Martin appeared overhead and our first House Bunting was a stunning male that perched on a roof and we later saw singing birds too. A couple of Black Redstarts showed well in low vegetation, a small flock of Cattle Egrets was flushed by one of the ever present donkey and rider combinations and a Hoopoe showed well on a muddy slope. A small flock of Mallards were perched on some posts in the water, alongside a large flock of Great Cormorants; a Eurasian Spoonbill flew out towards the sea, a pair of Linnets perched up openly and careful scanning of the water towards the river mouth produced a couple of Eurasian Wigeon, a female Red Crested Pochard, Gadwall, two pairs of Northern Pintail and at least thirty splendid and much wanted Marbled Ducks along the reed edge and then in flight. A couple of Barbary Partridges showed superbly after an anxious wait for those who didn't see the birds initially, two Moorhens were along the reed edge, a few distant Audouin's Gulls loafed on the water and a lucky few had a brief glimpse of a Black-crowned Tchagra, though we heard several this was the only sighting of the day of this much wanted species. Following an excellent picnic lunch we drove the Sous Plain searching for Cream-coloured Courser, but in the vast hammada desert, we were unable to find any, though a group of nine Tawny Pipits, another Little Owl and the first Sand Martin provided some compensation. As we drove back towards Agadir a Southern Grey Shrike perched up on some wires in the village of Cdbabe. Arriving at Oued Sous, the first bird we saw was an Osprey that perched on a dead tree just across the river, and which made occasional flights up and down the river that spooked all the shorebirds and gulls. A flock of thirty or so Greater Flamingos were in the water close by the road and good numbers of Black-winged Stilts, Eurasian Curlew, Grey Plover, two

Common Sandpipers and a few Black-tailed Godwits were also recorded. A White Stork was on the opposite shore amongst an extraordinarily large sized group of roosting Grey Herons. Walking further down the estuary towards the Atlantic produced good numbers of shorebirds of several species including Dunlin, Sanderling, Red Knot, Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Eurasian Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits, Common Redshank and Greenshank. Some distant terns were eventually identified as Sandwich Terns, more of which were later found on a sand bar; a small flock of Black-headed Gulls included at least five beautifully marked, if a little distant, Slender-billed Gulls and vast numbers of Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were spread out all over the beach. Several flocks of Eurasian Spoonbills were noted including one group of 33 flying overhead, six Common Shelduck appeared as the light started to fail, as did a lone Meadow Pipit, but the two real highlights here came right at dusk as first one then a couple more Stone Curlews flew overhead, calling loudly and just as the light was barely sufficient to see it, a Red-necked Nightjar flew over our heads, landed and started calling before perching up briefly and then dropping out of sight. It was a great way to end what had been an amazing first days birding. We arrived back in Agadir quite late, but were all happy with a great start to the tour.

### **DAY THREE**

Another long and hot but extremely rewarding day began with us meeting up with Martin over breakfast and for some the addition of a pair of Blackcaps to the tour list in the hotel grounds along with further sightings of Serin and Common Bulbul. Clive and Chris H saw a Barbary Falcon while waiting for everyone to check out, but this couldn't be relocated. Once everything was loaded up, we headed north from Agadir along the very picturesque Atlantic Coast. A small flock of Pallid Swifts went over and several Southern Grey Shrikes, Common Kestrels and Blue Rock Thrushes were noted as we went. Our first stop was at Tamri where we immediately found another Wryneck that showed well if rather briefly and where good numbers of Southern Grey Shrikes, Sardinian Warblers, Common Chiffchaffs, Stonechats and Zitting Cisticola were all present. One or two Moussier's Redstarts, Black Redstarts and Meadow Pipits were on the roadside slopes and our first Common Ravens involved four birds displaying low overhead. A few beautifully marked Audouin's Gulls were present on the small lake, alongside good numbers of Yellow-legged Gulls, whilst four Greenshanks, and a couple of Little Egrets and Grey Herons loafed on a quiet stretch of river. We had come here specifically to look for the critically endangered Bald Ibis, but had to make do with a distant and high flying flock of eight that disappeared behind a hill and out of sight. Josele went to search for them or others, while everyone else was being frustrated again by the no show of any Black-crowned Tchagras. Eventually, Clive, Martin and Chris B heard a couple and after some time and good team work, a bird was seen high by Larry and Clive in a distant dead tree. Scopes were quickly assembled on the bird, which showed reasonably before disappearing. However, John relocated it and the slight change of angle meant that even though it remained distant we could see all of the salient markings – big relief all around as this is a bird that can't be easily found anywhere else in the Western Palearctic. A couple of Goldfinches and Common Bulbuls were also seen in the same bush mobbing the Tchagra, but we decided to leave to search elsewhere for ibises. We drove along the coast to a nice viewing area and were extremely fortunate to find some birds on a cliff and then a whole load more arrived, making for a superb spectacle with a marvellous background to add to the sense of wonder. We must have seen in excess of 200 of these amazing birds, but all too soon it was time to leave them and get some lunch. We stopped at a cracking little restaurant, where traditional Moroccan Tagine, Chicken and Beans, Lentils, Soda Bread and Mint Tea proved a popular choice with plates soon emptied and approving comments heard all around. The early afternoon drive back along the coast was a pleasure and more time was spent admiring the view than birding, but a coffee stop in a small town just outside Agadir provided more opportunities to see House Buntings, as well as a few Collared Doves and Barn Swallows. One of the buses also had good views of a European Shag as it flew close inshore. We then drove the main road towards Taroudannt, which was our next base, but birding from the bus was rather quiet and a mid afternoon lull set in until a stop at a dry roadside river bed produced a perched Long-legged Buzzard, a distant kettle of over fifty White Storks and a few Kestrels plus three distant unidentified swifts. We continued to drive along the very scenic route of the fertile Sous Valley in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains to the north, when a sudden roadside stop was required when Chris B found a perched Black-shouldered Kite. The bird gave outstanding and prolonged views before it flew gracefully off into the distance – terrific! Another was later seen on a telegraph wire, but this time we carried on driving, five cattle Egrets looked rather comical as they perched high on a tree that bent under their weight and yet more Barn Swallows passed through. Our final stop of the day was at Wadi Sous, which to be truthful was rather quiet. A few Sardinian Warblers, Barn Swallows, Crested Larks and White Wagtails were the only species of note, so we headed off to the Hotel Palais Salem inside the bustling walled city to check in, following another tremendous day's birding.

### **DAY FOUR**

Today was a very long transfer day through some amazing landscapes as we left the Sous Valley and headed east through the stony desert hammada to our next base at Boumalne – a journey that took us until early

evening through vast tracts of open country. As ever, the roadside birds initially included Common Bulbuls, Southern Grey Shrikes, Crested Larks, Cattle Egrets and Collared Doves, but this time we also saw a few Cirl Buntings and Laughing Doves. A roadside stop for another extremely obliging Black-shouldered Kite was soon followed by our best views yet of Long-legged Buzzards, one of which allowed prolonged scope views as it perched on top of a roadside pylon in the rather chilly morning air. A male Moussier's Redstart showed briefly here too. We continued on before another roadside raptor had everyone thinking perhaps a Barbary Falcon, but closer inspection revealed it to be a Peregrine due to the lack of chestnut in the nape, the heavily barred underparts and the very thick moustachial stripe – none of which were initially easy to see. A kettle of nine Black Kites drifted up over the hills here, allowing excellent views and just as we were preparing to leave, John found an adult Great Spotted Cuckoo perched on top of a nearby bush and this bird also gave superb views before it flew off and out of sight. With the need to press on apparent, we continued to the end of the Sous Valley and another stop at the town of Alououz, where a bridge over a shallow river produced two Grey Wagtails, at least two very unexpected Kingfishers, a singing Cetti's Warbler that was seen by Clive, a couple of House Buntings, a singing but unseen Chaffinch, a small group of Tree Sparrows and another Peregrine that made everyone look hard, but it was another Peregrine!

Onwards we went, stopping only for a roadside raptor perched high on a crag that was another Long-legged Buzzard. A short excursion onto an area of stony ground with low bushes produced a superb flock of fifteen or so Trumpeter Finches that gave excellent views and even included one bird singing its odd toy trumpet call. A few Thekla Larks and a couple of Black Wheatears were also noted here. We stopped for another excellent Tagine lunch before making a rather unproductive stop where we hoped for Desert Lark, but saw only a House Bunting and a Striped Ground Squirrel, so it was back on the road again until we reached the town of Ouarzazate, where we stopped for fuel and a quick coffee before our final birding stop at the reservoir a few kilometres out of town. We were all rather surprised to see ten or so Great Crested Grebes here, as well as pair of Ruddy Shelducks roosting on a spit. A Black Redstart put in a brief appearance on the roof of a building, a Little Egret and a couple of Mallards and Black-headed Gulls were also on the water and a cracking Tawny Pipit showed well just as it was time to leave. A few White-crowned Black Wheatears were seen from the vehicles, but we had no time to stop. We continued east leaving the most magnificent desert sunset behind us as we went. The birding had been a little quieter today, but still full of quality birds and we enjoyed some spectacular scenery all the way along our journey. Upon arrival, the remoteness of the setting ensured a fantastic display of stars – magic!

## DAY FIVE

We spent much of today birding the famous Tagdilt Track, which produced several much wanted species with superb views of almost everything – and all this on John's birthday! We arrived early on a morning with a distinct desert chill despite the already gloriously blue sky and no sooner had we got out of the bus when a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears; the first of many today, gave excellent views – lifer number one for most! Josele then called a lark on the other side of the main road and before long we were looking at the much wanted and very un-lark like Thick-billed Lark, which showed very well before flying off and showing its distinctive wing pattern. Next up was a pair of very smart Temminck's Horned Lark, which also showed very well at close range before we left them rather than them flying off – lifer number three for most in the first fifteen minutes!! We saw good numbers of these birds including one with its tufts raised and a pair in sexual chase. A large central area was unfortunately littered with plastic bags, which constituted the local rubbish dump and finding birds in this area wasn't easy, but we saw more Red-rumped Wheatears, a few Sky Larks, White Wagtails and Crested Larks before moving on to explore the stony desert away from here. Considering we had vast tracts of land to explore, our bird finding skills were working in overdrive as next up was a pair of Hoopoe Larks that flew in and landed nearby, but sadly these birds quickly moved on, though we did scope them again at distance a little later. A Lesser Short-toed Lark joined them and Alan found a cracking Long-legged Buzzard that decided to come and investigate us, or was it the nearby Sand Rat, and landed just a few metres away, allowing for what was probably the best view ever of this species for most present. A strangely marked pipit was giving us a bit of a headache as it kept disappearing behind grassy tussocks, but eventually, we figured out that it must have been a Tawny



Hoopoe Lark

Pipit that was in transitional plumage from first winter to adult as nothing else fitted the description – an interesting bird. By now it was warming up considerably and a Hoopoe took to the wing, shortly followed by a splendid Lanner that gave us quite a prolonged fly past before heading away from us and we also saw the Long-legged Buzzard again. We took a walk away from the vehicles and soon had the first of two superb male Desert Wheatears perched up and showing very well, while the females were less obliging. Another Thick-billed Lark came into view after being first located by Larry and this bird proceeded to feed right under our noses offering incredible views before it ran off into the denser vegetation. A flock of Sandgrouse flew over; initially picked up by Mohaar, one of our drivers, and these turned out to be a flock of twelve Crowned Sandgrouse, which we watched as they flew off into the distance, but they didn't land and we had to make do with flight views. However, a drive around produced a flock of seventeen Black-bellied Sandgrouse that showed very well despite the considerable heat haze and as we ate lunch we found a small cultivated area with some lying water that contained what may have been the same flock showing very well in what was much better light. A couple of Trumpeter Finches and a large flock of House Sparrows joined them, more Red-tailed Wheatears and Temminck's Horned Larks were present, a couple of distant Lanners were seen briefly and as we left after a splendid picnic lunch, another seven Thick-billed Larks flew in and landed nearby and a pair of White-crowned Black Wheatears showed very well on the roof of a building. An awesome morning's birding and everything we had hoped for here. The afternoon was spent at the Todra Gorge and this superb location provided us with yet more excellent birds as well as some awe inspiring scenery. A few Crag Martins flitted around the rock faces, as did a couple of House Buntings and three Grey Wagtails were on the surprisingly fast flowing river. Following a brief coffee stop and encounters with persistent "looky looky men" trying to sell cheap souvenirs, we drove on deep into the gorge, where at times the road had totally eroded and we had to use every bit of our 4x4s capabilities to drive through the river in places!

A couple of Black Wheatears showed very well but the highlight of the afternoon was undoubtedly the Bonelli's Eagle that we picked up while looking for Tristram's Warbler. This bird stooped several times, while circling high overhead and everyone was able to get great scope views for full plumage detail before it disappeared over a ridge and out of sight – superb! We were unable to find any warblers so decided to head back to our base, as it had been a long day. Few birds were seen, but some nice panoramic views and an absolutely fabulous desert sunset kept our attention, as we followed an incredibly bright Venus back, just as many who have wandered these plains over the centuries must have done. The first bus had a brief view of an Eagle Owl as it flew across the road but it could not be relocated. Upon arrival, the most magical show of desert stars was waiting for us – the perfect end to what must have been one of the most productive days birding for most people in a long time.

## **DAY SIX**

Another long transfer day, which in truth, produced the least impressive birding of the tour so far. We began with a very quick drive along the outer edge of the Tagdilt Track and soon saw a couple of Red-tailed and Desert Wheatears and Temminck's Horned Larks, as well as a Long-legged Buzzard, but time was of the essence so we didn't stop to search for other species already seen yesterday. We stopped briefly at a ledge to look for Pharaoh Eagle Owl in the area where one was seen last night by the front jeep, but no sign, though we did get excellent views of a pair of copulating Long-legged Buzzards and some saw a Desert Lark briefly. We also stopped at a site for Mourning Wheatears, but these were also absent – it was turning into that sort of day, though we did get nice views of a pair of Black Wheatears here, as well as a couple of Barn Swallows passing through. We stopped for a break in the town of Tiginhir to change money and get supplies for the desert and a little further along the road, we stopped at some allotments to search for migrants. It was fairly quiet, but a good flock of Cattle Egrets was present in the rice paddy that was being tilled, a male Blackcap and a couple of Common Chiffchaffs showed briefly and a pair of African Blue Tits gave us the run-around by refusing to stay in any one place for more than a couple of seconds; though we were pretty much all able to get reasonable views of this quite distinctive race that may well be split in future years. Otherwise, a few Serin, House Sparrows and Blackbirds were all that was present in this rather unpleasant place. Continuing along the road to our lunch stop at a small auberge, we started to see good numbers of White-crowned Black Wheatears and our first Southern Grey Shrikes for a few days and our picnic site produced a couple of Black Redstarts too. Following lunch, we continued on and finally found a pair of Desert Larks at the side of the road and watched them in display and sexual chase at close range – easily the birds of the day! A few Crested Larks and more White-crowned Black Wheatears were all that was seen other than a few flocks of Feral Rock Doves and the odd Collared Doves as we passed through the widely spaced villages. Our first attempt at real sandy desert birding had to be abandoned as the river was in flood and we couldn't get the vehicles across – rather ironic, but potentially costly for our chances of one or two species. Another roadside stop brought a good flock of Trumpeter Finches, but we ended the day on a low note by being unable to find the pair of Pharaoh Eagle Owls that were staked out en route to our auberge in Merzouga. We heard a bird, but just couldn't find them as darkness fell. We arrived mid

evening to the most wonderful display of desert stars. Fingers crossed tomorrow will return to the highs of the previous days...

## **DAY SEVEN**

We began early on our full day in the desert and once we had finished breakfast and met with our local guide we set off through this incredible landscape in search of some of the most special birds of the tour. There had obviously been sufficient rain to encourage several species of flower to bloom and in many places we were treated to a wonderful and fragrant display of purple, pink and yellow as spring in the desert took hold. Elsewhere, we were in awe of the huge red sand dunes that broke the horizon in long lines, which added a splendid array of shapes and shadows, as the azure blue sky and bright yellow sun beat down in typical desert fashion. We drove through extensive palm groves, stony desert and vast areas of nothing but sand as we went and were rewarded with great views of almost all of our target birds. First up were the first of a few displaying Hoopoe Larks that showed far better than previously and we were able to note the strange and far carrying song in several places. Large numbers of Trumpeter Finches were present throughout the day, including one flock that numbered at least 100 birds. We approached an area known to our guide where we stopped to look for Houbara Bustard and had just found one when an idiot in a pick up truck decided to flush the bird by driving round in ever decreasing circles where it had been quietly feeding behind a dune. We didn't see it fly, but once he had gone we couldn't relocate it, so we had to make do with brief but reasonably satisfactory views of the upper part of the bird. As we walked another area, Josele found a bird displaying distantly, which one or two others got onto but soon it was gone and despite extensive searching both here and in other areas, this was the last sighting of this species – two Houbara in a day can't be bad, however brief the sightings! A snatch of warbler song had us stopping to scan the many tamarisk and low bushes and we soon had excellent views of a singing Spectacled Warbler that was obviously in pursuit of a female as he was constantly doing song flights and flitting from bush to bush. We also saw a couple of Short-toed Larks here and nearby our first Bar-tailed Larks of the trip too; we went on to see quite a few of this species and all showed well including a couple of birds giving their poor quality song while stood on nearby ridges. A couple of Desert Wheatears were noted, but the star birds of the day had to be the small groups of Cream –coloured Coursers that we came across at many sites – our timing must have coincided with their migration as we probably saw close to fifty birds in total and these included several displaying birds seen at very close range – superb! We took lunch at the Lac du Sergie; a surprisingly large body of water hidden in the dunes, where the dominant species was Ruddy Shelduck with approximately 100 birds present. Other wildfowl included a few Northern Shoveler, Common Coot and Common Pochard and we also noted a few Kentish Plovers, Greenshank and a Dunlin around the shores, as well as a small flock of distant Black-headed Gulls; not a species any of us expected in the desert! A stop at some dunes with low vegetation soon produced the desired result as a pair of African Desert Warblers gave superb views as they perched openly, as did another Spectacled Warbler, before they disappeared behind the dunes in a sexual chase. We tried a palm grove for Fulvous Babbler, but this was to be our only failure of the day, but we did see a Greenfinch, Spectacled Warbler and a few White-crowned Black Wheatears here. We did a short stop for photos in the most amazingly scenic spot you can imagine – a lake in front of a huge red dune and finally we found a splendid and very showy pair of Desert Sparrows around the Café Yasmina; alongside large numbers of House Sparrows for good comparison. This was the perfect end to a most amazing day's birding and one that will stay in the memory for a very long time for many reasons. We arrived back early evening as our auberge had laid on a special meal for us – a lamb roasted in our honour, followed by a belated birthday cake for John, entertainment from the nomad drummers and finally the stars under a desert sky at midnight all toasted with cold beers and reasonable red wine; what more could you ask for!

## **DAY EIGHT**

Today was another long travel day as we left the desert behind. We left after final photos were taken and made our first birding stop near Rassani where a pair of Brown-necked Ravens gave excellent views as they collected nesting material before flying off to a nearby cliff. The sheen on the neck was clearly visible and to those of us who hadn't seen them before they had the jizz of a large Bronzed Cowbird. Some also saw a couple of Desert Larks here and a Hoopoe Lark was seen briefly. We also stopped again at the Eagle Owl site, but without any great expectations, and we left after finding a couple of Common Kestrels on the ledges. We drove for a considerable distance in great empty and barren tracts of land punctuated by rolling hills in the distance and the occasional settlement, almost all of which held a few House Sparrows and White-crowned Black Wheatears. The occasional Desert Lark, Southern Grey Shrike, Trumpeter Finch and Common Kestrel were noted en route, but it was for the most part rather quiet. Following a coffee and souvenir stop, we stopped for a stretch of the legs in

an Acacia Forest, where a nice male Moussier's Redstart gave reasonable views, but a small passerine that flew into a low bush then evaded further detection, but it did look worryingly like a Tristram's Warbler, which was our target species here. A leisurely lunch was taken at a roadside auberge where two Trumpeter Finches accompanied us and another Acacia Forest produced a male Spectacled Warbler that showed well, but again wasn't quite what we hoped for. A couple of House Buntings and more Desert Larks were noted as well as the odd White-crowned Black Wheatear, but the remainder of the journey was spent admiring the scenery rather than birding as their was precious little to see. We arrived early evening in Ouarzazate and a Little Egret was seen along the river as we approached our hotel, just before two coach loads of German Tourists checked in!!

## **DAY NINE**

A day of real contrasts as we finally left the south behind. After an early start we drove the short journey to the Ait ben Haddou Kasbah; one of the most famous in Morocco and one which offered a chance to just do some birding rather than looking for specific species and we enjoyed a pleasant hour searching the tamarisks and date palms in the gardens. A couple of African Chaffinches and Blue Tits were first up, Sardinian Warblers were noted in the allotments, as were Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes on the buildings. A male Moussier's Redstart showed very well, a couple of migrant Common Chiffchaffs and Barn Swallows were passing through and a Goldfinch was singing in a tamarisk. Crested Larks were displaying by the river and some of the group saw a Hoopoe and House Bunting, which rounded off a nice walk. Our journey from Ouarzazate was then punctuated by several stops as we searched for Mourning Wheatear in scree slopes along or near the road. The first produced our first Common Swift of the tour and a Desert Lark, but on the second at Tanhourate, we struck lucky as a male perched up for prolonged, if a little distant scope views of this somewhat difficult species. We also saw a Laughing Dove and White-crowned Black Wheatear here. Driving on, a roadside stop for what looked like another Mourning Wheatear perched on a wire, produced a couple of new birds for the tour in the form of a flock of fifteen or so Rock Sparrows that flew up every time a lorry passed and showed well before flitting down to the side of the road again once the lorries had passed and a couple of migrant Northern Wheatears in the wadi. We finally relocated our wheatear and it was a male Desert that was obvious on closer inspection. A couple of Thekla Larks showed down to a couple of metres here and a Peregrine was perched on a wire. With time to make up, we drove on and the scenery began to change to more lushly vegetated valleys and then alpine pastures as we started to gain height as we climbed slowly through the Atlas Mountains over the Tizi n' Tichka Pass. We reached 2600 meters at the snow line and took a short break in the surprisingly warm sunshine. A couple of Common Ravens flew over and two Long-legged Buzzards displayed high over a crag. One or two saw an African Chaffinch in the pines, but the highlight was the adult Golden Eagle that perched on a crag, allowing us to scope it for excellent views before it flew off over a ridge – superb! Dropping down into the village of Toudanne for lunch, we enjoyed more views of Common Bulbuls, Chaffinches and Blue Tits, as well as our first sighting of Great Tit and a splendid but rather brief singing male Rock Bunting. We started to descend the valley and fast flowing snow melt rivers looked good for Dippers, but we couldn't find any, and a roadside stop produced a pair of Long-legged Buzzards and a male Sardinian Warbler. We took a roadside walk in Toufliht, where a search of the pines produced a couple of Coal Tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a very obliging and singing Common Crossbill; though the plumage suggested it wasn't a full adult male, a couple of singing but unseen European Robins and the briefest of views of a fly over Hawfinch that can barely make it on to the trip list but for the fact that it was seen by all and it called too! Our final stop was at some forested slopes near Taferiat, where careful scanning of a flying and then perched falcon finally produced the much hoped for Barbary Falcon. We studied the bird long and hard until everyone was satisfied that they had all of the credentials required to claim this species from the similar races of both Peregrine and Lanner found in North Africa – a really good identification exercise. More Chaffinches were seen here and a Common Chiffchaff called but wasn't seen. We continued on to the exotic and bustling city of Marrakech, arriving just as dusk fell and accompanied just outside the city walls by a sizeable flock of Pallid Swifts and Barn Swallows, as well as seven White Storks perched in a palm grove and thirty or so Cattle Egrets that flew overhead.

## **DAY TEN**

Our last full day began with some quick birding outside the hotel where a flock of Pallid Swifts contained one or two Little Swifts that were in view briefly before drifting off towards the city. We began the drive up to the ski resort at Oukaimiden by passing through the outer suburbs of Marrakech, where a few Spotless Starlings and White Storks were noted en route. As we climbed to the tree line, we stopped at Tifirte, where we soon had superb views of a pair of Levaillant's Woodpeckers that showed superbly as they were in courtship routine. We watched for some time before they flew off down the valley and also noted Common Chiffchaff, several Serin, a Mistle Thrush and slightly higher up four Peregrines were in display low over the deep gorge and we had excellent views of these birds too. As we approached the resort, a large flock of Red-billed Choughs were present over the slopes and small numbers of Yellow-billed Choughs were noted perched on the roofs of the many cafes

. We then started to walk into the mountains along a good path, but some felt it was too windy and held back to view from another area. Thankfully, we all got excellent views of many Crimson-winged Finches, some of which were showing down to a couple of metres, several Shore Larks and one or two Rock Sparrows, all of which made for a magical hour or so in glorious surroundings and good weather. Following a good Tagine lunch, we walked a different area, but couldn't find any *Seebohm's* Wheatears, so we headed back down, stopping en route to pick up a small flock of singing Firecrest that showed very well, a very close but as ever flighty Hawfinch, a showy Coal Tit and some also saw and all heard a Barbary Partridge. At the bottom of the valley we tried a final time for Tristram's Warbler, but could find only Common Bulbuls in what looked like excellent habitat and we had to admit defeat on this much wanted species – everyone was fairly philosophical, preferring to enjoy the birds we had seen rather than worry about the ones that got away, which was nice... We stopped for a coffee to thank and say farewell to our drivers, who would leave as soon as we reached the hotel and saw three White Storks and more Pallid and Little Swifts and Cattle Egrets as we arrived back after a day that had produced yet more superb birding in this amazingly diverse country. Following dinner, most of the group went into Marrakech to see the famous Jamaa el Fnaa, which was a riot of noise, colour and smells, and where we could hone our bartering skills with the many stallholders; all things that sum up Morocco perfectly! A most welcome farewell round of beers was had at a nearby hotel and was a great way to toast the end of the tour.

## DAY ELEVEN

Following breakfast and farewells to Josele, we drove to the airport for our flight back to London. We departed an hour late, but arrived virtually on time to conclude a superb birding experience.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

1 Great Crested Grebe	36 Lesser Kestrel
2 Little Grebe	37 Peregrine
3 Great Cormorant	38 Barbary Falcon
4 European Shag	39 Lanner
5 Black-crowned Night Heron	40 Barbary Partridge
6 Cattle Egret	41 Moorhen
7 Squacco Heron	42 Common Coot
8 Little Egret	43 Houbara Bustard
9 Grey Heron	44 European Oystercatcher
10 White Stork	45 Stone Curlew
11 Eurasian Spoonbill	46 Black-winged Stilt
12 Glossy Ibis	47 Cream-coloured Courser
13 Bald Ibis	48 Ringed Plover
14 Greater Flamingo	49 Kentish Plover
15 Common Shelduck	50 Grey Plover
16 Ruddy Shelduck	51 Sanderling
17 Eurasian Wigeon	52 Red Knot
18 Mallard	53 Dunlin
19 Gadwall	54 Ruff
20 Northern Pintail	55 Eurasian Curlew
21 Northern Shoveler	56 Black-tailed Godwit
22 Common Teal	57 Bar-tailed Godwit
23 Marbled Duck	58 Common Redshank
24 Red Crested Pochard	59 Common Greenshank
25 Common Pochard	60 Common Sandpiper
26 Ferruginous Duck	61 Green Sandpiper [H]
27 Tufted Duck	62 Common Snipe
28 Black-shouldered Kite	63 Mediterranean Gull
29 Black Kite	64 Slender-billed Gull
30 Marsh Harrier	65 Black-headed Gull
31 Long-legged Buzzard	66 Audouin's Gull
32 Golden Eagle	67 Lesser Black-backed Gull
33 Bonelli's Eagle	68 Yellow-legged Gull
34 Osprey	69 Sandwich Tern
35 Common Kestrel	70 Crowned Sandgrouse



71 Black-bellied Sandgrouse  
72 Wood Pigeon  
73 Feral Rock Dove  
74 Collared Dove  
75 Laughing Dove  
76 Great Spotted Cuckoo  
77 Pharaoh Eagle Owl [H]  
78 Little Owl  
79 Red-necked Nightjar  
80 Little Swift  
81 Pallid Swift  
82 Common Swift  
83 Common Kingfisher  
84 Hoopoe  
85 Wryneck  
86 Levaillant's Woodpecker  
87 Great Spotted Woodpecker  
88 Sky Lark  
89 Crested Lark  
90 Thekla Lark  
91 Short-toed Lark  
92 Lesser Short-toed Lark  
93 Shore Lark  
94 Temminck's Horned Lark  
95 Desert lark  
96 Bar-tailed Desert Lark  
97 Thick-billed Lark  
98 Hoopoe Lark  
99 Crag Martin  
100 Sand Martin  
101 Barn Swallow  
102 Meadow Pipit  
103 Tawny Pipit  
104 White Wagtail  
105 Grey Wagtail  
106 Yellow Wagtail [*Iberiae*]  
107 Wren [H]  
108 European Robin  
109 Black Redstart  
110 Moussier's Redstart  
111 Stonechat  
112 Northern Wheatear  
113 Desert Wheatear  
114 Black Wheatear  
115 Mourning Wheatear  
116 Red-rumped Wheatear  
117 White-crowned Black Wheatear  
118 Blue Rock Thrush  
119 Blackbird  
120 Mistle Thrush  
121 Zitting Cisticola  
122 Cetti's Warbler  
123 Spectacled Warbler  
124 African Desert Warbler  
125 Blackcap  
126 Sardinian Warbler  
127 Willow Warbler  
128 Common Chiffchaff  
129 Firecrest

130 African Blue Tit  
131 Great Tit  
132 Coal Tit  
133 Common Bulbul  
134 Black-crowned Tchagra  
135 Southern Grey Shrike  
136 Spotless Starling  
137 Black-billed Magpie  
138 Yellow-billed Chough  
139 Red-billed Chough  
140 Common Raven  
141 Brown-necked Raven  
142 Tree Sparrow  
143 House Sparrow  
144 Spanish Sparrow  
145 Rock Sparrow  
146 Desert Sparrow  
147 African Chaffinch/Common Chaffinch  
148 Hawfinch  
149 Serin  
150 Greenfinch  
151 Goldfinch  
152 Linnet  
153 Crimson-winged Finch  
154 Trumpeter Finch  
155 Common Crossbill  
156 Corn Bunting  
157 Cirl Bunting  
158 Rock Bunting  
159 House Bunting  
160 Reed Bunting

#### **OTHER WILDLIFE**

Chameleon. Striped Ground Squirrel. Barbary Ground Squirrel. Sand Rat. Morabic Snake-eyed Lizard. Brebohm's Agana Lizard. Brimstone. Painted Lady. Large White. Two unidentified cat species were thought to have been Caracals.

Prepared by Neil Donaghy