Birding Trip Report
Morocco: South-eastern Circuit – Atlas Mountains to Sahara Desert
18-21 March 2019

All Hail Pharaoh (Eagle-Owl)!

I undertook a short three-day birding trip to Morocco with the objective of trying to find thirteen supra-Sahelian species that were of special interest to me (all potential lifers):

Maghreb Magpie, *Pica mauritanica*

Maghreb Lark, *Galerida macrorhyncha*

Spotted Sandgrouse, *Pterocles senegallus*

Crowned Sandgrouse, *Pterocles coronatus*

Pharoah Eagle Owl, *Bubo ascalaphus*

Egyptian Nightjar, *Caprimulgus aegyptius*

Red-rumped Wheatear, *Oenanthe moesta*

Tristram’s Warbler, *Sylvia deserticola*
African Desert Warbler, *Sylvia deserti*

Desert Sparrow, *Passer simplex*

Maghreb (Mourning) Wheatear, *Oenanthe lugens halophila*

Seebohm’s (Northern) Wheatear (Black-throated), *Oenanthe Oenanthe seebohmi* (African)

(African) Crimson-winged Finch, *Rhodopechys sanguineus alienus*

As time and my list were both relatively short, I stitched together an itinerary around Ebird records and several itineraries used by the birding tour companies. For my time on the edge of the Sahara Desert, I contacted the very personable and knowledgeable, Otman Elhourchemt, proprietor of Birding Tours Morocco, based at Merzouga, the frontier town near the sand dunes of Erg Chebbi. I can highly recommend Otman (pronounced Atman) as a first-class guide. His contact details:

Email: birdingtoursmorocco@gmail.com Phone / WhatsApp: +212 642 399 431 Birding Tours Morocco Merzouga centre Merzouga, 52202 Morocco.

**Itinerary:**

**Monday, 18 March:** Arrival at Marrakech by air. Rental car (Budget) at Marrakech Menara Airport. Departed Marrakech at 13:00 by road direct to Boumalne Dades (310kms - 5hrs 30 mins via Ouarzazate on N9 & N10 highways). NB: Very slow driving over the Atlas range with many kilometers of bone jarring road works. For accommodation, I booked a room ahead of travel at the very comfortable *Kasbah Dades* at Boumalne.

**Tuesday, 19 March:** Early morning birding along the well-documented Tagdilt Track. Drive from Boumalne Dades to Merzouga: 253kms; 3.5 hours. Check in at *Riad Aïcha* guesthouse. Afternoon drive to Rissani (for Eagle Owl) and then desert birding in the Merzouga stony desert with Otman.

**Wednesday, 20 March:** Early start birding with Otman to desert edge and sand dunes of Erg Chebbi. Mid-morning departure from Merzouga to Oukaimeden, Atlas Mountains: 600kms; 9 hours via N12 to Agdz; proceeding on N9 to Ouarzazate with short birding stop at Amerzgane (for Maghreb Wheatear). Overnight at Oukaimeden.

**Thursday, 21 March:** Early morning birding around Oukaimeden and hike to Atlas pass. Return midday to Marrakech via P2030 and P2017: 80kms; 2 hours.

The trip was somewhat rushed, but all targets were comfortably achieved – with the notable exception of African Crimson-winged Finch (which I thought would be guaranteed at Oukaimeden – but not so!) Clearly better to go earlier in the year with more snow on the ground and the finches feeding lower down. The weather I encountered was generally hot and sunny.

Heres with my notes on the key birding spots of the journey:

**Marrakech:** Maghreb Magpie, *Pica mauritanica* – split as a full species since my last birding visit to Morocco in 2009. Common even by the roadside; much less frequently encountered traveling further east.
**Boumalne Dades – Tagdilt Track**: I birded the unsealed road leading to the rubbish tip on the eastern outskirts of the town in the late afternoon and early morning. While mangy stray dogs and smouldering garbage strewn everywhere are not everyone’s idea of a birding idyll, the local feathered creatures seem to love it. Good birds here were:

**Red-rumped Wheatear, *Oenanthe moesta* –** perhaps the most common wheatear in the area – easily found just off the highway at the beginning of the track:

*Red-rumped Wheatear: male (left) and female with her distinct rufous head (right) are common at Boumalne Dades*

*Trumpeter Finch and Temminck’s Lark both found in small flocks at the rubbish tip site*

White-crowned Wheatear, *Oenanthe leucopyga* - frequent

Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe Oenanthe* – several seen in open country habitat

Larks: Temminck’s, Thick-billed, Short-toed, Thekla and Bar-tailed

Wagtails: Yellow and the distinctive *subpersonata* subspecies of Pied/White Wagtail

Trumpeter Finch, *Bucanetes githagineus* – common in the garbage

House Bunting, *Emberiza sahari* – only one pair seen on the trip
Typical topography of the Tagdilt track – leading east from the rubbish dump

A pair of Temminck’s Lark
Rissani: My local guide, Otman, drove me here from Merzouga with the express purpose of showing me the resident Pharaoh Eagle Owl, *Bubo ascalaphus*. This was fairly easily accomplished, although the female bird (usually seen roosting not far from the male (photographed below)) was nowhere to be found:
Here we also encountered several specimens of the recently split **Maghreb Lark, Galerida macrorhyncha** with its characteristic long bill:

Great Grey (Northern) Shrike, *Lanius excubitor elegans* – only one seen on the trip.
Otman pointing his bins to the upper most left cleft in the rockface where the Eagle Owl was day roosting.

**Merzouga (flat stony plains with sparse, low scrub around the town)**: Our late afternoon birding from our 4WD vehicle was highly productive and our targets came in thick and fast:

**Spotted Sandgrouse, *Pterocles senegallus*** – small parties of 10+ birds were seen on three occasions:
Spotted Sandgrouse typically huddled in small groups allowed very close approaches in a vehicle.

African Desert Warbler, *Sylvia deserti* – we found several birds feeding on the ground and then hopping onto bushes to better observe our movements:
Tristram’s Warbler, *Sylvia deserticola* – several observed, but very skittish; only managed one (extremely poor) shot! (find the tail if you can…). Tristram’s was also (self-found) in similar vegetation just before arriving at Merzouga the day before (also seen were Subalpine Warblers):
In the same area were other obliging desert species:

(Greater) Hoopoe Lark, *Alaemon alaudipes* – very common in the area. Otman’s whistling would send the birds into their remarkable display flight:

Cream-coloured Courser, *Cursorius cursor* – a family of eight birds was quite confiding:
Brown-necked Raven, *Corvus ruficollis* – the only corvus and common in the area:

(Greater) Short-toed Lark, *Calandrella brachydactyla* – the rufous-tinged crest was diagnostic.

As the evening approached, we visited a Berber family (mother & one of her 16 children) who are used to birders and obligingly led us to a dry creek bed to show us:
Egyptian Nightjar, *Caprimulgus aegyptius* - a well-camouflaged pair resting in the sand:

*Otman and our berber family watching the nightjars until they flew off in the evening crepuscule.*
Merzouga (Erg Chebbi sand dunes): For our final target desert species, we got an early start the next morning and drove into the sand dunes that spread out east to the Algerian border. Here and around a bedouin camp we found:

Desert Sparrow, *Passer simplex* – two males, several more females and young (male pictured):
Female Desert Sparrow coming to drink in an improvised sardine waterpoint and one of the young nesting in a pile of fire wood.

House Sparrow, Passer domesticus – reputed to be increasingly competing with, and occupying, simplex territory on the edge of the Sahara Desert.
Crowned Sandgrouse, *Pterocles coronatus* – a pair coming to drink at a leaking hose point; for us, *coronatus* was much less common than the Spotted which we found commonly at sites on both days:

White-crowned Wheatear, *Oenanthe leucopyga* – several very confiding birds around the camp:
Having seen the last of my desert target species, I was keen to depart for the long drive to Oukaimeden (nine hours). En route, I stopped at:

**Amerzgane:** this town just north of Ouazarzate is reputed to be a reliable area for the somewhat difficult Maghreb (Mourning) Wheatear, *Oenanthe lugens halophila*. This I managed to see after 90 minutes of frenetic searching along a dirt road just outside of the town, finally getting brief views of the striking white tail, black back and white head of a single bird in flight. NB: Also in the area were dozens of Black Wheatear, *Oenanthe leucura* – which tend to be sedentary sentinels on rocks and in (rare) flight show almost the same black-and-white tail, but have an all-black head.

**Oukaimeden:** I arrived at Morocco’s premier ski resort town in the Atlas Mountains just on nightfall. My accommodation was the somewhat eccentric Oukaimeden Ski Lodge located on the main drag (the sign outside proclaims the hotel to be the highest ski resort in Africa). The food here was excellent and I enjoyed *confit de canard* and a whole smoked trout with an excellent Moroccan red wine for my dinner. The next morning, I was up with the proverbial sparrow’s and spent the next six hours searching (in vain) for my principal target, (African) Crimson-winged Finch, *Rhodopechys sanguineus alienus*. While ultimately unsuccessful, I did manage some special birds:
Seebohm’s Wheatear, *Oenanthe seebohmi* – a (controversial?) split from (Northern) Wheatear (Black-throated), *Oenanthe Oenanthe seebohmi* – only two birds seen close to the township

Unable to find my finches near the ski facilities, I climbed the steep-ish (unsealed) road into the Toubkal National Park to the very top of the pass, affording me spectacular views (but no finches!)

During my ramblings through the town and the 5kms to the top of the pass, I encountered a few interesting species:
Water Pipit, *Anthus spinoletta* and Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*:

Moussier’s Redstart, *Phoenicurus moussieri* – increasingly common at higher elevations:

Blue Rockthrush, *Monticola solitarius* and Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*
African Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs africana* and Brambling, *Fringilla montifringilla*:

Atlas Horned Lark, *Eremophila alpestris atlas*:

Alpine Chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus* – common; (and Red-billed Chough also seen flying in high flocks) and Thekla Lark, *Galerida theklae* (right):
Having gotten all but one of my targets, I resigned myself to the humbling principle of birding - never crow too loud or get too cocky! Indeed, my failure to see the Crimson-winged Finch would mean there would be another opportunity to visit and bird beautiful Morocco!

David Karr, Bissau, 21 April 2019

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Flamingoes at Lac Dyet Srij, Merzouga

Many thanks to my guide, Otman (at Rissani)