

## Morocco – 04/29/2018 to 05/13/2018

Greetings All;

I have recently returned from a birding trip to Morocco using Rockjumper as the bird tour company. The overall trip went very well with all major targets being seen while enjoying great food throughout the tour. This was Rockjumper's first Morocco tour in May and it took in several locations that are not visited on their regular tour route of the country. The thirteen days maiden voyage of "Morocco – Atlas to the Sahara in depth" turned out quite well as it was somewhat of an experimental trip – never being done before. The timing was excellent as we picked up most all major winter birds, along with many migrants and the newly arrived targeted breeding species.

I decided to use Lufthansa Airlines as it provided the best connections for both arriving in Marrakech and leaving out of Casablanca. This was the first time that I had used this particular airline and almost everything worked out well. There was a 3-hour layover in Frankfurt on the way over and another 4-hour layover in Frankfurt on the return. All other airlines had either much longer layovers, airport changes, or did not connect to both cities. The flights were pretty much on time and the customer service both on the plane and at the airport was very good, while the meals were typical airline food. Overall a good flight experience. Watch the Upgrades!! I was met at the airport in Marrakech by a pre-arranged Rockjumper driver and transferred to the Le Meridian Hotel.

I arrived in Marrakech a day and a half early in order to get a little rest and to recover from the flight as well as to get a start on learning some of the more common birds of the area, and the Le Meridian Hotel was an ideal spot to accomplish this. The room was comfortable and there was a good choice of restaurants but most important the grounds were well kept and acted as a magnet for birdlife in the general area. During the time I spent at the hotel I was able to see species such as EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER, SARDINIAN WARBLER,

EURASIAN HOOPOE, PALLID SWIFT, EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE, and became acquainted with many other more common species, which was a big plus.

On the first day of the tour with Rockjumper we left the hotel early in the morning heading up towards Oukaimeden in the High Atlas. Just outside of Marrakech we happened to come across a GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO, near the side of the road, so we immediately pulled over to get some great views of this bird – very nice. While viewing the Cuckoo a BARBARY PARTRIDGE was seen nearby (what a bonus to see this bird at the very beginning of the tour), and a SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE was also in the area. Continuing on toward our destination a pair of LITTLE OWL were seen perched along the roadside allowing us to get close up viewing and photos. Near Tagadirite, a small village enroute, we had excellent sightings of singing COMMON NIGHTINGALE, HAWFINCH, and MOUSSIER'S REDSTART while at another couple stops as we were getting closer to Oukaimeden we observed LEVAILLANT'S WOODPECKER (a North African endemic and our only sighting of the tour), GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER, WHITE-THROATED DIPPER, and BARBARY PARTRIDGE. Finally, after arriving at Oukaimeden (where it was quite cold) we saw RED-BILLED CHOUGH, YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH, and NORTHERN WHEATEAR (SEEBOHM'S or BLACK-THROATED WHEATEAR) along with a few other higher altitude species but missed a main target the AFRICAN CRIMSON-WINGED FINCH.

The next day was primarily a travel day from Oukaimeden to Agadir, but a decision was made to start early and try for the Finch again as this was the best spot for it during our tour. Well, the decision paid off and soon we were all getting prolonged views of the bird as well as seeing RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH and HORNED LARK (Atlas subspecies). We then continued on the long trip to Agadir and arrived later that evening.

This morning (day 3 of the tour) started with a pelagic out of Agadir on which I was hoping to see a few shearwaters but unfortunately this was the wrong time of the season for them, but we scored big by seeing a WHITE-FACED STORM-PETREL which is unusual in these waters. In the afternoon we traveled north to Tamri and had good looks at AUDOUIN'S GULL, GREATER FLAMINGO and EURASIAN SPOONBILL; while the Star of the show NORTHERN BALD IBIS put in a super appearance with several small flocks flying over and some landing very near

(much easier to find than I thought they would be – we had Luck on our side – (for almost the entire trip! – WooHoo!)).

Day 4 saw us driving south to Oued Massa in the morning and to Oued Souss in the afternoon. We had our first EURASIAN THICK-KNEE of the trip along the roadside while traveling to Oued Massa. I really enjoyed the Oued Massa area which was quite birdy and really good for shorebirds, where we saw our first ELEONORA'S FALCON (somewhat distant views), CETTI'S WARBLER, EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER, BLACK-CROWNED TCHAGRA, and LITTLE BITTERN as highlights. Oued Souss was also a great birding area with Much better looks at ELEONORA'S FALCON being had - along with MARBLED TEAL, LITTLE GULL, EURASIAN CURLEW, and MEDITERRANEAN GULL.

Today (Day 5) was another travel day from Agadir to Boumalne du Dades with a lunch stop at Ouarzazate. At a roadside stop on Hwy. N10 west of Taliouine we had FULVOUS CHATTERER and SPANISH SPARROW while at Ouarzazate we saw our first MONTAGU'S HARRIER and a RUFIOUS-TAILED SCRUB-ROBIN. Day 6 was an exciting one indeed as we birded the Tagdilt Track in the morning and the Dades Gorge in the afternoon. The Tagdilt Track appears to be a barren stretch of land where one would find few birds but this is far from the truth. We started out with many species of Lark including THICK-BILLED LARK, GREATER HOOPOE-LARK, LESSER & GREATER SHORT-TOED, TEMMINCK'S, and BAR-TAILED LARKS, while ending up with super species like CREAM-COLORED COURSER, PIN-TAILED and BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE, and best of all a HOUBARA BUSTARD (hard to beat). At the Dades Gorge in the afternoon we notched up DESERT LARK, BONELLI'S EAGLE, and TRUMPETER FINCH, while the TRISTRAM'S WARBLER still remained elusive.

Day 7 was to take us from Boumalne du Dades to Erg Chebbi via stops in the morning at Todgha Gorge and at Errachidia later in the day. We finally nabbed TRISTRAM'S WARBLER at the Todgha Gorge (a bit of a relief for the guides), while in the Errachidia area we had MAGHREB LARK, SCRUB WARBLER, DESERT WARBLER, and BLUE-CHEEKED BEE-EATER.

The next morning saw all of us being transferred to 4 x 4s for our birding in the Erg Chebbi region amongst sand dunes, stony desert, and scrub land. The hired drivers (and guides – who were essential) were very experienced in maneuvering

through the various terrains and got us close to the birds. Super birds observed today included CROWNED and SPOTTED SANDGROUSE, PHARAOH EAGLE-OWL, DESERT SPARROW, EGYPTIAN NIGHTJAR, and nice looks at LANNER FALCON; what a great day of birding while also being in an intense sand storm with rain and lightning (Wow!).

Day 9 was a travel day from Erg Chebbi to Midelt with stops in Erfoud and Lake Barrage Al-Hassan Addakhil. Not much new was seen today but we had more looks at several species that had been seen earlier on in the tour. After a good night sleep, we were up very early in the morning to try for the DUPONT'S LARK on the Zaida Plains and scored very quickly. Also present were CREAM-COLORED COURSER and several Lark species that had been observed earlier on in the tour. We returned to our hotel for breakfast then stared out for Ifrane birding along the way. At Zaida we had a EURASIAN GOLDEN ORIOLE and soon we were traveling through some forested areas higher in the mountains where we made a stop to do some birding. This proved to be a good decision as we saw our first ATLAS FLYCATCHER (a major target). At this stop we also had SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER, EURASIAN NUTHATCH, and EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK, while after lunch later in the afternoon in the Azoru area we saw WOOD LARK, LESSER KESTREL and ALPINE SWIFT. We rounded out the day with a stop at Dayat Aoua Lake north of Ifrane and had EURASIAN HOOPOE, HAWFINCH, RED CROSSBILL, EURASIAN GOLDEN ORIOLE, and MISTLE THRUSH.

Day 11 had us traveling from Ifrane (where we had ATLAS FLYCATCHER right outside our hotel in the morning) to Asilah with a birding stop at Larache (Oued Loukos). Oued Loukos, another birding magnet area is located along the Moroccan coast south of Asilah and Tangier. Migrants were moving through the area and we saw several EURASIAN GRIFFONS and a single distant EGYPTIAN VULTURE soaring overhead while also finding COLLARED PRATINCOLE, SAVI'S WARBLER, RED-CRESTED POCHARD, PLAIN MARTIN, and WESTERN SWAMPHEN in the surrounding area. The next morning, we scoured some areas around Asilah looking for Great Bustard (to no avail) before heading south to Rabat with a stop at Sidi Bougaba, a small popular recreational lake near Kenitra. This place was very busy with a lot of locals enjoying the good weather by the lakeside and the birding (especially for waterfowl) was exceptional. We nabbed WHITE-HEADED DUCK, COMMON & RED-CRESTED POCHARD, FERRUGINOUS DUCK, WESTERN

SWAMPHEN, EURASIAN HOBBY, EURASIAN SPOONBILL, and LITTLE GREBE while at this site before continuing on to our hotel in Rabat for the night.

On day 13, the final day of the tour, we birded some Cork Oak Woodlands in the Rabat / Sale area before arriving at the hotel and finally the airport in Casablanca for departures. There was not much new to be found in these woodlands although we did see CORN BUNTING and BLACK STORK.

I ended up with 215 species being seen of which 141 were lifers, a respectable total. I could have had one more but was unable to get on a viewing of the Pied Avocets at Oued Souss due to heavy winds and trying to see them through a scope in these conditions. I believe the total count of species seen for the trip was 226 species (really good for a Morocco Tour). My favorite (top three) birds of the tour in Order were EGYPTIAN NIGHTJAR - because of the exceptional close up views (what a bird!!), HOUBARA BUSTARD (no reason needed), and ELEONORA'S FALCON (a bird I really wanted to see); while another big highlight of the trip was getting great looks at four species of Sandgrouse. A few cool mammals were also seen on this tour including BARBARY SHEEP (wow!) at the Tizi n' Test Pass and BARBARY APE (MACAQUE) at Cedre Gouraud Park, as well as several reptile and amphibian species.

We had a very large tour group (12 people) and I was somewhat apprehensive about this, as the largest birding group I had ever been with was 6 or 7 people. All worked out well though primarily because of the wide-open birding conditions (no real forest birding), and we had two exceptional Rockjumper guides, (which breaks down to 6 participants per guide). Mark Beevers and David Hoddinot had led Rockjumper birding tours to Morocco with one another previously so were accustomed to the area, terrain, and with the others birding style; while both were excellent spotters. They also provided good company at meals and during downtime when we were not birding as well as handling our luggage at several locations. A primary reason that I signed up for this tour over others was the guides, as I had heard that David Hoddinot was excellent and this proved to be the case; definitely a guide you might want to look for on future tours. One drawback was the van that was used seemed cramped and it took time for everyone to enter and disembark from the vehicle, while viewing from the van was very challenging at times; - I believe that possibly ten tour participants (with

two guides) instead of twelve would have helped in this regard (twelve is really pushing it, even with two superior Rockjumper guides).

The lodging during the tour varied quite a bit, but overall was very acceptable with the Le Meridian (our arrival hotel) and Xaluca Dades (quite an exceptional place) being the best. The food was good throughout the tour and the buffet at the Xaluca Dades was fantastic. When looking at future tours with Rockjumper to Morocco, I would recommend this extended version "Morocco – Atlas to Sahara in Spring (in depth)" (13-day tour) over the "Morocco – Atlas to Sahara" (11-day tour), since many more sites are covered and the species of birds seen is much greater. One should also beware of the participant to leader ratio on these tours, as in this case two guides worked out quite well whereas with one guide (no matter how good they are) it would have been nearly impossible. Another factor to be aware of is that the Morocco tours are priced in Euros so about two or three months before the start of the trip the price in US dollars is calculated based on current monetary rates, and the tour ended up costing a little more than I had anticipated but still acceptable and worth the money paid.

The field guide which I used for the tour was Birds of Europe (Second Edition) by Svensson, Mullarney, and Zetterstrom which I believe is one of the few current options available for Morocco.

Overall, I can highly recommend this tour as Rockjumper takes good care of its tour participants plus all their guides (that I have been with) were top notch! If anyone would like more information regarding my thoughts or data on this tour, feel free to send me an email; while bird species lists can be provided if you would like to see them.

Cheers - Michael