

Morocco – The Atlas and the South

15th – 24th November 2014



Erg Chebbi nr Merzouga

Introduction

This was another trip that was focused as a holiday for my wife and I, but the natural world is an important ingredient rather than being solely a birding trip. We had previously been to Morocco on three other occasions and I had birded around Erg Chebbi in a mad dawn raid 10 years previously. The aim was a self-drive meander down to Erg Chebbi and back, via Ouarzazate and flights were booked from Gatwick to Marrakech on Easyjet to tie in to this.

As previously, I opted to car hire via Europcar which was simple to add to the Easyjet booking. All of this worked well on the way out, but due to unforeseen problems we didn't return that way.

Bookings were made for hotels via the internet. One word of advice is that some of the booking sites said that certain hotels were full whilst contacting them directly gave us rooms. The time we travelled is the low season, and most hotels are relatively easy to book into. There are characterful and good value options throughout and we had a selection of pleasant places to stay. We were offered high quality of food throughout – hopefully meat and fruit tagine of all varieties is your thing as this is the staple fare.

November is a good time to visit the desert as the temperature is pleasant, but it must be said that the weather was variable during our trip. We hit a sand storm in Erg Chebbi that blew for a few hours leaving visibility down to a few metres. But on the Thursday it started raining in the mountains. We were unaware until we couldn't get from Rissani to Alnif as the N12 was blocked by a wadi in full spate across the main road. We circled back and this led to a 10 hour journey marked by blocked river crossings and towns and villages where the whole population was out to see the "once in life time" experience of rivers actually holding water. We noted that some had gone from nothing to over 1km wide in a matter of hours.

Incredibly, we made it back to Ouarzazate, and our planned stop, however as the rain continued overnight, we soon discovered that we were not only prevented from getting to

Marrakech, but also all routes out of town were now blocked. The lake of the Barrage El Mansour, normally 5 or so km out of town was now lapping at the outskirts. During the day the message changed from “the waters will recede in a few hours” to the roads are washed away and it will be back to normal in 10 days “Insha’Allah”. We managed to book flights back to Gatwick from Ouarzazate on the Monday and left the area to an uncertain future as news of lives being lost and villages being washed away started to come through.

Although stressful for us, the Arab sense of hospitality remained throughout. It did dampen the spirits of the normal busy shopkeepers and hawkers and the City was very subdued as we wandered around on the Sunday before leaving.

Gazetteer



Skoura Palmerie from Kasbah ait Ben Moro

Erfoud, Tinejdad and Boumalne – dangerous and tiring driving due to rain and floods throughout

November 22nd – Attempt to return to Marrakech, thwarted by road being washed away

November 23rd – Day in Ouarzazate including visit (with the whole town it seemed) to the lake of the Barrage El Mansour

November 24th - Early morning flight back to Gatwick via Casablanca.

Site Comments

Tizi n’Tichka pass – a difficult area to bird on as the pull offs were limited due to the road works near the pass and the habitat didn’t show much variation to attract a stop. On the way up this was hindered by mist and low cloud. On the northern side of the pass we stopped in the “alpine meadow area but all there was seen were a couple of Ravens and mixed flock of finches and pipits. Coming off the main N9, on to the minor road to Telouet, brought us into an area of open Juniper forest where Ring Ouzel, Coal tit and Jay were found.

Skoura Palmerie – this is a large area not only of palms but other small scale agriculture. Birding is tricky but this area is obviously a magnet to species and the river bed and surrounding drier areas give a good mix of species.

Boumalne du Dades – the areas of the Tagdilt track has been a famous stop over on the classic itinerary for birders for many years and I had last been there 10 years previously. In the winter, many birds do leave and head further south, so no Red-rumped Wheatears, but still many larks. The most numerous were Temminck's Larks, but careful walking of the tracks brought a good mix of other species



East of Jorf – only listed as comment to Dave Gosney's guide. The areas of Erfoud 29km and 35km are too commercialised and disturbed; however about 37km to Erfoud there is a pull off with a well and a rocky outcrop to the south of the road by a wadi crossing. In our first 10 minutes we had found Trumpeter Finch, Desert Lark and Hoopoe Lark and there is probably more to find here. We saw a Lanner falcon in the area on our trip back at the end of the week.

Erg Chebbi & Rissani – on the 19th we had a day with Brahim of Gayuin Tours. Gayuin is Berber for the Pharaoh Eagle Owl, and having seen the recommendation in Ian Merrill's May trip I made contact. I can echo Ian's thorough recommendation not only for local to Brahim's home town of Rissani, but anywhere in Morocco. He arrived with Otman, his driver, at our hotel in a 4x4 and we shot off into the desert to find the specialities of the area, and also an understanding into the background of the bird populations and movements. In November, some species have moved south e.g. Egyptian Nightjar and can't be found, others will move as the weather gets colder but are present e.g. African Desert Warbler and some have moved down from further North, e.g. Thick-billed Lark. The Desert is not uniform, sandy areas, flat stony desert, scrubby areas all give different species the ability to hang on to life here. You need to cover each to pick up on all the species possible.

The following day we headed alone to Dayet Srji and the lake gave a counterpoint to the desert areas. The guidance from Gosney on directions are still good, and though we could see it from the main Merzouga – Rissani route, which of the many tracks is still confusing and we did briefly "loose" it.



Bird Species list

Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) – 60+ were at Dayet Srji on the 20th and 20+ at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate

Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) – c.40 at Dayet Srji and 10 at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on 23rd.

Marbled Duck (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*) – a flock of c.20 were at Dayet Srji on the 20th

Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) - a flock of 40+ at Dayet Srji were the only record.

Cattle Egret (*Bubuculus ibis*) – seen at Riad Bledna on the 16th and low numbers until the flooded areas at Ouarzazate attracted 50+ (no idea where they came from!)

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) – 2 at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd were the only record.

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) – 3 at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd.

White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) – the first was seen near Telouet on 16th, however 30+ were around Ouarzazate and seen on the 22nd.

Booted Eagle (*Aquila pennata*) – a distant lone bird was at Skoura on 17th.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipter nisus*) – one was at Skoura, one 17th Auberge Derkaoua on the 20th.

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*) – The most numerous raptor and seen daily in low numbers.

Lanner Falcon (*Falco biarmicus erlangeri*) - a single was seen near Jorf on 21st.

Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) – the only record was on at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on 23rd.

European Coot (*Fulica atra*) – flocks were at both Dayet Srji and Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate where at both they were the most numerous waterbird.

[**Red-knobbed Coot** (*Fulica cristata*) – coot flocks at both Dayet Srji and Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate were scrutinised and although some looked promising they were too distant to confirm if any were present].

Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) – only seen at Dayet Srji, with circa 20 present on 20th.

Common Redshank (*Tringa tetanus*) – a single at Dayet Srji was the only record.

Grey Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – an adult at Dayet Srji on the 20th was a surprise. Bad record shots enabled this to be confirmed as an adult Grey rather than Red necked.

Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) - a single at Dayet Srji was the only record.

Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) - seen in the rocky areas and southern edge of the Atlas Mountains. All were pure plumaged birds.

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decanto*) – seen daily around villages and towns.

Laughing Dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*) – First seen at Riad Bledna on 16th and common at Skoura.

Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata riggenbachi/macrorhyncha*) – The Crested Larks seen around Skoura appeared to be of the form *riggenbachi*. However, at least one seen near Rissani on the 19th was the long-billed *macrorhyncha* form that is sometimes split as the Maghreb Lark.

Thekla Lark (*Galerida thekla*) – seen in the drier areas and first identified at Boumalne on the 18th and also seen in the southern deserts on 19-21st.

Greater Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla rubignosa*) – a small flock of c.8 birds were flushed on the Tagdilt track at Boumalne on 18th.

Lesser Short toed Lark (*Calandrella rufescens minor*) – two birds were seen on the Tagdilt track at Boumalne on 18th.

Desert Lark (*Ammomanes deserti payni*)- a pair were at Jorf on the 18th and then a few were around Rissani on the 19th.



*Temminck's Lark;
Tagdilt track*

Bar-tailed Lark (*Ammomanes cincture*) – probably the commonest lark in the sand desert and seen in daily from 19th to 22nd.

Thick-billed Lark (*Ramphocoris clotbey*) – a single was found by Brahim to the west of Rissani on the 19th.

Temminck's Lark (*Eremophila bilopha*) – the commonest lark at Boumalne with at least 40 on the 18th

Hoopoe Lark (*Alaemon alaudipes alaudipes*) – a single was at Boumalne on the 18th and then a further bird was at Jorf later the same day. On the 19th c.6 were seen out in the desert north of Erg Chebbi.

Crag Martin (*Pytonoprogne rupstris*) – first seen near Telouet on the 16th and then seen daily in rocky areas. Notably this was the most numerous species at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) – the first was seen at Auberge Derkaoua after the sand storm on 20th and then another couple were with the mixed hirundine flock at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd

Red-rumped Swallow (*Cecropis daurica*) – circa 6 were at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd

House Martin (*Delichon urbicum*) – a couple of birds were at Barrage El Mansour, Ouarzazate on the 23rd.

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) – only seen at the Tizi n'Tichka pass, where about 8 were seen.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) – common and seen daily

Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochurus*) – seen daily around village edges.

Moussier's Redstart (*Phoenicurus moussieri*) – 2 males and a female were seen at the edge of the Palmerie at Skoura on 17th.

White crowned Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucopyga*) – the most numerous Wheatear and seen daily south of the Atlas Mountains on the edge of villages and in the desert.

Black Wheatear (*Oenanthe melanura*) – seen only in the high Atlas Mountains especially between Tizi n'Tichka and Telouet on 16th.

Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*) – 4 or 5 were seen on the trip with Brahim on 19th and another pair were at Dayet Srji on 20th.

Common Stonechat (*Saxicola torquatus*) – birds seen at Skoura and Auberge Derkaoua.



Common Blackbird (*Turdus merula*) – seen daily in the gardens and palm groves

Ring Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*) – two were loudly “chacking” and breaking cover in the juniper forest on the road to Telouet on 16th,

Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) – common in the Palmerie at Skoura and also seen at Rissani and around Ouarzazarte.

Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) - common in the Palmerie at Skoura

Sardinian Warbler (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – more often heard than seen, but common in the Palmerie at Skoura and also around Auberge Derkaoua

Spectacled Warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata conspicillata*) – only seen around Rissani on the 19th.

African Desert Warbler (*Sylvia deserti*) – Found by Otman in the desert to the east of Auberge Derkaoua on the 19th. There were at least two birds present and surprisingly they were holding territory. We were told that were not resident but as the weather got colder they would leave the area for a month to six weeks and head south, returning thereafter.

Tristram's Warbler (*Sylvia deserticola maroccana*) – seen at Rissani on the 19th and another the following day was found around Auberge Derkaoua

Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia cettia*) – a calling bird was heard from the road to the Tizi n'Tichka pass on 16th.

Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – the commonest warbler and seen daily in good numbers from the Atlas Mountains down to the desert edge.

Coal Tit (*Periparus ater atlas*) – two were seen & heard in the juniper forest on the road from Tizi n'Tichka to Talouet.

African Blue Tit (*Cyanistes teneriffae ultramarinus*) – only seen in the Palmerie at Skoura, with a couple there on the 17th.

Southern Grey Shrike (*Lanius meridionalis elegans*) – seen daily as a frequent roadside species.

Common Bulbul (*Pycnonotus barbatus barbatus*) – common garden and palm grove species, particularly attracted to hotel grounds and seen daily.



Fulvous Babbler; nr Auberge Derkaoua

Fulvous Babbler (*Turdoides fulva maroccana*) – a party of six were seen near the nomads palm grove in the desert north of Erg Chebbi with Brahim on 19th. A further seven were found around Auberge Derkaoua the following day.

Common Magpie (*Pica pica mauritanica*) – seen around Riad Bledna on 16th.

Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius minor*) – one was seen on the edge of the juniper forest on the road from Tizi n'Tichkna to Talouet.

Raven (*Corvus corax tingitanus*) – a pair was seen near the summit of Tizi n'Tichkna Pass on the 16th.

Brown-necked Raven (*Corvus ruficollis*) – common around Rissani on the 19th, with over 30 seen then and on the 21st. Also present around the hotel on the edge of Erg Chebbi on the 20th.

Spotless Starling (*Sturnus unicolor*) - only seen to the north of the atlas mountains and common around Riad Bledna on 16th.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus tingitanus*) – seen daily around human habitation.

Rock Sparrow (*Petronia petronia barbara*) – four were seen on the wires on the outskirts of Talouet in the Atlas Mountains on the 16th.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs africana*) – another species common around the Palmerie at Skoura but seemingly absent elsewhere.

Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina mediterranea*) – seen in the Atlas Mountains on 16th.

Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis parva*) – only seen at Tizi n'Tichkna.

Serin (*Serinus serinus*)- small flocks were common in the Palmerie at Skoura on 17th.

Trumpeter Finch (*Bucanetes githagineus zedlitzii*) – first seen east of Jorf on the 18th.

Thereafter seen daily in the desert areas, often the most numerous bird and small flocks would play “chicken” at the road side, flying in front of the car.

House Bunting (*Emberiza sahari*) – a town bird, and one that was familiar around the Kasbah's and other mud brick houses throughout.



House Bunting, Kasbah Ait Ben Moro

Mammals

The only mammals seen were 3 or 4 foxes to the west of Rissani on the rocky ridge by the N12. Brahim called them desert foxes and the likely species is **Ruppell's Fox** (*Vulpes rueppelli*), certainly they were sandy, had distinct facial markings and white tips to the tail – although the ears didn't seem abnormally large.

Amphibians

We saw no reptiles (assuming the nights were too cold) and only one amphibian. Sadly the toad was freshly dead in the swimming pool at Riad Bledna. It appears to be a Berber Toad (*Amietophrynus mauritanicus*)

Butterflies

There were relatively few butterflies seen, and these were all in the southern desert areas. By far the commonest was the Painted Lady – whites and blues seen have been difficult to confirm the species concerned

Bath White (*Pieris duplidice*) – a number of whites were seen in the southern desert and those that were seen well appeared to be this, or perhaps as similar species.

Greenish Black-tip (*Elphinstonia charltonia*) – two were seen around the well just west of Jorf on the 18th.

Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*) – the commonest species and seen daily in reasonable numbers in the southern desert, Most were well worn and heading south.

African Grass Blue (*Zizeeria knysna*) – a small number were found in the desert around Rissani on the 19th.

Odonata

Dragonflies were scarce and only seen around Erg Chebbi and especially Dayet Srji. None were seen well but they appeared to be mainly comprised of two species; **Emperor** (*Anax imperator*) and **Red veined Darter** (*Sympterym fonscolombii*)

Martin Pitt – November 2014.