

Morocco – March 28th-31st 2017

This report covers 4 days in Morocco, south of Marrakech, at the end of March. Being my first time in Morocco a lot of species would be lifers for me, so listing every single target would be a bit pointless. Furthermore, given the unorthodox nature of the trip (it was a surprise birthday present, with limited time) and the fact I can't imagine anyone will have a similar itinerary, I won't lay this report out in the same way I have previous ones. Instead I'll go into my experience of the logistical side of things, before focusing on the key sites/species I encountered that people look to visit and see in Morocco. I'll also describe some of the lesser known sites I visited or chanced upon.

The time restraints meant it wouldn't have made sense to visit all of the main sites in south Morocco, so, in order to enjoy time with birds instead of racing around, we planned to drive through the Atlas Mountains to Boumalne Dades, and base ourselves there for 2 nights. Given I'll be back (probably several times) to Morocco in the future, it also seemed logical to prioritise a Western Palearctic mega – Pied Crow - that was available in Mhamid, on the edge of the Sahara.

Transport, accommodation and weather

Both flights, from Barcelona to Marrakech and from Marrakech to Gatwick respectively, ran fine, and were booked for about £40 each way. Car hire with Europacar wasn't the cheapest option, but the service was very professional and smooth. After getting lost in downtown Marrakech on the way back to the airport, we didn't have time to fill the tank up – the extremely understanding and friendly bloke at Europacar only charged us half the amount for this mistake. Driving in Morocco is a bit of a mixed bag – fairly hectic in the cities, less so in the countryside, though domestic animals and oblivious locals often wander into the road with little warning.

Before our visit we'd read lots about the 'corrupt' police, and how they'd flag you down for no reason and wait for a financial bribe before letting you go. This is presumably very dated – all the police we encountered were extremely friendly. Indeed, on the one occasion we were stopped, we'd left the hotel without any driving licenses/ID, and the police couldn't have been nicer, with a friendly reminder (in perfect English) that we'd be better off with these documents, before letting us go! Given how much the country leans on tourism, it's likely the government have clamped down on any such previous behaviour of policemen towards visitors.

We stayed at the Hotel Ibis Marrakech on the first night, which was comfortable and well located. Whilst the hotel Soleil Bleu in Boumalne Dades (right next to the famous Tagdilt Track) has a famous reputation among birders, the service we enjoyed was far beyond our expectations.

Ali, the proprietor, was an absolute star – he cooked our (delicious) 3 course meals to order every night, asking what we'd like, and provided an amazing breakfast on the 31st. Birds seen from the breakfast table included Laughing Dove, Common Bulbul, House Bunting, Woodchat Shrike and Bee-eater! Furthermore, as we were the only guests, he upgraded us

to the best room in the hotel free of charge. Indeed, this first-rate service, including the food, cost us £50 a night. Anyone birding the Tagdilt Track need look no further than this hotel for accommodation – the birders log here is also a great help.

The weather was good during our visit, warm, and sunny, with temperatures generally around 26 degrees, though it reached 33 in Mhamid on the 30th.

Literature

Gosney very much the go to, with both his Morocco books used. Bergier's *Where to Watch Birds in Morocco* was also helpful, despite being a touch dated, and was great for suggesting sites along the relatively unvisited road from Ouarzazate to Mhamid. Several trip reports were useful too, as was the birders log in *Soleil Bleu*.

Highlights

Pied Crow, Pharaoh Eagle Owl, African Crimson-winged Finch, Fulvous Babbler, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Maghreb Wheatear, Seebohm's Wheatear, Lanner, Maghreb Lark, Moussier's Redstart, Hoopoe-lark and Brown-necked Raven.

Key sites and species

Oukaimeden, Atlas Mountains

Access from Marrakech was straightforward, and took less than 90 minutes. The track beyond ski lift car park was more treacherous than the books make out, but we enjoyed a very productive morning here. On the track/pass beyond the ski lift, several **Moussier's Redstarts, Seebohm's Wheatears, Atlas Horned Larks** and **Water Pipits** were seen. Around the ski lift, simply crippling views of at least 4 **African Crimson-winged Finches** were enjoyed. Also here were both species of **Chough**, a Moussier's Redstart, and some **Rock Sparrows**. Other birds seen at various stops in the mountains were **Black Wheatear, Long-legged Buzzard, Common Bulbul, Rock Bunting** and **African Blue Tit**.

Amerzagne (near Ouarzazate)

This site, just off the road to Ouarzazate, is known for being semi-reliable for Maghreb Wheatear. We didn't find any, but the wadis and scrubs held a few good birds, including **Trumpeter Finch, White-crowned, Seebohm's** (bit of a surprise) and **Desert Wheatear, Desert Lark** and **Spectacled, Western Olivaceous** and **Subalpine Warbler**.

Tagdilt Track

Despite the expansion of the rubbish dump (in what was formerly the prime area), this vast site still holds loads of excellent birds, and the plentiful tracks that zig-zag across it allow for fantastic views of most species. With the parts of the site that are well-documented now under more and more litter, it's pretty obvious to head south and east, into the vast parts of the track that are still in pristine condition.

We spent a late afternoon/evening and morning here, and saw plentiful **Red-rumped, Desert** and **White-crowned Wheatears, Desert, Lesser Short-toed, Temminck's** and

Hoopoe Larks, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Cream-coloured Coursers and Tawny Pipits. We also saw a single **Lanner**, and a couple of **Long-legged Buzzards**.

We didn't connect with any other Sandgrouse, including Crowned, which I was hoping to see. We also managed to dip both Bar-tailed and Thick-billed Lark, the latter of which apparently favours the littered area, which we didn't spend much time checking.

Boumalne Dades to Mhamid

From a birding perspective, this route is largely untraveled, but along the way we found several wadis that were very good for birds, including some of the more desert specialities.

South of Isdaoun (roughly 30.661051, -5.495277), a short walk next to the road produced the only **Fulvous Babblers** of the trip, as well as a pair of **Bar-tailed Larks**, and a couple of **Brown-necked Ravens** flew over.

At Tamegroute, the road runs past the Oued Draa, which provides the opportunity for vegetation in an otherwise desolate environment. Here we encountered a few **Laughing Doves**, plenty of **Brown-necked Ravens** and our only flock of **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters**.

About 60 kilometres from Mhamid, at the village of Anagam, we had our only **Maghreb Wheatears**, a pair.

Mhamid

Not a birding hotspot, but at the time host to a **Pied Crow**, which we connected with after a good couple of hours of searching. **Brown-necked Ravens** were plentiful here, and several **Maghreb Larks** were seen.

Ifly

This delightful spot along the Oued Draa, 18 kilometres north of Zagora, features in Bergier, and for good reason. In just a half hour stop in these lush palm groves here we had **Laughing and Turtle Doves, Western Olivaceous and Melodious Warblers, Common Bulbuls** (granted these are everywhere in Morocco) and, near the sandier parts, **Trumpeter Finch**. Take the track at 30.443915, -5.944970 and continue to the river.

Tizi-n-Tinifift

A known site for **African Rock Martin** near Agdz, though splitting from the numerous Crag Martins here is considered tough. However, on our visit, we saw very few Martins at all, and they were all Rock! Also here was a **Rock Bunting**, and some **Desert Larks**.

Imiter quarry (near Boumalne Dades)

Now famous as a site for **Pharoah Eagle-owl**, we benefitted from the excellent (and frequently updated) details in the Soleil Bleu log-book. It took little over 15 minutes to find a roosting bird in the scope, and we enjoyed fairly distant but extended views. Also here was **Trumpeter Finch** and **Desert Lark**.

A word of warning – as with other sites that hold rare species in Morocco, the locals have cottoned on, and it wasn't long until a local approached us, offering in limited French to take us to the nest. Given the presumed high level of disturbance this would cause, we declined, and the obvious advice to anyone else visiting is to do the same.

Long on my bucket-list, Morocco was fantastic in every aspect. There are several trips to different parts of the country I'd like to do, not least another, longer stint in the semi-desert areas south of Marrakech.

