

Mauritania 13th-23rd April 2018

This was a privately organised trip initiated by Dan Pointon. Participants were Dan, Josh Jones, Kris de Rouck, Peter Stronach and myself. We contacted Justus Buma at justusbuma@yahoo.com based at Bab Sahara in Atar, who arranged the logistics (at 750 Euro pp). Dan booked flights by Air Mauritania from Gran Canaria to Mauritania, and we arranged our own flights to and from Gran Canaria.

13th April. Left Peters at 0300 and drove down to Glasgow. Parked car in city centre and got bus through to Edinburgh Airport for 0910 Jet2 flight to Gran Canaria. Arrived just after 1400 and met up with Josh, who had hired a car. Drove north up to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, to the port area adjacent to Castello de la Luz. Drove around the port till we eventually located the long staying **Pied Crow**. Got good views watching it carry nest material up onto one of the container cranes. Few **Yellow-legged Gulls** and **Common Terns** also noted. Returned to the airport and met up with Kris and then Dan and checked in for our Air Mauritania flight to Nouadibhou. The flight took one and a half hours. On arrival took a while to get a visa and we were then met by Achmed and his two colleagues, who were to look after us during our stay. Drove north through the town to find our accommodation and had a late meal before bed.

14th April. Up 0700 to find our accommodation was on the shore of the Baie d'Etoile. Masses of feeding waders comprised lots of **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Sanderling**, with a scattering of **Oystercatcher**, **Kentish Plover**, **Grey Plover**, **Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Curlew**, **Whimbrel** and **Turnstone** feeding along the shore. Further out in the bay were 100+ **Great White Pelican**, a few **Greater Flamingo**, **Yellow-legged Gull**, **Lesser Black-backed Gull** and **Caspian Tern**. Overhead had a couple of **Osprey** and two **Marsh Harriers**.

After breakfast drove back into and through Nouadibhou to the allotments on the SW edge of the town. So began the great roller search. Overhead lots of **Barn Swallow** and **House Martin**, with a **Red-rumped Swallow** and a **Sand Martin**. Also a few **Common Swift** and three **Little Swift**. Migrants in the allotments comprised many **Willow Warbler**, **Blackcap**, **Tree Pipit**, with a few **Chiffchaff**, **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Woodchat Shrike**, a **Nightingale**, a **Northern Wheatear** and a **Turtle Dove** along with 20+ **European Bee-eaters**. Resident species comprised **Collared Dove**, **Laughing Dove** and numerous **House Sparrow**. Also present were five **Black Kite**, a **Long-legged Buzzard**, a **Marsh Harrier** and a few **Common Kestrel**. Eventually after four hours searching, and hope running out, Josh located the **Abyssinian Roller** that had been present since last autumn. Unfortunately it immediately disappeared. After frantic searching Dan refound it and we got distant views of it on one of the palm trees before it vanished again. Eventually we relocated it on the edge of the allotments and got great views of it perched and then in flight before it disappeared yet again. There was much delight that we had got this WP mega.

As it was now mid-day we drove back through Nouadibhou, getting a few supplies, before heading north to a restaurant on the Baie d'Etoile for some nice grilled fish. Around 1430 we continued north, round the top of the bay and then south to Bon Lanouer (21.2936N, 16.5262W) where Achmed managed to get his Hylux stuck in the sand. A wander round the gardens revealed a large flock of 100+ **Sudan Golden Sparrows**, with a high percentage of adult males. We also located our first **Western Olivaceous Warblers**. Other birds seen in and around here included lots of **White-crowned Black Wheatears**, small groups of **Brown-necked Ravens** and a migrating **Booted Eagle**.

Continued our journey south, and out of the WP before cutting across the desert for 40km to reach the remote fishing community of Iwik on the Banc d'Arguin. Just before the village we had a **Peregrine** sitting out in the desert. On arrival just as the light was going we checked into our 'camp' which consisted of two nomad type tents, whilst a meal was prepared for us. The desert sky was spectacular.

15th April. Up at first light and headed down to the shore. All birds below the high tide line are deemed to be in the Western Palearctic. Out on the mud flats were masses of feeding waders. Big numbers of **Knot**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Ringed Plover**, **Grey Plover** with a few **Oystercatcher**, **Curlew**, **Whimbrel**, **Redshank**, **Greenshank** and **Curlew Sandpiper**, many in full summer plumage. Also feeding on the mud flats were numerous **Western Reef Egrets** (mostly dark morphs), **Grey Herons** (many of the local race *monicae* with very pale, whitish, wing coverts) and **Eurasian Spoonbills**. Further out masses of birds were flying out (from a roost site?) to the north. Probably 2-3000 **White-breasted Cormorants** and 150+ **Red Cormorants**. Some stopped to feed in small pools in the mud flats giving good views, along with **Eurasian Spoonbills** and **Great White Pelicans**. Masses of **Slender-billed Gulls** were also flying north, whilst offshore good numbers of **Caspian Tern**, **Royal Tern**, **Gull-billed Tern** and a few **Little Tern** were feeding. We also got good close views of 8 **Grey-headed Gulls**, many of which were paired up. Walked down the shore to Iwik, finding some confiding, and

very pale, **Hoopoe Larks** and a few **Blue-headed Wagtails**. A small group of six **Sudan Golden Sparrow** flew over the village.

Returned to camp for breakfast, before heading back down to Iwik for a boat trip out into the Banc on a traditional sail powered fishing boat. We sailed a few km offshore till the first island and anchored off it. This gave good views of the large colonies of **Slender-billed Gulls**, **Eurasian Spoonbills**, **Western Reef Egrets** and **Grey Herons**. We also got further close views of **Reed Cormorants**, **Royal Terns** and **Great White Pelicans**. Small groups of **Black Terns** regularly flew by (c80 in total) along with a few immature **Common Terns** and some **Arctic Terns**. Further out over the water we spotted two single **Wilson's Petrel**, which was a bit unexpected. Whilst anchored the skipper and his mate caught a small shark and a couple of fish. They then proceeded to grill the fish on deck, on top of an old wheel and offered them to us for lunch. To our disappointment it was obvious we were not going to get any further out onto the bay, so we suggested that we should just return to Iwik.

Returned to camp, packed and then headed out back across the desert to Chami. Here at the large local market got more supplies, including blankets, and refuelled. Then drove south to 19.796N, 15.939W and left the road, heading east for c10km into the desert. Here we pitched camp for the night. It was now very windy. After a nice meal of grilled fish we walked out with our spot lights into the surrounding desert finding our first Fennec Fox.

16th April. Up 0630, breakfast and then started the long drive, east then north east across the desert. Huge expanses of flat, featureless barren desert, were interspersed with ridges of fixed dunes that we had to slowly negotiate our way through, and mobile barchan sand dunes that we had to skirt round. In one dune area flushed a Fennec Fox. Had to skirt round a large shanty town occupied by gold hunters, who criss-crossed the desert armed with metal detectors. Eventually after about 8 hours driving we crossed back into the WP. Once we reached the iron ore railway line we began to follow it east. As we drove along we spotted a **Cream-coloured Courser**, a few **Bar-tailed Larks**, a nice group of 8 confiding **African Dunn's Larks** and a couple of **Yellow Wagtails**, that were following a camel near the monolith Ben Amir. We eventually stopped around 1900 and set up camp. The strong NE wind had at last died down. It had been a very long and at times very slow journey. During the night we heard the massive 2km long ore trains pass by on their journey west to the coast.

17th April. An early start. Up 0600 and on our way by 0700. Headed east and then SE to Tdiyaunien where we drove up to the wadi at the base of the escarpment at 21.0994N, 13.0795W. As we entered the wadi had a flock of seven **Trumpeter Finch** and three **House Buntings**. Soon we located our key target bird – a **Blue-naped Mousebird**. Further up the wadi we found another party of four and a pair (making seven in total). They were quite vocal and eventually we got very good views of them. In the acacias there were lots of **Western Orpheaan Warblers** along with many **Western Bonelli's Warbler**, **Western Sub-alpine Warbler**, **Western Olivaceous Warbler**, a few **Willow Warbler**, a **Melodious Warbler**, a **Common Whitethroat** and a **Sardinian Warbler**. Other migrants comprised a male **Pied Flycatcher**, a **Common Redstart** and two **European Bee-eaters**. Overhead had six **Griffon Vultures**. Resident species included many **White-crowned Black Wheatears**, **Rock Martin**, **Desert Lark**, 40+ confiding **Sudan Golden Sparrows** and a few **Desert Sparrows**. In the rocks had a couple of rat sized rodents possibly Senegal (or Felou) Gundi's. By midday it had got very hot and windy so took shelter in some nomad huts and had lunch.

After lunch drove down to a lower wadi close to the road at 21.14257N, 13.13168W. Here we had another group of six **Blue-naped Mousebirds**, but little else. We continued south out of the WP and climbed up the escarpment towards Atar, where we checked in to Bab Sahara. Here we had a well needed shower, some nice cool drinks, a good meal and a bottle of beer before bed.

18th April. A pre-breakfast stroll round the edge of Atar revealed at least five singing **Black Bush Robin**, a few **Rufous-tailed Bush Robin**, several **Blue-naped Mousebirds**, **House Buntings**, a **Fulvous Babbler** and a pair of **Namaqua Doves**. Migrants included **Hoopoe**, a **Melodious Warbler** and **Turtle Doves**. After a nice breakfast we continued our journey heading ENE, climbing up onto a large flat plateau (800m). At 1040 we stopped at the edge of a large canyon with a fine panoramic view, which included at 19th century French foreign legion fort. Here under some rock overhangs we were shown 6000 year old paintings of a hunter, elephants, a giraffe and a buffalo. How the landscape must have changed since these creatures grazed this area! Had a very long three and a half hour lunch stop and folk began to get very bored. Only thing of note were a pair of **Rock Hyrax** with a youngster.

Eventually we persuaded the drivers to get going and made rapid progress along the long straight dirt track that took us c150km to Oudane. From here we continued NE and back into the WP in a large sandy wadi with large acacias. We drove straight to 21.01456N, 11.49895W – a site we had got from the previous Swedish group. We found a tree with a hole, played my tape and soon attracted in a pair of **African Grey Woodpecker**. Got super views of both

birds. Achmed was getting very agitated about the need to set up camp, so we moved on to our campsite at 21.00690N, 11.49785W. We birded around the camp till dusk, finding a singing pair of **African Collared Dove**, several **Fulvous Babbler**, **Southern Grey Shrikes**, **Woodchat Shrikes**, two **Golden Oriole**, a pair of **Bar-tailed Lark** and a few parties of **Sudan Golden Sparrow**.

After dusk we walked out to a belt of grassy tussocks east of the campsite, where Dan heard a **Golden Nightjar** singing. Once we all met up at the spot we began to search for the bird and soon found it in an open sandy area. Got great views of it on the ground and jumping up and chasing after a cricket. Elated we returned to camp for a late meal. Another go of spotlighting revealed a Fennec Fox, a couple of Lesser Egyptian Gerbils and several venomous spiders.

19th April. Up at 0500 for some pre-dawn spotting. Returned to the area east of the camp where we had seen the **Golden Nightjar** the previous evening. Soon heard one singing (even me!) and tracked it down to the top of a dune ridge between the acacias. Got nice views of it (a male) in flight and on the ground. It disappeared and as it was starting to get light we began to search possible roosting sites. Astonishingly under the second bush he checked Dan found a roosting bird. As he called folk to come and see it the bird flushed. I checked the bush and to my surprise found a 'nest' with a single egg, laid directly onto the bare sand. The first nest ever found in the WP. We retreated allowing the bird to return to the nest and then moved in closer to get good views and photographs. Returned to camp getting excellent views of a singing **Cricket Warbler**.

After breakfast birded the wadi seeing a **Black-eared Wheatear**, a **Whinchat**, a **Common Redstart**, **Southern Grey Shrikes**, **Woodchat Shrikes**, **Western Orphean Warblers** and a few **Western Bonelli's Warbler**. As we returned to camp we got a call from Peter to say he had found a noisy female **African Grey Woodpecker** calling above a nest hole. This bird provided more good views. Surprisingly no sign of a male.

At 0940 we headed of NE to cross the "Eye of the Sahara" – five concentric escarpments formed from a collapsed batholith. It was pretty barren and probably more spectacular from space. Just beyond the centre we stopped in a small grove of acacias for lunch. Being the only vegetation for miles this held quite a few migrants: a pair of **Turtle Dove**, a **Golden Oriole**, two **Rufous-tailed Bush Robin**, a **Common Redstart** and seven **Garden Warblers**. There was also a tail dipping **Eastern Olivaceous Warbler** of the Saharan race *reiseri*. We continued north crossing some very stoney areas of desert, before descending down a narrow steep track. Achmed informed us the 'road' was built with every rock being removed by hand. Eventually we dropped down into the wadi at El Beyyed and set up camp at 21.50515N, 11.34556W. El Beyyed was the centre of a nomad area with a well, a primary school and a hut that served as a mosque. Because of this there were lots of nomad encampments and the area was heavily overgrazed by goats and camels. We birded the area east of the 'settlement' finding a few **African Collared Doves**, **House Buntings** and the usual warblers. Returned to the camp where Peter spotted a **Golden Nightjar** flying by. After dark went out spotting getting good views of a Fennec Fox.

20th April. Up 0500 for a pre-breakfast walk down the wadi. Nice views of singing **Cricket Warbler** and found another **Garden Warbler**. Started packing up after breakfast, when Josh called to say he had found a roosting **Golden Nightjar** under an acacia very close to the camp. This bird, a female, gave superb views on the ground and in flight, so that even I got some good photos.

After packing we began to walk down the wadi. Lots of the usual warblers, plus parties of **Fulvous Babblers**, **Southern Grey Shrikes**, two **Golden Orioles** and some **Desert Sparrows**. Achmed picked us up and we continued drive west across what had become a large flat plain with some dry salt lakes. Tied onto the hylux was a young goat, live and in a sack. Highlight of the drive was a pair of **Lanner** chasing a **Common Swift**. Also had a couple of **Long-legged Buzzard**. We eventually stopped for lunch by a small group of acacias. Overhead had quite a few feeding **Red-rumped** and **Barn Swallows**, along with **Rock** and **House Martins** and a **Sand Martin**. In addition at least three **Booted Eagles** drifted north and a **Black Kite**.

Eventually arrived at the oasis at Armakou (21.21327N, 11.89266W). This turned out to be a bit of a disappointment. Fifteen years previously when Kris had visited it had pools and vegetable gardens and good numbers of birds. From the wells it appeared the water table was now over 3m below ground level and the agricultural areas were abandoned and replaced by tamarisks and reeds. Only birds of note were a **Reed Warbler** and a singing **African Collared Dove**. The neighbouring village held many **House Buntings** and a pair of **Namaqua Doves**. We continued west for a few km, passing another well, where we had a group of ten **Desert Larks**. Eventually stopped in a very degraded area, where Achmed decided to pitch camp. He disappeared, with the goat, and returned later with one of the local dignitaries and the butchered remains of the goat. Being a Friday they had a

brief religious service before supper. The goat was delicious, but it appeared the prime cuts were eaten by our Mauritanian hosts!

21st April. Up 0630 after a very windy night and the wind was still strong. After breakfast continued our journey south west. We only got about 10km when Achmed's Hilux started playing up with a fuel problem. They tinkered about with it but eventually the engine cut out. Peter suggested changing the fuel filter but instead they tried to bypass it. This worked for a bit but again the engine died. They then started to check the fuel pipes and in the process snapped one of them. Now we were well and truly stuck in the middle of nowhere. The second vehicle went off to the nearest nomad camp in the unlikely hope that they might have a spare part. It was now getting very hot. Predictably their quest failed. We rejigged the gear and got our luggage plus everyone into or onto the second vehicle and headed further west to a well constructed, but abandoned building. Apparently it was a religious centre set up by a holy man. Here we got some shade and had lunch whilst the unlikely search for the spare part continued. Predictably (in the middle of a barren desert) this was unsuccessful. The decision was taken to continue to Atar and Achmed would return later for the abandoned vehicle once they got the part in Atar. The whole disastrous episode meant there was no time to bid Achmed's 'secret' wadi!

Eventually arrived at Atar for the welcome cool drinks (we had been reduced to using well water for the last couple of days), shower and a beer. Peter and I had a walk down the river bed near Bab Sahara, but saw little new, highlight being up to 13 Blue-naped Mousebirds coming in to roost in the acacias. Achmed managed to source the part and return the 90km to rescue his vehicle.

22nd April. Pre-breakfast walk revealed nothing new. At 0830 we left for our journey south. We stopped at a small settlement (20.251N, 13.502W) in the middle of a fairly barren plain. Highlight here were some **Chestnut-bellied Starlings** in one of the gardens. This is a regular spot for them and they performed well giving good views. We also had some **Crested Larks**, a **Short-toed Lark** and a **Tawny Pipit**, along with **Namaqua Dove** and **Bar-tailed Larks**. Got another 20km down the road, when Achmed's vehicle started to play up again. This time they did change the fuel filter – a pity they hadn't followed Peter's suggestion and done that yesterday. Eventually arrived in Nouakchott in time for our 1715 Air Mauritania flight back to Gran Canaria. After collecting hire cars and checking in to our apartment we went out to a local restaurant for a final celebratory meal.

23rd April. Up 0615 and took coastal motorway to Mogan and then followed a very steep, narrow winding road up into the Inagua pine forest. We arrived on the south side of the ridge to find low clouds, strong winds and rain! Drove up the track for a couple of kms then got out to walk. The habitat looked quite good so played tape and this quickly attracted a pair of **Grand Canaria Blue Chaffinch**. Got good views, despite the weather. Also had **African Blue Tit** and **Canary Island Chiffchaffs**. The weather was so foul we decided to head back down to Maspalomas to check out the lagoon. This held three **Dunlin**, a summer plumage **Curlew Sandpiper**, a **Whimbrel** and **Moorhen**. The adjacent park had noisy **Monk** and **Ring-necked Parakeets**. Went into a local restaurant for some brunch before Dan and Josh headed off. We then went to Maspalomas Golf Course which was pretty quiet – a few **Hoopoes**, lots of **Canaries** and a couple of **Common Sandpipers**, with **Plain Swifts** overhead. Then drove to the lagoons near El Doctorral. A variety of waders included three **Black-winged Stilts**, six **Greenshank** and a pair of **Little Ringed Plover**, along with seven **Eurasian Spoonbill**, a **Purple Heron**, a few **Grey Heron**, **Little Egrets** and a **White Stork**. A pair of **Ruddy Shelduck** and several **Coot** were on the water. Our final destination was the coast below the lagoons, which held very little bar some **Berthelott's Pipits**. Returned car, said goodbye to Kris and checked in for our Ryanair flight back to Glasgow.

The trip was a great success with excellent views of all the key target species. In between, however, there was a lot of driving over large tracts of birdless deserts. In all we saw 104 different species in Mauritania, all bar 8 of them within the Western Palearctic boundary. In addition we saw 31 species (including the 2 target ones) in Gran Canaria.

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