

Intense Morocco



Rufous Bush Robin, nr Ar-Rachidia, 24.05.13 © N. Watmough

Nick Watmough & Graham Clarke

May 23rd-26thth 2013

Introduction

The initial goal of this trip was to spend a long weekend birding the Middle Atlas with the intention of seeing Atlas Pied Flycatcher, Crested Coot, Levaillant's Woodpecker, Dupont's Lark, Tristram's Warbler and Seeborn's Wheatear. In the event there was some "mission creep" and we headed to the deep south to try and see Egyptian Nightjar and both species of Olivaceous Warbler. Although we missed a couple of our original targets this was more than compensated for with an a superb array of birds that included "Pharaoh" Eagle Owl, Lanner, Spotted Sandgrouse, Thick-billed and Hoopoe Larks and "Moroccan" Wagtail.

Logistics

We flew with Ryanair from Stansted to Fes return and hired a car through Hertz (booked in advance with Holiday Autos). The local currency is the Dirham (Dh) and during our visit £1 equalled 12.6Dh. Please remember that this is a restricted currency and cannot be taken out of the country and is not available abroad. It is easy to purchase at the airport and all the towns that we passed through contained ATM machines that accepted our bank cards. We covered ca 1100 km and spent 1035 dirham (£82) on unleaded fuel for our hire car (Skoda Fabia with AC). Driving was generally straightforward with the Route Nationale 13 leading from Arfou to Merzouga. It was a little slow going over some of the mountain passes (lorries) and through towns (poor signage, cyclists and speed-traps), but otherwise possible to maintain a respectable average speed.

Accommodation was not booked in advance, but we had not problems finding a place to stay. One night each [Ksar-Timnay Hotel](#) (360 Dh B&B), [Hotel Yasmina](#) (500 Dh half-board) and the Hotel Le Chamonix in Ifrane (567 Dh - room). All prices quoted are for single rooms.

Guiding East of Rissani was with Lahcen Ouacha (al-hassan82@hotmail.com)+212 671146336).

Literature

We used "*Finding Birds in Morocco: the deserts*", by Dave Gosney supplemented with information from trip reports by [Richard Bonser](#) (May 2007) and [Josh Jones](#) (June 2012). The 1:1 000 000 Michelin map of Morocco (National Series; Sheet 742) got us around.

Further Information

Many more photos from the trip can be found on [Graham's Blog](#).

Daily Account

Thursday 23rd May late morning flight from Stansted to Fes. Despite a wrong turning leaving the airport we soon found, with some local help, the road to Ifrane and headed South and pausing only to watch some roadside Rollers. Unfortunately we missed the turning to Dayad Afoud and headed straight into Ifrane and took another wrong turning before finding, this time with police help, the road to Afrou. The track opposite the "Marakesh 411/Fes71" km marker described by Richard Bonser was easily located and as soon as we got out the car we could hear singing **Atlas Pied Flycatchers**. We spent just over a couple of hours in this area of mature oak forest where we also found Present also in the woods were Roller, several Hawfinch, **African Blue Tit**, "**African**" **Chaffinch**, Short-toed Treecreeper, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Spotted Flycatcher

We headed South during the last hour stopping twice; once to look at a perched Booted Eagle and again shortly after dark for a **Maghreb Tawny Owl** on roadside wires before pitching into the comfortable Ksar-Timnay Hotel for the night.



"African" Chaffinch, Near Ifrane, 23.04.13 © N.Watmough



Thekla Lark, Zaida Plains, 24.05.13 © N.Watmough

Friday 24th May:- We were on the Zaida plains shortly after first light and immediately found a pair of Desert Wheatears but there was no evidence of singing Dupont's Lark. We birded the plains for the next 2-3 hours and turned up both Lesser and Greater Short-toed Larks, Thekla Lark, **Thick-billed Lark**, **Red-rumped Wheatear** and Trumpeter Finch whilst three Ruddy Shelducks flew over.

A brief stop around the orchards opposite Ksar Timnay yielded Woodchat Shrike, half a dozen Turtle Doves, Serin, Reed Warbler and another Booted Eagle. After breakfast we settled up and carried on down the road to our next destination the Tizi-n-Tairhemt pass ca 23km ESE of Midelt

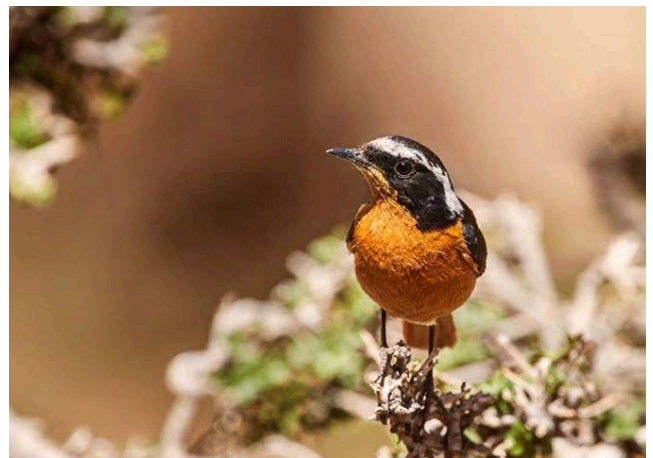
which is a well known site for **Tristram's Warbler**. We were not disappointed and in addition to a superb singing male we saw 2 male Moussier's Redstarts, a pair of Black Wheatears, Woodchat, Serin and Coal Tit.

A speculative stop in a lay-by ca 8.5 km North of Rich (32.32580N 4.54946W) that overlooks a shallow river plain provided us with both Grey and **Moroccan Wagtails** feeding young. A couple of km further South we explored a small area of orchards by the Pont Oued Sidi Hamza-Tilicht which held Hoopoe, Nightingale and a singing **Western Olivaceous Warblers**. A pair of Long-legged Buzzards flew over and the Blue Rock Thrush was nearby.

Satisfied with the sight and sound of Western Olivaceous we continued on to Ar Rachida and took a short detour 20km to the West on the N10 and turned off South opposite a rundown cafe (sign-posted Ksar Tarda 3km).

We parked where the road crosses the well vegetated wadi (31.819336N, 4.605745W). In addition to another Western Olivaceous Warblers, we found our first White-crowned Black Wheatears, Melodious Warbler, a presumed Saharan Olivaceous Warbler, **Blue-cheeked Bee-eater**, Desert Wheatear and a very photogenic **Rufous Bush Robin**.

We re-traced our steps to Ar-Rachida and headed for Erfoud and Rissani. It was around 7pm and school had just finished for the day the sheer number of cyclists made finding our way through Rissini challenging. We eventually found the Merzouga road and after a brief stop at the Auberge Tresor, which was rapidly eliminated as a place to stay, we started to explore the flat sandy desert on the North side of the road for **Egyptian Nightjar** (Gosney p11). The still conditions and full-moon made us cautiously optimistic, but to try and bring matters to a conclusion we split up and started looking



Moussier's Redstart, Tizi-n-Tairhemt, 24.05.13 © G. Clarke



Egyptian Nightjar, near Rissani, 24.05 13 © G.Clarke

under stunted acacias for roosting birds. The sun had already set when Nick noticed Graham waving frantically ca 500m away and simultaneously received the immortal text - "*got one roosting*". We sat quietly and watched an exquisitely camouflaged female until last light when she eventually half-opened her eyes called briefly and flew over a nearby ridge. We walked back the car then found our way in the dark over the rutted piste to the famous Café Yasmina where we celebrated an outstanding day with a cold beer overlooking the moonlit Erg Chebbi dunes.

Saturday 25th May: Birding started at breakfast with another Western Olivaceous Warbler on the terrace. The wind had gone up overnight and made exploration of the tamarisks around the hotel difficult. In addition to late migrants in the form of Spotted Flycatcher and Melodious Warbler there were . We settled our bill and headed back to the tarmac road with one stop which provided Desert and **Hoopoe Larks**. Rissini was less busy than the night before and after parking by the football stadium just before the bridge we explored the riverside tamarisks (Gosney p8) which were full of nesting **Saharan Olivaceous Warblers**. Meanwhile **Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters** patrolled the dry river bed and both White-crowned Black Wheatear and **Moroccan Wagtail** were visiting nest sites in the walls of the stadium.



Moroccan (White) Wagtail, Rissini, 25.04.13 © N. Watmough

Next up was the Pharaoh Eagle Owl site (Gosney p11). The 4km return walk through the wadi was hot, uncomfortable and apart from the hordes of Brown-necked Ravens and a couple of Desert Larks not very productive. As we returned to the car a moped drew up beside us driven by a man in local dress with a pair of bins around his neck and in possession of possibly the most distressed copy of the *Collins Guide* that either of us had ever seen. He introduced himself as Lachen Ouacha and offered to show us the owl plus Lanner and Spotted Sandgrouse. After a short negotiation we agreed to 100Dh each per species - no birds/no fee!

The next 90 mins will live long in the memory - first of all we headed West along N12 for about 2 km before turning ENE to follow a series of pistes that brought us back almost to the furthest point of our earlier walk (approx. 31.27888N, 4.36290W) from which we could obtain telescope views of a female **Pharaoh Eagle Owl**. Next we went South of the N12 to view an isolated rocky outcrop (31.23581N, 4.35898W) on top of which was perched a pristine **Lanner Falcon**. Before returning to the tarmac took us to the edge of a small vegetation filled depression (31.25492N, 4.40835W) which held ca 10 **Spotted Sandgrouse**. After returning to the N12, we thanked Lahcen and paid the agreed fee. It was now nearly 15.00 and there was unfinished business further north, and after refuelling we set off stopping only for a flyover Long-legged Buzzard.

***NB** We have given GPS coordinates for the sights but would not recommend leaving the tarmac road without a guide - for three reasons: 1) The pistes are in very poor condition and you will need a guide to make sure you take only those that are passable especially if you don't have an off-road vehicle. 2) The owls use multiple roost sites and it is a massive cliff face - up to date information will save you a great deal of time 3) We would agree with Dave Gosney that it can only be good for locals to see there is a financial benefit to not disturbing these special birds*



Seebohm's (Northern) Wheatear, Middle Atlas, 25.05.13 © G. Clarke

We made good time back to Zaida, but it was early evening and we realised that we would not make it to Dayad Afoud before dark. However, as we descended from the Col du Zad we noticed a vegetation filled lake (with many Coot) next to the road (33.029642N 5.071417W) and stopped to explore. The lake held breeding Little Grebe, Coot and **Red-knobbed Coot** whilst **Seebohm's Wheatear** was common on the nearby rocky slopes along with Linnet and Corn Bunting. We enjoyed the last good light here before heading back to Ifrane where spent the night in the Hotel Le Chamonix.

Sunday 26th May We made a 04.30hrs start to drive from Ifrane to Fes Airport (50 mins) in good time for the 07.25hrs flight to Stansted.