

January 2007. Home and Away, Pure Quality

Contributed by Jos

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A cracking start to the year. The month began in the sunshine of Morocco, a leisurely few days tagged onto the end the December trip to Western Sahara - oodles of waterbirds along the Atlantic coast, plus a fantastic array of other birds, including several Bonelli's Eagles, a large flock of Bald Ibises and at least a half dozen Black-crowned Tchagras. Back in Lithuania, things were no less exciting - the feeding stations simply glittered with quality birds, amongst the hordes of Tree Sparrows, Yellowhammers and assorted tits, the undoubted star was a White-backed Woodpecker, though two Grey-headed Woodpeckers, a trio of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a Hawfinch could not be sniffed at! A few Waxwings also put in an appearance.

New Year's Day

Whereas the previous year had kicked off in style with a Peregrine Falcon in the desertlands of Gujarat, 2007 began with rather more humble offerings - narrowly beating a House Bunting to the post, the first bird was a House Sparrow! But that standing, it was another year had begun and very soon the New Year list was soaring …before the sun had even appeared, Spotless Starling, Moroccan Magpie, Serin, Sardinian Warbler, Moussier's Redstart and Thekla's Lark were all safely under the belt!

And where better to spend New Year's Day than at Oued Massa? A sure fire way to guarantee a good day. After finding a café already open, I had a quick coffee and then went for a wander - in amongst small fields and scattered tamarisks and sedge growths, soon the birds were doing the business. First up, a Black-shouldered Kite still snoozing in a palm, then a Bluethroat on a field edge, not much later a Moustached Warbler showing briefly. Also plenty of Spanish Sparrows and Fan-tailed Warblers and I then came across a Black-crowned Tchagra demolishing the largest caterpillar you could imagine. Another coffee, then down to the oued itself - bird numbers were certainly up on the earlier visit, and not just the ducks. Quite a fantastic sight, an impressive 138 Glossy Ibis stood in the shallows, along with 15 Cranes and a solo Lapwing, the only one recorded on the trip. And just to round up the ibis family, six Bald Ibis also winged it over, making their way north. Brilliant birds, all of them.

Up in the sky, plenty of action too - two Bonelli's Eagles, an adult and youngster, two Ospreys, a Marsh Harrier and the odd swift knocking about - soon notched up at least three Pallid Swifts and four Little Swifts, but there was another species with them ...not unfortunately a Plain Swift (which would have been a real bonus) but a Common Swift, also rather unexpected for the time of year.

And so passed the first day of the year, ambling about in the sun for the whole day, seeing plenty more good birds. By the day's end, the tally had risen to 74 species, not a bad total for a single site. Also saw three Wild Boar. And, to end the day, I then hitched-hiked north for a night of relative comfort in Agadir!

2-4 January, Essaouira and Tamri

Leaving Agadir, I hitched the 200 km up to Essaouira. The main attraction here, during the breeding season only, is the large colony of Eleonora's Falcons on an island just offshore. But for my visit, I spend the first afternoon at Ksob Wadi, a small river just south of town - a good colony of Plain Martins in one bank, two Ospreys, a few Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls and a Barbary Partridge were amongst the best, though a pair of Moroccan White Wagtails were perhaps most of note, finally allowing me to get a photograph. Also a good selection of common birds in adjacent scrub, including very large numbers of Blackcaps and Serins.

In Essaouira town, a very fine place in itself, House Buntings seemed to be dripping off every other building. Got to one spot, a spice shop in a souk and was most amused to find the owner none too worried as a good half dozen birds helped themselves to seeds on his stall. Then spotted one bird hanging upside down from a balcony above the shop …it had got its leg caught in twine and was trapped! Enlisted the help of a Moroccan and eventually located the owner of the flat - he freed it, but simply tossed it into the air, still with twine attached. The bird fluttered across to a door overhang and I managed to grab it, there than followed a very delicate operation lasting a good fifteen minutes as the Moroccan and I

slowly cut the many threads wrapped tightly around its legs and feet. Success at last, we realised the bird and watched as it flew off to a rooftop, I presume to regain a bit of pride!

Next day, I had a quick walk along the rocky shore adjacent to the Kasbah and port - dozens of Turnstones, a couple of Whimbrel and a few Grey Plovers and Ringed Plovers - then took another stroll along the Ksob Wadi. Much the same bird selection as the day before, but also a second Plain Martin colony about 2 km further up the river.

Then it was time to depart Essaouira. I returned south and a couple of hours later was sitting in the hotel at Tamri again ...perhaps a little greedy, having already seen Bald Ibis very well, but I did fancy finding a larger flock than my earlier visit had produced - I had heard of one guy bumping into over 100 and really did think that would be nice. So, after checking into the very same room, I set off for a stroll - again numerous Serins, the same Blue Rock Thrush by the river bridge, also three Moussier's Redstarts, a few Fan-tailed Warblers and Cetti's Warblers. Wandering south, I decided on a hike into the hillsides above the cliffs …and there they were, about a kilometre from the lagoon, I came across a scantily vegetated field full of Bald Ibis! Not the hundred I had hoped, but still a stirring image as no less than 31 strutted their stuff without a care in the world.

Now this I thought impressive, but better was to come - the very next morning, I found 41 at the same spot! With that I had a very slow hitchhike back to Agadir, including a stop at Cap Rhir, where a very quiet seawatch did finally produce a Bonxie, a bird I had been looking for all trip!

5 January, Big Day Birding

A long day in the field, idea to notch up as many species in the single day - had ideas of doing Oued Massa and Oued Sous, the combined sites could well have produced 120 or so species, but settled on the easier option of just Oued Sous.

Now Oued Sous is just fantastic - a long, narrow estuary full of waders and some half decent scrub, bushes and woodland adjacent to produce an added selection of birds. The day certainly started off well enough with a super male Blue Rock Thrush on boulders next to the road, a bunch of Moussier's Redstarts in the scrub areas and a covey of Barbary Partridge on some rough ground. Being a tad chilly, I thought I'd leave the waterbirds till a little later and stuck to the trees for a while longer - Serins absolutely everywhere, at least 250 in all, and also the first African Blue Tits for quite some time, along with Great Tits and Great Spotted Woodpecker. Rather pleasing too were the number of Black-crowned Tchagras I bumped into - even once the sun was well and truly up, I kept finding them and, by the morning's end, I had seen no less than five. As the sun climbed and the warmth began to build, finally I wandered out onto the sand flats - and the first reward was overhead White Storks, a splendid flock of 22 drifting across the blue sky.

The estuary was as expected, very good - dozens of Black-winged Stilts and Bar-tailed Godwits, hundreds of Sanderling and numerous more, a total of 17 wader species were seen, including a major surprise in the form of a Jack Snipe (in a small channel in the salt marsh). Mystery of the day, indeed of the whole trip to Morocco, was a stint that appeared in front of me mid-morning. Frustratingly, it was against the sun the whole time, but did allow a couple of photographs …what it was, I still am not sure. Though the legs mostly appeared dark, they did seem to be pale on occasion when catching the light better, suggesting perhaps an odd Temminck's Stint. Or could it be something nearctic? Or?

With Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls found amongst the Black-headed Gulls and Audouin's and Yellow-legged Gulls amongst the Lesser-black-backed Gulls, the tally of birds seen was rising steadily, Greater Flamingos and Spoonbills added too, but to ensure a few extra I need to take a walk upriver into the agricultural areas. Quite quiet up there, but did add the expected Spotless Starlings and Moroccan Magpies, as well as yet more Barbary Partridge and a fantastic pair of low Bonelli's Eagles, adding to the Ospreys and Marsh Harrier already seen.

As the day wore on, I returned to the estuary front, had a walk in the salt marsh - lots of Fan-tailed Warblers and, on a small stream, a Moroccan White Wagtail. There was one last species to hope for - Red-necked Nightjar. Most leave southward for winter, but a few do occasionally hang about, so I stayed on till dusk to watch the area adjacent to the Royal Palace - floodlit and about the best chance for this bird. The result of my endeavours? Got chastised by the palace guards and didn't see the bird anyway!

6-7 January, Morocco, the end

Thinking it might be sociable to do a bit of shopping before departing Morocco, I used my last full day to return inland to the Sous Valley and walled city of Taroudannt. Of course, I began with a half day's birding west of the city! Starting at the road bridge, I walked for about three hours up the dry riverbed and neighbouring scrub - good variety, including a party of six Fulvous Babbler, five Stone Curlews, four Moussier's Redstarts, five Barbary Partridge and about a dozen Cirl Buntings. Also an Iberian Yellow Wagtail, further colonies of Spanish Sparrows, two Crag Martins and quite a few

Southern Grey Shrikes and House Buntings, the latter in villages. Then cut across to Tarouandant itself for the old souks and a last chance to enjoy the White Storks in the palms again, along with the odd Laughing Dove or two.

8 January, a UK stopover

Agadir to Vilnius is so much nicer with a little stop-over in the UK, so arriving and leaving from Gatwick, I had a whole half day free to go charging round England! Of course, Britain being Britain, it was chucking it down with rain and blowing a right little gale ...still, there was a certain person over in Suffolk talking of Casual EuroListing for 2007, so had to do something!

And where better to spend a rainy day than at Slimbridge? It is a very nice place, coffee overlooking plastic flamingos reminded me of the day before - then it was coffee overlooking proper Greater Flamingos! Anyhow, out to the hides ...a very showy Bittern didn't show, a Glaucous Gull sat well out of sight and I couldn't be bothered to scan the hundreds of White-fronted Geese for a lone Bean Goose (thousands will be winging over Lithuania in a couple of months!), but can't say I had a bad day - a Peregrine put on a nice performance, saw all the usual ducks and I did enjoy trying to get my UK year list up to something half respectable (after all, it is possibly the only day I'll be in the UK this year!). Star of the day though was the weird leucistic Moorhen pictured, a most strange looking thing strutting about in the rain!

Back on track, Lithuania, a birder's tale!

9-17 January, the sub-tropics hit Lithuania

Jeepers, what has happened? Got back to an almost sub-tropical Lithuania - temperatures hit plus 12.6 C, a record high for January and a staggering 46 degrees warmer than the lows of the previous year!!!

So, first job, needed a tour of the feeders in my gardens and land, hoping that the food had lasted out ...and it had, still peanuts in the feeders at all three locations! Good stuff, the mega-feeders had done their job! So, starting with the feeders on the land, I topped them all up, then sat back to see what was about - despite the mildness, birds by the dozen ... perhaps not in the numbers that would accompany the usual sub-zero, but all the familiar faces present and waiting. My one and only Coal Tit was hopping about within minutes, a dozen or so Marsh Tits, my feeder-trained Treecreeper back to his familiar spot and, of course, the woodpeckers. At both the house and forest sites, good numbers - at least four Great Spotted Woodpeckers, three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and the pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, sometimes all three together. In Vilnius too, all the usuals were on show, including the entire tit tribe, a very nice spectacle - Great, Blue, Coal, Marsh, Willow and Crested Tits all busying themselves on the peanuts. Also had a female Sparrowhawk sat on the birdtable for a while and the odd woodpecker in and out.

The total lack of snow and ice, despite casting a general grey gloom across the land, did have certain advantages - on a rare winter outing to Baltoji Voke, where by rights there should have been a half metre of solid ice, there now floated a flock of over 80 Whooper Swans, surely one of the highest January counts for this species in Lithuania! Otherwise much as expected - next to nothing!

Some days later, despite the mildness, the feeders up on my land continued to set new records ...for the first time ever, three Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers on the peanuts together, a fantastic sight, especially with Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers occupying the adjacent feeders. Altogether, there were at least ten individual woodpeckers coming into that feeding station, with several more at the nearby garden site. Meanwhile, back in Vilnius, a grey gloomy day was livened up somewhat by my first Waxwings of the year - about 20 on the berries in the hedge around my garden. Also, the ultra-tame Crested Tit seemed to have completely given up on the pines - he now resided more or less constantly in the garden, either flitting to the kitchen window feeders, his favourite, or occasionally those in the back garden.

20-25 January, winter arrives

Ah, at last, the snow and cold arrived ...just a dusting at first and temperatures barely below zero, but it did the trick - I got to see again the star of my feeders, the Grey-headed Woodpecker. Though he'd probably been coming in every day, his visits are fewer during mild weather - only every few hours - and I hadn't seen him for a while, so a most welcome reunion.

The forecast was for proper cold over the following days, but till then still some pretty good action - not least another 'first' on my feeders! For the second winter in a row (last year at the forest feeders, this year in the new garden), a Treecreeper had been using the feeding station near daily, frequently working the trunk and even ground beneath one of the feeders, picking up tiny morsels dropped ...but on this day, after working the trunk as usual, he went one stage further - he

hopped over onto the actual feeder itself. First time I have ever seen (or heard of) a Treecreeper on a peanut feeder, he stayed on it for about a minute, before flitting off and away.

And also a red letter day for another reason - sat in the cabin at the forest feeders and watching the usual collection, I was just thinking how abundant Blue Tits are this winter, when suddenly a whole flock of the northern snowy-headed Long-tailed Tits suddenly appeared and poured onto the feeders. Had a flock this time last winter too, but feel very honoured to get a repeat performance this year. Hope they stay about, they sure are quality birds to enjoy, but their visit today was all too brief - a few minutes and they were gone!

A couple of days later and it had arrived …winter proper! Plenty of snow and minus ten for starters, thereafter down to minus 15 over the next days. First casualty - something missing from the garden! On the Friday I still had a hedge sporting plenty of berries, by the Monday it was empty ...darn Waxwings had been in and chomped them all and I didn't even get to see them this time!

26-31 January, 'pressure birding'!

Birding under pressure! Not just a few days wandering around, but with a guest in tow, a guest expecting to see some birds…eeks, fail to produce and I could see the reputation of Lithuania slumping! So, started their mini-tour by dumping them in my Vilnius garden for a day whilst I worked - with windows overlooking feeders in each direction, they had to have a good day, or so I hoped! Well, before I left in the morning, both Marsh and Willow Tit had been sorted out, so it was a good start. I slunk off and left them to it …returned in the evening to find them beaming - the Crested Tits had been just 4 cm from them (I had promised 5 cm), a Middle Spotted Woodpecker had joined the Great Spotted Woodpeckers and the hordes of Tree Sparrows and little posse of Yellowhammers had kept my guest happy. So to the evening entertainment - a night out ‘owling’ in the deep forests. Out we strutted, a cool minus 15, fresh snow and forests stretching out forever. Two hours on and not a hoot! Not a hoot all evening actually, but not all lost - came across fresh Wolf tracks, two animals moving along a forest trail, as well as Elk.

And then came the next day - make or break, produce the birds or face failure. Secret weapon - the feeders up on my land. An hour of driving through light snow and we arrived, a quick stop at the house to have a peek at the feeders there …a Rook, not a usual bird in rural Lithuania in winter, a few more Marsh and Willow Tits and the first Middle Spotted Woodpecker of the day.

Then over to the forest feeders …and wow what a day! Not only did my regulars put on a good showing, but an absolute mega turned up. There we sat in the cabin with birds just dropping down onto the feeders in front of us - male and female Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers in and out all day, several Middle Spotted Woodpeckers keeping them company, not to forget the Great Spotted Woodpeckers too. There was still the star to wait for of course, the Grey-headed Woodpecker, so just had to wait a bit more. Then another woodpecker flew in and landed behind a feeder just in front …hmm, that was odd, it just had to be - a WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER. Only problem was it fed directly behind the feeder and barely showed, just brief views of a streaked pink flank and occasional peeps of the head. As I have only ever seen a single White-backed Woodpecker in Lithuania, I couldn't believe there was really one hiding behind my feeder! Then it flitted up onto the tree behind - barred back, massive white back and stunning head pattern - a full-blown classic White-backed Woodpecker, what a stunner. Then it was off and gone!

Well, my day was made, but there was still the matter of Grey-headed Woodpecker to deal with …but all too soon, there was one edging down the tree in front of our eyes, ah my traditional male was on his way to his usual feeders …or so I thought. But it wasn't - it was a female, the first time she has come in this winter …brilliant! Ten minutes later and the male came in too - one Grey-headed Woodpecker on one feeder, one Grey-headed Woodpecker on the next! And just for the icing on the cake, in popped a party of six snowy-headed Long-tailed Tits to provide fun on the feeders. Plus, a Great Grey Shrike sat atop a Starling nestbox in the meadows beyond the feeders.

And to the next day ...up and out at 4.30 a.m. for a three and a bit hour drive westward to the Baltic Sea. Arrived to conditions a tad stormy - waves doing their best to hide the birds, bitter winds guaranteed to bring water to your eyes and a pier covered in a good few centimetres of ice. Still, some good birds dotted about - a Velvet Scoter just offshore, stacks of Goosanders, a couple of Red-throated Divers and hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks everywhere. Of course, we were hoping for Steller's Eider, but try as I might I couldn't pick one out between the waves. Suitably chilled, I suggested a tactical retreat to the car and a try at another favoured spot a few kilometres further south. A quick stop for coffee and we were there - again, plenty of good birds - rather many Red-throated Divers moving north, one Black-throated Diver too, a single Smew amongst the many Goldeneye, but still no Steller's Eider, so as the weather began to improve, we returned to the first spot. Calmer seas and birds were much easier to see - Red-breasted Mergansers, several Velvet Scoters, one Common Scoter too, then miles and miles out to sea, I spotted a White-tailed Eagle! How strange it looked - probably almost a kilometre out, I have never seen one hunting so far out from the shore. My guest soon got engaged with this bird, hogging my telescope and thoroughly enjoying the bird. So, what to do, I started to scan for other birds and as I followed one bird flying by, my eye caught a glimpse of two broad white stripes on the top of one wave! Oo, knew what that was, backed up and sure enough there sat a female Steller's Eider, a right nice bird. Time for the eagle watching to finish, now our target bird was floating before us. Slowly it drifted in, eventually ending up just about 30 metres away, and

then we had the very nice spectacle of having four birds together - the Steller's Eider, a Common Scoter, a Velvet Scoter and, to top it all off, a Common Eider too.

Then it began to snow ...sideways! And snow quite heavily at that, so soon the end of an exposed pier did not seem the most desirable place to be, so said farewell to the Steller's Eider and headed off. It never stopped snowing all day! Went to a rather good area even further south where, despite a near blizzard in full swing, managed to find three male Hen Harriers, a Rough-legged Buzzard and a right stunner of a male Smew resting on a shelf of ice. Nigh on 800 km covered in the day, arrived back in Vilnius in the evening both pretty happy I'd say. Also saw a few Grey Partridge during the day, very easy to spot in the snow, and a big mixed finch flock (not a usual sight in winter Lithuania).

Well, left my guest to it on the following day, nipping out before dawn and getting tied up all day, but I did receive a text message mid-morning to say they were watching a Hawfinch in my garden! Very nice, Hawfinches have been rather scarce this winter, but it is about time for them to be turning up at the feeders.

Fortunately, though my guest had fled the country and was safely back in the UK, the Hawfinch lingered on. Saw it next day and was impressed to see it had already mastered the peanut feeders, probably not to the amusement of many of the other birds. Also, heavy snow all day and masses of action at the feeders. Perhaps the most impressive thing was the rocketing numbers of Yellowhammers - joining the many Tree Sparrows and Greenfinches, a minimum of 40 had flocked in, creating a right squabble of birds under the bird table!