

Part Two: Western Sahara, plus coast revisited.

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Last Updated Thursday, 03 May 2007

Rarely visited and little known, this arid portion of the world does not feature on the itinerary of many birders. The reasons are not difficult to understand - as well as the simmering military conflict and the almost total lack of birding information, there is also the issue of distances ...they are vast, everywhere is very far from everywhere else!

For the adventurous birder though, the attraction is clear - Dakhla in particular, and the southern deserts in general, offer the possibility of birds more typical of the Afrotropics. Royal Tern is near guaranteed and Black-crowned Finchlark have been recorded, reasons enough to see me travelling the 1400 km south to the Tropic of Cancer, about as far south as you can go without actually entering Mauritania.

Itinerary

25 December.

It was going to be Christmas Day that my trip would start! With Western Sahara, I was really clambering into the unknown - lacking birding information, I had simply boarded a bus in Marrakech the evening before for a long and tedious 16 hours that would take me right into the heart of the Western Sahara, a state recognised by the United Nations and most other bodies, but not by Morocco.

So, there I was, Christmas morning, pre-dawn and a bit weary-eyed, I looked out of the bus window and squinted across the desolate landscapes hoping to spot the first birds, nothing! A half hour trundled by and as we neared the coast somewhere in the middle of nowhere, we stopped at a coffee place (a single run-down place looking sorry to be there) - out I wandered and there I found my birds - first, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Audouin's Gull, then a single Black Wheatear. With my Western Sahara list standing at an impressive three, the journey continued - it must have been an hour before the list climbed to four! But number four was quite good - a flock of seven Spotted Sandgrouse that had the good grace to fly alongside the bus as we passed a dried out saline lake. After 850 km of travel, it was at 10.30 a.m. that my bus finally deposited me in Laayoune, the so-called capital. It was to my pleasant surprise that, just before entering town, we had crossed a flamingo-filled lagoon, the first real water I had seen all day. So I had a birding site for my day's birding - chucked my little daypack in a hotel, then went for a wander. The lagoon followed a wadi for a few kilometres before finally giving up the ghost and vanishing into a massive bank of rolling sand dunes. But for those few kilometres, sheer magic.

The first couple of kilometres were saline and banks devoid of vegetation, but absolutely crammed with birds: perhaps 650 Greater Flamingos and waders everywhere - at least 800 Black-winged Stilts, 150 Avocets and about 400 Sanderling amongst the most numerous, but also good numbers of Ringed Plovers, Little Ringed Plovers, Redshanks and a dozen or so other species. Next, after a few hundred metres where spreading dunes had engulfed the pools, they emerged once again into an even better oasis - fresh water, green and lush and stacks of birds. More Greater Flamingos and Black-winged Stilts, but also masses of other waders, including Wood Sandpiper, and an impressive wildfowl collection totalling almost a thousand birds, led by upward of 650 Marbled Teal and 45 Ruddy Shelducks. Quartering the pool, two Marsh Harriers occasionally spooked the odd bird, but the appearance of an adult Bonelli's Eagle, bird of the day, really caused commotion, putting everything up into the air.

Passerines were rather thin on the ground, but the oasis area did okay - two Red-throated Pipits with a few Meadow Pipits, several Northern Wheatears and, in adjacent desert, both Desert Wheatear and Hoopoe Lark. An arrival of hirundines saw not only a dozen or so Barn Swallows, but also at least 20 House Martins and a single Rock Martin too.

And just to finish the day off, staggering back into the town in the evening, nicely suntanned and feeling quite happy with what Santa had provided, a spiral of swifts appeared above me - 12 Pallid Swifts and 5 Little Swifts.

26 December.

I saw more wild camels than birds on this day ...and I didn't even see that many camels! Having never been a big fan of public transport, I gave up on the buses and trusted my good ol' thumb for the rest of the trip, so the 26th saw me setting out into the desert for the next leg - a 530 km push to the southern end of Western Sahara. Not too many vehicles tend to travel these roads, so many an hour was spent plodding along or sitting and gazing about, waiting for the chance of a lift. Can't say it was torture - though roadside birds were few and far between, what better way is there to spend a late

December day than to sit under a sun approaching 30 C and savour the birds that did appear - a party of 15 Stone Curlews, a pair and a single Hoopoe Lark, several Desert Wheatears and Black Wheatears, a few Thekla Larks a Long-legged Buzzard and, dead on the road, a Barn Owl. Arrived at Dakhla in the evening.

27 December.

With the deserts near devoid of birds, I decided to concentrate my efforts at Dakhla on waterbirds - the area is a spit and the landward side has vast inter-tidal sands, shimmering in the heat and brimming with birds. I spent a whole ten hours wandering the sands, paddling from one set of banks to the next, something my feet took weeks to forgive me for, becoming rather cut up and burnt in the process! Still, the rewards were pretty amazing - thousands and thousands of waders, particularly Bar-tailed Godwits and Sanderling, hundreds of Greater Flamingos and at least five Ospreys. Better than all those though were the gulls and terns. Literally thousands of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and, amongst them, a good scattering of Audouin's Gulls and Slender-billed Gulls, but it was the terns that were the specials of the day. At least 250 Caspian Terns and, the top prize, a minimum of 200 Royal Terns. Frequent mixed tern flocks invariably contained both these species, along with smaller numbers of Sandwich Terns too. A single Lesser Crested Tern, five Little Terns and a Common Tern completed the set.

Though the intertidal areas are the best area, I also decided to have a look at the seaward side of the spit - I would guess occasional tropical seabirds are possible, none on my visit, but still an amazing sight ...Gannets by the thousand, clearly a major feeding area, the sea was a mosaic of white, birds bullet-diving from shore to horizon in all directions. The walk back, only a kilometre or so, notched up one further good bird - a Cream-coloured Courser

Only two passerines were recorded during the day - a single Hoopoe Lark and a single Black Wheatear, though three White Wagtails were added in the evening back in town!

28 December.

Did have ideas of heading down to Mauritania, but nothing moving on the roads til after New Year, so decided on a return northbound. Spent many hours waiting for a lift at the main junction north from Dakhla - a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears, a male Desert Wheatear and a single Black Wheatear to keep me company, along with one Hoopoe Lark and a few Thekla Larks. A Swallow flew overhead. As it turned out, a most fortunate wait - sitting there and watching the dust, the Hoopoe Lark came walking along the road, passing just metres from me, finally enabling me to get the photos I wanted!

When my lift did finally arrive, it was a good one - a truck travelling a whole thousand kilometres. My destination, Laayoune, was only 530 km, so I hopped aboard and enjoyed my journey north. A lot of Black Wheatears en route, several Red-rumped Wheatears too, a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes and yet another Hoopoe Lark.

29 December.

Another excellent day at the lake at Laayoune. Waterbirds pretty similar, but with the addition of 11 Glossy Ibis, rather more Wood Sandpipers and Little Stints and, soaring in from the south, a White Stork.

I, however, spent most of the day in the greenery of the oasis area. Largely fed by the waste water of Laayoune, it is a positive magnet for passerines and other migrants. During the day, not only were there Crested and Hoopoe Larks, but also Black, Northern, Desert and, best of all, Black-eared Wheatears, several Spectacled Warblers and a fine array of hirundines, including both Red-rumped Swallow and Sand Martin. Having found Red-throated Pipits a few days before, I decided to check the 'pipit patch' again ...didn't find them, but found both a Tawny Pipit and Water Pipit instead! Also flushed a Hoopoe, had a couple of Turtle Doves bombing past and, best bird of the day, found an adult Great Spotted Cuckoo in a bush. On top of all this, five Cream-coloured Coursers flew over too. Also in the skies, a Bonelli's Eagle appeared again, sending the Marbled Teal into the air once more. I expected it to be the same bird as a few days before, but it was clearly not - this was not an adult. Some time later I happened to glance up at a distant dune and saw something flapping ...thought for a moment it was a displaying Houbara, but instead I was surprised to find it was the Bonelli's Eagle sat atop a still flapping Greater Flamingo!

All in all, a very good day and, wandering back to town, time for one last reward - a rather puzzling raptor, which appeared to be a Booted Eagle, minus most of its tail!

30 December.

The start of the day was an almost perfect replica of the 28th - once more I sat by the roadside waiting for a lift north, this time the 300 km to Tan Tan. And birds around, again a pair of Red-rumped Wheatears, single Desert Wheatears and Black Wheatears, a Hoopoe Lark running past and a few Thekla Larks nearby. Even a single Swallow flew north! Only difference, this time added a Spectacled Warbler too.

Once my lift came, it was an interesting route north - a Montagu's Harrier not far from Laayoune, a Cream-coloured Courser not much further on, a total of four more Hoopoe Larks, a half dozen Desert Wheatears and about 20 Red-rumped Wheatears. In the latter stages of the journey, a small lagoon held 15 Greater Flamingos, a Spoonbill and several Grey Herons, whilst near Tan Tan itself, a Lanner sat on roadside wires.

Back to Morocco, the West Coast

31 December.

New Year's Eve and I was back in Morocco proper. Leaving Tan Tan, I stuck my thumb out and soon got a lift to Oued Draa, a small wadi about 25 km north of the town.

There, wandering through the scrub, I soon found a Tristram's Warbler and over the next hour bumped into at least five more, along with quite a few Red-rumped Wheatears, a flock of Spanish Sparrows, nine Black-bellied Sandgrouse, two Long-legged Buzzards and several Moussier's Redstarts.

Next, I moved up to the desert areas south of Goulimine, this time concentrating on an area 3 km further south than the traditional 'Tan Tan 100' marker post. In an area where the desert was being cultivated, light rains some weeks earlier had brought a flush of green and the whole area was alive with birds. Numbering about 60, there was another flock of Spanish Sparrows, this plus a whole host of assorted desert goodies having a feast - at least 50 Bar-tailed Desert Larks and 60 Temminck's Horned Larks and, of course, the regular wheatear assortment, including about 30 Red-rumped Wheatears and three Northern Wheatears, all very nice. But the real plum was one that had been eluding me - wandering around, with larks going each and every direction, up flitted two Thick-billed Larks, the male of which then had the decency to land again and say 'hey look at me, aren't I a special one'. Indeed he was! Tristram's Warblers were also here, as well as a Long-legged Buzzard, a Marsh Harrier and about a dozen Crag Martins. Throughout the trip, Painted Ladies had been abundant, but today I also saw another butterfly, a most stunning one - similar to a Monarch, it was a Plain Tiger. Also, a surprise given the total absence of water, dragonflies were often common in the desert ...where do the larvae grow up?!

I then pushed on northward and got to the small town of Tiznit just before sunset, but I really wanted to get another 140 km, so walked out the other side and began another sit in the desert, thinking it might well be the way I would spend the turn of year. Not so, my luck was in - a car stopped after a few minutes and a guy gave me a lift to exactly where I wanted. My last birds of the year, cruising over the Anti-Atlas, six Black Wheatears.

Then my luck was out - the only hotel in the little village I had chosen was closed and boarded. A lone security guide suggested I might want to bed down under the bushes out front! Hmm, I thought, not particularly adverse to such, but hadn't imagined my New Year would be spent like such! Fortunately, after a little discussion and pleading, the good fellows opened the hotel up and I had the luxury of the whole place to myself!

1 January.

The previous year had begun with a Peregrine and finished with Black Wheatear. By contrast, the first bird of 2007 was a House Sparrow, narrowly pipping a House Bunting to the post! Nevertheless, New Year's birding was off and soon the list was soaring - before the sun was even up, Spotless Starling, Moroccan Magpie, Serin, Sardinian Warbler, Moussier's Redstart and Thekla's Lark, amongst others, had all been seen.

I was at Oued Massa again, so a good day was guaranteed. Started it with a coffee in a small cafe, then set off for a wander in the agricultural areas - first, a Black-shouldered Kite still snoozing in a palm, then plenty of Stonechats, Fan-tailed Warblers and Moussier's Redstarts, next up came a brief Moustached Warbler and not much later an excellent

Bluethroat. Top bird though, quite an amazing sight, was a Black-crowned Tchagra that had caught an enormous caterpillar, clearly a case of eyes bigger than stomach! Down on the oued itself, bird numbers were certainly up on the earlier visit, both amongst the ducks and others ...plenty of Marbled Teal, a couple of Ferruginous Ducks and the usual collection, but even better were the birds congregating in the shallows - an impressive 138 Glossy Ibis, along with 15 Cranes, one Avocet 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.

Up in the sky, plenty of action - 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, ambled about the whole day in the sun, added plenty more good birds, plus three Wild Boar, 74 species by the day's end. Late evening, I hitched up to Agadir.

2 January.

Hitch-hiked 200 km up to Essaouira, a historic walled town on the coast. For the birder, the main attraction, during the breeding season, is the large colony of Eleonora's Falcons on an island just offshore. No chance in January, so I spent the day at Ksob Wadi, a small rivermouth just south of the town. Doesn't compare with the major birding hotspots of Oued Massa and Oued Sous, but still a nice enough collection - a sizeable colony of Plain Sand Martins were already very active in one bank, whilst highlights along the river included two Ospreys, a few Slender-billed and Audouin's Gulls and, top birds of the day, a pair of quite confiding Moroccan White Wagtails. Also good, the adjacent scrub was well worth the hour or so exploration - though nothing out of the ordinary, a Barbary Partridge was seen, along with very large numbers of Blackcaps and Serins.

Back in town, I decided to have a walk amongst the souks - House Buntings were everywhere! Singing atop buildings, flocking down onto spice stands to gobble grain and, rather unfortunate, I also encountered one hanging upside down from a balcony, tangled in twine around its legs. Still alive, it prompted a rescue operation and, a half hour later, after calling up the owner of the property and enlisting the help of one very helpful Moroccan, the bird was finally released, the twine removed and the bird free to live another day.

3 January.

Spent the morning in the Essaouira area, beginning with a walk along the rocky shoreline adjacent to the kasbah - a selection of waders, including dozens of Turnstones, a couple of Whimbrel and a few Grey Plover, but not much else. I then returned to Ksob Wadi, walking upriver until I hit the main road bridge a couple of kilometres up. Pretty much the same bird selection as the day before, but also a second Plain Sand Martin colony, adjacent to the road bridge.

I then returned to Tamri for an afternoon revisited the lagoon and adjacent hillsides. Numerous Serins, a few Fan-tailed Warblers and Cetti's Warbler and the Blue Rock Thrush again, but I was high to try and find a bigger flock of Bald Ibis. Having seen small numbers there a couple of weeks before, I decided to concentrate in the area south of the lagoon, climbing into the hills and scanning from there. I was in luck, about a kilometre from the lagoon and about half a kilometre inland, I found a flock of 31 feeding in a weedy field. As tame as ever, I sat ahead of them and let them just wander in - all too soon, I was surrounded by Bald Ibis in all directions, a large proportion of which were youngsters, very magical.

4 January.

A quick look on the hillside south at Tamri revealed 41 Bald Ibis this morning! Also a Northern Wheatear, a Black Wheatear and about 16 Crested Larks. I then hitched, or rather walked most as lifts were bad, to Cap Rhir. Had ideas of a classic seawatch, but the sea was calm, the wind non-existent and birds almost absent! In a couple of hours watching, I managed just a few Gannets milling about, one Razorbill drifting past, a single Common Scoter hurtling past and, star of the watch, a Bonxie which flew in from the south, landed on the sea and sat about for 15 minutes, then upped and flew back to the south. Otherwise, best birds were on the headland itself - a male Blue Rock Thrush, one Black Redstart and a Whimbrel.

5 January. Big Day Birding! I set myself the challenge of choosing a single birding locality and then to bird it from dawn till dusk with the sole purpose of notching up as many species as possible.

And for my chosen site, I could do little better than Oued Sous, an estuary full of waders and some half decent scrub adjacent, with bushes and woodland to produce an added selection of birds. So leaving Agadir in darkness, I was on site just as dawn broke and soon the rewards came rolling in - a male Blue Rock Thrush on boulders next to the road, several Moussier's Redstarts in the scrubby areas and the first Barbary Partridges of the day. 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 were absolutely everywhere, at least 250 in all, plus I saw my 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 - 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).

With Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls found amongst the Black-headed Gulls and Audouin's and Yellow-legged Gulls with 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 for winter, but a few do hang about, so I stayed till dusk ...and saw nothing!

6 January.

Leaving Agadir, I headed inland to Taroudant, partly to check the town's markets out for some handicrafts, but moreover for another half day's birding in the Sous Valley. Starting at the road bridge west of Taroudant, I walked for about three hours up the dry riverbed, encountering a good variety of birds - including a party of six Fulvous Babblers, five Stone Curlews, four Moussier's Redstarts, five Barbary Partridge and about a dozen Cirl Buntings. Also an Iberian Yellow Wagtail, a few colonies of Spanish Sparrows, two Crag Martins, five Southern Grey Shrikes and, in the villages en route, several House Buntings. I then cut across the valley, through the orange plantations and back to Taroudant, giving myself the chance to again see the White Storks nesting in the palms, plus a few Laughing Doves.

7 January.

And then it was all over! A quick morning trip to Oued Sous produced similar birds to the visit a couple of days earlier, still the Blue Rock Thrush there, but waders in perhaps slightly higher numbers. And then it was off to the airport ...got there a couple of hours early to enjoy the last birds of the trip - a Moussier's Redstart in the car park, a Sardinian Warbler in a bush and a few Spotless Starlings dotted about. Farewell Morocco.