

Part One: Morocco, the Southern Loop

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Following the well-trodden path of many a generation of birder, my month in Morocco began with a loop southward from Marrakech, crossing the snow-laden mountains of the High Atlas, enjoying the fantastic desert sites at Merzouga and Tagdilt, before crossing the country to reach the bird-rich Sous Valley and thereafter the Atlantic coast. Covering 3700 km in total and all via the relative luxury of a rented car, these first two weeks of the trip were just one highlight after another - Desert Sparrows at Merzouga, Mourning Wheatear near Ouarzazate, Bald Ibises at Tamri and Crimson-winged Finches in the mountains to mention just a handful. But Morocco is Morocco, a fantastic all round birding locality, the overriding memory of these first two weeks being simply excellent birding everywhere.

Itinerary

10 December.

Day One, sunny Morocco! Midday arrival to light rain in Marrakech and within an hour standing in the snow in the High Atlas! Plan A was Oukaimeden, an Alpine resort some 75 km south of Marrakech - climbing up through the Vallee de l'Ourika, the snow was becoming ever heavier and the chances of reaching Oukaimeden ever less. Still the first birds of note began to appear - a Southern Grey Shrike, several Common Bulbuls and Thekla Larks, a Woodlark and a couple of African Chaffinches. 30 km short of the destination, the road was closed, end of plan A!

Plan B - reverse the order of the trip and head eastward to Ouarzazate and onward to Merzouga. All good, except this also required traversing the High Atlas, in particular the 2260 metre pass at Tizi-n-Tichka. No chance, not only was the road closed, but so too were the entire 60 km before the pass! Having still seen next to no birds, I was finally able to persuade the police to permit me to continue for 'a few kilometres' to have a look round. In the event, I managed another 45 km, climbing higher and higher through conditions best described as a raging blizzard. Eventually I reached Taddart, a small village just 15 km or so from the top of the pass, but here was journey's end - the snow was a half metre deep and a barrier was down across the road. Still, I was now in birding land - roadside birds included numerous African Chaffinches, quite a few Rock Buntings, the odd Blackbird and plenty of Thekla Larks. A short walk around Taddart added three African Blue Tits, a couple more Rock Buntings, a Common Raven and rather many House Sparrows. Still snowing heavily, so ducked into a village hotel to ponder my next day.

11 December.

Woke early, expecting to be totally snowed under, unable to move either way, but was pleasantly surprised - not only had it stopped snowing, but it was showing hints of a sunny day and, even better, the snow ploughs had been in action and the road was open.

So, I dug the car out of almost a metre of snow and got going - all the way to the next village! There, waiting for the high pass to be cleared, a queue of trucks & hopping about amongst them, a male Moussier's Redstart, an excellent bird! A few minutes more and we began the slow journey upward - though the snow was almost a metre deep, I almost immediately encountered a pair of Barbary Partridge feeding at the edge of the road, then the first of many Thekla Larks and Rock Buntings. Nearing 2600 metres, the first surprise of the day - a flock of White Storks approaching, no less than 57 migrating over the mountains. Birding got much better on the southern side of the pass - eight Shore Larks on the road, numerous Thekla Larks, about ten Black Wheatears and a single Long-legged Buzzard. Further down, nearing an agricultural field, a large flock of birds turned out to be mostly Rock Sparrows, perhaps a hundred in all, mixed with good numbers of African Chaffinches and House Sparrows too.

By midday, after having been slowed by a mudslide across the road, we exited the Atlas Mountains and reached Ouarzazate and the plains - Black Wheatears now replaced by White-crowned Black Wheatears and, though Thekla Larks remained common, also found Desert Larks at one stop. I thought we had left the snow behind, but not so! Arriving at Boumalne and its legendary Tagdilt track, the weather changed again ...a novel experience, birding the semi-desert in the snow! Got the car stuck once, but pretty good birding - a lot of Temminck's Horned Larks and Red-rumped Wheatears, several Trumpeter Finches and flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse too, all looking strange in the snow! Best stop though was at the rubbish tip, where many birds put on a good show, including a fine Hoopoe Lark, top desert bird photographed on a rubbish tip in the snow!!!

With the weather poor, I decided on a night drive to push ever further east to the true Sahara at Merzouga. Flash floods blocked roads and twice caused lengthy diversions. Finally arrived in the Erford area late in the night and slept in the car.

12 December.

Dawn saw me on the stony plains just south of the town - bright but extremely windy. A Trumpeter Finch kicked the day off just moments after getting out of the car, but there then followed an hour of walking in increasing winds and just a further two species - a Spectacled Warbler and a pair of Brown-necked Ravens. No sign of Desert Warbler.

I then moved onto Merzouga - the Sahara under water! An exceptional sight greeted me - the massive Erg Chebbi dunes ending in pools dotted with ducks and waders! Quickly added Shelduck and Ruddy Shelduck to the list, plus waders including Ringed, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers. Near Merzouga village, the massive Dayet Siri lake also held Greater Flamingo and Coots.

As for desert birds, the strong winds were not helping and the best I could muster were a good scattering of White-crowned Black Wheatears and, late on, one Hoopoe Lark. Most of the day though was spent trying to find Desert Sparrows. No problem with House Sparrow - 350 at Cafe Yasmina, 200 at Cafe and various other smaller flocks elsewhere - all repeatedly scanned to no avail, not a sign of the target bird anywhere! Met two Belgians who were also having equal lack of success. The search was probably hampered by the wind and, worse, rain that set in from about 2 p.m. and lasted much of the afternoon. Added two Palm Doves, a half dozen Black Redstarts and a couple of Sardinian Warblers.

Got the car stuck in sand once, spun it on wet mud once. As it is the Desert Sparrows' favourite haunt, I stayed overnight in the Cafe Yasmina, as did the Belgians.

13 December.

No cloud, no wind, things were looking up. So to the Desert Sparrows.

A half hour round the Cafe Yasmina and, despite the perfect weather, it soon became apparent there would be no reward in terms of Desert Sparrows. So swapped phone numbers with the two Belgians, then headed off to retrace the route of the day before, checking all the likely spots along the dunes. Barely a kilometre along, I got to the camel pen adjacent to the Auberge Caravan and settled down to scan the dozen or so House Sparrows present ...was almost resigned to the inevitable absence of Desert Sparrows and, in the first scan, that was true. Then, another scan and bingo! Just behind, two male Desert Sparrows, quite fantastic.

A quick look, then I jumped back in the car and hurried back to the Yasmina to fetch the Belgians. Not long after, three relieved observers were back with the Desert Sparrows - not just two, but a whole flock of them, at least four males and three females. Favouring the camel area, adjacent dunes and crumbling buildings of the nearby Auberge, these right stunners certainly gave views to compensate for the lack of success the day before. At one stage, three Hoopoe Larks also appeared on the dunes and one Desert Sparrow spent a good few minutes chasing them about! So too did a Bar-tailed Desert Lark appear and five Trumpeter Finches flew over. White-crowned Black Wheatears were, as usual, common all around.

I then returned to the Yasmina for breakfast, before crossing the desert flats to visit the wadi near the Auberge Kasbah Dakaoua - very good for sylvia warblers, with several Dartford and Sardinian Warblers quickly found, then about three Spectacled Warblers and a single Tristram's Warbler too. Desert Warbler occurs here too, but I did not see. A kilometre from the wadi, a Hoopoe Lark was found knocked down on a desert track - miles of open sand, almost no cars and not that many Hoopoe Larks ...but still they managed to collide, unlucky bird! Nearby, stopping at a random patch of good-looking scrub, I found in quick succession another Spectacled Warbler, six Trumpeter Finches, three Bar-tailed Desert Larks and a couple of Brown-necked Ravens. Another stop a bit further on produced similar - several Spectacled Warblers and three Trumpeter Finches, plus the first Desert Wheatear of the trip.

Then, to finish off the afternoon, we headed a few kilometres south to the cliff faces a little to the west of Rissani town. Here, a rocky ridge extends some kilometres to the north of the road and has, in past years, been a reliable spot for roosting Eagle Owls. A rather pleasant location, but I was never sure I found the exact spot on the cliff face where the owls roost. There looked to be several likely looking holes and fissures, but none contained any bird! All in all though, not so bad, I did see a stunning Moussier's Redstart, a few Sardinian Warblers and a couple more Dartford Warblers, several Crag Martins and two Brown-necked Ravens. With the weather rumoured to become not so nice again, I decided to push on and set out for another night drive, returning to the Tagdilt Track for another day's birding, before pushing on towards the coast.

14 December.

Drizzle at dawn made for not such a pleasant start on the Tagdilt Track, but still there was no wind and birds were active. I quickly notched up similar species as a few days earlier (Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Temminck's Horned Lark, Red-rumped Wheatear, etc), but also added Skylark and Short-toed Lark. I also met the Belgians again and they described a

pool with Crowned Sandgrouse ...by chance I found the pool and, sure enough, 12 Crowned Sandgrouse were still there!

Fortunately, the weather soon cleared up and the drive westward was mostly bright and sunny. On the way to Ouarzazate, I made several stops to check for Mourning Wheatear, mostly around the the ravines 55 to 57 km east of the town. These ravines, despite not revealing the wheatear, did hold a good selection of birds - Desert Larks, Trumpeter Finches, a Dartford Warbler and the first Grey Wagtail of the trip. Having not found one whilst searching, a stunning male Mourning Wheatear decided to be most co-operative by appearing by the roadside less than a kilometre from the ravines, almost exactly by the '55 km' marker post.

The next stop was at a river bridge near Tiouine, about 40 km west of Ouarzazate. Slightly higher elevation and cooler, the riverside cultivations proved quite good for birds - though a flock of House Sparrows failed to produce any Spanish Sparrows, there were eight Rock Sparrows instead! Also a male Moussier's Redstart, both Crested and Thekla's Larks, the first Great Tits of the trip and several African Chaffinches and Corn Buntings. Thereafter, the land began to rise again and still the odd patch of snow remained from days earlier. Birds became fewer, though I did see two more Moussier's Redstarts, a couple of Black Wheatears, several Desert Larks and a Black-bellied Sandgrouse. By evening, I had dropped into the rather warmer village of Taliouine, the top of the legendary Sous Valley. The weather had improved and the next day promised to be good!

15 December.

The Sous Valley is a stunning place, rich in raptors, rich in many other species. Starting at Taliouine in the far east of the valley, I spent the entire day in the valley, concentrating on the wooded areas that still hold the odd Dark Chanting Goshawk or two. Didn't see this elusive speciality of course, but plenty of other birds to compensate. The best birds of the day came in the lower end of the valley - in addition to Long-legged Buzzards and numerous Kestrels, the raptor tally included a Lanner Falcon and no less than four Black-shouldered Kites (a single at the aerodrome and three together along the 'new' road on the south side of the valley). Also one Hoopoe, eleven White Storks over the aerodrome and further pairs in Taroudannt, the latter birds nesting in palm trees near the main entrance to the walled city.

As evening approached, it was time to leave the valley - destination Oued Massa. A few kilometres short, just as I travelling a rather busy stretch of road (Agadir southbound), I spotted a squat dumpy falcon powering along directly above the road and about four or five cars ahead. With eyes more on the bird than road, it just had to be a Barbary Falcon, so I sped up and got right under the bird ...on it flew, following directly the road and on I followed too. Then it suddenly turned and landed, forcing me into an emergency stop: a quick bit of reversing and there it was - glaring down at me was indeed a Barbary Falcon, a very nice bird!

I got to Massa late and reading my (admittedly old) notebook from the trip previous, I saw that I had stayed at a budget camping site on the coast - I wound down the sandy tracks in the dark, surprising myself by finding an Osprey in the headlights, then got there to find it was now an upmarket luxury hotel! Fortunately it was also full, so my wallet was happy to find me driving out into the desert for another night in the comfort of the car!

16 December.

Secretive birds that prefer the depths of thickets once the sun has risen, Black-crowned Tchagras are best seen near to dawn as they emerge for a brief spot of sunbathing prior to their daytime habits of seclusion! So pre-dawn, having slept in the car, I positioned myself at an ideal spot just inside the entrance to the Oued Massa reserve and began my search. I hoped they would be singing, making the task easier, but they were not! Moussier's Redstarts had woken up and were adorning many of the shrubs all around, a gang of Moroccan Magpies descended and plenty of Spotless Starlings and Common Bulbuls were also about, but no sign of the target bird! I wandered the area for a good twenty minutes and was just considering moving to a different area when a Black-crowned Tchagra flitted across from one dense bush to another ...success! Moments later, the sun hit that very bush and up popped the bird, giving very good views as it basked in the early morning rays. A few moments later, a second bird began creeping up through the bush and very soon both were in full view, sunning themselves and even allowing photographs. Then, after just a few minutes, they had had enough, they flew over to a bigger bush, disappeared into its interior and were gone. No more sightings all day!

With the Black-crowned Tchagras seen, I then had the whole day to enjoy Oued Massa. This small wetland is one of the best birding sites on the Moroccan coast and there were waterbirds by the bucketload - Greater Flamingos, Glossy Ibis, Crane, a few Ferruginous Ducks, 40 or so Marbled Teal and at a couple of Ospreys too. More than this, its the best place in Morocco to find Plain Martin and find them I did, along with quite a few Crag Martins and a Red-rumped Swallow. Having been totally consumed by the excellent birding, I lost the friend I was travelling with, so I thought it might be sociable to try and locate them down on the beach - didn't find them, but did come face to face with a big pair of yellow eyes staring at me! Click, click, click and I had some very fine photos of a Stone Curlew. As for the friend, I found them by the lagoon watching an Osprey! An Egyptian Mongoose decided to try to sneak past.

By mid-afternoon, as the heat began to build, I thought it time for another trip to the desertlands, this time to Goulimine, a couple of hundred kilometres to the south. Got there and opted for another night in the car - I wanted to be on site for dawn.

17 December.

Dawn, site one, 7km south of Goulimine, I had another elusive bird to search for - Scrub Warbler. Choosing an area of scrub just south of a small river, I soon found the place alive with birds, or more particularly with wheatears ...take your pick, Desert Wheatear, Red-rumped Wheatear, White-crowned Black Wheatear, Black Wheatear, almost falling over themselves to get the best stones on which to perch! I also found a most co-operative Tristram's Warbler, but it was not the species I was searching. In fact it took me near an hour of slog across the desert before I eventually found a pair of the Scrub Warblers, very dainty and active things. Thought I'd be darn lucky to get anything approaching a photo - they were flitting from bush to bush at one heck of a rate, but then suddenly they took a prolonged fancy to one tiny patch of scrub and, as luck would have it, one decided to pop right up onto the top just as I had my lens pointed that way, yippee I thought and returned to the car.

I then moved down the desert area 30 km south of the town - a famed locality, supporting a good range of species ...and it did not disappoint! Two kilometres before getting there, we came across a pair Lanners on a roadside pylon, one chomping through some bird, a good start. Then, at the 30 km marker post, an area famed for Thick-billed Larks, I stopped for another wander. No sign of the Thick-billed Larks on that occasion, but ample compensation with some almost tame Bar-tailed Desert Larks, plenty more wheatears, a Long-legged Buzzard and a few fly-over Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

Then thought it nice to return to Oued Massa for the evening - a perfect end to the day, watching the sun go down to a backdrop of a couple of White Storks plodding a meadow, a Black-shouldered Kite coming into roost in a palm and assorted goodies, including Iberian Yellow Wagtails and a mixed roost of Spanish Sparrows and Spotless Starlings.

18 December.

Any day that you see a globally endangered bird must rank as a special day, so the 18th was a very special day - I saw 26 globally endangered birds, all Bald Ibises! They did make me work though - seventeen years earlier, I had rolled up at Tamri, their traditional stronghold, and found the birds on the beach by the lagoon, very easy! This time not quite so, no sign by the lagoon, no sign on the cliff tops either north or south of the village, in fact no sign at all for the entire morning! Plenty of other birds though - a sign of changing times, Audouin's Gulls were everywhere! Seventeen years before, I had logged a mere seven at Tamri, this trip the number was at least 950, with many more on other beaches up and down the coast!!! On the lagoon itself, the bird selection included a couple of Spoonbills, but little else, so I put all my effort into looking for the Bald Ibises (a flock of over 80 had been seen some days before). Bumped into a rather stunning Long-legged Buzzard that sat and posed for photographs, also a fairly co-operative Barbary Falcon, but still no luck with the target birds! Coffee in the village, then back out to search ...stopped about 3 km south of the village and began to scan ...and there, on a rock about 500 metres away, was a very distinctive silhouette! At last, a Bald Ibis! Walked over and sat a little distance away and waited ...the bird, and four of his chums, were wandering my way. Ten minutes more and I was surrounded, Bald Ibises all around. Stunning birds at close range, it was a family party with two adults and three immatures, all of which paid absolutely no attention to me as they ambled past. Quite content with that, I continued my day's birding ...and of course then saw nothing but more Bald Ibises! First a single, then three flying past, then finally at least 16 coming into roost at dusk on the cliffs north of the lagoon! Whilst watching these, a screaming pair of Barbary Falcons buzzed overhead and a few Crag Martins drifted about.

During the day I had also found a female Blue Rock Thrush by the road bridge in Tamri village and, on a short seawatch at Cap Rhir, added five Cory's Shearwaters and a couple of Razorbills to the trip list.

19 December. t.b.a

20 December.

Further exploration of the Sous Valley in the morning - not too productive, but more Fulvous Babblers, three Long-legged Buzzards and another Iberian Yellow Wagtail.

At midday, we left the valley and began the crossing of the High Atlas via the Tizi-n-Test Pass - the route to the small town of Asni was only 100 km, but took four hours ...partly due to the many stops, but also largely due to the route being a single lane with spectacular drops to one side and many hairpins. A very scenic route and good bird selection - on the way up to the summit, many Black Wheatears, a flock of 18 Barbary Partridge and, nearing the top, a Rock Bunting and an impressive flock of about 150 Chough wheeling about a cliff face. Also, very nice, every other hairpin seemed to be home to a pair of Barbary Ground Squirrels, very nice animals indeed!

Dropping down the northern side, I made one stop in a steep valley overlooking almond groves and small fields - alive

with birds, a lot of Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and African Chaffinches, plus also a pair of Coal Tits, a single African Blue Tit, a Hawfinch sitting eating buds and, in an orchard below, both Great Spotted and Levaillant's Green Woodpecker, the latter only calling.

If the first 100 km had been dramatic, the next 50 ranked as one of the most tension-filled drives I have had in many years! At Asni, I took a small side road to Oukaimeden, sign-posted 'piste', the reason for which I was soon to find out! All started well enough, but soon it was nothing more than a small rocky track bordered by drops one side and rock faces to the other. Climbing higher, the problems started - the track was snow-covered ...alternating between deeper soft snow, barely passable, and sudden icy patches. Had to judge the speed high enough not to get stuck, slow enough to not spin off the edge! Grounded the car once and got stuck, but eventually managed to reverse it out and then take a run at it. Not a good place to get stranded - didn't see another car on the entire route. Then it got dark, then it suddenly went all foggy. Could only see a few metres in front, but at least it ensured you could not see the valley bottoms below into which a mistake would plunge you. After two hours, suddenly reached an asphalt road and breathed a sigh of relief. Continued through the fog for another 15 km up to the ski resort of Oukaimeden and, a kilometre short of the destination, broke out of the fog and into a bright starlit night!

21 December.

After the drama of getting there, it was with just reward that my day at Oukaimeden turned out to be one of the best of the whole trip. Woke at the customary pre-dawn and wandered out into the chill of a crisp minus 4. What a place, the first light was just clipping the peaks around and from the heights, flocks of birds were dropping out of the sky - tumbling collections of Chough, first Red-billed Choughs by the dozen, then Alpine Choughs by the hundred. The town was alive with them swooping about and calling, quite magical. Far too dark to take photos, so I shuffled along to a car park just up the valley and what a great sight there too - a flock of Shorelarks, tame as could be, and perhaps as close as two metres on occasion. Then the star, as the Shorelarks flitted up onto a snow bank, from nowhere appeared Crimson-winged Finches, a whole 32 of them. Not the easiest bird to see anywhere, this has to be just about the best place in the Western Palearctic to encounter this special bird ...and I had done so before the sun was even up.

By now, my fingers were beginning to freeze, so a quick return to the hotel to wait the sun come up. Sat by the radiator and listened to the Alpine Choughs out the window. Finally the sun poked up over the ridge, so out I went again - pictures of the Shorelarks no problem, but it seemed the Crimson-winged Finches had gone. Just then, one landed right in front of me, paused for about 15 seconds, letting me get the pictures, then flitted off, never to be seen again during the day.

In the now warm valley, spent a very nice day, watching abundant Rock Sparrows, Rock Buntings and some right stunning African Blue Tits. A sunny hillside behind the village held birds all day, allowing good photos to be had of many, and adding Black Wheatear and Barbary Partridge to the day's tally.

Then did a bit of touristy stuff, took a ski lift to a peak towering above the valley - at 3200 metres and looking towards even an greater 4000 metre mountain, it was above the birds, but I did secretly hope for a chance encounter with Lammergeier. Didn't happen, but still, can only say what a amazing place.

22 December.

With a day to spare before the car had to go back, I decided on a return to the Tizi-n-Tichla pass, site of my day one adventures in the snow. Two weeks on and what a difference - a green and pleasant valley with snow just at the highest altitudes. Target of the day was Levaillant's Green Woodpecker and this proved extremely easy ...driving up the lower reaches of the pass, I stopped at the first likely spot, an area of fields with mixed walnut and birch groves. Still the sun had yet to rise above the mountains and a heavy frost chilled the ground, but a lot of birds were active - thrushes, including three Redwings, both Coal and African Blue Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Then, from about a kilometre down the valley, the voice of a Levaillant's Green Woodpecker. Calling almost continuously, it was easy to track down and not long after I was under its tree watching him, a fine male calling without a care to my presence. Three Crossbills also flew across.

Then, as the sun had still not risen above the mountain peaks, we decided to seek out a rather warmer spot for a morning coffee - a few kilometres up the valley and a cafe overhanging a rather nice valley served the purpose just perfect! A Sardinian Warbler hopped about, but better was yet another Levaillant's Woodpecker calling from the groves beneath! The rest of the day was spent slowly winding up to the summit, down the other side, then back again. Highlights included a flock of about 210 Red-billed Choughs feeding in a ploughed field, about 12 roadside Black Wheatears, a few Rock Buntings and, right at the summit, five Moroccan Magpies.

Returned to Marrakech in the evening.

23-24 December.

Two days in Marrakech, essentially non-birding. Even so, you'd be bonkers to hang up your binoculars, many good birds were seen even in the heart of the centre. From Jeema el Feena, the bustling heart, a noisy and colourful assortment of vendors, food stalls, snake charmers and ancient souks leading off in all directions, there are birds to enjoy.

House Buntings and Spotless Starlings adorned buildings, White Storks drifted over, Little Swifts appeared to roost at the one end of the square and, whilst sitting in a street cafe on one occasion, a Barbary Falcon went motoring over. All good stuff, plus the Common Bulbuls and African Chaffinches.

By now, it was Christmas Eve, the car had gone back, my friend had just fled the country and stage one of the trip was over. Part two was to come: the venture into the Western Sahara.